

Status Hierarchies in American Portrait Painting

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In the tradition of Howard Becker (1982) and Everett Hughes (1958), I study the occupation of portrait painting by treating art production as simply one type of work. In contrast to art historians' focus on great art and uniquely talented creators, sociologists study portrait painters of all makes and models—good, bad, and indifferent. Interest in the entire range of portraitists leads to an examination of the status organization of the occupation.

In this analysis, I use a symbolic interactionist theoretical framework to examine how individual choices and social factors interact to produce status rankings of individual portraitists and portrait painters as a whole within hierarchies of artists and art forms. Three dimensions are relevant: individual artist goals and motivations; the interaction between actors and the norms that regulate portrait painting; and a pervasive cultural system of social values, beliefs, and symbols.

Methods

I conducted in-depth interviews with two dozen portrait painters who work in a variety of artistic styles in the mid-west, the south, and the northeastern United States. I also observed six different portrait painters as they worked. In the process, I became a participant observer as a portrait sitter and a portrait painter. I have complemented these core activities with ongoing documentary research and conversations with portraitists, portrait sitters, and art experts, including the director of the National Portrait Gallery.

The Status of Portraiture Among Painting Genres

The lowdown on the life of a portrait painter is this: There is money to be made—people want portraits of immediate family members, and universities, corporations, and associations seek likenesses of their leaders—but there is little fame to be gained in this line of work (Grant 1990: 26).

As Grant observes, neither portrait painters nor their art enjoy prestige in contemporary America. However, a small cluster of painters such as Chuck Close, Alex Katz, Lucien Freud, and others are highly regarded mainly because they are avant-garde experimenters who seldom accept commissions--“money-making” work in Grant’s terms. To understand the generally disparaging attitude towards portraiture as an art form, I first examine the organization of the occupation within its social milieu.

Portrait painting’s negative label is initially surprising in the face of an increasing demand for portraits, rising prices for this work, and a renewed interest in figure painting (Galliani 1985). The low ranking can be traced to three factors: social conventions and expectations about the art form, and the economic organization and social structure of this type of work. The first issue is the expectation of likeness. Because subjects are expected to be recognizable in the finished work, portraits are usually painted in various styles of realism, a style that has never fully recovered its status since abstract expressionism dominated painting in the 20th century. Realism is tainted by the notion that it is at heart a craft, and mastery of it reflects the ability to copy nature. This runs counter to the belief born in the Renaissance that art should be a serious intellectual pursuit—and a creation, possibly divinely inspired (Campbell 1991).

National Portrait Gallery Director Alan Fern admits that some types of portrait painting are generally ranked near the bottom of contemporary art, but he emphasizes that America has a spectrum of portraiture that includes a select group of esteemed portraitists (conversation 1991).

This high status group probably numbers less than 20 of the more than 100,000 Americans who paint portraits. These artists routinely avoid conventional expectations of likeness.

The elite portrait painters also insist that sitters respect their autonomy, in the few cases when they agree to work on commission. The issue of control over one's work is particularly sensitive in portraiture because the sitter is physically present during much of the painting process. During breaks in the sittings, subjects have the opportunity to view the work in progress, and rare are the sitters who can objectively assess an artistic rendering of themselves, especially since it is destined for public display. Thus, the portrait is apt to become a negotiated product as the artist and sitter vie for control of the outcome. Both feel pressure to please their respective audiences, and these audiences frequently demand different results. Sitters' and client's friends and families are likely to expect a favorable characterization and a likeness of the subject. However, artists paint for two audiences. Aware that reputations rest on pleasing clients and sitters, they are, at the same time, mindful that peers and art critics will also judge the work. The crux of this problem is that the general public and art world tend to define "art" differently.

This situation is compounded for the painter by the practice of not requiring payment should the client be dissatisfied with the finished work. This convention clearly places portraitists who wish to earn a livelihood in a compromising position. Taken together--sitter presence during work sessions and the payment arrangement-- allow for a potentially outrageous degree of client interference in the planning and execution of the portrait. Typically, only portraitists with established reputations are able to fully withstand the pressure of client pleasing. With less respected portrait painters, the resulting portrait may satisfy the client but is often an exercise in likeness and flattery—anathema to artists and art critics who subscribe to the romantic ideal of occupational freedom, individual expression and creativity (see Lethbridge 2002). The method of payment and the expectation of likeness and flattery date from the Renaissance, the time of portraiture's original stigma. Back then, religious and history painting were the most valued art genres. However unlike today, individual Renaissance portraitists such as Raphael,

Holbein, and Van Dyke were revered for their skill at painting life-like images of kings, nobles, and the emerging middle class.

The Status of Individual Portrait Painters

Within a social context that includes a cultural system of conventions, norms, and archaic payment arrangements--plus working conditions that permit client surveillance and interaction during the painting process-- portrait painters have individual goals and motivations. Robin Simon (1987: 12) proposes that the “working methods” of 17th-century portraitists reveal a range in priorities from producing likeness to concern with aesthetics. A similar range in the goals of portraiture exists today. These goals are rooted in a variety of individual preferences and practicalities that often require choice and compromise. In addition to these artistic goal preferences, artists have lifestyle and security preferences. For example, many artists are drawn to portraiture in the first place because of its ready market. They are also attracted to the simple and certain “cash-on-delivery” payment system rather than deal with the uncertainty and hassle of marketing finished artwork through dealers, shows, and galleries.

Related to this first issue is the question of whether the artist wishes to make a living at portraiture. If portraiture is to be “bread-and-butter work” (Hughes, 2002: 60), reputation, security, and success usually depend on producing client-satisfying likenesses. The majority of portrait painters select this option. The most skilled among them command high prices for portraits of the contemporary nobility—presidents, kings, CEOs, and such. However, even those highly skilled professionals who paint 21st-century notables are not likely to make the grade as “great” painters when they are evaluated in the total context of contemporary art production (Fern 1991). Essentially, they forgo fame for financial certainty.

However, if the artist values aesthetics foremost, commitment to the legendary “purity of art,” originality, experimentation, and autonomy are the driving forces. Here, sitter likeness takes a back seat, or is ignored. These avant-garde artists (see Crane 1987) often avoid sitter

presence altogether preferring to guard any threat to their autonomy by working from photographs or memory. Some have never accepted a commission (Hughes 1998). Many artists take this path. However, to achieve success, they must market finished portraits through the gallery system (see Bystryn 1989), and risk the possibility of not being paid. Furthermore, to work in the forefront of the avant-garde, artists must locate in a major city (preferably New York or London) at least until they become established. Overall, the avant-garde route harbors considerable risk.

The choice between traditional and avant-garde portraiture revolves around individual preferences about lifestyle, security, and artistic goals. The decision made can channel an artist to fame or fortune, but only the tiny elite group of avant-garde portraitists achieves both. Presuming that portraitists' career choices are goal-based and purposeful, we can loosely characterize the two career paths as either primarily concerned with financial security and well being (the traditionalists), or with artistic freedom and purity (the avant-garde). These goals are not necessarily mutually exclusive as the elite portraitists attest. However, to achieve high status in the profession, the avant-garde way of the legendary romantic artist is the only way to go.

Ideal Types of Portrait Painters

To clarify this analysis, I identify two ideal types (Weber in Gerth and Mills 1946) of portrait painters. Type A represents the avant-garde painter and Type B, the “bread-and-butter” traditionalist (see Figure 1). This model recognizes that no single artist precisely fits the ideal categories. Because differences in portraitists are a matter of degree, the ideal types represent the poles of a continuum. This technique illuminates the “spectrum” of portrait painters mentioned by Fern (1991).

Figure 1
IDEAL TYPES:

PORTRAIT PAINTERS

	<u>TYPE A</u> Avant-Garde	<u>TYPE B</u> Bread-and-Butter Traditionalist
<i>Motive</i>	aesthetic principles fame, fortune	earning a living fortune
<i><u>Service</u></i>	serves self-interests	serves clients
<i>Portrait content</i>	innovate, experiment	likeness, little innovation
<i>Art world's Evaluation</i>	highly esteemed	medium to low esteem
<i>Payment</i>	gallery sales	commissions
<i>Income</i>	high	low
<i>Risk</i>	high	low
<i>Autonomy</i>	high	low
<i>Purchaser</i>	collectors, museums	clients
<i>Networks</i>	exchange ideas with other artists	social networks to find clients
<i>Appreciators</i>	highly educated in arts	everyday people low in art education
<i>Romantic Myth of the Artist</i>	cherish	less valued

Summary of Ideal Types:

Art cannot make a big statement hinting at possibilities. If an artist perceives a person (in a certain way), he cannot come up with a painting that is seventy-five percent concessions.... It's impossible. We don't live in a fairy tale world where everybody is good, everybody is smiling. (Such an image) would make a vague statement. ...For me art is a "sock it to them" proposition. ...There are still artists—not too many because the

risks are tremendous—who insist that they cannot compromise. Of course, you have to be, first of all, a competent painter who knows how to put across [a statement about the human condition]. ...A portrait should stand on its own as a pure work of art. (Bela Petheo, artist interview).

The romantic image of the artist permeates Type A standards and directs the portraitist's choices. This type ideally maintains complete autonomy, power, and control over sittings and thus prefers noncommissioned work.

In contrast, the Type B portraitist is an artistic entrepreneur. This type seeks out clients, keeps tabs on the market, promotes his or her reputation, and welcomes portrait commissions. Because Type B portraitists want to avoid client rejection of their work, likeness can become almost an obsession:

I'm not Van Gogh. ...I'm out to get a picture of a person down on canvas as well as I know how to do it. ...I think most portrait painters are fighting for the likeness. The hell with the inner glow. The hell with the eyes. The hell with the rest of it. If they don't get the likeness, it's not a portrait. And the fundamental thing you're fighting for is "God, I hope the dog thinks it looks like him, I hope the maid thinks it looks like him, I hope somebody knows who it is." Really. ...Portrait painters will give you all this bullshit about the inner me and that sort of thing, but what they're fighting for is number one, likeness (Comer Jennings, artist interview).

This is not the voice of a free artistic spirit, but rather a realistic and practical businessman who performs a service for his clients. For Type B portrait painters to achieve success, they must be willing to relinquish the romantic myth of the artist, and with it, usually some degree of occupational autonomy. In return, they earn a steady income through painting. Broadly speaking, whereas Type A lives to work, Type B works to live.

Clearly, the portrait painter's goals, motives, and preferences affect his or her occupational status, financial security, lifestyle, and identity.

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