On Portrait Painting
by UTA GÖHRING-ZUMPE

Paris 1906: When, after more than eighty sittings, the twenty-five year old Picasso had finally finished his portrait of the American writer Gertrude Stein, her dismay was great. She complained of having been portrayed as far too old, much too ugly, and with a face that had taken on the appearance of a mask. After having reworked the painting over the following autumn in response, Picasso remained unable to convince her of its merits; Stein continued to insist that her likeness had not been truly captured. The artist refused to compromise, delivered up the canvas and prophesied that, if the portrait had not adequately represented its subject, the sitter would certainly one day come to resemble the portrait.

This episode illustrates one of the problems that portrait painting poses for the artist. What does painting a portrait entail? How can paint and colour be used to achieve the immediacy of an individual person upon the canvas, with all of the presence and radiance that day-to-day interaction often fails to do justice to?

Once the artist has decided to paint a portrait, the first step is to devise the process—finding the form of representation and composing the picture. The composition begins with ordering and arranging the objects and figure or figures involved. In this initial phase, defining the space, the direction of light, the surroundings and pictorial atmosphere, the figure's pose and many other things play an important role. Amidst this bewildering weave of relationships, the painter must not forget that some form of contradiction is paramount to the success of the picture. The artist must resist focusing upon elements that may be favourable for the model; the less flattering aspects are equally important in capturing the character of the subject and should not be left out. Contrast gives the subject matter greater effect. It is the use of colour that makes this possible, allowing for an overall coherency that is set within a field of tension and a complex fabric of relationships upon the surface of the painting; the painter is confronted with all these adversities.

In the 17th century, the art-writer Roger de Pîles—today's notion of the art critic did not yet exist—described a certain phenomenon in portraiture that he referred to as *la politique*. Portrait painting, he claimed, presented a 'political problem'. According to him, subjects invariably wish the artist to present them in a favourable light, in accordance with their own expectations and perceptions. Above all, women are like *les maîtresses* a dangerous pitfall for the painter. Another challenge posed by portraiture is the fact that the painter is expected to meet the demands of the commissioning party. Roger de Pîles thus recommended that the artist never spoke to an onlooker about the work in progress in the presence of the model, as this could easily disconcert the sitter. According to de Pîles, the painter is to use 'political sagacity' to draw attention away from the conversation. The writer also warned painters not to allow a subject's sitting time to be too lengthy. This being a mistake that ignored the laws of nature. Posing for an overextended period entails the danger of exhaustion. It is recommended that, after a sitting period of about one hour, the painter takes a stroll with the model through his studio, giving the latter an opportunity to regain his or her strength.

I am certainly able to relate to de Pîles's descriptions, as they remind me of my own experience as a painter and my own approach to the profession. Nonetheless, I strongly disagree with the notion that men and women behave differently when faced with the task of posing. The only difference in behaviour between the sexes is, in my experience, that men tend to become restless and impatient more quickly than

women do. This also explains why I tend to paint more women than men—something I have been asked about repeatedly. Many aspects come together in portraiture, however—not only the need for the painter to behave with 'political sagacity'. There is, for example, the important interaction between the painter and the model. The subject must feel comfortable with constantly being observed. The sitter must be allowed to let his or her guard down, to take off his or her mask, as it were. On the other hand, the model expects the painter to produce an attractive portrait. The artist may not give way to this expectation.

A painter ought to paint the model according to his own interpretation; using his own faculties of discernment; remaining aware of the proximity and distance he shares with the sitter, and in the way that he approaches the use of colour and paint. Faced with the canvas and confronted with the pictorial factors—the subject, invention, composition, contrast, colour values—the painter encounters his own weaknesses and difficulties that he can only overcome through an honest enthusiasm for painting. The actual artistic problem is comprised of arriving at a balance in representation, in which the painter no longer simply attempts to assert his own will, but is also open to the advent of spontaneous developments and able to incorporate incidental occurrences. The presence of the model can give rise to new colour gestures and means of expression. Through the personality and radiance of the model, a painting can emerge that the painter could never have imagined in advance. It is only through this interplay between the painter and his model that a portrait is created which, ideally, allows absent things to become present. The painter reveals not only the visible qualities of a subject, but also those that may have been hidden behind a veil of pretence. If veiling can be viewed in a positive sense, it can be said that painters are masters of deception in that they are able to make pretence more complete than the actual visual givens could ever be. In portraiture, it is not only the painterly ability of the artist that counts but also the 'artfulness' with which the painter approaches his model and many other aspects of his craft.

Portrait painting has always posed a special challenge to the artist and requires a great deal of ardency. With all talk of colour, contrast and the multitude of other important elements, the underlying principle behind the genre, as formulated by Henri Matisse, should never be forgotten: "I create a painting and not a woman."

While Picasso was willing to modify his work to some extent, he never doubted its value, despite the protests of his subject. Though the canvas remained veiled for some time, Gertrude Stein eventually came to terms with the portrait and, finally able to admire it, decided to hang it up. The painting is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and word has it that, in the end, Picasso's prophecy was indeed fulfilled.