

**CONCERNING  
PORTRAITS  
AND PORTRAITURE**

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Concerning portraits and portraiture by Helen Bigelow Merriman

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**HELEN BIGELOW MERRIMAN**

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AND PORTRAITURE

BY

*Miss.* HELEN BIGELOW MERRIMAN

READ BEFORE THE

WORCESTER ART SOCIETY

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## CONCERNING PORTRAITS AND PORTRAITURE.

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I once heard a conversation between two painters of portraits. One of them said "When I have a sitter I think to myself, 'this is just one of the great human family,' so I make a general representation of a human being, and then add so much of individual peculiarity as is needed to make the picture recognizable as a portrait."

The other painter said "My first thought is of the extraordinary peculiarities of this face and figure that I am about to paint. I notice how long the nose is, how wide apart the eyes, how firm the mouth, how drooping the shoulders, etc. These eccentricities appear so piquant and novel, they absorb me so deeply in the effort to seize and reproduce them, that I have to force myself to generalize and soften the effort, for fear of making a caricature."

In these two painters we have clearly marked types of two ways of looking at portraiture. Both have



their advantages, and the best work combines something of both attitudes, for, of course, every human being exists in both of the two capacities that these artists recognized. We are all individuals, and also parts of the human family, and our best life is found in the way each of these capacities illuminates and vivifies the other.

But all painters inevitably approach their sitters with a predisposition to see in them a certain class of facts, rather than another class that may equally be present. And not only is this true of those who are artists by profession. We are all artists in a degree, although we may lack the power of expressing our ideas in paint.

You will readily recall the two mental types that I refer to by remembering how, in the attempt to describe an absent person, some people will give you an accurate account of the shape and color of his eyes, whether he has a moustache or not, the length of his face and tint of his skin, while others will remember no facts about him distinctly at all, but may, perhaps, mention some little trait or action—such as the way he sits down, the quick turn of his head in speaking,

or some illustration of the man in motion, which will set him clearly before you by a single stroke.

The artist to whom individual peculiarities most appeal is, as I have before hinted, in danger of becoming a caricaturist. He is pretty sure to make a strong likeness, but it is often a likeness lacking something in poetic charm. Marked facial peculiarities in a person are usually the result of inheritance, but the mental and moral qualities they indicate may have been trained and softened by the experience of life so that the outcome in character is very complex and beautiful. If, then, the artist seizes merely the external form, he is often most unjust to the total impression produced by a person upon his intimate acquaintances, who know and love his character, and who, by great familiarity, have become almost unconscious of his individual features.

The other type of artist, the generalizer, has also his dangers. If he be a person of small ability, his portraits will be insipid. He will make all persons look more or less alike. If he be a genius, he will, perhaps, over-idealize his sitters. He will give them an air so prophetic, so in advance of the present facts

that those who like their friend as he now is will be disappointed in the portrait.

Portraits of this sort are, however, the kind that one likes to give to institutions—that one would like to be thought to have looked like after one is dead.

Portrait painting has, after all, for its deepest secret, the same rule that lies at the bottom of all the best achievement in any direction, viz. *Accept the facts and then put the noblest possible construction upon them.*

The facts of form and color in any face are here and can be measured, and the literally-minded person will insist that the artist should do this with accuracy; but absolute accuracy is possible only when the features are rigidly fixed, as in death. In a living person they move and change continually, and when we see how they are illuminated and transfigured by love, by enthusiasm, by a lofty thought; how they are chastened by suffering and made resolute by endurance; what complexity of beauty they may be made to express; how the same face and figure may show at the same moment independence and sympathy, tenderness and strength, the completest individuality