

# History of portraiture: changes in styles and techniques



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The immemorial fascination of man's own image and of those of his fellow human beings arose a desire in men to attempt and embellish his likeness into a physical medium. However at the time portrait was exclusive to those who wished to celebrate man's relationship with God and the divine rulers of the times, which makes the Renaissance a revolutionary era for portraiture and the development of artist techniques. The common subjects of royalty and wealth were joined together with the trivial and oppressed, giving artists around the world more latitude to delve into painting intricate and thought-provoking portraits to be cherished for centuries. Deciding to undertake the task of compiling the substantial triumphs for portraiture styles and methods over time, I plan to introduce it in the span of six notable art movements and cover the most significant artist of the time. The theme portraiture hold a special place in my heart, it's enigmatic and flexible principles give the artist the upmost freedom to depict people in a way that suits them. It's a theme that lasted through the test of time, becoming more and more popular as the centuries turn.

Jan Van Eyck was a powerful visionary in 15<sup>th</sup> century with his command of linear perspective and captivating interiors that bathed in golden lights, his art sank into oblivion until the 1930s. Expressing a new awareness of reality through the use of oil paint, he crafted remarkable paintings and portraits that had remarkable attention to detail, observation of nature and light, and constructing spaces steeped in elegant interior which inhabited realistic characters. His careful positioning, golden lights and expert command of the technique of oil painting made him one of the most significant representative of the Renaissance art movement. His style and technique was a step up

from the less realistic depiction of human forms by the then pre-Renaissance artists Giotto di Bondone and Cimabue.

As the 17<sup>th</sup> century approached, the subject for painters was changing as the patrons no longer served an essential role in the choice of subjects and composition. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio painted people who were then counted as trivial: peasants appeared alongside sovereigns and saints, crafting a new approach to portraiture for his time. At the beginning of his artistic career he broke through with his loose interpretations of traditional subjects, painting the first still life in the history of art as a subject in itself and knowingly portrayed saints as everyday people. The conventions of his time didn't worry him, nor did the already established art guidelines. He did not make primary sketches but place the paint straight to the canvas, using the foundation coats as an artistic element. The early works of the artist revealed his love of poetic naturalism that was inspired by his everyday life. Caravaggio's approach to chiaroscuro (the artistic play of light and shadow) was a clear departure from the art conventions of Mannerism. These conventions found their way into the most significant Baroque and Rococo artists.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a new freedom became apparent with the French painters as they began portraying a carefree and libertine behavior of society consistently in their artwork. The most noteworthy artist of the time was the Rococo painter François Boucher. He was highly adept in many forms of media as he switched traditional bright oil paints to forms of decorative art. Adopting a high tone palette that favoured blues and pinks,

he set a definite foundation for most paintings of dream-like quality. His paintings of beautiful women in rich silk clothing endorsed scenes of erotic and passionate love. Oil and gouache sketches were common in preparation for his bigger commissions as his careful attention to finer background detail made the scene more poignant and alive, filling it with character and passion. The dream like qualities of his prominent artwork carried on into the triumph of Romanticism.

The spirituality and the influences from the previous eras stimulated the imagination of artists around the world. The art historian and theoretician of colour, Eugène Delacroix was and still is the acknowledged master of Romanticism and one of the last great decorative painters. His passion for colours and the depiction of lively composition is reflected in his canvas won the admiration of the public. ' Everything is the subject; the subject is yourself: our impressions, your emotions when faced with nature.' he professed. His skill in the thick impasto unified well with his choice of colours, giving his paintings the form of a sketch. The innovative take on colour, the earthy shades and the use of rich varnishes changed the way most artists composed their portraits and subject matters, crafting their styles to match Delacroix's. The analytical approach to colour is recognised in almost all realism, impressionism and art nouveau paintings that dominated the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The creations of Vincent Van Gogh, albeit spanning over a short period of ten years, contained distinguishing marks of his life and the torment he endured as well as the places he lived in. The canvases bore his

trademark frantic colours and figures in the form of various self-portraits, landscapes and scenes from ordinary day to day life. His impact on art gave colour a new meaning in the works of artists and put forth a new style in which the painter can place his brush on the canvas. A new approach to light and colour enabled him to go beyond both Impressionism and Neo-Impressionism, enabling his style in his self-portraits to experience a change that brought criticism upon him at the time. The intense expressiveness, accompanied by a turmoil of brush strokes produced a new wave of artists stimulated to create more illusive and stylised paintings to continue the tradition of expressive portraiture.