The Lie of the Portrait

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While Italian Renaissance artists in the early 15th century were slowly groping their way toward believable realism, their counterparts in the north of Europe soared ahead of them with their own kind of pictorial illusion. The German-born painter Hans Memling, who worked for most of his life in Flanders, was one of several 15th-century artists who were conspicuously good at not only the requisite religious pictures, but also secular portraiture that exquisitely replicated hundreds of the tiniest details of human physiognomy and gathered them into an astonishing overall "likeness" of the subject.

A jewel of an exhibition titled "Hans Memling and the Portrait" that I saw at the Groeninge Museum in Memling's hometown of Brugge, Belgium, last summer reaffirms his staying power after all these centuries. (The exhibition, in slightly altered form, is now at the Frick Collection, in New York City, through December 31.)

Hans Memling isn't all that well known to casual viewers, and even serious art students tend to regard him as merely the guy who painted the Madonnas with the egg-shaped heads. But serious art lovers consider him one of the all-time greats. Although Jan van Eyck (c. 1395-1441), who usually leaves viewers dumbstruck with his poignant verisimilitude, is indisputably No. 1 among the early Flems, Memling is arguably a close second.

Memling was born sometime between 1435 and 1445 in a village near Frankfurt. He seems to have received his early art instruction near Cologne, and art historians now generally agree that he trained in Rogier van der Weyden's studio in Brussels. By 1465 Memling had moved to nearby Brugge, where he acquired the municipal citizenship necessary to set up his own workshop. In Brugge, Memling gathered enough commissions to employ two workshop assistants. His work consisted of large religious panels, family group portraits, and small individual portraits. Local merchants, as well as rich Italian businessmen living and working in the city (many Medici bankers, for instance, worked in Flanders), wanted Memling portraits of themselves and their wives. Even when Brugge experienced a sudden and severe economic decline in the 1480s, and Memling's Italian clients left the city, the painter continued to obtain commissions from the locals. The demand for Memling's work, however, eventually began to lessen a few years before the artist's death in 1494.

Although we obviously have no photographs of the people Memling painted by which to measure his painterly interpretations against the "objectivity" of the camera (as we can do, for example, with George P.A. Healy's painted portraits of Abraham Lincoln), Memling's portraits look "photographic" enough for us reasonably to assume that his pictures closely resemble their subjects. Memling's portraits are, however, subtly semi-imagined. His is a painter's cobbled-together world, grounded in myriad observations made over time, rather than a whole world captured in an instant by a camera. His portraits contain "mistakes," such as minor distortions of anatomy. But these mistakes aren't merely small incompetences — as they might be with a lesser painter — but rather, deliberate or not, the very ingredients that make up Memling's style.

Commissioned secular portraiture constituted a large and important part of painting's subject matter from Memling's time until well into the 19th century. With the advent of modern art (let's use the usual moment cited in Art History 101, the display of Manet's "Luncheon on the Grass," in the famous "Salon des Refusés" in Paris in 1863), the painted portrait began its downhill slide to the stuffy, retrograde, peripheral exercise that it is today. Yes, modern art has its own great portraits — Cézanne's and Matisse's pictures of their wives, van Gogh's postman, and Picasso's famous painting of Gertrude Stein all come to mind. And there are serious contemporary painters who continue to do portraits — Lucien Freud, David Hockney, and Chuck Close among the most prominent.

But the artistically significant commissioned painted portrait died, for all practical purposes, around 1900. The last great American portrait painters were John Singer Sargent and Thomas Eakins. Subsequent painters who were ambitious — who wanted to make their mark in art history and eventually be thought of as "important" instead of being merely popular and wealthy in their own times — turned to problems of invention rather than depiction. They willingly conceded portraiture to photographers.

The invention of fixed-image photography in 1839 clearly undercut portrait painting. It made it easy for people other than trained and talented painters and sculptors to achieve accurate likenesses. By the end of the 19th century, photography, with its rapidly increasing shutter speeds, was able to record casual poses reflecting a more modern outlook on life. At the time, in fact, speed and rapid change were increasingly understood to be the core characteristics of contemporary existence. Painted portraits, requiring multiple sittings over time, couldn't capture the fleeting smiles and other chance expressions that both clients and viewers were starting to favor. Photography, with a number of prints obtainable from the same negative, also undercut the uniqueness of a painted portrait. Granted, tossing out a failed portrait photograph was a graver act 100 years ago than it is today, but chucking a finished painting has always been hard to do.

There are, however, deeper reasons for

the death of the painted portrait. Portraits have been around in Western art since its inception with the ancient Greeks, and the wide variety of portrait styles arising over the centuries strongly implies that what we would call "photographic" likeness was never the whole of the matter. Instead, the portrait was a pictorial means of trying to get at and then hold onto the very soul of a person. That notion, in turn, rests on the belief that a person's inner life is openly and unself-consciously reflected in the face.

Sigmund Freud, of course, put the lie to that idea, and after him, it was pretty well killed and buried by Michel Foucault. The idea of portraiture as a mirror of the soul could survive neither Freud's theory of repression (by which people hide who they really are even from themselves) nor Foucault's later contention that a person's identity is always historically contingent and continuously in flux. Modern and contemporary portraitswhether painted or photographeddone by artists with serious artistic ambitions are like all portraits: They inevitably reflect the most powerful and significant intellectual currents of the times in which they are made. The faces in modern and contemporary portraits lean toward distortion because artists have peered at them through the fractured lens of modern anxiety and uncertainty about what can be known. But who, other than collectors of avant-garde art, would want to be painted by Francis Bacon, or have their wedding photographs taken by Diane Arbus?

Academically realistic painted portraits — the skillfully done portraits of college presidents, bankers, and venerated politicians that hang on staid office walls — are still around, of course, but they're stagnant. Anyone with half an eye for aesthetics avoids looking at them. On the other hand, most of us are fascinated by portraits painted by Old Masters. Why? Why are we lovingly drawn to portraits such as Memling's while having so little interest in those painted from our own time?

The first reason is the inescapable awe we feel in the presence of something very old. But age alone doesn't explain our fascination. Old pots from the Ming dynasty or ancient Rome, interesting as they are to look at, do not affect us as profoundly as painted portraits by Old Masters. These paintings move us because of the palpable connection implied between the sitter and the artist.

The invention of oil paints, in Northern Europe sometime in the first third of the 15th century, allowed artists for the first time in history to make gradual transitions between colors, or from light to dark, in the same way we perceive colors and tones in real life. Oil painting allowed artists to create "color depth" — the sensation that color recedes into space — by applying successive transparent and semi-transparent glazes over layers of paint that had already dried. Most important, oil painting dried slowly, giving painters the time to be more contemplative about their work, and to make changes over longer periods of time. When we look at an old painted portrait by Memling, for example, we sense the buildup of the painted face through real ticking time, which gives us the queasy feeling that we are almost in the same 15th-century space alongside the sitter

and the artist. And out of the paint texture itself we derive the odd sensation that the skin doesn't just look like skin, but somehow recapitulates in paint real skin that covers a real face.

Unlike his idealized egg-headed Madonnas, Memling's small portraits (often no more than a foot high) have individual and particularized heads. But the heads are invariably presented turned slightly left or right, following the established Flemish formula for enhancing the illusion of roundness. The eyes almost invariably gaze into a space in front of the picture plane, past the spectators who stare at them more than 500 years later. Memling invented a new position for his sitters' hands, in which they seem to perch on top of the bottom part of the frame, as if they are breaking through the surface of the picture, into the viewer's physical space. The scholars involved in the current Memling exhibition argue that he also was the first painter to come up with the idea of using an extended landscape as a background, instead of a solid-color background or an interior of a room, with merely a glimpse of nature seen through a window.

Does that mean that Leonardo da Vinci lifted his idea for the expansive landscape background in his Mona Lisa from Memling portraits brought back to Italy by their rich subjects? No concrete evidence exists to support that idea, tantalizing as it is. Scholars do agree, however, that Italian artists weren't always the first to make painting discoveries. Painting ideas moved fluidly back and forth, from the north down to Italy as well as the other way around. Oddly, Memling had a direct impact on a 20th-century American artist. According to Steven Biel's *American Gothic: A Life of America's Most Famous Painting* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), the painter Grant Wood, whose fame derives from his iconic 1930 double portrait of an elderly farmer grasping his hay fork as he stands stolidly next to his hard-scrabble daughter, traveled in the 1920s to Europe, where he admired Memling's pictures. The painting "American Gothic" pays homage to Memling by making the outdoor Iowa barnyard its background.

Flattered though Memling might have been by the art-historical impact of his portraits, his main concern was to please his eager, paying clients with the kind of exact pictorial likeness first achieved by his immediate predecessor, Jan van Eyck. Memling's approach was to use a basic template for the head and the hands (which, to use a commercial photographer's term, were often "stock"), and then to plug in the particular features of the sitter. His customers ordered their portraits with varying sets of "extras," according to their taste and their wallets. The cheapest paintings came with a plain background; a portrait with a glimpse of landscape through a window cost a little more; and a full landscape went for a premium. To this basic formula Memling would have added only those innovations that he thought would increase the pleasure and approval of his clients and make them want to employ him instead of competing painters. In sum, Memling's art flourished in the middle ground — anathema to contemporary artists — between commercial formula and artistic inno-

vation.

"God rests in the details," the early-20th-century art historian Aby Warburg famously observed. And so does the devil, as others noticed long before him. Disciplined and meticulous attention to even the smallest and most unnoticeable detail gives an artist a glorious shot at emulating divine perfection. But the detail in a Memling portrait, as any painter knows, must have been devilishly difficult both to observe and capture. Mastery of detail (probably enhanced by the magnifying glasses that could be found in artists' workshops in the early 15th century) shows up in all of Memling's faces.

That mastery is especially compelling in his depiction of stubble growing on a man's face. Scores of individual dark whiskers sprout from soft, brownish-gray skin on Memling's menfolk. How did Memling paint those impossible whiskers? Did he count them? Did he observe each and every one of them singly, or did he simply freely add them to the skin tones until he felt as if the face had enough of them? Except for their solemn expressions and Renaissance clothing, Memling's five-o'clock-shadowed men sometimes look startlingly contemporary, like fashion models or art-world celebs.

In several backgrounds Memling inserts adorably minuscule but clearly depicted horseback riders, often no more than two millimeters high. In one painting he shows off with a Madonna-and-Christ-child pin, the two of them together no larger than a pencil point, and then goes on to insert at the bottom of the same picture a small, wickedly perfect fly, an ancient symbol of illusion.

Brilliant verisimilitude aside, Memling's portraits are not psychologically penetrating. Indeed, they are remarkably alike, with the subjects always calm and composed, gazing into the faraway distance. Was everybody so serene in 15th-century Brugge?

The disheartening truth — a truth most often swept under the rug of aesthetic pleasure — is that while portraiture teaches us about the human range of emotions and character in general, no specific portrait can reliably be said to reveal the inner life of its subject. Instead, great artists have the daunting ability to deceive us into believing that they have painted the heart and soul of a person. When we are moved by a specific portrait, then, we are unwittingly moved by the artfulness of the artist rather than the personality of the sitter.

Even in real life, of course, no felicitous accord exists between a face and the character behind it. A bad man often hides behind a handsome face; a good man must often overcome a homely or repulsive visage. The way we best acquaint ourselves with someone's character is through their actions, not their looks. Only after we know a person do we accurately read character back into his or her face. The portrait is, in other words, devious by nature, fooling and charming us into believing, for the brief time we are transfixed by it, that appearance and character are one and the same thing.

Nowhere is this deception more evident than in Memling's 1472 portrait of Gilles Joye

(now in the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Mass.). The sitter was 47 when his portrait was painted (Memling wrote this out on the bottom of the frame). He was a famous and talented Flemish singer and composer who spent most of his life in Brugge. There is speculation that he was ill when Memling painted his portrait, and that the work of art might have been intended as an epitaph; but Joye went on to live more than a decade after the painting was completed. In any event, with his hands held together in a pyramid of prayer and a doleful look on his face, there is no mistaking that Joye presented himself in the penitent pose of the times. In fact, he appears to be the personification of piety.

But Gilles Joye, it turns out, led a dissolute life from start to finish. He was a lecher who, obsessed with possessing expensive, hand-copied music manuscripts he couldn't afford, spent his way deep into debt. Memling was the hired help, and his task was not to paint Joye as he was but as Joye wished to be seen. With a soothingly untruthful Memling portrait, Gilles Joye just might have a shot at being forgiven by both his fellow citizens and, perhaps, God himself.

For all we know, Memling knew all about the sins of Gilles Joye, but nevertheless considered him to be a good Christian genuinely trying to obtain forgiveness by ensuring that he left behind an image of contrition. That may sound deluded to us, but it was a perfectly reasonable attitude in Memling's time. Or maybe Memling had no particular feeling for Joye one way or the other; maybe Memling's thoughts were concentrated entirely on how to get the bridge of the man's nose just right, and how to capture the peculiar turn of one of his 82 (I'm estimating) eyebrow hairs. Perhaps Memling worried while he painted about whether he'd be able to collect his fee from the profligate Gilles Joye, or what the artist's wife, Anna, and his three kids were up to at that moment.

In Memling's great portraits — as in all great painting — evidentiary cavils are shunted to the side. It does not matter whether Memling tells us the truth about the specific human being who sat for him or not. What counts is what his pictures, taken as a whole, and taken on their own, say about painting, and — through painting's special attributes — what they say about humanity in general. Although Memling's portraits look "real," they are no more than an imagined world in which an individual face tenders the hope that human beings, for all their miserable failings, are at bottom good. Gilles Joye was no doubt a rotten man whose big worry was money, but Memling's Gilles Joye is a good man whose big worry was God's law. In the elusive, artist-made world of Hans Memling, beauty and morality become one, and looks are all that count.

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