

## El retrato en la docencia de las bellas artes

### The portrait in the teaching of the fine arts

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#### Resumen

Centrándonos en el retrato desde un punto de vista pictórico, su ejecución no consiste en hacer únicamente un inventario físico, pues el físico debe de ser el vehículo que nos hace penetrar en el retratado. En relación a la enseñanza de este género desde la pintura, si bien podemos decir que hay tantas maneras de ejecutar un retrato como pintores existen, en la etapa de formación es necesario canalizar al alumno mediante unas pautas de trabajo determinadas, las cuales van desde la realización de ejercicios los cuales podíamos denominar de síntesis, para pasar posteriormente a una apertura de superficies en donde toma mayor relevancia el estudio de la fisonomía, así como la pincelada.

**Palabras clave:** Retrato, Autorretrato, Pintura, Docencia, Bellas Artes.

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#### Abstract

Focusing on the portrait from a pictorial point of view, its execution does not consist in making only a physical inventory, since the physical must be the vehicle that makes us penetrate the portrayed. In relation to the teaching of this genre from painting, although

we can say that there are as many ways to perform a portrait as painters exist, in the stage of formation it is necessary to channel the student through certain work patterns, ranging from the realization of exercises which we could call synthesis, to pass later to an opening of surfaces in which the study of the physiognomy, as well as the brushstroke, becomes more relevant.

**Key words:** Portrait, Selfportrait, Painting, Teaching, Fine Arts.

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The portrait has been continuously present throughout history finding it in all times and cultures. From a pictorial point of view, I dare say that it is, possibly, the most difficult genre for the artist, as it is not enough to achieve the external resemblance, because a good portrait besides being a work of art in itself, must be a painted biography.

For the above, the realization of a portrait does not consist in making only an inventory of the physical, as this must be the vehicle that makes us penetrate the portrayed and as a result of osmosis to portray beyond the physical resemblance.

As for the process of struggle of the painter when it comes face to face with the portrayed, there are texts and studies that talk about how the hard sessions that the artist faces when it comes to tackling a portrait. Among them, I would like to refer to two, the first is a text by Eugenio D'Ors that describes this process very accurately and the second is an experience that had the gallery owner Ambroise Volard when he was portrayed by Cezanne:

“Then begins a kind of terrible tragedy for the work, for the author and, to a certain extent, for the portrayed also. That seems to go back every day in which they were said to have achieved semblance and vivacity. The painter or the sculptor may think they are more lost with each step that they advance. The model becomes fatigued. And worse, he goes with it with his expression waning, and the secret of his personality becomes more obscurely hidden in his features. As if the portrait were dying a little more each session; as if its light were dimmed and gradually submerged in a mineral absence ... The proof is so hard, that it happens that most of the portraits which are attempted in the world, shipwreck in the same; many times the model gets tired and seems preferable the failure to the continuation; other times it is the artist who, disguising his own disappointment, decides not to

keep on signing and signing, and on to something else; in painting and in sculpture itself, matter seems condemned to a breakdown in the disaggregated and kneaded. There, it is, however, at the return of the rough effort, the reward for the brilliantly stubborn. One day, oh prodigy! Not perhaps as a result, but rather as a prize for heroic accumulation, the portrait proclaims - as a drowned man, to whom apply artificial breathing for hours and hours - that life returns to him. A new synthesis, but now objective, restores the miraculous semblance. The work has risen! A few more touches, now in happiness of play and grace, have to carry it to perfection. That perfection that in the Museums of the World we all know some immortal examples “. [1. P. 19]

As for Ambroise Vollard, the gallerist narrates the following: “I saw Cézanne on each of his trips to Paris, and he showed me so well that one day I asked him to do my portrait. He decides to accept and he cited me for the next day in his workshop. Upon arriving, I saw in the middle of the workshop a chair on a box, placed in turn on four flimsy supports. I examined that podium, not without concern. Cézanne guessed my apprehension by saying: “I myself have prepared the chair for the posed! Oh, there is no risk of falling, Mr. Vollard, just keep your balance. But, if you pose, you are quiet! Once seated - not without precautions - I took good care of making one of those movements that they call false. I froze. But that same immobility eventually brought me a dream that I fought victoriously for a long time. In the end, however, my head bent over my shoulder at the same time as I lost the notion of the outside world; suddenly, the balance faded and the chair, the box and myself ended up on the floor. Cézanne rushed over me. Unfortunate! He has undone the pose! You have to hold on like an apple. Has he seen any apple move? Since that day, before I went to pose, I would have an extra cup of coffee. “[2. P. 29]

After these brief excerpts that describe both the painter’s tension, and sometimes that of the person portrayed, I will focus on the methodology that I use at the time of approach the student to this genre.

In the teaching that I teach at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Complutense University of Madrid, in the subject of 2nd year of Degree, “Conformation of the Pictorial Space”, several exercises of portraiture-self-portrait are the ones that the students must do in a compulsory way; in addition to having to work throughout all the term a “field notebook” also dedicated to this genre. In a complementary way, several sessions are held by taking notes of hands, which in addition to great pictorial difficulty, also provide us with very interesting data about the personality of the character.



*Pictures 1 and 2. Student notebooks.*

Prior to the realization of these works, they receive a theoretical class in which they are told about the importance of this genre in painting, as well as the essential guidelines to begin to realize them. They necessarily have to start by doing a study of the person who is going to be portrayed by the execution of different types of drawings (analysis, stain, synthesis) being this the way to begin to study and to understand the portrait that they have to realize.

Although during the whole course they have had as a rule the order and cleanliness in the palette, since it is where the work is first managed to later be settled on the support or canvas, in this exercise they are insisted even more, since the neglect of it can cause dirt on the flesh colour. In addition, they are advised that subjection of the painter's pallet supported on the arm, instead of leaving it on the table, is advisable because the subtle vibrations that are realized in the masses of color are appreciated with more proximity and immediacy.



*Picture 3. Student palette.*



Picture 4. Student working.

Often these preliminary drawings or studies carried out by the student and the process that they develop from “learning to see” are more interesting and provide us with more fruitful results than the final work itself, being essentially due to the moment of formation in which they are located.

For the student, this type of pictorial proposals are complicated, but at the same time they are stimulating, since it is a question of facing a genre that in many cases has never been addressed, or if they have done so, in most cases with different artistic tools, not with brushes and oil painting.

While we can say that there are as many ways to perform a portrait as painters exist, in the stage of training it is necessary to channel the student at the time of performing this genre. After the drawing sessions that we have indicated before, the next proposal of work that is presented to them in the classroom-workshop is to begin a self-portrait with the technique of oil painting, and when it is time to start painting it is convenient to avoid that the students fix their pupil directly in anecdotes of their face, for that reason they are asked to make a synthesis of what they are observing and thus to try to discover from the whole to the parts, avoiding that the excessive exaltation of their features leads them to the caricature and avoiding as well that they do not fall into the error of making a disordered mix of “elements” that are not related to each other.

The reduction to the minimum planes as well as geometrization I consider to be essential steps for the student gradually processes and understands the traits that characterize the person he portrays. Although they are already familiar with this process of synthesis since, in previous exercises made with still lifes, they have carried out it, in the genre of the portrait they are more difficult to realize it, mainly because they have to fight with the anxiety

and the emotion to search quickly the resemblance. But the surprise is taken when making this proposal, because they observe that, making this reduction to the minimum surfaces, the structure similarity emanates. Achieving this is not an easy task, as the student tends to dwell on details and partial aspects.

This simplification, although it can give a sense of rigidity, which in a way it is, serves as a starting point to later address another exercise of self-portrait, but this time opening structures, incorporating spirited brushstrokes and adding little by little more data of its physiognomy, but in a way that has previously been studied, which gives the student the ability to select what to put and what to remove.



Picture 5. Student exercise.

The next step is to reexamine the exercise of self-portraiture, but now from a spirited brushstroke and open structures, adding little by little more data of its physiognomy already subject by a structure that guides them in this process, but always trying to dose the binomial reason-emotion not to work in a run over, because the apparent “suddenness” emanates from sessions of work and effort, for this and to finish, then I include this piece that I read to the students in class, written by Ramón Pérez de Ayala on the work sessions of the painter Joaquin Sorolla.

“It has been said that Sorolla was working roughly, that he was fatigued or annoyed before concluding or finishing a work. It is not true. He painted me two portraits: one of interior and one in his garden. In each one he employed more than one month, with sessions, day by day, of three hours. However, both paintings seem suddenly made, with fortunate suddenness. The multitudinous amount of his work must be attributed to his untiring work. He worked from the early hours of the day until midnight, in his study, in the open air, with ar-

tificial light. At the same time that he painted my portrait, he had many others in his hands, and when there was an interstice without a model, he made studies and notes, or painted landscapes, enchanting landscapes. For him, the exercise of art was a vital function, like breathing. If he stopped painting, he stopped breathing. “ [3. P. 245]



Picture 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10. Example of several self-portraits made by students.

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