

# reverence to the real: a study in comparative realistic portraiture

By Sara Shavel-Jessop



In the modern age of airbrushed models and retouched photography, it is uncommon to find, as a mass-produced representative image, and unflattering, or unaltered, likeness. As catwalks display the dictated impression of what it is to be beautiful, much of what society considers to be respectable



and worthy of admiration is imposed on the receptive public eye. By means of this commonly held understanding, however, it is therefore shocking when a public image appears that does not seem to uphold these aesthetic standards; nonetheless, two such images did, and still do, challenge this principle, offering representations of significant political figures that emphasize naturalism: one, a woodcut of the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I dates from around 1519, and the second, the portrait head of Queen Elizabeth II of Britain, from the recent year of 1998. Portraying their subjects honestly, without any artistic embellishments, these portraits are both vehicles of propaganda, possibly made more impressive and authoritative on account of their blunt realism.

In terms of the woodcut itself, it is most notable because of its bare honesty of feature and intention. Unpretentious but commanding, not deified but noble, the woodcut is a simple, but undeniably detailed representation of the Emperor. Marked by the definitively Hapsburg features of a hooked nose and a prominent chin, the portrait is not, however, a caricature of these dominant characteristics. As Wölfflin writes, "these features are there but our first impression is not determined by them. The mental qualities of the sitter have an immediate impact." The Emperor has been described by Paul van Dyke as "intensely egoistic. Insatiable family pride possessed him." As a consequence of this pride and vested interest in his personal heritage, Maximilian devoted much of his time and effort to tracing his lineage and establishing his legacy. While this prevented him from becoming a successful statesman, Maximilian was nonetheless a power director of the family affairs of the Hapsburgs. It is in these areas that Maximilian expended himself, and this is the source for the pronounced crevices at the corners of the Emperor's eyes and mouth, as he is represented in Dürer's woodcut.

All of these features, a mélange of psychological and social influences, are significant in terms of how the image of Maximilian affects the viewer; upon first glance, the Emperor seems preoccupied, as if something distant is diverting his attention. Making no effort to meet the gaze of the viewer, Maximilian commands his own portrait, existing not as a subject of reflection, but almost as if he were reflecting on his view from the woodcut's frame. Dressed in heavily brocaded traditional dress of royalty, the Emperor is not, however, overwhelmed by the ostentatious display, but it rather compliments his seemingly discerning attitude. The firmly set jaw line and downward-turning mouth also indicate a certain remote preoccupation, and the viewer is inspired to wonder what so enthralls the subject as he is drawn into the image.

Just as Dürer's woodcut is, the profile portrait of Queen Elizabeth II of Britain is a testament to realistic portraiture. Drawing a strong comparison to the Dürer woodcut of Emperor Maximilian I in its stark face of reality amongst a sea of earlier classical busts. Although Elizabeth II's features are not nearly as dramatic or pronounced as those of Maximilian, which is partly due to the relief medium having less flexibility than the woodcut, the realism and almost-harsh detail of her face is surprising when compared with past renditions and modern conceptions of beauty; while most would agree that the Queen was once quite beautifully depicted on the past faces of British coins (see Figure 3), the modern likeness shares nothing of this standard conception. Facing to the right, in keeping with traditional coinage portraiture tradition, in which successive monarch face in opposite directions, the Queen wears the tiara given to her by her grandmother, Queen Mary, as a wedding present fifty years ago. With pronounced jowls, a double chin, and a shameless display of wrinkles, the Queen here appears to the viewer as an almost-degenerated version of her younger self. As in the woodcut of Maximilian, the Queen's mouth sags downwards at its corner, accentuating the deep line at its side. No longer the image of fresh youth as she was once portrayed, Queen Elizabeth's modern representation is one that emphasizes her age. She seems resigned and in control on account of her apparent seriousness, complete with drooping nose and flabby chin, as though, after 46 years of reign, Elizabeth II reserves the right to judge; she, like Maximilian, has a discerning eye that seems to challenge the viewer rather than submit to the individual's scrutiny. Perhaps it is the lack of standardized classical beauty, which has its origins in the Greco-Roman artistic tradition, that gives these two royal portraits their undeniable influence. Showing the rulers as they were seen in life, these representations of heads of state seem imperturbable and determined, an effect perhaps achieved by their realistic, untouched depictions that seem to give them power, thereby rendering them successful in their aims to create an unquestionable figure of authority. Both images of propaganda, the woodcut of Emperor Maximilian I was originally carved by Albrecht Dürer in 1518, and was printed innumerable times for wide distribution, while the relief portrait head of Queen Elizabeth II of Britain adorns one side of all British coinage-a constant reminder of her presence that penetrates all of British society.

For Emperor Maximilian I, the medium of the woodcut was an efficient and cost-effective means to convey what concerned him most-his fame. An active ruler who needed command of his empire to be a success, Maximilian was able to spread his influence and build support for himself through familiarizing his people with both his presence and his image. A great patron of woodcuts, Maximilian used them as illustrations for nearly all of his written works, and, as Paul van Dyke writes, "Took the greatest pains about the wood-cuts, inspecting rough sketches, suggesting alterations, rejecting entire plates." Van Dyke continues, "His object in pursuing literature and patronizing art was fame." Quoting the Emperor himself, Van Dyke recounts Maximilian's response to a lord who criticized the Emperor's expenditures on "remembrance":

'Who does not make for himself in his life remembrance, he has after his death no remembrance and is forgotten with the toll of the bell. And therefore the gold I spend for remembrance is not lost, but the gold I save in the matter of memorials is a lessening of my future remembrance. And what I do not finish for my remembrance in my lifetime will not be made up for...' Although Maximilian planned for the construction of a great tomb in his honour, "in the art of engraving on wood... he saw a means of keeping his "remembrance" vivid among those who could neither read his books nor visit his tomb. He planned, therefore, several series of wood-cuts to record his glory," as Van Dyke explains.

One of the artists Maximilian employed was Albrecht Dürer, whose "art, skill, and intelligence" Maximilian lauded in September of 1515, according to Hutchison.

Officially 'signing' the artist in that year, Maximilian had the City Council of Nuremberg arrange that "for the duration of his life, but not longer, he shall be given, shall be paid, and shall receive annually and every year, against his receipt, one hundred guilders Rhenish out of the customary city tax which the...Burgomaster and Council of the City of Nuremberg are obliged to remit and pay annually and each year to our Treasury." It was in this manner that Dürer became inextricably linked to the Emperor and his court, to which he would remain loyal until his death. With this affiliation, Dürer was commissioned to paint a series of portraits of the Emperor; the woodcut portrait, however, was most likely executed after the Emperor's death, since the text above the portrait reads Imperator Caesar Divus Maximilianus Pius Felix Augustus, and the term *divus* was an imperial Roman term reserved for past emperors, making it unlikely that it was a specific commission from the Emperor as well.

The portrait of Queen Elizabeth II that now appears on all British coinage is also a prime example of such propaganda. Since she became Queen in 1952, there have been four different portraits of Elizabeth II on circulated coinage. Since the beginning of coins, the practice of adorning one side with the head of the monarch of the country has been commonplace. An effective means of familiarizing the population with the face of their head of state, such portraiture serves as an efficient means of spreading influence. Since the beginning of Elizabeth II's reign, she, too, has profited from this 'free advertising', as Maximilian's memory did with the distribution of his printed woodcut portrait. Since the commemoration of her accession in 1953, four portrait heads of Elizabeth II have been minted on British coins: one for the years 1953-1968, a second for the years 1968-1985, a third for the years 1985-1997, and the fourth from 1998 to the present.

Becoming queen after the death of her father in 1952, Elizabeth II has ruled over the United Kingdom for 46 years to date. Great Britain's Head of State, Queen Elizabeth II's portrait for the 1998 coin was selected from nineteen entries submitted to a committee at the Royal Mint. The winning design was the work of Ian Rank-Broadley FRBS, FSNAD, chosen for its "balance between the traditions of the past while still capturing the spirit of the present," as the Royal Mint's website explains. With this particular design it is rather the absence of this beauty and the admission of age that makes the portrait on this current mint of coins so surprising; in fact, it was received with such shock by the British people when it was released that many questioned the authorities that allowed its use, including the Queen herself. In today's government, according to the website of the British Monarchy:

The Queen is the United Kingdom's Head of State. As well as carrying out significant constitutional functions, The Queen also acts as a focus for national unity, presiding at ceremonial occasions, visiting local communities, and representing Britain around the world. Thus it is clear that her projected self-image is an important one, both nationally and internationally, which perhaps suggests why such an authoritative and unshrinking portrait of Elizabeth was chosen for this particular representation.

As both the woodcut portrait of Emperor Maximilian I and the portrait head (in relief) on the British coin are naturalistic representations, designed as such in an effort to increase the rulers' influence and command of power, they are both successful portraits in their ability to communicate strength and authoritative presence to the viewer. Their features showing each individual as he or she is, both portraits are propaganda images, mass-produced and widely circulated, thereby reaching a wide and varied audience. Although the woodcut print of Maximilian was not circulated until after the Emperor's death on January 12, 1519, since Maximilian was so concerned with the successful perpetuation of his memory the distribution of his image would have helped his cause posthumously; for Queen Elizabeth II, however, the printing of her portrait on British coinage serves as a constant reinforcement of her current reign.

Therefore effective in their similar goals of propaganda, both portraits are testaments to the strength of the individual ruler in their naturalistic honesty. Classical Greco-Roman beauty aside, these two figures show their beauty in their capacity to communicate an authoritative presence in what would otherwise be traditional portraiture. Shying away from the aesthetics of the classical tradition that have dominated Western culture for so long, these two portraits are testaments to power in design; an impressive and effective means of conveying the intentions of their subjects in a fashion that would benefit them most.

© Sara Shavel-Jessop 2000

