

CRAYON PORTRAITS

Synonyms: Crayon enlargement

“To many who know nothing about the art of crayon portraiture, the mastery of it not only seems difficult but unobtainable.” This opening sentence to J.A. Barhydt’s 1886 treatise entitled *Crayon Portraiture* reveals much about this particular genre. First is Barhydt’s unequivocal assertion that crayon portraiture is an art. Even after the passage of 120 years, this claim is startling as critical appreciation of crayon portraiture has been dulled by the sheer volume and ubiquity of these objects. Especially in the United States, these portraits abound and can be purchased very cheaply, sometimes sold incidentally more for the value of the frame than the portrait itself. Another revealing aspect of Barhydt’s opening line is the idea of “mastery.” Mastering a visual art, at least from a 19th century perspective, directly implies a complete understanding of the expressive potential of the medium as well as a comprehensive understanding of materials. The photographic literature of the time is filled with both aspects, filling page after page of detailed recommendations for materials and techniques as well as stylistic recommendations and aesthetic guidance.

From a materials standpoint, a crayon portrait is fundamentally a photographic enlargement that serves as a base for rendering using conventional artists’ materials such as Conté crayon, pastels and watercolors. The photographic image is typically silver-based made on a lightweight paper (while some platinum papers for enlarging were commercially available, these are scarce). In the middle of the 19th century, the paper base usually did not incorporate a binder while toward the end of the 19th century and into the early 20th century papers often had a gelatin binder with or without an underlying baryta coating. The fundamental prerequisite for the papers was that they have sufficient tooth to permit the subsequent application of media. Once the photographic image is fixed, the paper base is mounted to a secondary support, sometimes a light weight fabric adhered to a wooden strainer as was typical prior to the 1880’s, or to a medium weight paperboard as was typical toward the end of the century. The mounting adhesive is typically starch-based. A popular variation was to mold oval paperboard mounts by wetting and pressing the board into a convex lens shape. Paperboard mounts tended to be composed of unrefined wood pulp, which, after years of aging, can make these portraits extremely brittle and highly susceptible to physical damage. In addition, the inherent acidic nature of these mounts can contribute to an overall darkening and staining noticeable in the highlights of many crayon portraits. As most studios provided a fully finished presentation, with or without a mat, but routinely with glazing and a frame, standard sizes for crayon portraits were generally favored. Popular sizes were in the range of 20” x 16” and 24” x 20”, though larger portraits up to 30” x 24” were also made in large numbers.

Creating photographic enlargement during the middle of the 19th century provided some distinct technical challenges. The earliest “solar enlargers” date from the 1850’s. These specialized cameras gathered light from the sun using mirrors, condensing lenses

or both. The strongly focused sunlight would be directed through the back of the camera and through a conventional negative. The image would then be projected and focused onto light sensitive paper, either contained inside solar enlargers specially designed for this purpose or tacked in place on a studio wall or an easel. Most of the early papers were sensitized with silver chloride. Later in the century more light-sensitive silver bromide papers were favored. With the bromide papers the usual working practice was to create a fully “conventional” photographic image with a full range of image tones from highlight to shadow. On the other hand, the typical practice with the slower, less light-sensitive silver chloride papers, was to render only the broad forms and critical outlines of the subject. These differences are clearly evident in the finished portraits, as portraits dating closer to the middle of the 19th century appear more painterly and those dating from the end of the century and into the 20th century appear more photographic.

These fundamental technical differences had a great impact on the artistic development of the genre. As earlier images tended to be weaker and more diffuse, greater emphasis was placed on the abilities and discernment of the artist. For example Barhydt’s treatise is almost entirely devoted to the development and refinement of fundamental artistic principles, such as the rendering of volume through light and shade, conveying the character of the sitter through the application of color theory and an assimilation of classically ideal conceptions of beauty. A marked shift in the literature occurs toward the end of the 19th century as the underlying photographic image becomes increasingly dominant. Though still governed by certain aesthetic principles, the focus shifts towards removing “defects” caused not by technology but by the frailty and humanity of the sitters themselves. Step by step instructions proliferate on the artistic means to deal with bad skin, fat necks, terrible posture, wrinkles, out of control hair and opening closed eyes.

Whether the imperative was to work up a weak photographic image or to soften an overly dominant one, artists working in the genre of crayon portraiture more or less depended on similar tools and media. Though the contemporary conception of “crayon” implies a waxy media, the more traditional definition is broader encompassing any drawing medium in stick form such as pastels and charcoal. The most basic monochromatic renderings were often made using Conté crayon, a dense stick of black pigment similar to a hard pastel. The medium is often worked with a finger, tortillon or stomp. Somewhat more elaborate is the application of “crayon sauce.” This material was popular during the 19th century, but has since completely disappeared from contemporary catalogs of artists materials. Apparently, “crayon sauce” was a form of pastel provided not as a stick but in a soft cake. It was intended only for application with a finger, tortillon or stomp. Toward the latter part of the 19th century and into the 20th century the brush application of opaque paints such a gouache became increasingly common. Prior to this time, opaque applications of paint were often limited to dense white pigments often used to pick out highlights. Commercially available by the end of the 1880’s the airbrush was readily adopted by many crayon portraitists, especially to lay in soft, atmospheric backgrounds. For the most part crayon portraits are seemingly unvarnished, leaving the friable media susceptible to disruptions through physical contact.

Other preservation issues are plentiful. Removed from their frames, crayon portraits are extremely vulnerable to all manner of chemical and physical deterioration. As mentioned above, the papers and wood pulp backings tended to be relatively acidic. Given long-term exposure to light, elevated relative humidity and poor quality backing materials, crayon portraits can be extremely brittle to the point where even the most careful handling can cause severe breaks. Contemporary conservation treatments have often focused on removing the primary paper support from compromised paperboard or fabric backings. Once removed, the portrait can undergo aqueous treatment to reduce some of the acidic degradation products while diminishing staining visible in the highlights. Breaks and losses can likewise be more effectively stabilized once the piece is removed from the backing. This type of treatment is not without risk and can sacrifice some important original attributes. Weighing the perceived benefits against the potential cost sometimes makes for a difficult and highly subjective exercise.

Complicating matters is the fact that the conservation treatment of crayon portraits requires a great deal of time and can be very costly, especially relative to other treatments performed more routinely by a photograph conservator. In many cases the cost of even the most basic preservation steps, measured in time or money, significantly outweighs the perceived benefit. In essence, unless there is a direct sentimental attachment to the person depicted, most crayon portraits today have almost no value and are scarcely considered worth saving. Even in the 19th century Barhydt feels compelled to make an almost apologetic appeal for appreciation stating “Those who are disposed to treat disdainfully the work of finishing photographs in crayon and color as not demanding truly artistic qualities, should not forget that success here still has real value in awakening in many who undertake it a feeling for the art of a higher kind.” As a hugely popular genre, no doubt Barhydt was right that these portraits, displayed on the walls of millions of homes, often were successful in providing a pleasurable exposure to art and possibly even deepening nascent aesthetic sensibilities. Whether this function will eventually translate into value in a contemporary or future context, and then rescue a single crayon portrait, is an open question. Barhydt, the most articulate and ardent champion of the medium had no apparent lack of faith writing “Let courage be an important part of your equipment, if you would succeed in doing good crayon work.”

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