

2. PERSISTENCE AND THE BECOMING OF THE PICTORIAL PORTRAIT

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Abstract: *The seductive power of the Pictorial Portrait determined that, in the context of certain cultural eras, the portraits were made according to attitudes and expressions that would cover the aspects of philosophical, theological, aesthetic, or political ideals. Once it regains its place in the modern art of the 20th century, the Pictorial Portrait becomes an opportunity to explore unlimited expressive and conceptual dimensions. Artists realize that when there is an exceptional talent and it is educated on all intellectual and spiritual levels of the human being, the perspective on art acquires unprecedented dimensions in the history of the arts.*

Key words: *portrait, painting, expression, art history, contemporary*

1. Introduction

The traditional arts - painting, sculpture, engraving, and architecture - target the territory of genius and are static par excellence, compared to music, literature, cinema, and new visual media - video performance art or kinetic installations. The reference frame which the traditional visual arts address is *physical immortality*, the Italian conceptual artist Gino de Dominicis masterfully points it out in his aphorisms,¹⁵² inspired by Constantin Brâncuși's way of thinking. It is commonly accepted by all modern and contemporary scholars that traditional visual arts, along with music and dance, appeared long before articulate language. This phenomenon will be understood when we consider that a child will start singing and drawing before speaking, as he will exhibit choreographic movements before he can walk on his own feet, as soon as the child hears rhythmic music. It is impossible to locate in time the moment the portrait pictorial genre appeared. The oldest legend on this subject is in XXXV volume of the *Naturalis Historia Encyclopedia*, transmitted to us, over millennia, by the historian The Old Plinius (Pliny). He tells us the story of *Potter Butades* from the Greek city of Sicyon, the one who made the clay portrait of his future son-in-law.

2. Discussions

The young man was destined to go to war, and the night before the parting, Butades outlined the shadow of his profile head, a shadow cast on the wall of his house by a candle flame. Myth emphasizes the magic of the process of transposing the face and, implicitly, the personality or soul of an individual into the artistically generated image. In the same volume of his fantastic encyclopedia, The Old Plinius (Pliny) reveals the existence of an ancient pictorial culture in the northern Mediterranean Sea, as complex and valuable as that of Greek and Roman sculpture,

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¹⁵² Phrases by Gino de Dominicis, 1969-1996, collected by Cecilia Torrealta in the *official catalog of the 45th edition of the Venice International Biennial Art Exhibition. Section Past, Present, Future*, Venice 1997, Editura Einaudi, Milan. p. 145

which managed to span millennia until Nowadays. He revealed us not only the refined techniques of realistic and hyper-realistic painting made by the masters of ancient Greece and Rome but also the sophisticated levels of their aesthetic thinking, the special forms of valorization, the condition of the artist in the society of time and centuries before the era, in which he lived. At the level of the pictorial representation, the main function of painting, as well as of sculpture, was that of *mimesis* - the idealization and the most faithful reproduction of reality, but we are not dealing with representations of common, mundane aspects, but with exemplary characters and moments, idealized by applying standards of proportions and formal beauty, just like in Lyssip and Praxiteles sculpture, kings, heroes or nobles of the Greek and Roman cities are represented, personalities who stood out through extraordinary actions or decisions, able to bring them the admiration and gratitude of their fellow citizens.



Fig. 1. Joseph Wright of Derby - *The Corinthian Maid*, c.1782

Fig. 2. Antinoé - *Portrait of a woman*, known as "*L'Européenne*", c.120-130

The works were most often presented to the entire community in the fortress and at the same time the concept of the gallery was born, the same Roman historian reveals us. Artists who gained notoriety in their hometowns were invited to exhibit or assess the painting and sculpture salons (exhibitions) organized on the occasion of the Olympics, once every four years. The artists enjoyed impressive financial recognition, which rivals the prices attributed to superstars in the institutionalized circuit of the modern and contemporary art world. They used to display their works even when they were in progress, on the exterior walls of their houses, to be seen and commented on by the general public. This way, they decided to build an arcade gallery (porticos) across the road in front of the house, as we find, for example, in the architectural configurations of houses in medieval Bologna. We learned, therefore, that establishing the meaning and principles of artistic value was a perfectly democratic process, and the valorization of works was determined not only by the level of technical execution but also by the metaphorical refinement of the scenes, characters, objects, or landscapes represented. Like the artists of the Renaissance and all ages that have survived to the present day, painters and sculptors of European antiquity were also convinced that “the purpose of art is to present not the exterior of things, but their inner significance; because this, not the

external design and detail, is the authentic reality."¹⁵³

The seductive power of the pictorial portrait determined that, in the context of certain cultural eras, the portraits were to be done according to attitudes and expressions that would embrace the expectations of some philosophical, theological, aesthetic, or political ideals. The artist generally attempts a representative portrayal, as the English symbolist Edward Burne-Jones put it: "The only expression allowed in large portraits is the expression of moral character and quality, not something temporary, transient, or accidental"¹⁵⁴. "For reasons easy to understand, none of the pictorial portraits of Greek and Roman antiquity have managed to survive more than two millennia of history. The fire, the water, the earthquakes, and the destructive actions of the people led to the loss of all the canvas of that era. Surprisingly, the Greeks and Romans did not take over the technique of the Egyptians, that of painting on wooden boards. From the late period of the last Egyptian empire, we have been sent portraits of exceptional sensitivity, psychological depth of expression, and artistic beauty.

The resistance over time is due to the refined wax *encaustic* technique (polishing), through which both the wood substrate (support) and the mineral or organic pigments used were protected by a layer of wax. Moreover, the testimonies of The Old Plinius (Pliny) tell us that among the Egyptian artists also women who had the necessary talent and technical training were accepted: The largest group of painted portraits are funerary paintings that have survived in the dry climate of Fayum district of Egypt, dating from the 2nd-4th centuries AD. These are almost the only paintings from the Roman period that have survived, apart from frescoes, although it is known from the writings of The Old Plinius (Pliny) that portrait painting was well established in the Greek era and practiced by both men and women artists."¹⁵⁵

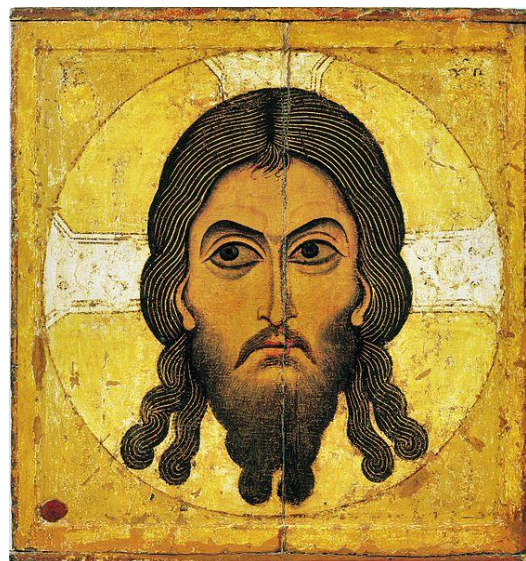
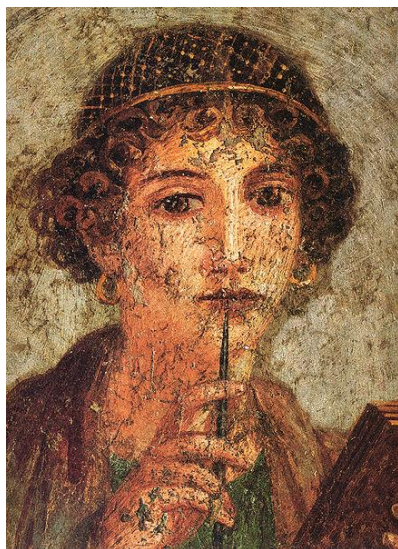


Fig. 3. *Woman with wax tablets and stylus* (so-called "Sappho"), between 55 and 79
Fig. 4. *Christ Acheiropoietos (Made without hands)*, a 12th-century Novgorod icon from the Assumption Cathedral in the Moscow Kremlin

¹⁵³ Gordon C. Aymar - *The Art of Portrait Painting*, Chilton Book Co., Philadelphia, 1967, p. 119

¹⁵⁴- Gordon C. Aymar - *The Art of Portrait Painting*, Chilton Book Co., Philadelphia, 1967. p. 94

¹⁵⁵ Cheney, Faxon and Russo - *Self-Portraits by Women Painters*, Ashgate Publishing, Hants, England, 2000, p. 7

Worth mentioning is the cry of The Old Plinius (Pliny), who draws our attention to the fact that "there is nothing new under the sun" and that artistic movements and trends, as well as the cultural eras to which they belong, have the same cycles of manifestation, they are born as a factor of novelty, they reach a moment of maximum expansion after which they start to decline and eventually die, leaving room for another page of history, most often oriented complementary to the previous one: "Painting portraits that used to convey over the centuries, the exact similarities of people have completely disappeared... Indolence has destroyed the arts."¹⁵⁶

The Middle Ages did not favor the pictorial genre of the portrait. Everything that belonged to the great cultures of antiquity was eradicated or passed into the underground culture. In Eastern Europe, the formulas of Greek portraiture, both the aesthetic canons and the constructive/compositional style and artistic techniques, once taken from Egypt, are preserved and adapted to iconographic art and fresco painting, with the emergence of Byzantine doctrines and canons. The Byzantine portrait, strongly stylized (perfected in terms of style) and spiritualized as expression, would reach exceptional levels of expressiveness and beauty in Russian iconography, but also in schools in Constantinople, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and, last but not least, in the Romanian Principalities.

As is well known, early Christianity developed only miniatures style in Western space. The portraits were highly stylized (perfected in terms of style) and can be found in the pages of the illustrated manuscripts: "Most early medieval portraits were those of the donors, mostly popes, in Roman mosaics and illuminated manuscripts, an example is a self-portrait of a complex female character - Hildegard of Bingen (1152), who was a writer, a mystic passionate, but also a pioneering scientist, the creator of beautifully illustrated manuscripts, and a valuable musician."¹⁵⁷

With the advent of Romanesque Art, there is a development of the portrait genre in the sarcophagi sculpture dedicated to principles, nobility, and high clergy. Here reappears an obvious interest for capturing defining features of the physiognomy and psychological aspects of the character represented: "As in the case of contemporary coins, there have been few efforts for similarity. The expansion of the tombstones monuments happened in the Romanesque period. Between 1350–1400, secular figures began to reappear in frescoes and panel paintings, such as that of Charles IV of Master Theodoric, who received fidelity (for this portrait)."¹⁵⁸

The renaissance, started not by chance in the territories of origin of the Roman Empire, it follows the natural course of the values sinusoidal repetition in history. The interest in antiquity aesthetic principles will allow the pictorial genre of the portrait to be reaffirmed at an extremely refined and complex level. The transition from the portrait of the Middle Ages to the great portraits of the Renaissance asserted in Italy and later in Germany, the Netherlands, France, and

¹⁵⁶ John Pope-Hennessy - *Portrait in the Renaissance*, Bollingen Foundation, New York, 1966, p. 71-72

¹⁵⁷ Cheney, Faxon, and Russo - *Self-Portraits by Women Painters*, Ashgate Publishing, Hants, England, 2000, p. 7

¹⁵⁸ David Piper - *Illustrated Art Library*, Portland House, New York, 1986, p. 297

Spain, is made gradually, through an almost *kinematic* process. From the desire to approach the real physical characteristics of the model, the art of portrait has undergone a process of transition and gradual expansion.

The first portraits of considerable size were made *from the side*. It took many decades for the partially turned *portrait and* then the *front portrait*, looking directly at the viewer to appear. With the advent of the first optical systems, *darkroom*, and *lucid room*, in the early 15th century in Flanders, we are witnessing an incredible revolution in the art of portraits. We can state that the *photo(graphy)* was invented then, only the actual transposition of the model's image was done through the artist, as the chemical technology of photo transposition would have to wait another four centuries before it was invented.

The Van Eyck brothers in the Netherlands, Holbein, and Durer in Germany, or Velazquez in Spain wrote exceptional pages in the history of European portraiture, along with the great names of Italian Renaissance painting. It's not just about the incredible acuity of the details, it's also about the secret science of organizing spaces, displaying points of interest, screens, contrasts, and the smallest details to support and highlight a whole arsenal of attributes, visible or less visible, to build a *portrait* of incredible expressive complexity. Leonardo da Vinci sends us an impressive message about the level of aspiration that Renaissance artists have for *The art of Portrait*: "If the poet says that he can inspire people with love, the painter has the power to do the same, in that he can put in front of his lover the true likeness of his beloved, often making him kiss and talk to him."¹⁵⁹



Fig. 5. Jan van Eyck – *Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434

Fig. 6. Gustav Klimt – *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I*, 1907

The renaissance, however, especially in the Netherlands and Germany, brings an innovative mystical spirit to the Art of Portrait. We are dealing with explorations of the depth of the human psyche and spirit and the relationship of the human being, in the set of plans that compose it, with different levels of reality and

¹⁵⁹ Martin J. Kemp - *Leonardo da Vinci: Science and the Poetic Impulse*, Journal of the Royal Society of Arts, Vol. 133, no. 5343 (Feb. 1985), p. 196

levels of accomplishment of the being. These concerns are also expressed in the art of portraiture, which sometimes takes on serious and disturbing accents: "Based on Culianu's studies on the Neo-platonic conceptions of the Renaissance regarding phantastykon pneuma, we have highlighted the essential historical features that define the imagination as an intermediate organ between the human and the supernatural regime. Also known as "pneuma phantastica", identifiable to some extent with the Platonic psyche, also called the astral body by modern spiritualists, this subtle vehicle, receptive to both physical stimuli and spiritual influences, seems to behave like a double mirror: with one side facing the sensitive plane and the other facing the intelligible plane. "¹⁶⁰

As I said, the technological revolutions in the Netherlands (optical systems and the onset of oil painting and drying *varnishes*) make a qualitative leap in the representation of portraits that had no reference in the European art of the time and would rival, over the centuries, the photography and the new visual environments of modernity: "Northern European artists have led the way in realistic portraits of secular subjects. This appetite for realism and the cult of detail, of the Nordic artists during the 15th century, was partly due to the delicate brushes and finer effects achieved with oil colors, while Italian and Spanish painters still used tempera. One of the earliest painters to develop the oil technique was Jan van Eyck. Oil colors can produce more texture and degrees of thickness and can be layered more efficiently, with the addition of thicker and thicker layers (a technological process known to painters as "thick over thin").

Also, the oil colors dry more slowly, allowing the artist to make changes easily, such as changing the details of the face. Antonello da Messina was one of the first Italians to take advantage of oil and petroleum-based paints. Trained in Belgium, he settled in Venice around 1475 and had a major influence on Giovanni Bellini and the school in northern Italy. "¹⁶¹ Not only at the level of pictorial technologies revolutionary elements appear, but also at the level of the study of light, which is transposed in a portrait, to favor the expression and the compositional ensemble.

Contrasting screens, unpredictable light sources, and cinematic optical effects are used: "A very high degree of grace in light and shadow is added to the faces of those sitting at the doors of dark rooms, where the eyes of the observer see the shaded part of the face hidden by the shadows of the room. And you see the luminous side of the face with the greater brightness that the air gives it. With this increase in shadows and light, the face is given more ease. "¹⁶²

The great artistic currents that followed after the Renaissance, refined the range of technological and psychological issues that are inherent in the European pictorial portrait. One of the most exciting chapters in the history of portrait art is Rembrandt's creation. Endowed with an impressive ability to capture and represent inflections of the look and expression of the face, but also a possessor of an exceptional talent of designer and colorist, Rembrandt created during his life a

¹⁶⁰ Radu Carnariu - *Visual Composition from a Trans-disciplinary Perspective*, Editura Artes, Iasi, 2020, p. 3

¹⁶¹ Robin Simon, *Portrait in Great Britain and America*, GK Hall & Co., Boston, 1987, p. 80

¹⁶² David Piper - *Illustrated Art Library*, Portland House, New York, 1986, p. 103

series of several hundred portraits and self-portraits, starting with the representation of his own face since adolescence and at a level of artistic complexity, difficult to imagine and achieve for today's times.

The portrait thus becomes a confession of faith or a message, a true psychological diary. We can say that Rembrandt's work represents for the Art of the Portrait what Dostoevsky pointed out in the art of the modern psychological novel. With the advent of chemical technology, which allowed the transposition of photographic images, a series of profoundly revolutionary currents and artistic movements were launched, which attested to the birth of modernity. To Rembrandt, in the same Dostoevsky key, is added the tragic-sized portrait work of Vincent van Gogh.

Starting with the same beginning of the twentieth century, the great liberation of creativity in all fields of research and knowledge of Reality takes place. Quantum physics appears in the same decade as abstractionism, cubism, surrealism, and Dadaism. The pictorial portrait is strongly overshadowed. It becomes the subject of representation only when it is approached in the algorithms of cubism or expressionism, so with strong deviations from the realistic and natural image of the human face: "The production of portraits in Europe (except Russia) and America generally declined in the 1940s and 1950s as a result of growing interest in abstraction and nonfigurative art. However, one exception was Andrew Wyeth, who became America's foremost realist portrait painter. With Wyeth, realism, though obvious, is secondary to the tonal qualities and disposition of his paintings. This is rightfully demonstrated by his landmark series of paintings known as "Helga" paintings, the largest group of portraits of a single person accomplished by an important artist (247 studies of his neighbor Helga Testorf, dressed and naked, in different surroundings, painted between 1971–1985)."¹⁶³

Once it regains its place in the modern art of the 20th century, the pictorial portrait becomes an opportunity to explore unlimited expressive and conceptual dimensions. Artists realize that when there is an exceptional talent and it is educated on all intellectual and spiritual levels of the human being, the perspective on art acquires unprecedented dimensions in the history of the arts. Overcoming the incredible fascination with photography and cinema, artists and audiences rediscover the power of pictorial metaphor. Even when making a hyper-realistic representation and competing with the camera, a painter can focus on two or more levels of clarity, as he decides. He focuses his attention and shapes the qualities of the surface as he pleases, in order to produce the desired psychological and aesthetic effects.

Elements of portrait architecture are reinvested with meanings and their potential is studied in the most unexpected situations. Theorist Gordon Aymar describes how much artistic power, for example, eyebrows can develop. They can transmit "almost alone, wonder, pity, fear, pain, cynicism, concentration, thought, dissatisfaction and expectation, in infinite variations and combinations."¹⁶⁴ The posture (stance) in which the modern and contemporary pictorial portrait is

¹⁶³ An American Vision: Three Generations of Wyeth Art, Little Brown & Company, Boston, 1987, p. 123

¹⁶⁴ Gordon C. Aymar - *The Art of Portrait Painting*, Chilton Book Co., Philadelphia, 1967, p. 93

approached no longer follows any traditional norm and speculates on all combinations and modifications of angles and expressions, dimensions and representation techniques: "The subject's head can turn from" full face " (front view) to profile (side view); a "three-quarter view" ("two-thirds view") is somewhere in the middle, ranging from almost frontal to almost profile (fraction is the sum of the profile [half of the face] plus "a quarter of the other side" - alternatively, each party is considered a third party).¹⁶⁵ Exercises of originality and plastic experiments have always been made throughout history, as in the case of multiple portraits, capturing views from several directions, as in the triple portrait of *Carol I, in three positions*, painted by Anthony van Dyck.¹⁶⁶

3. Results

The modern and contemporary portrait also reveals hypostases in which the face of the model no longer appears, it's up to the viewer to discover with his/ her imagination what would have been the physical and emotional features of the represented character: "Christina's World (1948) by Andrew Wyeth is a famous example, in which the picture of the woman with disabilities - facing her back to the viewer - integrates with the setting in which she is placed to convey the artist's interpretation."¹⁶⁷

No less famous are the portraits of his wife with the head turned, made by the German Gerhard Richter. There are situations in which the total size of the portrait is a defining conceptual aspect, as is the case of the huge portraits of Chuck Close, created for the exhibition in the museum. They are very different from most portraits designed to fit in the house or to travel easily with the client. Often, an artist considers where the final portrait will hang and the colors and style of the surrounding decor.

The psychological relationship of the artist with the represented model has always been a constructive dialogue in every era of art history. The client's expectations, when dealing with an order addressed to the artist, have always been the subject of dialogues, negotiations, or even disputes: "In terms of the fidelity of the portrait to the appearance of the model, portrait painters are generally consistent in their approach. Clients looking for Sir Joshua Reynolds knew they would get a flattering result, while Thomas Eakins' representatives knew how to expect a realistic and relentless portrait. Some subjects express strong preferences, others let the artist decide completely. Oliver Cromwell demanded that his famous portrait exhibits all the roughness of his face, pimples, warts and everything else you see, otherwise I will never pay anything for it".¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Betty Edwards - *Drawing on the right side of the brain*, 2017, Ed. Penguin, 2017, page 292

¹⁶⁶Gordon C. Aymar – *op. cit.* p. 283

¹⁶⁷ Idem, p. 119

¹⁶⁸ Idem, p.280

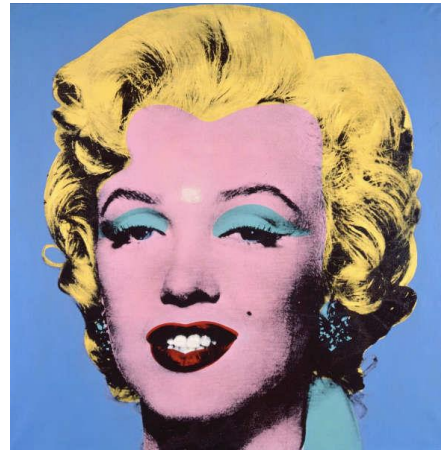


Fig. 7. Grant Wood – *American Gothic*, 1930

Fig. 8. Andy Warhol - *Marilyn Monroe*, 1962

When the interaction between the artist and his model materializes in favorable energy exchange, the portrait is loaded with artistic values that will surprise both the artist and the model represented, to the delight of both: "A successful portrait, however, can earn a client's lifetime's gratitude. Count Balthazar was so pleased with his wife's portrait created by Raphael, that he told the artist: "Your image ... alone can ease my worries. That image is my delight; I smile at her, it's my joy. " ¹⁶⁹

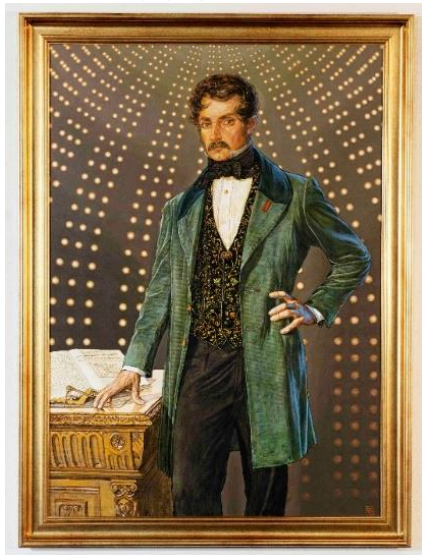


Fig. 9. Cristian Ungureanu - Portretul lui Gheorghe Asachi la 30 de ani", 2017, colecția autorului

Fig. 10. Cristian Ungureanu - Portretul lui Gheorghe Asachi la 30 de ani" (detaliu), 2017, colecția autorului

In the 1960s and 1970s, recent art history experienced a new explosion of interest in the genre of portraits due to the works of English painters Lucian Freud (grandson of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud) and Francis Bacon, anticipated by the successful boom of the fascinating portraits of celebrities by Andy Warhol. If in Freud's portraits we find an endless palette of contemplative feelings and emotions and even with accents of a Boticellian melancholy, the simple or compositional

¹⁶⁹ Gordon C. Ayma – *op. cit.*, p. 165

portraits of Bacon stand out for their infernal, horror appearance and energy. The interest of the public and the institutionalized commercial mechanisms of the art world, has led to the recent investment of enormous amounts in pictorial portraits. In May 2008, the portrait of Freud, *Benefits Supervisor Sleeping*, since 1995, has been auctioned off by Christie's in New York City for \$ 33.6 million, setting a world record for the selling value of a painting by a living artist.

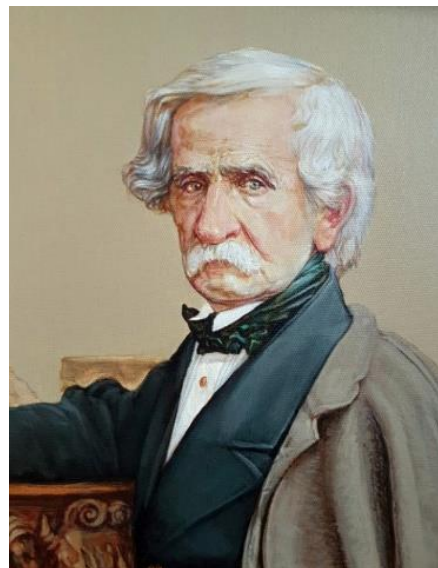


Fig. 11. Cristian Ungureanu – *Portretul lui Gheorghe Asachi la 80 de ani*, 2022, colecția autorului

Fig. 12. Cristian Ungureanu – *Portretul lui Gheorghe Asachi la 80 de ani*, (detaliu), 2022, colecția autorului

4. Conclusions

Many important artists of the end of modernity and the new millennium have invested considerable creative energies in the pictorial genre of portraits, gaining an excellent appreciation from the top critics and the general public in major artistic events. This testifies that the journey of the portrait and the self-portrait in history is far from over and that the human gaze and face, with all the details that make it up, looks like a complicated and fascinating book for those who have good eyes, talent, and "still healthy minds" to be able to express, look and distinguish what is offered to them for contemplation and admiration, in an ever more complex and complicated Reality, as is the age of the new Renaissance and the digital technology revolution, that we are now experiencing.

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