

The Visual and Expressive Aspects of Portrait-Painting

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Abstract: *This study sheds light on the formative and expressive aspects of depicting the human face throughout the ages. It demonstrates the influence of various era characteristics, including cultural, social, ideological, and scientific features, on depicting the human face's formative and expressive aspects. Moreover, it demonstrates how depicting the human face expresses its era, the artist's artistic personality, and his or her formative style. The study presented models representing paintings depicting the human face across successive artistic stages, which the researcher divided into four basic stages based on the creative characteristics of each stage: First, the primitive arts stage; second, the arts of civilisations stage; third, the modern art stage; and finally, the postmodern arts stage (contemporary arts). The study discussed models depicting the human face in these successive artistic stages. The study concluded that the subject of depicting the human face reflects the characteristics of the era in which it was created, with all its cultural, social, ideological, and scientific aspects. Besides, it is concluded that portrait painting is a fundamental artistic subject addressed through the ages. The study also confirmed that portraiture can be considered a document reflecting the characteristics of an era, its arts, culture, and techniques.*

Keywords: Painter, Artwork, Plastic Formation, Portrait

1. Introduction

Artists have long recognised portrait painting as depicting the likenesses of the represented person (Maes, 2015). However, the audience and artists believe that a portrait painting is a form of artwork representing the human face. The visual and expressive aspects of portrait painting have been an issue for artists throughout history, and this has been ended by successive development of the methods, techniques, and subjects adopted in this context (Freeland, 2007; Zhao & Zhu, 2011). Depicting the human face has always been an essential theme of painting artworks. Therefore, it is rare to find a period of art without paintings depicting the human face. The methods of expressing the human face in art have varied, ranging from symbolic to realistic, abstract to cubist and other art movements. Sometimes, the painter depicts specific individuals and other times, he presents a particular artistic and expressive value that he seeks to embody. Depicting the human face has varied from era to era, as the various characteristics and circumstances of the era have influenced the final aesthetic form. Sometimes, painters specialise solely in depicting the human face and become professional portrait painters. The profession of depicting the human face has been undertaken by painters to portray the personalities of the wealthy and rulers and rewarded with financial and/or moral rewards.

Meanwhile, other painters have found depicting the human face a source of inspiration and expression, upon which they project all the artistic and expressive concepts they seek to present. It is rare to find a painter who has not created a portrait that expresses at least his or her psychological state and artistic style. The subject of depicting the human face is an inspiring and expressive one. It has been one of the most critical themes in artworks through the ages, embodying the personality and characteristics of the era and the painters' personalities, artistic styles, and expressive abilities.

The present study tries to shed some light on the question: To what extent do artworks depicting the human face reflect the nature and characteristics of the era in which they were produced?

The significance and value of this research are that it seeks to highlight the work of painting the human face as an artistic subject, reflecting the nature of the era and the painter's personality.

2. Methodology and Approach

2.1 Research hypothesis

This study's investigation and exploration are based on hypotheses regarding depicting the human face in portrait painting; it

- i. began with the beginnings of painting art.
- ii. has been a fundamental theme throughout all artistic stages.
- iii. reflects the nature of the era in which it was produced and the personality of the painter who produced it.

2.2 Limitation of research

In this study, artworks are inspired by the human face at different time stages. These stages are: the First, the stage of primitive arts; the second, the stage of civilisational arts, focusing on ancient Egyptian art and the Renaissance era; and the third, a modern art form in which three painters and movements explored van Gogh, representing the impressionist school; Picasso, embodying Cubism; and Salvador Dali, representing Surrealism. These are the fourth stage, which is the stage of postmodern arts (contemporary arts).

2.3 Research Methods

The research followed an inductive analytical approach, analysing examples of artworks depicting the human face over successive periods.

3. Discussion

The art of painting emerged with the beginning of human existence on Earth. Therefore, it has gone through successive artistic stages that reflected the characteristics and nature of the era in which it was produced.

These stages can be divided into four phases, each based on its artistic characteristics: First, the stage of primitive arts; Second, the stage of civilisational arts; Third, the stage of modern art; Fourth, the stage of postmodern arts (contemporary arts) (Hanafy, 2024; Hanafy, 2017).

Regarding depicting the Human Face, it is rare to find an art stage that does not feature the human face as a fundamental theme of painting art. This study investigates the depiction of the human face in the four stages mentioned above. In these stages, the influence of the era's nature

and characteristics on the artistic expression of the human face was examined, as discussed in the following sections.

3.1 First - The primitive art stage

Primitive art features pieces of art created by primitive societies (Lewis, 1961). It began with human existence on Earth and ended with the emergence of human civilisations. In this era, painting was an innate art, a free expression without being affected by outside restrictions, dictations, or motivations. It was characterised by a degree of authenticity and originality of expression incomparable to any other artistic stage. The primitive painter had no material, moral, or cultural motives for producing his artwork; the motivation was subjective.

Figure 1 illustrates a painting depicting primitive human activity, namely hunting. The following is evident in the painting: The painting style used in this artwork reflects a state of freedom of expression and an artistic approach that is not compelled by any conventional artistic rules. The creative approach to depicting the subject relies on free colour patches without details and a specific portrayal of any particular character. The expressive, symbolic aspect is the central aspect and feature of primitive painting in general. Moreover, primitive painting techniques were used, and the colours used were natural, derived from the environment, and composed of earth oxides and animal blood. They were used directly to depict artistic subjects on cave walls. The primitive painter's approach to describing the human face was not the goal but rather part of a comprehensive expression. The painter explored a specific theme using the free, natural, artistic style and formulation popular at the time (Anonymous, 4000 BC).



Figure 1: A mural depicting a pre-historic human art form dating back over 4,000 years, Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand (Anonymous, 4000 BC).

3.2 Second - The art of civilisations stage

The era of civilisations arts emerged with the ancient civilisations, foremost among them the ancient Egyptian civilisation. Successive civilisations continued until the beginning of the mid-eighteenth century when modern art with its various schools emerged. The era of the civilisations' arts spans a historical period and includes several Eastern and Western civilisations. Each civilisation has distinctive artistic features that distinguish it from others, especially concerning belief and technological and scientific development. This study presents a model of Eastern painting, represented by the ancient Egyptian civilisation, and a model of Western painting, represented by European civilisation during the Italian Renaissance.

Portrait art was the most important and prolific type in ancient Egyptian art. It was implemented using significant features, including realism and perfectionism, and embodying several concepts, including individualism and immortality (Assmann, 1996). Figure 2 illustrates a painting of the human face in ancient Egyptian civilisation (from the tomb of Queen Nefertari), from which the following is evident: The ancient Egyptians sanctified the depiction of the human face in all its forms, seeing it as an actual, eternal image of the human being. They innovated in its production, believing spirits recognise their holders through facial features. Ancient Egyptian paintings were characterised by unique features and proportions created by the ancient Egyptian artist, which were considered models to be emulated throughout all stages of ancient Egyptian civilisation (Tomb of Queen Nefertari, Undated).

The ancient Egyptian artist derived his concepts and artistic aspects from his perception of ancient Egyptian beliefs and how to express and communicate their ideas. The perspective method used in depicting the human face and the proportions adhered to by the ancient Egyptians became a characteristic and style that distinguished this era's pictorial artworks from all other artistic trends. Painting techniques evolved, and pictorial styles were created, reflecting a quality of artwork that endured for thousands of years. Tempera and dry and wet fresco techniques were among the essential pictorial methods used by the ancient Egyptians. They are characterised by colour stability despite the passage of thousands of years. Ancient Egyptian art depicts the human face in an abstract, symbolic manner far removed from temporary emotions. Its commitment to aesthetic proportions and perspective positions reflects ancient Egyptians' belief in beauty and eternity.



Figure 2: Mural from the tomb of Queen Nefertari, Luxor, Egypt (Tomb of Queen Nefertari, Undated)

Figure 3 presents a significant example from the Renaissance era that uniquely represents its age. It is the Mona Lisa painting by the Italian painter Leonardo da Vinci. It is considered an example of depicting the human face during the Italian Renaissance era; the following concepts and visual aspects are evident: The Mona Lisa painting reflects the idea of depicting the human face, which emerged with depicting a specific person. It also adhered to the academic style, realistic proportions, and extreme sensitivity in artistic expression. Renaissance painters adhered to academic drawing and painting rules, applying realistic proportions to express the human face. This period was characterised by depicting people of social and religious standing with a realistic style (Da Vinci, 1503-1506).

Renaissance painters studied anatomy, especially concerning the human body. They applied the rules of scientific perspective, which helped them realistically express various people and subjects. The use of oil painting techniques began during the Italian Renaissance, which supported the flourishing of painting art, especially in wall-mounted figurative paintings. At this historical stage, the camera had not yet appeared, which helped spread oil painting art,

mainly depicting portraits of socially standing people, such as rulers, princes, and religious people.



Figure 3: The Mona Lisa by the Italian painter Leonardo da Vinci Louvre Museum (Da Vinci, 1503-1506)

3.3 Third - The Modern Art Era

The modern art era began in the mid-eighteenth century, marked by significant scientific advancements and discoveries. It reflects the level of artistic creativity in all fields, with the emergence of diverse art schools with distinct artistic characteristics, distinguished by innovative forms of expression compared to previous traditional arts.

Figures 4 to 6 present three paintings depicting the human face in different artistic styles, successively reflecting the creative characteristics of the Impressionist, Cubist, and Surrealist schools. By examining these paintings, it was found that the artworks presented demonstrate a diversity of artistic expressions of the human face, where the expression is not of the depicted person but, instead, is of the artist's creative direction and psychological state. Figure 4 presents a "Self-Portrait" by the Dutch painter Van Gogh that reflects the impressionist expressionist style. Van Gogh's powerful, emotional, and expressive brushstrokes and radiant colour palette reflected the expressive features that distinguished him from his Impressionist peers. His self-portrait in this painting demonstrates his facial features and seeks to express his psychological state (Van Gogh, 1889).

Figure 5 shows a painting titled "Weeping Woman" by the Spanish painter Pablo Picasso, which reflects Picasso's distinctive Cubist style. He draws on realistic facial features, creating geometric changes and formations for more significant impact and aesthetic expression. Cubism relied on geometric lines as the basis for every form, using straight and curved lines to create these innovative and strange geometric compositions that provoke questions and aesthetic exploration (Picasso, 1937).

Figure 6 depicts a human face by the Spanish painter Salvador Dali, reflecting the surrealist style. Dali was distinguished by his skill in composition and artistic expression. He shocked audiences with the strangeness of his forms and their symbolic meanings, combining reality and imagination, the rational and the irrational, in an aesthetic and shocking duality. The depiction of the human face flourished in modern art despite the advent of the camera due to the diversity of aesthetic expression methods offered by modern art schools of various orientations (Dali, 1937).



Figure 4: Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear (Impressionism Movement) (Van Gogh, 1889)



Figure 4: Weeping Woman, 1937, Picasso - © Succession Picasso/DACS, London 2023. (Cubism Movement) (Picasso, 1937)

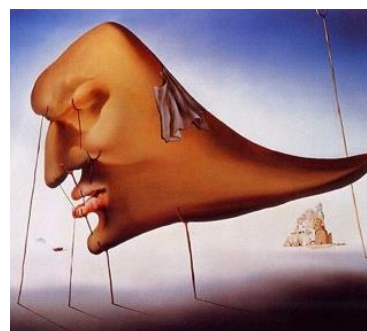


Figure 6: Sleep by Salvador Dali, 1937, Private Collection (Surrealism Movement) (Dali, 1937)

3.4 Fourth Stage: The Postmodern Art Era (Contemporary Art)

This era began in the mid-twentieth century and continues until these days. It was characterised by emerging previously unseen artistic expression styles influenced by modern technology. The artworks created during this era present unusual and sometimes shocking artistic expressions. The most important and widespread trends in postmodern art are conceptual art (idea art), interactive art, and pop art. The depiction of the human face continued using the usual academic methods, but trends began to emerge to depict the human face using contemporary technological methods and techniques, such as modern interactive art and installation artwork.

Figure 7 shows an example of Pop Art, an artistic movement dating back to the second half of the twentieth century. It emerged in the early 1960s in Britain and then the United States and has spread worldwide. This artwork was executed using screen printing technology, and it depicts the character of the American actress Marilyn Monroe, with the aim of marketing and advertising, as the face was summarised and various colour patterns were used to attract attention (Warhol, 1967).



Figure 5: A billboard of the American actress Marilyn Monroe, produced by the American painter Andy Warhol (Warhol, 1967)

4. Conclusions

This study concluded that depicting the human face is a subject that began with the beginnings of the art of painting and continues till the present day. The human face has been a source of

inspiration for artists through the ages and various artistic schools. Moreover, trends in depicting the human face have varied between symbolic, expressionist, academic, abstract, cubist, and surrealist styles. The techniques used in describing the human face have also varied, reflecting all techniques used in painting, from direct painting on cave walls to contemporary techniques and technologies, including tempera, fresco, and oil painting. Besides, depicting the human face will remain one of the most essential subjects from which artists draw expressive and formative values, embodying them in their artistic works using their own language and artistic style. Despite the proliferation of painting art, specialised computer programs, and artificial intelligence, manually created paintings inspired by the human face will continue to have a unique artistic value and a remarkable impact on the audience.

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