



Fig. 1. Napoléon Bourassa, *Portrait of Marie-Louise Globensky, the Future Mrs. Alexandre Lacoste (1849–1919)*, ca. 1864, black chalk with white highlights, 52 x 42.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 2. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Head of a Neapolitan Girl*, 1881, oil on canvas, 35.6 x 30.8 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 3. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Young Girl with a Hat*, ca. 1890, oil on canvas, 41.5 x 32.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 4. John Lyman, *Habiba (Young Tunisian Girl)*, ca. 1922, oil on canvas, 54.6 x 45.8 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

## Portrait of a Girl

Alexandra Boucklos

The meaning and purpose of portraits have changed significantly throughout the history of art. Napoléon Bourassa's (1827–1916) *Portrait de Marie-Louise Globensky, the Future Mrs. Alexandre Lacoste (1849-1919)* (ca. 1864) (fig. 1), Pierre-Auguste Renoir's (1841–1919) *Head of a Neapolitan Girl* (1881) (fig. 2) and *Girl with a Hat* (ca. 1890) (fig. 3) and John Lyman's *Habiba (Young Tunisian Girl)* (ca. 1922) (fig. 4) demonstrate the ability of a portrait to convey a sitter's personality, social status and ethnicity. However, this essay will also explore how the portrayal of girls was ultimately limited by the traditional association of girlhood with submissiveness and sensuous beauty.

Portraits flourished in ancient Greek and Roman sculpture as people began demanding individualized and realistic portraits of themselves—even if the outcome was unflattering. During the Roman Republic (509–27 BCE), officials commissioned detailed portrait busts which were then attached to heroic, full-length statues of generic bodies.<sup>1</sup> This practice stemmed from the notion that the identity of the subject was expressed through the representation of their facial features, whereas the generic body served to convey broader notions of public identity and social or political position.<sup>2</sup> Portrait painting developed from this practice as well as from idealized images of gods, saints and heroes. By commissioning portraits, powerful leaders were able to reinforce their authority and legitimize their rule.<sup>3</sup>

By the late eighteenth century, portraits were no longer primarily seen as a means of presenting a public image, but as a vehicle for expressing an individual's personality. The Enlightenment

altered the way people began viewing the world around them. Theories and writings emerged on how external appearances can reflect internal character. These ideas were based on similar theories by philosophers such as Plato (428/427–348/347 BCE), Aristotle (384–322 BCE) and Socrates (ca. 470–399 BCE); the ancient science of physiognomy thus found new light in this era. Although theories such as physiognomy were not popular sciences at the time, they were established as common teachings within art academies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The study of physiognomy garnered new significance within the art community with the publication of Johann Kaspar Lavater's (1741–1801) *Essays on Physiognomy, Designed to Promote the Knowledge and Love of Mankind* in 1772 (published in English in 1781). He reinterpreted the antiquated subject, proposing new ideas on the assessment and classification of individual personalities as social types manifested in external features.<sup>4</sup>

Historically, painted portraits were reserved for the rich and powerful, and before the middle of the nineteenth century,<sup>5</sup> children's portraits were limited to the offspring of the privileged.<sup>6</sup> The rise of the middle class allowed varying social classes the opportunity to promote a public identity, just as the elite of the past had done.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the emerging view of children as capable of independent thinking and as possessing evolving personalities was reflected in the way artists depicted them. Artists sought to convey this expanded understanding of the nature of childhood through the portrayal of physiognomic features to express children's characters.<sup>8</sup>

The four images of young girls in this essay reflect these changing ideas within the genre of portraiture, as they depict subjects from diverse social, economic and ethnic backgrounds. The earliest of the portraits is Bourassa's drawing of Marie-Louise Globensky (1849–1919).



Fig. 1. Napoléon Bourassa, *Portrait of Marie-Louise Globensky, the Future Mrs. Alexandre Lacoste (1849–1919)*, ca. 1864, black chalk with white highlights, 52 x 42.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The young subject, who came from a prominent Québécois family, was approximately fifteen years old when she sat for this portrait. It was done during the summer of 1864 while the artist was vacationing at his father-in-law's home in Montebello, Quebec. Two years later, at the age of seventeen, Globensky married attorney and future senator Sir Alexandre Lacoste (1842–1923). She was described as being a very pious and dutiful girl (and eventually woman),<sup>9</sup> which is reflected in Bourassa's portrait. The lighting emphasizes the subject's smooth forehead. Her cheek and chin are shaded, but at the point of the jaw and neck, the shadows become transparent. Her forehead, nose, eyelids and lips are highlighted in white. Although the portrait emanates a neo-classical style, it differs in the way the figure is presented: neo-classical artists such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867) typically depicted their subjects gazing out of the canvas, while Bourassa's model is shown in profile. Her gaze does not engage with that of the viewer; instead she is looking down. The softly rendered lines of the drawing complement the

her gentle features, showcasing Globesky's identity as a proper young girl. Her hair is neatly pulled back and she is wearing a stylish hair accessory, further emphasizing her social position.

In the 1880s, Renoir travelled to Italy, where he painted the earlier of the two portraits discussed in this essay, *Head of a Neapolitan Girl*. This work depicts an adolescent girl with dark hair braided behind her head.



Fig. 2. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Head of a Neapolitan Girl*, 1881, oil on canvas, 35.6 x 30.8 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The second of his portraits, *Young Girl with a Hat*, was completed several years later in Paris in 1890. Renoir began his career as a porcelain artist, which is visible in the porcelain-like skin tones and soft features of the two girls.



Fig. 3. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, *Young Girl with a Hat*, ca. 1890, oil on canvas, 41.5 x 32.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

For Renoir, subject and effect were inseparable notions when it came to painting; he adamantly believed that painting should give pleasure and therefore only painted pleasing subjects.<sup>10</sup>

Although each of these portraits demonstrates Renoir's preoccupation with sensuous beauty, they differ on many levels. In *Young Girl with a Hat*, the long, flowing hair of the figure is pulled away from her face and she has on a stylish hat and dress, whereas in *Head of a Neapolitan Girl*, the girl's thick, dark hair is falling into her face, and she is wearing simple clothing and a sombre expression. Through these details, Renoir places these two girls in different social standings.

In 1913, American-born Canadian artist John Lyman received some negative criticisms from a harsh public after exhibiting his artwork. Due to the poor reception of his work in his native country, he spent the better part of the next eighteen years living in France, Spain and North

Africa. The high cost of living in Paris eventually led him to travel to Tunisia, where he painted *Habiba (Young Tunisian Girl)*.



Fig. 4. John Lyman, *Habiba (Young Tunisian Girl)*, ca. 1922, oil on canvas, 54.6 x 45.8 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

What is striking about Lyman's exotic figure is her sculptural characteristics. He creates a strong contrast in the lighting to reveal the various angles of the face.<sup>11</sup> The veil covering the girl's head is depicted in an almost three-dimensional way, taking her out of the context of a two-dimensional space so that it seems as though she is within the viewer's own space.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the girls in the other portraits, her face is harsher and more severe, and although she is still not looking directly out of the canvas, her gaze is not looking down but toward the side. The girl in Lyman's portrait is also set apart from the others in terms of her skin tone. Although her social circumstances are not immediately apparent, there is a racial and ethnic distinction between her and the other girls.



Through the depiction of facial features, hair and clothing, the portraits by Bourassa, Renoir and Lyman divulge the personality, social status and ethnicity of their sitters. Even though each girl's position in society is apparent from her outer appearance, these three portraits of girls share the generic sweetness and pure beauty inherent in the concept of girlhood.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rosemarie Trentinella, "Roman Portrait Sculpture: The Stylistic Cycle," in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–), [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ropo2/hd\\_ropo2.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ropo2/hd_ropo2.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Sheila Dillon, *The Female Portrait Statue in the Greek World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 103.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Stewart, "The Changing Faces of Portraiture: Toward a Legible Identity," University of New Mexico Art Museum, accessed December 2015, <http://www.unmartmuseum.org/portraiture/reading-portraiture/#physiognomy>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Alix Finkelstein, "New Directions in Children's Portraiture," *Fine Art Connoisseur* (November / December 2009): 39, accessed December 2015, <http://www.brendazlamany.com/res/finkelstein.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Stewart.

<sup>8</sup> Finkelstein, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Yvonne Globensky, "Histoire de la Famille Globensky" (unpublished notes, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Archives, Montreal, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> "Renoir and His Circle: Works from an Intimate Collection," Crocker Art Museum, <http://legacy.crockerartmuseum.org/exhibitions/exhibitions/upcoming-exhibits/32-exhibitions/past-exhibitions/137-renoir-and-his-circle-works-from-an-intimate-collection>.

<sup>11</sup> Michèle Grandbois, *Morrice et Lyman en compagnie de Matisse* (Montreal: Éditions de l'Homme, 2014), 168.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 72.

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