Intimate Portrait Drawings after 1800
From Physiognomy to a New Sensibility

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Portraiture at the turn of the 19th century saw the convergence of a number of different tendencies. This is especially clear from a study of intimate drawn portraits, a field in which French artists in particular distinguished themselves. Ever since the 17th century, a genre known as expressive heads, or *têtes d'expression*, had been cultivated in academic teaching in France. The aim was to chart human nature by means of a systematic study of physiognomy. A driving force in this context was Charles Lebrun (1619–1690), who took the view that it should be possible to standardise the representation of human emotions in an objective, matter-of-fact manner. He gathered his findings in a series of academy lectures, later published under the title *Méthode pour apprendre à dessiner les passions* (1698). The tradition which Lebrun established lived on undiminished in the 18th century, finding one of its finest expressions in the smiling subjects of Maurice Quentin de La Tour (1704–1788). It was a tradition that also influenced followers of that artist such as Joseph Ducreux (1735–1802), with his strangely affected and dramatised self-portraits, and Claude Hoin (1750–1817), with his more
sensitive model studies in black chalk. Works by these artists, with a clear focus on human nature, have recently been acquired by the Nationalmuseum.¹

The same physiognomic interest found perhaps its most famous expression in Johann Caspar Lavater’s (1741–1801) Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe (1775–78). This work made particularly frequent use of examples from art for the purposes of physiognomy, i.e. “reading” facial features and body types in order to determine character. Lavater, who was himself a Freemason, influenced a number of esoteric movements, including the Illuminati, that attempted to read the human soul based on a study of physiognomy. One of many who took an interest in his theories was the Swedish mystic and Freemason Gustaf Adolf Reuterholm (1756–1813). The two corresponded on the subject, and Reuterholm sent Lavater several engraved portraits with a view to the latter making pronouncements on the characters of the sitters.² Several examples with inscriptions in Lavater’s hand are to be found in the Nationalmuseum’s collection (Fig. 1).³

Various manifestations of physiognomy also left clear traces in portraiture after 1800. One of the most striking examples is a series of portrait drawings by the Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Wicar (1762–1834). He was a pupil of Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825) and at least as revolutionary in inclination as his teacher. As a result, Wicar was in fact imprisoned for a short time with David. Following his release, he immediately left for Italy in the autumn of 1795.⁴ It was here that he was to develop his remarkable art of portrait drawing. The majority of these portraits have been preserved in either the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille, or the Museo Napoleonico in Rome.⁵

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Fig. 3 Jean-Baptiste Wicar (1762–1834), Portrait of Luigi Fantuzzi. Pencil, 23.2 x 17.2 cm. Musée Magnin, Dijon, 1938DE338.

Fig. 2 Jean-Baptiste Wicar (1762–1834), Portrait of Filippo Benucci. Black chalk on paper, 22 x 13 cm. Nationalmuseum, NMH 362/1969.

Fig. 1 Jean-Baptiste Wicar (1762–1834), Portrait of Filippo Remondini, Black chalk on paper, 18.4 x 21.5 cm. Nationalmuseum, NMH 363/1969.
Scattered examples are also found in most major museums around the world, including the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm. Many of Wicar’s sitters were fellow artists and friends. The two drawings in Stockholm portray artists from Genoa and were probably made during Wicar’s stay there in 1800. One is of the miniaturist Filippo Giacomo Remondini (Fig. 4), the other of the printmaker Filippo Benucci (Fig. 2). Both are executed in a graphic, linear manner, with cross-hatching building up the relief. With a great sense of presence, the artist has succeeded in capturing much of the sitters’ personality. The same feeling informs his portrait of Luigi Fantuzzi, a young intellectual from Belluno in Venetia, in the collection of the Musée Magnin in Dijon (Fig. 3).

Wicar’s compatriot and fellow student François Gérard (1770–1837) was not quite as ardent a revolutionary. He became court painter both to the Emperor Napoleon and to the Bourbon kings following the Restoration. Not unexpectedly, he was criticised both for being too compliant with his patrons’ wishes and for devoting too much attention to detail, compared with the composition as a whole. Given that he virtually set up a factory for official portraits, it may seem surprising to find, in the midst of his extensive output, penetrating and informal renderings that cannot be directly linked to finished paintings. Several of these chalk drawings may possibly have been part of the portrait-making process, allowing the artist to try out an attitude or pose. Two newly acquired studies by Gérard of unknown women belong to this group and were probably drawn around 1815–20. One shows a woman in profile, wearing a turban and a dress with a high lace collar (Fig. 5). The former was a popular accessory and often appears in the artist’s portraits, generally consisting of a fashionable draped Indian scarf. The other sketch depicts a woman wearing the same type of dress, but with nothing on her head (Fig. 6). A distinguishing feature of both of these rapidly but confidently drawn studies in chalk on blue paper is their private character.

Neither of the anonymous female sitters seems to have been aware that she was being observed. The artist has also shown a particular interest in the contrast between light and shade, as they were evidently drawn by lamplight. This fascination with the way faces are sculpted by light was something Gérard seems to have come back to on several occasions. He painted a group portrait in oil of the silversmith Henri Auguste (1759–1816) and his family, for instance, gathered round a table in the evening light of a lamp. Another example is a drawn interior showing the family of
Christen Købke (1810–1848) attempted to establish himself as a portrait painter, presumably to secure a dependable income. Despite his hope of obtaining numerous commissions, however, he initially had to be content to paint relatives and family members. There were plenty of them, but the work did not make him a wealthy man, as they were not in the habit of paying. Like the French artist Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780–1867), though, he had realised that there was also money to be made from portraits done in pencil, which were less time-consuming than oils. And just like Ingres, he was to develop considerable virtuosity in this field.

One of the people who, early on, helped to introduce Købke to potential clients was the clergyman Nicolai Laurentius Feilberg (1806–1899), his future brother-in-law. In early September 1830, Feilberg’s sister Charlotte Catherine (1802–1879) had married the doctor Ditlev Andersen von Nutzhorn (1800–1865). It must have been in connection with this that Købke drew Nutzhorn’s half-brother Carl, just two years old at the time. At the end of July, the artist had travelled to Aarhus to meet his own brother, Valdemar. Perhaps this coincided with the commission for the von Nutzhorn family, who lived in nearby Fredericia. The result was a detailed and penetrating portrait. In it, the artist has drawn the face with a fine gradation of short cross-hatched strokes and sculpted the curly hair with wavy lines, while the costume is merely suggested by a few schematic outlines (Fig. 9).

The exceptionally balanced precision of this portrait of a pensive but no doubt lively two-year-old naturally raises the question whether the artist made the entire drawing from life or worked from preliminary studies. In this regard, we can rely on the evidence of another known drawing, Købke’s image of the four-year-old Sophie Clausen, made six years later. In that instance, the artist worked from preparatory sketches, and this was no doubt his approach when he drew the young Carl von Nutzhorn. Consequently, when the

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Fig. 6  François Gérard (1770–1837), Portrait of a Woman, c. 1800. Black chalk, white heightening on blue paper, 24.5 x 17.5 cm. Purchase: Wiros Fund 2020. Nationalmuseum, NMH 85/2020.

the miniaturist Peter Adolf Hall (1739–1793) in Paris – his widow Marie-Adélaïde Gobin-Hall (1752–1832) surrounded by her children – which is in the Nationalmuseum’s collection (Fig. 7). Whether the artist intended to make use of these studies at a later date or regarded them as independent works, we can note that they are marked by a new sensibility and a desire to capture the human psyche that goes beyond physiognomic observations (Fig. 8).

In northern Europe, too, this was a heyday for portraiture. At the beginning of the 1830s, the Danish Golden Age artist...
insight and empathy with which Købke was able to depict his subjects, he achieved the greatest measure of truth. Close-up studies of sitters were already to be found in the physiognomically informed portraits of the 18th century. With the addition of an esoteric element that was part of the pre-Romantic cult of emotion, the emphasis gradually shifted from an objective study of the outward appearance of those pictured to a more empathetic approach to the portrayal of personality. It is this new sensibility that we can observe in the drawn studies of both François Gérard and Christen Købke.

This image of the future interior and justice minister Carl von Nutzhorn (1828–1899) is probably one of Christen Købke’s earliest commissioned portrait drawings. Here the artist was trying out all the elements to which he would later return in many of his renderings of children – a fixed gaze, a frontal composition and a closed form. His friend and fellow artist Lorenz Frølich (1820–1908) took the view that in these portraits, thanks to the unusual final portrait was completed, there would be no need for the sitter to be present. Despite this, Købke has brilliantly captured the personality of a two-year-old with a powerful, penetrating gaze. Perhaps this is why we find the portrait unusually monumental, despite its small, intimate format (16 x 14.5 cm).

Fig. 7 François Gérard (1770–1837), La Famille Hall (Interior with the Hall family). Pencil, 24 x 40 cm. Transferred from Institut Tessin 1982. Nationalmuseum, NMTiD 109.

Fig. 8 François Gérard (1770–1837), Caroline Murat, Left Profile, c. 1808. Black chalk and stump on cream coloured paper, 16.6 x 16.6 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, INV26717-recto.
ACQUISITIONS/INTIMATE PORTRAIT DRAWINGS AFTER 1800


Notes:

2. Swedish National Archives (RA), Reuterholm-Ådelgrenska samlingen, vol 29, eight letters from Lavater 1791–94 and three drafts of letters from Reuterholm.


6. NMH 362–363/1969. The drawings were bought at Sotheby’s in Florence.

7. Xavier Salmon, François Gérard (1770–1837), portraitiste. Peintre des rois, roi des peintres (exh. cat.), Château de Fontainebleau 2014, p. 20. Salmon notes here that, unfortunately, there is no comprehensive biography of Gérard or list of works that could offer an overview of his output.

8. Ibid., p. 175.


10. Ibid., p. 184. The best-known example is his portrait of Madame Barbier-Walbonne, c. 1796, in the Musée du Louvre, inv. no. RF 2192. Here, Gérard had worked hard to achieve the striking light effects that make this image so special; see Langworthy 2012, p. 308.

11. A ricordo is to be found in the collections at Versailles, inv. no. MV 4855.


14. The author wishes to thank project researcher Dr Phil Jesper Svenningsen at the National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen, for kindly drawing his attention to the artist’s visit to Aarhus in July 1830.


16. Nationalmuseum, Dokumentationsarkivet. The sitter could be identified thanks to documentation provided by the former owners through Niels Vodder, for whose kind assistance we are most grateful.