

Portraits: More than Paint

10. Candid/Composed



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April 30, 2024

THE CAMERA BRINGS TWO STRENGTHS TO PORTRAITURE: its ability to record accurate detail, and its spontaneity. The first is invaluable in creating an official record, such as those photographs of the current President that grace every government office. The second does the apparent opposite, by catching a candid view of a man who is really little different from other Americans. In practice, however, even such candid shots are carefully composed to *look* candid; a truly casual view of such a subject is hard to come by.

In the second hour, we look at portrait photography more generally: its early (and still dominant) use to create a record of the subject, various attempts to bring it closer to art, portraits that mercilessly record every wrinkle and foible of their famous subjects, and portraitists that choose unknown ones to make social or political points.

Most portraitists are specialists who are unlikely to feature in other courses. For this reason, I have not added them to the database or listed most individual works, though the names of the leading practitioners are given below. *rb.*

A. First Families on Film

Photographs of American Presidents since 1945, with special emphasis on two who came to the White House with families of young children: the Kennedys and the Obamas.

Mark Shaw (1921–69): the Kennedys on Cape Cod

White House and **TIME**: *An Obama Family Album* (*rb.* montage)

Anonymous: Official photographs, Truman to George W. Bush

B. Presidents in Paint

Official painted portraits of Presidents tend to be a pretty stodgy lot, and the First Ladies are little better, though they may have more color. But there are a few who conspicuously buck the trend: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, John and Jackie Kennedy, Ronald and Nancy Reagan, and Barack and Michelle Obama.

Various: Presidential portraits, Harding to Eisenhower

Kehinde Wiley: *Barack Obama* (2018)

Everett Raymond Kinstler: *Ronald Reagan* (1991)

Norman Rockwell: Johnson and Nixon

John Howard Sanden: *Laura and George W. Bush* (2011–12)

Douglas Chandor: *Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt* (1945, 1949)

Elizabeth Shoumatoff: *Lady Bird and Lyndon B. Johnson* (1968)

Elaine de Kooning: various Kennedy portraits, 1962–63

Aaron Shikler: *Jackie and John Kennedy* (1970, 1971)

♪ **Film:** *Thirteen Days* (Roger Donaldson, 2000), ending

C. The Portrait as Record

Early photographers who have served the public desire to make a permanent record of themselves and their families—even though many sitters’ names have been lost to time—and a later one who used his mastery of the *carbrot* process to flood celebrity photos with color.

George Kendall Warren (1832–84), Daguerrotypes and others

David Barr & Charles Wright, Houston walk-in studio, 1870s

Nickolas Muray (1892–1965), celebrity photographs

D. The Portrait as Art

Two pioneering women who used the camera more like a painter with his brush, and a contemporary man whose digital *collages* challenge the traditional understanding of the portrait as literal representation.

♪ **Video:** *Julia Margaret Cameron* (Anne Lyden)

Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–79): *Herschel and Longfellow*

Julia Margaret Cameron: *George Frederic Watts and Ellen Terry*

Gertrude Käsebier (1852–1934): *Virginia Gerson*, 1906

Gertrude Käsebier: *Solon Borglum* (1902), *Auguste Rodin* (1906)

Robert Weingarten (1941–): [subject to be revealed], 2008

E. The Portrait as (e)-Motion

The towering genius of **Richard Avedon** (1923–2004), who started by reinventing fashion photography, then used that experience to take some of the most psychologically searching portraits ever made, and to tackle anonymous subjects of contemporary relevance.

♪ **Video:** *Richard Avedon, Darkness and Light* (1996), opening

Avedon: Fashion photographs, 1955–67

Avedon: *Coco Chanel*, 1958

Avedon: *Ezra Pound* and *William Casby, Born into Slavery* (both 1963)

Avedon: *Nothing Personal* (1964) and *In the American West* (1985)

F. The Portrait as Comment

The Depression-era photo-journalist **Dorothea Lange** (1895–1965), who documented the very poorest in society and, in a different key, the contemporary photographer and film-maker **Lauren Greenfield** (1966–), whose subject is the deadly lure of riches and fashion.

♪ **Video:** Lange’s *Migrant Mother* (1937) at the Library of Congress

Greenfield: stills from *Girl Culture*, *Fast Forward*, and *Thin*

♪ **Greenfield:** *The Queen of Versailles* (2011), trailer

The course website is www.brunyate.com/portraits

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