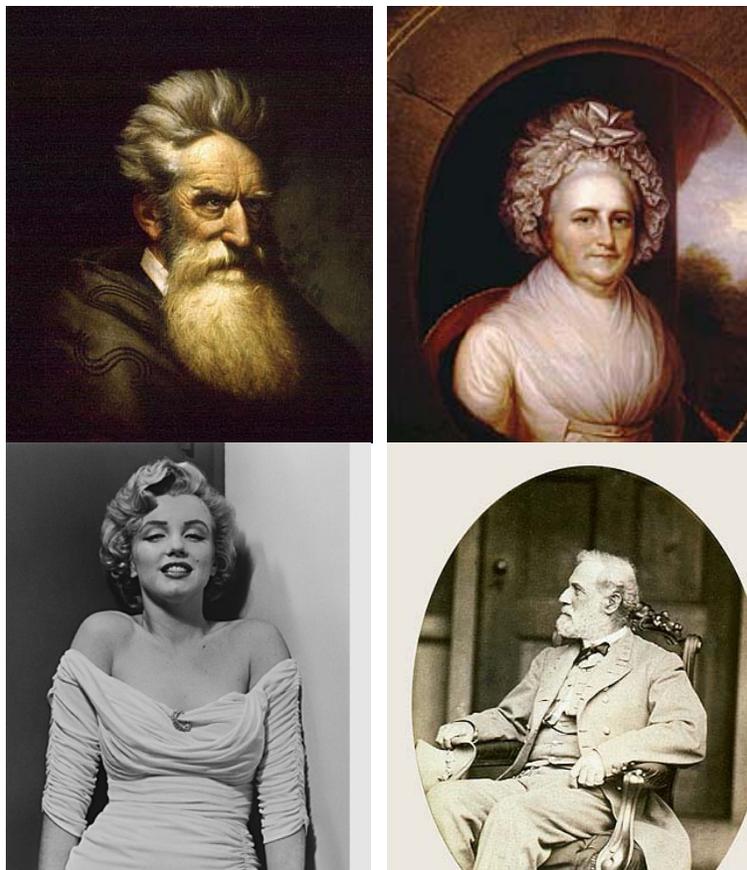


Attitudes Toward Portraiture

An Exploratory Study for the National Portrait Gallery



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INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

In January 2006, the Director of the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) asked the Smithsonian Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) to conduct an exploratory study of museum visitors' attitudes toward portraiture in general and the National Portrait Gallery in particular. The purpose of this study was to obtain information that might assist the soon-to-be-reopened NPG in positioning itself among Washington DC's many competing cultural attractions.

Between February 6 and March 3, 2006, OP&A staff members conducted 18 qualitative interviews with a total of 27 visitors at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History and Hirshhorn Museum. Interviews were wide-ranging, and in many cases lengthy—most were in the range of 20-40 minutes.

Visitors were typically asked at the start of the interview if they had heard of or visited the National Portrait Gallery, what they would expect to see in the reopened NPG, and how interested they would be in visiting it. In all interviews, the study team also made use of picture cards with portraits from NPG exhibitions on one side, and explanatory texts on the other. (Both images and texts were obtained from online exhibitions on the NPG website.) Subsets of these cards were used in various ways, depending on the specific issues interviewers sought to explore, and on the dynamic of particular interviews. For example, interviewees might be shown

- Contrasting sets of “traditional” portraits (formal, realistic, posed paintings of prominent figures from the past) and “non-traditional” portraits (such as *Time* magazine covers, caricatures, abstractions, and photographs);
- Contrasting sets of portraits of widely-recognizable figures and portraits of figures unlikely to be familiar;
- A series of contrasting portrait pairs depicting the same sitter (perhaps a photograph and a painting, or a caricature and a realistic depiction);
- A random assortment of portraits.

In conjunction with these picture cards, interviewees might be asked about

- Their immediate reactions to, and comments on, the pictures;
- Which pictures they found most interesting;
- Questions raised by the portraits;
- Which set of pictures they found most interesting, and why;

- What kinds of information they would like to see provided about the figures depicted in the pictures;
- What stories they would tell about the people in the pictures (in the case of sitters with whom they were familiar) if they were writing a label or wall text.

The study team found the picture cards to be useful. Ideas suggested by the various exercises with the pictures are discussed throughout this report.

Because of the qualitative methodology employed here, the study team wishes to stress that inferences about the views of the overall population of Smithsonian visitors cannot be drawn from this study alone. Rather, this study is intended to open a suggestive window into how some Smithsonian visitors think about portraiture and the National Portrait Gallery. A qualitative approach allows visitors to express their thoughts in their own words, thus providing more nuanced and deeper insights into how they view the subject, and it can raise issues that the researchers may not have even considered. It cannot, however, provide sufficient data to answer narrowly-defined questions.

Thus, while the study team hopes the findings and conclusions presented here will prove thought-provoking, they must be considered suggestive. This report is meant to raise issues, not to resolve them. If, on the basis of this report, NPG leaders identify specific questions they would like to investigate more rigorously, it can initiate further studies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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She would also like to thank Marc Pachter, the Director of the National Portrait Gallery, who provided OP&A with the opportunity to conduct this study.

FINDINGS

THE APPEAL OF PORTRAITURE

Negative Stereotypes

Several OP&A studies (such as the visitor study of the *Retratos* exhibition recently on display in the International Gallery of the Ripley Center) have found that exhibitions devoted to portraiture attract many visitors who are specifically interested in the genre. Such individuals constitute a natural constituency for the reopened NPG. The challenge for NPG, however, will consist in reaching beyond this core constituency to attract individuals who may be initially indifferent to the concept of portraiture, or may even hold negative stereotypes of the genre.

Such stereotypes were mentioned by a number of individuals interviewed for this study. For example, several interviewees expressed concerns about the expected monotony of a museum devoted entirely to portraiture. Similarly, some assumed such a museum would be stuffy, dull, and staid. Common to both views was an expectation that the works on display would consist primarily of a succession of barely distinguishable, stiffly posed depictions of uninteresting characters:

When you say “portrait gallery,” I think of a rather deadly expanse of pictures of ancestors hanging on the castle walls. And nobody really cares about these people to begin with, unless you happen to be part of the family.

Honestly, I was thinking it would be just guys with their horse-riding outfits on.

I imagine the people to be doing pretty much the same thing in many of the portraits: that would be, sitting for portraits.

While it is impossible to say how widespread such negative stereotypes may be in the population at large, efforts by NPG to reach out to the widest possible public will undoubtedly need to contend with them.

Specific Exhibitions

Some interviewees indicated that, although the inherent appeal to them of a portraiture museum was limited, they might be drawn in by well-publicized, focused exhibitions that offered an interesting perspective on portraits—particularly high-profile “headline” exhibitions like the Sugimoto show that had opened at the Hirshhorn Museum when the study team was conducting interviews there. If lured through the doors by a provocative exhibition, these interviewees would probably explore the rest of the museum:

***Interviewee:** You have to have a temporary or changing exhibition that would have a certain educational focus, or a focus of some kind. That would get people started or draw them in, and then they could go and look at other things.*

***OP&A:** So changing, temporary exhibitions are a draw...?*

***Interviewee:** Well, it's not so much that it's changing or temporary per se, but that it's got a focus and it's small enough to digest it at one time. Then that's sort of a starting point.*

*Will you have a part of the gallery that's for rotating exhibits? Because basically, I would expect it would be **that** that would pull me into the Gallery—if you had something going on in that part of it that would catch my eye. And then off of that, I would go to look at the rest of it.*

Interviewees also offered some ideas about the sorts of thematic exhibitions they would personally find interesting, some of which struck the study team as thought-provoking. Some examples included:

- An exhibition focusing exclusively on self-portraiture;
- An exhibition of portraits of unknown, non-famous individuals from various social and historical circumstances;
- A show featuring multiple portraits of a single well-known figure, with commentary on what the various depictions suggest about the sitter at different times or from different perspectives;
- A history-in-portraiture of the Gilded Age, with separate groupings for the robber barons and their supporters, the social reformers and muckrakers, and the ordinary people caught in the middle;
- A history-in-portraiture of the Cold War, with separate groupings for Western and Soviet leaders, as well as other depictions of ordinary people to contrast how the two sides wished to perceive themselves (for example, Norman Rockwell paintings of idealized middle Americans and propaganda works depicting sturdy Soviet peasants and industrial workers);
- An exhibition that raises the question of “What is a Portrait?” featuring works that push the envelope of the accepted definition of portraiture and prompt the viewer to make his or her own judgments about the boundaries of the concept;
- An exhibition that focuses on the social function of portraiture in different times and places.

The Impact of Images

One of the more striking findings of this study was that after looking through the picture cards provided, most interviewees expressed considerably more interest in the Portrait Gallery, and were better able to articulate the possible appeal of portraiture. Indeed, individuals who initially expressed indifferent or negative feelings about a portrait museum often became very engaged when presented with picture cards and asked to comment, choose favorites, guess who the sitter was, tell stories or ask questions about the sitter, and so on.

In short, most interviewees found portrait images drawn from NPG exhibitions to be more far interesting than they anticipated. Indeed, several indicated that they were immediately more inclined to visit the Portrait Gallery after looking through the picture cards, and they believed others would feel the same way:

Now that I'm looking at these pictures, I see it isn't just people in chairs with their dogs and a vase of flowers; it's actually really cool. ... I don't see why people wouldn't want to go if you could just show them this—maybe just a pamphlet or a flyer or something. It doesn't seem boring at all, now that I'm looking at these pictures.

After viewing the images and discussing the appeal of them to her, one initially uninterested interviewee suggested that a tagline under the “National Portrait Gallery” name—something that captured the historical and human appeal she discovered in the images—could make a great difference to the casual visitor trying to decide what to see in the nation’s capital:

Interviewee: *You could have something like “The National Portrait Gallery: ...” and then in small captions, something else. I think that would help a lot. If I was walking down the Mall and I saw this museum and that museum, and I saw the “National Portrait Gallery,” I probably wouldn't walk in. But if I saw “The National Portrait Gallery: ... ” and then in small captions: ... [Pauses and gestures to interviewer]*

OP&A: ... *“The People Behind the Portraits” ...*

Interviewee: ... *I would probably walk in. That would make the difference of me walking in or not.*

Discussions also suggested that interviewees’ interest in portraiture such as that depicted in the picture cards was, to a greater or lesser extent, contingent upon the *selection* and *presentation* of the portraits. These issues will now be addressed in turn.

PORTRAIT SELECTION

Interviews suggested that the selection of portraits on display has a strong impact on the level of interest generated in the whole.

Variety

One comment that arose repeatedly in the interviews was the appeal of *variety*. Many interviewees were pleasantly surprised by the variety of images on the picture cards shown to them, indicating that they were not as monotonous as anticipated:

The different types of art are definitely captivating. [It's not just] these blank faces over and over again. Looking at these, the variety would keep me interested.

However, it should be noted that the selections of images shown to interviewees—including a mix of realistic paintings, photographs, caricatures, illustrations for *Time* magazine covers, sketches, and paintings in more modern styles—were typically more diverse than the selection of portraits on display at NPG prior to current renovations. A deliberate effort was made to include images of historically significant women and people of color, as well as images of figures from the worlds of sports, entertainment, the arts, and other professions likely to be underrepresented in portrait galleries commemorating economic and political elites. Further, portraits from the Civil War era onward were disproportionately represented, to raise the likelihood that interviewees would have some familiarity with the sitters.

In a small number of interviews, the study team explicitly experimented with contrasting sets of “traditional” portraits (formal, realistic paintings with upper-body-views of public figures from all periods of US history) and “non-traditional” portraits (a more eclectic mix, with an emphasis on more recent figures). The latter generated more comment and interest. The greater familiarity of interviewees with sitters in the “non-traditional” set contributed to this difference, but so did the greater stylistic variety. For example, one interviewee commented on the “traditional” set:

*These are [in a monotone:] formal portraits in formal settings—kind of traditional and expected. I'd rather have something that captures **character**.*

By contrast, another interviewee described her interest in the “non-traditional” set of images by noting,

I have a personal interest in popular culture and the 20th century, so these figures are more in that group. But it's interesting that these are more varied in the style. I mean, you have the drawings, the photographs, and then some paintings.

However, at least one interviewee noted that even the “traditional” set was more interesting and varied than the stereotype of portraiture he initially held in his mind's eye at the outset of the interview:

*These are exactly the kinds of poses that I was imagining; and yet as I look at them, there is enough variety here that I'm actually interested. There's enough variety that I seem to want to know who they **are**.*

Different Views of a Sitter

Many interviewees responded with particular interest to different depictions of the same sitter. When queried about the reason for this, interviewees typically referred to their interest in the human dimension of portraiture—that is, what portraits tell us about the sitter, the artist, or both. Exploring multiple artistic or historical perspectives on a familiar figure can bring out this human dimension in several ways:

- Suggesting how a figure may have changed over time, or according to the circumstances at the time a portrait was created (Robert E. Lee as a confident young army officer, versus Lee as the weary, defeated face of a lost cause after the surrender at Appomattox);
- Showing how perceptions of a figure may have differed among observers, or at different points in time (Richard Nixon as Ike’s workmanlike Vice President; as the champion of the “silent majority” in his early Presidential years; as the villain of the Watergate scandal; and as the rehabilitated eminence grise of US foreign policy thinkers);
- Illustrating contrasting aspects of a figure’s personality or character (John Brown as an inspiring crusader for justice, versus Brown as a wild-eyed, fanatical zealot);
- Illustrating differing interpretations of, or perspectives on, a figure’s historical significance (Albert Einstein as the ivory-tower theorist of relativity, versus Einstein as the father of the atomic age).

Indeed, a few interviewees mentioned the potential appeal of small shows (or gallery sections) explicitly devoted to multiple images of a single important figure, created by different artists or at different points in time.

Portraits of Ordinary People

Some interviewees spontaneously mentioned a particular interest in portraits of ordinary, non-famous people, and several others liked this idea when it was presented to them. They seemed to feel that such portraits could provide perspectives on history—and on the social-cultural role and art of portraiture itself—that complement and go beyond the perspectives captured in portraits of prominent public figures:

OP&A: *What would you expect to see in a “National Portrait Gallery”?*

Interviewee: *I’d expect to see quite a few renderings of people of note. But I would also **hope** to see a number of interesting character developments of just regular people.*

At a certain point, modern artists started to become interested in painting ordinary people. So I wonder if there are portraits of ordinary people in the NPG collection?

One interviewee, however, noted that while he would personally like to see such portraits, the appropriateness of them at NPG depended to some extent upon what the museum understands to be its mission:

If it were a Gallery about the art of portraiture, I would [expect to see such portraits]. But if it's about commemorating important people in Washington DC, I wouldn't expect to see a single picture of an ordinary person.

PORTRAIT PRESENTATION

The interviews also indicated that how portraits are presented affects people's response to them.

The Need for Context

One unambiguous message that emerged from the study team's discussions was that information on historical, cultural, and artistic context generates a level of interest in portraits that the images themselves usually do not:

I personally don't care too much about what the people physically looked like. I care more about what they've done, their character, their personality, and what impact they've made on their generation and generations to follow.

What would cause a person to have special interest in portraits? Who does? Maybe some people do—I don't know. Then they would want to go there because this is a gallery of portraits. But I'm not sure most people have a special interest in portraits. ... [What most people need is] context. Context for the person. Context for why the person is portrayed in this particular fashion. ... There's the person, there's the social or political function of the picture, and then there's everything related to portraiture in general and the painting in particular.

Maybe what you need are less portraits—although I know that's hard, because your purpose is displaying a bunch of portraits!—but displayed in a less overwhelming way, with more context or more historical explanation.

Indeed, at interviews conducted in the Hirshhorn, the study team often got the impression that visitors would have preferred more contextual information on the artworks surrounding them in that museum—and that such information would only be *more* important in a portrait museum, where the variety is inherently more limited, and the historical dimensions more relevant.

The information gathered by the study team was inadequate to hazard even a rough guess about the relative importance to visitors of different types of contextual information (for example, on the sitter; the artist; the social/political-historical context; the art-historical context; the creative process behind the portrait itself; and so on). It would be fair to note, however, that few interviewees expressed a deep interest in the artist *per se*—although many were interested in the question of why an artist chose to depict a certain subject in a certain way at a certain time:

If I really wanted to know more about [the artist], I guess I would go to the bookstore downstairs and buy a book.

The artist chose that person for a reason; so it would be interesting to know why they chose that person. Maybe not so much on the background of the artist, but on why they made the connection to do it that way.

OP&A: *Do you need to know anything about the artist?*

Interviewee: *No, it doesn't necessarily matter. You aren't usually going to have a lot of the artist's work in one museum; they're going to be spread out and intermingled with everyone else's works. So it really doesn't matter to me who the artist is.*

The issue of the relative importance of different types of contextual information might be a fruitful subject for more in-depth and rigorous investigation in the future.

The Human Connection

Another, somewhat related theme was that displays that create some kind of connection between the humanity of the viewer and the humanity of the sitter—or, in some cases, the artist—were particularly appealing to many interviewees. That people are deeply fascinated in the triumphs, foibles, and inner lives of others should be clear to anyone who has furtively thumbed through the celebrity tabloids while waiting in a supermarket queue. Several interviewees suggested this natural human fascination with fellow creatures might be exploited to good effect to enhance the appeal of portraiture:

I'm interested in the person behind the face. ... Yes, they were living two hundred years ago. But they're human; I'm human. A lot of the issues we deal with today are the same issues they were dealing with back then. We can connect; we just need something to make that connection. ... When I look at a portrait, I try to figure out who's behind that face—who is the person inside. And if you can present it in a way that would tell me who this person is, that would draw me closer. That would capture my interest.

In each case, [the portraits] raise a question: "Who is this person, and why has a portrait been made of them?" In many cases, if I know something about both the

painter and the subject, I'm likely to be more interested. Because those questions come up: "Who am I looking at?" "What should I know about them?"

I think an interesting angle would be to have a sort of "point of view" gallery. How do we see people, and do different people see others? And look at different areas and different cultures. "How people see people."

Interviews also suggested that, while this human connection to the viewer was *potentially* present in all portraits, something more than by-the-numbers text on sitter, date, and artist is usually needed to bring it out. In the case of the picture cards used in interviews, it was often the "stories" behind the portraits themselves—some of which were derived from the explanatory text on the back, and some of which interviewees drew from their own background knowledge—that forged this connection. Such "stories" might be comprised of facts, anecdotes, or other informational tidbits about the sitter (or, less frequently, the artist) that grip the viewer with their humor, poignancy, or continued relevance. The study team was both impressed and amused by the "stories" that interviewees came up with when asked to comment on picture cards. These suggested a desire for explanatory text very different from the dry, scholarly labels and wall text often associated with art museums in the public's mind. (See the Appendix for some comments on specific picture cards.)

A few interviewees specifically commented that more engaging text did not mean longer text. Rather, it was a question of presenting relevant and interesting information concisely:

Interviewee #1: *If you do a whole long summary, it's too hard, because visitors are trying to see everything. So do little quick facts, or maybe some highlights. ...*

Interviewee #2: *Some humanistic things—either funny, or something we can relate to. ...*

Interviewee #1: *[People are] not going to spend all day at one museum. You could maybe have something underneath that's a little bit more detailed.*

Several interviewees also pointedly noted that direct quotations from or about the sitter (or artist) could be a powerful mechanism for creating the human connection that builds interest in a portrait:

You know what would be nice: Have a quote from each of these people—a simple quote that reflects either his character or his impact.

OP&A: *What did you think about when you were looking at the Sugimoto portraits [here at the Hirshhorn]?*

Interviewee: *Well, the quotation on the wall from him—"If you think these are lifelike, what does it mean to be alive?" ... I appreciate having that kind of thing as a context for it.*

Finally, a number of interviewees expressed a special interest in the thoughts and circumstances of the sitter *at the time a portrait was done*. The fact that this idea was spontaneously mentioned by several interviewees took the study team by surprise, and could suggest some interesting approaches to portrait presentation. In sorting through picture cards, the study team repeatedly heard questions about what was going on in a sitter's life at the time a portrait was created that might be reflected in the image—for example, comments about how a sitter seemed to be “thinking about something,” and it would be interesting to know what that might be.

CONCLUSIONS

As noted in the Methodology section, the conclusions presented here must be regarded as tentative—food for thought and further investigation, rather than definitive pronouncements. However, with that in mind, the study team would like to cautiously suggest some generalizations.

ON DRAWING IN (NEW) VISITORS

Interviewees suggested that the idea of the “National Portrait Gallery” does not sell itself, so there is a need to hook people and draw them in.

Several visitors suggested that the museum should present its title in conjunction with a tagline or slogan that captures something about what people are likely to find interesting about portraiture. The interviews conducted by the study team suggest that such a tagline might focus on the “human connection” dimension of portraiture stressed by many interviewees, or on the art-history nexus that comes together in portraiture. The study team (and one visitor) came up with possibilities, and interviewers tried them on other visitors at the end of the study. These included:

- “The Face of History”
- “The Personal Side of History”
- “How We See Each Other” (proposed by a Hirshhorn visitor)
- “The Art of History”

Interviewees generally responded favorably to these taglines, the first of which appeared to be particularly popular among interviewees at the National Museum of American History. However, rigorous audience-testing of such taglines was not attempted, and would require a separate effort.

It is also worth reiterating that several interviewees—particularly after viewing picture cards—suggested that just *knowing what is in the museum* might make them more likely to visit. This could be achieved through flyers available in the Castle and elsewhere, posters with multiple portrait images, the NPG website, community outreach programs, and other channels. Many interviewees indicated that they simply had no idea what was in the Portrait Gallery when first asked, and—based on stereotypes of classical portraiture—had expected the worst.

In the longer run, interviewees suggested that focused, provocative “headline” exhibitions that generate “buzz” in cultural circles might draw in people who would otherwise never give a second thought to visiting NPG, as well as people who would tend to rank NPG relatively low on their list of area cultural attractions. The OP&A visitor study of the

Retratos exhibition recently on display in the International Gallery suggests that this might provide a useful model for such shows.

ON PROVIDING SATISFYING EXPERIENCES FOR VISITORS

Interviewees suggested that displays of portraits may become monotonous for many visitors without careful attention to selection and presentation.

With regard to selection, an important consideration is visitors' desire for variety in both artistic styles and types of sitters depicted. Concerning the latter, several interviewees mentioned a particular interest in seeing portraits of historically significant women and people of color, as well as representatives of professions and social strata that typically receive short shrift in portraiture devoted to images of the wealthy, famous, and powerful.

With regard to presentation, the underlying message picked up by the study team concerned the need for the museum to provide information placing sitters and portraits in their historical, cultural, and/or artistic context, and to do so in a concise and engaging way. Interviewees discussed the need to steer a course between leaving the visitor puzzled because of a lack of sufficient context, and overwhelming the visitor with too much information. They also alluded to the need for writers and exhibit designers to think in terms of "stories" about the sitter and portraits, rather than just providing the facts in a dry, scholarly tone.

A FINAL WORD

An underlying message that the study team drew from its discussions is that *portraits are more interesting than many people expect*, if well selected and presented. Thus, NPG faces a dual challenge: the marketing challenge of convincing potential visitors that portraits can be much more exciting than the stereotype of "guys in their horse-riding outfits"; and the curatorial challenge of actually creating exciting displays and exhibitions that connect visitors to the historical and human dramas behind every portrait.

APPENDIX

Selected Interviewee Comments on Portraits from NPG Collections

Muhammad Ali [*Time* magazine cover illustration—NPG.78.TC307]

The greatest boxer; but I also think of him as a draft dodger during the Vietnam War.

The best quote: “I ain’t got nothing against the Cong.” He went to jail and forfeited his championship.

Now there’s a man it would be interesting to know more about, beyond just who he was. Because in some ways, to understand what the portrait is about, you do need to know more about who he was, and the context in which he was what he was—the civil rights movement and what his life meant to people, or what his accomplishments meant to people.

John Wilkes Booth [Photograph—NPG.80.214]

*He’s a major factor in **why** we view Lincoln the way we do. If his presidency had run its course, who knows what would have happened. He may not be revered the way he is.*

He believed that the South could not survive without slavery, because in their economy they did not have much of an infrastructure. He hated Lincoln. What can I say? Did you know that they tried the doctor who treated him for his broken leg? I believe President Grant later gave the guy a pardon. It was a Union army colonel, and he was tried and convicted for aiding an enemy or some crazy thing.

John Brown [Photograph—NPG.96.123]

This guy believed he was more valuable in death than he was in life. He insisted they execute him. He wanted his death to be public. ... He refused any clemency or appeal process. He insisted that his death was more valuable to society than he would be alive.

John Brown [Painting— NPG.74.2]

You have that wild-eyed look. I have to wonder what the artist was thinking when they painted this picture. Because you sometimes read what some artists say about portraits painted a long time ago—like Ben Franklin here, about how “Oh, he was such a nice man, so I painted that extra little twinkle in his eye.” So you wonder if this artist was thinking, “My gosh! This guy is completely off his rocker! Let’s show that in the eyes!”

Frederick Douglass (as a young man) [Painting— NPG.74.45]

I'm glad to see Frederick Douglass in there; I'd probably pause and read more at that one. But still, it's a portrait that looks like a normal portrait—you know, it's him, and there's not much in the background. But when there's more in the background, it's more interesting.

Benjamin Franklin [Painting (on display at NMAH)—NPG.87.43]

Interviewee: I like to see how the painter viewed him.

OP&A: Did you have a sense of that from that picture?

Interviewee: Yes. ... He was a man who was pleased with himself, and pleased with what he's done.

What drew me to it was the text that told me about who he was, how he was seen, how the French court looked at him, and that everyone was in awe of him. You cannot tell that just by looking at a painting of him. He was a gentleman, a scholar, an inventor, a ladies' man.

Bill Gates [Time magazine cover photograph— NPG.88.TC111]

Interviewee #1: That's a very good encapsulation. We're both in publishing, actually. He looks a lot different than he did on that last cover—the [recent] Person of the Year cover. [Laughs]

Interviewee #2: And if anyone doesn't recognize him from presumably when he was in his twenties or maybe early thirties, there's that 1980s-era floppy disk.

Interviewee #1: It's nice to include magazine covers. I work at a magazine myself, and fashion-wise, the art and photography [of magazine layouts] is being taken more seriously, at least at exhibits in New York. It's nice to see magazine photography in the exhibits here too. So that's cool.

Lena Horne [Painting— NPG.85.2]

*Oh! Lena! Wow! Now that is a pretty woman; she was **beautiful**. You know, she's got to be in her nineties now.*

Helen Keller (as a young woman) [Photograph— NPG.91.105]

She's communicating in an almost completely different way. She's not looking at the flower at all. But she can feel it and smell it; and that's her experience of the flower.

Martin Luther King [Time magazine cover illustration— NPG.78.TC516]

*With these people that I recognize, I want to know something that I **don't** already know about them. I don't want another heroic picture of Martin Luther King—I want maybe a soulful picture of him.*

Robert E. Lee (days after surrender at Appomattox) [Photograph—NPG.78.243]

The photograph was obviously taken at some time when he was distracted, so I'd like to know where he was, who took it, and at what time. Because the time is very important there.

I think he's a little indignant. His chin is raised a little bit, and he has a little frown on his face.

Edna St. Vincent Millay [Drawing—NPG.97.151]

***Interviewee:** I was curious who that one was. I was wondering if that was maybe Emily Dickinson. It looks like a poet, for some reason.*

***OP&A:** Why does it look like a poet?*

***Interviewee:** I don't know—it's the clothing. It's drapey. What a weird comment! But you know, you always picture poets in something drapey—like "Shakespeare in Love" and all the flowing robes. Also, her expression is a little pensive. And the romantic clothing; maybe that's what gives me the idea.*

Marilyn Monroe [Photograph—S/NPG.84.273.C(?)]

***Interviewee #1:** She was always a symbol of idealized feminine beauty, with the perfect images and whatnot. It seems like her life was all just in photographs.*

***Interviewee #2:** Honestly, looking at this or any picture of Marilyn Monroe, I don't know if there is a "real" Marilyn Monroe. She was always in the public eye, she was always looking her best. There were no candid moments. Even her time with JFK—that was very staged. You had "America's prince" and you had "the beauty." I hate to use the term "superficial," but that's the impression I get.*

Richard Nixon [Painting (by Norman Rockwell)—NPG.72.2]

He opened China; there's even an opera called "Nixon in China." A man of incredible contrasts.

At the time this was painted, he was a new President. And you know how we think about Presidents in their "pure" beginnings—and then how that changes based on what they do. Maybe even Norman Rockwell would have painted him differently after Watergate.

When you think of Norman Rockwell, you think of family, apple pie, the flag, and all that. And then you see Nixon—and that's not at all who you think Norman Rockwell would paint, which is interesting!

Richard Nixon [Photograph—NPG.97.TC18]

That's definitely in his later years. He's reflecting back on time—what's happened since he was President. Changes—what's come about, past and present. Reflection—that's definitely reflective.

I like this photograph—the way it's staged, and the lighting in it. It looks like they put just a little bit of lighting in it, like his life has almost come to its end, and there's just a little more left for him to experience. And the rest of it—everything behind him—is in darkness, like he had a darker past or something like that.

By the time that picture was taken, he had kind of regained some of himself. He was able to leave this world not totally in disgrace.

George Patton [Painting—NPG.99.5]

Give us his famous quotation. You know which one I'm talking about? He was giving a pep speech to the troops, and he said, "Your job is not to die for your country. Your job is to make the other son of a bitch die for his country." That explains everything about him

"Old blood and guts." His guts, their blood. [Laughs] He had a very privileged life; he went to Hawaii to take a post there, and they sent his polo ponies ahead of him. ... I think he died in a jeep accident; ironic...

Rubens Peale [Painting—NPG.86.212]

It looks like this person is maybe peering at me out of the corner of his eye, and that makes it a little more interesting. ... This person is youngish looking and he has a kind of contemporary look, so I feel I can kind of read his face a little bit.

I don't know why he's turned and facing away from the viewer, or what's on the chair. I just don't know enough, because I don't have the background knowledge. So if something were there saying what was the significance [of these things], then I think I would be more interested.

H.H. Richardson [Painting—L/NPG.1.99]

I find this one a little more interesting because it's got some kind of background stuff going on. I don't know anything about him, but I would be interested to know why the artist chose to paint these things in the background. Did they just happen to be in the room? Or are they significant?

Out of that set, the H.H. Richardson one is the most interesting to me, because of the background, and because he's a big old overweight guy—he doesn't look like a leader of the modern world. [Laughs]

Eleanor Roosevelt [Photograph—NPG.82.158]

She wasn't the conventional First Lady. She was her own woman. There's a lot of rumor behind that too, but I won't even delve into that! She's reflective. And she's proud; this is a proud look.

She's got a very interesting face; she doesn't look as though she would want to be ignored. She's got a lot of thoughts there. It's a very strong picture.

Babe Ruth [Caricature—NPG.93.117]

I didn't even know who it was—I'm not into baseball. But it was interesting to see a different style. So that was cool.

Josef Stalin [Time magazine cover illustration—NPG.86.TC82]

Did the artist go to Russia and paint him on the spot...?

From looking at it, you get the impression he is definitely not a person to be messed with! [Laughs]

I'd want to know a bit about his history and dates, obviously. And who painted it; because I can't imagine he would let many people paint him—maybe it's done from a photograph or something. He was a difficult man, I would imagine, to get to wait or stand or sit for someone to paint! So it must have been done for a reason. It's probably some sort of political poster or something like that.

Interviewee: *Is this Saddam Hussein?!*

OP&A: *No—more famous.*

Interviewee [reading the back]: *Stalin! Jesus, I'm terrible at this!*

OP&A: *That's okay; dictatorial guys with mustaches...*

Interviewee: *They're very common. [Laughs]*

Sojourner Truth [Photograph—NPG.79.209]

You can see the hard life etched in her face.

Martha Washington [Painting—NPG.75.3]

Interviewee #1: Oh, my—look at her hair!

Interviewee #2: It's a wig.

Interviewee #1: Martha! See, I wouldn't have known that's what she looked like. I think it's fun to see that kind of stuff.

Interviewee #1: It looks like a very presidential wife! That hair! [Laughs] ... Poor Martha! She always gets a bad rap! That's interesting; I mean, it's more traditional, but she deserves a place.

Interviewee #2: She doesn't look like the wife of a revolutionary. [Laughs]

I can't tell [anything from] her facial expressions or her postures. It's just so posed. I don't know who she really is. It's not natural. And I am more interested in the more natural state of a person than a posed state.

Edith Wharton (as a child) [Painting—NPG.82.136]

*That's a pretty one, but still it's kind of an **expected** way of doing it; she's with flowers, and it just looks like the traditional European notion of art.*