Picture perfect
400 years of European portraiture on display at Clark

By TELLY HALKIAS

If a picture is said to paint a thousand words, then the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown has a best-selling novel on its hands.

The Clark on Jan. 23 is opening a special exhibit of European portrait painting, “Eye to Eye: European Portraits 1450-1850.” Organized by Richard Rand, senior curator and curator of paintings and sculpture, and Kathleen Morris, director of exhibitions and collections and curator of decorative art, the show includes works by master artists from the late-15th century through the early-19th century.

“These portraits represent work from a particularly interesting period in the development of European art history,” Rand said. “During those four centuries, painting emerged from the shadows of the Middle Ages and then went through major stylistic trends culminating with the Romantic style, just before Manet and the Impressionists.”

Rand added that this range of styles and themes in Old Master portraiture was practiced in the Netherlands, France, Italy, Spain, and England during the aforementioned era. He said that from a technical perspective, the show allowed a look into the stages of representation of the subjects in the portraits.

“In the early Renaissance, portraits of individuals, particularly profiles, came into fashion,” Rand said. “Leaders, rich bankers, prominent citizens, all wanted to be portrayed for posterity. Then we see a major development with a three-quarter turn of the subject instead of a profile, and the further sophistication of portraiture was on its way.”

Depth of research
“Eye to Eye” includes a number of rarely-known paintings, including “Portrait of a Man” by the Mannerist artist Parmigianino, painted around 1530 in Bologna. Another is “Portrait of a Young Woman” by Giovanni Battista Moroni, a 16th century artist widely considered one of the most talented portrait painters of all time. Both will be shown publicly for the first time.

According to Rand, such depictions raised many questions that the curatorial team worked to frame in the proper context.

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Portraits

The public will ask themselves the same questions we did in our research,” Rand said. “Most importantly, this included musing on what exactly is a portrait and what is the purpose of portraiture. Is it the accurate capture of a likeness? The picture of someone’s character? A subject’s expression frozen in time? A look into the kind of person portrayed? Or do all these things make a portrait simply a wonderful creation of art?”

These new examinations were made possible not only by the research efforts of Rand and Morris, but also a team of both graduate as well as undergraduate students from Williams College. Four of the latter participated in studying the history surrounding specific portraits.

Morris agreed that the depth of research produced a vibrant public offering, one that will be juxtaposed in the Clark’s permanent galleries nearby with works from its permanent collection.

“The range of portraits in the exhibition is astonishing,” Morris said. “Visitors will be delighted to encounter these faces, painted with such authority and sensitivity by a wide range of artists. It is just as exciting to see these paintings within spaces we have carved out of our permanent collection galleries — by placing them in close proximity to works in the Clark collection of the same period. We provide an opportunity to see our own, familiar, works in a new context and with new eyes.”

Several portraits proved controversial in terms of attribution, and many scholars were contacted to elicit opinions and discuss possible attributions. Although this process didn’t necessarily result in definitive attributions, Morris described the process as exhilarating.

“By laying out the facts as we know them behind each work, we have provided an entire to broader scholarly discussion for a number of previously unknown works,” Morris said. “There were other mysteries to unravel or fascinating stories to tell — about the artist, or the sitter when that person was known, or details within the paintings that held their own historical fascination.”

More about ourselves

The Clark, which was founded by an avid private collector, benefited from the generosity of Aso Tavitian, one of its trustees, who contributed the works from “Eye to Eye” from his private collection.

The exhibit, on view from Jan. 23 through March 27, consists of 29 paintings and one sculpture, and includes portraits by David, Menling, Pamiqamino, Gresu, Rubens, Van Dyck, Rubens and Cranach, as well as other portraits by lesser-known artists.

This exhibit is the first opportunity for the public to see many of these works. As such, Rand said the opportunity to contribute both to the scholarship and public discussion of the art of portraiture carried a meaning to which everyone — both scholar and casual art fan — could relate.

The stories behind many of the portraits ended up being "somewhat chatty and colloquial, like a discussion of friends in a cafe," Rand said. He likened them to eulogies and monuments. In that light, the works possibly reveal more about those viewing them than either their subject or creators.

These portraits all raise different issues, which lead us to believe that there may not be one perfect definition for a portrait, just a start point for learning more,” Rand said.

“Ultimately, the works in this exhibition tell visceral, human stories. If not specific stories that we know, then maybe they can serve as inspirations for anyone to think about the circumstances of the human condition — about ourselves — with an emotional connection that goes past scholarship.”

"Eye to Eye: European Portraits 1450-1850" runs at the Clark Art Institute from Jan. 23 through March 27. The Clark is located at 225 South St. in Williamstown; admission is free through May. For more information, call 413-665-2363 or visit clarkart.edu.