

Episode 9: Portraits of Rulers Created by Linda Steer

Welcome back!

Let's begin by thinking back to 2018. Not that long ago, although it seems like a lifetime, doesn't it? Do you remember the unveiling of former US President Barack Obama official portrait? It differed from typical official US presidential portraits. But, while Kehinde Wiley's painting seemed to diverge from current portrait conventions for rulers, it also **used** traditional portrait conventions to legitimise Obama's rule. To understand **how** it did that, we need to look even further in the past, and examine a few canonical European royal portraits.

In this episode, we consider the history of portraits of rulers in the canon of Western art and we examine how portraits engage with structures of power.

There are ancient portraits of rulers, such as the profile portraits of Alexander the Great we see on ancient coins, or statues of Roman Emperors, but these differ from the kinds of portrait paintings that emerged in the early modern era, in the 17th century. We'll focus on the 17th and 18th century, but keep in mind that there are different kinds of portraits, with differing emphases across various geographical locations and time periods. Those statues of Augustus, for example, were not exact likenesses of the man who died in 14 CE, but rather were idealized and ideological.

Let's take a closer look at 17th century Baroque portraits and power. Wealthy and powerful people used portraits to create and maintain their identities. This was a way to radiate an aura of power and to legitimise that power. How did they do that? Well, Anthony van Dyck's portrait of *Charles I in the Hunting Field* is a good example.

(music clip: Thomas Lupo, "Fantasia," c. 1620-30.)

Van Dyck was a renowned Flemish portrait painter who worked at the court in England. He created this painting around 1636.

Here is what I see when I look at it. First of all, at more than 8 feet tall, it is huge, and the figure of Charles is monumental. Charles stands in the left side of the painting, his body facing the frame, a walking stick in his right hand, his left arm bent and turned so that he places the back of his left hand on his hip. The pose sounds awkward, but it is not. He holds his glove in that elegantly turned left hand and looks out of the painting, to his right. He appears confident, self-assured, and relaxed. Dressed in very fancy riding clothes that he would probably not actually wear when riding, he displays his stylishness for us as our eyes gloss over the textures of the fabric he wears: the white lace trim on his collar contrasts with the luxurious, silvery gleaming satin of his doublet; the pale beige of the soft leather of his gloves and matching boots contrast with his velvet persimmon-coloured breeches. His stockings are tied with the same or similar mottled white and pale jade fabric that is wrapped around his shoulder and chest. A stylish hat,

cocked to the right, covers his long wavy hair and allows him to reveal his pearl earring. It is difficult to see in this painting, since his body is turned, but his hair was likely shorter on the right and longer on the left, since this was the style at the time. The gold spurs on his knee-high low heeled boots match the gold baldric slung over his right shoulder to hold his sword on his left hip next to the hand holding his glove.

He is supremely elegant.

Behind the king, a young servant holds what appears to be a cape, as an older servant steadies a horse with a curly golden mane, echoing the king's greyish-brown curls. The group stands on ancient looking steps under a tree, the king, of course in the light, with the others in the dappled shadows. Behind them we glimpse a vista, perhaps evoking the king's land.

Why so much attention to clothes? The clothes here are important. In depicting Charles' elegance, his fashion, his sophisticated taste, we see something of the man's personality, or at least the personality he wanted us to see. Portrayed as an aristocratic and confident man, a man of great wealth and stature (even though he was in fact short and sensitive about that), this painting is a twist on the traditional equestrian portrait that shows, as Harris and Zucker claim, Charles I retains his power even when not on the horse.

Charles I's wealth power and status are expressed through his beauty, but also in van Dyck's composition. Van Dyck uses lighting, costume, pose, and point of view to indicate power. Note that we look up at Charles and Charles looks down on us. The portrait also has a sense of liveliness, where Charles seems about to walk through the scene, commanding the land he governs. Even though his reign was rocky, and there were several civil wars, he is depicted as though his power is natural.

(music clip: Jean-Baptiste Lully, "Ouverture" from the French opera *Cadmus et Hermione*. Harpsichord arrangement by Jean-Henri d'Anglebert. c. 1763.)

The 17th c Europe is known as the "age of absolutism" where monarchies expanded and developed more tightly-centralized national governments, a shift that is regarded by many historians as the origin of the modern state. During this period we see the gradual erosion of local power and autonomy and the rise of national legislation and civil bureaucracies. And, we see monarchs, such as Charles the I of England, presenting themselves as having absolute power and a god-given right to reign. This didn't end well for Charles, who, in taking too much power, angered his parliament and lost his head for it; his contemporary in France was much more successful.

In the 17th century, the power of the French monarchy had increased tremendously, and at the centre of power, the centre of everything, was King Louis XIV (the 14th) aka *le roi soleil* or the sun king, a title that allied him with ancient rulers of Egypt and reminded everyone that he was the light at the centre of the sky.

You might have heard of his palace? Versailles?

(French Baroque music clip: Jean-Baptiste Lully, "Ouverture" from the French opera "Cadmus et Hermione." Harpsichord arrangement by Jean-Henri d'Anglebert. c. 1763.)

This is a bit of a generalization, but useful for our purposes: in the 17th century France starts to become the centre of European intellectual, philosophical, scientific and artistic activity → the cities of Italy cease to be at the center. During the late 17th and early 18th century, France became the most powerful nation in Europe, and had the largest population.

In the study of art history, the figure of Louis XIV is important for he used art to create and reinforce his persona. Art bolstered his power.

Louis immortalized himself in paintings of his likeness; the most well-known is by Hyacinthe Rigaud, who painted it in 1701. Louis was in his 60s at the time.

Rigaud shows Louis as a powerful monarch and has used visual cues to evoke this reading. One of Louis's key phrases, was "l'état, c'est moi" or I am the state. Rigaud shows this visually -- he depicts Louis as the personification of France. We could say that this is a very strong propaganda image, really.

At the centre of the painting, we see the king in a self-assured stance-- He looks towards us, not with animosity, but with the gaze of one who knows his own power. Louis stands in a ¾ pose on a raised platform that is covered in rich gold silk patterned with blue, red, and black. He wears his coronation robes, luxurious, extravagant, lined with ermine, and faced with blue velvet covered in gold embroidered *fleur de lys*, which is the symbol of France. We see the extravagant lace on the collar and cuffs of his shirt. The voluminous robe is folded back over his left shoulder to reveal his white stockinged legs, that end in white leather shoes with red heels and ribbons over the buckles. He is wearing white round hose. They look like very short, puffy shorts. Even though France was at the centre of fashion in 1701, his round hose are dated. While he was known for being proud of his legs, it is likely that he wore round hose with his coronation robes to visually connect himself to the past.

This portrait connects King Louis to the past in other ways: He stands in front of a rich red silk curtain behind which there is a column, signifying the Graeco-Roman past, a heroic, glorious era in the eyes of 18th c people. The column also refers to his role as the structure and support of France -- he is the column. And Louis allies himself with France in other visual cues, such the stool beside him, also covered with blue and gold *fleur de lys*, that holds the crown, the symbol of the king's power. He also holds a scepter, which rests near the crown. Louis wears a gold, gem-encrusted sword on his left hip. This is no ordinary sword; it is Charlemagne's sword. Charlemagne was the first king of France. A final symbol of his power as king is the chair behind him that represents a throne. Covered in the same blue velvet with golden *fleur de lys*, the throne is visually linked to the king. The **message** is that the person of the king, his

body, and the state of France are one and the same. In Rigaud's painting, Louis is France, which exemplifies the statement: "L'état, c'est moi." I am the state.

Let's fast forward to the last quarter of the 18th century.

(music clip Joseph Haydn, "Symphony 85," aka "La reine," from Paris Symphonies, c. 1785.)

After Louis XIV (14th), there were 2 more King Louis before the monarchy fell during the French Revolution, which began in 1789. I want to focus on one of many portraits of Louis XVI's (16th's) wife Marie Antoinette, the Queen of France, here in her early 20s, as painted by Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun in 1778.

We see little sign that the revolution would take place soon after this portrait was painted, and she would be executed in 1793.

Vigée-Le Brun painted the queen many times. Here she uses some of the same symbols as Rigaud to show Marie Antoinette's stature as queen. Marie Antoinette is portrayed in elaborate clothes and what seem to be acres of cloth, that signify her wealth. Her silver and gold satin dress, with ribbons, flounces and lace appears to be as wide as she is tall. It's really quite amazing. She wears an elaborate grey wig decorated with pearls and feathers. The train of her dress flows behind her, over a chair and out of the painting. Her body faces us, but she turns her head to her right, looking into the distance. She does not meet our gaze. In her right hand she holds a pink rose, her signature flower in Vigée Le Brun's paintings.

The Queen is portrayed as a sensitive individual, which shows the changing style in painting. The Rococo style is typified by an interest in sensitivity, beauty and frivolity, evidenced here by the softness of the brushstrokes, pale colors and soft lighting and in contrast to the Baroque theatricality, with its intense colors and dramatic lighting that we see in Rigaud's portrait of Louis XIV.

Vigée Le Brun's painting also shows gender differences in portraiture: Louis XIV is shown as all powerful; Marie Antoinette is shown as pretty and sensitive. Nonetheless, it shares some similarities: behind the queen we see a huge Doric column, reminiscent of the ancient world, to her left, her crown sits on a pillow made from blue velvet embroidered with gold fleurs de lys and to her right a velvet covered chair symbolizes the throne.

Let's return to the portrait of former US President Barack Obama. Other official portraits of US presidents that are part of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery collection either depict the men in nondescript backgrounds, or in a setting that indicates something about their work, such as a table or desk with a book or papers, or in the White House. Excepting Elaine de Koonings's colourful, gestural portrait of Kennedy, they are mostly painted in sombre tones. Kehinde Wiley's portrait of Obama depicts him in a casual pose, leaning forward from a wooden chair, arms crossed casually. He

wears a dark suit, with a crisp white shirt and no tie. His facial expression is open, yet serious. There has been much debate about the chair – for its style and the time period it represents is difficult to pin down. But the chair’s style doesn’t matter. What it *signifies* matters. Wiley is an artist known for adopting the visual tropes of heroic European paintings to represent everyday African American figures – regular people he meets. Obama is certainly not a regular subject, and this painting is a bit different from Wiley’s typical work, but the painter has subtly incorporated visual cues from portraits of European royalty. The chair is no simply a chair. It represents a throne. What stands out in this painting, though, is the lush verdant and floral background. Gorgeous flowers and foliage touch the figure’s arms and ankles, threatening to envelop the man and his symbolic throne. And these flowers have meaning – personal meaning. Wiley has stated the painting symbolically charts Obama’s path on Earth. The flowers tell his life story: African blue lillies reference his Kenyan father; jasmine is from Hawaii where he was born, and chrysanthemum is Chicago’s official flower. So this democratically elected leader doesn’t legitimize his rule by evoking heredity in his official portrait. Instead, the portrait legitimises his rule by conveying his life story, how he got to where he is, a fitting image for America’s first African-American president, and also a very *American image* – one that reinforces the mythology of the American dream or the idea that anyone can be successful if they work hard enough. Certainly there are holes in these ideologies, for there are many hard-working Americans who live their lives in poverty and obscurity, and the notion of a democratically elected so-called “leader of the free world,” when the majority of the free world does not have a vote in US elections, is merely American imperialism at work. But, like the portraits of the European rulers, this one, too, is a powerful image meant to maintain that imperialism. In that sense, although Wiley’s portrait of Obama is stylistically very different from the portraits of Charles I or Louis XIV, the painting’s dual representation and enactment of power is similar. And, if I weren’t running out of time, I’d have something to say about Michelle Obama’s frame-filling flowing skirt in her official portrait in relation to Marie-Antoinette’s gown in Vigée le Brun’s 1778 portrait. Maybe in a future episode...