



Portraits in European and Islamic art

On the social media, we actively share portraits of ourselves and one another in the form of our own photos. This might lead many people to associate the concept of a portrait with photography. But a portrait can also take the form of a painting, drawing, or sculpture. A common feature of all portraits is that they are artistic representations of one or more persons. A portrait represents specific people and depicts their characteristic appearance and perhaps also their personality so that they cannot be mistaken for someone else.

Anyone can be the subject of a portrait – men, women, children, young and old, rich and poor, attractive and ugly – but some subjects are more common than others. In both Europe and the Islamic world, portraiture is found most frequently in the upper classes. Both cultural spheres have a tradition for portraits of royalty, for example. In some cases, a portrait is commissioned, which may also give the customer an influence on the result. In other cases, the artist portrays his family and friends or himself, just as he likes.

The portrait painter's choices

Behind every portrait are a large number of choices that the painter has made. First the artist has to decide the purpose of the portrait and choose the personal traits that should be highlighted. The painter also has to ask himself the following questions: Should the portrait be realistic or embellished? What palette and painting technique should be used? Shall the portrait show only the face, or should it include the entire figure? How should the subject pose and with what kind of facial expression? Should the background be discrete or illustrate a specific environment? Some painters also decide on the style, atmosphere, and mood of the period that they wish to evoke. The portrait painter must consider even the minutest details, since everything contributes to the work's overall expression.

DURING THE GUIDED TOUR OF THE MUSEUM:

When pupils are shown around the museum, the guide will introduce them to the many expressions and functions of portraiture, based on European and Islamic portraits. Pupils will make specific comparisons between European and Islamic portraiture in order to identify differences and similarities between the two art traditions.



Good questions – and answers

Are there portraits in the Islamic world?

Yes, there are, especially in Islamic miniature painting, also called book or album painting. In contrast to Islamic art in general, miniature paintings are highly figurative, not abstract. We find portrayals of princes, courtiers, holy men and women, and ordinary people. Instead of depicting specific individuals, some of these portrayals are idealized types, and consequently not true portraits.

Can we call a picture of Jesus a portrait?

No. There are innumerable depictions of Jesus, but they cannot be called portraits. As far as we know, no portrait was made of Jesus during his lifetime, and there is very little information about his appearance from written sources, including the New Testament. This makes it impossible to document his authentic physical features, so pictures of Jesus can only be conceptions of his appearance. Artists have to create idealized depictions of the Prophet Muhammad as well.

What is the Danish Golden Age – and what role did the portrait play in this period?

The Danish Golden Age refers to the period between c. 1800 and 1850, considered a highpoint in the history of Danish art. Golden Age paintings typically feature motifs from the everyday life of the bourgeoisie and from the Danish landscape. The period's portrait painters created an idealized but fairly realistic and naturalistic world that reflected this class's domestic and working life. The bourgeoisie was often both the artist's motif and his customer.

Why paint portraits when we can take photographs?

A photograph can reproduce a person's appearance with great precision, but portraits are still being painted today, for example of the Danish royal family and leading politicians. This indicates that painting's potentials as a medium for portraiture are different from photography's. For example, the painter's technique gives him greater freedom to stage his subject and emphasize selected features. The painter can take the liberty of being more independent of reality than the photographer.