

Studio Craft: Should portraits smile?



La Gioconda, Da Vinci, ca. 1503-ca. 1517

Ask the Experts: “My instructor says not to try to paint a portrait of a person smiling because it looks fake and people don’t hold a natural smile for a long time. I feel like the person I’m painting looks more like themselves with a smile, though. How can I work this out?”

A: If the style of portraiture you are learning involves classical, traditional methods, the broad smile one might wear in a “selfie” could look strange and unnatural. It’s impossible to sustain a wide grin through long sittings painted from life. Traditional portraits with a smiling subject are usually much more subtle and relaxed.

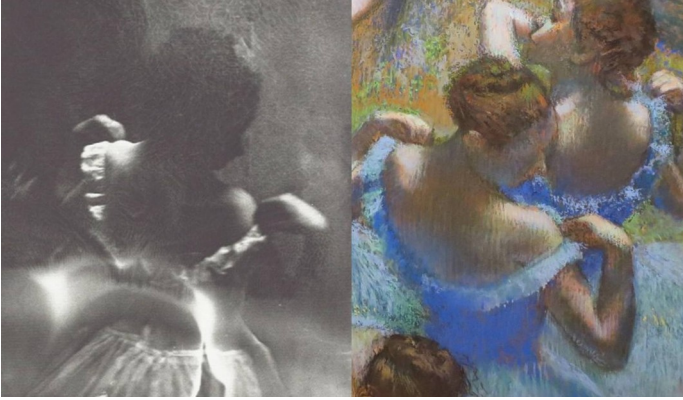
Modern notions of what a portrait should look like are not the same as in the past, certainly since the advent of photography. The ability to capture an image through a lens dramatically changed the depiction of the human likeness, and the ongoing evolution of photography (such

as mobile selfies, filters and AI enhancement) continues to change what looks normal and natural in portraiture.



“Cupid as Victor” (detail) Caravaggio 1601

After the introduction and spread of photography, people became increasingly more accustomed to photos of the human face. Short, flash exposures began to capture brief expressions, including the natural smile, and the “frozen moment in time” came to seem a more natural depiction of the individual than earlier, painted portraits.



Pastel by Degas and, at left, a photo taken by the artist

Artists began to incorporate photographic imagery into their work almost immediately. Although most people associate French Impressionism with subjects captured from life through direct observation, some of the Impressionists were early adopters of photographic reference. Degas learned the process of early photography and used his own photos to generate some of his most well known images.



Smiling Girl, imitator of Vermeer, ca. 1925, possibly showing influence of early photography

Some smiling figures derived from photography can look unnatural, depending on the artist's approach. Traditional artists who use photographs as reference often take their

own pictures, so they can capture a pose, lighting and design that is closer to direct observation. A painting executed with apparent speed and immediacy can seem more harmonious with candid photo reference than a painstaking, multi-session picture built gradually in layers. Sometimes, however, artists deliberately embrace the strange sense of dilated time that flash photography can evoke.

For a traditional portrait, the smile that is likely to look most natural is a soft, relaxed expression rather than a tight grin. Leonardo's *La Gioconda* (Mona Lisa), the most famous smile in art history, has an expression that is barely discernible. Broadly smiling figures that predate film photography do exist, and some of them are exquisite, but none of these look anything like a modern photo of a smiling person.

We think you may want to select a few paintings of smiling subjects from before the invention of photography, and ask your instructor if any of them would provide an acceptable approach for this class. A portrait painter has an obligation to capture the truth of the subject, and if you feel strongly that your subject will look more natural with a smile, there should be a path forward that is consistent with the class curriculum.