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The Portable Portrait: Physicality, Meaning, and Mediation

The painting is small. In it, a pale, auburn-haired girl looks to her left; her expression is placid. She might be five or six, but she is dressed in a jeweled red cap and square-necked black bodice with full gold silk sleeves, fine 16th-century clothing. She holds a rosary. Standing in front of the painting last November, Minneapolis Institute of Arts Assistant Paintings Curator and Provenance Specialist Erika Holmquist-Wall remarked that a king commissioned this portrait of his daughter to take with him on the battlefield along with portraits of his other children.

In my Masters of Fine Art work in photography at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, I wrestle with the question of how people live with art outside of institutional settings, and, in Jean Clouet the Younger's oil on cradled panel *Portrait of Charlotte of France*, perhaps there is an answer. Royal privilege made this particular object possible, but here is art, not as extravagance, but as an essential part of one man's practice of family. Rather than hang imperially at a distance, this painting is sized for portability. Though there are difference between paintings made for a king and the wide variety of family photographs, my encounter with *Portrait of Charlotte of France* inspired consideration of the way the physicality and purpose of that painting can inform understanding of contemporary portable portraits.

What is a portable portrait? What distinguishes it from other small images of particular individuals? First, the individual in a portable portrait and those who cherish the image generally share a familial relationship whether by blood, marriage, or sentiment. Further, portable portraits are the result of two co-existing preconditions: the physical

absence of the person in the portrait and access to representative image making. In the absence of a loved one, a portrait can maintain a sense of connection; access to image making that faithfully represents a subject makes the portrait possible. Though it is certainly not the first, in the perfect historical storm surrounding its creation, *Portrait of Charlotte of France* exemplifies many of the elements central to considerations of contemporary portable portraits.

King Francis I, Charlotte of France's father, was both a politically minded warrior and a shrewd patron of the arts. His nickname, *Roi-Chevalier*, was the result of his seemingly endless campaigns to push and strengthen France's national boundaries – campaigns that meant extended time away from his family. Francis I also brought creative luminaries to his court, including Leonardo Da Vinci who lived at Château du Clos Lucé from 1516 until his death in 1519, the same year he completed the *Mona Lisa* that the French king acquired ("History of the site - Discover Le Clos Lucé").

In her examination of King Francis I's role in the development of portrait miniatures, Stephanie Buck argues that, because of his political activities throughout Europe, "consideration of the early years of Francis I's reign reveals that international artistic exchange during this era was both rooted in, and inextricable from, a tightly woven network of political relationships" (191). Small portraits were sent between European courts as diplomatic gifts (Buck 193; "Portrait Miniatures: Royal Portraiture").

As Francis I's court painter and a master in his own right, Jean Clouet the Younger had access to his European peers either directly or though their work. This artistic exchange is evident in Clouet's portraits; like Da Vinci, Clouet's used light and shade dimensionally and made his paintings from life drawings of his subjects (Holmquist-Wall interview). It is Clouet's use of these techniques that bring Charlotte to life for the viewer.

Further, curators of the Royal Collection in England hold that Clouet was the first to emancipate "the portrait miniature from the illuminated manuscript" citing as an example his miniature *Portrait of Francis, Dauphin of France* sent in 1526 to Henry VIII by King Francis I's sister, Margaret, "probably to encourage Henry to negotiate the release of the French king's sons, who were being held hostage in Spain" ("Royal Collection - Francis, Dauphin of France").

Here, because Clouet painted both portable portraits and portrait miniatures, it becomes important distinguish between the two. Though both are easy to carry and represent particular individuals, I identify subtle differences regarding their use and production that differentiate their meanings and aid in identification of contemporary portable portraits.

Portrait miniatures derive their name not from their size, but from the red lead, *miniare*, used in painting their antecedents, illuminated manuscripts ("National Portrait Gallery - Room 3: Miniatures Gallery"). From their advent in the 1500s, to their deployment in late Tudor courts, through the height of their popularity in the Victorian age, portrait miniatures were, using magnifying glasses and other specialized tools and techniques, watercolors painted on vellum and ivory, or enameled onto metal substrates ("Miniatures - Royal Collection Trust"; Eade 1). The resulting objects were worn as jewelry and often kept in small, decorative cases ("Portrait Miniatures: Royal Portraiture 1580-1625 - Victoria and Albert Museum").

Consider as a model portrait miniature the c.1600 painting *Elizabeth I of England* by Nicholas Hilliard. At around 2.5 by 1.75 inches in size ("Portrait miniature - Hilliard, Nicholas - V&A Search the Collections"), this and other portrait miniature paintings, including Clouet's *Francis, Dauphin of France,* are never the size of the five by seven inch portrait of Charlotte.

Further, like subsequent portrait miniatures, Hilliard's painting of Elizabeth I is embedded in a jewel encrusted carrying case. This case indicates that, though personal, this miniature was meant to be seen in public to convey a particular message about the wearer's social status; these paintings were often given as royal tokens or propaganda to loyal or important courtiers ("Portrait Miniatures: Royal Portraiture 1580-1625 - Victoria and Albert Museum"). Unlike portrait miniatures, Francis I's portraits of his children were meant to be portable, but not worn.

Finally, Hilliard's painting of Elizabeth I, made from a template of the queen's face, is an idealized portrait meant to convey, not so much the fact of her being, but the extent of her power and connection to England ("Portrait miniature - Hilliard, Nicholas - V&A Search the Collections"). Though elements of *Portrait of Charlotte of France* are symbolic, it is remarkable for the way it and Clouet's other paintings of the French royal family convey a sense of personality that goes beyond the merely flattering or formulaic.

Admittedly, portrait miniatures and portable portraits as genres might, at times, intersect. Portrait miniatures could be worn close to the heart and used to reinforce a sense of intimacy. However, portable portraits are not notable for their contrived creation, novel viewing, or fashionability. Indeed, unlike the cameo broaches, silhouette cutouts, mourning jewelry and other direct decedents of the portrait miniature, I argue that Clouet's *Portrait of Charlotte of France* is more related to school pictures or family snapshots resting on bedside tables.

The period after the Industrial Revolution and, in the Americas, westward expansion, saw the demise of the portrait miniature as a result of the rise and increased demand for photographs. Thus, the portable portrait, by means of a new medium, became ubiquitously available to masses of people.

Less concerned with the 'art' of title and focused on the 'middle-brow', in *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu considers who acquires photographs, the types of photographs they keep, and ultimately why they want or need those images in the first place (19). Thus, at one point in his analysis, Bourdieu describes the circumstances that structure the taking, sending, and receiving of a child's photograph. In the past, births or christenings took place in multi-generational homes or tightly knit communities. Now, according to Bourdieu, "(t)he geographic dispersal of relatives demand(ed), more than ever, the periodical reinvigoration of family ties, carried out more effectively by means of photographs than by a simple exchange of letters" (26).

Cultural theorist Walter Benjamin holds that photography as a medium, in its reproduction of images, increasingly distances the viewer from the actual object in an image. However, in his own words, "aura is tied to… presence; there can be no replica of it" (Benjamin 7) and a portrait derives meaning from the presence – at the time of its creation – of the person in the image. That is, we make and cherish portraits because we believe they collect some truth about the subject that is present at the moment the portrait was made and definitive of the person across time. Though portable portraits can be complicated by <u>how</u> the subject is portrayed, for instance, a child might smile not because she wants to but because she is asked to do so, that she was there at some point in the creation of the portrait is the foundation on which any discussion of the veracity of how she comes across must be based.

Take, for example, in *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes' description of looking for and at last finding a photograph that represented – as he knew her – his recently deceased mother:

> (T)his photograph collected all the possible predicates from which my mother's being was constituted and whose suppression or partial alteration, conversely, had sent me back to these photographs of her which had left me so unsatisfied. These same photographs, which

> phenomenology would call "ordinary" objects, were merely analogical, provoking only her identity, not her truth; but the Winter Garden Photograph was indeed essential, it achieved for me, utopically, *the impossible science of the unique being*. (71)

In every other photograph, Barthes found "(i)t was not she, yet it was no one else… I recognized her differentially, not essentially" (66). Though these 'other' images fell short of what he sought, they came under consideration because his mother was in fact present for the photograph. Likewise, the portrait wherein Barthes does find his mother turns *potential* embodied by presence into *proof*.

Meaning also comes from the way we handle things. Looking at portable portraits, we bend our heads and look into our hands. This is an intimate posture. We move into this pose when we take intimate care of ourselves and others, for instance when doing needlework, polishing shoes and nails, cleaning a small child's face, reading, and handwriting. Because of their size, not larger than the five by seven inch *Portrait of Charlotte of France*, portable portraits lend themselves to this positioning.

Here again, it is necessary to draw distinctions between portrait miniatures and portable portraits. In his discussion on limning, the painting and viewing of portrait miniatures, Hilliard said that these types of images were "to be viewed of necessity in hand, near unto the eye" (Davenport 65). Though he was making a contrast between the particularities of style between limning and larger paintings, viewing a portrait miniature "near unto the eye" is to marvel: "Looking so closely seems almost indecent as details such as the tiny brushstrokes and dots that form the beginnings of a moustache and or the lower eyelashes (above), or the petals of a rose (below), comes into focus" (Eade 2). This 'intimacy' *is* almost transgressive as, by inspecting the painter's style, the viewer objectifies rather than realize the subject in full. It is not the same 'looking' that Barthes brings to 'the' portrait of his mother. He writes:

> I studied the little girl and at last rediscovered my mother. The distinctness of her face, the naive attitude of her hands, the place she had docilely taken without either showing or hiding herself, and finally her expression, which distinguished her… (69)

As personal as a portable portrait might be, sharing, too, is very much a part of the experience of these images. Once we have registered the image, we seek to share our pleasure with someone else. This act also has a distinct posture. When we show what we hold in our hands to other people, we generally do so side-by-side to continue looking at the image rather than break our gaze. Here again consider Barthes: "I studied (Barthes has adopted a posture of intimate caring) the little girl (his focus is the whole person, not the art that makes her visible) and at last rediscovered my mother (proof of the existence of the person as Barthes knew her)." This passage 'shares' the Winter Garden photograph while Barthes himself is in these lines forever 'looking' alongside the reader.

Considering a textual description of a photograph seems far from looking at a painting. But Bourdieu and Benjamin's assertions do connect Clouet's *Portrait of Charlotte of France* to portable portraits in contemporary communities worldwide. My art practice is rooted in photographic portraiture. Research into the ways portraiture is used throughout the African Diaspora led me to see that work of Malian photographers Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé and African American artist Lorna Simpson literally and conceptually extends the use and interpretations of the portable portrait as embodied by *Portrait of Charlotte of France*.

It might be argued that demand for photographs in colonial, increasingly cosmopolitan, and then newly independent Bamako was the result Malians seeing themselves through and adapting their tastes to Western culture. However, the content of Seydou Keïta's photographs tells a more complex story. Because, though the differences in time, station, and medium between 16th century French court painter Clouet and self-employed mid-20th century Malian photo studio owner Seydou Keïta abound, similarities in the

purpose of their images speak to the power of the portable portrait; family and travel are at the center of both artists' work.

Keïta operated his studio, located near a train station, from 1948-1962, and his rich black and white 5x7 contact prints of middle class African families and individuals in were easily transported or mailed to places near and far. In his photographs, sis subjects wear a blend of traditional Malian and Western clothes that speak to the ways they adapted to the changes taking place in their community ("Seydou Keïta").

Just as Keïta closed his studio, Malick Sidibé opened Studio Malick in Bamako. Like Keïta, Sidibé's business was portraiture. He worked with 35 mm or medium format cameras that allowed him to photograph outside of studio. However, like Keïta, Sidibé also printed his images at portable sizes "suitable for sending through the post or for display in a domestic interior" (Batchen 254).

Like Clouet and Hilliard, both Keïta and Sidibé are important to discussions of the portable portrait because of the way size complicates the meaning of their work. Here, though, the discussion is not about the ways that small portraits can have different meanings. Rather, drawing on an article, "Does Size Matter?" by photography historian Geoffrey Batchen, I would like to consider the way a change in size can obscure full understanding of portraits – especially portable portraits.

When their work was introduced to the larger art world in the 1990s, Keïta and Sidibé's photographs were treated in notably different ways. Keïta's images were enlarged from 5x7 to 20x24 (Rips). While Keïta was comfortable with the change in size ("I knew then that my work was really, really good,") Batchen argues that, if "you actually care about their meanings and functions in Mali, where they were first taken," then radically changing size is to bury the history behind portable portraits (254; 250). Sidibé's photographs were shown at their original size. Gathered and grouped

(252), viewers could interact with the work in ways similar to what Keïta or Sidibé's patrons might have found those in their Bamako studios as described by Keïta: "I had pinned on the walls of the studio various samples of my work: men or women in bust, alone or by two, or even groups up to 6 people, families and so on" ("Seydou Keïta").

Lorna Simpson's 2009 installation *Please Remind Me of Who I Am,* is made of 50 ink drawings sized to match 50 aged, found photo booth portraits sent from African Americans in the North to their families in the South during the Great Migration. As presented at the Brooklyn Museum, the work echoes the installation of Sidibé's work and similarly "insists on a close inspection and therefore a physical intimacy between" the viewer and the subjects in the photographs (Batchen 255). Neither Sidibé nor Simpson's installation provides information on the sitters in these portable portraits, an anonymity that Simpson highlights in her drawings that, according to the curatorial notes, create a "sense of a missing history (that) is reinforced by the shadow images interspersed among the photographs" ("Brooklyn Museum: Lorna Simpson").

Simpson's piece exemplifies the complexity involved in understanding portable portraits when they are decontextualized. Like Clouet's painting, the photo booth images were once personal possessions. And who among us does *not* have plastic wallet inserts filled with school pictures, mobile phone videos of the baby or the wedding or the vacation, desk or bedside table photographs? The portable portrait is an integral part of Western culture and contemporary life. Though the technology has changed from the time of Clouet's *Portrait of Charlotte of France*, the meaning of its content and size transcend media and time. And if we understand Clouet's painting as similar to Keïta's 5x7 contact prints, then the space between the elite and the vernacular shrinks and we see our own portable portraits in new ways.

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