PORTRAITS FROM LOGAN

by

Leroy Lawson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

Art

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

1976
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without exception, every faculty member has provided worthwhile and critical advice to me in the course of this project, but I would like to expressly thank the following:

Harrison Groutage, my chairman for his patience and insight.
F. Michael Bull, Adrian VanSuchtelen, and Marion Hyde, committee members for their encouragement and advice.
A.J. Meek and R.T. Clark for sharing their knowledge and facilities.
Jim Huffaker, who helped immeasurably in my photographic technique.
Marylinda Lawson, my wife, whose faith helped me perform.

Leroy Lawson
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ABSTRACT

Portraits of Logan

by

Leroy Lawson, Master of Fine Arts

Utah State University, 1976

Major Professor: Harrison Groutage
Department: Art

Thesis Proposal

The purpose of this thesis is to explain some of the historical and personal developments in the painting of portraits.

For this project, eleven models were selected all of whom showed a wide range of emotional types and were painted in oil on canvas. The subjects were placed in shallow space, and color was explored as an emotional element. The personal experiences were evaluated and ideas for future development were suggested.
INTRODUCTION

There are many valid reasons for looking at a painting as a work of art. It may be the choice of subject matter, beauty of image, artist's style, or appreciation for detail in the artist's representation. ¹ One painting form that generates considerable interest is that of portraiture since humans are particularly responsive to any shape resembling the human body and develop a rapport with the human face.²

Portraiture is the painting of human features to differentiate individual characteristics. It has been evaluated by some, on the basis of skill levels; rendering form, arranging pose, suggesting character, and delicately painting hands and hair.³ However, this type of evaluation falls short of great portraiture. There is a difference between portraitists who use paint and painters who make portraits.⁴ The portraitist generally stops at rendering a physical resemblance to his subject and depends upon this alone for the value of his work. A painter is more inclined to develop a deeper meaning which enables the painting to be more universal in appeal.

Art comes out of artifice, not narrative subject matter.⁵ It is not specifically the choice of subject, nor the application of certain rules that make a great painting, it is the way the total image is arranged. An artist should concentrate on design and interpretation instead of subject.⁶ Of these, it is the abstract elements of the design that create the first and strongest visual impressions.⁷ It is the visual combinations that first attract enough attention to get the viewer to give more attention to the painting. This relationship of individual parts is one of the essential elements of pictorial construction.⁸
Once the arrangement of abstract forms, shape, and other elements has been determined, the artist must deal with the subject matter, i.e., the person sitting for the portrait. Few painters have been able to free themselves from the visual demands of the sitter. Generally, the artist ought not let what he sees before him dictate his end, or distract him from his ultimate expressive goal. This visual inhibition keeps many painters from allowing their art to assert its superiority to nature. As they exist in nature, "facts are not poetry." The artist must work with what he sees and feel free to change appearance when necessary.

Creative power fights the very nature of the portrait. The painter transcends nature by developing symbolic versus literal representation. If the artist is successful, the subject becomes more universal than its own image, and relates as a type or symbol with broader appeal.

The head can be used as an expressive medium by a creative artist to convey a universal image in addition to a physical likeness. This platonic duality allows the perceived form of the head to be altered through the mental and physical facility of the artist to make it more real and expressive. Leonardo said that a portrait should come from the mind. He knew that, strictly speaking, total reliance on the senses is inferior. It is the combination of what the artist sees, knows, and feels that should be used to express the ultimate visual reality.

Historically, the painted portrait as we know it is a product of Renaissance thinking. The concept of people being what they are and worthy of contemplation comes from the humanism of the Fifteenth Century. There were two basic approaches for the many great painters of the
Renaissance who worked in portraiture. Leonardo painted the physical atmosphere that surrounds and the psychological essence emanating from the subject, yet he hung these feelings on an idealized human form. Durer, on the other hand, emphasized the physical differences of his subject from the ideal.

Velasquez painted each individual's physical difference and even added a suggestion of the subject's reaction from sitting in his studio. It was Goya who forced his own personality on the subject to proclaim the right of the painter to communicate his own particular vision or "madness." Degas was also actively engaged in depicting the personality of the sitter as he knew it, which separated him from other impressionists who painted only what they saw and avoided editorial comment. American painters of the same period showed their contempt for their middle-class patrons.

Ingres was less influenced by the sitter and tended to allow his linear design to dictate the form of the painting. Ingres' facility was such that this caused no conflict between the subject's appearance and the painting. Whistler arranged everything according to his theories of design and balance, seldom even naming his paintings after his subjects.

For the first half of this century, portraiture was seldom used in expressive fine art. Even now portrait painters among the "New Realists" are not leading a return to a more classical, preimpressionist treatment. These new portrait painters have contemporary views of humanity which do not coincide with Renaissance views.

For some, like Pearlstein, the human figure is used purely as an abstract device for the arrangement of line, form, space, color, etc.
The person, or subject, as an individual, is a meaningless form that occupies pictorial space. For others, like Alex Katz, the subject is much more narrative according to personality, mood, and feeling. This does not mean that the latter group tries for a more traditional means of representing visual reality, but their images exist more as people in environments on the picture plane.

The two main problems in portraiture are organization on the picture plane and depiction of the total person, both physical and psychological. The treatment of the total person breaks down into the further problem of the idealized human form conflicting with the individual character of the subject. From the Renaissance until the present, there have been continual debates between painters who sought idealized human form and those who emphasized individual characteristics. There have been great artists who have done both, but few have combined them into a single statement.

The pictorial-organization problem has developed from the bust-length portrait of the Renaissance to the full-length outdoor portraits of the Seventeenth Century. Since then the artist has had the freedom to choose whatever format he wanted to express himself.
CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT AND INVESTIGATION

I selected a number of individuals for subjects because of certain qualities that I thought would be of interest. Most people are unique in personality and role in this environment and, at the same time, capable of being expanded to appeal to a wider range of values than simply portraits. I have allowed my feelings and "subjective vision" to dictate the form, mood, and expression in this series of portraits.

The subjects were selected from my friends and acquaintances. I would ask them to sit for me and tell them to wear whatever they wished in order to give some type of color clue to their personality. Three subjects asked me to paint them, and one was a model from a painting class. I tried to select a variety of people, most of whom were connected with the University. There were six students, three faculty members, one secretary, and one businessman. They were in their twenties and thirties.

There were two reasons for my selections. First, and perhaps less important, is the physiognomy of the subject. There were some people whose facial structure was fascinating and demanded a certain attention. The more I did, however, the more I became fascinated by the role of their personalities. Often their faces gave clues to their personalities, but there were many other ways it would manifest itself. The psychology of the subjects became more important as I progressed, both on each painting and through the series.

I chose oil on canvas because it has been the traditional medium of portraiture, and I enjoy the tactile manipulation on the surface. The paintings are of two main sizes, 30 x 40 inches and 24 x 30 inches.
I tried a variety of methods and procedures to utilize my model. I would have liked to have done all of them from sessions with a live model, but since I tend to work slowly and spend long hours on each painting, this was impossible. There were two instances where I did use live models exclusively, and I felt I had more control over the paintings.

Due to the availability of my subjects, I knew I would have to devise a method to use photographs as references. The most satisfactory method was to start the painting at one session with the model, work on it without the model, and take the photograph at a second session. I used this several times and was pleased with the results.

The advantages were that I did not need to totally previsualize the image as it would appear on canvas. Also, it gave me a chance to work out certain details before I formalized my reference sheet or photograph. The disadvantage was that it took quite a while to have several poses in order to work out the problems with compositions and details.

The second method that I used was simply to take one photograph and start the painting after it was developed and printed. Often with this method, I would have to bring the subjects back for repeated sittings to clarify or modify the image when the photograph had too little information, or when I changed the pose slightly.

I discovered that making several photographs gave me a variety of views of the subject with which to deal. I could use them like sketches and could preconceive what I wanted my final photograph to be. This method gave me more visual and personal exposure to the subject and therefore more insight into how I wanted to treat them, but it also involved the subjects making several visits to the painting studio.
One method that I tried only once was to do a small sketch and take a photograph, then paint a larger more detailed painting. This did not work because of a weak idea and composition, but I would like to try it again.
ANALYSIS AND GENERAL DISCUSSION

The Paintings

I have taken a number of subjects and reinterpreted their images through my seeing, knowing, and feeling to produce what I hope are meaningful paintings. I have dealt with the human form in a shallow space and some of the expressive aspects of color.

Judy

This is a painting of a young lady who is not the least bit girlish, but is quite energetic and dynamic. At the same time that she appears confident and stoic, there seems to be some inconsistency about her. I tried to make her pose strong and stable, therefore, the triangular composition. Then I felt that there needed to be some weakness or indication of instability, so I repainted her left hand so that it leads out of the picture plane. This hint of vulnerability is what I sought in this painting.

Ona

This is an energetic and overbearing person, who has one of the most intense faces I have painted. The eyes stare intensely and the whole face is defiant. The hands, arms, face, and hair fill up nearly the entire surface and seem to project themselves into the viewer's space. The triangular movement of the arms and shoulders give her a sense of personal solidarity and strength. The gray background and off-white shirt provide contrast with the flesh and hair, but are consistent with the feeling of the painting.
Karmen

This is the only portrait done in a classroom situation. The subject is a relatively cool and aloof model whose rigid pose and facial expression indicate a lack of concern with the surrounding. She is confident and solid, yet she is not so dynamic that she jumps out of the background.

Self-Portrait

The subject is placed off center and hard at work. Within the pose, diagonals indicate the tension and the facial expression shows the concentration involved when actively painting. The directions of movement and placement of shapes keep the painting slightly off balance.

The darks within the figure separate him from the acrid yellow-green of the background. The cools in the blues of the shirt are to a lesser extent, separated from the flesh colors. The painting is a combination of parts that project an energy of movement.

Vicki

The portrait is of a young woman who gives all appearances of being quite sure of herself. The pose itself is nearly a traditional one with one hand propped up and the other partially balancing the body. At closer inspection, it is apparent that this would have been a hard pose to keep for a long time. There is a suggestion that the sitter is unsure of the future, and yet cannot stay this way for much longer.

The dark values of the background and shirt tend to isolate the flesh and hair areas. This tense isolation from the environment helps break from a classical pose and stress some of the conflict within the subject and ourselves.
Jim

This painting of a young man who is dejected and moderately depressed is stated through the slouch of the body and facial expression which combine to express a psychological moment. There is little happiness or optimism here. The stretched arm is no longer reaching for something, it is simply helping to hold the body up.

The color scheme is almost too obvious. Blue on blue is the standard color for depression in Twentieth Century America. The flesh color does add a note of contrast and warmth in opposition, but this is very clearly a depressed person.

A. J.

This person is certainly not depressed. The facial expression hints at hidden amusements, many of which will remain secret. The delicacy of the hands holding the small orange pitcher works against the overwhelming hulk of the figure. The straightforward, upright stance of the body denotes optimism and confidence.

The colors are all warm and rich, keeping with the pleasant nature of the painting. It is harmonious in color and treatment with no drastic color contrast. The contrasts between the dark shirt and flesh make both elements stand out from the vibrant background.

Anne

A painting of a lady in a late stage of pregnancy that avoids many of the expectant-mother cliches. Obviously, this woman is alone and not overly sentimental or happy about her condition. She extends one arm to support herself while she looks away from the artist. The other hand and arm almost cup her burden as she waits for the time to come.
The color also avoids the pleasant and the ordinary. The pallid flesh does not radiate health and warmth. The background and garment are in similar color, but quite different in disharmony.

Edward

This man is a businessman who is quite confident of his place in society. Or is he? The facial expression is not quite as confident as one might think. The position of the arms is an invented triangle that gives an otherwise robust person a certain awkward position as a composition.

The color of the suit is not particularly bold, nor does it generate any energy when it is compared to the background. The tie which could stand out and help energize the painting is the same color and value as the background and seems to help keep the subject held in his place.

Jeffery

An energetic person who has certain grandiose airs about himself. The facial expression indicates someone who is quite sure of his position, and the posture also emphasizes it. The position of the hands adds rhythm and further stresses both the energy and theatrical airs of the subject.

The flesh colors jump away from the background and suit to give an indication of an energy present. Also, the dark blue vest in the center of the painting adds a certain push-pull tension. Somehow, the off-white suit and cooler off-white background do not give an indication of purity, but contrast with the face.
A determined and probably self-made man is the subject of this painting. There is determination in the face that is echoed in the position of the body and action of the hands. Although this person is obviously in a wheelchair, it doesn't seem to be important as an obstacle.

The color of the warms in the flesh and suit contrast violently with the intense dark blue of the background. Color pushes him forward to confront the spectator. This man is energetic and self-sufficient in spite of any mere physical handicap.

Evaluation

At the start of this project, I was aware of weaknesses in the handling of human form and anatomy; I still am, but at a higher level. I feel that my painting technique and my control of the medium and its manipulation has improved in the progression of the paintings.

My perceptions and levels of awareness grew from a mild interest in individuals into an urge not only to perceive, but transcribe these perceptions into an image. I developed perceptive abilities in addition to technical facility of handling form and media.

My method of painting portraits has changed slightly in the past year. I still rely on photographs, but to a lesser extent. I have been able to develop my perception, insight, and technique to the point that I can now take just one photograph and have enough visual information to express my nonvisual thoughts and feelings.

I have had several failures that I have tried to analyze. The main reason for the failures was that I did not have a clear-cut idea. In my successful paintings, I recognized the feeling that I wanted to convey
pictorially. When I started a painting without this feeling, I soon lost the interest that is necessary in order to overcome the many technical problems of portraiture.

Related to this, but slightly different, is the problem of the lack of nonverbal communication, or painter-subject interaction. Regardless of the level of acquaintance, there were some subjects with whom it was impossible to develop a meaningful relationship.

I will continue to read and research the painters, both past and contemporary, who have dealt with the portrait. I feel that, in particular, many American painters have been neglected by the general public due to their lack of flamboyant style instead of appreciated for their subtleties. From 1850 to 1930, there have been some great paintings done which are only now being appreciated.

Also, there are many great paintings from Europe from which I can learn much. I will go to museums and look at all available sources to increase my understanding and visual vocabulary.

There are also contemporary sources of information which I will continue to seek. There are paintings being done today that can enhance ways of seeing. Also, I can visit schools and talk to other artists about the visual treatment of individuals.

My work will continue to develop along the lines of the investigation of individuals. In my future paintings, I will try to indicate more of a physical and mental interaction between the environment and the subject. I can incorporate each aspect of what I have learned in order to produce more meaningful paintings.
SUMMARY

In addition to being visual communication, art should be a record of growth and a quest for knowledge. I feel that the "completion of this project" is a segment out of a continuous span that has neither beginning or ending. This is not a specific moment in history, captured in a camera, but is a sequence of a journey. Consequently, this has been another stage of beginning a new life and ending an old one, without being either.

Through books, magazine articles, and class discussion, I have researched the evolution of portrait painting as art and decided that there are many valid, historical precedents for its appreciation. Through my research I have seen trends and techniques which have come into and out of favor, yet the portrait, as a work of art, always seems to survive. In this thesis, I have mentioned some artists who were particularly significant to me and who gave me a particular insight into portraiture and paintings.

The subjects were chosen for two main reasons: their physiognomy and personal characteristics which would provide material to be developed as paintings. The method was to work from live models, if possible and photographs when necessary.

I not only produced meaningful images for me, I developed skills in painting, observation and research that will provide me with material and direction for future growth. I learned from successes and failures and feel confident that I will continue to develop as an artist.
FIGURE 1

JUDY
FIGURE 2

ONA
FIGURE 3

K A R M E N
FIGURE 4

SELF-PORTRAIT
FIGURE 5

V I C K I
FIGURE 6

J I M
FIGURE 7

A.J.
FIGURE 8

A N N E
FIGURE 9

EDWARD
FIGURE 10

JEFFERY
FIGURE 11

RICHARD
FIGURE 12

J I M
FIGURE 13

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FIGURE 14

JEFFERY
FOOTNOTES


19. Ibid., 491.
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