Docent Talk 10-14-08

Portraiture in Britain from the Renaissance through the Eighteenth Century

In my talk today, I'll be presenting a brief history of portrait painting in Britain from the Renaissance through the eighteenth century. My goal with this lecture is to give you a rough background and context for the material you will be touring in the Huntington Art Gallery. I will mainly focus on pictures on display in the Huntington Gallery. But, I am going to have to start out with an example not from our holdings in order to give you a fuller picture, especially because the Huntington does not have many works from the early period.

[SLIDE 1] The history of portraiture in England is often told as a story of the foreign artists who came and worked there. I'm showing you a slide of Hans Holbein's portrait of *Henry VIII* from 1540. This picture, by the way, is in the collection of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica in Rome. Holbein was a German-born painter who came to England in the 1520s, and eventually settled there in the 1530s. It was his art, and that of foreign artists like him, that really shaped the taste of the English court and upper classes during the Renaissance.

So what was the reason for this foreign artistic invasion? As you know, the sixteenth century was a period of great political and religious turmoil in Europe. Widespread dissatisfaction with what was seen as the corruption of the Catholic Church, especially in terms of its financial abuses and the lavish lifestyles of its clergy, led people to challenge its established practices, beliefs, and eventually its authority. The Reformation, as the movement has come to be known, can be really said to have begun in 1517 when Martin Luther issued his 95 Theses calling for Church reform. This eventually led to the breakup of the Catholic Church, with the Protestant Church prevailing mainly in northern Europe, while the Catholic Church remained strong in the south. Luther and John Calvin established Protestant churches in

Germany and Switzerland, and in England, of course, our good friend Henry VIII here broke with Rome in 1534 over a messy divorce.

Though England had to deal with the same disruptions caused by the Reformation as the rest of Europe, it was economically and politically stabile enough to provide substantial support for the arts at this time. This was not the case in many places. In fact, Holbein, who had been working mainly as a religious painter in Basel, Switzerland, found he couldn't support himself there any longer. Because of Henry's split with the Church, there was no real place for religious painting in England. But, the Tudor monarchs had a great taste for portraiture. They also had a clear preference for German and Netherlandish artists. This was probably only natural considering its strained relations with Italy. These two circumstances greatly affect the development of art in Britain. You'll see echoes of what you see in early portraits like this, in the art of later centuries.

Holbein's portrait of Henry VIII depicts the monarch at the age of 49. His huge frame is covered in the latest fashion – a short puff-sleeved coat of heavy brocade trimmed in dark fur, with a doublet encrusted in gemstones and gold braid, slit to reveal the fabric of his white shirt underneath. The careful rendering of these different materials shows the artist's interest in verisimilitude, in depicting the textures and appearances of objects. This is one of the hallmarks of northern art at this time. Henry the VII's portrait is an excellent example of the Tudor court's cosmopolitanism and knowledge of foreign styles. It also reveals something of the great rivalry Henry felt toward King Francis I of France. **[SLIDE 2]** The English king is known to have envied his royal neighbor and attempted to outdo him in any way he could, even going so far as to copy the style of the French king's beard. As you can see, the composition of Holbein's portrait also compares to that of Francis, especially in how both artists place the large bulky

bodies of their sitters close to the picture plane before a plain, but richly colored background. I'm making a comparison between these two pictures to give you a visual example of how a portrait can function on a level beyond a simple record of likeness. In this case portraiture has a political function. It's something that you should bear in mind when looking at the later works I will show you. I think Henry may have gotten one up on his French rival with this particular portrait. The full-frontal view and the authoritative gesture of the sitter simply vividly express the notion that here is someone in control. **[SLIDE 2B]** The richness of the garments, layer upon layer of fabric and jewels, add to the size of the king's body and give the impression of greatness. With its three-quarter length format, Holbein's picture is nearly completely filled with the king's commanding figure, making it one of the most imposing images of power in the history of art.

This example shows that a portrait is not always simply a record of likeness. Portraits serve a variety of political, social, and even religious functions, and the way they look can often give us a clue as to how they were intended to work. Some of you may remember my lectures last winter and spring on visual analysis – how to use a thoughtful description of an image as a means of understanding how it tells us what it wants us to know. This is the methodology I tend to use when teaching art history and so you'll hear me describing the way a painting looks in conjunction with its social history to make the connection. I'll also try to make as many connections as I can between works in our collection. Right now, we don't have the ability to tell the whole history of British art with works in our own gallery. Hopefully we will one day, but for now we'll have to poach images from elsewhere, like this picture of Henry VIII, for this lecture.

The art of Renaissance England was perhaps a bit too early for Henry Huntington's taste. As you know, he tended to focus on what is commonly called as the "Golden Age" of British art – roughly the late 18th and early 19th centuries. So, while we currently lack any English

Renaissance paintings, we have acquired some excellent examples of early miniatures. **[SLIDE 3]** This miniature portrait of Elizabeth I, the daughter of Henry VIII, is on display downstairs in the Huntington Gallery. It is by the artists Nicholas Hilliard and was painted around 1595. Unlike Holbein, Hilliard was not a court-appointed painter. He worked on commission, mainly creating miniature portraits of the queen and other notable courtiers for members of the court and those attached to court circles. Though we often think of miniatures as private tokens of affection, in Renaissance England they served both public and private functions. For example, a courtier might commission a portrait of the queen, such as this example, as a means of showing his allegiance – literally wearing his loyalty on his sleeve. Much like the portrait of Henry VIII, this miniature is less about likeness than it is about creating an image of ruling authority. The richness of Elizabeth's clothing and jewelry, especially the starched white collar, create a strong pattern and lend a sense of stability to the composition. Pretty stiff, right? But this stiffness would have reinforced the queen's public image as a strong and stabile monarch.

If British portraiture in the Renaissance is mainly characterized by the patronage of court circles, the art of seventeenth-century Britain is marked by an expanding patron base that that was not exclusively tied to the royal court. The seventeenth century was a period of remarkable economic growth, which helped to support a large and growing middle class. **[SLIDE 4]** In fact, the artist Cornelius Johnson drew many of his clients from provincial rather than courtly circles. This portrait of an unknown man, from 1632, is one of these. (I should note that this portrait is currently on display in the room just outside the Main Portrait Gallery. However, I want to give you fair warning that I'll be taking it away in January to an exhibition at Tate Britain.) Much more so than the Tudor portraits we looked at earlier, Johnson's portrait of a *Man with a Lovelock* makes a real attempt to render the features of the sitter as naturalistically as possible.

Compared to the mask-like face of Elizabeth, this gentleman looks much more "real." **[SLIDE 5]** If you look closely you can see the blue veins underneath his pale, almost transparent skin. The artist has also painted his thinning hairline and the fleshy jawline and rather weak chin with a remarkable degree of honesty. This has the effect of making the sitter seem approachable. This effect is enhanced by the fact that he has removed his cloak, a symbolic act indicating his desire to reveal himself as he is, without formality or artifice. The emphasis on naturalism, a mode of art which seeks to imitate the forms found in nature, likely derived from Johnson's artistic training, which he probably undertook in Holland. Dutch artists worked for a market that was not so much dominated by court patronage as it was by the middle class, who bought pictures that accurately depicted themselves and their surroundings. The Dutch taste for portraits that went beyond a simple portrayal of facial features and costume to convey a sense of the emotion or personality of the sitter may also have influenced Johnson. The direct gaze with which the *Man with a Lovelock* engages us gives his portrait an almost "living" quality, which is enhanced by the inclusion of his hand in the composition, actively fingering the fabric of his cloak. **[SLIDE 6]** The gesture of elbow on waist, which you may recall from the portrait of Henry VIII, here doesn't so much lend an air of authority as it does add a sense of three-dimensionality to the portrait. We get the impression that the elbow almost protrudes into our space. Compositional devices such as these give us a sense of closeness to this unknown sitter. Though we have no idea who he is, we are able, though the composition of his portrait, to grasp something of his sensitive personality.

[SLIDE 7] Closeness is definitely <u>not</u> the impression we are meant to get when we look at this portrait by the Flemish artist Anthony van Dyck. When Van Dyck settled in London in 1632, he had already established a reputation as a painter of glamorous aristocratic and royal

subjects. Van Dyck's portrait of *Anne Killigrew Kirke* was painted around 1637, just a few years after Johnson's portrait, but this full-length depiction of a high-level member of Queen Henrietta Maria's court is completely different in function. Though Van Dyck brings the same gentle, reflective quality to his sitter's likeness as Johnson had, the rest of the picture is designed to give a different impression. Instead of an intimate portrait of a private person, *Anne Kirke*'s portrait celebrates a political achievement and was meant as a public statement. This grand portrait was probably painted on the occasion of Anne Kirke's appointment to the position of Dresser to the Queen, one of the most coveted places for women at court. It was a position that required a knowledge of fashion and the protocols of court dress. This makes it hardly surprising that one of the most striking features of Van Dyck's portrait of Anne Kirke is her magnificent clothing. Her dress is made of a heavy gold-brown silk, the color was known as "orange tawny" in the 17th century. Van Dyck uses the backdrop of deep brown and red curtains to set off the rich fabric of the gown. Notice how the artist has used thick strokes of yellow, gold and light brown paint to create a sensation of light playing off of the shimmering fabric. **[SLIDE 8]** This attention to naturalistic detail is actually remarkably similar to that displayed by artists such as Cornelius Johnson, who used the same technique in creating the folds of the white shirt in his portrait of a *Man with a Lovelock.* Van Dyck, however, uses naturalism to augment the impression of courtly elegance he wished to create around his sitter. **[SLIDE 9]** Though everything looks realistic, as it would in nature, it is all carefully constructed to enhance the graceful authority of Anne Kirke. For example, notice how the sitter's left hand. Though it is actually in a very awkward, unnatural position, it appears to be very gracefully holding the fabric of her dress. The folds of the fabric around her hand echo the petal-like forms of the white ruffles at her sleeves, which in turn mimic

the petals of the rose on the left hand side of the picture – all linking the sitter to the beauty of the flower itself.

The full-length format Van Dyck uses here is one that he developed as a means of endowing his aristocratic and royal sitters with visual authority. **[SLIDE 10]** He used the same formula in this portrait of King Charles I, from about 1635. Van Dyck sets the portrait in an open landscape with a low horizon. The position of the figure close to the picture plane with the vast receding view behind gives visual weight to the sitter. This careful manipulation of setting allowed the artist to portray the rather short monarch as towering above the landscape, making him the most imposing figure in the picture. **[SLIDE 11]** Van Dyck also uses the device of the open landscape behind Anne Kirke. By placing her figure close to the picture plane, like Charles, he gives her a similar visual authority. She stands back just enough from the front to tower over us – we are literally forced to look up to her, as we would to someone in her high position in real life. This format – a full-length portrait, usually in a landscape setting, with the sitter dressed in rich clothing, became very influential to British portraitists in the late 18th century. We call 18th-century portraits that use this format "Grand Manner" portraits. The display in the Huntington Gallery allows you to make a visual connection between our great Grand Manner portraits displayed in the Main Portrait Gallery and this seventeenth-century prototype, which we have hung in the room just outside.

However, before I move on I want to make sure those of you who are touring the Huntington Gallery know that Van Dyck's portrait of *Anne Kirke* will also be going out on loan to Tate Britain in January. **[SLIDE 12]** Replacing her will be a portrait of *Mary Stuart, Duchess of Lennox and Richmond*, probably painted in the late 17th century by a follower of Anthony van Dyck. Its unknown artist is working in the portrait style established by Van Dyck earlier in the

century. This painting was purchased by Henry Huntington in 1925, though it has not been on public display for many years. **[SLIDE 13]** If you are touring the Huntington Gallery, you may use this painting as an example of the influence of Van Dyck and the development of the Grand Manner. Notice how it has a similar format to the portrait of Anne Kirke, with the open sky view, and the use of a curtain to set off the richly-clothed figure.

Before I really get into the Grand Manner, I'm just going to take a little detour to discuss another important category of portraiture that developed in the eighteenth century. The eighteenth century saw a further expansion of artistic patronage down the social ladder that had begun in the seventeenth century and portrait artists developed new styles and formats to accommodate their new patrons. **[SLIDE 14]** One of the new formats that developed in early eighteenth-century Britain is commonly known as the conversation piece. These pictures operate under the appealing fiction that the viewer has just happened upon an informal family gathering and caught the subjects as if by chance. Sitters in conversation pictures are normally shown at some type of activity, usually of a domestic nature. In the slide on the screen, you see a conversation piece by the British artist Francis Hayman called *The Gascoigne Family*, painted around 1740. This work is on view upstairs. It shows members of a family performing one of the typical social rituals of the time – taking tea. Portraits like this seek to define their sitters not only by the way they look, or the way they are dressed, as we saw in earlier portraits by Van Dyck, for example, but also by the recreations they pursue, the objects that they own, and the manner in which they comport themselves. The idea of "gentility" is important – a middle class family, such as we assume the one is depicted here, was not able to rely on inherited social status for its position within society. To differentiate themselves as "gentlepeople," the wealthy middle classes relied on the careful manipulation of social codes, something an aristocrat, who was by

nature a "gentleperson," didn't have to worry about. A middle class family, therefore, had to rely on outward appearances and behaviors to signify their social status. The family depicted here is shown enjoying tea together, which is a conspicuous demonstration of their good manners. Their possessions include a fine china tea set, which at the time may have been the most expensive object in the house. The inclusion of the tea set in this portrait puts the Gascoigne Family's good taste proudly on display. This particular tea set, however, may have not belonged to these sitters. It was more likely a studio prop owned by the artist. Painters of conversation pieces such as Hayman would have owned a wide variety of props such as tea sets, and other genteel furnishings, that they would include in their portraits as signs of the good manners of their sitters. Another sign of the sitters' good manners was their own body language. Here you can see the gestures of the two women on opposite sides of the tea table, who gracefully point their index fingers while rotating their palms upward. These gestures not only signify the ladies' comportment, but may also be what in portraiture is called a "speaking gesture." A speaking gesture is a pictorial code indicting the act of speech or the sitters' engagement with each other. Polite conversation was an important element of good manners and a useful marker of the refinement of those depicted in a portrait. The combination of features such as household objects and the visual expression of conversation, with a portrait's requirements for intelligible likeness, necessitated a very careful balance. The fact that this balance is not easy to achieve is probably why many conversation pieces look so awkward to us today.

[SLIDE 15] The other mode of portraiture most often associated with eighteenth-century Britain is of course the Grand Manner. The Huntington has probably the finest collections of Grand Manner portraits in the United States. It was a form of portraiture that was practiced by the leading artists of the day, including George Romney, Thomas Gainsborough, and Joshua

Reynolds. Reynolds codified this form of portraiture in his *Discourses on Art*, a series of yearly lectures he made to the students of the Royal Academy while his was president of the institution. I'm going to use Reynolds' portrait of *Diana, Viscountess Crosbie* painted in 1777 as an example. The painting depicts the young aristocrat full-length in an open landscape setting. She is shown wearing a fantastic gown of cream-colored silk, edged in gold ribbon. Her hair is piled high on her head and secured with more ribbon and pearls. The juxtaposition of this fashionable hairstyle is at odds with the vaguely classical feeling of the gown the sitter is wearing. There is a reason for this. In his *Discourses*, Reynolds lectured that artists should follow a set of rules of art derived from a study of the great masters of the past, especially those who worked in the classical tradition, such as Michaelangelo. Related to this adherence to the classical tradition, art, according to Reynolds, should also be generalized to create a universal image rather than a particular one. This means that though an artist should still base his works of art on the observation of nature, he should not depict nature exactly as it is, with all its flaws. Instead, the artist should study many particular examples from nature and generalize them into an ideal image. Take an arm, for instance. Using this method, an artist would look at many, many arms and take all the best features of every arm and blend them all together – to create the image of the ideal and therefore universal arm. Reynolds also taught that the highest form of art was not portraiture, but rather history painting – high-minded scenes from the past, literature, mythology, or the bible that taught a moral lesson. However, since British patrons did not have a long tradition of supporting history painting, and since portraiture was still the most popular form of art in Britain, Reynolds used his own portrait practice to make a compromise with the ideals he proposed in his *Discourses*. Grand Manner portraits, such as that of Diana Viscountess Crosbie, represent Reynolds's attempt to elevate portraiture toward the intellectual level of history

painting. He did this by generalizing his subjects as much as possible (an interesting challenge in a genre that was all about depicting a specific sitter) and by infusing them with high-minded artistic, historical, or literary references. **[SLIDE 16]** *Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse*, which Reynolds painted around 1783-84, is a perfect example of this. While a portrait of one of the most famous actresses of her day, it is also a reference back to the art of the past – in this case making a link to the work of the great Italian Renaissance artist Michalangelo. **[SLIDE 17]** You can see how Reynolds based the composition of Sarah Siddons' portrait on Michelangelo's fresco depicting the Prophet Isaiah from the Sistine Chapel in Rome. The majesty and gravitas of the figure in Michelangelo's fresco is visually transferred to the great tragic actress in an appropriate allusion. **[SLIDE 18]** Returning to the figure of Diana Crosbie, we can see how Reynolds used an even more general reference to the art of the past to elevate this portrait of a young woman. Diana wasn't a famous tragic actress. At the time the portrait was painted she was just a young aristocratic bride, so the artist chose not to elevate her portrait with grand references to the Sistine Chapel. Instead, Reynolds depicts her in a gown that is loosely inspired by the drapery seen on classical sculpture. It is meant to be timeless because it does not reference contemporary, fleeting fashions, and therefore satisfy his stipulation that art strive for the universal. Unfortunately for Reynolds' high ideals, the particularity of fashion is the enemy of universality. As a portraitist catering to a trendsetting clientele, Reynolds was obviously willing to fudge his own rules to satisfy his customers. In this case, Diana's hair is shown dressed in the latest style. Portraits like this were intended for the public rooms, halls and stairways of their sitters' aristocratic residences and were usually also calculated to make a splash at the annual Royal Academy exhibitions in London.

[SLIDE 19] If Reynolds strove to elevate portraiture by removing as much of contemporary fashion from it as possible, his great rival, Thomas Gainsborough often did quite the opposite, painting ladies and gentlemen dressed at the height of fashion. Gainsborough also worked in the Grand Manner, but he modified it, and infused it with his own sensibility. His portrait of *Penelope, Viscountess Lionier* is one example. Painted in 1770 it shows Gainsborough looking back to the art of the past, much as Reynolds does, but rather than the Greek and Italian tradition that Reynolds preferred, Gainsborough looked most often to the art of the great Northern painters, especially Anthony van Dyck, whose portrait of Anne Kirke we looked at a few minutes ago. **[SLIDE 20]** In this portrait, we can see how Gainsborough takes elements that Van Dyck used in his own aristocratic portraiture, such as the open landscape, the rich drapery, and the full-length format. **[SLIDE 21]** He surrounds Lady Ligonier with artistic references, including a porte-crayon, portfolio, and sheets of paper, as well as the plaster casts typically used as artist models, alluding to the sitter's own drawing practice. Much like Reynolds, Gainsborough invents a fantastic garment for Lady Ligonier to wear. But unlike Reynolds, he doesn't spend a lot of time using it to connect his sitter to a sort of universal idea of art. Instead, he uses it as an excuse to delight in the texture of white silk gauze he creates on the canvas. If fashionable accessories are extraneous to Reynolds' main program, in Gainsborough's art they often take the main stage, serving as the vehicles with which he explores light and shade and texture. Lady Ligonier's robe is a study in translucency, achieved with a seemingly chaotic riot of brushwork. He scumbles white highlights across the surface of the dress, which he sets off with shadows of violet gray. These colors are echoed in the sash at her waist. He creates a sense of shimmering fabric with his lively, slashing brushwork.

Grand Manner portraiture had a profound influence on artists of generations succeeding Reynolds and Gainsborough. **[SLIDE 22]** Thomas Lawrence, for example, uses elements of the Grand Manner in his portrait of eleven-year-old Sarah Goodin Barrett Moulton, known as "Pinkie." Painted in 1794, it depicts a young girl in much the same format as the ladies we have just seen in works by Reynolds, Gainsborough, and van Dyck. Set off against an open receding landscape, Pinkie's figure is monumental. Note how low the horizon line is in the picture, how the girl towers above it. Lawrence also diffuses some of the seriousness of this mode of portraiture by infusing the picture with movement. A wind blows Pinkie's dress and ribbons, while her arms are posed as if she performs a dance.

Pinkie was one of the last British portraits Henry Huntington purchased before his death. He was not particularly interested in collecting nineteenth-century British portraiture, and our collection today still does not have significant holdings in this field. Of course, I could go on and on about nineteenth-century art, as it is my particular specialty, but I will go ahead and stop here today in order to keep the focus on what you will actually see in the gallery. If you have any questions, I think I still have a few minutes left to answer them. Thank you.