

# Looking at Each Other: American Portraiture

Aleesa Pitchamarn Alexander, PhD  
Assistant Curator of American Art

## Introduction

Portraiture is an artistic genre that has been part of American culture for centuries. Narrowly defined, a portrait is a painting, sculpture, or work on paper that captures both the physical characteristics and personality of the sitter. As viewers, we are often tempted to fixate on the notion of “likeness,” or how well the artist has managed to apprehend the sitter’s aforementioned qualities. A fixation on how well a portrait captures likeness, however, can blind us to the historically exclusionary character of portraiture, as the genre was once reserved only for the very elite. In the colonial period, to have one’s portrait painted was often directly tied to the one’s power, wealth, and social capital. Later, in the nineteenth century, new technologies like photography and the rise of the itinerant painter allowed greater access to the art form. Moving into the twentieth century, artists begin to challenge the conventions of portraiture to allow for greater artistic expression and more diverse representation.

Here, a selection of American portrait paintings from the Cantor’s collection demonstrate how American artists have worked within the genre, and how the genre itself has changed over time. These paintings allow us to ask questions like: what types of faces do we typically expect to see in a painted portrait, and what faces are rarely, if ever, represented? What can portraits tell us about social histories in the United States? How have contemporary artists expanded the possibilities of portraiture?

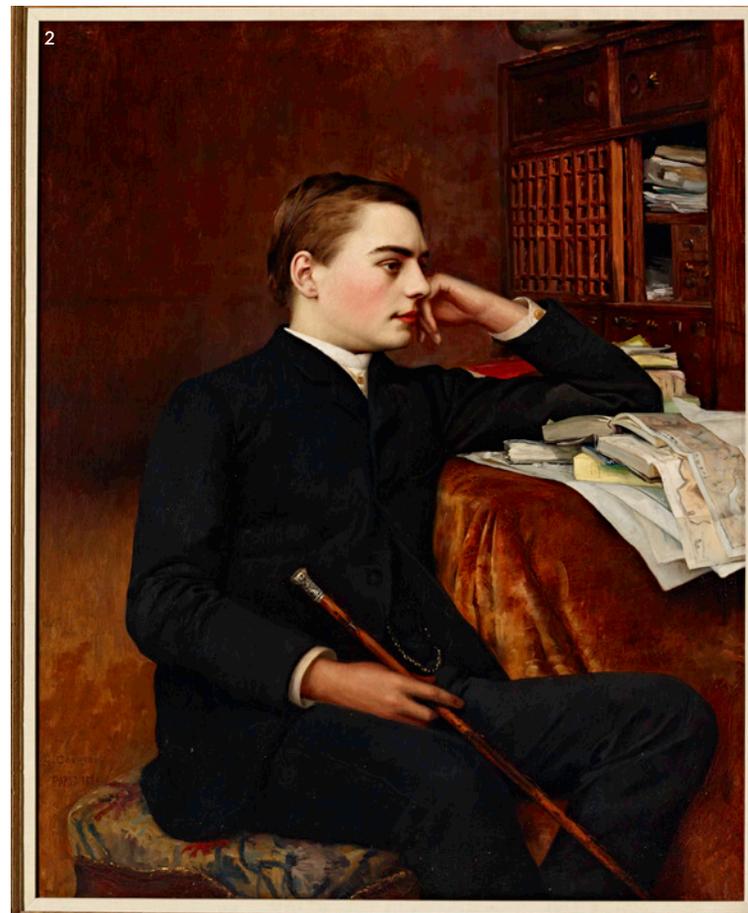


## How can portraits help manage grief?

1. C.R. Parker was an itinerant portrait painter who traveled throughout the South in the early nineteenth century. Itinerant painters were artists who, in lieu of working solely from one studio, chose instead to travel and set up shop in various locations. They would generally stay in an area until all interested clients were satisfied, and then move on to the next location. Many itinerant painters were in the business of creating mourning, or posthumous portraits, an art form that honored and preserved the memory of deceased family members. Given conventions of the time, in this portrait the child is likely deceased. Though contemporary viewers might find such a practice macabre, it is important to remember these types of paintings may represent the only images certain families had of children whose lives ended prematurely.

## What is the value of an unfinished painting?

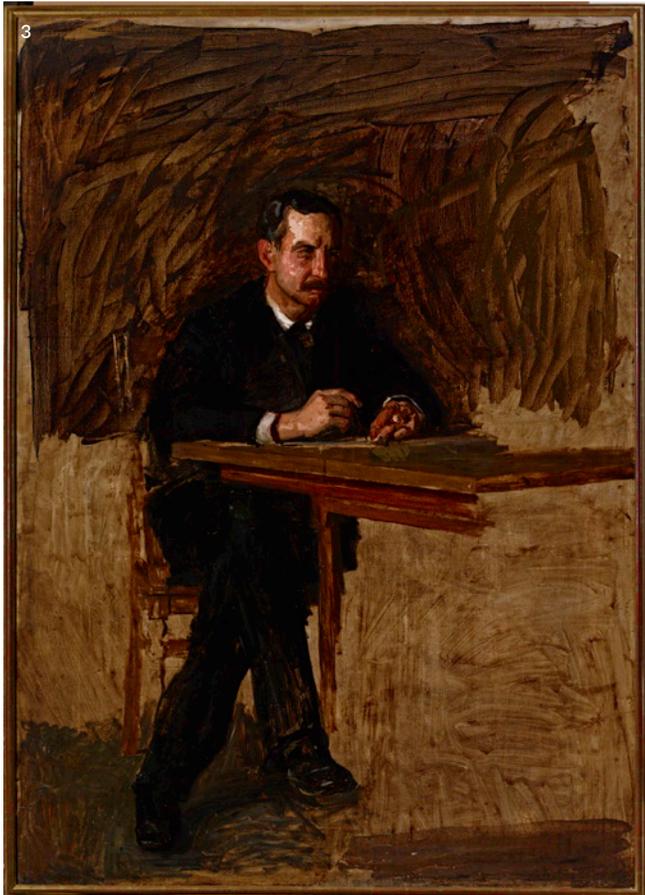
2. This portrait-in-progress is an unfinished study by Thomas Eakins, one of the most sought-after painters of his time, whose painterly, realist style became his trademark. In this work, Prof. Marks form is mostly realized, while the background remains assertively loose, with the artist's brushstrokes readily visible. The painting represents a rare opportunity to observe Eakins' process; a behind-the-scenes look. The finished version of this painting, which depicts the prominent University of Pennsylvania engineering professor William Dennis Marks, is in the collection of the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum at Washington University in St. Louis.



1. C.R. Parker, active 1826–1846. *Mourning portrait of a mother and daughter*, 19th century. Oil on canvas. 29-1/4 x 24-1/4 in. (sight); 39 x 34-1/8 in. (frame). 74.3 x 61.6 cm (sight); 99.1 x 86.7 cm (frame). Gift of Christine Guth, in memory of Jay Fliegelman, 2017.23  
 2. Gustave-Claude-Etienne Courtois, France, 1852–1923. *Portrait of Leland Stanford Jr.*, 1884. Oil on canvas. 46-7/8 x 37-15/16 x 7/8 in.; 55 x 46-1/8 x 2-1/2 in. (frame) 119 x 96.3 x 2.3 cm.; 140 x 117.5 x 2.3 cm. (frame). Stanford Family Collections, JLS.12065

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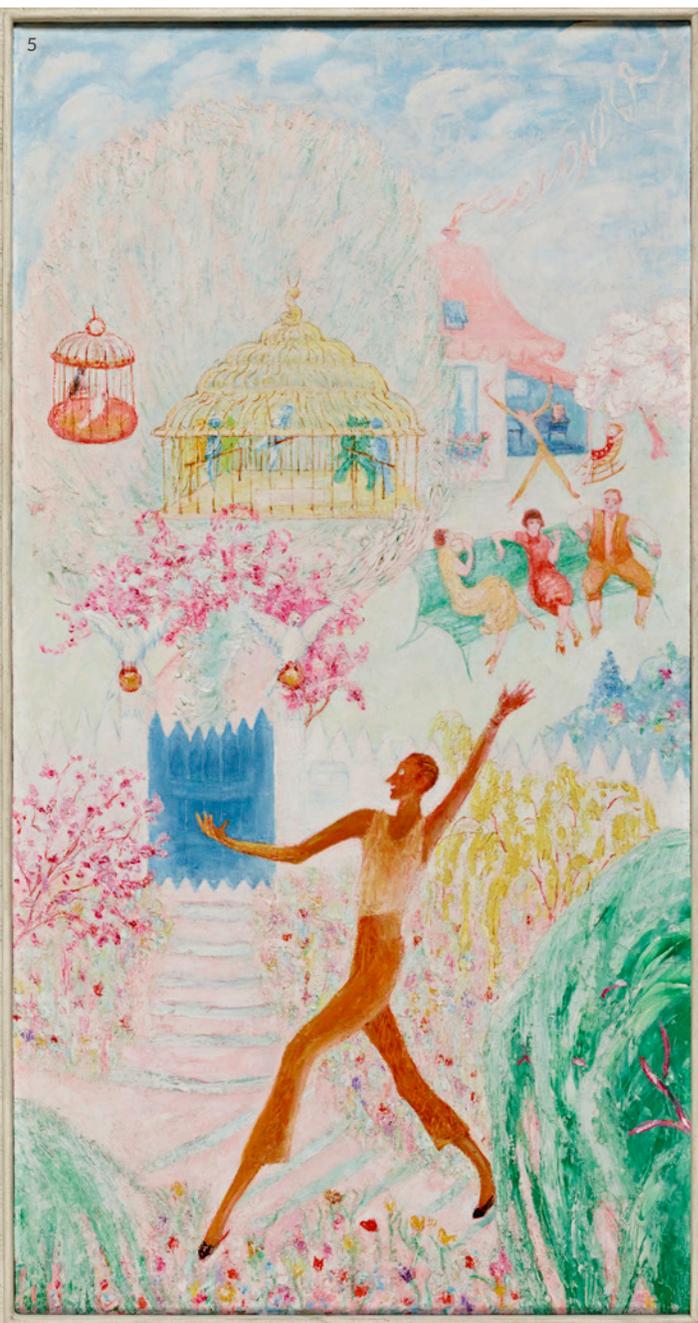


❑ What is the purpose of creating multiple paintings of one person?

4. During the course of his long career, John Singer Sargent painted many members of international high society, including President Theodore Roosevelt, arts patron Isabella Stewart Gardner, and English author Henry James. In this painting, Sargent captures the likeness of a young Sally Fairchild, from the prominent New England Fairchild family, who would also be among the first women allowed to attend lectures at Harvard. Sargent, who was a friend of the family, painted many portraits of Sally Fairchild, implying a sustained interest and fascination between artist and subject. Captured in this particular work is Sargent's skillful handling of white clothing, for which he was known. Fairchild's blouse, upon close inspection, is comprised of a shimmering array light blues, browns, and yellows, adding visual interest and nuance to an otherwise plain garment.

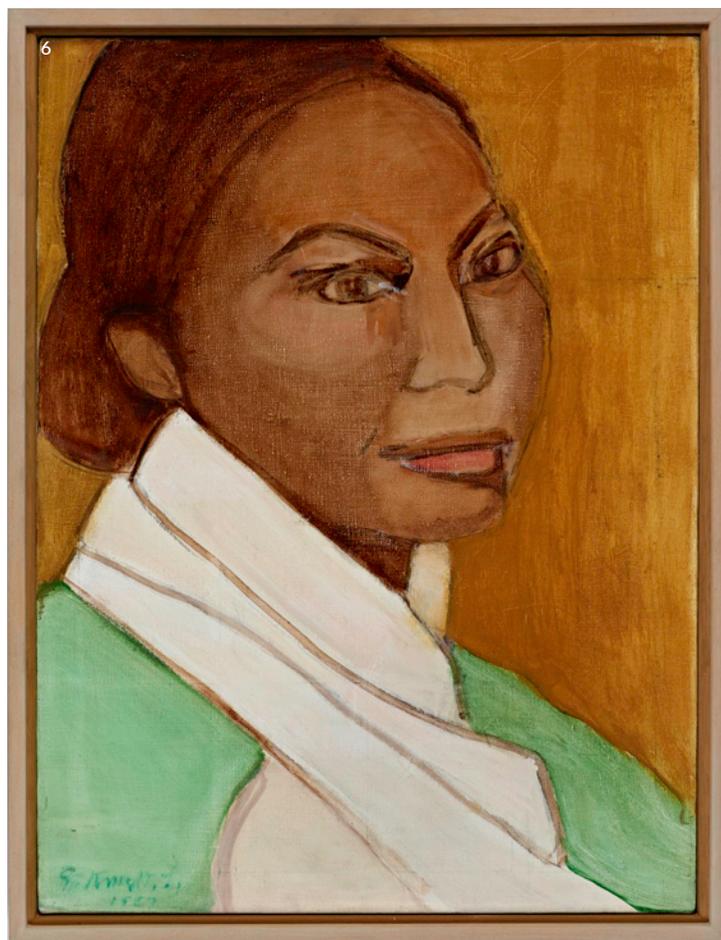
3. Thomas Eakins, U.S.A., 1844–1916. *Portrait of Professor William D. Marks*, c. 1886. Oil on canvas. 76 x 54 in. (painting); 86 1/2 x 64 1/2 in. (frame) 193 x 137.2 cm (painting); 219.7 x 163.8 cm (frame). Gift of David and Valerie Rucker, Dean and Chiara Sussman, Eric and Nancy Sussman, and Stephen Sussman, M.D. and Kelly E. Watson, 2010.31

4. John Singer Sargent, U.S.A., 1856–1925. *Portrait of Sally Fairchild*, 1884–1887. Oil on canvas. 37-1/4 x 31-1/4 x 3-1/8 in. (framed) 94.62 x 79.38 x 7.94 cm (framed). Gift of Dr. Herbert and Elizabeth Sussman, David and Valerie Rucker, Dr. Stephen Sussman and Kelly Watson, Eric and Nancy Sussman, and Dean and Chiara Sussman, 2012.1



■ ■ How can a portrait represent a community?

5. Florine Stettheimer was a diversely talented figure in the early twentieth century—painter, theatrical designer, poet, and arts advocate. Living most of her life in New York City, Stettheimer was part of an exciting group of fellow artists and arts professionals, including Marcel Duchamp, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Marsden Hartley. Stettheimer often painted portraits of her friends and colleagues, like Olin Howland, American film and theater actor, who is represented here. Howland starred in more than two hundred films over the course of his life.



■ ■ How can a portrait honor a relationship?

6. This moving tribute to Gwendolyn Knight’s teacher, friend, and fellow artist, Augusta Savage (1892-1962), was completed five years after Savage’s death. In the 1930s, Savage directed the Harlem Art Workshop, one of the largest free art education programs in New York City. There, Savage taught and mentored Gwendolyn Knight and her future husband, the artist Jacob Lawrence. In addition to the work’s aesthetic import, it is also a rare portrait of a black woman artist by one of her peers. Both women were major figures in the Harlem Renaissance, yet their contributions have historically been overshadowed by the careers of their male counterparts.

5. Florine Stettheimer, U.S.A., 1871–1944. *Spring 1932 (Portrait of the Dancer, Olin Howland)*, 1932. Oil on canvas. 38 x 20 in. 96.5 x 50.8 cm. Bequest of Ettie Stettheimer, 1958.46

6. Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence, U.S.A., b. Barbados, 1913–2005. *Augusta Savage*, 1967. Oil on canvas. 24 x 18 in.; 25-1/2 x 19-1/2 in. (frame) 61 x 45.7 cm. Gift of Dr. Herbert J. Kayden and Family in memory of Dr. Gabrielle H. Reem, 2013.91



■ Is it still a portrait if the sitter's name is undisclosed?

7. This painting depicts a figure only identified by his ethnicity. While this nomenclature strikes us as reductive today, Alice Neel was unique during her time for her representation of previously underrepresented subjects in art. Women, people of color, and children were her main subjects. Neel made images of Communist party members, her pregnant friends, black activists—figures rarely represented in formal painted portraits at the time. Though the name of portrait's subject remains unknown, Neel's painting suffuses a rare and unparalleled sense of life and vibrancy to this representation. His posture, clothing, and hairstyle help offer a sense of the moment and personality of the sitter.

■ How can we grapple with history in the present day?

8. This painting belongs to a series of tar portraits in which Titus Kaphar imagines enslaved sitters as freed men and women, a conceptual tactic he calls "visual reparation." Created with specific reference to Thomas Jefferson's "Farm Book," which contains lists of Jefferson's slaves, Kaphar employs the style of Old Master paintings to address representational absence and erasure in the history of art. By representing this sitter in historical dress above her lived status, Kaphar offers the possibility of posthumously freeing her from forever being represented as a slave.



7. Alice Neel, U.S.A., 1900–1984. *The Arab*, 1976. Oil on canvas. 43-7/8 x 32-1/2 in. 111.4 x 82.6 cm. Museum purchase made possible by the Robert and Ruth Halperin Foundation, 2010.25

8. Titus Kaphar, U.S.A., b. 1976. *Page 4 of Jefferson's "Farm Book,"* 2018. Oil on canvas on support panel. 60 x 60 x 1 1/2 in. 152.4 x 152.4 x 3.8 cm. Palmer Gross Ducommun Fund, 2018.102

## Selected Resources

Hollander, Stacy C. *Securing the Shadow: Posthumous Portraiture in America*. New York: American Folk Art Museum, 2016. Exhibition catalogue.

Kaphar, Titus. "Can art amend history?" filmed in April 2017 in Vancouver, British Columbia, TED video, 12:52, [https://www.ted.com/talks/titus\\_kaphar\\_can\\_art\\_amend\\_history?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/titus_kaphar_can_art_amend_history?language=en) (accessed May 24, 2020).

Mitchell, Elizabeth. *Promised Land: The Art of Jacob Lawrence*. Stanford: Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, 2015. Exhibition catalogue.

Petrovich, Duskho. "The New Face of Portrait Painting." *The New York Times Style Magazine*. February 12, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/12/t-magazine/portrait-art-painting.html> (accessed May 23, 2020).