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The Rise of the Subject and the Artist in Northern European Portraiture

Hans Memling's *Portrait of a Man*, painted in 1470, might well pass for a Raphael at first glance. The subject, surrounded by a narrow, gray window frame, occupies the center and the vast majority of the picture. Outside the window, the lush green land runs to a crystalline blue sky, ranging by a seamless gradient from white at the horizon line to a deep cerulean blue at the top of the canvas. Two small buildings stand on the horizon, one over each of the man's shoulders—delightful architectural studies reminiscent of the towers found in many of Raphael's paintings—pointed out by the diagonal lines of the subject's garment, which create a V-shape at the painting's center. The bottom point of this V meets near the subject's hand, which serves as a kind of anchor for the piece, sitting nearly at the center of the painting's base, powerfully grasping the black sash whose ridges on the subject's shoulder mimic those created by hills on the horizon. Memling offers us an Italian Renaissance landscape behind a man that, were it not for his conservative, clearly Northern European garb, might fit nicely in an Italian painting. Memling's *Portrait of a Man* is certainly exquisite, but it is also nearly anonymous; the man that is its subject has no name, the landscape no clear place, and that artist's name appears no where. A study in balance and order, rather than tension or drama, this painting depicts a world of total ease, held together by a single, peripheral hand, holding onto the sash, but without any sign of tension. Memling's world is beautiful, but alien. Nearly sixty years later, Hans Holbein painted his portrait of Sir Thomas More, and while this portrait maintains much of the control, color, and clarity of Memling's, a shift in atmosphere has begun. Beginning with Holbein's *Sir Thomas More*, and moving through some of the Frick Collection's great portraits of Northern Europe—particularly Van Dyck's portrait of Frans Snyders, and Rembrandt's Self-Portrait—I hope to examine the shift from Memling's anonymous, Italianate style to something distinctly Northern, expressing the spirit of a place and a subject, and eventually the spirit of the artist himself.

Clearly and carefully composed, full of saturated color, seemingly uninterested in its subject's emotions, Holbein's portrait falls at first glance quite clearly into the tradition of portraiture exemplified by Memling. It is only upon closer examination that the subtler differences between the two become apparent. Of course, the most obvious difference between Memling and Holbein is

simply the level of Holbein's skill in depicting materials. Rather than the smooth, colorful fields of Memling's portrait, Holbein gives us swaths of materials—velvet on More's sleeve, fur around his color, gold upon his breast—all rendered with life-like precision. It is in looking more intently at the details of these materials that we begin to notice Holbein's alterations of Memling's Italianate conventions. Holbein organizes his portrait with exceptional care and precision, placing More's hands (clasped around a book), medallion, and prominent nose along the same vertical axis, accentuated by the vertical line of the red cord that runs parallel to it. But this axis is not the *central* axis. The apparent centers of the painting, More's face and his medallion, fall on an axis just to the right of the painting's central vertical axis; in fact, there are few features of the painting to help us distinguish the actual location of that central axis. Shifting his composition just slightly to the right, Holbein creates an illusion of a center while opening far more space to fill with More's clothing and adornments. More's garments are no longer the simple black of Memling's subject, but rather richly detailed indications of stature, wealth, and occupation. Where Memling was content to depict his subject's garments as a negligible black plane, Holbein used More's garments as part of the portrait itself, allowing them to occupy an enormous amount of space (they fill the bottom third of the canvas entirely, and extend almost three quarters of the way up). The only interruption of the mass of clothing in the lower portion of the painting is the subject's hands, rendered with great delicacy, and, like those of Memling's subject, grasping an object near the center of the painting.

A flash of flesh-tone in the midst of red and black velvet, More's hands act as a balance for his face, which glows as the painting's clear focal point even while sitting outside the painting's center and occupying relatively little space. Unlike Memling's man who gazes unperturbed into the distance, More's face, though staid, is highly expressive nonetheless. More's dark, intense eyes are surrounded by wrinkles and creases, his mouth tense and unsmiling; More's face shows the tremendous weight of his position in the King of England's Court at least as much as the hefty golden medallion on his chest does. Indeed, everything in Holbein's painting participates in creating a sense of weight entirely absent from Memling's portrait where the subject seems to float freely. The rich, thick fabrics draping heavily over More's steeply sloped shoulders, the sagging green curtain, the red cord hanging from the curtain, the gold medallion—all of these seem to sink, while the tension in More's jaw and around his eyes is matched by the tension of his firm grasp on the book in his hands. The sense of weight and tension here is matched by the overall darkness of the atmosphere. Though Holbein uses colors at least as vivid as Memling's, he fills his canvas with rich jewel tones, lending the painting a more autumnal air than is created by Memling's pastoral pastels.

While Holbein provides no glimpse of the outside world, the setting for the portrait of More speaks to the chill just outside the thickly shrouded walls, a barren winter entirely foreign to Renaissance Italy, a world ignored by Memling in his idyllic portrait.

In his portrait of Frans Snyders, Anthony Van Dyck takes this study in the textures and contours of Northern darkness to new heights. Painting nearly 100 years after Holbein, Van Dyck pushes his predecessor's alterations of Memling's conventions further still, freely placing his subject off the central axis, evoking an even darker, more dramatic atmosphere, and introducing a new interest in techniques of painting that might emphasize the act of painting itself. With its subject placed notably to the right of the central axis, the portrait of Frans Snyder exaggerates the same compositional move made by Holbein of dislocating its subject from the center. Where Holbein creates the illusion of a central axis at the subject's face by avoiding any notable emphasis on the *real* central axis, Van Dyck actually draws attention to his subject's displacement by strongly delineating the location of the central axis, marked clearly by Snyders' right hand grasping the back of a chair whose leg and back mark the central axis' bottom half. Van Dyck compensates for this oddity by deft manipulation of space, using the black curtain suspended from the ceiling in the upper left corner of the canvas to mimic the cloak thrown over Snyders' left shoulder. The folds in the cloak lead the eye directly to the hand that sits at the painting's center, while the bottom end of the curtain comes to a point directly over the other hand. The space created between the parallel lines of the curtain and the cloak act as a frame for the subject's face and an obscurely lit landscape of windblown trees and a thickly clouded sky, with light breaking through only in the distance. More explicitly than Holbein, Van Dyck has painted an obviously Northern landscape; the chill suggested by More's clothing and the atmosphere of his surroundings appears clearly here as the artist's chosen backdrop. We have moved far from Memling's idealized countryside into the tempestuous reality (or hyper-reality) of the lowlands.

The colors employed in this landscape—shades of blue and green nearly as dark as the dominant blacks and grays, shot through with flashes of bright light—are part of the same color pallet used throughout the portrait. Just as the tiny flash of light stands out prominently in the distant landscape, so too do Snyders' face and hands spring immediately to the viewer's attention, surrounded as they are by darkness. The direct, piercing gaze from Snyders' dark eyes does not need to occupy the central position of the canvas to be its clear focus, nor does he require the status symbol of the lace collar to indicate his power. The stern melancholy of Snyders' almost-skeletal face mimics the world outside: threatening in its power, yet not overtly violent. Indeed, the

restrained emotional life suggested by the subject's face seems to burst forth in nature outside. And then there are the hands. Like both Memling and More, Van Dyck gives a prominent place to the hands of his subject, and what strange hands they are too. In the midst of this image of masculine power and control are these slender, effeminate hands, not grasping anything as did Holbein's More and Memling's man, but relaxed, at rest atop a chair, entirely without the tension we see in More's hands. These hands seem to correspond to the style of painting employed by the artist. One might imagine such hands as More's painting with the kind of obsessive precision that Holbein clearly used to create a painting that, even seen quite close, would not reveal itself as painted. Conversely, Snyders' relaxed hands seem to match Van Dyck's style, which allows both for greater flexibility in the positioning of the subject, and importantly allows us to see brush strokes in such places as the landscape and the chair. If Memling's painting is one of tranquility and balance, and Holbein's of tension and precision, then Van Dyck's is a painting of restrained but uninhibited power, of technique perfected and set free.

Rembrandt's *Self Portrait* of 1658 draws on elements of those portraits discussed above, combining and adjusting them to draw greater attention to the work of the painter, and to the subject—in this case one and the same. Like Holbein and Van Dyck before him, Rembrandt strongly emphasizes a vertical axis that sits just off center and runs through the subject's face, the V of his garment, and the point where the two pieces of the red sash meet. The position of the subject in the painting synthesizes Holbein and Van Dyck, using the roughly pyramidal shape of Holbein's portrait—created here by the subject's clothing as it is in Holbein's portrait—in a portrait posed *en face* like Van Dyck's. Yet while Van Dyck's Snyders meets his viewer with a penetrating stare, Rembrandt looks into the distance as More does. Like much of the canvas' upper quarter, the subject's eyes fall into shadow, yet while the subject's forehead and hat fade almost completely into the background, the eyes gleam clearly from the shadows. Rembrandt has moved the darkness of Van Dyck's landscape indoors, back into Holbein's interior space, but stripped of all adornment, and like the white of the sun breaking through the clouds or of Snyders' skin against the dark curtain, Rembrandt's eyes shine out of the darkness. In eliminating all traces of landscape or setting, Rembrandt creates a space that does not comment on the subject but merely provides a plain against which the subject might be observed—a darkness from which the subject might shine. Where Holbein's setting gives us information about status and Van Dyck's about location, Rembrandt's forces us to look only at the subject.

Heeding the painting's injunction to look closer, our eyes are drawn to the enigmatic, partially hidden face. Restrained, aged, unemotional, and obscured by shadow, the face of the subject becomes an exercise in the use of texture, shadow, and light. From the face, the eye follows nearly all of the painting's lines to the hands. The slope of the subject's shoulders, the diagonal folds of his garment, the horizontal axis of the sash—all these point to the hands, which are, in their way, far more dynamic than the subject's face. The left hand rests softly on a cane, as relaxed as Snyders', though less stylized, while the right sits in some of the most direct light to be found in this painting of shadows. As much as the face, these hands are Rembrandt's subject, the almost independent entities that undertook the creation of the painting. Given the importance of the hands in this portrait, it is no surprise that the technique of the painting draws clear attention to its own artificiality. Taking Van Dyck's technique one step further, Rembrandt paints his own portrait with amazing transparency, allowing individual strokes to become visible, not imitating reality as did Holbein, but showing us reality as it appears through the act of painting and the eye of the painter. The rich texture of the garment is also a series of brushstrokes; the monochromatic background is composed of myriad colors and motions. Everything in Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait*, then, is designed to draw us back to the fact that it is a painting, and that the subject of that painting is the painter himself.

From Memling through Holbein, Van Dyck, and finally Rembrandt we see a transition in portraiture from anonymity to an absolute expression of the subject's personality and place. Consequent with this rise is the appearance of the painter in the canvas, subtly exposing himself through transparency of technique, and through the ascendancy of that single detail common to all of the paintings I have considered here: the hands. In Memling's portrait we see a single, unobtrusive hand anchoring the painting. In Holbein, a second hand appears, and the subject's hands express tension as clearly as does his face. Van Dyck moves the hands to the very center of the canvas, and while Rembrandt's lay near his portrait's periphery, they constitute two of the cardinal points of the compositional pyramid. In this arrangement, Rembrandt harkens back to the prototypical arrangement of the Madonna and child, the three sacred figures constituting the points of the pyramid. Here, those points are mapped onto the body of the artist whose eyes—gleaming from the shadows—provide the vision realized by his hands. In Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait* we see the point at which these two strands in the development of portraiture meet: the full expression of the subject in the painting itself and the ascendancy of the painter's personality meet at the point when the subject being expressed is same as the man creating that expression.