# The Portrait as a Mirror: Character Studies by David McCosh

If you have ever had your portrait painted, you've probably been surprised, maybe amused, perhaps perplexed because what you see in the painting is not what a mirror shows you. You see what the painter chose to portray, about you of course, but also about himself. Since the time of the ancient Greeks, the portrait painter has used the facts of the subject's appearance as the starting point for an imaginative exercise in psychology. And as we know, such an analysis can tell us as much about the analyst as it does about its subject.

Painters sometimes say that a painting isn't finished until it has a face that looks back at the viewer. This is true metaphorically for any painting, portrait or otherwise. The "face" is the painting's independent life. In portraits, the painting's face comes alive when the artist gives the image a unique, living personality. To do this, the artist must find a distinctive character in the subject that he understands well enough to express in paint. Often, character that is known this well is character that is shared. When the portrait reaches the point where it looks back at the artist, he sees something of himself. So in this sense, the portrait is like a two-sided mirror that reflects the image of the subject on one side, and the painter on the other.

The viewer, you or me, sees both the sides of the mirror. For the viewer, a portrait addresses that simple, but endlessly fascinating question we have about others: "who are you?" Who was Julius Caesar or Constantine? Who was the nameless tradesman from 15th century Flanders who stands before us now, the nobleman from 16th century Germany, the peasant of 19th century Holland? And who were the artists who gave us their portraits: the Greek and Roman sculptors, Memling, Holbein, Van Gogh?

Self-portrait, 1660
Rembrandt (Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn)
Oil on canvas; 31 5/8 x 26 1/2 in. (80.3 x 67.3 cm)
Metropolitan Msuem of Art

Portraits can also engage us in a discussion of the even bigger question: "who am I?" The Metropolitan Museum in New York City has a self-portrait of Rembrandt that I have been looking at for more than 40 years. It is not Rembrandt as the self-assured jokester we see in his early self-portraits. It is a portrait of a middle-aged man, who has taken some hard knocks in life. By the time he made this painting, Rembrandt's young wife had died, he had been through the equivalent of bankruptcy, and the wars, plagues and grief of 17th century Europe weigh heavily on him. His proud gaze has crumbled. He seems weary, worn. Yet his anxious, searching eyes burn through us. A lifetime is compiled in this face. Whenever I am in that great museum, I make a special point to see this painting. One day I happened to look at the tag on the wall next to it, noticed the date when the painting was made, computed how old Rembrandt was then, and understood for the first time the real hold this portrait had on me. Rembrandt made this painting when he was the same age that I was on that day. For all the years I had been looking at it, I was becoming the man in the painting. From that day on, the man in the painting would be the man that I once was. This portrait had become a mirror for me.

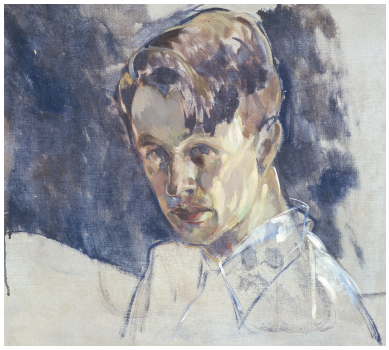
We think of David McCosh as a landscape painter. But during the years that he studied and taught in Chicago, people were most often his subject. The landscape paintings we remember him for came after he left the big city and moved to Oregon. McCosh always painted what he found unique and interesting about his surroundings. When he lived in Chicago, people dominated his work; when he lived in Eugene, the landscape was his great passion.

The Bachelor, 1932, oil on canvas, 25 x 30

In 1934, during the depths of the Depression, McCosh was employed by the Public Works of Art Project to paint portraits of workers at a Civilian Conservation Corps camp in Illinois. Think about that for a moment - a government sponsored program whose purpose was to commission gifted young painters to make portraits of workers. Not the great and wealthy of society, not its political leaders, but the common people. The sketch in this show for the painting "The Foreman" and the painting entitled "The Bachelor" were made around this time and they provide an interesting comparison.

"The Foreman" is an idealized, young worker portrayed as a hero - almost like a Greek Olympic champion. Boldly drawn with great balance and symmetry, the piece is obviously intended to illustrate the virtues of the American manual laborer. While there must have been a model who posed for the drawing, the piece is not about that individual; it is about the qualities he embodies.

The title of "The Bachelor" suggests that this work is also about universal qualities that a category of people share - in this case, a lonely man, sewing a button on clothes in need mending, seated in front of an open door which invites him out into the dark night. But unlike the Foreman, the Bachelor strikes us as an actual person, not a stereotype. His face is asymmetrical, which makes it possible for McCosh to create the impression of a man of multiple emotions which are complex, contradictory, and lifelike. The painting makes us ask, why is this man a bachelor? Was he always alone? Is he alone by choice? We don't know his name, but we sense that the Bachelor is a real person, because we see a history and a future in his face. David McCosh was 29 years old when he made this painting, romantically involved with his future wife, but still a bachelor. We might ask how much of McCosh is reflected in this painting.



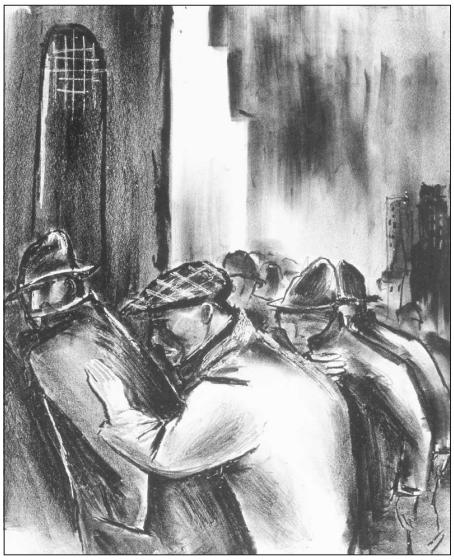
Self-Portrait, late 1920s, oil on canvas, 18 x 20

Yellow Sweater, 1936, oil on canvas, 17 x 20

The "Self-Portrait" which is undated, but probably from around 1928, is the very epitome of the intense, romantic young painter. The paint itself has a dashing, almost unfinished quality that neatly characterizes the young David McCosh. There is a young man each of us has known in this painting. In "Self-Portrait with Apple," painted in 1932, two years before McCosh moved to Oregon, we see an almost sarcastic depiction of a rather sullen young fellow who appears to be trying to look like a hayseed. Again, we know this guy. Is this how the hot young painter from Chicago felt about moving out to Oregon?

McCosh's most deeply emotional portraits are the paintings of his wife, Anne. Yet the titles of "Yellow Sweater" and "Blue Smock" (both from the 1930s) make us wonder what he thought was the real point of these paintings. Are they simply compositional studies - still-life paintings that happen to feature his beloved wife as a willing model? That hardly seems possible given the great care McCosh used to capture something of Anne's thoughts and feelings. Anne was a gifted artist who had studied at the Art Students League and managed a New York City gallery in the late 1920s and early 30s. His paintings of her always seem to show her lost in thought or in a sort of reverie. Those of us who remember her crusty and direct manner see a side of Anne in these portraits that she did not often reveal in her later years. David also did several sensitive paintings of Anne when he returned briefly to portraiture

in the 1940s ("Figure in a Hammock" and "The Red Vest"), but, for whatever reason, he never painted her again.



Parade, 1933, lithograph, 10 x 12

The Greeks believed that the portrait must depict the entire body, not just the face, because the soul is expressed throughout the body, not in the head alone. The belief that the body as a whole expresses personality is wonderfully illustrated by the watercolor entitled "Repast," where the hearty diners feast on their meals and on one another's company, and by "Parade," an especially bitter lithograph from the Depression years. In spite of its title, "Parade" is no celebratory march; it portrays a breadline. I remember Anne McCosh telling me that this print sent chills through her as it brought back the terrible emotions she felt when she saw these long lines of beaten but angry men, unable to support themselves and their families, desperate for food.

Had McCosh stayed in Chicago, we would almost certainly know him today as a painter whose great subject was the people of his time. While he would have had a different subject, I suspect he would have been the same painter. His portraits and character studies have the technical and structural integrity we see in all of his best work. They are based upon careful observation, and they focus on what is distinctive, special, and personal about his subject, just as his landscape paintings do. But because their subject is people, we respond differently. We find emotion in them, we speculate about the experience that shaped them, at times we may even speak to the paintings as if they could answer us. I imagine that if we asked McCosh about this, he might say something like: "That's good. Now try thinking like that about landscape painting."

Roger Saydack
September 2005

Note: The best study of portraiture that I know is regrettably long out of print, but well worth searching for: "Likeness: A Conceptual History of Ancient Portraiture," by James D. Breckenridge (Northwest University Press, 1968). Breckenridge brilliantly relates ancient portraiture to the changing politics and philosophies of those times. This book first articulated for me the questions that a portrait can ask.

Essay to accompany exhibit: The Portrait as a Mirror: Character Studies by David McCosh, curated by Roger Saydack, October 4 — November 12, 2005 at Karin Clarke Gallery, Eugene.