

IN SILENT CONVERSATION

Portraits from the 16th to the 20th centuries

While our bodies are confined to a difficult and surreal present, physical distancing and, in many cases, solitude, looking out allows our minds and souls to be transported somewhere completely different. Our ability to see allows us to read words in a book and be shifted to distant worlds, but it also allows us to travel across the empty street, and to meet the eyes of the person who lives in the building opposite us, perhaps noticing them for the very first time. It also allows us to look at the screens of our phones and computers, to keep ourselves better informed and entertained, but also to look into the eyes of our families and distant friends.

For us art lovers, who have, as we explored in a previous publication “the insatiable desire,” our eyes are the medium through which we can also admire the art we live with in our homes and in our fantasies; the companions we have chosen - and keep choosing - out of curiosity, instinct, academic interest or for pure and simple pleasure.

Every object we covet, love and collect; every artefact we decide to own that transmits an emotion or a narrative, is a friend with whom we can have a silent, but meaningful conversation. The art we ‘own’ therefore accompanies us in our daily lives, and now that museums are closed and our homes have become our universes, these conversations and introspections are the feasts with which we can feed our souls.

In this sense, therefore, ‘portraits’ represent a significant category within artists’ production and a particularly poignant subject to collect and live with.

Portraits, in particular personal, intimate and familiar ones, which are very different from state and official portraits that convey the status of the sitter more than his or her true self, are multi-layered conversations, that is, they allow us to establish an eternal dialogue that is constantly renewed between the artist and the sitter; but also between ourselves and the sitter, and even between the different portraits possibly hanging on our walls. Meeting the gaze of these characters from the past, each with their own story and looking into their eyes through the filter of the artist’s style and virtuosity offers, in times like these, a new, meaningful interpretation.

One is never alone when living with portraits, for in a painted or sculpted face we can find a comrade, a partner or a kindred spirit. There are stories to discover, moods to interpret and emotions to share. Looking into the eyes of a character in a portrait transports us to the moment of its conception in a complexity of meanings that has no equal in other genres and subjects.

In one of the most famous passages from Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Basil Hallward states: “every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter.” In this vein, we would go as far as to say that when a collector chooses to live with a particular portrait, it becomes a part of the collector’s own image.

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But we can also find portraits in less obvious places: idealised heads, saints, historical or mythological characters in larger, multi-figure compositions. They can all become an opportunity for the artist to present a real - or imagined - person with whom any onlooker can strive to have a connection. Thus their existence as fictitious or real people from the past doesn't really matter if the characters can talk to us, if their glance tells us about theirs - or their creator's - personality.

To love a portrait means having a silent conversation with a person we do not know but with whom we might have much more in common than we might imagine, and through whom we may possibly even get to know ourselves better.

Therefore, now, at a time when circumstance has presented us with an exceptionally rare and tragic moment (since, for the first time in 100 years, we are ALL equally vulnerable) silent conversations with people who lived before us – who perhaps experienced wars and pestilence, overcoming them or possibly even succumbing to them – have the ability to take on a new and soul-nurturing meaning. *Talking* to a person from the past can help us escape from the now, but it can also put our present state into perspective and maybe even help us aim for a better future.