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Portraits Matter

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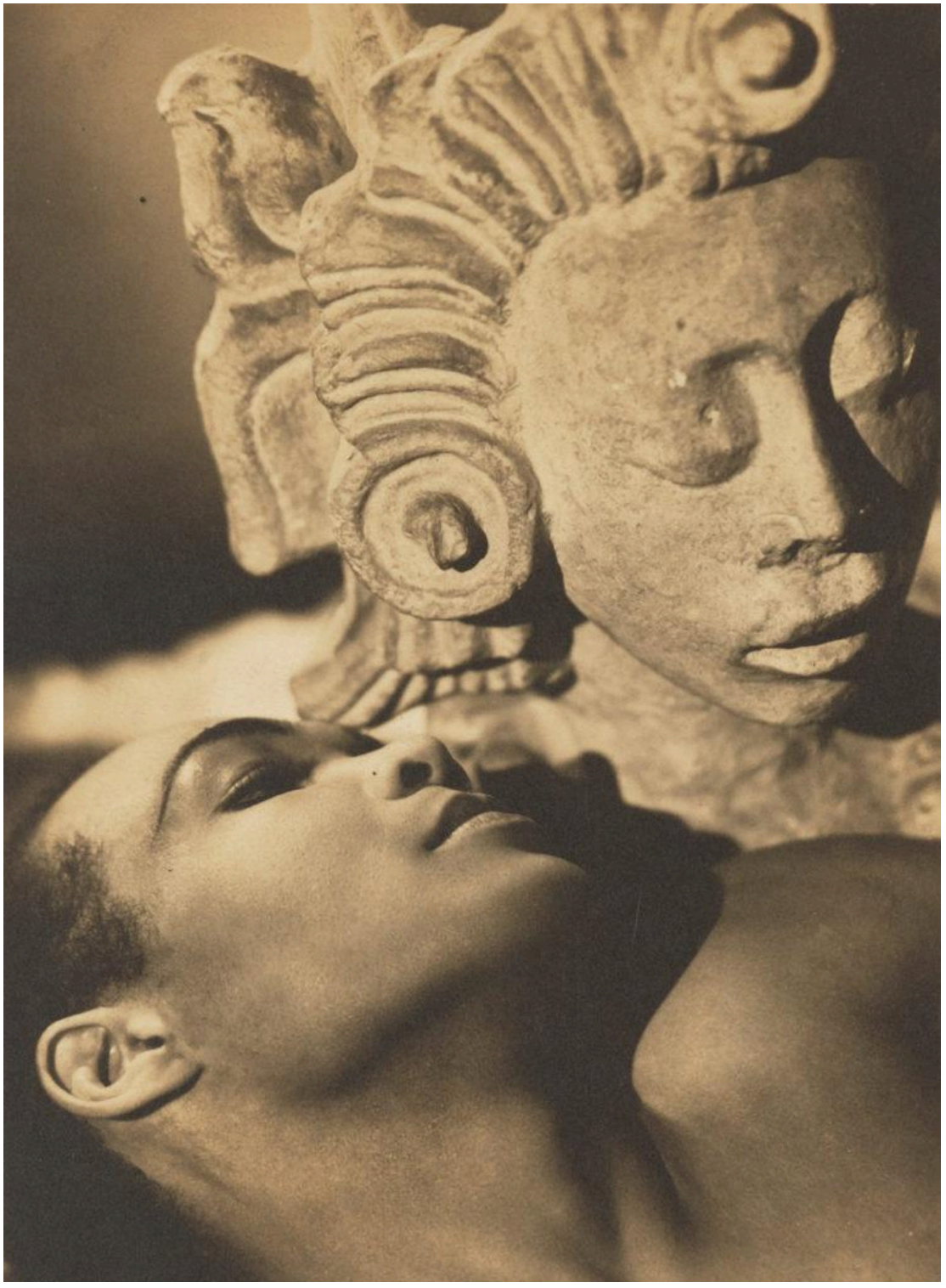

Berto Pasuka, by Angus McBean, 1947© Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University

by Volker M. Welter

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Judging by the crowd, of which I was part when recently visiting London's National Portrait Gallery, the attraction of portrait painting is undiminished. This was especially obvious in the galleries dedicated to the *BP Portrait Award 2016*, the yearly show of the latest and best in British and worldwide portraiture. The exhibits ranged from traditional to modern, from the dressed to the naked human bodies, from works on paper and canvas to photography, from well-known artists to names I at least had never heard about but was excited to see their works on the walls of the National Portrait Gallery.

Founded in 1856, "as a collection of portraits of eminent British men and women", as the art historian David Rodgers explains in the online *Oxford Companion to Western Art*, the range and display of works in the National Portrait Gallery has come a long way. Go into any of the permanent galleries focusing on early periods of British history, and you are greeted by venerable lords and ladies, barons and baronesses, royalties, and other noble men and women. Visit galleries dedicated to latter times, and the kind of sitter whose portraits are shown widens significantly. Increasingly scholars, academics, poets and artists are, for example, included. Jostle with the many visitors for a good view in the annual portrait award show, and you realise that sitters and visitors are increasingly alike.

Those who look down at you from the walls—actually mostly at you in eye height—look like those who look back at them. There were portraits exhibited that showed London youth loitering at bus stops, faces which have grown old into dense networks of wrinkles, figures that stand in stooped postures comparable to those who shuffle from portrait to portrait. Moreover, those sitters whose names are known (or so one thinks) are often depicted in settings and appearance as if they were one of us, the crowd. Visitors and sitters merge to a degree that any museumgoer who suddenly freezes into a living statue—comparable to those on Trafalgar Square outside of the National Portrait Gallery—could easily be mistaken for just another portrait on show. One (lasting?) difference is that many sitters for contemporary portraits "assume an artificial expression", a kind of "camera face" as Lorne Campbell calls it in her contribution on portraiture to *Grove Art Online*. They seem to be aware of their own, or at least some importance that comes with being portrayed.

The faces of the visiting crowd are much more difficult to read. What makes us look at portraits? Is it the obvious delight in seeing beautiful faces and bodies? (By not depicting obvious ugliness, contemporary portraiture may be politically correct, but diminishes a traditional distinction in art between, to cite Campbell once more, "images of beautiful people" and "true portraits.") Or the realisation that every portrait is in the end only an image of another sitter who, like Dorian Gray, will eventually age? Or an awareness of our own transience, and thus envy that those who are portrayed will live on, even if only in form of a painted or photographed likeness on display in a museum or a gallery?

A different exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, *Black Chronicles: Photographic Portraits 1862-1948*, which is on show until 11th December of this year, throws a sharp light onto the double-jeopardy sitters for portraits potentially face. Over time, those portrayed can and, more likely than not, will be forgotten; yet the existence of a portrait is also often the first step towards remembering them. *Black Chronicles* brings together approximately forty black and white photographs of Black and Asian individuals, who lived and worked in mainland Britain before 1948; the year when with the arrival of almost 500 citizens from Jamaica on the MS Empire Windrush of immigrants began coming to the UK.

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Mr and Mr Davies, by Camille Silvy, 1862 © National Portrait Gallery, London

Conceptually, *Black Chronicles* intervenes into the existing displays of the National Portrait Gallery. One gallery, the heart of the exhibition, shows large-size reproductions of historic portrait photographs of Black and Asian people. Into two other galleries, *Black Chronicles* temporarily inserts display cases with black and white portraits and group photographs. In the permanent display “Expansion and Empire” (gallery 23) the large portraits of Brits involved in the creating and administering the Empire are now juxtaposed with images of African chiefs, soldiers, and other officials attending the House of Commons or visiting England for various reasons. Among the latter

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is, for example, a group of pygmies from the Congo that, as the caption explains, performed and recorded the first sub-Saharan music in the UK. A comparable juxtaposition was created in the permanent gallery “A National Portrait: Britain 1919-1959” which is now enriched with a display case showing photographs of members of Les Ballet Nègres, the first all-black ballet group, and its founder Berto Pasuka (1911-1963).

The images in the display cases are shown in their original, usually small sizes, which obliges a viewer to study them attentively. By comparison, the larger paintings on the walls can often be taken in, even if superfluously, by just walking by. The differences in sizes and mode of display capture the two way-relationship between those who ruled the empire and/or were mostly natives of Britain and the immigrants and visitors. The former dominate the rooms, the latter are present, but are visible only when one specifically looks for those vitrines. Among the portraits on the walls, one sees many known figures of British political and cultural history; to know whose image is included in the vitrines requires close reading of the captions and accompanying texts.

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*Berto Pasuka, by Angus McBean***,** 1947© Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University

The centrepiece of *Black Chronicles,* the first gallery visitors encounter when walking up the main staircase, mimics permanent displays elsewhere in the building. The aforementioned large-scale reproductions line the walls and additional cases show more images in their original size. The focus here rests on the wealth of portraits and biographical information that is available once one looks and searches for people of Black or Asian descent who have lived in the UK before approximately the end of the Second World War. Among the portraits on display is a series of members of the African Choir, fourteen singers who toured Great Britain and America between 1891 and 1893 in

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order to raise money for a college back home in South Africa. All members of the choir are named, even if the biographical information varies for individual sitters. The caption accompanying the portraits of Paul and Eleanor Xiniwe, for example, offers plenty of details about the couple's life, whereas that for Johanna Jonkers' image simply states that next to nothing is known about her. And this despite the fact that she had been interviewed by the *Illustrated London News* in August 1891. Among other portraits with more extensive biographies are photographs of Ndugu M'Hali (Kalulu) (c.1865–77), the personal servant of Henry Morton Stanley (1841-1904), who, when searching for Livingston, was given the boy as a slave by an Arab merchant, and of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875–1912), a successful composer who had studied violin and composition at the Royal College of Music, but died at early age.

One of the most fascinating exhibits is a studio daybook of photographer Camille Silvy (1834–1910). On any given day, Silvy chronologically mounted in large ledgers small prints of the portraits taken that day, including the names of the sitter and an order number. At first sight, the daybook suggests the normality of a photographer going about his business, including taking—in the 1860s—portrait photographs of black sitters such as Sarah Davies (*née* Forbes Bonetta, 1843–1880) and James Pinson Labulo Davies (1829–1906). Yet in order to include in the exhibition the portraits of a couple that had once lived in the UK, an illustrated, administrative document was the only available exhibit. There is perhaps no other object in the exhibition that captures in such neat manner the invisibility of knowledge and loss of awareness about the Black and Asian people who lived in mainland Britain well before the middle of the twentieth century.

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Pandit Ram Gopal, by George Hurrell, 1948 © reserved; collection National Portrait Gallery, London

Black Chronicles is curated by Autograph ABP; a London-based charity that was co-founded in 1988 by the gay photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode (1955-1989). Focusing on “photography, cultural identity, race, representation and human rights”, Autograph ABP organizes exhibitions, and builds up and maintains, since 2008, the Archives & Resource Centre, the first UK collection dedicated to culturally diverse photography. The current exhibition is part of *The Missing Chapter* project that The Heritage Lottery Fund supports since 2013. The goal of this project, as stated on the website of Autograph ABP, is “to locate, preserve and present rarely-seen photographs of people from different

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cultural backgrounds living and working in Britain prior to 1945, with a focus on unearthing images taken during the Victorian and Edwardian eras."

For a historian like myself, for whom biographical research is an important methodology to approach architectural history, my main field of research, the exhibition raises interesting questions. Various captions point out that some of the exhibits have only recently been 'discovered' in the Hulton Archive. While being preserved in a photographic archive, these portraits have nevertheless remained invisible until recently. Perhaps nobody knew about them, which can happen for reasons as simple as that cataloguing an archive is incomplete. Accordingly, this fate can (and will) meet many portraits of all sorts of people preserved in archival collections.

More interesting is to ponder why nobody seems to have ever asked or searched for these portraits, a request that would require a willingness on the side of the historian to assume that such portraits may have been taken in the first instance and may still exist. Theorising relationships between colonizers and colonized (or other, abstracted concerns) tend to consider individual human beings primarily as representatives of larger collectives. Whereas the focus *Black Chronicles* places in addition to their visual representations on the biographies of the sitters suggests an advantage of a more biographically oriented research methodology; an approach that not only describes and analyses the gaps in our knowledge of history, but also overcomes the latter.

To give just one small, additional example from my own discipline, architectural history. Coincidentally, while writing this text, I was also reading a recent biography of the two German architect brothers, Bruno and Max Taut. A son of Bruno Taut studied in London for a year in 1929. In his letters to his family, he commented on the—to him until then unfamiliar—appearance and colourful dresses of Indian women students in the streets of London. One can classify such observations as the 'orientalist' musings of some European. Alternatively, one can find delight in having 'found' in the account of an individual life a contemporary, Benjaminian trace pointing at a larger historical reality. The knowledge about these 'other' inhabitants of London and Britain is out there, if not in the official halls of fame reserved for the few, then in the biographies of the many.

Black Chronicles manages exceptionally well a difficult double act. First, to challenge the established order of the National Portrait Gallery (not that the display of this institution has remained static or stuck in the past) by inserting into its spaces portraits of people of African, African-American, or Asian background. Second, to insert back into history—even if only temporarily in the form of an exhibition display, though a book on the entire *Black Chronicles* project is forthcoming—the faces and the lives of those individuals that were then excluded and have, since then, often been forgotten. Beside the fascinating portraits, the great strength of the exhibition are, however, the glimpses it grants into individual biographies. Portraits matter. Portraits and biographies together matter even more.

About the Author:

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