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—Dean Lahikainen,
curator of American decorative art

What makes a portrait art?

Of the innumerable portraits created as decoration, as treasure, and as family record, only the most successful transcend those social functions to become mesmerizing works of art. “Fascinating portraits draw us in with their beauty, with the layers of meaning revealed about the artist and sitter’s

relationship, and with the conveyance that the subject is an interesting individual,” says Trevor Fairbrother, guest curator of *Family Ties* and scholar of contemporary art and American painter John Singer Sargent.

Art historians can explain how and in what context a portrait was painted, and the significance of positions, costumes, and props, but this knowledge doesn’t explain what makes a portrait truly compelling. Beauty and technique, emotional connection, and a sense of personality: these are among the qualities that transform a work.

“Artists who bring a distinctive vision to this often-conventional genre are able to create portraits whose immediacy connects us to people from the past,” says Dean Lahikainen, the museum’s Carolyn and Peter Lynch Curator of

American Decorative Art.

John Singleton Copley, whose work is exhibited in the museum’s American Decorative Art Gallery, is widely regarded as colonial America’s first master portraitist. He rendered his subjects with stunning realism even when he took liberties with his compositions. Fairbrother explains, “He would sometimes copy the dresses and costumes in English prints to make Boston’s early merchants look a little bit grander.”

Copley’s works are indeed distinctive, especially for his time. “He tried to individualize his female subjects more than many of his contemporaries did,” says Lahikainen, “as in the museum’s portrait of Sarah Erving Waldo. Women, as Copley painted them, are not idealized objects of beauty and adoration, but individuals who share the aspirations of

OPPOSITE: Portrait of Sarah Erving Waldo, ca. 1765, John Singleton Copley, United States.

For the men and women of New England, portraits traditionally defined their sense of self as well as their place in society. In this work, the branch of cherries symbolizes Sarah Erving’s beauty and fertility, referencing her recent marriage to a wealthy Boston merchant. The Boston tea table relates to her new duties as hostess.



New England's merchant class. For example, the tea table at which she sits is unique to New England and reflects her ability to appreciate and acquire furnishings of the highest quality." Although symbols of wealth have changed since colonial times, Copley's breathtaking rendering of highly polished wood and opulent satin is as impressive now as it was to Waldo's contemporaries.

Equally adept at reflecting the ambitions of his affluent and trendy circle, Andy Warhol succeeded, Fairbrother says, "in combining traditional portraiture with contemporary art." A painting of his mother, Julia Warhola, featured in the exhibition *Family Ties*, is a strong example of how the artist's relationship with his subject can have a profound effect. "The image, an old photograph silk-screened onto a brightly painted background and then finger-painted on, seems to make fun of conventional techniques. At the same time, it is very much about his closeness to his mother. And the fact that he's rubbing his hands over this memorial image of his mother—that," says Fairbrother, "is very poignant."

Even when an artist doesn't know his subject intimately, "an exceptional individual can inspire the exceptional portrait, which can become the artist's masterpiece," says Fairbrother. John Singer Sargent's painting of Madame Pierre Gautreau, now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and known as *Madame X*, created a scandal at the 1884 Paris

OPPOSITE: *Madame X (Madame Pierre Gautreau)*, 1884, John Singer Sargent, United States. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1916. (16.53) Photograph ©1997 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"A portrait is both a portrait of the person who's paying for it and a subliminal self-portrait of the artist," says Trevor Fairbrother. Sargent was a young artist seeking success at the Paris Salon when he painted Madame Gautreau in her most revealing gown. Sargent originally painted Gautreau with her shoulder strap down but touched up the portrait after a furor erupted over the audacity of subject and artist.



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Salon and illustrates Fairbrother's assertion that no matter the subject, subliminally, all portraits are also self-portraits. "*Madame X* was painted while Sargent was still in his twenties and trying to make a name for himself at the Paris Salon. He wanted to push the envelope."

"She was a notorious figure who flaunted her beauty and pushed social limits," explains Fairbrother. The artist was intrigued by her boldness and painted her standing regally and magnificently in her most revealing gown. "It's as if she is posing as a statue of a classical goddess. When it was exhibited at the Salon, people laughed at her. They thought she was too brazen, that she wanted to be worshipped." Still, his ability to capture the essence of his subject secured Sargent's reputation as the portraitist of choice during America's Gilded Age.

But what if one doesn't know about

Copley's source material, Warhol's closeness with his mother, or Madame Gautreau's fondness for revealing gowns? What is it that makes a portrait fascinating even centuries after it was created? Lahikainen summarizes the emotional connection that portraits can inspire: "There is a reading of character that the best artists can convey—was this person happy, confident, contented? A truly great artist captures a sense of his subject's soul." ■

ABOVE: Julia Warhola, 1974, Andy Warhol, United States. The Andy Warhol Museum Founding Collection. Contribution The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.

Julia Warhola lived in her son's New York home for more than twenty years, throughout his rise to success. Several years after her death, Warhol created this painting in her honor.