

# 10 : Candid/Composed

---

## 1. Class title 1 (Kennedy family)

I am combining two themes in today's class. It is the third in my **Portraits of Power** series, following British Queens and French Emperors. And it is also a study of **portrait photography**. The first hour, on **American First Families**, begins with the camera, but then returns to paint on canvas before ending with film. The second hour looks at the topic of photography more generally.

## A. First Families on Film

### 2. The two pictures below

I put this comparison on the website. Both the photographs of the **Kennedys** are by LIFE photographer **Mark Shaw**, who had by this time become a family friend. Both are taken at the family compound in Hyannis Port on Cape Cod, but they are two years apart. Let's compare them, especially in terms of my title for the entire class, **Candid/Composed**. And in particular, how important in each is the background?

### 3. The Kennedys, formal, 1961

### 4. Jack and Jackie Kennedy with Caroline, 1959

The 1961 portrait is obviously formal, taken I think in the first summer of JFK's presidency. What softens it is the fact that was not taken at the White House but at Hyannis Port. You can see other Cape Cod buildings through the windows, and that is clearly Cape Cod light. So it is a formal portrait taken in an informal setting. The 1959 picture, however, was taken during the campaign, and its intent is different: to sell the candidate to the public as an ordinary young father (though with an unusually beautiful wife). So is it casual? Let's look at another version of it.

### 5. Two versions of the 1959 picture

Which is the more casual? I would say the one on the left, because it captures that surely spontaneous moment of Caroline reaching out for her father's cheek. By the same token, however, it is less good as a portrait of the two parents; his face is partially hidden, and hers lacks the radiant smile of the right-hand picture. It is clear that this is a session set up to acquire a number of "casual" photos like this, some of which can be cropped and distributed to serve a particular purpose. But the very fact that the photo *is* cropped and selected makes it no longer a casual snap; it is a new category applying distinctly to photography: the posed-casual picture. Had I found the left-hand picture in a bin somewhere, I would have called it genuine casual. But in fact it is on the photographer's website; the very decision to publish it automatically takes it out of the genuine-casual category.

6. Barack and Malia Obama, 2015
7. The Obamas returning by helicopter from Martha's Vineyard, 2015

Here is a set of photographs of a more recent President with his daughter: **Barack Obama** with his daughter **Malia** in 2015. I would assume that this too would have been a quasi-casual set-up, made for the purpose of getting a few natural-looking images. But in fact they are all cropped from larger pictures of an event that was not posed at all: the Obamas on the White House lawn return from vacation on Martha's Vineyard. I don't know for sure, but I imagine that the President either did not go with them, or went and came back early; the pictures all have the air of him coming out to meet the helicopter, and asking how the trip went. So, genuinely casual—although again, the act of selection and cropping turns the snaps into a kind of portrait.

#### 8. Barack Obama and daughters in the White House

Perhaps because, like the Kennedys, the Obamas were a youngish family with still-young children, perhaps because Barack Obama himself adopted a more open style, there are far more casual photos of them than of any of their predecessors, and many of them seem genuinely so, not posed-casual. I am posting a link to a TIME round-up of such pictures beginning with the Presidential Campaign and running through both terms. You will notice that half of them (in the middle of the bunch) are labeled "Official White House photo"; see if you can discern any difference between them and the news photographs that come before and after. And again, see if you care to make a distinction between casual human-interest photo and actual photographic portrait? The music is **Paul McCartney's Michelle**, apparently (and slightly obviously) a favorite of the President's

9. Montage of Obama family photographs
10. The two images below
11. National Christmas Tree Lighting, 2012
12. At home in Chicago, 2006

What did you think? To help focus the discussion, let's pick on just two of those I showed. The one at the bottom is the closest to a conventional portrait photo: it is a public occasion, the whole family is on display, they have chosen their outfits with some care, and they are more or less lined up. Yet within that, instead of having them all face the camera and say "Cheese," the photographer has selected a moment where the formal pose has relaxed into some private aside between the President and his two girls. On the face of it, the at-home photo in Chicago is genuinely casual: the start of a working day, the girls getting off to school, Dad on the phone, and Mom calculating something important. And yet it is obviously carefully composed, to show each of the figures doing something significant.

#### 13. Official photographs, Johnson through Bush 43

Brace yourselves for a shock, as we shift from these to the **official photographs** taken of every President shortly after his inauguration, to be printed up and displayed in government offices and consulates all over the world. And a pretty standardized set of images they are. Despite the fact that all these come from the Kodachrome era, it feels as if you had gone from color to monochrome. You can recognize the faces, yes, but they don't give you much more than a sort of federal uniformity.

14. Official photographs, Truman through Nixon
15. As above, the two Kennedy photos compared

Even the smiles seldom seem genuine; for some reason, everybody except Barack Obama has smiled from Ford onwards. Before that, nobody ever smiled—with one striking exception: Kennedy. But his smile in the official photograph looks (to me) out of place and forced, nothing like the casual naturalness of a photo from the Mark Shaw shoot I showed earlier. But of course, he was younger then, and not yet in office. Anyway, the point is that there is a gap between the function of a portrait to emphasize the high office and its function to show a relatable person—and a photograph is not always the best way to bridge that gap.

## B. Presidents in Paint

16. Section title: Presidents in Paint

I have to say that, for the most part, the official painted portraits of the Presidents are seldom more inspiring than their official photographs. These five span 40 years, 1921–61, but other than the clothes, there is hardly a hint of increasing modernity between them. [I have left out FDR and stopped short of JFK, because those *are* different, as I'll explain in a moment.] However, we should bear in mind that different kinds of portraits serve different purposes. Those circulated during a campaign are meant to sell the candidate to the public. The official Government photo is intended to represent him as the holder of the office and the powers it represents. But painted portraits generally come late in the President's administration, sometimes even after it; they generally have a retrospective quality, honoring the former incumbent before the torch passes.

17. Kehinde Wiley: *President Obama* (2018, National Portrait Gallery)

Against such a stuffy background, **Kehinde Wiley's** portrait of **President Obama** seems like a starburst!

18. Portraits of Ronald Reagan by Everett Raymond Kinstler, 1991
19. — the above with Kinstler's *Kaanga, Jungle King*

Though we needn't go to such extremes to find things to interest us. In a few instances, you do get the painted equivalent of the **posed-casual** photo. These two official portraits of **President Reagan**—one hanging in the White House the other in the National Portrait Gallery—show him surprisingly relaxed as compared to most of his predecessors and many of his successors. It may be relevant that the artist, **Everett Raymond Kinstler**, had a parallel career as a graphic magazine illustrator. And some of the most strikingly lifelike presidential portraits out there were done by another magazine illustrator, **Norman Rockwell**, though not as official commissions

## 20. Unofficial presidential portraits by Norman Rockwell

### 21. Some First Ladies

Portraits of **First Ladies** tend to show more variety. Of course, because these women have no constitutional power; their main public function is to project an image, and an image is precisely what a good portraitist can capture. All the same, it is surprising how many of them also fall into a predictable pattern, as you can see from the portraits of **Lady Bird Johnson**, **Betty Ford**, and **Rosalynn Carter** along the left-hand side, but at least they each have their color. But there are some surprising standouts. The portrait of **Grace Coolidge** is a stunner; you would think she was a glittering socialite rather than a teacher of lip-reading to deaf children. And, though infinitely simpler, the portrait of **Nancy Reagan** is equally stunning.

### 22. John Howard Sanden: *Laura Bush* (2012)

### 23. John Howard Sanden: *George Bush* (2011), reveal

Against that background, what do you think of this portrait of Laura Bush? I would not be surprised if you thought it impossibly retro, a return to a dusty old tradition of First Lady portraits. But it makes more sense once you realize that the artist, **John Henry Standen**, painted it as a pendant to the official portrait of her husband he had done the year before. While entirely conventional, his **George W. Bush** portrait stands out for its naturalness. Laura's may not be as good, but it works as a complement to it.

### 24. Douglas Chandor: *Eleanor and Franklin D. Roosevelt* (1949, 1945)

### 25. — detail of the FDR portrait above

The Bushes were not the only President and First Lady to be painted by the same artist. One portrait that absolutely jumps off the wall among the Presidents in the National Portrait Gallery is Douglas Chandor's **Franklin Delano Roosevelt** (1945), and he painted another of **Eleanor Roosevelt** four years later, in 1949. Why is the President's portrait so weird? Because it was never intended as a standalone painting. It is actually labeled "Study of President Roosevelt for painting Big Three at Yalta." Chandor had already painted **Churchill**, but he had not met **Stalin**, and before long FDR was dead, so the historical commemoration was never undertaken. But the study remains a remarkable portrait of a charismatic and complex man. Four years later, his widow Eleanor commissioned her own portrait in a similar style. What do you think this approach brings to our understanding of her character?

### 26. Elizabeth Shoumatoff : *Lady Bird and Lyndon Baines Johnson* (1968)

### 27. — comparison with Peter Hurd portrait of LBJ (1967)

### 28. Heads of LBJ portraits by Rockwell, Hurd, and Shoumatoff, with official photograph

We have already glimpsed the portrait of **Lady Bird Johnson**. What is unusual is that the artist, **Elizabeth Shoumatoff**, also painted a picture of **President Johnson** at the same time; they are clearly conceived as a pair. But Johnson had already had one official portrait painted, the year before, by **Peter Hurd**. But he hated the result, thinking it made him look mean, and refused to hang it. So Hurd put the portrait on display independently. Johnson responded by bringing out the Norman Rockwell portrait from 1964, although he had only given Rockwell a grudging 20 minutes for a sitting. Once Shoumatoff had

completed her portrait, he finally pronounced himself satisfied and gave the Rockwell away. So let's do a comparison between the three of them, throwing in the official photograph for reference.

### 29. Official portraits of President Kennedy

Whether you are looking through the Presidential portraits in the National Portrait Gallery or at the White House, the two official images of **President Kennedy** simply leap from the walls: the one in the NPG because of its color and vibrant brushwork, the one in the White House because of its contained quality, thinking, looking down, and not meeting the beholder in the eye.

Here is a brief section of a video about the first of them, by **Elaine de Kooning**, widow of the Abstract Expressionist pioneer Willem de Kooning. It comes from an introduction to an exhibition of her work.

### 30. Elaine de Kooning exhibition video, on the Kennedy portraits

#### 31. Elaine de Kooning: portraits of President Kennedy, 1962–63

There is also a video of De Kooning presenting a version of this portrait to the Truman Library, who commissioned it. She makes the excellent point that a portrait of a public figure is different from a private one because it is no longer just a negotiation between the artist and sitter. Infuriatingly, though, the movie cuts out before she explains how she handled it in this case. But we do have some of what she wrote at the time.

#### 32. Elaine de Kooning, about painting Kennedy

#### 33. Aaron Shikler: *Jackie and Jack Kennedy* (1970, 1971)

#### 34. Thomas Eakins: *The Thinker* (1900, NY Met)

The two portraits by **Aaron Shikler** were commissioned by Jackie Kennedy, years after her husband's death. Both in a sense are **ghost portraits**: one of a woman whose marriage and tenure as First Lady vanished into thin air, one of a President whose memory had become almost mythic. I had assumed that the unusual pose of his portrait was a tribute to an earlier American icon, *The Thinker* (1900), by **Thomas Eakins**. I still think that, but this video from **Bill Allman**, the Curator of Art at the White House, suggests more immediate explanations.

### 35. Bill Allman on the Shikler Kennedy portraits

#### 36. Aaron Shikler: *Jackie and Jack Kennedy* (1970, 1971), repeat

And I thought it might be fun to go on from there to show the closing sequences of **Roger Donaldson's** 2000 film *Thirteen Days*, about the Cuban Missile Crisis, which ends with some of the same shots that inspired Shikler. Kennedy is played by **Bruce Greenwood**, not especially close in looks but spot-on in demeanor. The protagonist, however, is the President's close friend and adviser **Kenneth O'Donnell**, played by **Kevin Costner**—a useful narrative device, though seen outside the context of the whole film, it does look a bit like "How Costner Saved the Country"! But the last voice you hear is Kennedy's own.

### 37. Donaldson: *Thirteen Days* (2000), closing sequence

#### 38. Class title 2 (*Thirteen Days*)

## C. The Portrait as Record

39. Section title C (Muray and Warren)

40. Perich: *The Changing Face of Portrait Photography*, cover

These images are separated by about 90 years. On the right, **George Kendall Warren's daguerrotype** of his mother. On the left, one of the many portraits of the artist **Frida Kahlo** taken by the pioneering color photographer **Nickolas Muray**. Both are among the 10 photographers featured in this Smithsonian publication, *The Changing Face of Portrait Photography* (2011) by **Shannon Thomas Perich**, which I am using as my guide for this second hour. Perich is writing a history, and assembles her artists chronologically. I, however, prefer to group them thematically: **Portrait as Record**, **Portrait as Art**, **Portrait as (E)Motion**, and **Portrait as Comment**.

41. George Kendall Warren: Frederick Douglass (1876) and PT Barnum (1855)

My first category, **Portrait as Record**, is the simplest of the lot: the use of the camera simply to record what people looked like. **George Kendall Warren** (1832–84) pioneered the college yearbook, photographing the graduating classes from Rutgers, Columbia, West Point and other schools. But he also did individual photography too. He was far from the only one, but it is because of him and others like him that we know what many of these iconic nineteenth-century figures looked like: here is the showman **PT Barnum** and the abolitionist **Frederick Douglass**.

42. Barr & Wright: portraits of infants

43. Barr & Wright: portraits of children

44. Barr & Wright: portraits of adults

Of course famous people and college graduates were not the only people wanting their portraits taken. Shannon Perich also includes the partnership of **David Barr** and **Charles Wright**, whose business in Houston in the 1870s was but one example of **main-street studios** operated by now-forgotten photographers. These are three page-openings from her book. It is ironic that, if the purpose was to record a person for posterity (even a dead one), almost all the photos in this section of the book are anonymous. We see what they looked like; we can only conjecture who they were.

45. Nickolas Muray: *Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 1932*

I chose this relatively youthful portrait of FDR to link back to our Presidential portraits of the first hour. The photographer, *Nickolas Muray* (1892–1965), emigrated to the US from Hungary, and presumably accepted the inevitable anglicization to “Murray,” but since he continued to spell the name with one R, I’ll continue to pronounce it that way. He worked mainly in the commercial world of advertising and Hollywood, but his mastery of a complex process called color carbonyl printing gave his pictures a richness of color that he exploited to the full.

46. Nickolas Muray: portraits of Frida Kahlo

47. Nickolas Muray: *Edward G. Robinson* (for Pabst, 1950)

48. Nickolas Muray: *Marlene Dietrich* and *Frank Sinatra* (both 1946)

He exploited it in his many portraits of **Frida Kahlo**, who was an exotic creature in her own right. He exploited it in his advertising spreads, such as this portrait of actor **Edward G. Robinson** for Pabst. And he exploited it especially in his numerous shots of Hollywood personalities, whether as independent commissions or intended for magazine covers, such as these of **Marlene Dietrich** and **Frank Sinatra**. One other thing you may notice about all these pictures: Muray absolutely understood the value of props and costume accessories to build our view of the sitter.

## D. The Portrait as Art

49. Section title D (Gertrude Käsebier: *Virginia Gerson, 1906*)

50. — the same, without title and credited

The goal of most of the early photographers was to create a record, and the camera's accuracy in recording detail—something it could generally do much better than paint—was a given. But from the earliest days, there were a number of photographers who felt more at home with traditional artists than with technicians, and looked for ways to make their photos look *more* like paintings, not less. Look at this image here. I think if I were to tell you that it was a pastel by **Degas**, photographed in sepia, you probably would not contradict me. But in fact it *is* a photograph, a portrait of a woman called Virginia Gerson; the photographer is **Gertrude Käsebier** (1852–1934), one of an extraordinary generation of artists paving the way towards modernism in the early 1900s.

51. Gertrude Käsebier: *Solon Borglum (1902) and Auguste Rodin (1907)*

Käsebier felt more at home with traditional artists than with technicians, and some of her most striking portraits are of other artists, such as the sculptors **Solon Borglum** and **Auguste Rodin** shown here. Nowadays, if we use film at all, the sensitive emulsion is already evenly applied to the plates and printing paper when we buy it. But photographers of Käsebier's generation had to apply the emulsions themselves, and she found that she could be every bit as painterly in how she applied it as an artist handling thick *impasto* with a brush.

52. Julia Margaret Cameron

A couple of generations before Käsebier, that is to say in the early years of photography itself, the idea of photography-as-painting had already been demonstrated by an Englishwoman, **Julia Margaret Cameron** (1815–79). Taking up the medium in her late forties, her first pictures were out of focus because she lacked the skill to make them sharp. But she liked the result, and stuck with it both for portrait and narrative photography—she did a set of illustrations to *Idylls of the King* by her next-door neighbor **Alfred Lord Tennyson**. Anne Lyden explains in this brief video.

53. Anne Lyden on Julia Margaret Cameron

54. Julia Margaret Cameron: portraits of Herschel and Longfellow

Cameron was well-connected. Tennyson, was her next-door neighbor, as you have heard. Queen Victoria's summer residence was just down the road. Sir John Herschel, the Astronomer Royal, was a family friend. So many of her actual portraits (as opposed to her literary and romantic compositions) were of giants of the Victorian era.

- 55. George Frederic Watts & Julia Margaret Cameron: portraits of one another
- 56. Julia Margaret Cameron: *Ellen Terry at 16* (1864)

Mostly these portraits were stern and imposing. But her portrait of the painter George Frederic Watts, another family friend, is altogether more romantic, treating him as a musician rather than a poet, and giving him two pubescent muses to suggest his art. Watts was obsessed with the much younger actress Ellen Terry, and photographed her when he brought her to visit; it is one of her most striking images, almost modern in aesthetic. Cameron and her husband encouraged Watts and Terry to marry, despite the 30-year gap between them and the actress's driving ambition; they separated a year later.

- 57. Robert Weingarten: *Portrait of Colin Powell, 2008*

There is one contemporary photographer I must include in my section on The Portrait as Art: **Robert Weingarten** (1941– ). He is merely a placeholder because he uses digital photography in ways that parallel the *non*-representational techniques in painting that I shall be exploring in my final class. The sitter, as such, does not appear in any of his photo-collage portraits, which are made up of places and things important to the sitter. [Can you guess who is the subject here?](#)

## E. The Portrait as E/Motion

- 58. Section title E (Richard Avedon: *Mikhail Baryshnikov and Twyla Tharp*)

Mostly I have been grouping photographers together. But **Richard Avedon** (1923–2004) is such a giant in twentieth-century photography, and so much his own man, that he cannot easily be grouped with anyone. This photo of dancers **Mikhail Baryshnikov** and **Twyla Tharp** shows the intense qualities of motion and drama that infuse the vast majority of his portraits, although few of his subjects are as physically active as Baryshnikov. You can get something of his concern for both **motion** and **e-motion** from the precredit sequence of this video in the **American Masters** series.

- 59. **American Masters: Richard Avedon, opening**
- 60. Richard Avedon: *Dovima* (1955) and *Carmen* (1957)
- 61. Richard Avedon: *Verushka (dress by Kimberly)*, 1967

There are three things to be said about Avedon, three phases as it were, though they overlap: (1) his concern as a fashion photographer with movement and line; (2) his shift in focus from the externals of a subject to the interior of the sitter; and (3) his use of his growing fame to tackle subjects of social relevance. So for example, these two iconic fashion pictures for Dior and Cardin respectively, show a great deal of imagination, though they cannot be called portraits in any real sense. Nor can the photo of



**Verushka** from ten years later—all three are professional models paid to be whatever the photographer asks of them. But the later one is quite remarkable in its total elimination of background and props, and distillation of energy into a single body hieroglyphic.

62. Richard Avedon: *Coco Chanel, 1958*

63. — the same, with Douglas Kirkland: *Coco Chanel, 1960*

But sticking with the fashion theme, look at these two portraits of the veteran *couturière* **Coco Chanel**, both taken in the same sitting in 1958. How might you compare them? Which tells us more about the sitter? Why did she allow both to enter circulation? As a comparison, look at this portrait by a rather more conventional photographer, **Douglas Kirkland**. I said before that Avedon learned to look beyond the externals of fashion photography to concentrate on the interiors of his subjects. But I was only half right: Avedon still concentrates very much on the externals—the dewlaps and wrinkles—but he seems to be saying that to get beyond the externals, the first requirement is to accept them.

64. Richard Avedon: *Ezra Pound and William Casby, Born into Slavery*

I could show you numerous portraits of famous people, mostly in their declining years, with every wrinkle showing—**Bertrand Russell, Marianne Moore, Alfred Hitchcock, Dorothy Parker**—but I will stick with only one, the poet **Ezra Pound**. Against it, black against his white, is a portrait of a virtually unknown man, *William Casby, Born into Slavery*. The portrait is all detail, the wrinkled face thrust into the frame, searching us with his eyes. And how do we answer that gaze? How can we?

65. Richard Avedon: *Julian Bond (1963) and image from In the American West (1985)*

This portrait of an African-American is far from Avedon's only encounter with race as a subject. He photographed the protests that led up to the Civil Rights Act, and his book *Nothing Personal* (1964) had a text by **James Baldwin**, who had been co-editor with Avedon of a magazine at the New York high school they both attended. His later book, *In the American West* (1985), gives an alternative view of the American Dream, showing all those unnamed people left behind by visions of prosperity. And that gives me a nice segue into my final section, which is about portraits of sitters who remain anonymous....

## F. The Portrait as Comment

66. Section title F (*Dorothea Lange: Evicted tenant farmers in California, 1937*)

This photo, *Evicted tenant farmers in California*, was taken in 1937 by photo-journalist **Dorothea Lange** (1895–1965). Lange got a WPA grant to photograph migrants displaced by the dust bowl in the Great Depression. Her most famous photo, the so-called *Migrant Mother*, is in the Library of Congress, along with its earlier versions. Here is a video narrated by Lange's granddaughter, also a photographer.

67. Video on Lange's *Migrant Mother*

68. Dorothea Lange: *Migrant Mother, 1937*

So is *Migrant Mother* a portrait? We know her name now—**Florence Owens Thompson**—but only through careful research. Lange herself never published the names of any of her subjects; she may not even have asked. The important thing is that they could be any one of the thousands suffering a similar plight; the purpose of the picture is political comment, not individual portrayal.

- 69. Lauren Greenfield: *Exotic Dancer and Track Athlete* (2007), untitled
- 70. — the same, with title

It may seem obscene to jump from Lange's gritty monochrome to **Lauren Greenfield's** lush use of color, but she is more closely aligned with Lange than any other photographers in this section. I have omitted the title for now: what do you think is the young woman's story? What is the photographer's point? We do not know the sitter's name, but we do know that she is a successful track athlete who pays for her tuition by working as an exotic dancer in a strip club. It is one of a series of works—still photographs, books, and later movies—she has published about the traps that young women fall into, with titles like *Girl Culture* and *Fast Forward: Growing Up in the Shadow of Hollywood*. Here is a shot from the latter:

- 71. Lauren Greenfield: *Showgirl Anne-Margaret, Stardust Hotel, Las Vegas, Nevada, 1995*

This has almost as many props as a Robert Weingarten collage. Yes, the woman has a name, but the subject is not so much her as the accumulation of objects on her dressing-room table, about the various standards of beauty to which a young woman is expected to conform. Here is another that makes a similar point in a less flamboyant way; it is from a 2011 collection called *Beauty CULTure*.

- 72. Lauren Greenfield: *Lili, Nicole, Lauren, Luna, and Sam* from *Beauty CULTure* (2011)
- 73. Lauren Greenfield: *Thin*, 2006

Greenfield, who majored in Film Studies at Harvard, soon realized that the best medium for her work was the documentary film. Here is one she made for HBO in 2006 called *Thin*, about eating disorders. I'd show you a clip, but it is too depressing. So instead let me end with the trailer to her 2012 epic, *The Queen of Versailles*, which is splendidly over-the-top in its reveling in the conspicuous over-consumption of the very, very rich.

- 74. Lauren Greenfield: *The Queen of Versailles* trailer (2011)
- 75. Class title 3 (Sara shopping in Greenwich Village)