Influence and Identity: Twentieth Century Portrait Photography from the Bank of America Collection

Introduction

IMMA is delighted to present *Influence and Identity: Twentieth Century Portrait Photography from the Bank of America Collection*, an exhibition loaned from the Bank of America Collection and featuring artworks by international photographers from the early to the mid-twentieth century, a period often called the golden age of portrait photography.

With the invention of photography in the 19th century, portraiture became more accessible, and a significant feature of celebrity culture. The exhibition explores various approaches and contexts used by photographers to capture something of their influential sitters. Also highlighted in the selection of artworks, is the use of photographic portraiture as historical record, whether it be unofficial social documentation or formal state commissions, and how it has been used as an enduring tool to mark a person's image and significance in a specific time and place. The evolution of portraiture styles and the messages contained within, show in the works some of which date over 100 years old.

The exhibition is divided into three areas of focus- The Face, The Setting and The Relationship. The first section, The Face, includes artworks selected to consider ideas of likeness and how aspects of persona, overt or hidden, have been communicated by the photographer. The next section, The Setting, looks at the context used to give us a sense of the sitter, their lives and interests. Finally, The Relationship, looks at the distance, physical and emotional, between the subject and photographer.

The twenty-five photographers included in this exhibition are significant in their contribution to the history of photography and have been influential in their own right, while the subjects celebrated here have been noteworthy contributors to the fields of culture and politics.

This exhibition has been loaned through the Bank of America Art in our Communities® programme.

The Face (Rooms 1 - 3)

This section of the exhibition looks at the different creative approaches photographers have taken to reveal something of their subjects; crop, lens angle and proximity are used in various ways to tell a story of the sitter. The subjects in this section of the exhibition were aware that they were being photographed, and it is their engagement with the process which helps to determine what is revealed of them.

In the first room, there are works which act as profile images, some of them becoming deeply psychological, where there is possible scrutiny at either end of the lens - Miles Davis and Elizabeth Taylor, confront us as viewers, locking eyes with the lens, while Marilyn Monroe averts her gaze, and seems otherwise occupied. We become aware that what is disclosed in a photo is also dictated by the sitter.

Another highly recognizable image in this room, is Alvin Langdon Coburn's headshot of the United States President Theodore Roosevelt Jr. taken in the White House in 1907. At the time, Roosevelt was the youngest man to enter office as president, thus Coburn's close-up created familiarity with Roosevelt, but also communicated the directness of Roosevelt 's personality and his gravitas. This image, along with that of W. B. Yeats and Mark Twain (located in Room 3), were included in Coburn's *Men of Mark*, 1913, a compendium of 32 photos that Coburn took of politically and culturally powerful figures.

An example of a commissioned photograph in this room, is that of Lee Friedlander's portrait of the musician and composer Miles Davis which was taken for Atlantic records. During the 1950s and 60s, Lee Friedlander took photographs of jazz and rhythm-and-blues artists both for himself and for clients.

In the second room we are presented with works by photographers who famously added lighting sources and posed their subjects with props, such as Yousuf Karsh, or those photographers who used a more minimalist approach without props, such as Richard Avedon, who frequently used flat lighting and a white background, and Berenice Abbott, who was known to practice 'straight' photography and avoided altering the sitter or the scene in which they were photographed.

Yousuf Karsh's portrait of Winston Churchill is one of the most widely reproduced images from the 20th Century. Karsh caught what seems to be a brooding Churchill, his humour perhaps the result of the photographer having just removed the subject's cigar from him moments before the photo was taken. The photo was organised by the Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King and hung in the Canadian Parliament. It has since been used on the front cover of *Life* magazine in 1945, on the Sterling five-pound note, and on Canadian stamps and coins. This photo was especially significant in launching Karsh's career.

In the second room of this section there are also examples of photos where the inclusion of more of the subject's body, particularly the hands, is used to offer an additional understanding of the sitter. Edith Sitwell was not only a poet but also considered something of an anachronistic fashion icon. In Philip Halsman's portrait of Sitwell, her face is partially angled away from the camera lens, and instead we are exposed to other important signifiers of her persona, that of her beautiful clothing and famously large aquamarine rings.

The last room of this section focuses on depictions of artists, writers and actors. In Edward Steichen's photograph of Paul Robeson, he shows the actor dressed as the title character in the 1920 Eugene O'Neill play *The Emperor Jones*, with the photographer's hallmark use of dramatic light and shadows seemingly apt for the depiction of this subject. Working for *Vanity Fair* magazine from 1923 to 1937, Steichen played an important role in establishing the genre of fashion celebrity portraiture in the 20th century.

Pablo Picasso trusted his friend Brassaï (Gyula Halász) to photograph his sculptures. In Brassaï's photo of Picasso with his oversized sculpture *L'homme au mouton (Man with Ram)*, the artist and his work could be read as holding equal importance as subjects- or as being one and the same, though it is uncertain whether the human figure of the sculpture is a type of elongated self-portrait. The sculpture is thought to be a reaction to the occupation of France during World War II and has been interpreted as a representation of the Good Shephard, though Picasso reportedly rejected one comparison to that of ancient *Moschophoros (the Calf Bearer)*.

The Setting (Rooms 4-5)

This next section looks at how photographers have used environment and staging as context for their sitters. Shown here are examples of settings ranging from the home, ancestral lands, city, nature, and workspace - such as the stage or studio. Context is also constructed by placing the sitter with their family and friends.

The first room of this section focuses on portraits where the subjects have been photographed with their loved ones or within their homes. An example of this is André Kertész's portrait of Marc Chagall and his family which reveals how entering a subject's private setting can offer a glimpse into their everyday worlds. This image features the famous painter from above, sitting outdoors in a quiet family moment. The family look up toward the camera, slightly surprised, as though caught in mid-conversation. The moment is one of candid intimacy. It connects the personal life of Chagall with the themes of love, marriage, nature and family seen in his own work.

Also shown in this room is a depiction of Jamaican Olympic weightlifter Louis George Martin and his wife Ann Robinson by portrait and society photographer Anthony Armstrong-Jones, Lord Snowdon. Rather than overstating Martin's athleticism, the photograph focuses on the unity within his marriage to Robinson, as the couple are depicted with their hands intertwined. In 1964, The Sunday Times published these images in an article on interracial marriages, which was particularly significant as other countries at the time did not legally allow interracial marriage – in the United States, this became legal in 1967.

The photos in Room 5 show subjects in landscapes significant to them, or in their workplaces, including examples of photographs of artists in their studios and actors on stage.

In Carolyn DeMeritt's portrait of Tecumseh Deerfoot Cook, the Pamunkey Chief stands at age 98, framed by the landscape that he lives on as a proud member and leader of the Native American Pamunkey people.

The Relationship (Rooms 6-7)

In this last section, the exhibition shifts focus to look at how the relationship between the photographer and subject influences a portrait. Considered here are the feelings of emotional and physical distance between photographer and sitter, resulting from their relationship as friends, recent acquaintances or complete strangers.

This section starts by looking at those portraits where there has been a closer relationship, such as a self-portrait, or depiction of a friend or acquaintance.

Peter Hujar captures an air of playfulness and intimacy in the close-up of his friend Lynn Davis, while Gisèle Freund and Virginia Woolf were only acquaintances at the time of this photo- Freund earned Woolf's trust to photograph her despite the author's reputation for not enjoying posing for photos.

In other instances, the relationship determines the physical distance between photographer and subject. Garry Winogrand photographed Senator John F. Kennedy accepting the presidential nomination at the 1960 Democratic National Convention. In order to record Kennedy's face from his backstage vantage point, Winogrand creatively includes a television screen broadcasting Kennedy's speech from the audience's perspective at the bottom of his picture-frame. Though the two stood in close proximity, the higher status of the future President is clear. This sense of physical and emotional distance is the point of focus in the works displayed in this final room of the exhibition, where many of the photographers acted as journalists.

About the Bank of America Art in our Communities® programme

At Bank of America, we believe that investments in arts and culture help to build communities and have a positive impact on the lives of our clients and employees. We support a wide range of local and global non-profit organisations with funding and programming to drive engagement, promote cultural sustainability and make the arts more accessible and inclusive in the communities we serve.

Through the Art in our Communities® programme, we use our art collection, which has come to us from many legacy banks that are now part of Bank of America, as a community resource. Museums and non-profit galleries may borrow complete, curated exhibitions at no cost. Since establishing this programme in 2009, more than 170 exhibitions have been loaned worldwide.

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Front Image:
Gertrude Käsebier,
Auguste Rodin, France, c. 1902,
Gum dichromate print, mounted,
Bank of America Collection