

## knowing, and the unknown sitter

Looking at all the descriptions of unknown sitters together, it becomes clear that there are a limited number of ways to approach the interpretation of portraits. Although each writer calls on unique specialist knowledge, and each writes about a different portrait, the texts share similar approaches to interpreting the portraits of unknown sitters. So in conclusion, what can we say that we know about the unknown sitter? The answer - perhaps an unsatisfactory one - depends on the standards we set for what it means to 'know' something.

All of our authors have generated descriptions of the sitters based on what is in the 'frame' of the portrait, and how it relates what is (or was) outside of that 'frame'. Whether we accept their accounts as 'knowledge' depends on how convinced we are by their characterisation of those relationships. Does the appearance of Chinese junks in the **Portrait of Merchant Naval Captain** mean, as Lara Perry suggests, that this is a portrait of someone who sailed to China? Or is this entirely wrong, and the Chinese junks should more properly be interpreted as (for example) metaphors for the journey into death? At the moment, we do not have enough information to decide between these two explanations for the presence of the ships in the portrait: all we can decide is whether we agree with one explanation, or another.

What we do now have is a better idea of the strategies through which we might devise an account of a sitter from their portrait. Our authors have shown us how, when we look at a portrait, we attempt to draw conclusions about the person in certain ways. As Vicki Bruce makes clear, we automatically make decisions about a person's sex, age, trustworthiness, and attentional state from their appearance. The ordinariness of this kind

of judgement is demonstrated by the fact all of our authors have treated at least the sitter's sex and age as 'knowable' from their portrait.

Many of our authors have, however, attempted more than the basic description of the sitter's physical state. One common strategy has been to study the presentation of certain kinds of inanimate objects in the portrait (like clothes, furniture and backgrounds) as evidence for the social status, or occupations of the sitter. This kind of general information can suggest a great deal about how the sitter lived, and more importantly, some of the things that the sitter thought was important enough to record in a portrait. But some of our authors also considered these aspects of a portrait as a document of the interests and inclinations not of the sitter, but of the portrait maker. Many aspects of a portrait - pose, background, composition, technique - may have nothing to do with the sitter, but instead reflect the strategies of the artist.

If understanding the portrait as the outcome of a relationship between the sitter and the artist wasn't complicated enough, some of our authors have also introduced a third 'author' to the portrait, the viewer. Some portraits may be designed to prompt certain feelings in the viewer, but not all viewers will recognise these prompts in a similar way. The uncertainty of this aspect of a portrait - that its meaning changes depending on who is looking, and when - may mean that we can never come to unanimous agreement about what a portrait says about the sitter.

This suggests that knowledge of a sitter is constituted through an agreement about what any given aspect of a portrait means. Many of the ways we have of describing and analysing a portrait can lead to that kind of agreement; but there are some in which consensus may, and should, be impossible. In at least a few respects, a sitter will always remain unknown.