





**A SHORT HISTORY OF PORTRAITURE:**

*'You brought me a potato, and you expect a peach!'<sup>1</sup>*

These frustrated words were spoken by American painter Gilbert Stuart to a client who was evidently not pleased with Stuart's rendition of his wife's face. Stuart was born in the mid-18th century and his stock-in-trade was portraiture. He is estimated to have painted over one thousand portraits in his time, most famously the portrait of George Washington that graces the American one dollar bill. His exasperated statement – of potatoes that must blossom into peaches under his hand – gives an amusing but also prescient insight into the complicated nature of the portrait. The portrait is a complicated set of interlocking dynamics: between the artist and the subject, between the artist and the patron, and between the resultant artwork and the artistic and cultural expectations and rules of any given historical period. All of these combine to create a heady swirl of possibilities and problems for the genre of portraiture.

Portraiture is an ancient tradition. It dates back to the earliest days of artistic creation giving us wonderful connection to the people of ancient Egypt or Greece or, in Australia, to Indigenous people who lived thousands of years ago. The bust of Nefertiti attests to the Egyptian Queen's great beauty, while the many busts of Socrates, the Greek philosopher, have recorded ineradicably for history that his great mind was housed within a fairly burly noggin. Portraiture remains an artistic preoccupation, something evidenced in Australia by the enormous popularity of the Archibald Prize and the fact that our richest prize, worth \$150,000, is the annual Doug Moran National Portrait Prize. Faces – from those that could launch a thousand ships to those that only a mother could love – are of enduring interest.

The 'rules' of portraiture – the social and cultural conventions around how to represent the subject – change greatly over time, giving fascinating insight into humanity's thoughts on humanity. For instance, ideals of aesthetics and beauty change over time. The voluptuous 'Rubenesque' figure, once so highly coveted, is largely disavowed today as unattractively pudgy. Similarly, thoughts on what props might confer authority or what pose might enable gravitas also change over time. What is regarded as dignified pomp in one era can seem boorishly pompous in another. Furthermore, what is accepted – even allowed – for different classes, genders and ancestries modulates greatly over time. The pantheon of lord mayors in this exhibition is overwhelmingly comprised of men of European ancestry.

It was not until 1987 that Melbourne first had a female lord mayor when Lecki Ord was awarded the post, and John So was the first mayor of Asian heritage. Even the most cursory glance over the *Good Looking* exhibition gives an insight into the social, cultural and political changes that have taken place in Melbourne from the 1850s to now. Time's change, as they say. Today's potato might even be tomorrow's peach.

**INSIDE COVER**

Portrait of John Hodgson,  
1855 (detail)  
Mayor 1853-55  
b. Yorkshire 1779  
– arr. Australia 1838  
– d. Studley Park 1860

Ludwig Becker  
b. Darmstadt,  
Germany 1808?  
– arr. Australia 1851  
– d. 1861

Oil on canvas  
214.5x104cm

**OPPOSITE**  
Photograph, Members  
of Melbourne City  
Council during  
Centenary of Melbourne  
(June 1935), Jubilee  
of King George V (May  
1935) and Coronation of  
King George VI (May 1937)

Mendelssohn and Talma  
Photographic Studios,  
Swanston St, Melbourne  
photograph, card  
38.5 x 25.5cm





**ABOVE**  
Councillor James  
Thomas Buxton  
Jubilee Album of the  
Incorporation of the  
City of Melbourne,  
1892  
photograph,  
maker unknown

### **The Official Portrait:**

*'In his eyes we see  
confidence and in the  
corners of his mouth,  
stamina.'*

that the contributions of high profile Melburnians might be rightly recorded in the pages of history.

Some portraits in the City's collection have been created through the course of official duties or to commemorate a special occasion. There is, for instance, a beautiful illuminated parchment from 1868 with photographs of all the councillors in office when the foundation stone was laid for the Melbourne Town Hall. The oval photographs of colonial heads, which present an extraordinary taxonomy of facial hair, are surrounded by exquisite drawings of flowers and foliage. Similarly a handsome green leather-bound album from 1892, which commemorates the Jubilee celebrations of the city, holds ethereal photographs of the councillors in office that year alongside any surviving pioneers from the first council of 1842.

Perhaps surprisingly, there has been no single systematic process for official portraits of lord mayors (and other 'good burghers') to enter the City's collection. The approach has been more ad hoc, depending on the temperament of each mayor and their predilections towards both art and posterity. Some portraits have been commissioned and paid for by the City, some by the close associates of the mayor, and others by the mayor themselves. Sometimes portraits come into the collection via other means. There is a handsome portrait of the pastoralist John Aitken that came into the collection via 'public subscription' – that is, some segment of the community desired for him to have a portrait in the City's official collection. Aitken was one of the earliest settlers in Melbourne. He first inspected the Port Phillip region in 1835 – only six

The City of Melbourne's Art and Heritage Collection dates back to the 1850s. As Melbourne grew and prospered, official portraits were made of many key figures in the life of the city. This was motivated by a desire to celebrate the achievements of 'Marvellous Melbourne' but also to ensure

weeks after Batman – and returned with his flock of sheep from Van Diemen's Land in 1836. When the ship docked in Port Phillip Bay, Aitken took on the Herculean task of personally carrying each of 1600 sheep from ship to shore.

Unfortunately, the City's collection of portraits of lord mayors is an incomplete one. A portrait was not done of some mayors and, in other cases, the portrait has been somehow mislaid. Some thirty-seven full length portraits were regrettably destroyed when a fire incinerated the Town Hall in 1925. Others have left the building in a more surreptitious way, usually tucked under the arm of the subject as he left his office for the last time. There is at least one instance of a portrait being rather magnanimously presented back to the City by the family of a one-time lord mayor, while the provenance documents indicate that the portrait was actually the property of Council all along.

One of the curatorial aims of *Good Looking* was to give the public access to works that are usually relatively off limits. The lord mayor's office, for example, is hung with some spectacular portraits. While he toils away at his official duties, Lord Mayor Robert Doyle is surrounded by (amongst other things) magnificent life size portraits of Charles La Trobe, the first Lieutenant-Governor of the colony, and Henry Condell, the first mayor of Melbourne, as well as two exquisite half portraits of Viscount Melbourne, William Lamb, one as a young man and one as a rather more elderly gentleman. Lamb was an English Prime Minister and dear friend of Queen Victoria, and our city is named in his honour. It should also be noted that the Lord Mayor's portrait collection also includes some of his 'nearest and dearest' in the form of framed but relatively informal family photographs.

In the partisan environs of Council, art historical priorities can sometimes be a secondary concern to politics. Decisions about which portraits will grace the Town Hall's 'corridors of power' are, unsurprisingly, politically charged. Many fine specimens of Australian art history are consigned to the City's archive due to lack of space but



**ABOVE**  
Portrait of Henry  
Condell Esq., First  
Mayor of Melbourne,  
undated  
Mayor 1842-44  
b. Madeira 1797  
– arr. Australia 1822  
– d. London 1871  
Artist unknown  
Oil on canvas  
164.6x109cm



**OPPOSITE**  
Molly Meldrum,  
Moomba King, 1985  
Photographer:  
Bob Van der Toorren  
50x41cm

**THIS PAGE**  
Portrait, Alderman  
Samuel Amess, 1886  
Mayor 1869-70  
b. Newburgh,  
Scotland 1826  
-arr. Melbourne 1852  
-d. Melbourne 1898

Tom Roberts  
b. Dorchester,  
England 1856  
-arr. Melbourne 1869  
-d. Kallista, Vic 1931  
Oil on canvas  
226x145cm





**LEFT**  
Destiny Deacon  
b. 1957, G'ua G'ua  
& Erub/Mer peoples,  
Torres Strait  
Raised/lives in  
Melbourne

*Princess in waiting...*,  
2005  
light-jet print from  
a polaroid original  
ed 1/15  
120 x 100cm

**THIS PAGE (LEFT)**  
Portrait of Lord  
Mayor Cr John So,  
2003  
Lord Mayor 2001–2008  
b. Hong Kong, 1946 –  
arr. Melbourne 1963

Jiawei Shen  
b. Shanghai, 1948 –  
arr. Australia 1989  
Oil on canvas  
209 x 133cm

**ABOVE**  
Mayoral board,  
Level 2 Corridor,  
Melbourne Town  
Hall



also sometimes because of a deficiency in political clout. Conversely, the installer's logbook records one instance of a portrait strenuously asserting its political clout. With the idea that it might be nice to give another portrait some attention for a while, a certain portrait was removed from its prominent spot and placed into storage. Before long, however, a directive came down from up high demanding that it be put back, and with speed. There is also another amusing anecdote told about a high-ranking Council staff member feeling such displeasure at a particular portrait that they ignored all the usual rules for art handling and personally removed the work from the wall. The offending portrait was then stacked (no doubt face to wall) in their office ready to be collected and banished to the collection store.

The *Good Looking* exhibition offers an opportunity to undertake an interesting comparative study of different conventions for portraiture, including such standards as full, three quarter and half length paintings or the marble bust. Furthermore, a fascinating addendum to the history of portraits is a survey of the props carefully arranged around the subject. For in the conventions of portraiture – and especially official portraiture – as Baudelaire wrote... ‘nothing in a portrait is a matter of indifference. Gesture, grimace, clothing, even décor – all must serve to realise a character.’<sup>2</sup> All the lord mayors are dressed in the full ceremonial attire of their office including opulent robes and the Lord Mayor's Chain of Office, which comprises seventy-two linked medallions each engraved with the name and dates of ex-mayors, the crest of the City of Melbourne and the City's motto *Vires acquirit eundo* ('We gather strength as we go'). Present in some portraits, such as Roberts' painting of Samuel Amess, are the traditional mayor's shoes, a curious set of winklepickers that seem more Gulliver's Travels than mayoral (John So evidently declined this tradition for his portrait). It is also interesting to make an inventory of the items the mayors hold or their gestures. Some hold a scroll, letter or medal, others point to a book, perhaps offering a hint as to their profession or a testimony to their learnedness.

**FOLD OUT PAGE  
INSIDE RIGHT  
(CLOCKWISE)**  
Portrait, John  
Hodgson, 1855  
Mayor 1853-55  
b. Yorkshire 1779  
– arr. Australia 1838  
– d. Studley Park, 1860

Ludwig Becker  
b. Darmstadt,  
Germany 1808?  
– arr. Australia 1851  
– d. Bulloo,  
Queensland 1861  
Oil on canvas  
214.5 x 104cm

Portrait, Charles  
Joseph La Trobe  
b. London 1801  
– in Australia 1839-54  
– d. England 1875

Artist unknown,  
after Sir Francis Grant  
RA (British, 1803 –  
1878)  
Oil on canvas  
125 x 100cm

Portrait, Alderman  
William Bayles  
Mayor 1865-66  
b. Yorkshire, England  
1820 – arr. Australia  
1846 – d. Toorak 1903

James Clarke Waite  
b. Cumberland,  
England, 1832  
– arr. Melbourne 1886  
– d. Woollahra 1920  
Oil on canvas  
224 x 133cm

- 1 Gilbert Stuart quoted in Gordon C. Aymar, *The Art of Portrait Painting* (Chilton Book Co., Philadelphia:1967): p. 264.
- 2 Charles Baudelaire 'Salon of 1859' quoted in Heather McPherson *The Modern Portrait in Nineteenth-Century France*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001: p 14.
- 3 Jiawei Shen quoted in Archibald Prize 2005 from the website of the Art Gallery of New South Wales at <http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/prizes/archibald/2005/28111/>.
- 4 Thomas Gainsborough allegedly stated this in relation to his portrait of Mrs Siddons, 1785, recounted on The National Gallery's website at <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/thomas-gainsborough-mrs-siddons>.
- 5 Oliver Cromwell quoted in Gordon C. Aymar, *ibid*: p. 262.
- 6 Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, 1839.
- 7 Sangeeta Sandrasegar, catalogue essay, *The Shadow Class*, Murray White Room, 2008.

These conventions become especially interesting when looking at Jiawei Shen's portrait of Lord Mayor John So from 2005. So wears the traditional mayoral attire (sans winklepickers, as noted) but he is also draped with an Indigenous possum skin coat, which was given to So by an Aboriginal elder on the occasion of his election in 2001 when he became Melbourne's first lord mayor to be popularly elected. The combination of the European robes, So's Chinese heritage and his Indigenous cloak are indicative, says Shen, of 'an extremely new landscape of Australian political life in the 21st century'. Shen continues: 'Robe and skin, along with the chain, give him a ceremonial status. His pose needed to be ceremonial too. His right hand is held in a symbolic gesture as if he is making a pledge. In his eyes we see confidence and in the corners of his mouth, stamina. So this is an official politician's portrait. For me it is a first attempt but hundreds of thousands of similar portraits have been made over the centuries.'<sup>3</sup>

Shen's was the last mayoral portrait to enter the collection. However, with current Lord Mayor Robert Doyle now in his second term, perhaps he may also turn his attention to thoughts of official portraiture. What artist might undertake this commission? How would Doyle like to be remembered?

### The Portrait of the Artist:

*'Confound the nose, there's no end to it!'*<sup>4</sup>

(the highly celebrated English portraitist Thomas Gainsborough evidently struggled with the nose). Consequently, as much as it is a record of some key figures in the public life of the city, Council's art collection also comprises an impressive insight into Australian art history. This is reflected, for instance, in an elegant painting of Samuel Amess, the gold rush beneficiary and prominent builder (behind such

buildings as Treasury, Customs House, the General Post Office and Kew Lunatic Asylum) who was lord mayor between 1869–70. Amess' portrait was created by Tom Roberts, an artist much admired for his work in establishing an 'Australian style' of painting. Roberts' portrait of Amess is beautifully painted and displays Roberts' expert ability with portraiture – the artist has realised a great sense of personality in Amess' face. While the painting displays the precise brushwork and dark 'boot polish' palette customary to formal works of the time, there are also lovely glimmers of the looser, more 'impressionistic' brushwork that Robert was moving towards and which would result in 'Australian Impressionism'. Roberts' resplendent two-metre tall painting cannot help but be a dominant force in the *Good Looking* exhibition, giving the public a rare opportunity to see this little known work by one of Australia's most popular artists.

Oscar Wilde once stated that 'Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter'. As much as they are likenesses of the subject, the portraits in *Good Looking* are also portraits of the artists who created them. A portrait is in many ways a collaborative work – it could be described as an artefact of the interactions between the artist and the sitter. It's intriguing to imagine the experience of the artist undertaking each commission. What did Tom Roberts think of Lord Mayor Samuel Amess? How much time did he have with him to study his face, his gestures, his mannerisms? What kind of man did he understand him to be? How important was the commission to Roberts? Was it a commission he undertook with pleasure or a more conventional undertaking that bankrolled his other more avant-garde artistic experiments? Did Amess care about art? Did he admire artists, especially feisty ones like Roberts who was given the nickname 'Bulldog' at art school for his forceful personality? What discussions took place around how idealistic or realistic to make the portrait? How much flattery was involved between artist and subject? Did Amess expect a little 'Vaseline on the lens' or was he more like Oliver Cromwell who insisted that his portrait include 'all these roughnesses,



ABOVE  
Sangeeta Sandrasega  
b. Brisbane 1977, lives  
and works in London  
*Untitled (flower seller)*,  
2007-8  
Felt and cotton  
195x 90cm



pimples, warts, and everything as you see me, otherwise I will never pay a farthing for it.’<sup>5</sup>

Similarly how did Polly Borland manage to take such an unorthodox image of the Queen? And, what does her Majesty think of it? The Australian photographer was one of a select few invited by the Queen to take her portrait on the occasion of her Golden Jubilee. Borland had one five-minute sitting during which she shot two roles of films. While some are disproving of it – adamant that this style of portraiture is most certainly not fit for a queen – Borland’s image seems to have seized the popular imagination. In *Good Looking*, Borland’s striking photograph sits alongside a most beautiful but certainly more conventional painterly rendition of the younger Queen by Beatrice Johnson.



As well as a presentation of official portraits, the *Good Looking*

**Non-official Portraits:**

*‘There are two styles of portraits: the serious and the smirk.’<sup>6</sup>*

exhibition also considers some of the ‘unattributed’ and less official portraits in the collection. Take for instance the suite of winsome photographs from the Talma photographic studio, which was sited opposite the Town Hall in Swanston Street

and which counted Lord Mayor Henry Weedon (in office 1905–08) as one of its managing partners. Although not recorded in history, these people were also important to the life of the city and they offer a charming counterbalance to the official portraits.

Furthermore, the *Good Looking* exhibition also includes portraits by local contemporary artists that have been acquired for the City’s collection within the last decade. These interventions are important to the curatorial narrative because they encourage us to re-consider accounts of history, including more critical consideration of the City’s collection of official portraits. For instance, Sangeeta Sandrasegar’s full length silhouette portrait enacts a striking counterbalance to the other

full life size portraits in the room. The official portraits in the room present figures well remembered in history who enjoyed a relative amount of power and agency in their lives. Conversely, Sandrasegar’s figure, from a series called ‘The Shadow Class’, is an anonymous and disempowered worker eking out a living by flogging flowers, rugs or DVDs to tourists. As Sandrasegar writes: ‘The Shadow Class is a project on contemporary slavery, and the myriad forms that exist today.’<sup>7</sup> In this room, Sandrasegar reminds us that not everybody gets their portrait done and not everyone’s name is remembered.

Vivienne Shark LeWitt’s charming portrait of office worker ‘Bob’ inverts the formal protocols of official portraiture to give a more humdrum picture of a man involved in the work of Council. The balding and bespectacled Bob, wearing brown pants and a button-up shirt, leans against the ubiquitous office filing cabinet holding a coffee mug proudly displaying his name – this is, if you will, a different kind of ‘mug shot’. Shark LeWitt’s watercolour hangs in a cluster of works that shines a little limelight on the Council worker. Council is a big institution and, although they may be more focused on paperwork that pomp, the Council worker is crucial to the functioning of the city. Shark LeWitt’s watercolour sketch sits besides equally endearing images of Council workers.

**Phip Murray**  
February 2013



**ABOVE**  
Vivienne Shark LeWitt,  
b. Sale, Victoria 1956

*Untitled sketch (‘Bob’  
standing at filing cabinet),  
1994*  
Watercolour on paper  
75x55cm

**OPPOSITE TOP**  
Polly Borland  
b.1959

*Her Majesty, The Queen  
Elizabeth II (gold), 2001*  
type C photograph  
edition 6/6  
76x65cm

**OPPOSITE BOTTOM**  
*Portrait of HRH Queen  
Elizabeth II, 1954*

Beatrice Johnson  
1906–2000,  
United Kingdom  
Oil on canvas  
120x93cm



## Good Looking: Portraits from the City of Melbourne Collection

13 February –  
13 April 2013  
City Gallery  
Melbourne Town Hall  
[citygallery.com.au](http://citygallery.com.au)



### THIS PAGE

Portrait of Lord Mayor  
Robert Doyle in his  
office, Melbourne  
Town Hall, 2013  
Mayor 2008–  
b. Melbourne 1953

Louis Porter  
b. England, 1977  
– arr. Australia 2001  
Photograph,  
dimensions variable

### INSIDE BACK PAGES

Yarra Room,  
Melbourne Town Hall



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