

Making true portraits requires three indispensable elements: skill (see also talent), particular, as distinct from general, intention, and an X-ray-like visionary penetration. Clairvoyance, clear-sight in the literal sense, would be a better word for the third one, had not the term long become misused for something rather less real. Imagination is the medium in which alone the invisible can be projected into analysis, fact, and flesh, and is accessible only to the human creature cum creator.

The challenge of portraiture is that the personality resides in more than external factors, since all of us use our common structural components in countless different ways: hence "a speaking likeness" as often used to describe an especially striking one. My portraits are meant to speak, and they surely do. Everyone says so!

So, my sitters are asked to speak when posing. People go slack and frozen-featured when allowed to sink into ruminant torpor. Except when they have reached a particular point of professional apotheosis which I particularly want to illustrate, I like subjects to choose what they will wear (you can tell when real or false modesty would pervert the course of truth), because of what this will tell you about their beliefs, longings and self-judgments. What is there to be seen doesn't have to be spelt out in so many words, does it? It will still make all the difference between reality and pretence.

Meanwhile the composition will have been worked out, the overall design which in fact is what creates a picture. Even if it's a case of a head or head and shoulders only, size, angle of focus, placement, colour can never be foregone conclusions. Every picture has to be considered in its own right and as a unique problem. The drawings from life and back-up photographs are the notations I have to build on. While life drawing is a vital necessity for depicting the person, there is no point in spending hours recording clothes, jewellery and so forth, which the camera will capture perfectly well - though occasionally I ask to retain some garment or ornament to work from in the studio over a period of time.

Time? On an average it takes three weeks upwards to make the actual painting - yes, painting is what it is, whether by brush or scalpel, pattern and tonal gradations being created simultaneously from a number of homogeneous layers of paper of equal size stapled together and placed vertically on easel or wall, like canvas or board. No two works follow the same route - so long as at some early stage every colour has been exposed to view. Every move, every perforation has to be carefully plotted.

I am not a slow worker. The framed head in this picture ((Inge)) is an insert of oil on canvas, a good likeness, life size, and took maybe three-quarters of an hour. All the rest, face and all, took the regulation three weeks plus. Obviously this doesn't account for preparatory work like selection of colour scheme and also of the order of the layering, which again depends very much on the design. For example, a highlight in an eye or on a ring usually demands that the white layer be under not over the base colour. And you may wish to combine, say, a red, a blue, a white, a yellow. Fine: but which red, blue, yellow, white - yes, even in the case of white



there can be several variants to choose from -? It can become a matter of almost endless adjustments. I have counted as many as five hours' sweating this stage out; then having to start over again to fix the order of the layering sequence. In the end I don't often get any of that wrong to the extent of having to abandon and destroy a work begun. But I remember an instance admittedly long ago when I discovered too late that the colour there was going to be most of was right at the bottom of the pile. Accuracy of cutting would have been prohibitively compromised, moreover leaving hardly any connecting points and lines such as act as the skeleton does to the flesh of our bodies. Of course I had to re-think and re-make the whole piece. But it's rightly said that you learn more from your mistakes than from those easy runs.

This whole technique, I have to say, is calculated to teach you unexpected lessons all the time, in an inexhaustible number of directions. Which renders it inexhaustibly fascinating, an unending adventure, with moments of real terror to overcome, and breathless recovery. You may smile: but try and have a bash some time. For there's no correcting mistakes. Every step can resemble an invitation to a traffic accident, a fatal one.

The most difficult assignment I ever had to face was the commission to do a portrait of a young man who had tragically died and whom to my knowledge I had never met. I had never met his parents either. To me there is no calamity to compare with the death of a child; and there is nothing I find more irresistible than a challenge. I had to try.

Everybody knows that no two snapshots of a given person will look at all alike. The parents collected every photo in existence of their son; I saw his room and other effects, the odd garment and pieces of work; and above all heard/learnt a very great deal about him - all there was to know, I felt, except that this is an impossibility. I felt I knew him and knew what I had to do. If it didn't work, the heavens wouldn't fall, or no more than they already had done with his death as such. I did what I always do - sank myself in my subject, like a deep-sea diver with preternatural breathing equipment, and for the time being lived and worked wholly immersed in him, permeated with the need to bring him back. That may sound weird, but that's the way it goes, without any supernatural overtones, mind.

Well, it did work: one of the best moments I've ever experienced. I've done another couple of "unknown" posthumous commemorative portraits since, with equally satisfying outcome. Not counting the statue of the scientist Sir Rowland Biffen for the Cambridge Plant Breeding Institute named after him. Though applauded by people who had known the man, a three-dimensional likeness is easier to achieve than the single-plane, out-and-out illusion, and I was not labouring for close family. Moreover the man had had a bushy moustache, camouflaging a fair area of facial structure, as you might say labour-saving!

I'm not saying anyone could do it. But by and large, that's how it's done.

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*addendum*