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### **Unknown man, formerly known as Johann Zoffany**

Unknown artist, 1761, oil on canvas, 527x413mm

National Portrait Gallery, London

NPG 399

I am in a warehouse, on an industrial estate in south London, looking at the portrait of a man who looks out of the canvas and beyond me. His face is a striking colour, a combination of what appear to be yellow and pinkish tones, with a large exposed forehead, glassy yet somehow piercing eyes, a sharply defined nose, and gently rounded chin; his hair is dark brown, long and curly, draped over his left shoulder; his right arm curves outwards to rest upon a leather volume and holds a pen in its hand; he wears a waistcoat, with the top button open, over a voluminous shirt. This is almost but not quite a profile portrait: the right eye can just be glimpsed as the man's face inclines ever so slightly into the pictorial space following the curvature of his arm, but nothing is visible below the middle of the torso. The composition of the painting, presented in oil, is incredibly mobile for as I look upon the face looking to the left of the canvas, I am then drawn to the hand moving to the right; in effect, an arc or semi-circle can be traced from the face, not particularly large but seemingly incredibly heavy, to the right hand, which balances carefully on a book for support and holds a pen between its index and third fingers and thumb therefore pointing back to the face, and in particular the nose and eyes.

There is no single clue to the identity of the man, although the pen and volume suggest that I am looking at an educated man, possibly an artist or writer. Physiognomical teachings, often used by artists to convey particular expressions and types of character, posit a correspondence between external appearance and the internal character. (1) So, the physiognomical details of the high forehead and the pronounced nose that sandwich those all-important eyes suggest a man of relatively good character; and yet the top and middle sections of the face, especially the eyes, seem somewhat at odds with the fleshy lips and jawline of its bottom half, perhaps conveying a tension between the intellectual powers of the mind and the sensual impressions of the body. (2) The overwhelming impression is, however, of elusiveness; there is something enigmatic about this man that is not dispelled

by the various details of the painting. Yet, and ironically, this elusiveness can be located quite precisely in those apparently glazed eyes - especially the extremely prominent left one - which gaze, ever so slightly downcast, at a point or object or person beyond the canvas. This act of look is profoundly disconcerting: it poses a hermeneutic challenge to me, the viewer, in its refusal to engage with me or to meet my gaze, and so I look upon a man looking and, unlike many portraits, receive no reciprocal response whereby he looks back at me. The absence of reciprocity has a curious effect upon my position as viewer or spectator as I seem to be distanced from the real subject that the painting depicts while, at the same time, compelled into responding to his presence by my physical proximity to the actual painting.

Back in my study with a black and white reproduction of the painting from a Paul Mellon Foundation publication in front of me, (3) I continue to think about the portrait in abstraction. There is much that is not evident in the painting - for example, the focus of the man's gaze is unclear and the contents of the volume, resting (presumably) on his thigh, are not disclosed. But it is clear that much can be gleaned from the kind of impressionistic description that was produced from my experience of viewing the actual painting. Stripped of the usual frameworks of understanding, such as details of the artist and the sitter and the owner or collection, the painting nonetheless accrues meaning and value as I survey its formal qualities and speculate about its significance. How is the painting composed? What is its focal point? And, perhaps most intriguingly, who is this man? It is quite easy to construct a narrative that makes sense of the portrait in broad terms; here is the picture of a man who wanted to preserve his own image and so sat for an artist who produced a portrait - that, after all, is the point of portraits is it not? The difficulty is that embedded in the idea of preservation, or the desire to endure, are all kinds of issues about the lineage, status, and legacy of the sitter along with questions about the authenticity, style, and authority of the artist.

Of course, there is some contextual information for this portrait, which tells us a number of things that might help to make more sense of the portrait. Firstly, this is an 'unknown man, formerly known as Johan Zoffany'; secondly, the artist is

is unknown; thirdly, the date of the portrait is 1761; and fourthly, this portrait belongs to the collection of the National Portrait Gallery. Most significant here is the 'formerly known as' because it indicates a dispute about the identity of the sitter with potentially important consequences for our interpretation of the portrait. If we know either the artist or the sitter of a portrait, then we can start to construct an account of the painting in terms of its name, the contribution it makes to the fashioning of a personality, and the way in which its subject is exemplified; the relationship between the viewer and the portrait is forged on such a process of identification. (4) Zoffany (1733-1810), known for his conversation pieces and portraits, spent a considerable portion of the 1760s in London and returned for a shorter period from 1779 to 1783 but, and importantly, the disputed identity of the sitter makes this information potentially irrelevant.(5)

A note for 'NPG 399 Called Zoffany self-portrait', written by Jacob Simon, then curator of eighteenth-century portraits at the National Portrait Gallery, reviews the evidence for the portrait as both the representation and production of Zoffany. Simon cites visual evidence from the portrait the sitter's gaze, lack of wig, sharp nose - together with details about the provenance (the portrait was bought from J. Scotcher by William Bean and sold to the NPG in 1875) - and the frame (nineteenth century in date but eighteenth century in style) in order to conclude that 'it is impossible to accept NPG 399 as a work by Zoffany'; a signature that seems genuine is, Simon suggests, more likely to be a later addition to the portrait. The notes follow the conventions of art history in looking for evidence of stylistic consistency between this and other Zoffany self-portraits, and in particular a pen and ink drawing (now lost) of Zoffany by himself with the same date, which is very similar in pose and gaze to NPG 399; Simon also compares the portrait to Zoffany's early work in England for evidence of stylistic and iconographic similarities and finds little to support such a claim. Thus, as Simon points out, we are left with a couple of possible solutions to this muddle: is this a portrait by Zoffany of one of his fellow artists at the St. Martin's Lane Academy? Or, conversely, is it a portrait of Zoffany by another artist?

What interests me about this note is that the introduction of this additional material

seems to intrude upon my impressionistic response to the portrait, not so much assisting as distracting me from the task of interpretation. There are one or two visual details that I had not grasped, such as the fact that man is holding a porte-crayon not a pen, and the existence of a signature on the canvas; and a few nuggets of information about the provenance, frame, and other self-portraits that I did not know. But, far from resolving the hermeneutic difficulties thrown up by the portrait, these notes obfuscate the task of interpretation by taking me, the viewer, away from the portrait in order to consider what is known about, and what can be intuited from, the portrait. To me, the unknowableness of this portrait, in terms of its sitter and its artist, does not detract from its value or meaning as a pictorial representation. It certainly makes it difficult to respond to the painting as a form of emulation by its artist or a 'likeness' of its sitter but we can, nevertheless, develop quite a sustained response to the individual that is depicted, and speculate about the life that they lived and their mode or condition of being.

The portrait offers us the outline of a male subject, supplied with some supplementary details, in a state of suspended absorption.<sup>(6)</sup> But the painting contains a key contradiction, namely that our attention is focused on an act of looking that seems transitory within a form of representation that asserts permanence. It is precisely this tension between the living presence and the painted portrait of the subject that defines the genre of portraiture: it is, as Marcia Pointon has astutely observed, 'a question of the relationship between the self as art and the self in art'. <sup>(7)</sup>

There is no doubt that this painting is a portrait of someone; however, in doubt is not only who as subject constitutes the portrait ('the self in art') but also who as artist produced the representation ('the self as art'). What we see when we look at this portrait is a conception of selfhood in all its complexity; the averted gaze and self-absorption provide a focal point for the painting that is, at once, asserted and denied insofar as we look at the man looking and look with him as he looks away from us. The alienating effect of the averted gaze is mitigated by the immediacy of this moment of contemplation, caught between action and emotion, and as a result the portrait of an unknown man becomes knowable. We see and feel and think with the man as if we were that man; this phenomenology of selfhood,

as I should like to call it, bestows meaning and value upon the portrait, transforming it from that which is not known to that which is known because it is experienced by us all. Above all, then, the portrait conveys a powerful sense of the complexity of our inner lives both through its formal composition and its focal point; its movement outwards and inwards, from the eyes to the hand and back to eyes, compels us to concentrate on fathoming the reasons for this man's absorption and, equally importantly, imagining ourselves in his position.

## Endnotes

- 1 See Jennifer Montagu, **The Expression of the Passions: The Origin and Influence of Charles Le Brun's 'Conference sur l'expression générale et particulière'** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); and Mary Cowling, **The Artist as Anthropologist: The Representation of Type and Character in Victorian Art** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- 2 For a fuller account of the principles of physiognomy than space permits, see my recent book, **Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression in Nineteenth-Century Culture** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- 3 Oliver Millar, **Zoffany and his Tribuna** (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), plate 2. Interestingly, the portrait is cited as a self-portrait by Zoffany before later being corrected in the NPG catalogue. Compare to plates 21, 32, and 34 for 'authentic' self-portraits by Zoffany.
- 4 Ludmilla Jordanova considers the importance of portraiture to the construction of social identities in 'Medical men 1780-1820', in **Portraiture: Facing the Subject**, ed. Joanna Woodall (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 101-115.
- 5 See Mary Webster's catalogue for the exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in 1977, **Johan Zoffany, 1733-1810** (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1976).
- 6 My description of act of looking in the portrait as characteristic of a state of absorption is indebted to Michael Fried's **Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). From the 1730s in France, Fried claims, Chardin,

in particular, 'made painting after painting in which engrossment, reflection, reverie, obliviousness, and related states are represented with a persuasiveness equal to that achieved by the greatest masters of the past, and by doing so perpetuated as much of what I shall call the absorptive tradition as it was in one man's power to keep alive' (pp. 44-45).

- 7 Marcia Pointon, **Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 1.