

Audio Profiles from the National Portrait Gallery **Eye Contact: Modern American Portrait Drawings Transcripts**

(Alphabetical order by sitter's first name)

Introduction by Wendy Wick Reaves, Curator of Prints and Drawings, National Portrait Gallery

Hello, this is Wendy Wick Reaves, Curator of Prints and Drawings at the National Portrait Gallery. The art of portraiture after thriving for generations at the forefront of the visual arts, rode a rollercoaster of reputation in the twentieth century. First it was re-empowered as experimental, then discredited in an age of abstraction, and gradually rediscovered. But although portrait traditions were buffeted by new ways of thinking about art and the individual, artists never completely abandoned the figure; they continued to experiment. These drawings from the National Portrait Gallery's collections, dating from the 1880s to the 1980s, are adventurous, assertive, witty, or monumental. They all reflect modern themes and aesthetic concerns, confirming the vitality of twentieth-century portraiture.

As I go through the exhibit, I think about the fact that you can look at a work of art that you thought you knew well and suddenly see something you'd never seen before. Just like any visitor to the museum, I often have a personal reaction to the images. Sometimes, when I think I have finished looking at a drawing, I go back and take another look, challenging myself to see something I hadn't seen before. These recordings are a sampling of those personal reflections that have developed over time as I've studied these fascinating 20th century drawings and grown to love them.

***Agnes Ernst Meyer* by Marius de Zayas**

Charcoal over graphite on yellow paper, circa 1912-1913

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Anne Meyer

How can you possibly make a portrait of a specific individual totally abstract? Well Marius de Zayas tried early in the 20th century. He was probably actually working from a photograph of Agnes Meyer, translating her broad brow and strong chin into geometric shapes and suggesting her intelligence and vitality with math and upward trajectories. Needless to say the critics were completely baffled when this was exhibited in 1912. But what this picture says to us now is how experimental the concept of portraiture could be at the beginning of the century. Gertrude Stein was writing abstract prose portraits that sounded nonsensical; Virgil Thompson was composing musical portraits; e. e. cummings wrote portrait poems. They were all trying to evoke the emotional essence of a person.

Alex Katz Self-portrait

c. 1987

Graphite on paper, circa 1987

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; the Ruth Bowman and Harry Kahn Twentieth-Century American Self-Portrait Collection

It must have taken a certain amount of courage to take up figural art in the 1960s and 1970s. The popularity of Abstract Expressionism at mid-century seemed to have dealt a blow to representational portraiture. For many critics, it was just out of fashion. But artists like Alex Katz, along with Chuck Close, Larry Rivers, and others, began to reinvent figurative art. Katz loved the energy of the abstract paintings with their ambitious scale, and formal structure, and surface pattern, and suddenly the notion of applying all that to the *face* struck him as a “wild, novel idea.” He disliked self-portraits with too much “soul” and his are strangely impersonal, artificial and unrevealing. The drawing in this exhibition is a study for a triptych juxtaposing smiling and serious expressions. But despite the suggested intimacy of the smile, notice how you don’t actually get much personal information

Beauford Delaney by Georgia O’Keeffe

Pastel on paper, 1943

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of the Georgia O’Keeffe Foundation

We know that Georgia O’Keeffe’s exquisite pastel is a portrait; Beauford Delaney actually posed for her. But sometimes when I look at this drawing, the word portrait seems too limiting. I’m tempted to think of it also as a still life or even, perhaps, a landscape? She really defies such categories here. O’Keeffe of course is best known for her oil paintings of skulls or rock formations or flowers. And this image strikes me as similar to those works; it has little to do with human interaction. Clearly she loves the texture of Delaney’s hair and the colors of his skin which she renders in beautifully blended pastels. And she admires the head as a form in space, isolating it high up on the sheet. It feels to me almost like looking up at a mountain in a golden light.

Edna St. Vincent Millay by William Zorach

Ink, charcoal, and colored pencil on paper, circa 1923

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

William Zorach faced something of a challenge, I think, in portraying the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay. She was a pale, pretty, delicate young woman which hardly matched her personality. He knew her well. She was an unfettered spirit, dominating, promiscuous for her time, fiercely independent. And Zorach managed to suggest a new age women. Millay’s bobbed hair and loose clothing, the provocative opening of her jacket, her self assured, intelligent expression are as suggestive of her as his bold outline and undetailed features. We think of the preoccupation of present day artists with gender, race, and

sexuality, but we see the beginnings of those explorations in an earlier, more guarded age.

***Ethel Greenglass Rosenberg* by Elizabeth Catlett**

Graphite on paper, 1952

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

When I first saw Elizabeth Catlett's drawing of convicted spy Ethel Rosenberg, I just loved it. The simple, unembellished head was so plain, yet strikingly powerful. But the piece raised all sorts of questions for my fellow curators: What was the artist's purpose in portraying Ethel alone without her better known husband Julius? What did this add to our ability to tell the story of the Rosenbergs' trial and execution? Fortunately, we were able to ask the artist herself. She recalled that she had drawn this charcoal for a protest poster that was never produced. Like others at the time, she felt that the case against Ethel was weak, and she was being used unfairly just to get to her husband. And then Catlett said something profoundly shocking. She said that as an African-American, she was used to the idea of lynching but she was horrified at the idea of electrocuting a woman. It was not only a startling reminder of the glaring injustices of mid-century America, it also confirmed that the drawing was intended as a protest based on her lifelong sympathy for the sufferings and sacrifices of women. Suddenly this iconic and emotional portrayal of Ethel Rosenberg made sense to us and it spoke not only to a facet of the Rosenberg story but also to the growing feminism of the era.

***Harold Hart Crane* by Gaston Lachaise**

Graphite on paper, circa 1923

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of the Lachaise Foundation

One might legitimately ask how we could be sure that this very stylized and idealized nude man was actually a portrait of Hart Crane. It is the kind question we worry a lot about at the Portrait Gallery and really fuss over. We consulted photographs and other drawings of Crane. And we did begin to see a resemblance: the prominent nose, full lips, sloping forehead, and hair combed up and back. But that scanty visual resemblance was reinforced by biographical clues. His friends knew the poet to be vivacious and fun-loving. A letter from Crane describing his frequent dancing and Lachaise's threat to draw him nude finally convinced us that the spirited figure was a portrait.

***James Baldwin* by Beauford Delaney**

Pastel on paper, 1963

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

This is one of those drawings you can get lost in. There is so much love and longing, so much revealed about subject and artist, and all through color. Have you ever seen a yellow quite so anxious? After looking at this pastel, it doesn't really surprise us to learn of Beauford Delaney's struggles with alcoholism and mental instability. Delaney used that yellow a lot. And look at those skin tones of James Baldwin. Most artists would blend their colors for the brown skin tone. But in Delaney's work, patches of green, brown, and ochre combine here in violent disharmony. Instead of defining those arms, he makes vivid dabs of violet suggest the armpit shadows. And the likeness kind of suggests that Baldwin is younger than he actually was at the time. It is more like a summary of a decades-long relationship.

***John Barrymore – “The Fortune Hunter”* by Al Frueh**

Ink, ink wash, and graphite on illustration board, circa 1909

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of the children of Al Frueh; Barbara Frueh Bornemann, Robert Frueh, and Alfred Frueh, Jr.

This artist, Al Frueh, is playing with us here. How many lines can he eliminate and still recreate John Barrymore? Somehow, with a simple arc shape, Frueh can make us see a chin, an ear, or a cuff. That playful spirit was typical of many early 20th century modernists. But so was that search for the essence of the individual, the abstract inner core. Frueh's "extreme economy of line" fascinated art critics - the highbrow set- but it also worked in the newspapers and magazines where he helped invent a new form of "celebrity caricature." His drawings celebrate more than attack their subjects, in my view. That profile and clenched-fist intensity were Barrymore trademarks; Frueh spoofs the public image here not the man.

***John Finerty* by Diego Rivera**

Charcoal on paper, 1937

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

This drawing of John Finerty by influential Mexican muralist Diego Rivera makes me understand more about the impact of 1930s mural painting on portraiture. Here on a quite small sheet Rivera has duplicated the monumentality of his enormous mural figures. He presents an almost cinematic close-up of Finerty's head, filling the paper with a strongly outlined profile. That low viewpoint also gives us the sense of looking up, making the image seem larger and grander. Simplifications and slight distortions make the portrait all the more powerful. But Rivera's figures seem very human unlike the mythical and allegorical creatures of turn of the century mural art. Portrait painting of Rivera's time often imitated such heroic portrayals, enhanced with expressive exaggeration and simplification.

Untitled (Self-portrait) by Louise Nevelson

Ink and watercolor on paper, circa 1938

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; the Ruth Bowman and Harry Kahn Twentieth-Century American Self-Portrait Collection

Judging from this picture, when Louise Nevelson looked at herself in the mirror she didn't see the beautiful young woman everyone else saw. I heard a recorded interview from our archives recently where Nevelson is saying "I am interested in my life and my awareness and my consciousness." You certainly see that from her expressive self-portrait. She clearly has reached deep within herself to achieve this haunted intensity. Those heavy marks and distorted features speak to the considerable struggles of her early years as an artist. But it seems to me the strength of character seen here also forecasts the dramatic persona of later years.

Luther (Bill "Bojangles") Robinson – "The Hot Mikado" by Al Hirschfeld

Ink on illustration board, 1939

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

To know Al Hirschfeld's drawings is to marvel at his talent for capturing a likeness. You know that ability we all have to recognize a friend walking towards us from a distance before we can see any details of the features or clothes? Well *he* had a unique facility for translating that common human perception into portraiture. Here he uses distortion to increase our sense of movement, making the picture seem like a freeze-frame image of bending, stretching motion. Hirschfeld actually did work in the early movie industry in New York as a young man, and to me this picture seems more influenced by film than the theater. This is a fascinating picture to study; Hirschfeld has a huge vocabulary of different lines and marks, and each is used for a different effect.

Mary Cassatt Self-portrait

Gouache and watercolor over graphite on paper, circa 1880

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

I love how subversive Cassatt's watercolor self-portrait is. She appears feminine and genteel at first but look at her glance: how boldly, almost brazenly, she appraises us rather than the other way around. While her theme of a female in a domestic interior seems tame at first glance, she is projecting herself here as a working artist, not the subject, a modern professional woman, earning her own living, independent of husband or family. Look too, at how she composes her watercolor. Where is the contour of that chair? What happened to her right hand? We can only guess about that bonnet which has dissolved with the bright yellow light. This really is a radical picture for its time.

***Milton Clark Avery* by Sally Michel Avery**

Ink and graphite on paper, 1957

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Portraiture seemed kind of out of fashion in the 1950s for progressive artists at least. But Sally Michel Avery's portrait of her husband is to my eye *so* fresh, *so* vital. Her story is very common for women artists of the first half of the century: assuming many of the daily burdens and subordinating her own art for her husband's. But what confident draftsmanship! Notice how those eyes don't match, that she drew the nose in a single line, that wild hair and impossibly craggy chin. All of it she created with bare ink outlines and only a hint of shading. But all the simplifications and distortions coalesce into a powerful portrait style. And against that soft penciled background, those ink lines pop forth, making the face that much more compelling.

***Oliver Hardy* by Joseph Grant for Walt Disney Studios**

Graphite on paper, circa 1935

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

I guess it would be unlikely for most art museums to include a Disney animation sketch among the treasures of their drawing collection. But in putting together this show I was thinking a lot about the sort of things that impacted portraiture. I mean, how did increasingly stronger indoor lighting, or urbanization, or psychoanalysis affect our perception of the human face? And if you think about the visual stimulus of the movie close-up or billboard advertising say as having an impact on 20th century portraiture then why not add animated cartooning? It strikes me that the humor, the miniaturization, the rounded shapes, and the Mickey Mouse proportions of cartooning all had an effect on illustration and figurative art. Plus, I think that Joe Grant's drawing of Oliver Hardy on his polo pony is truly masterful. You can still see some of the circular shapes that he has used for both the chubby actor and his fat pony. And I love the way Hardy's gentle, graceful hands are echoed in the dainty movements of the pony's hooves.

***Ornette Coleman* by Elaine de Kooning**

Graphite with stumping on paper, circa 1965

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

What amazes me about this drawing of saxophonist Ornette Coleman is how deftly Elaine de Kooning gives us the sensation of sound. One feels the pounding energy of his horn from those wildly drawn lines. In order to convey music through art, de Kooning merges portraiture—and it really does look like Coleman—with abstraction. Her parallel strokes and smudges suggest jazz improvisation. Those compacted scribbles just above the bell of the horn read to us as sound. And I love the way she has dragged the heavy charcoal of the face and beard off the head, creating ghostly, rhythmic diagonals. Is he enveloped in music, here, or is this almost like an aura related to Coleman's creativity. At any rate, she has given us a drawing we can almost hear.

Robert F. Kennedy by Roy Lichtenstein

Felt tip marker over graphite with adhered paper corrections on paper-faced matboard, 1968

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Time magazine

Roy Lichtenstein turned presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy into a pop superhero for the May 24th, 1968, cover of Time. I find his stylized face, with its comic book hair and features, actually quite elegant and precise as well as fresh and new as an approach to portraiture. The Kennedy drawing is the black key drawing for the color cover which added red, white, and blue stripes and the bright, radiating shape of campaign flashbulbs. This initial drawing proves to me how pop sensibilities could reanimate figural art. But there is also a suggestion here of how mediated our images of politicians are whom we hear only in sound bites and often see in airbrushed photographs or blown-dry and made up for TV. So often they are reduced to comic book characters of good or evil.

Stuart Davis Self-portrait

Graphite on paper, circa 1927

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

What makes Stuart Davis's portrait look so modern? For centuries artists had pushed beyond the flat, two-dimensional "picture plane" as it is called to give us an illusion of objects or figures in space. Like looking through a window. But Davis rejected that illusionistic draftsmanship. He built up the face with geometric shapes, adjusting the hat brim and jaw line to his careful stylization. With those austere, simplified pencil contours, he does convey the physical head and hat. But as a modernist, he is very conscious of line and placement on a flattened plane. This formal rendering suggests not only an individual but a universal portrayal of mankind in a modernist idiom.

Truman Capote by Don Bachardy

Graphite with stumping on paper, 1964

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Have you ever thought about the implication of staring directly at someone from close-up? Well lovers, perhaps, can gaze into each others' eyes for a prolonged amount of time. Or maybe parents with their infants. But most of us as adults would find such an encounter uncomfortable, it makes us too vulnerable. That confrontation, however, is precisely what California artist Don Bachardy finds stimulating. He draws his portraits directly from life, starting with the eyes. He calls that intense encounter "eye contact" and claims that the resulting "exchange of energy" makes the drawing seem like a collaborative project. It doesn't describe a normal, interpersonal relationship, and maybe that is what gives Bachardy's drawings such an intense, almost surreal feeling.