Hill Art Foundation

“The Lost Beauty of Humankind: Robert Bergman’s Portraits in the Hill Collection”
By David Levi Strauss

Among the earliest painted portraits that have come down to us are those generally known as the “Fayum portraits,” named for the place where most of them were found, in the Faiyum Basin south of Cairo. They date from the time of Roman rule in Egypt, from the late first century BC or early first century AD to perhaps the middle of the third century, and were probably painted by Greeks who had settled in Egypt. The nine hundred or so of these portraits that have survived can now be found in museums around the world.

These portraits are direct and evocative. They picture individuals—merchants, military officers, teachers, religious figures—who could afford to have their earthly identities so commemorated in death. They were painted in encaustic or tempera, using gold, black, red, and two ochres, on wooden panels to be affixed to the mummified remains of the dead, and were preserved remarkably well by the hot, dry Egyptian climate.

The Fayum portraits are surprisingly modern in effect, even though they were made some two thousand years ago and were ostensibly not intended for the contemplation of the living, but for the dead, in the spiritual world beyond. When we look at them now, we are caught in an illicit act: an intrusion into the borderlands.

It is significant, I think, that these portraits began to make their way into European collections at about the same time the first photographic portraits were made. Louis Daguerre made what many consider to be the first photograph of a human being in 1839, but the figure registers as only a shadow, really, a full-body profile of a man getting his boots cleaned, on the Boulevard du Temple in Paris. Since he was the only one on the dirty boulevard who was standing still, his was the only form that had time enough to make an impression, in the four minutes or so that Daguerre needed to expose the film. There is another tenebrous specter in that image, belonging to the bootblack kneeling before the man, but he or she is even more ephemeral and is seldom mentioned. From the very beginning, the essential question has been: Who deserves to be pictured, or mentioned?

In 1839, Robert Cornelius made what is arguably the first photographic portrait in the United States, a self-portrait daguerreotype made outside his family store in Center City, Philadelphia. Cornelius was, appropriately enough, a lamp maker by trade. In that same year, Sir John Herschel coined the term “photography” (light writing) to name this new process.

The demand for portraits among the burgeoning middle class in Britain, Europe, and America following the Industrial Revolution overwhelmed the ability of painters to fulfill it. And many more people could afford to be photographed than to be painted. The history of portraiture in painting and photography is haunted by these origins, and by the persistent question, Who is worthy of being portrayed? And the question hidden within that one: Who is worthy of having their image survive their death?

I first saw Robert Bergman's color photographic portraits at the artist and publisher Phong Bui's loft in Brooklyn in 2004, and they were an immediate revelation to me. They had a quality of openness, vulnerability, and honesty that is very rare in any medium. Phong knew about Bergman's portraits through Phong's mentor, the art historian Meyer Schapiro, who had written an afterword for Bergman's 1998 book *A Kind of Rapture*, which also included an extraordinary introduction by Toni Morrison. Phong asked me to write about my experience of first seeing Bergman's portraits, and I began in this way:

When my mother died, I was holding her face in my hands and looking into her eyes. I wanted to see what she was seeing, then, but I couldn't. I could feel it, but I couldn't see it. I thought that I should be able to save her, and I tried to hold her gaze, to hold her here, but the moment she died, her eyes went out, and I was left alone.

In the last weeks, the skin of her face had pulled taut around her skull to create a face I had never seen before, though I'd known her all my life. It was her face, definitely, but she'd never shown it to the world before this. It was her true face, and it was new, and it was the most beautiful face I have ever seen.

This is what I remembered when I first saw Robert Bergman's photograph of the old woman in a lavender robe with light on her hair and behind her eyes. It's the first photograph in his extraordinary book, *A Kind of Rapture*, and it's still the hardest one for me to look at.[1]

The people portrayed in Bergman's photographs are not ideal forms, but real ones, individuals depicted in all their contradictions and infinitely variable, unique *humanations*.[2] Bergman once called these pictures "collaborative portraits," of Americans he met by chance on the streets in cities from 1985 to 1993. What went on between the photographer and his subjects is mostly unknown to us, except for what we can see in the portraits, if we take the time to look. Bergman well knows the damage that words can do to images and so has forsworn them in this relation. No names, no places, no descriptions. Just look.

Besides, fixed identities and names, locations, even dates, often fall away from portraits over time, and we are left with only the visual evidence before us, just in time.

Bergman pares everything down formally, so that the remaining elements are heightened and the faces come forward out of the particulars. Everything is in place, but you have to make a decision to see these portraits. You cannot see them passively.

I have always thought that Bergman's portraits should be seen within the larger history of portraiture rather than just within the history of photographic portraiture, and the Hill Collection thankfully makes that possible. Obviously, paintings are very different from photographs, and looking at paintings is very different from looking at photographs, or photographs of paintings. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't look at them together and seriously consider the relations among them.

It's Like Mercy: Caravaggio and Bergman

Both Pier Paolo Pasolini, one of the greatest poets and filmmakers of the twentieth century, who was censured by the Vatican during his lifetime, and the recently deceased Pope Francis made it clear that they loved Caravaggio's work. Pasolini was turned on to Caravaggio early on by his teacher, the art historian

and curator Roberto Longhi, who was largely responsible for the rediscovery and revival of Caravaggio's work in the 1950s. Longhi considered Caravaggio the first painter of the modern era, and Pope Francis said, "Among the great painters, I admire Caravaggio; his paintings speak to me."[3]

The key for both Pasolini and Pope Francis was that Caravaggio included the excluded—prostitutes, pimps, gangsters, murderers—in his depictions of religious subjects. This obviously resonated with Pasolini, who did something very similar in his films, but also with Pope Francis and his vision of a "poor church." In Caravaggio, the introduction of street people into sacred imagery takes on the quality of transfiguration, wherein people are revealed in their sacred essence. As Pope Francis said, "Art must not discard anything or anybody. It's like mercy."[4]

For both Pasolini and Francis, this practice had a strong political impact. John Berger wrote that Caravaggio was "the first painter of life as experienced by the popolaccio, the people of the backstreets, les sans-culottes, the lumpen-proletariat, the lower orders, those of the lower depths, the underworld. There is no word in any traditional European language which does not either denigrate or patronize the urban poor it is naming. That is power."[5]

Today they are "homeless" or "unhoused" or "undocumented." In today's politics in the United States, the word that nobody but Reverend William Barber uses anymore is "poor." It has now become a crime to be poor, or unhoused, and certainly to be undocumented (that is, unportrayed).

In the apocryphal story of Judith and Holofernes, Judith is a symbol of resistance—of the people fighting back against much more powerful foes. Her look of steady persistence and resolve is a look you will find often in Bergman's portraits. Berger points to "a special facial expression, which, painted, exists only in Caravaggio. It is the expression on Judith's face in Judith and Holofernes. . . . It is an expression of closed concentration and openness, of force and vulnerability, of determination and pity."[6] This is very close to something found in the expressions in some of Bergman's portraits, which appear to arise from contradictory valences.

The sword and the bedclothes in the lower part of this painting are rendered almost entirely in black and white, and almost photographically—or prephotographically. Pasolini called Caravaggio's paintings "profilmic." "Caravaggio invented an entire world to place in front of his studio's easel: new kinds of people (in both a social and characterological sense)," wrote Pasolini. "He realized that there were individuals around him who had never appeared in the great altarpieces and frescoes, individuals who had been marginalized by the cultural ideology of the previous two centuries."[7] Bergman's portraits share Caravaggio's tenebrism both formally and emotionally.

In 1606, Caravaggio killed Ranuccio Tomassoni, a gangster who might have been the pimp of Fillide Melandroni, a model for a number of Caravaggio's important paintings (including an earlier version of Judith Beheading Holofernes). For Tomassoni's murder, Caravaggio was sentenced to death by beheading, a sentence that could be carried out by anyone, under an open bounty, putting Caravaggio in a particularly precarious position. After his sentencing, Caravaggio painted a number of works of people being beheaded, including the Judith and Holofernes in the Hill Collection, in 1607. He died three years

later, at age thirty-eight, perhaps of lead poisoning from the mediums he used. After his death, his work was out of fashion for three hundred years.

Love and Revolution: Pontormo and Bergman

The face of the young man in a red cap could almost be one of those placed on a mummy in Roman Egypt, but in this case, the model's pose and mien are intended to evoke those of the biblical David, the hero of Florence, especially prized by the Florentine republicans who opposed the Medici family's rule. Among these radicals were Michelangelo and the painter of this magnificent portrait, Jacopo Pontormo.

This is probably a portrait of a young aristocrat and republican volunteer named Carlo Neroni. It was painted in 1530, during the siege of Florence by the imperial army of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, attempting to restore the Medici rulers who had recently been ousted. Neroni and many other brave young men like him fought on the battlements against the tyrants and autocrats until they were overcome by starvation and disease. Neroni holds a love letter in his right hand and wears a ring on his left hand, indicating that he is about to be married, in spite of the siege.

During the period from 1512 to 1570 in Florence, portraiture became an essential means of signaling and memorializing one's social position and power. In this case, it also sits at the potent intersection of aesthetics and politics. This portrait of Carlo Neroni is mentioned in Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* in 1568, but was then lost for nearly two hundred years.

Only about fifteen portraits by Pontormo survive, and most of them are now in Italy. This one is actually in England, even though it has been owned by the Hill Collection since 2015. What you see in this exhibition is a digital copy of the painting: a picture of a picture.[8] The critic Peter Schjeldahl once noted that "even Pontormo's blacks and grays glow,"[9] and in this very high-resolution digital replica, even that glow is manifest.

This replica of the Pontormo portrait was produced by the team at Factum Arte in Madrid, which has developed a number of different technologies to enhance the recording and production of objects. Using laser scanners and other tools, they are able to record a vast amount of visual information in a painting and reproduce it with a depth of field and resolution that exceed what was previously possible. What you are looking at here is a copy, yes, but a highly sophisticated one.

The level of verisimilitude achieved in this replica should challenge our certainties about originality and authenticity. How close to being identical to the painting is this reproduction? Of course, Pontormo's painting itself is, in a sense, a reproduction of Neroni's original form. But what are the parts of our experience of a painting that cannot be reproduced in a technical copy? This one does a good job of replicating the information in the painting, but not our perception of the painting, gathering and receiving the raw data of sensual apprehension affected by our beliefs, ideas, and memories of individual experiences.

I have paired this replica of Pontormo with a photograph by Robert Bergman portraying another young man looking every bit as determined as Carlo Neroni. From his pocket peeks a newspaper clipping showing a picture of a young woman, in a doubling of the reproductive play. We know less about this

young man's particular situation, but we can't help but speculate, for those eyes are every bit as evocative as Neroni's Davidian eyes.

I was lucky enough to spend time with the art historian Leo Steinberg in the 2000s, after writing an extensive account of his work in 1997.[10] Steinberg was a great writer who happened to also be a great art historian. But he thought that too many art historians relied too much on what had been written about works of art instead of actually looking at works of art for the time it takes to see them. He always said that if you just look, and pay attention, the work will tell you how to look at it.[11] Just look.

The People on the Way to Calvary: Bassano and Bergman

The Christian church has long believed that one of the paths to God runs through the eyes—through pictures of human beings enacting the biblical stories. The Word is sanctified by God, as Christ, but the image reaches believers more quickly and sometimes more directly. First artisans, and eventually artists, made these pictures come alive in surpassing beauty and transfiguration, by depicting living, breathing human beings in drawings, paintings, and sculptures, and later in photographs and moving pictures.

Again, in portraiture, the essential question has always been, Who is worthy of being portrayed? At its height, portraiture imparted a kind of immortality. And how do we measure a person's worth? The most radical answer to that question comes directly from the Gospels, in the Beatitudes of Luke 6: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." Every one of God's creatures is worthy of being portrayed, because they are all created in God's image, and because the way to salvation is not through good works, but through grace. Some artists endeavor to find the grace and the eternal spark in all people.

In Jacopo Bassano's painting *The Way to Calvary* (ca. 1542–45), Christ is the focus, but the people accompanying him to his death on the Cross are the real subjects of the work. The man in the very center of the composition (which was inspired by prints by Raphael and Dürer depicting Christ falling down on the way to Calvary) could be a Bergman subject, wearing everything on his face. He is directly behind Jesus, separated from him by the vertical and transverse beams of the Cross, which frame the man's form. He is looking toward the muscular man striding ahead, moving out of the picture, who looks back at him while lifting that side of the Cross with a strap. It takes some time for us to realize that the man in the center in the brown brimmed hat is one of the Roman guards charged with carrying out the Crucifixion, and that the shield at his back is his shield, acting here as a carapace, separating him from the three Marys to his left. In front of and above him is another guard, wearing a green shirt and a version of that same brown hat and carrying a wicker basket holding the gruesome implements of death by crucifixion: rope, pincers, and sturdy nails. In the distance is the hill of Calvary, the "Place of the Skull," Golgotha, where this Cross that Christ is carrying will be erected between the two already standing there.

The central guard's expression is a complex mixture of exhaustion, fear, and grief. His face mirrors the position of the face of Christ, but their expressions are very different, marking the contrast between the magnanimity of Christ contemplating his death and the agitation and anxiety of those witnessing and carrying out his death sentence.

In the exhibition, I've arranged seven of Bergman's portraits going into and coming out of the Bassano, in a kind of reflective procession. First come the two children, rare in Bergman's oeuvre. Then two people I think of as pilgrims, who might very well have been part of Bassano's crowd on the way to Calvary: a man in innocence and sorrow, and a man in a dark hat, with his face cast down in anguish. On the right side of the painting is a heroic figure bathed in golden light, another heroic figure in a red jacket and mask with raised arms, in the pose of an undocumented immigrant being accosted by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and three more children, costumed in sunlight, reflecting the three Marys arrayed at the lower right side of Bassano's composition.

Two Portraits of Gentlemen, Half-Length, Wearing Black: Bergman and Rubens

Both of these portraits seem to conceal secrets about their subjects. The look on the face of the man in Bergman's portrait is knowing but guarded, as is that of the rosy-cheeked man in Peter Paul Rubens' portrait, painted around 1628–29. The two men are separated by time but not by nature. In Bergman's portrait we see a Black man stylishly clad in a black leather coat and wide-brimmed flat-topped hat, with a tartan plaid neck scarf and a piercing gaze, standing against a steel blue wall. Everything we know about this man is in this portrait, but we take the visual cues to concoct narratives. We can clearly see that he is confident in himself, but more than a little distrustful of the portraitist.

Rubens, who was a skilled diplomat in addition to being a great artist, spent several months in Madrid in 1628–29, at the invitation of King Philip IV, to help negotiate peace between Spain and England, and while there, he painted a number of substantial portraits. There is some indication that Rubens shared a studio with Diego Velázquez while in Spain. The two painters became friends and planned to travel together to Italy the next year, but Rubens instead returned to Antwerp alone and Velázquez went to Italy without him.

An x-ray of the Rubens portrait has revealed that it was, in fact, painted over a portrait by Velázquez (probably of Philip IV or of the king's brother, Don Carlos), and some recent research speculates that the portrait Rubens painted over it may in fact be a portrait of Velázquez by Rubens! Comparing it to the Velázquez Portrait of a Man (1630, not illustrated) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which is now thought by some to be a copy of a Rubens portrait of Velázquez by Rubens' student Anthony van Dyck, we find a striking similarity. And this portrait has an even more striking similarity to the figure on the right edge of Velázquez's *The Surrender of Breda* (ca. 1635) at the Prado, which has long been thought to be a self-portrait of the Spanish master.

If the Hill Foundation's Rubens is not a portrait of Velázquez, it could still be a portrait of the man in Velázquez's The Surrender of Breda. Or perhaps Velázquez used his Rubens copy as a model for that figure? But if it's not Velázquez, who is it? We may never know, just as we may never know the name of the man in Bergman's portrait. How does this change our experience of viewing it?

Someone Next to You in the Dark: Frank Auerbach and Robert Bergman

Frank Auerbach's *Head of Julia* is a portrait of his wife, Julia (née Wolstenholme). He met her at the Royal College of Art in London in 1958 and they wed soon thereafter, remaining together for the better part of sixty years, until Julia's death in January 2024. Auerbach died ten months later, at age

ninety-three. He painted Julia many times over the course of their life together, but this particular portrait is from 1985, the precise year that Robert Bergman began making his color photographic portraits.

Auerbach described his style of painting as an attempt to elicit "what you feel when you touch someone next to you in the dark."[12] Rather than pare everything down, he built up the surfaces of his works into an almost sculptural density of paint, to try to give a sense of the visceral experience of the person being portrayed. Others have mentioned the relation of Auerbach's way of working with that of Willem de Kooning, and the connection is perhaps most evident in de Kooning's sculptures, including the magnificent Clamdigger, included in this exhibition. This sculpture, modeled in clay in 1972 and cast in bronze in 1976, remained with de Kooning for twenty years, placed at the entrance to his studio in Springs, New York, where he passed it every day as he went to work.

The only other freestanding sculpture in this show is the exquisite small bronze by Henri Matisse, *Madeleine II*, which was conceived in 1903 and cast sometime between 1930 and 1951. I've paired it in a niche with the very human little Duccio angel, a painted fragment from circa 1280.

De Kooning and Matisse made only a few sculptures each, but both went to the medium to engage the sensate differently. These sculptures by Matisse and de Kooning are both elemental and drawn from particular people.

The formal contrast between Auerbach's painting and Bergman's photograph is tactilely extreme, but the color palette and tone—in skin, hair, shirt, and background—rhyme and resonate, and I find their emotional affinity remarkable.

The Weight of the World: Van Dyck and Bergman

Anthony van Dyck was only nineteen in 1618, when he painted this study of a bearded man, but he had begun his formal training as a painter at age ten, and had already become a master in the Antwerp guild by this time. The Frick Collection in New York includes van Dyck's *Portrait of a Seventy-Year-Old Man*, painted in 1613, when the artist was only fourteen years old, as well as three remarkable self-portraits he made as a very young man.

When van Dyck made this portrait in 1618, he was working as the chief assistant to Peter Paul Rubens, who referred to the teenager as "the best of my pupils." Rubens had a tremendous influence on van Dyck, who later worked mainly as a court portraitist and became the dominant influence on English portrait painting for more than 150 years, extending all the way into the modern period.

Van Dyck followed Rubens' practice of using real people as models for figures in his religious and mythological pictures. This study of a bearded man may have been part of a work on panels depicting Christ and the Apostles, and this figure may have been intended to represent Saint Paul. There are a number of these small, close-cropped heads of bearded men by van Dyck from this time, and nearly all of them are looking down in anguish. Considering the youth of the artist, this head shows a remarkably developed understanding of the weight of age. All of these studies have indistinct backgrounds, bringing focus to the face, a strategy also seen in many of Bergman's portraits.

Bergman's portrait of an aging, bearded man looking down in anguish is the fourth portrait in his book A Kind of Rapture, and it is one of a number of portraits of people in this pose in the whole body of nearly one hundred color portraits in the Hill Collection's key set of works by him. They show the sitters in a pensive mood, often bare-breasted and showing battle scars. Saint Paul might have advised them, as he did the Thessalonians, "[Do] not grieve as others do who have no hope."[13]

Two Scholars: Joos van Cleve and Bergman

We don't know the name of the double-bearded man in Joos van Cleve's painting. But because we know that van Cleve spent time in the French court of Francis I, painting many portraits of the royal family and others in the court, we may guess that this fellow is one of those courtiers. The portrait gives us a number of iconographic cues that he is a man of substance and means, with his substantial knotted neck chain, gold-highlighted collar, and scarlet-over-black sleeves. His right hand grasps a paper scroll and his left the hilt of a sword, while armored gauntlets hang over his right shoulder. The well-appointed room seen over his left shoulder contains a stack of books, an exotic bird perched over a gold sphere, and a flute. Each of these accoutrements would have indicated to sixteenth-century viewers a man of learning, sophistication, and wealth, well worthy of being portrayed for posterity.

The fellow in Bergman's portrait could almost be from the same period, the background being chronologically indeterminate. But Bergman's man has more expressive latitude. He is wearing a shearling sheepskin jacket over a tan tunic over a striped, starched dress shirt, and is grasping a thick volume with both hands, which are white-knuckled in tension. Indeed, his whole body is tense, leaning into the portrait. The look on his face is guarded, almost threatening, but the eyes betray a certain softness.

Van Cleve's nobleman and Bergman's nobleman can be seen as bookends to the age of books, but they exhibit very different approaches to the art of portraiture.

Bergman's portraits are not responding to any fashion or trend in photographic portraiture of their time. Everything in them is dedicated to making a vera icon, a true image, on the way to making a true portrait.

As the German art historian Hans Belting wrote in his groundbreaking 1994 study *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, "The image and its beholder, in ultimate terms, related to each other like archetype and copy, like Creator and creature. The material image, as a mediator, thus became the tool for a contemplation of the lost beauty of humankind."[14]

In the modern period, and especially in photography, portraiture has concentrated largely on the physical traits of subjects in an attempt to reveal social typologies and assert identity, and also to explore the evolution of physical, psychological, and social types through the conventions of representation. The venerable pursuit of portraying moral or spiritual ideals, in the direct contemplation of the "the lost beauty of humankind," has been mostly eclipsed in recent times.

But not in Robert Bergman's portraits.

Notes

1. David Levi Strauss, John Yau, et al., "The Photography of Robert Bergman," The Brooklyn Rail, May 2004. Bergman's A Kind of Rapture was published by Pantheon in 1998.
2. I will always associate this word with the great art historian Leo Steinberg, who used it in preference to "incarnation," to speak of the act or process of becoming human.
3. Jason Farago, "Piercing the Shadows of the Pope's Favorite Painting," The New York Times, April 24, 2025.
4. Pope Francis, in a conversation with Monsignor Jacobone on May 29, 2015. Farago, "Piercing the Shadows of the Pope's Favorite Painting."
5. John Berger, And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos (London: Writers and Readers, 1984), 79. At the beginning of this passage, Berger admits that Caravaggio is his favorite painter.
6. Berger, And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos, 85. Berger is referring here to an earlier version of the scene by Caravaggio, Judith Beheading Holofernes (ca. 1599–1600).
7. Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Caravaggio's Light," in Heretical Aesthetics: Pasolini on Painting, with a foreword by T. J. Clark, edited and translated by Ara H. Merjian and Alessandro Giammei (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2023), 178.
8. The migration of the word "picture" from referring to a painting (the Latin word pictus, from pingeres, literally means "painted") to a technical image, including a photograph or a motion picture, has been historically promiscuous, but is etymologically sound. The Sanskrit pinj means "to dye or color," and pinjara is the word for "yellow," but the Indo-European root is peig, "to color," and also peik, "to adorn or form." And similarly, a portrait is a picture of a person. To portray is "to draw or depict," from the Latin protrahere, "to draw or bring forward, to expose, reveal," which is what these portraits do.
9. Peter Schjeldahl, "The Medici as Artists Saw Them," The New Yorker, July 5, 2021.
10. David Levi Strauss, "Rescuing Art from Modern Oblivion," Wilson Quarterly 21, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 34–49.
11. David Levi Strauss, "It Has to Be Danced to Be Known: On Leo Steinberg," in From Head to Hand: Art and the Manual (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 166–84.
12. Frank Auerbach: Paintings and Drawings 1954–2001 (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2001), 23.
13. Holy Bible (revised standard version), "The First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians," 4:13.
14. Hans Belting, Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art, translated by Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 209.