

FEATURES

Keep history alive: portraiture in the selfie age

Where does portraiture sit in our modern selfie culture? Don't let the heirs of tomorrow die away

By ANNABEL SAMPTON
6 HOURS AGO



Portraits of ancestors are visual memories that capture an expression, a likeness or a pose – with a much-loved pet, in a well-worn outfit or in a familiar family setting – relics of times gone by.

Today, where does traditional portraiture sit in the age of instant photography, instant gratification and selfie-ridden social media? Has our rich selfie culture – arguably a modern form of portraiture – doomed the artform redundant, fit only to serve as a visual record? Might a modern, abstract portrait be more valuable in 2019 – given that it offers something ‘more advanced’ and more distinctive than a photograph can possibly muster?



H.M. THE QUEEN BY ANTONY WILLIAMS. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF PORTRAIT PAINTERS.

A family heirloom is something that is carried from one generation to the next, gathering stories, admirers, dust – a photograph won't suffice and does not compare. It's time to take action and start commissioning the heirs of tomorrow, today, for the richest recordings of time and history.

Nicole Farhi, the 72-year-old French-born artist famously branched into the realms of sculpture, leaving fashion behind and selling her eponymous label seven years ago. How important is it to Nicole to capture a likeness, surely a key ingredient of successful portraiture? Farhi quotes an exchange with Picasso. ‘Picasso was once told by someone that he couldn't paint a tree. He replied, “No, but I can paint the feeling you have when you look at a tree.” That sums up Farhi's relationship with portraiture and its purpose as a recording device. “What I am really looking to do is express how I feel about that particular person. The portrait must be recognisable and must contain intrinsic qualities unique to that person.” But it needn't be an immediate replica.



LUCIAN FRIELED BY NICOLE FARHI

Dissimilarly, Antony Williams, a member of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters who painted Her Majesty the Queen when he won the Ondaarje Prize for Portraiture in 1995, believes that it's crucial to capture a likeness. ‘I would feel as if I've failed in some way if I couldn't.’ Although, a similarity isn't the be all and end all. ‘That's not to say that it's necessarily a good painting, because you've achieved a good likeness.’ Williams feels that its ‘success’ resides elsewhere. ‘It's more to do with the quality of the paint and the psychological depth of the portrait.’ Williams works primarily in classical egg tempera – a medium that saw its heyday in the Late Renaissance.



ANTONIA WITH CLENCHED FIST BY ANTONY WILLIAMS

Williams firmly believes that painting as a recording device is ‘as valid today as it's ever been’ and not in peril from its competitor, photography. He considers them to be fundamentally different mediums, ‘painting is usually the result of many sittings. The artwork becomes a distillation of the many hours spent with a sitter.’ He doesn't think it to be just a single moment frozen in time – a snapshot, a millisecond. Farhi agrees, her portraits are informed by a rich background understanding. ‘I always try to learn as much as I can about the person I am going to make the portrait of. I listen to their music if they are musicians; look at their paintings or sculptures if artists; read and watch their interviews as a writer.’ This tapestry of knowledge can only contribute to an artistic understanding – and will be revealed in the final portrait. Farhi makes the valuable point that ‘no two artists will portray the same person in the same way’ and thinks of portraiture as a two-way product with the mutual input of both sitter and artist.



THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH (AT GAINSBOROUGH'S HOUSE) BY NICOLE FARHI

Does Williams think that portraits are at risk of going out of fashion in the current selfie climate? He believes that portraits are firmly bound up as important markers of history. ‘Portraits of the past help us to understand the age they were created in and can vividly transport us back to – for instance – the court of Charles I as depicted by Sir Anthony van Dyck.’ The portraits being commissioned today will have something to say about our society and culture for the future. ‘Therefore, we must continue to commission portraits to keep our time on earth alive for the generations to come.

Nicole Farhi: Fields at Beaux Arts, London, 31 January – 2 March; and Heads and Hands at Gainsborough House, 25 February – 16 June. nicolefarhi.com
Antony Williams at Mousni's, 28 Cork Street, London, 2-28 June. antonywilliams.com