

Portraits

How do you tell the story of a collection of art? Where does that story begin? With the building of a gallery, or with a founding gift of artworks? Do you begin with the creation of the artworks or even the lives of the artists themselves?

In addressing these questions, many of the exhibitions at the Whitworth's reopening celebrate the story of the gallery's collection through its periods of building and expansion, and through major gifts that have greatly shaped the collection today. But many of the artworks that make up the collection inevitably began their life long before any conception of the Whitworth. They were, in the vast majority, made without any thought of the collection within which they have come to reside. Many works predate the gallery's formation by hundreds of years, others were made on different continents, and many more were made without the expectation of being shown in a gallery at all. Together, however, these individual works of art, each made in different circumstances, shape the collection, and give the Whitworth's collection its unique personality.

Portraits is a way of telling an alternative story. It is ultimately a portrait of the collection itself. And like any good portrait, it looks again at the legends, while seeking out and illuminating private moments. It hints at the breadth of the collection and the multiplicity of the stories contained within.

Several of the portraits here are of key figures in the Whitworth's past. Joseph Whitworth, the industrial philanthropist who gave an endowment and his name to the gallery; Robert Darbishire, an executor of Whitworth's will, and Margaret Pilkington, honorary director of the gallery for over 20 years, and possibly the first female director of an art gallery in the UK. Others are of unknown subjects by unknown artists, chance fragments, perhaps saved from an afternoon of quick sketching. Many more of those portrayed are artists themselves, sitting in repose or at work in the studio, revealing the people and the work behind each artwork.



Thomas Benjamin Kennington 1856-1916, *Sir Joseph Whitworth (1803-1887)*, oil on canvas (presented by Robert Dukinfield Darbishire in 1908)

The Whitworth has a surprising number of artist portraits, some made for publication by printers and engravers working from existing works of art, others portraits of artists made by their friends. Of these, the best known is Francis Bacon's portrait of Lucian Freud.

Throughout their friendship Bacon and Freud made several portraits of each other. These reciprocal portraits are not just seen as great works of art, but become documents of the relationship between two great painters of the 20th century. They punctuate their life stories,

illuminating biographies which, for both of these artists, are often discussed as much as their art. Bacon resisted the publishing of his life stories, fearing it would belittle his work and even change the reading of it. Certainly today we know more, and think more about his life than he may have liked, but the reason we are fascinated in his life is because of the extraordinary art he made; we are intrigued to know more about where these images came from.

Interest in the life stories of artists is nothing new. Giorgio Vasari first published the *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* in 1550. It is regarded as the first work of art history, and has remained well read to this day, not only as an excellent source of factual knowledge, but also as a rich repository of anecdotes. Vasari gives accounts of an artist who is afraid of bells, Donatello shouting at his sculptures and jealousy between artists that results in murder. Subsequently some of Vasari's accounts have proven not to be entirely true, the murder actually happening after the supposed murderer had in fact died, but his accounts do give a very human quality to the lists of astonishing artistic achievement.

Vasari's *Lives* emerges alongside an increasingly important notion of the artist as individual. As artists became more than artisans, so the interest in their lives and the person behind the art grows too. Editions of Vasari's *Lives* and later publications such as *Het Gulden Cabinet* (1662) included etchings of the artists, several of which are shown in *Portraits*, including Henry Berckmans, Pierre Franchois and Herman Saftleven.



Coenrad Waumans 1619- after 1675, *Pierre Franchoys*, engraving (purchased from Alfred Darbishire in 1964)

Interest in self-portraits grew at the same time as interest in artists' biographies. These personal insights still fascinate today, and, in fact, self-portraiture seems to be enjoying something of a

resurgence. In 2014 two major publications followed the trail of self-representation from cave painting to the ubiquitous selfie. And in 2015 an exhibition of self-portraits opens at Turner Contemporary to accompany what will be a national tour of Van Dyck's final self-portrait.

In making the maker its subject, a self-portrait holds an enduring fascination, simultaneously showing the artist and the work. The Whitworth's collection holds many such portraits, direct representations like Leon Underwood in the act of sketching himself, and more abstract creations like work made in the early 20th century by Adolf Wölfli. While not strictly self-portraiture, most of Wölfli's works were in some way autobiographical. His magnum opus is a nine volume illustrated, fantastical narrative of his life entitled *From the Cradle to the Grave*, which follows the adventures of 'Doufi' (Wölfli's childhood name) through cosmic war, catastrophe and conquest, with Doufi eventually transformed into St. Adolf II. His actual life story is a less grandiose tale, but none the less remarkable. At the age of 26 he was sentenced to two years in prison for the attempted molestation of two young girls, and in 1895, after a third incident, he was committed to the Waldau Psychiatric Clinic in Bern, where he remained until his death in 1930. Wölfli came to public attention when a doctor at the clinic wrote and published *Ein Geisteskranker als Künstler* (A Psychiatric Patient as Artist).

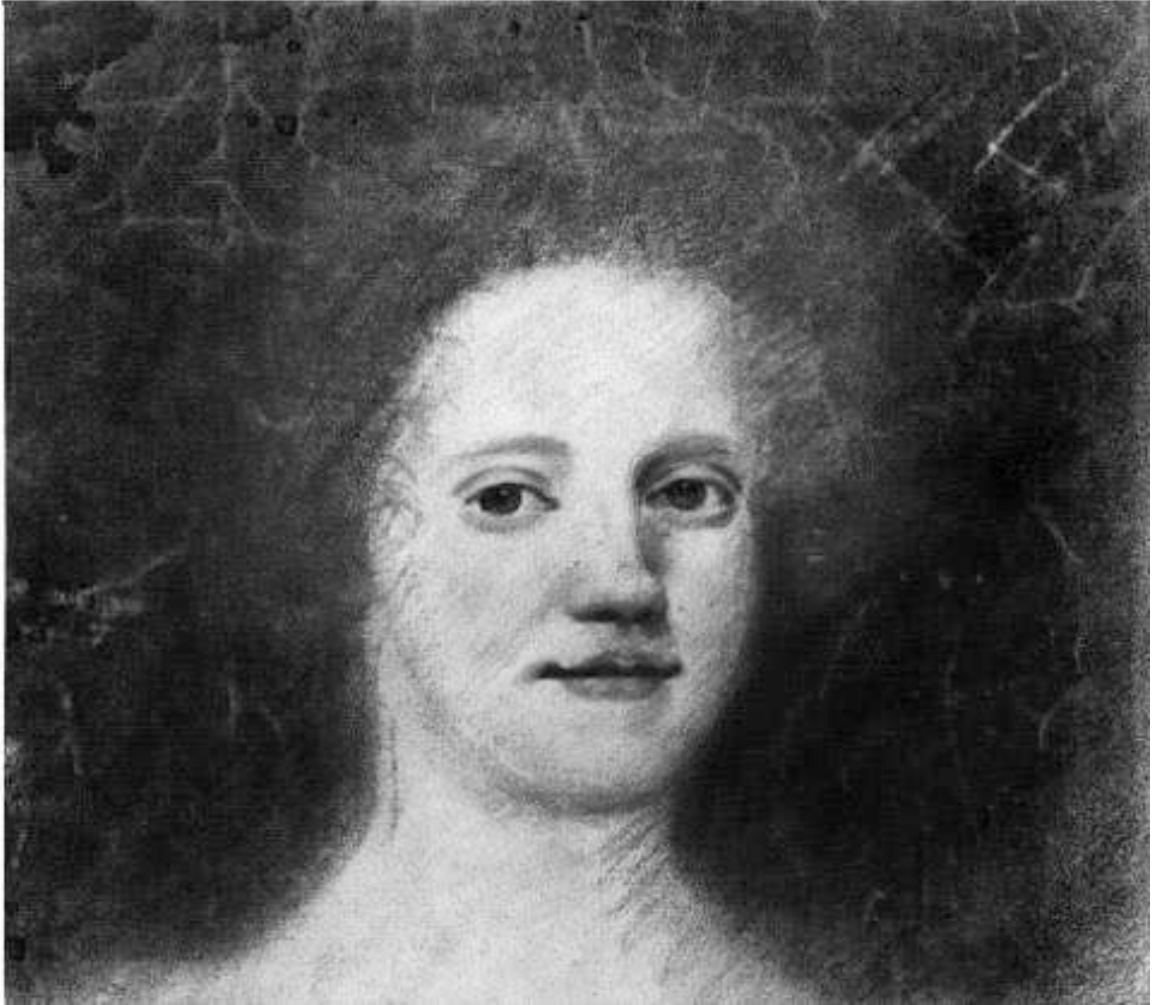


Adolf Wölfli 1864-1930 , *Untitled*, undated, pencil on paper (Presented by Monika Kinley in 2010)

Wölfli became one of the most important artists of Art Brut, or Outsider Art; works made by self-taught artists operating outside the mainstream art system. These artists are often inescapably yoked to their biographies. The work is rarely separated from the knowledge that it was produced in a mental asylum, or by a homeless woman or a spiritual medium; the biography of the artist is often as much a part of the work as the physical drawing or sculpture itself.

There are also many works in the collection with no record of the artist or subject. Several of

these, mostly sketches and fragments of drawings, are shown here. Often casually made, these sketches have an immediacy and sometimes a compelling strangeness about them. Although we don't know the artist or their life, we may imagine a little about how they were made, a quick idea jotted on a small scrap of paper, or an idle doodle followed through to completion. Many of these sketches come from the collection of William Ogden Sharp, a Manchester based architect who bequeathed over 3,500 drawings and prints to the Whitworth. Interested in everything, his collection was an eccentric mix of studies of people, architecture and landscape, and especially these fragmentary unknown sketches.



Unknown British artist, *Portrait Study of a Woman*, undated, pastel on paper (Bequeathed by William Sharp Ogden in 1926)

Every work of art accumulates stories, even if we don't know the artist or the situation from which they sprang. They evoke personal responses. We may be intrigued by the person portrayed, or delight in the material of the work. The works in portraits are shown just as themselves without the biographies foregrounding the viewing experience. The great and the good are shown alongside the incidental sketches, the famous artists shown alongside those who remain anonymous. Of course further information on artists and works can be found, and biographies are readily available at the Whitworth (just ask a member of the visitor team), but here, it is the works themselves that present the first reading.