

Like the others of us.

Face, bodies and posture in baroque portraits

(Rome 17th – 18th C.)

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My paper aims to investigate images representing family members or members of other communities who were largely inspired by the family model. How did men and women in the past encode family portraits and what sense did images “of them” have in their cultural context? Could portraits at home or in other institutional domestic spaces be considered vehicles for cultural transmission within the family, the religious order or within the brotherhood or guild that jealously guarded them?

Family portraits were frequently found in 17th-century private dwellings. In both aristocratic palaces and in the homes of jurists and painters, portraits conveyed the importance of continuing one’s blood-line, profession or membership in a particular group. Portraits – “honorific goods” – held great importance in bequests; precisely because they depicted a family member, these portraits were kept within close family circles. In this regard “familiar” images acted as parts of a cultural heritage of groups who claimed their property. But portraits were special objects because usually represented men and women who looked alike: they had the same facial features, same clothes or a posture of the same kind. When men and women looked at the images they recognized themselves, especially when the persons depicted all resembled each other or looked very much like the idea they had of their ancestors.

The portraits arranged in aristocratic palaces, in monasteries or in military academies were hung according to the real-life blood or friendship ties of the people portrayed. The place where portraits were exhibited was chosen with great care in order to ensure the highest visibility. Images of “those of the same blood” were expected to transform dwellings into a family shelter and to strengthen links between the viewers. The portraits of the most illustrious nuns in convents were the focus of attention for the young girls entering them and models to follow. In a certain sense, images of others of same community “acted” inside the space, so the shape of the place where they were exhibited had to be conducive to this activity. The art work is then embedded in a network of relationships in which they act upon they viewers.

A comparative examination of different portrait collections over time will show what particular effects various spaces were intended to produce in that particular space (emulation, inclusion, protection or incitement to action ...).

In recent years, neuroscientists and cognitive psychologists have decoded the mechanisms by which a familiar image is perceived; they have also analysed in detail how faces and bodies produce emotions. Other scholars who studied studying self-projections processes (the action to project alternative situations before they happened) highlighted the complex mechanisms of identification with a codified posture or with a resembling image. The interesting results of these investigations have increasingly linked the social construction of behaviour to the anatomy and biology of human brain.

Cross-referencing different sources and adopting an approach that combines different disciplines, the paper will focus on the effects that a *familiar* face could produce on a viewer (male or female) in Old Regime. Aware that a picture (or, even more, a portrait) can instil fear, awe, love ... men and women used portraits as vehicles for educating new generations and placed them in spaces that were specifically designed and shaped to optimize the impact of a family image. By considering how they did this, we could discover the relevance of facial and bodily emotions in European culture.