

**Who are you?**  
Two centuries of  
portraits  
*A compendium*

25.05.2017–25.02.2018

Neue Galerie Graz, Universalmuseum Joanneum

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This text is published on the occasion of the exhibition

**Who are you?**

Two centuries of portraits

**Neue Galerie Graz**

**Universalmuseum Joanneum**

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Nothing demonstrates the interaction between the individual and society more clearly than the portrait. Many different people are shown in this exhibition in very different poses, stances, arrangements and contexts—who are they? What is typical of their pictures and what is important here? Selected terms offer an insight into the theme from very different perspectives on these portraits from 200 years.

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## Portrayal

The history of the portrait is also a pictorial history of the Christian West; the true image of Jesus Christ, the *vera icon*, is considered its first portrait. On the way to Golgotha, Veronica saw Jesus carrying his cross and gave him her veil so that he could wipe the blood and sweat from his face. According to the legend, the image of the divine face was impressed upon the cloth. At the same time, this set a high expectation from the outset: the portrait as a true-to-life, mimetic depiction, as the only real and genuine image (of God). A realistic likeness aimed to represent the essential nature of the person in all their individuality, so that they remained recognisable across time.

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## Biography

A portrait is always also a snapshot of a personal history—a fragment that can be condensed with attributes, symbols, backdrops and clothing. Who is the person in the picture? Why did they have their portrait painted, in which

period, and how much of themselves do they reveal in the image? In the *Who are you?* exhibition, we meet many different characters. Through the way they stage themselves at eye level we can get to know them better. Beyond this, in the catalogue you can read more detailed accounts of the stories of these people.

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## Character

In the usual sense, the term ‘portrait’ describes the depiction of a person, and especially their face. In linguistic terms the word comes from the French *por* (as a reinforcement) and *trait*, meaning trait or characteristic feature, and derives originally from the Latin *protrahere*, *protractum*, which means something like ‘protract’ or ‘pull out’. If one describes external appearance as visual identity, one could define character as social identity—as the essence that we carry within us and which becomes outwardly perceptible in the way we look at things, our facial expressions and gestures. These allow the *true* face to transgress the human anatomical reality.

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## Life image

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, French author Honoré de Balzac believed that each time a portrait photograph was taken, a layer of our skin was stripped off. At that time, in order to ‘have one’s likeness taken’ on the photographic plate, one had to sit motionless for a while. Sitting still and calmly was of course also necessary if you were being painted by a portrait artist. Perhaps this necessary interval of time to allow an image to develop is also a reason why people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century rarely smile, and never laugh in the pictures; rather, their straight faces seem to convey that they are at peace with themselves. The grimace of a laughing face only became a motif with the arrival of the snapshot; at any rate, it was also previously not seen as acceptable, and instead served in the rare existing pictures more as the typification of an emotional state.

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## Memory

Portrait photos are given as presents, with the purpose of remaining present in someone’s

thoughts. The image of a person replaces their physical appearance, it simulates their presence in the moment, for long periods or even forever. One can imagine a feeling of closeness, and yet this remains an illusion. Apart from the private memory, collective memory also plays a role when portraits of, for example, rectors or mayors are hung in public buildings like universities or town halls. Portraits of emperors are reminiscent of the days of the Austrian monarchy: these pictures also served the function of both creating identity and demonstrating power. 20<sup>th</sup>-century pictures also pay homage to other professions: workers become the authentic motif of an industrialised society whose power structures have been completely transformed.

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## Fiction

Legends, stories and myths give rise to the fictionalisation of portraits. Selected poses, together with the right kind of staging, allow one to transform rapidly into someone else in front of the camera. In masks and costumes

you can at last distance yourself completely from your own self and become a plural personality. Shots of actors, artists who stage themselves by choosing other roles, but also the many people who currently photograph themselves for social media, point to the wide range of fictional human representation. Fact and fiction, reality and appearance are often close.

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## Society

Between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, autonomous portraits of individual people were rare. Afterwards, as had been the case in antiquity, portraiture remained the privilege of a small, privileged class in society. From 1750 onwards, miniature painting allowed the rising bourgeoisie to present themselves as the nobility did for the first time. Miniaturists were esteemed craftsmen and were skilful at satisfying the demands of an emerging cult around the self-portrayal of the individual personality. It was only with the invention of photography in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that the genre gradually experienced a wider democratisation.

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## Rulers

The portrait of a ruler portrays, evokes and even exercises his or her power. It serves as the regent's proxy and combines meaningful emblems of power such as the crown, sceptre, orb, a ceremonial sword, regalia, throne, the baldachin of honour or a red canopy of honour, in front of which the kings and rulers pose. Columns can be symbols of strength, fragments of temple are references to ancient Rome and idyllic landscapes relate to the flourishing and prospering state of the ruler's land. When the emperor appears in uniform, it is to emphasise his role as military commander, of particular significance during times of war.

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## Introspection

An essential aspect of the portrait is the depiction of the face—during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the trend towards abstraction also spread into this genre. Introspection, the representation of feelings and bodily states became a pictorial theme and increasingly layered mimetic forms of present-

ation. At the same time, we can also observe a dissolving of the human figure in sculpture during the post-War period. Outwardly apparent individuality recedes behind the bodily. Faceless portraits could be described as anti-portraits. And yet, at the same time, they remind us that characters can be recognised simply from clothing and accessories. What uniformity do beauty ideals give to faces?

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## Johann

Archduke Johann was a popular member of the Habsburg-Lothringen family, also known as the *green rebel*. After he had played an important role in the Tyrolean struggle for freedom of 1810 he turned his attentions to Styria, where he soon gained great popularity amongst the general public, especially because of his marriage to Anna Plochl, the daughter of a postmaster. His proximity to the people and great commitment to the province, which he showed in founding numerous still important institutions (including the Joanneum in 1811), remain of great significance to the history

of Styria today. The younger brother of Emperor Franz I intentionally chose simple clothing. Traditional Styrian costume was for him the plain grey coat with green lapels, which he is nearly always to be seen wearing in portraits. Because of political conflicts, the 'Steirer'-style suit that he had initiated was seen as a provocation in Vienna at the time, and therefore forbidden.

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## Concept

From the 1960s on, conceptual art identified the idea of an artwork as the focus of representation, which could use every imaginable material to express a concept. When this approach is transferred to the genre of portrait, interest in the external appearance of a person shifts instead onto scientific findings from the field of medicine, and their visualisations. What genetic codes do we carry? How can one measure one's own self in numbers, tables and diagrams? Concepts such as theses reflect a being as part of a scientific and technological civilisation. And yet the translation of bodily individu-

ality into numbers and letters also opens up a poetic space—who is I?

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## Lithography

Like copperplate engraving, lithography also starts with a drawing made by hand. Both were replaced as images by photography in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the portrait genre. More and more photographic studios opened up, the technology behind photography became increasingly refined and the demand for pictures of celebrities from politics, literature and art grew (due to the enthusiasm for collecting) to such an extent that most of the work performed by the emerging studios was the human image. Further to this, from 1860 onwards, the photograph as a *carte de visite* in small format also became more affordable, meaning that these pictures were soon produced in large numbers so that they could be distributed to friends and relatives—just as they are today.

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## Media image

Photography and video ensure the omnipresence of the face in the media, both in analogue and virtual space. Generally, people stage themselves differently in front of the camera than in their everyday lives, they assume a pose, and want to remain young and beautiful according to the current beauty ideal exemplified by superstars. In Pop Art—such as in Andy Warhol's work—these media images are condensed. Selected segments focus on the face, so that all distance from the subject seems to have been removed. Newspaper photos are taken from the midst of real life, celebrities and VIPs are printed like people we know well and become something close to public property. Pictures like these also become a resource for artists.

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## Narcissus

In Greek mythology, Narcissus rejected the love of another and instead fell in love with his own reflection in a pool of water. Today we would say that people who frequently post pictures of

themselves on social networks are narcissistic. Research has shown this, together with supposedly associated antisocial characteristics. At any rate, key features in depiction are self-optimisation, the editing of images and finding one's own appearance successful. Artistic self-staging allows the artist to assume different roles, to expose stereotypes and also to question human images.

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## Public sphere

Memorials have always been erected in Europe in memory of figures considered important for a community. Portraits of emperors or generals, equestrian statues or busts of artists considered geniuses were installed in public space in order to honour their service forever. It was important to make rank, power and status publically visible. Profile views on coins also fulfilled this purpose. They passed through many hands and so made the ruler's image ever-present. Today, other methods are adopted. Self-staged images in tweets and posts, with photo service providers such as

Instagram or one's own video blogs, are creating completely new sites in public space that follow their own rules. The portraits of these public figures are no longer cast in bronze, but instead regenerated every day. The ego has become multiple and has many facets, although not all of these are of public interest.

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## Pendant

During the Biedermeier period portraits became smaller, so that they were not too large for the drawing-rooms of the rising middle classes. At this time, pendant pictures were highly popular, showing husband and wife as matching counterparts. Couples are depicted according to their roles but in a similar style, captured in fashionable clothes and postures and in an impressive frame. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, portraits of men also tend to refer to their professional success and the accompanying gain in status, expressed with symbols of their profession or valuable attributes. Society ladies are shown to be solidly fashionable and politely reserved.

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## Ordeal

When you have your portrait drawn or painted, the long periods of sitting still can be an ordeal. Cartoons from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century made fun of the fact that people had to remain frozen for a while in order to be in focus in the picture. Head supports and other elements were supposed to make this easier: devices that are in fact reminiscent of torture machines. It is somehow not surprising, then, that, at the very same time, photographing the dead as a *last portrait* mutated into a special line of business.

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## Props

Ever since its emergence, portrait photography has made use of props as the ideal opportunity for staging a picture. Entire backdrops were erected, sometimes in order to create quite bizarre scenery for the shots. Today backgrounds are still used very deliberately in order to create an atmosphere. Thanks to increasingly improved technical quality, the use of light and shadow and the quality of light itself, together

with the use of proximity and distance, became important. Whereas early on, we usually see subjects posed with shoulders and hands simply hanging, later the choice of position was about finding the *correct* pose. The positioning of the body, particularly the head and hands, is also a key aspect of painted portraits.

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## Self-portrait

For a long time, mirrors served as the main tool used by artists when they wanted to portray themselves. While they were painting, their gaze shifted back and forth between the mirror and the canvas. Perception of the self then became self-reflection, allowing a self-perception that did not have to correspond to the reflection in the mirror. How do artists portray themselves? Do they stage themselves in work clothing, with a brush and palette in the midst of their studio, or as an elegant society figure, as a suffering existentialist, even as Christ? What is typical of the image of the artist, and do female artists portray themselves differently than their male colleagues?

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## Traditional costumes

Traditional costumes, or the traditional clothing of a particular region or people—or even profession—have suffered a decline, due to the globalisation of fashion, so that local clothing traditions have receded and are now usually only to be seen on special occasions. Some people wear traditional costume deliberately in order to signal their identity and their love for their home country or region. Archduke Johann made it his mission to record all of the different traditional costumes found in Styria, a task continued meticulously by Viktor Geramb as the first exponent of ethnology in Styria.

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## Unrecognisability

After 1945, Informal Gesture painting also led to the dissolving of the human image. During the period following the World Wars and their devastating consequences, this development seems a logical step. The National Socialist regime had distributed propaganda showing the strength of healthy, trained, 'German' bod-

ies; afterwards, there was a return to the fragmented, dissolving body of the advent of Modernism. Introspection once again became more important, expressiveness offered potential. Further to this, the fragmentation of the individual continued into collages, montages, overpainting or as a painterly gesture into unrecognisability.

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## Visualisation

Visualisation assumes the necessity of making what is absent present in order to activate memories. One views the picture of a loved person, and in it sees what we perceived them to be at that moment. It is not always possible to show the true face. Masks, make-up and veils allow one to conceal authentic appearance. The motivation for this is probably as diverse as humankind itself. Image conflicts and image taboos bear testament to efforts to prevent images of the divine or even of the human figure from being made. So the face is deprived of visualisation while (spiritual) power of imagination is called for.

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## Wax

The wax pictures produced around 1800 show images of people modelled as three-dimensional reliefs, sometimes embedded in their everyday environment. They were relatively affordable and hence were a forerunner of photography for private use. At the same time, silhouettes were also very popular, since they were quick and easy to produce and satisfied the growing interest in human physiognomy in that they could simply be traced from the shadow image of the subject. Up until the discovery of photography, it was the cheap and fast alternative to the more elaborate miniature portrait.

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## X hundred times

Self-portraits in the form of 'selfies' have become so common that it would be impossible to count them all. Thanks to digital media and the shrinking size of cameras in a vast range of technical devices, self-depiction is experiencing an unprecedented boom. Separate props serve as tools for achieving better per-

spective and spectacular angles. Self-staging at holiday resorts, in significant social situations or at events, as well as spectacular locations, now knows no bounds.

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## You

When you are producing someone's portrait, you get to know them on a level that remains hidden for most others. You take your time and familiarise yourselves with one another. A good, realistic portrait manages to capture the outer likeness in a powerful moment of inner charisma that is largely authentic. At such moments you are at one with yourself, and yet also completely open, and hence also vulnerable. In what kind of situation can you reveal your essential nature in front of the lens, and not slip inevitably into a role? How much posing, how much smiling, what hand positions are expected? Each portrait creates a relationship with a you—whether that you is the photographer or the viewer.

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## Time

In Oscar Wilde's famous tale of Dorian Gray, the man's portrait alters while he himself preserves his eternal, youthful charisma. The desire to evade transience is apparently timeless, while aging in itself is not considered a desirable state. And yet at what speed and in what form does one's external appearance transform over the course of time? Change only becomes visible in a series of shots of the subject. The time intervals and chosen regularity are an important element here. A snapshot may capture a moment for eternity; ultimately, with the distance of time, one can remember through the photo, which in turn can also shape one's own memories.

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An illustrated exhibition guide in German language is available at the museum shop or online.

The QR codes in the exhibition lead directly to the biographies (in German language) of the depicted persons. Log in to our WLAN 'Cityaccess' for free.

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**Accompanying programme**  
(in German language)

**Saturday, 16.09.2017, 3 pm**  
'The hidden Benesch portrait in Egon Schiele's painting "Stadtende"—discovery and restoration', presentation by Paul-Bernhard Eipper, Audi3

**Sunday, 17.09.2017, 11 am**  
'I am ... Marilyn', short tour with Verena Borecky

**Tuesday, 19.09.2017, 3.30 pm**  
Guided tour for teachers with Monika Holzer-Kernbichler

**Saturday, 21.10.2017, 3 pm**  
'The photographic gaze', short presentation and exhibition talk with Karin Lernbeiß (photo collective LUPI SPUMA) and Monika Holzer-Kernbichler

**Sunday, 22.10.2017, 11 am**  
Curator's tour with Günther Holler-Schuster

**Thursday, 26.10.2017 (national holiday), 11 am**  
Exhibition tour with explanations of the restoration work on the paintings, sculptures and frames with Paul-Bernhard Eipper

**Saturday, 04.11.2017, 3 pm**  
'Portraits of the rectors of Graz University', short presentation and exhibition talk with Barbara Aulinger and Gudrun Danzer

**Sunday, 05.11.2017, 11 am**  
'I am ... measureable', short tour with Romana Schwarzenberger

**Saturday, 11.11.2017, 3 pm**  
'Portraits in wax', short presentation and exhibition talk with Susanne König-Lein and Gudrun Danzer

**Sunday, 12.11.2017, 11 am**  
'I am ... Archduke', exhibition talk with Verena Borecky and Claudia Ertl

**Saturday, 18.11.2017, 3 pm**  
'Graz figures in portrait', with Jasmin Edegger

**Sunday, 19.11.2017, 11 am**  
Curator's tour with Gudrun Danzer

**Saturday, 25.11.2017, 3 pm**  
'Photographing artists', artist's talk with Rudi Molacek and Günther Holler-Schuster



**Saturday, 02.12.2017, 3 pm**  
'Portraits—staging by clothing',  
short presentation and exhibition  
talk with Sabine Hirzer and  
Monika Holzer-Kernbichler

**Sunday, 03.12.2017, 11 am**  
'I am ... red', short tour with  
Romana Schwarzenberger

**Friday, 08.12.2017 (holiday),  
11 am**  
'I am ... a female worker', short  
tour with Barbara Thaler  
**10 am until 5 pm**  
Matter of view: drawing portraits  
with illustrator Lukas Pürmayr in  
the 'Atelier' of Neue Galerie Graz

**Saturday, 09.12.2017, 3 pm**  
'I am ... many', short tour with  
Antonia Veitschegger

**Sunday, 10.12.2017, 11 am**  
'I am ... a star', short tour with  
Gabi Gmeiner

**Saturday, 16.12.2017, 3 pm**  
'Traditional costume as  
ideological clothing', short  
presentation and exhibition talk  
with Helmut Eberhart and  
Günther Holler-Schuster

**Sunday, 17.12.2017, 11 am**  
Curator's tour with  
Günther Holler-Schuster

**Saturday, 20.01.2018, 3 pm**  
Exhibition tour with explanations  
of the restoration work on the  
paintings, sculptures and frames  
with Paul-Bernhard Eipper

**Sunday, 21.01.2018, 11 am**  
Curator's tour with Gudrun Danzer

**Sunday, 28.01.2018, 11 am**  
'I am ... Milica Tomić', short tour  
with Markus Waitschacher

**Saturday, 03.02.2018, 3 pm**  
'Graz figures in portrait', with  
Jasmin Edegger

**Sunday, 11.02.2018, 11 am**  
'I am ... Peter Rosegger',  
short tour with Romana  
Schwarzenberger