The Modern Portrait: Is It Worth the Price to Get Yourself Painted?

By Daniel Grant • 05/09/18 7:30am

Kehinde Wiley's painting of President Barack Obama. Matt McClain/The Washington Post via Getty Images

A famous riposte: Gertrude Stein did not like the 1905-06 portrait that Pablo Picasso painted of her. Stein claimed it didn't look like her, to which the artist responded: "It will."

What the artist was ominously foreshadowing was that long after Stein had passed from this world the portrait would remain. It now hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art as the permanent representation of the famed writer and benefactor.

Most portraits don't find their way into museum collections, however. At least, not the commissioned ones that are painted or sculpted as a way of honoring someone—a family member, corporate CEO, government official, judge, church leader or generally moneyed person—and then displayed in that person's home, office or other place of business. You've seen this picture plenty: Old guy in a suit and tie with a dark background. Or if you haven't, maybe you didn't notice it was there. In other words, a lot of portraits out there don't exactly distinguish themselves.

But there are occasions where portraits rise above the what-did-he-look-

like monotony to achieve a certain prominence. The recently unveiled paintings of President Barack Obama by Kehinde Wiley and former First Lady Michelle Obama by Amy Sherald—paid for with private funds and in the permanent collection of Washington, D.C.'s National Portrait Gallery—grabbed the attention of the art world.

They weren't just remarkable because they showed these two stately figures in a more imaginative and informal style than is customary. They were also attention-grabbing because they harnessed the contemporary star power of their makers—one an emerging name from Baltimore getting noticed for her socially conscious portraiture, the other already commanding astronomical prices—both known for making space in contemporary art for painting likenesses *not* to hang in board rooms, but on cutting-edge gallery walls.

Kehinde Wiley, *LL Cool J,* 2005. Oil on canvas. Kehinde Wiley/Sean Kelly Gallery

And it isn't just these two artists getting contemporary acclaim for work that happens to feature human likenesses. The current exhibition of paintings by David Hockney at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, "David Hockney: 82 Portraits and 1 Still-life" (continuing through July 29), features seated

portraits of known figures (artist John Baldessari and gallery owner Larry Gagosian among them) alongside less well-known ones. Even George W. Bush's painted portraits of international leaders (Vladimir Putin, the Dalai Lama and George H.W. Bush), as well as combat veterans, have garnered the former president some bemusement and surprising praise.

What's with the renewed interest in portraiture? Perhaps it's because paintings of people permit viewers to do something that otherwise is thought of as rude—to stare at someone—and, in this age of selfies and other forms of self-regard, they add a level of interpretation that is proving refreshing to audiences. But then, portraits have always been newsmakers: as much for how they represent a person as for how they *don't*. And in all these cases—true to life, flattering, boring or seemingly fresh—one thing is certain, they do have a way of sticking around.

Portraiture: the Origin of Art?

Portraiture has a long history in art, with images of pharaohs, popes, kings, noblemen and political figures the first to be enshrined in paint. The original signs of art might have been humans leaving traces of themselves with handprints on cave walls, but soon after, they turned this newfound skill to making records of their leaders. The earliest depictions were often highly stylized, or idealized, fitting an idea of grandeur more than verisimilitude. (They've analyzed King Tutankhamun's skeleton, he was almost certainly was not as stately as artisans of the time portrayed him.)

Hans Holbein the Younger's 16th century paintings of Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell undoubtedly capture what these two looked like, although it has been assumed that the serious and humble expression worn on More's face, and the pudgy, beady-eyed visage of Cromwell suggest not only their appearance but the artist's opinion of each man. Leonardo da Vinci's enigmatic "Mona Lisa," John Singer Sargent's sultry portrait of Virginie Amélie Avegno Gautreau (known popularly as "Madame X") and Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein are among the most celebrated works of western art.

Gertrude Stein poses in front of the portrait of her that Picasso painted in 1906. AFP/Getty Images

Quite a few artists over the centuries have distinguished themselves through portraiture. Do the names Bellini, Rubens, Rembrandt, Manet, Cézanne, Braque, Warhol or Katz ring any bells? In the early days of the United States, Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827) dedicated himself to painting portraits of the leaders of the American Revolution in order that his countrymen would continue to recall those who fashioned a new and free nation in what had been British colonies.

We still promote the memory of those who lead the nation, its institutions and big businesses with painted (and, sometimes, sculpted) portraits. The walls of board rooms are covered with these things. However, nowadays, we are less apt to think of these portraits as works of art and more like executive wallpaper. The term "portrait painter" seems to carry a stigma of commercialism, of pleasing a patron and not oneself.

Brandon Brame Fortune, chief curator at the National Portrait Gallery, told Observer that the lauded painter Alice Neel "didn't think of her paintings of people as portraits, which they clearly were, because she saw portraits as something that were paid for and meant to flatter." One might see Neel's bright, stylized paintings of her friends, fellow artists and family members as the inspiration for the current Hockney exhibition, as well as a number of young up-and-comers (see: Jemima Kirke, Hope Gangloff). Most of her portraits were seated, aimed for psychological more than anatomical

accuracy and emphasized the informal—people slouch, don't wear their Sunday best and rarely smile. These aren't pretty pictures showing sitters in their prime.

Where Flattery and Historical Record Meet

In a lot of ways, what Neel said hinted at an underlying definition of what constitutes a portrait: it is, generally, meant to present the subject in a positive light—serious, thoughtful, *attractive*. Also, probably a bit younger than what the artist actually sees: Portraits almost invariably are commissioned after someone's retirement, when that person is old and tends to look it.

The most sought-after portraitists don't tell lies, but they usually go through photographs of the sitter at an earlier point in his or her career, finding an image that looks a bit more vital, a bit less worn out. For a lot of artists, though, the underlying message here is that they don't have free rein to paint whatever they wish. Ultimately, the subject has to be happy.

Portraitists of an earlier era had their own reasons for freshening up a subject, as Charles Baudelaire wrote back in the mid-19th century: "The great failing of Ingres, in particular, is that he seeks to impose upon every type of sitter a more or less complete, by which I mean a more or less despotic, form of perfection, borrowed from the repository of classical ideas." I.e. Baudelaire was charging the great neoclassicist Ingres with making every rich guy look like the new Cicero.

That need to account for the vanity of a subject has led to the idea of a portrait painter as somewhat of a second-class artist. "I'm a painter, and I do a lot of non-portrait work," E. Raymond Kinstler once told me. Kinstler is primarily known for his portraits of U.S. presidents. "I'm not a gun-for-hire," he said. Similarly, Daniel Greene, a portrait painter in North Salem, New York stated that "I'm not a hired brush." What they both meant was they won't just paint what you tell them to. There's artistic integrity at stake.

Tony Bennett posing for a portrait by E. Raymond Kinstler. E. Raymond Kinstler

Jim Pollard, an artist based in Wisconsin noted that many of his clients are big wheels—CEOs of large corporations, foundations or universities or are to the manner born—and they are accustomed to giving orders that underlings must carry out. "Occasionally, I get treated like the plumber coming to unclog the toilet," he said.

That may be the reason that Kehinde Wiley "almost always says 'no'" when asked to do a portrait, according to Janine Cirincione, director of Sean Kelly Gallery in New York, which represents him in the United States and periodically fields requests from people wanting to commission a work. "He sees himself as a conceptual artist who happens to focus on people," said Cirincione. Underlying in that statement: he's no "portrait painter."

Artists who regularly make people the subject of their work get those requests often. Alec Soth, who photographs people he stumbles upon in his travels but who reflect to him American types, also is asked frequently to photograph collectors. Like Wiley, he "almost always says no to portrait commissions, and I do not know when he last accepted one," according to Ethan Jones, studio manager for the photographer.

While some would rather not take commissions altogether to avoid any appearance of compromising for money, others have embraced taking paid

portrait work as a way of financing their other endeavors.

Andy Warhol was well-known for attending parties of the rich and famous, and was notorious for working the room, often coming away with a number of portrait commissions from a successful night out. These were a major source of income for him throughout the '70s. Some of his most famous artwork are non-commissioned portraits of well-known figures, based on popular photographs of them, such as Elvis Presley, Chairman Mao and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Small wonder that others wanted to have a "Warhol" of themselves.

The Price of Portraiture—for an Artist

"Portraits take time away from my other work, from exhibiting, from my career," said painter Brenda Zlamany. On the other hand, like Warhol, she also realizes how lucrative they can be. "I can make $100,000 from a portrait. I'm not going to turn that down. I can sell a painting for $100,000 at a gallery, but I only get half, because of the dealer commission." So she does one or two a year because of the more reliable money it brings in. "I make a really decent living, and I don't have to teach."

Brenda Zlamany, *Portrait #135 (Kurt Landgraf with Blu on Red),* 2010. Oil on panel, two panels, 88 x 41 and 27 x 27 in. Brenda Zlamany

Jacob Collins, a highly realistic painter who is represented by New York's Adelson Galleries and does an average of two private portrait commissions annually, also pushed back on the disparagement of portraiture. "If you're known as a portrait artist, at least you're known for something," he said. "A lot of people would like to be known for something."

His portraits, like his gallery paintings, average $100,000 apiece, although his style of working with a portrait subject may not appeal to everyone. Most portraitists meet with the subject, do some sketches and take lots of photographs, then retreat to their studios to paint. Collins doesn't use photographs but does everything—the posing, the sketches and the actual painting—in front of a posed subject. "I warn people in advance, 'Do you really want to sit this long?'" noting that there may be 12 to 14 sessions and as many as 40 hours of posing. "Most people don't want to do that." Many subjects simply feel uncomfortable with someone looking directly and intently at them, which may explain why people like to look at art but not be the subject of art themselves.

He also warns prospective subjects that he won't pretty up a face. As they sit still, sitters, especially older ones, zone out and their faces often droop. Gilbert Stuart, renowned for his portraits of George Washington, wrote that "a vacuity spread over his countenance" as soon as Washington began to sit. Most portrait subjects are older people who may become sleepy if they are required to sit inactively for extended periods of time. "I don't mind when faces sag and go into deep repose," Collins said. "My portraits look like a person who is sitting still."

Greene, who also paints from life except for when the artist is deceased, noted that his chosen way of working presents some roadblocks at times. "It is easier to do a posthumous portrait than one of someone who is alive," he said. And he has done quite a few of both over his 50-year career. "You work from a photograph, or from several photographs, selecting the facial expression that is most salient, and of course a photograph doesn't move or talk. The expression doesn't change, you don't have to arrange sittings." Alive or deceased, the price of his time and work are a constant.

For Greene, portraits of the living tend to take longer—from several months to a year—than those of the dead because of the need to do numerous sittings, perhaps as many as a dozen, each lasting three hours. And all that time is *needed*. For portraitists, there are a lot of decisions to be made: the size of the overall painting, what their subject should wear, whether it will be

full-length, three-quarters or a bust, not to mention the background. (In the portrait that Greene did of former Republican Congressman Larry Combest, a photograph of the politician's wife is part of the scenery—"he loved his wife very much.")

Another decision is whether or not to include the sitter's hands, which portrait artists often look to omit. "Hands are a pain in the ass," Zlamany said. "Goya used to charge extra for hands." (She didn't recall where she read or heard that.) "Hands are extremely expressive, as expressive as a face."

Brenda Zlamany's recently-unveiled portrait for Yale University's Davenport College, featuring alumni and members of the Davenport community. Benda Zlamany

Finding the Right Artist

Word-of-mouth, or just seeing a portrait in someone's house or office and finding out who painted it, is how a lot of people find artists when looking to have their likeness captured. Greene said that he was commissioned to do a portrait of the Governor of Hawaii after the governor had seen Greene's portrait of a prominent Hawaiian builder, Tom Gentry and his wife. ("It was a lot of fun going out to Hawaii several times to do the Gentrys, and then it was fun going back to do the governor.")

Presidential George W. Bush picked the artist John Howard Sanden to do his official White House portrait through a referral from a friend. Not long after leaving the White House, George and Laura Bush were invited by old

friends, Annette and Harold Simmons, to dinner at their home in Dallas. The conversation soon turned to the portrait that Annette was in the middle of sitting for, painted by Sandon. "Is he easy to work with?" the former president asked, and she offered profuse praise. Within a few weeks, a staffer in the Bush presidential library emailed Sanden about coming to meet the former president.

The most central resource for those looking for a portraitist is Portraits, Inc., an online resource that guides clients through the process. According to Julia G. Baughman, executive partner of Portraits, Inc., most prices range from $10,000 to $100,000 depending on the size of the portrait—head-and-shoulders, three-quarter length (no feet, often for a seated pose) or full-length—and the medium (charcoal, pastel or oil paint). The average commission is $20,000-30,000, although there is a lower-priced category of $3,000 to $10,000 for customers who want a portrait of their pet.

US President George W. Bush with his Union League of Philadelphia presidential portrait, painted by Mark Carder. Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images

Your Time and Money: Is It Worth It?

Portraiture is one of the odd areas of the art world where prices on the

secondary market may be but a tiny fraction of their original primary market value. Debra Force, an independent dealer in American art, told Observer that unless the subject "is a well-known person, people say, 'Why do I want a portrait of someone I don't know?'" Recently, she was asked by an insurance company to estimate the value of a contemporary portrait that someone had done of his wife, which had been burned in a fire. The insurance value—what it would cost to have another portrait painted of this woman—was approximately $25,000, although the fair market value (what the painting might have sold for on the secondary market if it had not been destroyed) "would have been much less. A thousand dollars, maybe $500."

It doesn't even matter if the artist is well-known and well-regarded, she said. Portraits by Charles Willson Peale, Thomas Sully and Gilbert Stuart, among the most renowned portrait artists of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, "can be difficult to sell. You can get a Stuart for under $10,000."

Gilbert Stuart painted one of the most iconic images of George Washington during his time, yet the artist's other portraits can be acquired for a surprisingly low cost. Cindy Ord/Getty Images

The National Portrait Gallery acquires works for its permanent collection through gifts from private art dealers, gallery owners and family members of noted individuals whose parent or grandparent was portrayed in a painting,

drawing or photograph, said Brandon Brame Fortune. They receive “maybe 100 things in the course of a year.”

Most curators look to solicit gifts from collectors of specific types of objects, but Fortune noted that there aren’t many art buyers who specialize in collecting portraiture. One who does, New York City lawyer Nathaniel Kramer, owns several hundred painted, drawn and photographed portraits of people he doesn’t know. “They’re usually friends or acquaintances of the artist,” Kramer said. “They weren’t commissioned.” Not knowing the subject isn’t a drawback for him; he just likes to look at people. “Some people like to look at horses, some people like to look at boats. I don’t ask questions of horses or boats. People are more interesting to me.”

Ultimately, however, having a portrait painted is a sentimental endeavor, and perhaps a slightly egotistical one, too. It’s something meant to preserve your memory or stand the test of time—the money and effort invested in it is the very reason they tend to linger as historical records. Long after the subject has gone, whoever he or she may have been, a painting is still something we assign immense value to, and are not given to discarding—whatever it’s actual market value may be. Having your portrait painted (or that of a loved one), whether you like the outcome or not, is a pretty sure-fire way of making sure that face sticks around.