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Physiology and Photography: The Evolution of Franz von Lenbach's Portraiture

by Carola Muysers

Fig. 1 Franz von Lenbach, *Giapello*, ca. 1865/66. Pastel on cardboard. Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich

Introduction

In an 1878 letter to his confidante Josephine von Wertheimstein, the German painter Franz von Lenbach wrote, "The great problem for me is [to capture] people's fleeting expressions, but I believe and hope I shall surmount this obstacle."[1] This was a startling admission, given that Lenbach, at age forty-two, was well on his way to becoming one of the best-known and highest-paid portraitists in the German Empire. By 1878 he had already painted portraits of such public figures as King Ludwig I of Bavaria (1866), Richard Wagner (1872), and Emperor Franz-Joseph I (1873).

In this article, I argue that the late 1870s (immediately after the artist settled in Munich, in 1876, to devote himself full-time to portraiture) constituted a period of reflection during which Lenbach rethought the concept of portraiture, reviewed his past practices, and created a new method of portrait painting that led to some of his most interesting works in this genre. This method, as we shall see, was developed in large part to overcome various problems Lenbach began to have with the traditional practice of posing the sitter in the studio. Even before the mid-1870s he hardly ever completed a portrait in the presence of a sitter, though he had asked clients to pose for preliminary drawings or oil sketches. After settling in Munich, he became increasingly dissatisfied with the "atelier pose." For one, his sitters too often fell into stereotypical poses. More importantly, Lenbach found that it was impossible to bring out the character of a sitter frozen in a single pose for an entire sitting.

Lenbach's new strategy positioned him as one of the most modern artists in the *Kaiserreich*, a development that challenges the widespread perception of him today as a traditional, even conservative, painter.[2]

Physiognomy vs. Physiology

Lenbach himself attributed his initial attraction to portraiture to his keen ability to observe and analyze anatomical forms. In 1897 he told Wilhelm Wyl, one of his biographers:

> Even then I noticed that I had uncommonly little imagination and could remember only one thing: the organic logic of nature, if I may be allowed to put it that way. I could see, for instance, how a specific person's ear emerged out of his head and once I had seen that, it stuck with me as an organic inevitability and it appeared before my eyes whenever I thought of it.[3]

Lenbach's portrait drawing of the Italian actor "Giapello" of 1865/66[4] (fig. 1) reveals his acute gift for observation. Using pastel, the artist outlined roughly the most salient parts of the head: the curved nose, the transition between nose and mouth, and the chin, neck tendons, ears, back of the head, start of the eyebrows, hollows beside the nostrils, and corners of the mouth.

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The soft transitions in the facial structure are executed in white chalk, smudged to achieve the desired effect. The facial expression is characterized by a subtle but telling detail: from the narrowed eyes, parted lips, and slightly protruding lower jaw, we get the impression that the actor is speaking, probably reciting a dramatic line.

In this drawing we can see that Lenbach's interest went beyond merely copying the head in all its structural and surface details; he wished to capture a characteristic expression of the sitter. Over the years, the artist became increasingly convinced that to achieve a telling likeness he had to record his sitter's facial expression and body movements rather than present an exact, two-dimensional copy of the sitter's overall appearance.

Lenbach's evolution as a portraitist reflects his era's re-envisioning of human character and the way character manifests itself visually. As early as 1856, the anatomist E. Harless, in his *Lehrbuch der plastischen Anatomie für akademische Anstalten und zum Selbstunterricht* (Textbook of plastic anatomy for academic use and self training), criticized the popular theories of Johann Caspar Lavater, who at the end of the eighteenth century had postulated that a person's psychological traits influence the shape, structure, and proportions of the head. Consequently, Lavater had reasoned, human physiognomy was a major indicator of personality, a theory that Harless called into question by noting that more could be gathered about a person's character by studying the movement of the facial muscles than by taking measurements of the skull.[5]

In 1867, eleven years after Harless offered the first major critique of Lavater's ideas, Theodor Piderit published *Wissenschaftliches System der Mimik und Physiognomik* (A scientific system for expression and physiognomy), a textbook for physiologists and psychologists, as well as artists and art critics. In this book, Piderit suggested that it was not the physiognomy of a person, but rather the physiology—the facial expressions and movements—that revealed a person's inner nature.[6] Piderit emphasized the difference between momentary and steady movements of the face, arguing that it was the latter which formed the characteristic expression of a human being.

Physiology and Photography

Piderit's book was widely known in its time, so it is reasonable to assume that Lenbach was familiar with the author's ideas and that they had influenced his changed approach to portrait painting after 1876. His new strategy was marked by the elimination of the formal atelier pose in favor of the artist's observation of the model seated informally and even moving slightly around the studio. Photography—which Lenbach had used only occasionally early in his career—began to play a major role. By the early 1880s the portraitist regularly hired professional photographers such as Friedrich Wendling, Adolf Baumann, and Karl Hahn to photograph his sitters, an effort made easier by the dry plates that had recently come on the market, and by the box camera.

Lenbach himself described his new method: "Once I have drawn the figure from life (and I always do that first) and I have had the movement photographed, it becomes a matter of fleshing it out

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with the help of photography and the imagination."[7] What distinguished Lenbach's method was not the production of portraits with the aid of sketches and photographs but his use of photographs of movement and his decision to "flesh out" these photographs rather than slavishly copy them.

The following example illustrates Lenbach's standard procedure. About 1895 the artist was commissioned to paint a portrait of the Egyptologist Georg Ebers. Ebers came to Lenbach's studio in the company of his son Hermann, who left an account of what occurred there.[8] The artist began by replacing Ebers's uninspiring coat with a dark, fur-trimmed cape and the slouch hat of a scholar. Under the pretext of getting to "know the model by heart," he first engaged the sitter in conversation, in the course of which Hermann heard clicking sounds behind some black curtains. It turned out that Karl Hahn was snapping photographs of the subject whenever Lenbach gave him a discreet hand signal.

Fig. 2 Karl Hahn, *Four Portrait Studies of Georg Ebers*, ca. 1895. Photographs. Lenbacharchiv Neven-Dumont, Cologne

Four of the twenty photographs Hahn took during that session survive (fig. 2). All show Ebers before a white background and the differences between his poses are slight, yet the psychological effects are astonishingly varied. In one shot, Ebers tilts his head forward menacingly, his eyes hidden by the brim of the hat. A second shows him standing straight and looking up to the left with a fixed, hostile gaze. In the third, he looks directly at the viewer, and a slight twist of the head and body lends a sense of energetic movement to the whole. The fourth photograph captures a glowering Ebers holding the hat in his hand.

The Ebers series shows that Lenbach had two major concerns. One was that the sitter not be conscious of being photographed. The other was that the sitter respond naturally, rather than fall into an stereotypical yet uncharacteristic pose. In this way, Lenbach put the physiological teachings of Piderit into practice in his new sittings.

One chapter of Piderit's textbook, devoted to the eye, seems especially relevant to Lenbach's practice.[9] The author shows how movements of the eye reflect a person's thinking. Central to his discussion is the concept of "mental performance." Piderit suggests that a fixed gaze can be focused on something real or something imaginary: "A person gazes fixedly when he encounters actual objects in real life or imagined ones in his fantasy, or when he sets out to act with determination or apply himself to intense thought." The notion of "mental performance" is relevant to Lenbach's practice because he never asked sitters to assume an arbitrary expression or pose, but rather engaged them in intellectual conversation, encouraging them to talk about their professions.[10] In some cases, he asked sitters to listen to music. By creating an atmosphere in which the sitters acted naturally but not casual or bored, their expressions became both unaffected and interesting.

"Fleshing Out" the Portraits

How did Lenbach "flesh out" his portraits? In other words, how did he move from the photographs of movement to the finished portrait? The artist would paste a series of snapshots on a piece of cardboard. (At first he used single shots, later contact prints.)[11] Seeing these movements in sequence gave him a sense of the range of the sitter's expressions and helped Lenbach select the most characteristic one for the portrait. Once the best parts of several photographs had been selected, the artist copied them onto his canvas. Beginning with such traditional aids as square grids, Lenbach proceeded to tracings and finally to *photopeinture*.

In this last method he would enlarge and print a negative on a specially prepared canvas, placing washes on the barely visible positive that was ultimately covered with lights and shades.[12] The painting was never an exact copy of a single photograph, however, as the artist often incorporated elements from several photographs and drawings.

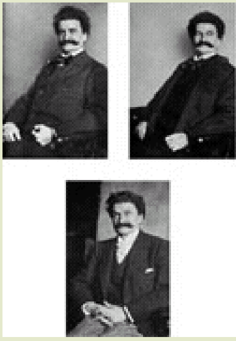

Fig. 3 Unknown photographer, *Three Portrait Studies of Johann Strauss*, ca. 1895. Lenbacharchiv Neven-Dumont, Cologne

Lenbach's portrait of Johann Strauss serves to illustrate this method. The composer commissioned a portrait in 1895. Photographs were taken, then sketches were made, and then, in the absence of the client, the final picture was produced. The photographs (fig. 3) show the sitter looking in different directions—directly at the viewer, to the right, and toward the ceiling. They also record different hand positions. In one the left hand is drawn into a fist on the arm of the chair; in another his hands rest lightly on his thighs; in a third they are folded together in his lap. The artist appears to have been concerned with the creation of a harmonious distribution of light and dark areas, for he first had Strauss photographed in a black suit with dark tie, then in light trousers, dark jacket, and white cravat.

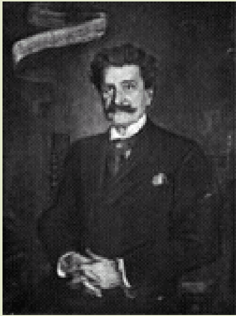

Fig. 4 Franz von Lenbach, *Johann Strauss*, ca. 1895. Oil on canvas. Location unknown

The photographs provided specific details that the painter combined to produce the finished portrait (fig. 4). He ultimately chose the dark clothing on a dark background, but he adopted the position of the head and the facial expression from the photograph in which the composer wears lighter colors. By changing the direction of the sitter's gaze—showing him looking straight at the viewer—Lenbach gives the impression that Strauss is concentrating. The musical score in the upper left corner of the picture suggests that the composer is listening to music. This detail appears to have been added as an afterthought, as if the artist had some difficulty with the portrait and hoped it would enhance the mood he intended to capture.

The Sitter and the Photograph

Although the new medium of photography was widely used by artists, many who resorted to it tended to keep this a secret.[13] A work of art was supposed to be unique, the product of a master's hand.[14] The use of photography seemed to contradict this expectation. Lenbach was aware of this attitude and both diplomatic and shrewd in relation to it. When he had sensitive sitters, he dissimulated his practice of making photographs by hiding the camera behind curtains, as he did during the visit of Georg Ebers. In the case of prominent sitters like Otto von Bismarck or Helmuth Graf von Moltke, who were accustomed to being photographed, he did not disguise the photography.[15]

None of Lenbach's clients seemed to have welcomed this new technique as enthusiastically as Richard Wagner did. The composer and his wife carefully cultivated his reputation, working to popularize a quite specific public image.[16] Lenbach clearly played a role in this process, painting no less than four images of Wagner. One of these, a half-length portrait in false profile from 1881–82 (fig. 5), merits closer consideration.

This portrait was painted in oils and thin washes of pigment on

Fig. 5 Franz von Lenbach, *Richard Wagner*, 1881/82. Oil and graphite on cardboard. Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich

the untreated ground of a cartoon, a technique that permitted repeated reworking and retouching without long drying times. Beneath the layers of color, we can see the preliminary pencil drawing in which the painter laid out the shapes of the ears, eyes, mouth, and hair. The portrait was based on photographs by Josef Albert (fig. 6), and there were sittings as well, so one can assume that the painter combined his sketches "from nature" with the tracing or copying of photographs.[17] Wagner's attire—a white shirt with broad collar, a dark cravat, and a black jacket—is only suggested with a few thick strokes, and is typical of what a middle-class man of the period might wear on a special occasion.

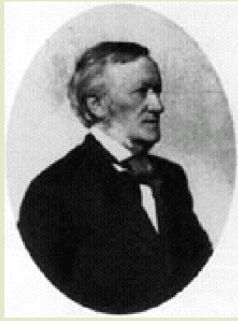

Fig. 6 Josef Albert, *Richard Wagner*, 1880. Reproduced in Solveig Weber, *Das Bild Richard Wagners: Ikonographische Bestandsaufnahme eines Künstlerkults* (Mainz-New York: Schott, 1993).

The composer looks uncommonly stern, with his thin, tightly pressed lips, his jutting chin, and his greenish eyes gazing slightly upward. The impression is underscored by the sharply drawn creases next to his nose, the horizontal ones across his nose between his eyes, and the vertical lines down the middle of his forehead.

This portrait can be fully appreciated only by considering Wagner's own artistic vision. At his Bayreuth Festival, he insisted that the audience, seated in a darkened, amphitheater-like auditorium, concentrate on the music and the action onstage.[18] This same domineering manner is apparent in the portrait. From his unfriendly, imperious expression, one gets the sense that the composer controlled his sittings as carefully as he did the musical public. In an essay on the "artistic personality," Wagner explained, "the more resolute his external expression of his inner self, the higher his stature as an artist."[19] Apparently Lenbach meant to conjure forth the artist from Wagner's outward appearance. The musician's brightly illuminated face appears to loom out of the shadowy background as though from a darkened stage. Even without making direct eye contact, he commands the viewer's full attention.

Conclusion

This essay has shown how, from the late 1870s onward, Lenbach developed a new concept of portraiture and a new method of portrait painting that were uniquely his own. His interest in his sitters' physiology, rather than their physiognomy, led him to make use of photography, with which he could capture the fleeting appearances of the sitter as he thought, spoke, or moved about the studio. Series of photographs registered the sitter's changing expressions and provided the artist with a choice of images from which he could choose to create a finished portrait that would fully express the sitter's character and personality.

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Bibliography

1. Franz von Lenbach to Josephine von Wertheimstein, 14 August 1878; see Wichmann 1973, unpag.

2. For this perception, see Jensen 1977, p. 23; Ludwig 1978, p. 41; Ebertshäuser 1979, p. 110; and Neidhardt 1990, p. 61.

3. Wyl 1897, p. 111.

4. See Mehl 1980, p. 34.

5. Harless 1856, pp. 15, 116.

6. Piderit 1867, pp. 22, 40.

7. Baranow 1986, p. 62.

8. Ibid.

9. Piderit 1867, pp. 61, 66f.

10. Mehl 1972, p. 134.

11. Rosenberg 1905, pp. 67f.

12. Popp 1902, pp. 236f.

13. It is well known that Franz von Lenbach, Franz von Stuck, Eduard Grützner, Franz Defregger, and Joseph Aigner used the technique of *photopeinture*. Karl Stauffer-Bern, Wilhelm Leibl, and Friedrich August von Kaulbach worked with the help of photography. See Schmoll 1987, pp. 78, 85.

14. Schasler 1875.

15. Schmoll 1969, nos. 251–52.

16. Weber 1993, pp. 277–79.

17. The sittings took place in Munich in November 1880; see Glasenapp 1911, vol. 6, p. 399.

18. Sennett 1993, p. 268.

19. Wagner 1872, pp. 78f.

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