Portrait poses in painting and photography - some reflections on their relationship.

In traditional painted portraits, the person is depicted in one of a conventional range of poses, reflecting contemporary ideals of social decorum and correct behaviour, often accompanied by conventional signs of status, wealth and position.


*Comtesse Vilain XIIII and her
Daughter
by Jacques-Louis David (1816)*

*Erasmus
by Holbein The Younger (1523)*

And in addition to the conventions of depiction, there were practical constraints on poses: the time required for the artist to capture a likeness meant that the person had to hold the pose for a considerable period of time. Holbein drew preliminary studies in chalk and ink during a session that might take three hours or more; and even Renoir, a fast worker, took 35 minutes to paint Wagner's portrait in 1882. Not surprisingly, the subjects of such paintings came to be described as 'sitting for a portrait' (though, if appropriate, standing or reclining poses were also convenient).

Photographic portraiture adopted the social and aesthetic conventions of posing used in portrait painting; and its 'sitters', too, had to be able to hold a suitably dignified pose during the long exposures needed. Initially subjects had their heads fixed in metal clamps to prevent movement. But even when such draconian restrictions became unnecessary, the conventions of posing persisted:
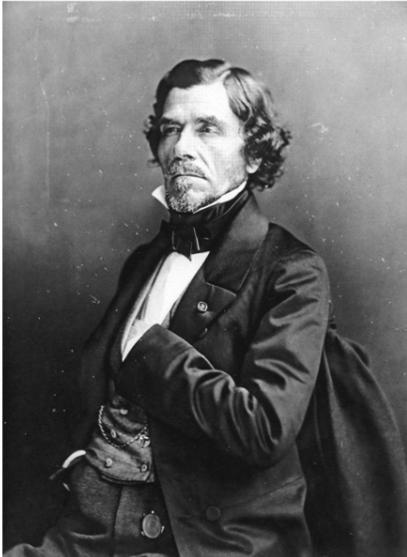
*Eugène Delacroix by Nadar
(Early 1860s)*

*Winston Churchill
by Yousuf Karsh (1941)*

*Princess Elizabeth in the uniform of
a Colonel of the Grenadier Guards
by Cecil Beaton (1942)*

Indeed, the manner of posing for a portrait is so embedded in our culture that Sir William Coldstream, the portrait painter, could tell his sitters not to 'be natural', but rather to 'sit exactly as if you were having your portrait painted'.[1]

However, even while portrait photographers were adhering to the conventions of the portrait pose through the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth, painters were eagerly imbibing the influence of other kinds of photography. Their creativity in doing so went beyond the mere use of photography as an aid to painting, as in Delacroix's use of photographs of the posed nude provided for him by Eugène Durieu; rather, painters were using ideas from the rapidly spreading amateur snapshot, especially its propensity to cut people and objects off arbitrarily at the edges of the frame, and to freeze people in 'accidental' and unconventional poses not traditionally used in the painted portrait.

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1   Recounted by EH Gombritch in his introduction to "Tête à Tête - The portraits of Henri Cartier-Bresson"

Stéphane Mallarmé by Édouard Manet (1876)

Robert Louis Stevenson and his wife by
John Singer Sargent (1885)

The kind of informal posing we see in these paintings by Manet and Singer Sargent slowly fed back into photographic portraiture in the early twentieth century, though it was not really until fast film and small, hand-held cameras with a fast shutter made capturing such poses technically feasible that they became the stock in trade of the new candid and informal style of professional photographic portrait.

*Katherine Hepburn smoking a cigarette
by Alfred Eisenstaedt (1938)*

Marilyn Monroe by Eve Arnold (1960)

Iris Murdoch by Jane Bown (1978)

Of course, what we are seeing in the paintings and photographs on this page are portraits that are *not* posed, at least not in the way that 'posing' would normally be understood. It seems unlikely that Manet and Sargent would respectively have required Mallarmé and the Stevensons to maintain those postures for the time it took the artist to make the likenesses. (Surely, Mallarmé's cigar would have gone out!) And the photographs by Eisenstaedt, Arnold and Bown have all the signs of images captured 'on the fly', as one might say. But while it seems likely that Hepburn, Monroe and Murdoch knew they were being photographed, and that awareness may have affected their posture and demeanour, it is doubtful that either Mallarmé or the Stevensons had any such influence on how the artist would would depict them. Photographers must perforce record some real state of affairs as it exists in the moment of the exposure, whereas painters are not so constrained.

And this is an important distinction. Despite the seeming similarities between a painted and a photographed portrait, they are fundamentally different: the painting is the expression of an integration, whereas the photograph, however elaborately staged or skilfully caught, is essentially analytical, a moment isolated by the opening and closing of the shutter. A painter gathers up his experience and knowledge of a person whose face is constantly in motion, whose flow of gestures, postures and physical expression bespeaks their moods and typical states of mind, distilling all that into the representation created on the canvas. A photographic portrait is a frozen moment in this flow, and what it records is no more than a passing instant. If the photographer is lucky, the camera captures a recurring conformation of facial and bodily expression that we recognise as 'typical' of that person; if unlucky, and the captured moment is not so typical, we dismiss it as a 'poor likeness': candid and informal photographic portraiture is a much more serendipitous business than photographing someone who is sitting 'exactly as if they were having their portrait painted'.

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Jan 2014