

VANITAS ON PAPER

(Paul Huvenne, Director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp)

Thoughts on Karl Meersman's "Paper Portraits".

The ancient Romans were animists, they believed in life after death - not only through metamorphosis but also, when it came to their loved ones, through existence on the other side. As Augustin wrote, in a letter that is often read at funerals and that catches the imagination: "Grieve not, for I am on the other side". That is why they honoured their dead with an effigy on the household altar among the household gods, the *lares* and *penates*. As these effigies were memorials of real people, the ritual images of ancestors gradually developed into unparalleled portraits. After all, although they belonged unmistakably to the same house, Uncle Julius differed from Cousin Marcus in character, particularities and certain traits that everyone had always noticed and still remembered. That was the context for producing individualised portraits. It should be no surprise then that the Egyptian Copts, as citizens of the late Roman Empire, assimilated this tradition of portraiture for the faces that they gave their mummies, attached as they were to the thought of eternal life for a person's soul.

Portraiture thrives to the extent that a society is concerned with the individual. In the Middle Ages, with their sense of collectivity, the effigies of great monarchs were reduced to heraldic figures and icons. During the humanist renaissance of the quattrocento, in contrast, masters like Donatello, Andrea del Verrocchio, Desiderio da Settignano, Antonio Rossellino and many others produced portrait busts that were every bit as good as those of their Roman ancestors.

Oddly enough, there is no Latin word for what we now call a 'portrait'. It was sometimes referred to as a *simulacrum* – a likeness – or even an *imago*, *imagines* or *effigies* – an effigy, as that other animist, Flemish poet Guido Gezelle (1830-1899), referred to it in his poem *Mother*: "No effigy, no image left of you down here ... no light print" ("'*t En is van u hiernederwaard, ... geen beeltenis, geen beeld gebleven ... geen lichtdrukmaal ...*'). Gezelle was thinking of a photo, because they did exist then for wealthier people. A photo has the advantage of being a likeness, but is not therefore necessarily a good portrait, which presumes something more than a likeness and recognisability. We expect a portrait to be true to life, to show the person in question as we know them, or as we want to remember them.

Therein lies the paradox of the genre. As a picture, a portrait is intended to survive the threshold of the generations and thereby ensure tradition. But at the same time nothing is more fleeting than the individualised moment of a meeting with another. Frozen in a photo this type of encounter is seldom more than anecdotal, an insignificant snapshot, good only for the wastepaper basket. A portraitist worthy of the name, however, distils timelessness from it, because he reveals – or adds – values in a recognisable individual that we all share, but in which we would each individually like to be special. Recognising a person in a portrait like this is a remarkable collaboration, whereby the maker and the observer share an image. Jean-Paul Sartre and, later, Ernst Gombrich wrote beautifully about it, about how every image is a question of reduction of what the eye once saw and what the brain could draw from it in terms of insight and knowledge. And how, when reading that reduction, we can form our own image, in which we feel we can recognise everything we already know.

In the visual arts, then, the portrait is a special genre. There are artists, such as Anthony van Dyck, of whom we might almost forget that they were capable of doing anything else, precisely because they were such good portraitists. For Van Dyck, indeed, it was a lifelong frustration because, like Rubens, he aspired to be a great history painter. However, it was mainly from his portraits – a genre considered inferior - that he gained fame, albeit unparalleled fame. Those portraits are eternally beautiful!

Yet most people – and that applies not least to monarchs and the great of olden days – are not beauties and we often look completely different in front of the mirror in the morning than we did the glorious evening before. Then again, a good portrait should satisfy the vanity of its commissioner. We all want to look good on one, as if unmarked by time, or at least distinctive. That is what makes an effigy timeless, universal, immortal. It shares our own self with others - on Facebook today, in the gallery of the forgotten but spirited heads later on. And that gratifies our vanity.

The idea that character and durability belong to the immortal being of an individual's soul invites the artist to incorporate it into a similar physiognomy. The Italians of the Renaissance were good at that, with a certain inclination towards heroism: the sitter became a hero and enjoyed the applause of apotheosis. Their fellow artists from the north, those they were wont to call Fiamminghi, usually remained more realistic. They kept closer to a description of what they saw, with more diffidence about southern rhetoric and its

associated generalisation, which could easily result in the stereotypical image of a character bust. Nonetheless, that eye for concrete realism could, with a little cynical observation, lead to the reduction of the countenance to a grimace. Rembrandt did that wonderfully successfully when he used his own face as a model for the *tronies* he painted as a change from his self-portraits. Wonderful, but another genre: satire. And we're not really interested in that right now, because portraiture is a serious business. Although it doesn't always have to be as deadly serious as Jan van Eyck's. He made portraits as if he were mapping out a moon landscape, with the same objective attention to every pimple and crater, every hair-fine vein, wrinkle and teardrop. He could not have made his portraits more distant.

Admittedly, that merciless scientific objectivity makes a portrait unique and timeless, but most of us would probably choose someone from a generation younger for our own portraits, such as Rogier van der Weyden. Van der Weyden depicts his sitters charmingly, individualising them by character type, embellishing their looks and interpreting their features as expressions of feeling and spiritual qualities. Yet he does not lose their individual traits in the common denominator of a type. This was what his clients expected of him too, the representation of a self-image, a vector of the soul, with which they could appear before their Creator later on.

However, too much love of reality can result in a portrait that is more like a caricature. Da Vinci tested the limits of that and amongst the Fiamminghi it was Quinten Metsys who experimented with that approach to human physiognomy – a manner of expression that takes us faster to the essence of the image as an alternative to the classic descriptive or rhetorical image.

Not by chance Metsys' approach came in a generation in which Erasmus pleaded for the earnestness of humour, in his *In Praise of Folly*. Remarkably it is a mode that never really caught on in the portrait genre. A portrait is serious, as we have already said. Constantly seeking the added value of the transient in humans, portraits flirt with almost every genre of the visual arts, from pure depiction against a neutral background, as an attempt to almost scientifically catalogue a physiognomy, to descriptive interpretation with the addition of all sorts of attributes; from mere knickknack to topographical setting; from the rhetoric of a *portrait historié* to the allegorical exposition full of philosophical and ideological connotations. And all of it aimed at eternal fame or recognition – or as a contemplation of transience, with the focus on *vanitas, omnia vanitas*. A portrait can be incorporated into the sociological multiplicity of the family album or as a witness of a life turned scrapbook, as Hugo Claus puts it in his poem *Thomas*.

However, portraits achieve that added value only to the extent that they not only mirror us for ourselves, but that we can share them with others. In that sense portraiture has a lot in common with theatre, which has sought since antiquity to hold a mirror to us. How earnest that can become we learn on reading Aristotle's views on tragedy, in his *Poetica*. Tragedy was conceived as a catharsis to chasten our overconfidence and audacity. Then, too, it had a match in comedy as an appropriate way of making us aware of our conceit and self-importance. But it is the nature of the beast that we can still not take that genre as seriously. Even though, in ordinary life, we prefer a good Molière to a Corneille or Racine and would rather watch Japanese *kabuki* theatre (with its changing moods) than *no* theatre, and we forget, in our earnestness, how light-hearted Shakespeare can be. But when it comes to portraiture, the rule is still that it is earnest. Is that, perhaps, because it concerns our selves, measured against the eternal?

As if visual humour cannot be generous, portraiture that risks humour is very quickly relegated to the niche of satire or moralising criticism, the mockery of caricature. The tone of this approach is usually indicated by the technique used, i.e. cartoon graphics. Sometimes it can be calligraphically brilliant, but the medium chosen and the style of drawing immediately warn against too much seriousness. Even though the portraitist attempts to identify completely with his model, and the extent of his ability to catch his subject is every bit as much a question of correct interpretation, the technique used to draft the cartoon is still that of caricature. The subject matter, the medium and the particular tone prevent us from judging the level of the artistry and quality of the work fairly. Indeed deeply rooted prejudices cloud our vision. Even when it comes from our own hand, we generally value work on paper less than a sculpture or a painting. And we tend to completely mistrust graphics, if only because of the circulation. That is certainly true of illustrations, where the power of the composition all too often escapes us. The phenomenon of the connoisseurs and curious amateurs, who are the exception to the rule, does not refute this. We are not always very consistent though. We have great regard for Japanese prints, for example. And I could easily hold forth here on the work of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, on the sarcasm and the pain in his portraits or, to keep it lighthearted, on the work of Félicien Rops. But actually I can illustrate it better with Karl Meersman's portraits. He is, in fact, the Molière of contemporary portraiture. Virtuoso, penetrating and amusing in equal measure, perfectionist and accurate.

"Sint sine dente sales", Erasmus writes in his book, cited above: "Your humour

need not wound.” Meersman is quite simply witty: cleverly and ingeniously amusing. Sometimes funny, sometimes moving, he is always engaged and always hits the nail on the head. However his preferred medium is misleading. He uses cartoons or caricatures, which we automatically associate with laughter.

It is all too easy to forget that this is a relatively new medium, with a jargon of its own that developed in the spirit of the 18th century cartoon in drawing and model books. The watercolour technique, which Meersman employs so skilfully, is perhaps the clearest illustration of how an artist can be tempted to experiment and can be seduced by a particular style. Just by virtue of having his own niche, the artist has more room to do that and to be able to achieve his own particular form of expression. Sometimes it is a question of unexpected effects that can suddenly lead to unusual results. A pure craftsman has an armoury of such special effects with which he can score throughout a whole career. But in the case of a visual *artist* their personal niche becomes a lab brimming with experimentation, whereby the researcher continually pushes the frontiers of concept, invention and expression.

This is where we find Karl Meersman’s portraits. While in the case of a classic cartoonist a portrait – in the form of a caricature – becomes an attribute or a support for the message, in Karl Meersman’s case the gimmick becomes an attribute of his portrait. It is a form of humour with which he pays homage, in all seriousness, to his ‘sitter’, and is worthy of the art of portraiture.

Karl Meersman uses a format and a technique associated with it to make a very personal portrait, often inspired by an event. It will not escape us either that in the past the commissioning and making of portraits was also usually linked to the important moments in life. In that sense, too, his portrait work fits perfectly into the great lines of the history of portraiture.

This book proves, yet again, how successful Karl Meersman is at that, in his own very individual and original way.

Paul Huvenne