NOTES ON THE PORTRAIT

BY JAVIER GOMÁ

For conceptual clarification, I will say that what I understand by “portrait” is the pictorial representation of an individual. The history of the portrait, therefore, runs parallel to the history of the individual. I will not attempt to summarize the various stages involved in the history of the portrait, but rather merely propose a few brief and provisional notes on the stages which comprise the history of individuality and its projection onto the aforesaid pictorial genre.

As per the *pictorial representation* of the individual, the portrait is an imitative art. As I have studied at great length elsewhere, all of pre-modernity develops under the emblem of imitation. Until the XVIII Century, Western culture is imitative, as it structures the totality of the world in accordance with the copy-model schema. The image of the pre-modern world supposes that reality is based on a pre-ordained model of perfection—normative, archetypal, antecedent to the subject that observes it. This earlier ideal perfection manifests itself, for instance, both in intelligible Forms and in Nature. Since the things of everyday experience—what we see and touch—do not exhibit the perfection of the model, they are said to be copies or imitations. Thus, things are imitations of Platonic Forms while art is an imitation of Nature. We are talking about similarity, participation, image, analogy, traces, vestiges: this vocabulary designates, time and again, that connection the copy has with respect to the model it indicates, no different to that which a symbol has with the symbolized. In this sense, it is reasonable to believe that the pre-modern mind, constructed atop the copy-model imitation, found within the symbol its highest expression.

Given that the portrait imitates reality, one might therefore infer from all this that pre-modernity, crisscrossed from tip to toe by the explanatory force of imitation, constituted a cultural epoch propitious for the portrait. But that is not the case. And the reason is that, the portrait is a

pictorial representation of the *individual* and individuality, as such, is a modern spiritual phenomenon.

In classic-medieval Antiquity the individual stood only as an example or manifestation of a superior generality. In effect, the major concern of this era with regard to things and persons—Nature and History—was their regularities, that which recurs and, because it recurs, denotes a law, an order, a symmetry, a canon or an archetype of general validity. Accordingly, there was a crushing tendency during this cultural stage to codify uniform situations and prototypical figures. What constituted a person was not the eccentric or differentiating characteristics found within them but rather, that which was shared with all the others of their same condition. Significantly, the "human" voice preceded the mask worn by the actors on stage to hide their countenance. Thus, in Antiquity a person is what remains of man once the distinguishing traits that set him apart have been blotted out.

Throughout a near thousand-year evolution, Greek and Roman statues have invariably celebrated figures which embody the human paradigm. Such a display of the paradigmatic traits found in man is, of course, compatible with the innumerable sculptures dedicated to historic figures, yet in these cases, the human element is cloaked either by the fêted characteristics of the ideal man or the accoutrements of a certain profession: those of the athlete, the philosopher, the politician, the rhetorician or the general, with an inscription or placard identifying the person by name. Even those genres better suited for distinguishing someone and their more proper characteristics, such as the literary biography, have an unswerving propensity to produce stereotypes. For instance, when Plutarch writes of the life of Alexander the Great, he concerns himself primarily with those details of his personality or with those feats which fix his image as the ideal triumphant leader. The biography of every great man is a corroboration of the ideal they embody. Of the works of Apeles, the painter chosen by Alexander the Great to fashion his image before the world, not a single one remains. But we may suppose that Apeles lent his celebrated

refinement and grace as consummate painter to the service of the exaltation of him who, in life, believed to rival the great Achilles.

In short, there was no portrait in Antiquity because there was no individual that would pose before the painter, who, in turn, only perceived in the personal figure the particularization of a typical generality. Many admire the modernity of certain Roman funerary sculptures or the so-called portraits of mummies in Fayum, Egypt, which date back to around the first centuries before and after Christ. Indeed, the depicted countenances of the mummified individuals present a few distinguishable traits which echo the modern portrait. But there is an eerie something that puts them at a far remove: the *look*. Theirs are faces that do not look, or are of a departed look, spiritless, lifeless, as though, deep down, they are to serve as gateway to life eternal but were not meant to supply them with individuality in this corruptible existence.

The Renaissance is an extremely ambivalent period of western culture. In greater and greater proportions, a wave of renovation sweeps across every cultural sphere, but the swell of the tide surges towards Antiquity, which could be understood as a step backwards. The new paradoxically assumes the attire of the old. Ultimately, in the renowned struggle between the Ancients and the Avant-gardes, first waged at the turn of the XVIII Century in France and later in England—whose rippling aftermath is still evident a century later in the controversy between Neoclassicism and Romanticism—the Avant-gardes prevailed. They thus demonstrated for the first time a solid confidence in themselves, and that seed of change carried in the womb of Modernity, once unbound from the manacles of tradition, was finally free to blossom in all its vibrant colors previously kept buried. That novel seed is, patently, individuality.

In the ancient worldview, held for millennia, man grants unto himself a predominant position within the sphere of the real—the center of the universe or the original creation—yet, bearing ever

in mind that he was part of something greater than himself. In the Renaissance, divorced from the notion of a Supreme Being, man becomes aware of his own dignity and thus creates himself anew in total autonomy. The *modern* ***I*** is born. He no longer identifies himself as an ancillary part of a perfect, exemplar, archetypal and complete world existing before the appearance of the subject, but rather reclaims subjective priority and utmost antecedence; as such, the constancy of the objective world is lost and, like a puff of smoke, vanishes. What follows then, is that the modern ***I*** makes an unexpected discovery. As a wholly autonomous entity, split off from the cosmos, the modern ***I*** is unique and unrepeatable but also, *despite this supreme dignity, the world has prepared for it an ignominious fate: Death.*

An ***I*** aware of its own dignity and ill-fated end: herein lays the aporia of modern subjectivity seeking out new modes of expression in its struggle for recognition. The modern novel is born, idealist philosophy, the confessional essay, the doctrine of free interpretation, and, in the political sphere, the first declaration and later constitutionalization of human rights. And, in painting, the portrait, strictly speaking, is also born.

Before the artist's brush poses, for the first time, a human figure whose *look* expresses those two aforementioned characteristics: awareness our own dignity but also of our inevitable mortality. However, during the Renaissance, history-painting, akin to the epic among writers, is still considered to be the highest genre. It is a style of painting of great scope and a plurality of figures normally depicting scenes from Greco-Roman mythology, the bible, or the most symbolic military accomplishments of a particular nation. In these vast compositions, as occurred in Antiquity, the educational or edifying result is still of significant import. The modern portrait, on the other hand, allows space for the arrival of this newly awoken subjectivity kindled between dignity and indignity. The painter must capture that arrival, in its pride as well as its vulnerability, and also, as a reaction against the injustice of impending death, in its impossible longing to endure.

However, this pure function of the modern portrait was mixed, over many years, with other spurious functions, non-intrinsic to the genre, which contaminated its true nature. Principally, the use of the portrait as an instrument by which to flaunt one's social status, as in the representation of crowned heads, of high ecclesiastic dignitaries and of the more distinguished aristocratic houses. The modern *I*, individual, is there alive and pulsating in front of the court painter, but at the same time the portrayed yearns to camber his image, integrating it rhetorically into a discourse on power meant to validate his position of privilege and thus chooses a certain attitude, a coiffure, an attire, insignias and other such symbols of political iconography that reinforce that rhetorical effect. The monarch, the prince, the Pope, the cardinal, the courtier, the gentlemen all pose for the painter but the individual traits of the portrayed are framed—draped with an aura of *maiestas*—in an iconic universe aimed at generating within the observer feelings of admiration and respect for the figure represented as well as arouse within one's subjects the predisposition for political obedience. Played out alongside the rules of the portrait, therefore, are the rules of the old, example-setting Historic painting.

Of course, this merger of the portrait with the political priorities of a stratified society, based on authority and obedience, does not preclude that many of the works produced in this style during the Renaissance and Baroque period stand as solid, authentic masterpieces. Moreover, in artists of such caliber as El Greco, Velázquez or Goya—so as to stay within Spain—the insight of their genius, pitted against an arrogant and miserable individual with the baggage of his specific physiognomic and psychological traits posing before their easels, allowed for artistic integrity to prevail over the expected and lackluster exultation of a position of political dominance, even when the result is less than flattering. Naturally, the artist works with greater freedom when the patron yields to the artist's character, has similar aesthetic tastes or when there is no patron, as occurs in the case of the self-portrait or in the sketches of humble folk, like the beggars painted by Veláquez. The difference being, perhaps, that in the self-portrait where the painter takes pleasure in his own self-estimated importance as an artist, the relationship between one's own dignity and

the indignity of one’s fate—wherein lies this modern individuality mentioned earlier—is kept in balance. Whereas, in the depictions of those drunks or beggars, the destitution of their humble, broken lives takes primacy over any other consideration.

It is within the context of this tradition, whether by continuity or contrast, where I would like to situate these final remarks dedicated to the works of Hernán Cortés, who has been chosen for this exposition.

The portrait is an imitation of reality. The portrait artist, therefore, is an imitative artist. The portrait’s unfurling as a proper genre reached its zenith during the XIX Century when wealth came to the middle-class and certain habits of the aristocracy were adopted. One of which was the desire to perpetuate an image embellished by the painter and punctuated by a dint of well-being and prosperity. With this expansion into different social classes, a once overly formalized genre, subject to strict rules, found a certain liberation from the old hieratic depiction of an individual. The artist was then free to paint a guarded vivacity, an ordinariness and a spontaneity that previously, under the pressures of upholding a stately etiquette, seemed out of place. Due to such a great demand, many painters, even those with higher ambitions, dedicated their art exclusively to the portrait.

But then two simultaneous phenomena occurred. On the one hand, the invention of photography, which, quite successfully, served the purpose of perpetuating in a lasting image an individual’s countenance without the need to have commissioned an artist to paint an expensive and laborious portrait. And, on the other hand, the emergence of the historic modernists who, with few exceptions, practiced a militant anti-mimetism and who, firmly resisting the temptations of realism, advocated the plunge into one’s own inner freedom and creativity. What matters in modern art is the inspiration and imagination of the artist, who proves more than unwilling to

accept a commissioned work as it would, in all likelihood, mar his incorruptible originality by imposing conditions on his genius. As it happens, for one reason or another, the portrait, until recently an established and respected genre, has, in the XX Century, become exceedingly problematic.

The work of Hernán Cortés displayed here is comprised of a gallery of portraits of public figures (senators and constitutional speakers) befitting of an institutional commission. This brief description sums up the number of bold transgressions against the avant-gardist canon that the exhibition entails: mimetic portraits, gallery, public figures, commissioned, institution. In a cultural epoch wherein most of the art being produced could be described as *epigonic* when compared to the genuine achievements of modernism, a proposal of these characteristics is suggestive of a shifting wind provided that the artist, as is the case with Hernán Cortés, is aware of the riddle of the contemporary portrait and his paintings prove to be the fruit of his reflection on the matter. The treatment of the countenance and the gaze in the figures portrayed, the shifting orientation of the torso and its insertion into an abstract background mingled with a silhouette only hinted at, are all elements that benefit from a thorough study of both the Spanish and foreign pictorial tradition of this genre. Yet, at the same time, any observer would agree that they constitute a collection of contemporary creations enriched by the contributions of modernism's experimentation, here, both prudently administrated and assimilated.

The works collected for this exhibition make up a gallery of portraits commissioned by the Spanish *Congreso de los Diputados y el Senado*. This type of *civil* projects has a history dating back to the end of the XVIII Century, when the National Chalcography started up the *Retratos de los españoles ilustres* (Portraits of illustrious Spaniards) which collected the effigies of outstanding politicians, ecclesiastics, artists and military heroes. The Bank of St. Carlos, later Bank of Spain, took up the custom of commissioning a portrait of its directors, something which ran parallel to the official portrait of the Royal Family or of the minister of the Spanish government. As a practice, the

institutional commission continued into the XX Century but fell into decline as a high art as the modernists set their sights on other ambitions. Today, the resuscitation of this artistic project, with a freshly democratic breath, resolves the very concept of the portrait contemplated herein.

From those *true effigies* of constitutional speakers and senators emerges, without a doubt, a modern individuality with a look wherein glimmers the awareness of their dignified but quivering mortality. But it emerges stripped of the allegorical apparatus which in the Renaissance or Baroque portrait elevated the portrayed to the lofty spheres of their superior status, separated from the rest by an impassable abyss, as though they were of a different nature. An official commission always implies an exemplariness. This gallery, however, carried out during a cultural epoch of egalitarianism, does not seek out the respectful obedience and admiration of the people but rather the empathetic identification of the citizen. The treatment of the figure, bereft of outward signs of exclusion and distinction, tells us that the portrayed is one of us, someone belonging to our same human condition, not placed at some unreachable remove by lineage or social position. In short, a common mortal of the same nature as the observer, although an excellent specimen and for that deserving of forming part of the gallery. The figures portrayed represent us, the observers, and not only those aided by fortune or birth. And if they have been selected for the gallery, it is not owing to an *a priori* privilege but rather, starting from a point of origin of equality, to those *a posteriori* merits which benefit the community.

In this sense I understand that the gallery of portraits drawn by Hernán Cortés manages to give aesthetic expression to that egalitarian exemplariness which is the source of ethical legitimization of modern democracies.

TRANSLATED BY ANDREW MORROW