Portraiture:
A Brief Introduction

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Course Outline

Module 1.   Introduction to Portraiture

Module 2.   Light for portraits

Module 3.   Working with a Model

Module 4.   About Models

Module 5.   Camera and Lighting

              -- equipment and techniques

Module 6.   Post-Processing for portraiture

MODULE 1.   What is portraiture?

Aim:

To develop a broader understanding of portraiture, and the elements of a good portrait.

Purpose

By investigating the historical backgrounds of portraiture in Art and Photography you will develop understanding to support your practical skills.

Why are you taking a portrait? This question can make or break a quality photograph. A photographer needs to plan and consider the practical skills required.

Importantly, a photographer needs to consider both the purpose and the outcome of the photograph.

Outcome:

Gain a deeper understanding of portraiture by taking and submitting 3 photographs for homework and discussion at the beginning of the next session.

Notes:

Portraiture is one of the commonest yet one of the most difficult genres of photography. Ask 3 photographers to define the qualities of a good portrait, and you will likely get 4 perfectly good answers. Here is my take. The human species has evolved as a social animal. Social interaction is an important part of our life, and as we interact, we are reading (and sending) liminal or subliminal messages with our body language, behaviour, clothing; we are connecting. The challenge with photographic portraiture is to try to capture this dynamic interaction in an instant in time on a 2-dimensional plane. It isn't easy. Beyond the basics of a good image – composition, focus, colour etc, we need the image to provide some connection with the subject(s) in the image.

A sense of empathy or connection is vital. The eyes are the window to the soul – a common aphorism with more than an element of truth[1]. Portraits usually (but not always) include the eyes. The numerous muscles of the face also generate expressions that convey emotion with which the viewer can connect. Body posture can also be powerful in conveying mood. Some people are relaxed in front of a camera, but often, if you wave a camera, those around you will instantly tense up, and it will show in the photos you take. It can help to develop a rapport with your subject/model. Talk to them, show the images as you take them. Or simply hang around long enough taking photos and people will forget you are there. These sorts of issues are covered in more depth in later modules.

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[1] See for example https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/04/170417182822.htm), or consider where the gaze wanders when viewings a face (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saccade).

Trace of saccades of the human eye on a face while scanning

To get a feel for what other photographers felt were the elements of I did a web search. Here are some opinions:

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https://www.howtogeek.com/280699/how-to-take-a-good-portrait-photo/

What Makes a Good Portrait

Portraits are about one thing: the person in them. It doesn't matter whether you're shooting a tight head shot or an environmental portrait; it's all about the subject.

So with that in mind, what makes a good portrait?

First, a good portrait draws attention to the subject. This is normally achieved through some combination of a shallow depth of field, composition, color, and lighting. When it's done right, as soon as a viewer looks at the portrait, their eyes instantly settle on the subject.

Second, a good portrait tells you something about the subject. It shows some element of their personality or their life. You should be able to look at a good portrait and know something about them. The best portrait artists can tell a whole story in a single image.

Outside of these two things, there is very little rhyme or reason to what makes a good portrait—you have a lot of room to be creative.

Here are some other views to consider:

https://photoworks.org.uk/makes-great-portrait-photograph/

http://jmcolberg.com/weblog/2008/02/what_makes_a_great_portrait/

There are 3 general pose possibilities for portraits. The face, head and shoulders or the whole body.

Images by Helen Warnod

All portraits require balance. Remember to frame your subject so they sit comfortably in the frame. It is a good idea to shoot a little wider that your proposed composition. Often your photograph will benefit from some post-processing. If your shot is too tight it then limits your options later.

Head photograph - The focus is the head (the neck may be included). Sometimes cropping the hair out of the image may improve the composition.
Head and shoulders – Beware not to include too much of the body! It is generally more complimentary for women to tilt their head toward one raised shoulder.

Attend to the background of your photograph. Make sure that it complements your subject. Otherwise simplify the background as in the portrait top centre. Consider using a wide aperture to blur the background. Too much clutter may distract. In the portrait at the top right, the background is sharp with a number of elements clear – wall, window frame, glass/reflections, but in this case the background provides a context, which adds to the image.

Animal portraits are also a possibility.   Some consider portraiture limited to images of people, but others might include animals. Some competitions might exclude or include animals explicitly in a *portrait* section or may have a section on *animal portraits*. If you are submitting an image in a competition under the subject *Portrait*, make sure you read the rules to make sure you understand what is allowed.

It is an idea to review images instantly and to ask your model to adopt a range of poses; rearrange the background objects and props; and modify lighting, to progressively refine the image.

Don't worry about the 99 images you discard – what matters is the image you want to keep (of course your subject may get somewhat impatient if you want to get more than two or three exposures – just remind them that if you were a painter, they would be there for hours and unable to move, as the paint is slowly applied to canvas).

And the photographer has the option to build their image as a composite, so not everything needs to be in one place at the same time, or things in the background might be moved or changed, or the lighting tweaked in post processing.

These (among many others) are worth a read:
https://digital-photography-school.com/10-ways-to-take-stunning-portraits/
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portrait_photography

Always bear in mind the purpose for which the image is taken. Portraiture is a broad field. Consider the following:

- Events – wedding – BBQ – family life – Journalism – decorative art – etc
- Personal use vs submitting for a competition. Photographs that appeal will depend on your personal relationship with the subject. Images you like for personal reasons may not do well in a competition where the judges do not have the back-story to the image
- Diaries, documenting an event, work, life-changes
- Marketing and commercial use
- Documentary – science; medicine; history; journalism etc

A casual portrait of a CEO at a family barbeque may be valued by the family but be totally inappropriate for that company *Annual Report* or the company web page, where a more formal image emphasising different personal qualities might be desired. If you are taking images for photographic competitions bear in mind that the judges will have viewed hundreds of perfectly competent portraits over the years (or even within that competition). To catch the judges' attention, you need to capture something extra special – a powerful emotion; an unusual perspective; a clear narrative; a celebrity (although celebrity is not sufficient on its own, it may help the judge see a narrative). Expect to take hundreds of good portraits for every extra special one. You will probably know it when you see it, though sometimes images have a subtlety that means you only realise they are special when you review them (or re-review them) down the track. It is not a bad idea to go back over your older photos and see what grabs your eye the second (or more) time through.

Quiz

Consider the images below – would you consider all of these portraits? If not, which, and why? Note you can view these images in full screen mode online https://photos.app.goo.gl/Q7vv1JubDujksc2e9


Are there any changes you would make to improve these images? Feel free to share your comments to the images in the google album https://photos.app.goo.gl/Q7vv1JubDujksc2e9/ .

To add comments in a Google Album, click on the thumbnail to get the full screen image, then click the speech bubble at the bottom right of the screen.

You can then type your comment in the "Say Something" dialog box to the bottom right then click the blue triangle icon to the right to submit.
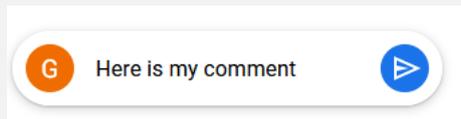
Your comment should appear at the top of the *Activity* bar on the right side of the screen. Please add any comments before the due date for homework so we can review your comments. If you return to the album after this time you should be able to see everyone else's comments too.

Homework (Required task for continuation of course)

Take one photograph of each of the 3 poses on Page 1. one face, one head and shoulders and one whole body photograph. The photographs will be collated, viewed and discussed as an introduction to the next session focussing on light.

To give us time to collate the homework for the next session, please submit your homework **by the Tuesday before the next session (Feb 23rd)** on the form at:

https://resources.waverleycameraclub.org/portraiture-homework-1/

Voluntary Exercise

Much is to be learned from classic art about portraiture- composition, lighting, narrative elements and so on. Look through galleries of classic portrait paintings. There are lots online if you cannot get to one in person. Here are a couple.

- https://www.portrait.gov.au/portraits.php?advanced=yes&sort=created&i=both&m=Photography&by=-1
- https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/

Select some you like and some you dislike (or like less).

- What about them makes you like them?
- What features of image composition can you identify?
- What is the relationship between the subject and the background?
- Does the image show a narrative? Does the image show this narrative or is there narrative text that is needed to explain the image?