

INNOCENT LINES & VISTAS

The great American portrait painter John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) advised his students to acquire sufficient command over their materials if they intended to work in a live class. "After that, do whatever nature presents itself to you!" he said. He went on to explain: "The conventionalities of portrait painting are only tolerable in one who is a good painter. If he is only a good portrait painter, he is nobody!"

Sargent's prodigious output included 900 oil paintings, 2,000 water colors and hundreds of sketches and charcoal drawings described his method: "Cultivate an ever continuous power of observation. Wherever you are,, be always ready to make note of postures, groups and incidents. Store up in the mind a continuous stream of observations from which to make selections later. Above all, do go outdoors as well and see the sunlight and beauty of nature to be seen!"

Known as an elegant colorist who admired Velasquez, Van Dyck and Titian, Sargent said: "Color is an inborn gift, but appreciation of value is merely training of the eye, which everyone ought to acquire. You can't do sketches enough. Sketch everything and keep your curiosity fresh!"

Whenever we see a beautiful portrait in an album or art gallery, we are immediately struck by its grace and beauty. It shows us the character and history of the person depicted. It captures his soul for posterity and renders his personality with a touch of immortality.

That is how portrait painting began as an exercise in preserving the memory of its subjects and gained a prominence in art history. This quest for immortality also created the monumental Pyramids as massive burial chambers to preserve the memory and remains of the Egyptian Pharaohs. Along with the Mummified

remains of the Pharaoh all his personal effects and belongings were also preserved inside the granite walls of the burial chamber. A pictorial representation of the Pharaoh was also made in Pictographs and Hieroglyphs that told his life story.

In ancient and medieval India this custom was also followed by Kings. The art works were often presented as a gift to his loyal courtiers. Royal portraits also came in handy for matrimonial purposes as in the case of Roman Prince Philip and English Queen Mary Tudor when no less than the great Renaissance artist Titian was commissioned to do the Prince's portrait.

In the pre-Christian era, history records the instance of King Bimbisara having a portrait made of Lord Buddha by his court painter which was given to Prince Rudrayan of Sindh province. This shows how portrait painting occupied a very high position in India dating back to the pre-Christian era.

The Mohenjo Daro seal tablet of the bearded Priest and the famous Harappan sculpture of the dancing girl also show the quality and skill of Indian artists going back to 2,000 B.C . The hunting scenes of animals and hunters painted on cave walls at ancient sites like Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh takes us back to the Stone Age era of 30,000 B.C when some of the earliest art came into being.

The hand prints left on the cave walls by the artists are their personal signatures in graphic ochre earth pigments. The painstaking details of the hunting scenes showing the hunters and animals in battle bring the entire scene alive on the walls of the cave more strikingly than any movie can do to this day.

This desire to depict the everyday reality of his life drove the artist to improve his skills over time to the point he could accurately draw and paint portraits in the modern era with photographic realism. This transition from the ancient to the modern took various different directions depending on cultural traditions and beliefs of each country as can be seen in Egypt, China, India, Europe etc.

ANCIENT HISTORY OF ART

Students can today learn about all this history including Native American, Aboriginal and even Adivasi and Tribal history of India in modern universities today. India's traditional art made use of spiritual as well as decorative urges in its depiction of portraiture. To show the importance of its subjects, the artists often resorted to enhancing his stature or depicting a halo behind his head.

As portrait painting in the west went through different phases like realistic, naturalistic, romantic, impressionistic and even surrealistic and expressionistic styles, it influenced a new generation of Indian artists who became familiar with such styles and techniques which they studied in various Indian art schools and universities and even abroad.

As a result it created a new trend of artists trying to bring their own subjective vision into the process. The improvement in the quality of not only paint, brushes and canvas but also the availability of modern tools like computers and graphics applications expanded the horizons of new generations of artists. There is no end to what a creative imagination can achieve by using mixed media and new technology to take portraiture into new frontiers of expression.

Today's artists can pursue portrait painting from the realistic, impressionistic, expressionistic or any abstract perspective according to his own desire for creative and subjective interpretation. We have seen this long ago in the way, for example, Indira Gandhi was depicted as Goddess Durga by M.F.Husain during the infamous Emergency and how he later depicted Mother Teresa in a halo as the epitome of virtue and compassion.

In olden times, the portraiture was a bit cumbersome with subjects dressed in opulent garments and ornaments which added to the subject's luster but

distracted from their appearance. We admire them today for their historical value and authenticity as modern times have made life simpler and complex not only from a societal perspective but a fashion standpoint as well.

The portraits of Maharaja Chhatrapati Shivaji and the Peshwa period we see in Museums today bring this fact into sharp focus. It is clear that the artist has to have the gift of probing into the very depth of the subject's personality to bring it out by visual means , color and texture on his canvas with his creative palette.

It is the same with sculpture as well. The story is told of the great Renaissance sculptor Michelangelo who went searching for a marble stone in a Roman quarry one day. Seeing his intense gaze on a particular stone the quarryman asked him what he saw in it. Michelangelo said nothing but asked him the price for it.

The quarryman told him the marble had a flaw in it and he could take it for free. Michelangelo took it at once as he could see in his imagination a perfect rendition of David in that stone. He took it to his studio and with his masterful strokes of hammer and chisel he created his masterpiece for the world to admire.

A similar story is told of his "unfinished" masterpiece "Pieta" of mother and child which creates a stunning effect of its form trying to literally burst out of its stony prison. It took the painstaking effort and diligence of Rodin to understand and explain Michelangelo's genius in creating a new style which he tried to emulate in his own work later.

In the modern era, Picasso revolutionized art with his new Cubist style in which he depicted the human face and figure in geometric style using the technique of orthogonal projection. A lot of great artists have done their own self-portraits in a creative manner. In the Renaissance era, Leonardo and Michelangelo even studied corpses being embalmed for burial to get anatomical correctness in their portraits and figuratives.

BEAUTY LIES IN EYES OF BEHOLDER

The Renaissance artists saw beauty in all human forms whether tall, short, disabled, black or white. They truly believed and practiced the idea that beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder. Van Gogh found beauty even in the prostitutes he frequented and used as models. Leonardo showed beauty of innocence and mystery in Mona Lisa's smile. He also found it equally in Sunflowers and in nature study and even in his torn shoes which became masterpieces at his touch.

In Indian art, Khajuraho is a living monument of excellence in sculpture. The human forms seem to burst out of their stone prisons in erotic abandon. The accuracy, realism and expressive postures of the sculptures cast a spell on the viewer. They have a universal quality and monumentality that goes beyond the merely personal and decorative.

We discern the same essence in the story of an artist who was asked to do a portrait of Christ from his imagination. He looked at various people as potential models like Popes, Padres, Saints and even common people. But he could not find anyone that he felt was suitable. He finally found someone in a jailyard.

After his painting was done it was hailed for its lifelike quality and declared to be a masterpiece. People came from near and far to marvel at it. One day a visitor saw it and recognized the person who had modeled as the Christ figure for the artist. To everyone's shock, he revealed him to be a convicted murderer.

The people's shock quickly turned into anger and the artist was confronted by mob fury outside his studio. They demanded the artist be punished for his heresy and blasphemy against Christ. The matter was referred to the Pope who mercifully spared the artist by saying he deserved credit, in fact, for finding a lotus

in the dirt. Just as the lotus is not dirtied by the by the mud it grows in, the spirit is not corrupted by the sins of the corporeal flesh. Only after this was the artist forgiven for his “sin” and his painting seen with fresh eyes. The same is true of Leonardo’s masterpiece “The last supper” in which he also used convicted prisoners to model as Christ’s followers.

From this it is clear that the subjects used for portraits can be different professions, age groups, gender etc and the artist can use such details to enhance the personality of the subject. The portrait becomes more personal, subjective and expressive in this way. But there is also the danger that the artist has to please the buyer.

In the case of landscape etc the buyer can be persuaded by substituting his choice with another artwork if he does not like the original. But in the case of the portrait, the artist has no choice but to do it again as per the buyer’s specification or make changes in it accordingly. The artist has no choice but to compromise with the wishes of his subject or buyer.

For this reason portrait art has been given a lower status than other genres of art historically. The 19th Century art critic Werner Lee compared the status of the portrait painter to that of an unwanted slave girl. But artists like Rembrandt, Van Gogh and others have proved Lee wrong. Under their influence even abstract artists like Picasso and Matisse did their self portraits which were as beautiful to see as portraits by Rubens, Sargent or Mary Cassatt. In the post-Impressionist era, the expressionist portraits of Egon Schiele, Soutine, Kokoschka and Chagall shocked conservative art critics but led to major new art movements like Dadaism, Surrealism, Fauvism which opened the door to Cubism and abstract art.

COMMERCIAL VERSUS CREATIVE ART

So there is definitely a distinction between commercial portraits and creative ones. These can be seen in all the top art museums and galleries. Rodin’s sculpture of Balzac is the best example of how creative art can take liberties with

the appearance of even famous people. Although he faced the stormy protests of critics, Rodin refused to change his artistic approach.

Even the great French general and monarch Napoleon understood this. He told an artist before posing for his portrait that he wanted him to bring out the revolutionary spirit in his personality more than a literal likeness or try to make him look attractive or authoritarian.

In art history there are also a lot of instances in which great artists have done portraits of each other. Derain's portrait of Matisse in Fauvist style and Picasso's portrait by Gris in Cubist style have gained a cult status as tribute pieces of art. The classic portrait of Van Gogh done by his friendly adversary Gauguin shows him applying paint to a flower and was ironically titled "Painter of Flowers"!

The most extreme example of this is Durer who depicted himself in his Munich artwork as a Christ figure. Among the great innovators of portraits in western art were such masters as Dali, Chagall, Joan Miro and Paul Klee. In Indian art Bendre, Husain, Raza, Palsikar, Mali and others blazed a new trail. All of them began as portrait and landscape painters before discovering their own unique styles.

Only after a deep study of these great masters does it become clear how their mastery of the realistic style was inherent in the way they chose to break all barriers of tradition later. In this way they were able to lay open a new world of artistic discovery for art students and art lovers. Their artworks are in every way a portrait of their art journey.

In Indian art history, Raja Ravi Verma is considered the master of the traditional realistic style. He learned this style from visiting English artists and painted a lot of master works. They were based a lot on historical and mythological subjects and he was also an early pioneer in the art of graphics.

Among the other great artists who trained under English artists at the J.J.School of Art in Mumbai were masters like Abalal Rehman, A.X.Trinidade, Dhurandhar, Vasant Rao Mali, Bendre, Bhosale, Haldankar, P.G.Sirur, Gopal Deuskar, Shankar

Palsikar and Sambhaji Kadam etc. That portrait painting is a very well developed and serious style becomes clear only after studying the work of such masters.

Realistic style painters can do portraits of their subjects by making them pose for them or even from their memory or from photographs. It is important for artists to study the habits, character, achievements and life story of their subjects, their mannerisms and appearance. The devotion that any artist has for his work and for his subject will be reflected equally in his portrait.

This quality is critically important in doing portraits of famous people. There has to be an authenticity, respectability and familiarity with the subject's personality that shines in the artwork. From a historical point of view also such portraits of famous people are important.

No one will accept any changes in the look or appearance of such great people in the name of artistic innovation. This kind of creative liberty will be seen as an insult to his status and memory. Such portraits must be done keeping in mind they are a historical record of the person and his era for posterity. When we see such portraits in any museum's collection we can discern not only the specific aspects of every era and age but also the changes that have occurred over time.

This is clear not only from the look and manner of the subject as depicted but also the clothes, postures, customs and habits reflected in the portrait. Therefore any great portrait has to have these three qualities of being lifelike, having unique quality of subject and having an artistic sensibility. Only then will the portrait have the quality to stand the test of time and people's fickle admiration.

This is the immortal quest of every artist which he can only achieve by creating such innocent lines and vistas. In recent times a lot of self styled experts influenced by foreign travel and study have tried to overlook this important aspect of reverence for the subject and innocence for the art.

Not only that, they even try to justify a purely subjective approach by imposing their own prejudices on the style of the artwork. They argue that just as a

person's appearance and character can change in his lifetime so can it in his portrait. In addition they argue there is no consistency in the way any person is looked upon even by his family, friends or rest of society.

So more important than realism is the artistic skill or innovation shown by the artist, they argue. But any art lover will agree and understand that if we place two portraits of the same subject standing in the middle, most people will select the portrait which looks more realistic.

At the same time the creative portrait may have such a powerful aura and appeal that it will win awards, make bigger impact and remain in viewers' minds for its unique quality that even photographic realism will fail to have.

The important thing here to remember is that for students learning their craft innocence and diligence are virtues they cannot afford to overlook. Only after they master the ability to achieve realism in their art will their creative outlook ripen and mature to discover new styles and approaches as was the case with Picasso, after his blue and pink periods, and with Matisse and other modern masters.

A lot of portraits are there in museums and art collections which show Herculean effort on the part of the artist but lack a pleasing quality. The subjects look dull and lifeless as if in mourning. It is the artist's duty and skill to bring the subject to life and create a happy feeling in him and the work.

The artist can resort to jokes, witty repartee or even music to enable this. This will ensure that even the frowns on his face will vanish, and the tired lines near his eyes and lips will not sulk. To be sure, the expressions of any subject are not consistently the same throughout the sitting. They always keep changing.

They sometimes appear happy, angry, bored, sulking etc. If this appears in the portrait, it will be there forever. In this sense the canvas and the artist's eyes and art is like a mirror. The mystery in Mona Lisa's smile has captivated millions but her real identity and nature also remain shrouded in secrecy till today. The effects

of light also play an important part. From dawn to dusk it goes through a bluish to reddish tinge which can brighten or dull the contours of faces.

But most important of all is the self confidence of the artist in his art. If he has it he can overcome all obstacles to produce consistently high quality of art. If not, he will be prone to errors and his work will suffer.

This is the foundation and basis of all creative art. This is how the art journey began from the most ancient cave art to the most modern abstract art we see today. This is the eternal principle of evolution that will remain the guiding spirit of all art.
