Throwback Thursday: Strike a Pose
Thursday 28 May 2020

Welcome to Throwback Thursday: Strike a Pose - sharing our heritage from Bruce Castle Museum & Archive.

Today, in Throwback Thursday, we are inspired by Art UK's #OnlineArtExchange promotion of self-portraits in the UK's public art collections, and so we are going to look at portraits and self-portraits in our collections at Bruce Castle.

Portraiture, the visual representation of a person or group, is an ancient art form. Portraits can be found on a wide variety of material and places, such as prehistoric caves and rocks, Ancient Egyptian tombs, paintings hanging on the walls in official places, galleries and even a family portrait photograph on our mantelpiece. Like all art, the forms and media used to create portraits are wide and varied and influenced by the new techniques and technology of the time.

Mrs Spinks - talking about the past 1982 by Eleanor Brooks (© The artist)
From the collections of Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

It seems that, as humans, we have always had a need to depict ourselves, be it in our homes, or surrounded by our land and possessions or showing us working and relaxing. Before the development of photography, formal painted portraits were often commissioned and the subject 'sat' for the artists over many days – sometimes weeks or months! This tended to mean that only the wealthy could afford a portrait. It wasn't until the development of photographic

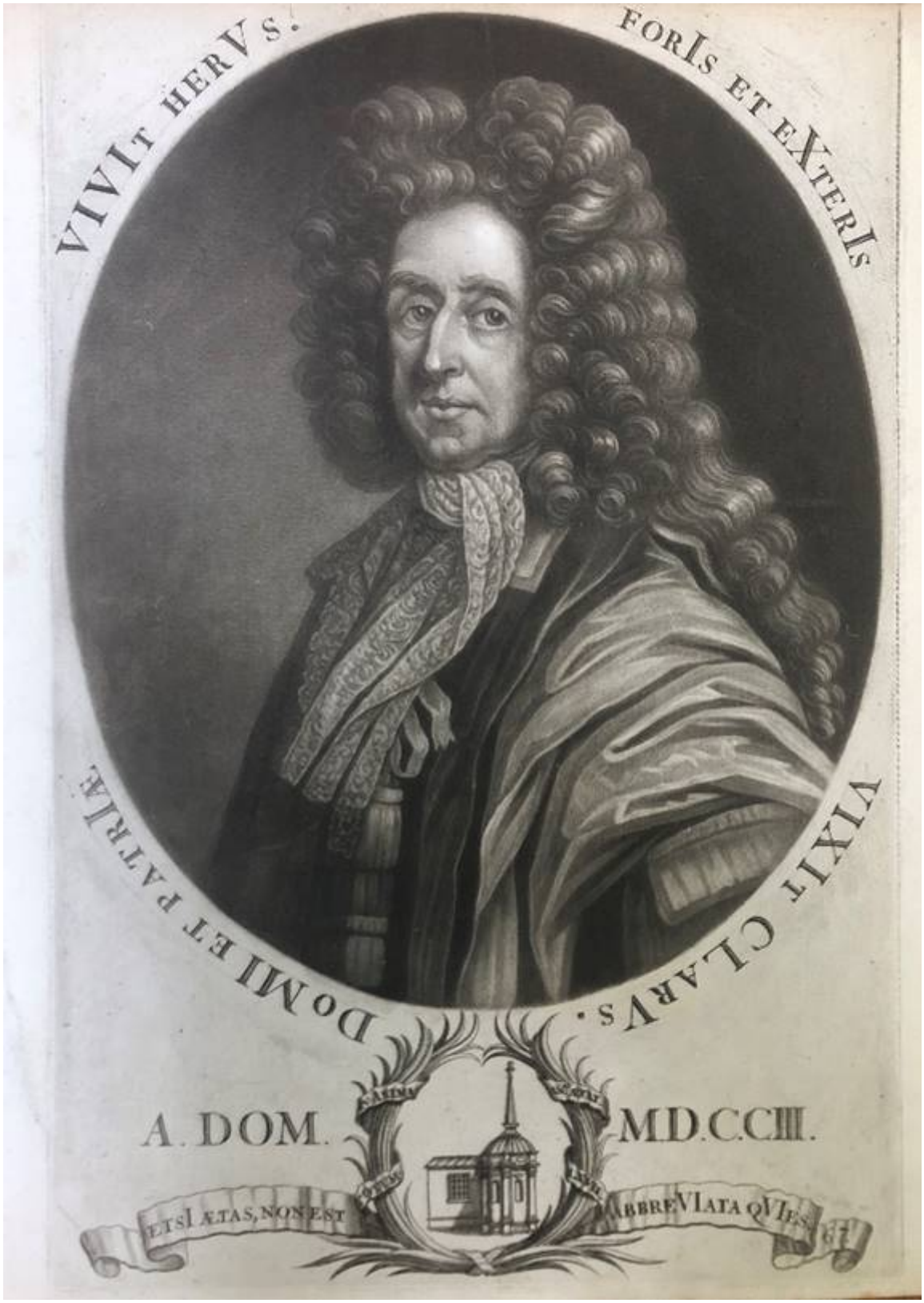
processes from the mid-19th century onwards that portraits began to represent a wider demographic of people.

Historical portraits have always been more than just a pretty picture of someone, although the concept of a beautiful, handsome or striking image can still be important. For many subjects, having a portrait done was (and is) the opportunity to show power, importance, virtue, wealth, strength, taste or other 'qualities' of the sitter. Think of portraits of monarchs, politicians, CEOs - these are done with notions of who they are and the image they want to project to others. These portraits will almost always be flattering, showing key traits that fit the narrative about the person or people.

The celebrated portrait artist, Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788) was noted for his portraits of Regency gentry. One of his most famous and popular paintings, *Mr and Mrs Andrews*. It was painted around 1850 and shows a bucolic scene with the couple looking directly at the viewer, bold and direct – the man standing with his gun and his dog looking lovingly up at him, and the woman sitting under a tree. They are situated in a landscape, owning all you can see and looking a little smug about it. It has been described as a 'triple portrait' – of Robert Andrews, his wife and his land; a statement of entitlement, power and ownership.

Mr and Mrs Andrews, Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788), courtesy and © National Gallery

At Bruce Castle we have our own former 'Land Lords' – or Lords of the manor - who have had portraits done to show their power, status and importance. Below is a mezzotint of Henry Hare, 2nd Lord Coleraine (1635-1708) in full wig (and what a wig!), staring balefully out from his oval frame at us. It was the 2nd Lord Coleraine who was responsible for the radical remodelling of the manorhouse between 1682 and 1684. At this time too, it is believed that he was the person who changed the name of his residence from Lordship House to the new name 'Bruce Castle' (and we will be coming back to that in a later post. We will also be talking in a later post about the small little building you can see at the bottom of this portrait).

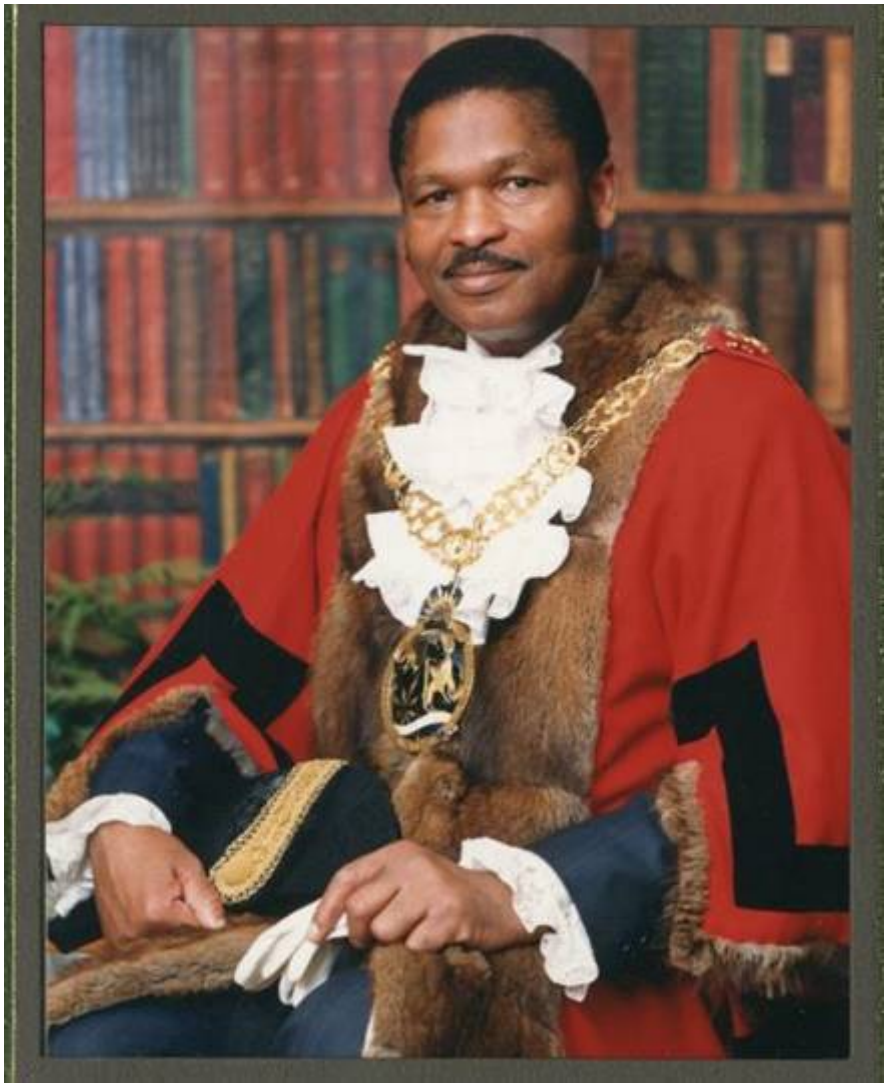


From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service

From the 20th century development in photographic processes meant that photography became the most economical, accessible and important medium of traditional portraiture, making what was formerly an expensive luxury product affordable for almost everyone. It was used for both formal sittings such as the Mayoral images below, as well as for more recreational and personal portraits too. Most of us will have a collection of our own family

portraits, with everyone sitting formally for the photographer in our best clothes.

Councillor C.H. Nash, Mayor for the Borough of Wood Green c.1933
From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive & Museum Service)

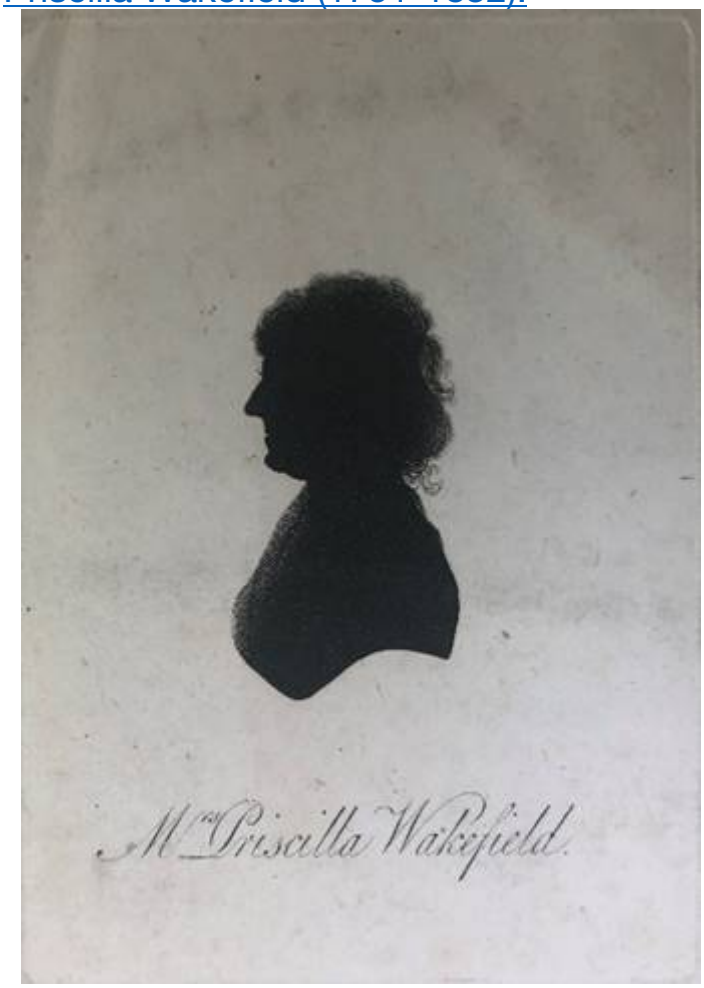


Councillor Vernon King, Mayor of Haringey 1988-89
From the collections of Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive & Museum Service)

Vernon King was Haringey's first Black mayor when he became the Mayor in the year 1988-89. Here we have his official Mayoral portrait (above), taken following Haringey's annual Mayor-making ceremony. The council recently produced a film 'Black in Haringey' in 2016 which shows Vernon talking about being the first Black mayor in Haringey, and the significance of that – go to the 22 minute mark to hear him, but do watch the rest of the film as it's a great film about Haringey.

For most people before the mid-20th century, having a portrait painted or a formal photograph taken was either too expensive, or only done to commemorate very special events such as marriage, christenings or even, in Victorian times, deaths as Memento Mori. Long before the arrival of cheaper photographic processes, a more affordable method of portraiture was a silhouette. These were an image of a person, represented as a solid shape of a single colour, usually cut from black paper and mounted on a backing of contrasting colour. The paper cut-out medium was popular from the 18th century, but other methods were also used by artists such as drawing a person's outline on paper and then painting it in. Some were reproduced as engravings, such as the stipple engraving (below)

from our collections of the Tottenham author, campaigner, feminist economist and philanthropist, Priscilla Wakefield (1751-1832).



Priscilla Wakefield, unknown artist, stipple engraving. Published late 18th century
From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service

Haringey has a host of internationally-known artists living here now and in the past. We have mentioned one of Bruce Grove's most noted residents, the artist Beatrice Offor (1864 –1920), in some of our previous posts, but it is hard to write about portraits without us mentioning her again. In fact, Beatrice was so noted as a portrait artist that a turn of phrase - the 'Offor Head' - was coined in relation to her specific style of portraiture. This newspaper article from *The Star* in 1907, which was circulated in New Zealand, goes into more detail about the stylistic nuances. As Beatrice notes herself in the article, the images are not necessarily of actual individuals, they are more composites of people, bringing a certain style to all her work, which you can see in the two works below.

Contemplative Woman by Beatrice Offor
From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service

Portrait of an Unknown Girl in a Grey Dress
From the collections and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

Another artist from Tottenham who we have also featured in previous posts is Kevin Okafor. He does amazingly realistic portraits in pencil and charcoal. He is a truly skilled draftsman, with his drawings so lifelike and such attention to the details of an individual's face that they look like photographs!

Israeli artist, Gabriela Schutz has made Haringey her home. Her work is varied in subject, not exclusively portraits, but here we can see some of her lovely portrait work and the use of a range of different media and the fascination she has with the way technology, information, communication and consumerism are increasingly shaping our life.

Nicola Green is from Haringey too. Her portrait of Sebastian Coe, undertaken during the London Olympics in 2012, is part of the collections at Bruce Castle. Nicola is passionate about telling human stories through her art. Her work helps us explore and to challenge our views and perceptions of what a portrait is and examines how we portray ourselves.

Image from Haringey's Oooooh Art blog, 2012

In 2013, we were lucky enough to hold an exhibition at Bruce Castle by Eleanor Brooks on her portrait work of Mrs Spinks. We took note from the artist that the exhibition was to have no labels. Two galleries upstairs at Bruce Castle were dedicated to a range of her portraits of one subject – Mrs Spinks, an elderly lady who was from the area originally, born in 'Harringay behind the dog track in 1899'. Eleanor became fascinated (and possibly a little obsessed) with her subject. Mrs Spinks became an unexpected 'muse' to the artist. She used multiple media – paintings, drawings, sculptures and prints - to make her portraits, over a period of many years. This video gives you an insight into both the artist's methods and motivations, as well as the ever changing character and personality of Mrs Spinks. The exhibition has travelled around the UK and is a touching testament to their enduring friendship.

Mrs Spinks – Felix by Eleanor Brooks, © the artist
From the collections Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

Image of the exhibition *Mrs Spinks Speaks* at Bruce Castle in 2013. © Eleanor Brooks
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Artists, through self-portraits (where the artist is the subject of their own artwork), have presented themselves in certain ways through their art. Many famous historical artists such as Rembrandt, Van Gogh and Lucien Freud are known for their self-portraits and are often painted with palette and brush in hand, showing themselves at work.

Today, artists continue to use self-portraiture to place themselves as the subject, but as American artist Cindy Sherman shows, they often subvert the genre to comment on the wider society rather than just focussing on themselves.

We are very lucky to have a work by renowned local artist Sadie Lee in our collection. Sadie's work comments on the representation of women in art, sexuality, gender and the aging body. The work we have, ***Stir (Gently),*** was created in response to an invite to make a 'Molly Spoon', representing lost and hidden LGBTQ+ heritage in Haringey. Sadie painted a detailed miniature self-portrait on the face of the spoon and dressed it in essentials – underwear and a Stetson.

Stir (Gently), is the brother of her alter-ego, Pat Gently. We will let Sadie explain:

'My spoon is based on my drag king alter ego "Pat Gently", although, due to his lack of manners and general rudeness, I've fallen out with Pat, so instead have made a portrait of his more sensitive brother, Stir (Gently)'.

The work was exhibited in the 'Molly Spoon Archive' exhibition at Bruce Castle Museum in 2014, in partnership with Tim Redfern, UCL and Share Academy. Here is an interview with Pat Gently, from 2011. You can see why Sadie fell out with him!

Stir (Gently), 2014 by Sadie Lee
From the collections of Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)
© The artist: Sadie Lee

Self-portrait of Jim Clark sitting in his lounge at 22 Ranelagh Road in Tottenham, 7 March 1977
From the collections of Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive and Museum Service)

The above image is a self-portrait taken by Jim Clark, again - someone who has popped up before in a few of our posts. Jim was exacting in his documentation and labelling of his many photographs in great detail (something very much appreciated by this archivist!), so now that he is not with us, we still know what the images are of, when they were taken and even, in some cases, what the shutter speeds were when he took the photograph. A very keen cyclist, there was a story of how Jim took a selfie whilst still riding a bike – it sounds a bit Heath Robinson, but alas we have no photo of that one. An unusual take on selfies!

Of course today, with most people having access to a camera on our mobile phones, the ubiquitous 'selfies' have become the natural evolution of the self-portrait genre. We will spare you a lockdown selfie of Bruce Castle staff, but many people have been using the medium to document their situation and to help them during these unusual and trying circumstances we are currently in. This article asks if Rembrandt 'invented' the selfie – we will leave that for you to decide!

So now it's your turn. As it is 'half-term' this week, we are attaching some more fun Family Activities for you to create a self-portrait or even your own silhouette! The National Portrait Gallery also has a Young People's Guide to Self Portraiture that you might like to try. Please do email us images of your artwork (to museum.services@haringey.gov.uk), and we will post it on our online gallery.

And so that ends today's post. Another topic tomorrow.
Have fun, get creative, stay well and keep healthy

With best wishes from us all at Bruce Castle

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