

M.LiT Tour by Irene Koo

Title: The Beauty and Vanity of Portraiture – European and 21st Century

Description:

Location:

Intro: Hello, Welcome to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. My name is Irene Koo. Our tour theme for this year is Social Trends: Beauty and Vanity. Today I will be taking you on a tour exploring portraiture and how social trends of different time periods have influenced artists' ideas of portraying beauty in art in the 19th and 21st century.



Object 1

Object Number: 49.11.21

Present Location: Off View

Artist: Vigée-LeBrun, Élisabeth-Louise

Culture: French

Title: Portrait of the Comte de Vaudreuil

Period: 18th century

Medium: oil on canvas

Date: 1784

Credit Line: Gift of Mrs. A. D. Williams

This first piece is called Portrait of the Comte de Vaudreuil by Elisabeth-Louise Vigée Lebrun. Lebrun was a renowned, in-demand French portrait artist who fled the country as the French Revolution began. Although it was uncommon during the time to be a female artist and Lebrun had to overcome this adversity, she completed close to 700 portraits during her lifetime, and was a favorite of her close friend Marie Antoinette of France, as well as many other prominent aristocrats and royalty. *Why do you think these powerful people wanted such portraits made of themselves?* This was a time in 19th century Europe of lavishness, glorification of the individual which goes back to ideas of the Renaissance, and idealization of the classical values.

The art movement Lebrun was a part of is known as Neoclassical, meaning “new Classicism”. The Neoclassical movement focused on Western classical art and culture, usually that of Ancient Greece and Rome. This style arose with the French Revolution as artists painted various scenes or portraits showing the values of the revolution, such as the importance of democracy, with Greco-Roman elements. Lebrun uses sharp colors and chiaroscuro, which is high contrast in lights and darks. In this painting, she creates a very dramatic presentation, with the sitter shown against a stark, grey background which sets off his relaxed pose and expression, the meticulous detail in the clothing, and his face which is the clear focus of the painting, illuminated against the dark background. She paints this portrait very much in the style of the classical artists, with the pyramidal composition found in many of the Old Masters’ paintings. Lebrun shows the finery and high position of the Comte de Vaudreuil by painting the details in the lace, the shiny medals and sword in his hand to show his valor and honor, and the intricate stitching in his jacket and vest showing his wealth.

The Comte de Vaudreuil was a wealthy plantation owner who lived a very aristocratic lifestyle, and was influential in the court of Louis XVI. He was known as a worldly and ambitious man, but the way he is portrayed in this portrait with a relaxed posture and expression shows how Lebrun, who was his close friend, saw him as more natural and unaffected by the pretentiousness of the court. He is shown in elaborate dress and dramatic effects of light focusing on his face, representing the way wealthy European aristocrats perceived beauty and wanted to glorify themselves. Do you think this portrait shows vanity? Why? *Audience*.

Elisabeth Louise Vigée Lebrun painted in a very classically influenced style, but the time after the influential French Revolution led to a huge revolution in art as well. Let's see next how this style developed.



Object 2

Object Number: 83.47

Present Location: Mellon Gallery

Artist: Renoir, Pierre Auguste

Culture: French

Title: "Pensive, 'La Songeuse'" or "Day Dreaming"

Period: 19th century

Medium: oil on paper on canvas

Date: 1875

Credit Line: Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

This piece is called *Pensive (La Songeuse)*, painted in the late 19th century by one of the world's most famous French Impressionists – Pierre Auguste-Renoir. He often worked with Claude Monet, and they are credited today as the most influential founders of the Impressionist movement, a movement that revolutionized art with a shift from pure Classicism to a focus on the more ephemeral. Renoir is known for his landscapes and portraits, especially of women and children in gentle scenes, which revolutionized and shaped the emerging Impressionist movement.

This painting is an example of Impressionism, characterized by the focus on effects of changing color and light in nature and rejection of crisp lines, contours, and smooth brush strokes. It is a sharp contrast from academic, classical pieces such as the *Comte de Vaudreuil*. This portrait is painted with short, textural brush strokes of pure prismatic colors in the Impressionistic style of creating an impression or sensation of something rather than an overly detailed image. As seen in this painting, the colors are not mixed on a palette and painted onto the canvas, but are juxtaposed next to each other for the viewer's eyes to fuse.

This portrait shows a young woman looking out a window with a pensive, reflective expression. Renoir challenges expectations of portraiture by keeping the subject's back towards the audience. Why do you think he painted the subject in this way? *Audience*
He also leaves her gaze ambiguous, and leaves it for the viewer to wonder what she is looking at

and thinking about. This piece shows the importance of color in his composition, with the dark range of blacks in the bottom part of the painting juxtaposed with the wide array of colors in the top portion of the painting. This use of color, also seen in the small accents of bright red, draws the focus towards her face and the nature seen in the window.

How does this portrait represent beauty? *Audience*

Renoir showcased beauty in this piece according to the changing movement during his time, of Impressionism – fleeting images and beauty in light and color more than through distinct figures and details.

Now let's move on to another portrait, this from the 21st century, but with a style in many ways much more similar to the first and earlier piece we viewed.



Object 3

Object Number: 2006.14

Present Location: 21st Century Gallery

Artist: Wiley, Kehinde

Culture: American

Title: Willem van Heythuysen

Period: 21st century

Medium: oil and enamel on canvas

Date: 2006

Credit Line: The Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund

This grandiose portrait at 8x6 feet is titled Willem Van Heythuysen, and was painted by contemporary artist Kehinde Wiley in 2006. Kehinde Wiley paints lush, larger-than-life

images of African American men in the style of Old Masters' portraits. They are painted in a tight, realistic style and blend hip-hop and grand European culture by showing anonymous young blacks from contemporary urban areas painted with the prestige of European bourgeoisie. He draws from the styles of Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo, and Neoclassical Art, but keeps the painting firmly ingrained in the 21st century with the figure's casual street wear. What are some things you see the figure wearing that are easily recognized in our culture today? *Audience*



Willem Van Heythuysen is actually the name of a powerful Dutch merchant, whose portrait was painted in the early 17th century and inspired this piece. What are some similarities you see between the two paintings?

Audience

Wiley paints his figure with the same strong, ennobling expression, and standing in the same pose of the original figure, including the hand gripping the sword. He takes more liberty however with the background of his image, using a decorative, stylized pattern which flattens the

space especially in the areas in which parts of the gold tendrils come off of the red plane in front of the figure's legs, adding a feeling of artificiality to the painting. This painting uses rich, regal colors, and also has an ornate, gold, gilded frame.

Kehinde Wiley's portraits of disenfranchised, young black men are ironic and self-questioning. They call attention to the desires of some black men to blend into mainstream white society and fulfill roles they had been previously barred from – he paints them with a demeanor of entitlement and exalted status. He questions lingering stereotypes of masculinity, race, and class, as well as showing the concerns of beauty in our society today and how it remains similar to conventions of beauty in the past. How do you think our ideas of beauty have changed from what we've seen in the 19th century portraits? How has it stayed the same? *Audience*. Willem Van Heythuysen shows beauty through grandiosity, fashion consciousness, and polished self-presentation.

Conclusion: In the three works of art we have viewed this evening, you have seen how beauty and vanity have been shown through portraiture in the 19th century and the 21st century. The artists we saw today, Elisabeth Louise Vigée Lebrun, Pierre Auguste-Renoir, and Kehinde Wiley, painted social conventions of beauty and vanity as they were relevant in their culture.

Do you have any further questions? *Audience*

Thank you so much for joining me this evening. Please take some time to listen to other M.Lit participant's tours before you leave.

