Period Portraits

Or how proper poses and props help avoid the grip-and-grin anachronism

Background

Portraits of identifiable people started to become a thing from the mid-1400s on. Initially associated with rulers and courtiers, portraiture patronage spread to the merchant class across much of Europe. This handout takes a very quick look at Western Europe portrait styles covering roughly 150 years, to provide some ideas on how modern folk can adapt the way they sit and stand for photos and give some thought to what could/should be in shot to enhance the effect of a period-style portrait. Even in period, portraits would be criticised as "confusing, irritating, or indecorous" with this put down to failures in the selection, pose, placement, or attributes of the individuals portrayed" (Nelson pg 6). Italian artist Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo wrote in 1584 that:

> *… it is truly ridiculous to see merchants and bankers having themselves painted in armor holding generals' batons, whereas they should appear in their gowns with quill pens behind their ears and daybooks in front of them*
>
> Nelson et al, pg 15

Most Important Advice

If you know where and when you are from, collect portraits that represent that time and place to get a feel for how people were portrayed, how they stood or sat or faced, what they were depicted with.

Poses

These tended to change over time, from the side-on profiles of early 15th century Italy harking back to Roman coin portraits to the relaxed three-quarter poses of the Low Countries in the 16th century which caught on elsewhere.

ᵫ **Profile**: an early pose popular with high-status women or couples; plain or indoor domestic background
eg Fra Filippo Lippi *Man and Woman at a Window*; Piero della Francesca *the Duke of Urbino and his wife*

ᵫ **Three-quarters:** Mid-1430s, first in Low Countries portraiture then 50 years later spreading to Italy; head may be turned to look at the viewer; standing or seated; often framed; primarily torso-focused
eg Bellini *Doge Leonardo Loredan*; Raphael *Bindo Altoviti*

ᵫ **Face On or Frontal**:
Often set within a frame or window; the direct gaze was considered quite confrontational, a statement pose
eg Albrecht Durer *Self Portrait*; Riechlich *Gregor Angerer*

ᵫ **Full-length**: bust length was the most common format for most portraits as full-length was associated with rulers or nobility until the latter half of the 1500s; full-length poses, typically standing, often have the subject holding something and/or with hand on hip; landscape background
see Titian *Philip II;* Anon *Sit Thomas Gresham* (a bold choice)

ᵫ **Seated**: this allows a recognisably regal pose, straight-backed, seated in a fancy chair, one arm resting along the chair's arm, typically in three-quarter pose, often looking directly out; a popular pose for women or older men

ᵫ **Sprezzatura**: a sense of effortless nonchalance and casual carelessness, elegance; introduced by Castiglione in his *Book of the Courtier* (1528); reflecting a move away from the more formal poses to something fresher
eg Bronzino *Portrait of a Young Man*; Sofonisba Anguissola *The Chess Game*

Props & Symbology

Most paintings had meaningful objects artfully arranged in view, on tables or shelves, held in the hands. Some common examples:

Skulls	mortality, humility
Candle	truth, time
Shells	fortune
Oysters	women, love
Mirrors	vanity, truth
Globe	power, adventure
Apples	temptation. learning
Grapes	pleasure. lust
Rose	sacrifice, love
Lily	purity, spirituality
Pansies	thought, remembrance
Carnation	marriage, transience
Dog	loyalty, protection

൭   *Contrapposto* (counterpoise): standing with weight on one leg, bend the other at the knee, tilt the torso, shoulders and head in a dynamic twist away from the straight leg; based on Greek sculpture and often used for mythological subjects, quite difficult to hold eg Michelangelo *David*; Botticelli *Birth of Venus*

൭   *Odalisque:* a reclining position, associated with naked women or goddesses with carefully placed drapery or hands, a direct gaze Eg Titian *Venus of Urbino*, Botticelli *Venus and Mars* (male version)

൭   *Pudica*: a nude female pose, arm across the breast and hand covering genitals, think Eve (pose included just in case you need it…) eg Botticelli *Birth of Venus* : Masaccio *The Expulsion from Paradise*

൭   *Couples*: Often wedding portrait;, woman usually on the (viewer's) right, holding hands, exchanging rings or flowers or with items representing fidelity and fertility; popular amongst the merchant class; sometimes produced as diptychs, as in separate but matching portraits, typically facing each other in a profile or three-quarter with common backgrounds Lotto: *Marsilio Cassoti and his Bride*; Ghirlandaio *Man and Woman*

൭   *Groups*: common in the Low Countries especially for guilds or military companies; families would have children typically grouped between the parents (men on viewer's left in the power position, grouped with sons); interesting hand positions based on antiquities eg Jacobsz *Guardsmen;* van Scorel *Haarlem Brotherhood*

> **Other Common Objects**
> *People are often portrayed with or pointing to significant objects:*
> Jewellery, eg rings, cameos
> Pilgrim's badges
> Armour, polished; worn or in background demonstrating power
> Coats of arms: often on outside cover or back of painting
> A globe or map
> Rosary or cross held in the hands
> Paper with a motto, year (eg *Anno lvii*) or the sitter's age (eg *Ætate xxx*); pinned to the background or stuck on the frame with sealing wax
> Letters showing quotes, drawings, names, epigrams, dates etc
> Books showing titles/authors
> Coins, ancient and regional, gold
> Vocational items: eg quills, scales, tools, craft items, seals, brushes
> Regalia, furs, high-status material

Frames, Foregrounds and Backgrounds

Many portraits show a trompe l'oeil effect with hands or objects appearing to project "outside" the inner frame. Think about whether you intend to position your portrait within a frame, either physically or electronically.

Probably easier is to provide some depth with a table in front of you, suitably covered with cloth, from plain white to cloth of gold to Turkish rugs. This can then be used to hold whatever objects you wish to display.

Sole portraits tend to have plain dark backgrounds, such as curtains of velvet or brocade; often black or dark green. These can be used to pin on mottoes, letters, arms etc. Landscapes are popular for groups or to represent specific power; posters or large-scale prints might be handy for this.

A Final Word

And if your portrait doesn't agree with you, consider yourself in good company, and better off than Isabella d'Este, the Marchioness of Mantua, who complained that Titian had made her look fat in the portrait she sent to her brother-in-law Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan. That insensitive man replied saying he thought the picture displayed an "excellent likeness"…

References and Collections
Rijks Museum; Remember Me Renaissance Portraits; catalogue for 2021 exhibition
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The Renaissance, Royal Collection Trust: https://www.rct.uk/collection/themes/exhibitions/the-art-of-italy-in-the-royal-collection/the-queens-gallery-buckingham/the-renaissance
Renaissance Portraits, Art in Context: https://artincontext.org/famous-renaissance-portraits/

L: Fra Lippo Lippi, 1440
C: Heemskerck, 1530
R: Memling,, 1480

Above L: Jacobsz, 1529
Above C: Philip II by Titian 1551
Above R: Holbein, Georg Gisze, 1532

L: An example of an SCA group shot modelled on da Vinci's Last Supper.