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Face to Face

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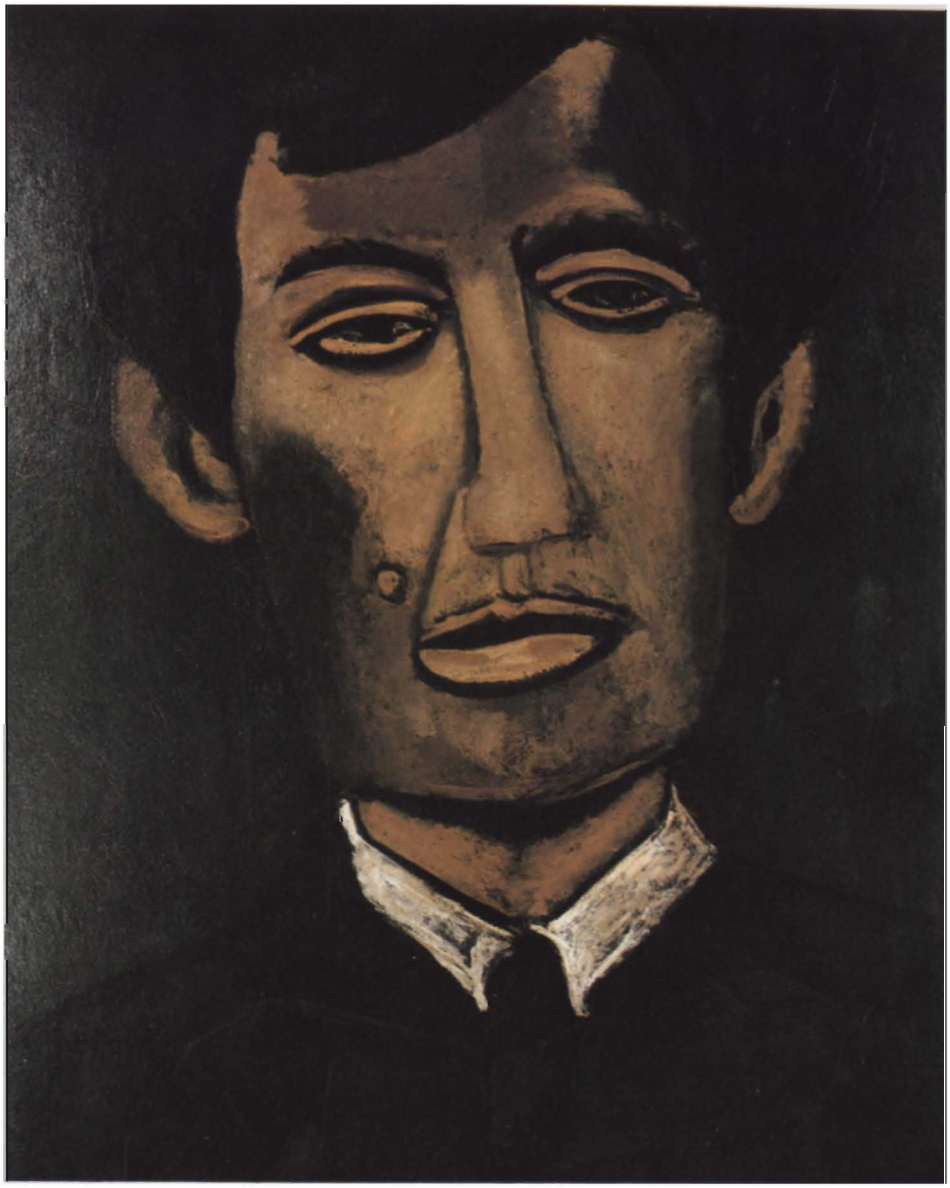
FACE TO FACE



Marsden Hartley, *Young Worshipper of the Truth,* 1940, oil on panel, 28 × 22 in, Nebraska Art Association, Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial Collection, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, UN–L, 1976.

A CIRCULATING EXHIBITION OF PORTRAITS
From the Permanent Collection of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery University of Nebraska–Lincoln

FACE TO FACE

Among the various types of artistic expression, portraits are probably considered the most approachable by the greatest number of people. And yet, upon closer consideration, it is evident that no amount of scrutiny on the part of the artist, or the viewer, can deliver the portrait from a fundamental limbo resulting from its dual referential and aesthetic functions. The portrait partakes of a variety of truths, but never resides within any one verity. The philosophical debate about the nature of likeness has raged since the time of Plato, and remains unresolved.

The motivations and limitations of portraiture have changed over the course of history. During the Renaissance, portraits were used not only to record historical personages, but also to advertise the role of the subject. The sitter typically sought to be portrayed as if "from nature," a request which required the artist to achieve a "true likeness." But Renaissance verisimilitude was acceptable only in an idealized form, thus Renaissance portraits typically achieve a balance between the classical ideal and actuality. Artists sought this balance in different ways, some accentuating the real, some the ideal. Thus, while facial imperfections and idiosyncrasies are faithfully recorded, an idealistic veneer is also apparent.

During the seventeenth century, portraiture more directly embraced the mind of the subject. Artists were fascinated with the details of costume and peculiarities of character. Also, dramatic lighting was used to promote the importance of the sitter to the viewer. Typically, the subject would directly encounter the viewer with a steady gaze. Sometimes an arm or hand would drape over a foreground windowsill or ledge. Thus the subject's proximity to the picture plane made the subject appear to enter the viewer's space. The Baroque portrait style was perhaps the most influential type, and remains the dominant traditional approach to likeness.

By the early Romantic period of the late eighteenth century, due to the growing interest in psychology and the quest for the introspective self, many artists felt that the portrait should reveal the sitter's feelings, rather than mere appearance. Understanding that the ideal form was unattainable, portraitists favored attempts to capture facial expressions. Most portraits were commissioned, placing the subject in an elaborate setting which served to extend the sitter's personality and psyche as well as to refer to the subject's social position and property. These portraits thus flatter while they document.

During the Neoclassical age of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, idealism won out over realism. The peculiar was deemed unnatural, and thus degenerate. Portraits were meant to improve nature, to promote a sense of beauty, in an effort to emulate the perfect image of God. According to the Neoclassic credo of portraiture, the passing doubts of the mind should not be traceable to the face. Only consistent and enduring qualities were intended to be revealed in the portrait. While the Neoclassicists prevailed for a time, there was a return to realism by the nineteenth-century satirists who rebelled against the constraints of idealism. Also popular during the nineteenth century was the genre portrait type. Here portraits served as social symbol, reflecting the dramatic changes in American society during the Industrial Revolution. But, by the end of the nineteenth century, photography had profoundly affected attitudes about portraiture. As a result, portraits resumed a documentary function, relinquishing the romantic interpretation of the portrait as a mirror of the soul.

Today, technology, philosophy, science, photography, literature, films and the traditional visual arts reveal the uncertainties of reality. The individual's perception of reality has superseded absolute definitions of The Real. Thus it is in the modern context that the portrait assumes its most complex meaning. The very essence of portaiture is challenged by the Modernist acceptance of ambiguity. We no longer question whether two will perceive a given subject in the same way. The ambiguities of perception underlie the very substance of the twentieth-century human condition. The myriad variables within one person's perception—social origins, psychological make-up, political point of view, education—determine the particular mindset, and any experience can cause an attitude to change. And all these variables apply to the subject, the artist, and the viewer. Thus an infinite combination of perceptions is present when viewing a portrait. Though a degree of likeness can be achieved, that likeness is inherently false, because only the thing itself can be the true likeness.

Face to Face includes twenty examples of major art historical developments spanning the fifteenth century to the present. Styles range from French court painting, through early American naive painting and German expressionism, to contemporary photo-realism. In the twentieth century, all methods of portraiture are brought to bear. The portrait can function both as an icon and an index of a particular life. Dichotomies—real and ideal, natural and imaginary—coexist, creating the impossibility of a true portrait. This variety exemplifies both psychological and interpretive likenesses. *Face to Face* can be appreciated for its subtle and profound references to the history and objectives of portraiture, or for its diverse portrayal of the moods and feelings of unique individuals.

Daphne Anderson Deeds
Curator

Schedule of Venues

September 1988
High Plains Museum, McCook

October 1988
North Platte Mall, North Platte

November 1988
Dawson County Historical Society, Lexington

December 1988
Museum of Nebraska Art, Kearney

January 1989
First National Bank, Aurora

February 1989
Columbus Library Art Gallery, Columbus

March 1989
Western Nebraska Art Center, Scottsbluff

April 1989
Morton-James Library, Nebraska City

Face to Face, a selection of twenty portraits in painting, drawing, sculpture and print media from the permanent collection of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, was curated by Sheldon's Curator/Assistant Director, Daphne Anderson Deeds. Additional educational programming was organized by the gallery's Education Coordinator, Karen Janovy. The Nebraska Art Association provided generous sponsorship for this statewide educational outreach program. Appreciation is expressed to Lonnie Pierson and Rhonda Seacrest, NAA's Statewide Council exhibition coordinators, for special assistance. *Face to Face* fulfills the Sheldon Gallery's ongoing objective to provide the citizens of Nebraska with visual art of the highest quality.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Milton Avery (1893-1965)
Self Portrait, 1930, oil on canvas mounted on board
20 × 15⅞ in,
UNL—Howard S. Wilson Memorial Collection
1965. U-460

Thomas Ball (1819-1911)
Lillian Bowen, 1864, marble
19¼ × 13 × 6½ in,
NAA—Development Fund
1975. N-333

Max Beckmann (1884-1950)
Portrait of Frau H. M., 1923, woodcut
13¾ x 12⅞ in,
UNL—F. M. Hall Collection
1956. H-412

Alexander Brook (1898-1980)
Peggy Bacon and Metaphysics, 1935, oil on canvas
36 × 25⅞ in,
UNL—F. M. Hall Collection
1939. H-198

John George Brown (1831-1913)
The Boot Black, n.d., oil on canvas
24 × 16 in,
UNL—Gift of Miss Anna Larrabee
1941. U-220

Mary Cassatt (1844-1926)
Margot Wearing a Bonnet, n.d., drypoint and aquatint
9⅛ × 6⅜ in,
UNL—F. M. Hall Collection
1969. H-1334

Jean Clouet (1485-1541)
Portrait of the Dauphin Henry, 1539, gouache on parchment
13¾ × 11 in,
UNL—Gift of the Kress Foundation
1962. U-357-K

Jean Dubuffet (1901-)
Head of a Man, 1954, oil on canvas
9½ × 8 in,
NAA-Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Frederick S. Seacrest
1979. N-518

Daniel Chester French (1850-1931)
Abraham Lincoln, 1909-12, bronze
38 × 10 × 12 in,
UNL—Bequest of Mr. and Mrs. Frank M. Hall
1928. H-167.E

Marsden Hartley (1877-1943)
Young Worshipper of the Truth, 1940, oil on panel
28 × 22 in,
NAA-Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial Collection
1976. N-348

Charles Bird King (1785-1862)
Ong-Pa Oton-Ga, 1836, lithograph
14 × 9½ in,
UNL—F. M. Hall Collection
1979. H-2395

Gaston Lachaise (1882-1935)
Portrait of John Marin, 1928, bronze
12¼ × 9 × 10 in,
UNL—F. M. Hall Collection
1950. H-304

Corban LePell (1933-)
Portait of Bruce, 1969, pencil on gessoed panel
diameter 21¼ in,
UNL—James E. M. and Helen Thomson Fund
1970. U-705

Alice Neel (1900-1984)
John and Joey Priestly, 1968, oil on canvas
36 × 24 in,
NAA—Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial Collection
1975. N-339

Diego Rivera (1886-1957)
Self Portrait, 1930, lithograph
15¾ × 10¹⁵⁄₁₆ in,
UNL—F. M. Hall Collection
1959. H-540

Joseph Stella (1877-1946)
Portrait of Old Man, 1908, graphite and colored pencil on paper
11¾ × 9¼ in,
UNL—Howard S. Wilson Memorial Collection
1977. U-2512

Unknown American, 18th century
Girl with Rose and Book, n.d., oil on canvas
27½ × 27½ in,
UNL—Gift of Mrs. Edith Halpert
1964. U-447

Unknown Spanish, 18th century
Bullfighter, n.d., oil on canvas
17 × 13⁷⁄₁₆ in,
NAA—Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Woods, Jr.
1980. N-559

Andy Warhol (1931-1987)
Jacqueline Kennedy, n.d., serigraph
24⅛ × 30 in,
UNL—F. M. Hall Collection
1967. H-1088

Grant Wood (1892-1942)
Arnold Comes of Age, 1930, oil on composition board
26¾ × 23 in,
NAA
1931. N-38

We invite your participation in support of the Sheldon Gallery's programs through membership in the Nebraska Art Association. For more information, contact the Nebraska Art Association, c/o Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, UN–L, Lincoln, Nebraska 68588-0300, (402) 472-2540.

SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY

THE NEBRASKA ART ASSOCIATION