FACING THE TRUTH

How do you speak about a person without using words? That is the problem faced by portrait painters. The visual language of portraiture which has developed over the centuries is every bit as complex as the vocabulary used to describe people verbally.

Of course, for some artists it is enough to merely paint an image of the face before them. I say 'merely' paint an image, but of course, that is the one thing that words can't do. How often when we read a biography do we jump to the clump of black and white photos in the center of the book to put a face to the description of the man who broke her heart, of the teacher who inspired his future career, of the handsome father who was the first love of her life. And how disappointed we are if it isn't there.

It is impossible to overestimate the power of a portrait. Soldiers carry photos of girlfriends into battle. Grandparents carry pictures of their grandchildren in their wallets . Religions and rulers use a face to represent themselves: images of the queen humanized the British empire and images of Jesus and Mary turned Christian values into a human story to touch the heart. Some portraits, like Mona Lisa or the photo of Che Guevera in his black beret have taken on a kind of afterlife, turning up in all sorts of odd places, as a basis for political cartoons or in other artists' work. Magazines like Hello thrive on our need to stare at celebrities , as if the longer we look, the more we will learn about these starry beings. I – as well as you -- could go on and on.

So the portrait painter owns the one thing that words can't do: the ability to show us what someone looks like. But though for some painters , it is enough,

for others it is not. Titian in the sixteenth century said that ‘the painter must always seek the essence of things , always represent the essential characteristics and emotions of the person he is painting.’

So to start with, let's see how Titian did that. On the surface, his portrait of the Doge Andrea Gritti looks pretty standard for a ruler of the Venetian empire. He is mature. He wears the robes of office.He doesn't look approachable. It is only when you compare it to Titian's own self portrait that the painter's command of visual language comes clear. This Doge is all belly, his face set , his hands clutching his gloves like the claws of a bird of prey. He is a man of action and a powerful head of state, his importance symbolised by the traditional hat that signifies his position. Titian looks to be about the same age in his self portrait, but the ascetic skull cap, the dark robes, the clerical , schoolmasterly garb gives the impression of a modest man, an intellectual.

Dress and colour are important elements in the language of portraiture and Titian knows how to use them . In his touching portrait of Ranuccio Farnese made in 1542, the richness of the adult clothes serves as a frame for his inexperienced adolescent face. It was painted just after the twelve year old had been made the prior of San Giovanni dei Forlani in Venice which belonged to the Knights of Malta –that's their signature cross on his cloak, a simple example of the use of symbols to impart information. Three years later, this grandson of Pope Paul 11 would become a Sicilian cardinal, which gives you an insight into the workings of the Renaissance career ladder, not to mention the Papal morality of the time.

Pose is another element of the language. Titian's idea of showing Rannucio looking out of the picture suggests the quick reactions and liveliness of youth.

And while holding gloves is a device available to every artist, it can mean different things in different paintings. The grasp of the Doge suggests decisiveness while that of the boy is a depiction of relaxed elegance, of an ignorance of what life can hold.

By contrast , Titian's portrait of Isabella d'Este is all clothes, all doll, no personality. The ornate dress tell us that she is rich, her face tells us she is young and comely, her hands that she is demure, but no more. In fact , she was 62 at the time and she had rejected Titian's first attempt at painting her as not flattering enough.

Size and scale are other elements. Size in particular can seem too obvious to mention. A life size full length portrait shouts its importance at you. But a head scaled up to fit just inside the canvas has its own intensity and when done well can have as much impact, holding you with its glittering eye like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner

More difficult for us to than pose, dress, colour, symbolism and scale are the standards and social conventions within which painters worked. For example, until the twentieth century, it was accepted that women were secondary to men, the mothers, daughters and wives whose value lay in their beauty, their modesty their biddability, their usefulness to their families in terms of marital alliances. The line in Milton 's seventeenth century epic poem sums it up; 'he for God only, she for God in him.

One result of these gender conventions is that when you look at portraits made in earlier centuries, you would be hard pressed to find a woman with

anything much to say for herself. The men hold guns, wear their medals of state , look at globes, read books, point to plans. The woman dangle their books in the folds of their skirts, look fetchingly off into the middle distance, stroke a little dog, wear costly clothes. The fact that we know that many of these women had talents and skills, were great letter writers or fine embroiderers, for example, or ran huge households, play instruments or paint to an impressive standard is not usually included in female portraits before the twentieth century .

This can lead to a very skewed picture of the genders. Even when a woman is doing the commissioning, she is hardly likely to want to alienate the society which surrounds her. We already know that by rejecting Titian's first portrait of her, Isabella d'este was a woman of firm views . But while the portrait tells us of her wealth and style – and in fact her fashions were followed -- it omits to tell us that she was an important cultural and political figure, ruling Mantua in her husband's absence and making the city a center of art and ideas.

By contrast, the portrait of Richard Milles, who was painted in Rome by Pompeo Batoni in the 1760s when the rich young Englishman was on the ground tour, positively explodes with information. His pose is the very pattern of a confident young gentleman . He points on the map to the Swiss mountains he had to cross to get into Italy and the bust alludes to his classical interests.

Isabelle d'este and Milles are the normal portrait patterns for the two sexes, in which inevitably the women lose out. You wouldn't guess from them that, aside from being a member of parliament, a position which at that period was offered on a plate to the upper classes, Milles left no legacy of thought or action while Isabella spent the last ten years of her action-packed life, as the ruler of a small Italian city state.

Changes in society get converted in some form or other into changes in art. The middle class developed in the eighteenth century and to match it, art developed the conversation piece, a new kind of small scale informal group depicting people of the middling sort, as they were called at the time.

In these delicious smallish paintings which seem so relaxed and intimate to us, the family hierarchy is still as clear as a clean window. The father is always the most important, often standing while his wife sits and linked in some way with the son and heir , as in the painting of the 1770s by Francis Wheatley, A Family Group in a Landscape. The mother takes charge of the babies and the girls as well as the boys up to the age of seven when they were removed from her soft orbit to harden them up for their role as adult men.

On the whole servants are strangers to art, unless they are so trusted or so picturesque that the head of the family wants them included. The young black servant at the edge of this group belongs to the family in the sense of ownership not membership, proof that though the poor did not commission portraits ,they do sometimes turn up in them.

There is a whole category of female portraits , shocking to us today, of beautiful women with little black boys included to offer a contrast to milady's porcelain complexion, as in Peter Lely's seventeenth century portrait of the Countess of Dysart. An anonymous portrait of a later, eighteenth century Countesss of Dysart shows the black child subservient to the white child. It is an image that disquiets us, because we know that the black boy , like the parakeet and the dog , is little more than an exotic pet.

Portraits of the poor are even harder to find. There is an urchin in the portrait done in 1793 by William Beechey of Sir Francis Ford's children but no one knows his name and he is only there as a device to allow the artist to speak about the rich children he has been commissioned to paint. The son , already acting like a miniature upper class man, is sturdily in command of the situation. The little girl, already displaying the required sensitivity and compassion of her sex, holds out a penny , her kindly charity managing to overwhelm her reluctance to get too close to the hobbling unfortunate. Their father was a plantation owner and politician who supported slavery.

Of course there are exceptions that prove the rule. The portrait of a tailor by Moroni made about 1565 is a masterpiece of dignity and one wonders why he made it; perhaps it was in exchange for a fine suit of clothes. In the case of these heads of the servants of Hogarth's household, which are treated with an equal dignity, we can make an educated guess. Beautifully painted, Unfinished but in no way a unified composition – just look at those gazes in all different directions -- it is painted with sympathy and and it stayed in his studio,

probably to prove that he could paint flesh as well as anyone. This was certainly the case with his glorious portrait of The Shrimp Girl made in the 1740s which exudes freshness and vitality . His widow used to point to it and say 'and they said he could not paint flesh. There's flesh and blood for you.'

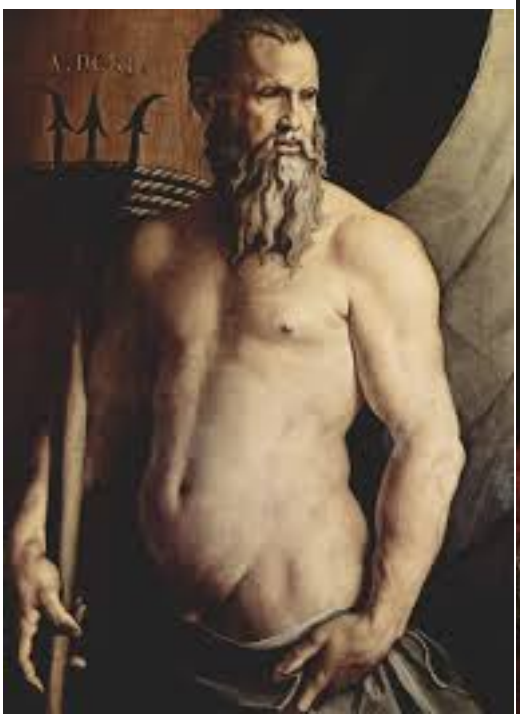
As well as working within the conventions of gender and social hierarchy, painters also worked within the artistic conventions of their day, which is another way of saying that artists don't work in a professional vacuum. On the surface, Reynold's portrait of Commodore Keppel is easy to read. He is heroic and his domain is the sea. What is less obvious is that the basis of its pose is the classical statue, the Apollo Belvedere . Reynolds was always looking for

ways to add dignity to portraiture as a category because in the eighteenth century it was ranked lower than history paintings, those stage sets depicting morally uplifting historic and biblical events which were considerered the highest form of art. At the time Reynolds painted Keppel, respect for classical learning was high , as was Reynolds' respect for Keppel who was to become a lifelong friend, so what better way to display the intellectual basis of your art AND flatter your subject, than by silently conflating him with the Apollo , a sculpture revered in the eighteenth century?

The one thing we haven't considered so far is truth, a difficult word when used in the same sentence as portrait. We tend to accept that a portrait painter tells us the truth about a person's appearance. But when you know the background to Isabella d'Este's portrait or read the advice to portrait painters to showcase the good and play down the bad , you realize that it is mostly a glamorized truth that is put before our eyes. Since presumably the portrait Goya made of Charles 1V of Spain and His Family in 1800 depicts them improved for the painting, one wonders what they really looked like in the flesh. The unflattering honesty of this portrait has astounded viewers ever since. One theory , which makes sense in the light of Goya's other work, is that it is a satirical depiction of the monarchy, with the queen placed in the center because she was the true power behind the throne. If it is satirical, the fact that Goya got away with it is a convincing depiction of the royal family's blindness to any views except their own.

Just as honest but a lot more endearing is Zoffany's portrait of the radical politician John Wilkes with his unmarried daughter ,Mary. He was deeply attached to her , and Zoffany shows him, most unusually for a father of an adult daughter, gazing up at her like a lover. Horace Walpole viewed this portrait in Zoffany's studio in 1779 and pronounced it to be 'horridly like' commentating that Wilkes was '...squinting tenderly at his daughter '. Even using all his powers of flattery, the painter can not turn these geese into swans, but the affection between them warms the canvas.

Not all painters are great, not all their subjects are well known today, and galleries are full of the kind of portraits which look as if they belong to the same undistinguished family. Dull colours, unimaginative poses, faces that fail to stop you as you tramp past them on your way to the coffee shop. So let's ignore those, and for the second half of this talk consider some portraits which use the language of their time in a particularly creative manner, creating originality out of the conventions that bind them.



In the 1530s or 40s, Bronzino painted this portrait of the Genoese hero and

naval commander Andrea Doria . It follows the convention of linking him to a classical antecedent as a base, in this case the sea god Neptune, but the manner of its use results in an extraordinary image of a middle aged man, strong , powerful, ruthless, and in my view, rather sexy . In 1760, Gainsborough painted this wonderfully dashing portrait of the amateur musician Ann Ford. He kept it as a sort of advertisement in his painting rooms in Bath which in the manner to the day were open to the public. 'A most extraordinary figure, handsome and bold but I should be very sorry to have any one I loved set forth in such a manner' wrote a disconcerted Mrs Delaney, an intimate of court circles. And Joseph Burke noted that 'she crosses her legs above the knee, a masculine freedom unrecorded in the female portraits of Rubens and Van Dyck.'

In the eighteenth century no upper class female amateur wanted to be seen as professional, that is as someone who worked for money. Aware of this, Gainsborough has painted her in a charming setting and music is not the first thing on her mind. But I believe that this dashing pose is the artist's way of telling us this is a woman with a mind of her own, a woman whose father once forbad from performing in public. The outcry raised by her crossed legs throws light on the pressures on portrait painters to keep within the boundaries of Artistic and social good taste.

Francois Gerard's life size portrait of the artist Jean Baptiste Isabey and his daughter Alexandrine painted in 1795 stops you in your tracks, as it did the contemporary audience. At first you think it is because the little girl is so enchanting but then it dawns on you how unusual a subject this is. Mothers and daughters , of course. But fathers and daughters? It is the exception that proves the rule of the conventional presentation of parenting. You sometimes see this thinking today when a gallery label suggests that an anonymous portrait of a man with a child must mean he is a widower.

A particularly interesting extension of the language of self portraiture came from women artists of the past . When I was writing a history of women's self portraits, I realised that some of them must have been dissatisfied with the masculine self portrait patterns available to them. There was the artist with the

tools of his trade. The artist looking like a gentleman. And several variations of the artist at work. But as women, they had a special problem: if they worked for money , they were not considered ladies. If they boasted of their skills they were not considered feminine. If they looked too arty or too industrious, they invited ridicule. So how to depict themselves as both feminine but professional?

Artemisia Gentileschi hit on an idea that no man could ever use: she painted herself in 1639 as la Pittura, the personification of painting as described in the seventeenth century, with the mad black hair, dynamic pose and medallion of the muse around her neck. The only part of the allegorical description she left out , understandably since this was a self portrait, was the cloth around her mouth signifying that painting was dumb. She is claiming to be painting itself – very daring.

The eighteenth century artist Elizabeth Vigee Lebrun who became painter to Queen Marie Antoinette in her twenties, made a series of self portraits in which she silently compared herself to the most admired paintings of the past. After seeing Rubens' Chapeau de Paille in 1782, she was inspired to make a self portrait ''in order to achieve the same effect.' A comparison of the two paintings , which hang in the National Gallery in London, illustrates the possibilities for expression in the language of portraiture.

There are certain elements in Vigee Lebrun's painting that are the same as in the Rubens. Like him, she shows herself standing and to below the waist; she is outdoors and wears a low cut dress and a shady hat; the light touches her cheek and falls on to her bosom. But far more extraordinary are the differences. Though her dress is cut low, she minimizes her cleavage. Instead of clutching herself in a body language of timidity, she graciously extends a hand to the viewer. Her level gaze meets ours and the angle of her head commands us to

draw closer on her own terms in contrast to the Rubens whose subject's shadowed face coquettishly invites the viewer to respond. Finally, her palette gives her an identity beyond her beauty.

Vigee Lebrun has reworked the Rubens into a statement about herself as a woman and an artist in order to subtly boast about her achievements. She disapproved of the silhouette achieved with corsets, draping her sitters with scarves and shawls instead. The natural placing of her bosom advertises this belief -- not to mention the fine figure of which she was so proud. Her loose brown curls are not the innocent transcription of reality they seem. In her memoirs, she claims the credit for ending the craze for powdered hair when she persuaded a fashionable Duchess to pose with her natural hair for her portrait. And of course she is proving that she can compete with Rubens , whose painting was revered in the late eighteenth century.

In 1785, she did it again, this time inhabiting the Madonna della Sedia by Raphael in an arresting image which well into the twentieth century appeared on everything from tins to trays and which cleverly succeeded in uniting her with one of the greatest artists of the past while simultaneously displaying the strength of her maternal feelings. The visual power of the embrace is evidence of the mother daughter bond, a useful strategy in this hard working artist's negotiation with the attitudes of an age that officially 'loved' women but only if they conformed to its notions of femininity.

Angelika Kauffman, an eighteenth century star who brought contintental ideas about classical art to England, specialised in speaking self portraits like this Self Portrait in the Character of Painting Embraced by Poetry of 1782. Since poetry was seen as more intellectual than painting, this superficially gentle image of two young women is actually a bold and justified claim by the artist that she possessed the education to produce art based on historical knowledge, far from the mere copying of appearances expected from most women. In all these self portraits, the women used the conventions of their times in an original way, showing off a sophistication to rival the men while never for a moment undercutting the modest femininity the age demanded of the weaker sex.

Over the last hundred years, portraits have changed radically. After the debut of Impressionism in the Paris of the 1870s, the pace of artistic styles speeded up. It was as if every generation built on the one before, or since we are all post Freudians now, killed off the one before. The post impressionists, the dot-crazy pointillists, the cubists, culminated in the abstract art that could be found in every country by the start of the first world war in 1914.

This caused a rupture between style and subject which was particularly obvious with portraiture where likeness is everything. In the paintings of the past, all the artists' skill went into making a speaking likeness, a living picture. But the avant garde artists had the problem of keeping true to their artistic beliefs at the same time as satisfying the sitter. It can be quite fun to spot the compromises, as in Klimt's portrait of the gorgeous Adele Bloch-Bauer of 1907 where his signature mosaic patterns cover the whole canvas except for the realistically painted face.

One way round the problem was to paint friends and family, as Picasso does in this portrait of Marie Therese Walter, the seventeen year old mistress he had picked up in the Paris street. This is a poem of a painting: the breasts rhyme with the arms of the chair, the beads are compared to her nipples. And of course, if you wanted to be considered artistically up to date yourself, you did as Picasso's dealer Daniel Kahnweiler did in 1912 and commissioned a painting from the artist ,knowing that your acceptance of the avant garde end product would mark you as a connoisseur.

The past century has seen an increasing number of nude portraits. Despite the odd early example, like the portrait of Andrea Doria as Neptune, and a rash of nude male self portraits by German and Austrian artists at the turn of the twentieth century,nudity and portraiture are not on the surface natural bedfellows After Gwen John graduated from the Slade in London , she went to Paris where she lived on pennies, modelling Rodin among others to make extra money. There were a group of women in a similar situation and sometimes they used each other as models. This painting of her friend Fenella Lovell made in 1909, introduces a completely new kind of female nude into art . The traditional ideal nude body was a kind of generalised perfection, air we would say , with a generalised and characterless young face to match. But an

individualised portrait face combined with an individualised portrait body that was nothing like the idealised nude body painted by male artists of any year you choose to mention, well , that was something new.

Alice Neel 's reputation as a portrait painter has shot up like a firework since her death in 1983. In the 1930s she got the idea that painting people without their clothes was the way to show their true character. At the time, she could only get friends and family to sit for her. This portrait of her friend Rhoda Meyers done in 1930 delights in her mismatched breasts, a body formation not unknown outside the world of the perfect painted nude but extraordinary within it. The portrait of her eight year old daughter Isabetta enraged HER daughter, who is on record in a film as saying 'I would never have my children naked like that standing for a photo or a painting. I just don't think it's correct. All that genitalia you know…and it was very pronounced in that picture and I think it's ugly.'

Alice Neel's great talent was finally recognised in the late 1960s and it gave her the confidence to return to her nude portraits. But this time her fame , and perhaps the happy, hippy, freedom revolution of the 1960s, meant that her subjects were famous and willing to be exhibited. The flesh in her 1970 portrait of Andy Warhol has something of the look of a large deshelled shrimp. Warhol looks oddly modest, a bit feminine and very vulnerable , as he must have been after the attempt on his life two years earlier by one of his circle, Valerie Solanas. A comparison between this and Andrea Doria as Neptune would make a challenging exam question.

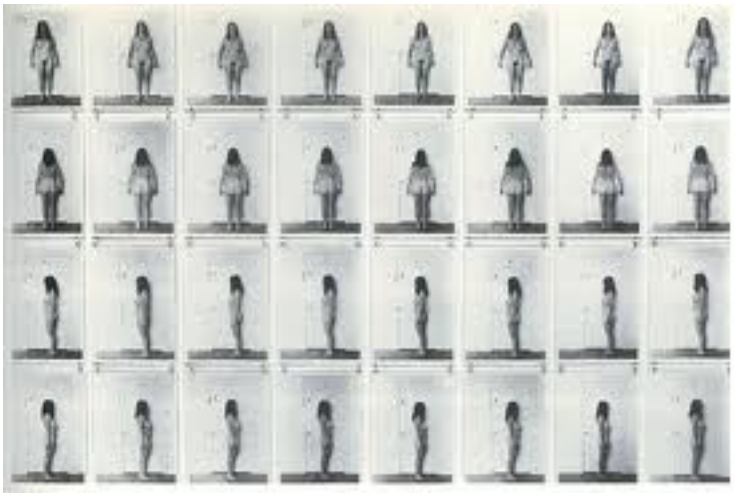
Sylvia Sleigh is also interested in painting portraits of men without their clothes. Paul Rosano Reclining made in 1974 offers a akind of encyclopaedia of male body hair. Her search to find a new kind of beauty in men led her to emphasise its varied patterns and textures . Her critics say that by concentrating on beauty without brains ,she is doing what male artists have

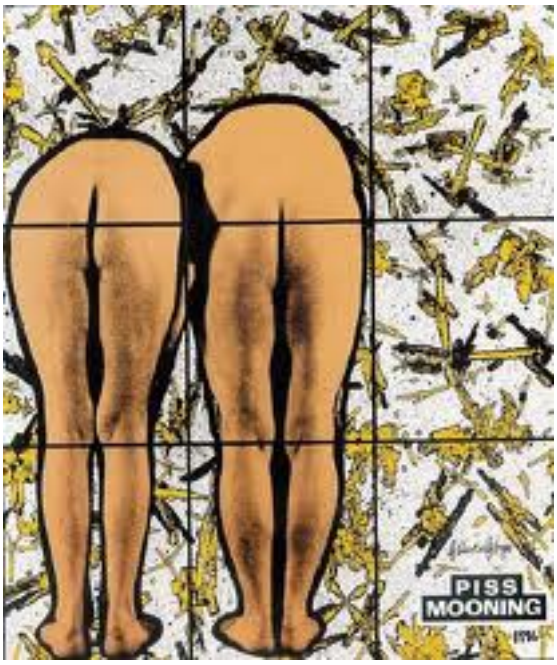
done for centuries, and while it is true that she collected a stable of gorgeous young men to model for her, the results, unlike the ideal female nude, are definitely portraits, named and individualised. Hers is perhaps an uncomplicated form of feminism as one might expect from the 1970s, but it is absolutely typical of its time. The double portrait Philip Golub Reclining of 1971 is a study in contrasts, the artist's square and upright middle aged body painting the languorous, boyish Philip Golub in a pose taken from Velazquez' Rokeby Venus.

Despite these paintings, nude portraiture is still as rare as a solid week of sun in England . Victoria Kate Russell toyed with it in her portrait of the actress and

director Fiona Shaw commissioned by The National Portrait Gallery in London in 2002. It is a magnificent life size image of the imposing Shaw in a sensible bra ,which suggests costume changes, and with her feet planted firmly apart, which suggests strength of mind . So unusual is it to see someone famous in their underwear in an art gallery, that a crowd always surrounds it. The pose may owe something to Paula Rego's portrait of Germaine Greer made seven years earlier in 1995 . Rego's decision to show Greer with her knees apart is a spectacularly no-nonsense image of a woman whose strength of mind puts her above vanity. Both portraits illustrate how the change in conventions surrounding the depiction of women allows a whole new range of character-revealing poses.

Portraiture is continually refreshing itself. At the start of the 1970s, the feminist artists who confidently marched on to art's stage extended the concept of self portraiture, turning it from a painter speaking about herself to an artist embodying ideas that mattered to women in general.





Many of these works have become classics, like Eleanor Antin's 144 photographs of herself taken iover 36 days in 1972 as she dieted to lose weight. Its witty title, Carving: A Traditional Sculpture, is a reference to the Michelangelesque idea that a sculptor chips away at the marble to release the body inside. Antin is using her body as a way to personify abstract ideas about the female search for the ideal shape, the constant dieting, the perpetual watching of oneself. The potential of this extension to self portrait patterns was understood by other artists. Gilbert and George often put themselves center stage in their huge photographic works that talk about the things that matter to them: the multi-racial young men, the sexuality, the slogans, the vibrancy of the area of East London where they live their artistic and private lives.

One of the ways I edited myself in talking about this endlessly fascinating subject was by limiting myself to painted images. But sculpture has been there from the start of art, photography has been around since the 1840s, film from

1900, and digital processes, including video, for the last three decades. Artists can pick and choose from any or all of them. So I leave you with a final thought.

I am entranced by the illusion that I can hold Australian history in my hand -- and I am aware of course that it is an illusion. At school I listened to nothing. Or to put it another way, nothing made much sense and this was particularly true of history .I once represented my class in a general knowledge quiz and was asked which English king had been beheaded. I replied 'I thought lots of them were' and I remembering hearing distant waves of laughter so I knew I was wrong. But I had no idea what was right. There was just too much history to get hold of. Here in Australia I feel I have a chance to understand a bit, and it is all fascinating, everything from the heritage status of tin roofs to the historic reasons for the strength of women and the fact that unlike my exhausted country, your ascent is nowhere near finished.

An Australian gallery of portraits can only grow and grow. How exciting that it will do so at a time when art has never been so varied, enabling portraiture to develop alongside the developing nation.

Frances Borzello

National Portrait Gallery of Australia

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