

Portraits, People, and Perspective: The Function of the Puritan Portrait in New England

Welcome to the lecture “Portraits, People, and Perspective: The Function of the Puritan Portrait in New England”! How can we examine portraits for evidence about what a society is like? How can we analyze the portrayal of someone’s clothing or the way in which people are standing in a portrait? What can a visual representation of a person tell us about the times in which they lived? As you will see in this lecture, Puritan portraits can tell us about what Puritans thought about the significance of symbols; the role of realism in art; and important values in their life. You might not think of artworks as communications media, but they are a way to communicate all the same, a way of communicating that does not involve words.¹ In this lecture, I’ll first discuss and analyze three specific Puritan portraits, then isolate three themes that arise from my discussion, which tell us more about the Puritans. The learning goals are for you to be able to discuss how at least one of the three themes in this lecture connects with a specific Puritan portrait or other Puritan media object.

First, Puritans did make portraits, even if we think they were mistrustful of images. For more on the topic of Puritans and images in general, see the lecture “The Second Commandment: Media and Representation.” In fact, portraits were the primary kind of painting that they made. Puritans used and appreciated portraits. Portraits were often sent to various family members, which I will describe more later. Let’s look at some examples of Puritan portraits; I’ll discuss and analyze each before diving into shared themes. You can find links for the images in the transcript of the course and look at them while listening to this lecture if you’d like, but if you can’t, don’t worry. I’ll still be describing each portrait.

First, let’s look at the portrait of Elizabeth Freake and her baby, which is one of the most carefully crafted ones in Puritan society. It is also one of the most famous. It has not been definitively concluded who the artist is, but he is known as the “Freake limner,” and he seems to have finished the painting in about 1674. Elizabeth Freake, the subject of the portrait, was born in Boston, the daughter of an affluent merchant; the baby’s name is Mary. The artist paints Elizabeth Freake sitting down and holding her baby on her lap. The artist depicts intricate details of Freake’s lacy collar and the baby’s delicate gown. We can see some details of the Turkish style upholstery of the seat of Freake’s chair. The painter seems to purposely present this portion of the chair by putting it right along the bottom edge of the painting. The background is a little more bare. The artist does not attempt to depict very many things behind the sitter, only part of a curtain and part of a chest; otherwise it seems empty and is just a plain dark background. Nor does the artist attempt to portray things in the distance using a sense of perspective. So, compared to some other artwork which effectively uses perspective to depict backgrounds, such as those of the Italian Renaissance, there is not as much attempt at realism, especially for the background, in this picture. Something that this portrait seems to feature, however, is color. We see a variety of colors including red, black, green, yellow, and orange across the painting. These colors are found in Elizabeth Freake’s dress, the baby’s gown, and the chair. Freake wears a dress with a green bodice—the bodice is the top part of a dress—held together with red laces and red and black tassels; Mary’s dress is light yellow; and the chair is red with white and yellow patterns.

¹ While we don’t normally think of paintings as a medium of communication, perhaps because they generally don’t contain words, in this course we will consider them one kind of communications media and consider how they generate meaning .

My second example of a portrait is the painting of Increase Mather by Jan van der Spriett (1688). Increase Mather was a prominent Puritan minister who also was president of Harvard and father to Cotton Mather, another prominent minister. This painting depicts Increase Mather standing in his library. He is pointing to a section in a book opened in front of him. A curtain partially swept open reveals bookshelves behind him. More books, as well as a watch and gloves, lie on a table in front of Mather. Mather stands with his face slightly tilted as if he were looking out to the side. He is dressed in black and white, with no additional colors or very much ornamentation on his clothing. This painting, like the one of Elizabeth Freake, does not make use of perspective to depict the background. It does not seem to focus on a variety of color. However, there are some interesting and carefully selected objects shown on the table and elsewhere in the painting. These include the books that are opened in front of him, the stopwatch on the table, and the gloves lying off the edge of the table.

Finally, my third example is the portrait of Mrs. Patteshall and her child, attributed to painter Thomas Smith. In this painting, Mrs. Patteshall sits with her child, which also happens in the portrait of Elizabeth Freake and her child. She and the child, baby Ann, wear black and white gowns, but the child has some red in her gown. Mrs. Patteshall holds a fruit and the baby grabs hold of Mrs. Patteshall's wrist. The baby appears to be sitting on top of a stand overlaid with red cloth. The background consists of just a curtain and the rest is dark. There is not very much grappling with perspective in the background in this painting, too. However, the modeling of the faces uses more perspective than the faces in the painting of Mrs. Freake. The eyes of Mrs. Patteshall are slightly different sizes, with the one further in the background slightly smaller so as to indicate movement towards a vanishing point. This creates a sense of perspective and depth. The baby's face also is part of a perspective system that leads towards a vanishing point. The lines through the eyes and the mouth start to converge gradually. Some of the parts of Mrs. Patteshall's and baby Ann's clothing are depicted with depth, too. The pearls of Mrs. Patteshall's necklace are shown carefully modeled as rounded forms. There is some sense of chiaroscuro, or contrast between light and shadow, in this painting. The colors in this painting are not quite as vivid or diverse as in the painting of Mrs. Freake, however. This painting also doesn't quite have many intricate visual details. The lace on the clothing of mother and child is not depicted in as much detail as in the Freake painting (Fairbanks 471-2). Finally, you'll find that once again, as with the portrait of Mrs. Freake, a mother and her child are depicted.

What are some observations we can make from looking at these portraits so far? One theme has been perspective—some portraits have some more and some have less. Of the paintings I have discussed the one of Mrs. Patteshall and her baby seems to have the most perspective. The artist depicted the sitters' faces and some of the objects in the painting with a greater sense of depth. For most artists in the time of the Puritans (ie Renaissance and Mannerist artists) linear perspective was one of the most important concepts to master, after proportion. Actually, most professional artists in New England understood the Italian method of creating a sense of perspective (Fairbanks 443). However, not all artists applied it with equal precision. For example, the painter of the Mrs. Freake and baby portrait did not apply it extensively to the faces in the portrait. But, this painter did apply it to the floor in another set of portraits he did, of the three children of Arthur and Joanna Mason. What the Freake portraitist lacked in applying perspective, he seems to have compensated for with the vivid colors and textural detail in his paintings. The Puritans' use of perspective was similar to that of other English painters in the Elizabethan period. The English painters worked in a style called "neo-medieval" (Miller). This style did not emphasize creating a realistic sense of depth. However, it did emphasize pattern and

color. One of the most famous portraits of Queen Elizabeth, by Marcus Gheeraerts the younger, is in this style. So we might conclude that Puritan portraits did demonstrate perspective, but that there might be a greater focus on patterns and color, that these were what allowed most for the “realism” of a painting.

Another theme is family ties. Both the portrait of Mrs. Freake *and* of Mrs. Patteshall also depict their baby children. They depict mother and child together. Children were valuable to the Puritans; in Boston at the time up to 10 to 30% of children died in their first year of life (Vinovskis 286). Mrs. Freake had several children, but each one must have been very important to her. This particular portrait captures her and her baby Mary together. The artists who painted these portraits also painted ones of other people in their family. The artist who painted the portrait of Mrs. Freake also painted one of her husband Mr. Freake. The artist who painted Mrs. Patteshall painted her husband Mr. Patteshall too. The painting of Increase Mather depicts only him, however. It may not especially reflect the value of family ties but instead reflects his prominence as an individual figure. Also, in the three portraits we’ve seen, those depicting family members together always include mothers. Portraits seem especially helpful for strengthening ties between mothers and children. There are actually several other instances of Puritans using portraits to strengthen connections between family members. One example is Puritans commissioning portraits for people when they were close to death in order to remember them. Nicolas Roberts lived in London and sent a portrait of his daughter Katherine, who was dying, to his other daughter in America, Elizabeth Shrimpton. It allowed Elizabeth to remember and reflect on her sister and it was a way for Nicholas to express his love for both of his daughters (Miller).

Finally, these three portraits all involve symbolism. Many of the objects in the portraits represent concepts or ideas. For example, the watch in the portrait of Increase Mather symbolizes the passing of time and the eventual prospect of death. It reminded viewers they would face death at some point. It also might have showed that Increase Mather remembered and applied this concept as a godly minister. In fact, many of the objects in the Mather portrait symbolize characteristics of Increase Mather. The reading stand reminds us of Mather’s ministerly duties. Mather points at a section of the Bible called “The Preacher” in the book of Ecclesiastes. The painter took care to indicate that Mather was pointing to this section by making the words on the page he is holding readable to the viewers. Ecclesiastes discusses how pointless much of human life is; the speaker of Ecclesiastes tells us that acquiring riches, enjoying culinary pleasures and luxury, and even working hard and acquiring wisdom is ultimately meaningless. The painting reminds its viewers that much of life has no eternal value. It indicates, too, that Increase Mather might have preached this idea, since he is pointing at the book of Ecclesiastes, specifically the part titled “the preacher.” The fruit in Mrs. Patteshall’s hand reminds us of youth, seen in the baby, but it also reminds us of the passing of time. We know that this snapshot of Mrs. Patteshall and her child only represents a certain moment of their lives and that what is depicted in the painting will change. What is important, however, is the bond between Mrs. Patteshall and her child and its persistence through time. Even the painting of Elizabeth Freake and the baby has some symbolism, too. While the faces of Freake and the baby may not be as realistic as possible, the lace and upholstery designs are hyperrealistic such that they seem to become prominent symbols. They might symbolize the wealth of the Freake family.

Puritans might have enjoyed symbols in portraits because their interest in the spiritual world made them less inclined towards realistic visual depiction. For them, the state of one’s soul was especially crucial, more so than what one might have looked like on the outside.

Scholar Jonathan Fairbanks quotes a poem written on an English portrait of the time (of George Withers), “What I WAS is passed by; / What I AM away doth flie; / What I SHAL BEE none do see; / Yet in that my Beauties bee” (Fairbanks 417). The importance of portraits lay not in an accurate representation of someone’s face, but rather in capturing and representing some part of them that was not their physical, outer, appearance. Increase Mather looked a certain way, but what was more important was the kind of Biblical ideas that he espoused and the ideas by which he lived. One can see this through the objects painted in the portrait.

In this lecture I have discussed Puritan portrait paintings. I’ve looked at three specifically: the portrait of Mrs. Freake and her baby Mary; the portrait of minister Increase Mather; and the portrait of Mrs. Patteshall and her baby. After discussing these three portraits I introduced three facets of Puritan portraits: the use of perspective; how portraits could enhance family ties; and how portraits focused on symbolism more than realism. Portraits did not always function through realistic portrayals, such as a detailed application of perspective; rather, many elements that the portraits depicted were symbols that stood in for a bigger idea, such as time or youth. The portraits also strengthened bonds between family members, as a way to circulate symbols of who someone was amongst family. Now it’s your turn: what do you think about portraits in New England Puritan society and how they worked?

Discussion question 1: Choose one of the three Puritan portraits that we talked about in this lecture as well as another Puritan portrait you find yourself (for example: the portraits of Elizabeth Eggington, of John Freake, of the Mason children, of Robert Gibbs, or of Henry Gibbs—see the links below). Describe both. Upon looking at the portrait this lecture described with your own eyes, what is something you noticed that this lecture might not have emphasized as much or touched upon? How do these two portraits compare in terms of the three themes I’ve described in this lecture?

Discussion question 2: Compare Puritan portraits as a medium with another medium we have discussed in this course. How are they similar and how are they different? Do both of them include the use of symbols? How important is realism, or what is the role of the family in relation to the other medium?

I have listed links for viewing the portraits online below. While you can find them in multiple places on the web, I have used mostly Wikipedia links for consistency.

Elizabeth Clarke Freake (Mrs. John Freake) and Baby Mary

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Elizabeth_Clarke_Freake_\(Mrs._John_Freake\)_and_Baby_Mary_Freake-Gibbs_Painter_1671%E2%80%931674.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Elizabeth_Clarke_Freake_(Mrs._John_Freake)_and_Baby_Mary_Freake-Gibbs_Painter_1671%E2%80%931674.jpg)

Elizabeth Eggington

https://www.thewadsworth.org/ngg_tag/american/

Henry Gibbs

<https://theclaycenter.pastperfectonline.com/Webobject/50F77348-B381-4AC2-B2AA-033542552190>

Increase Mather, by John van der Spriett

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Increase_Mather#/media/File:Increase_Mather.jpg

John Freake

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:John_freake_1674.jpg

The Mason Children

<https://www.famsf.org/stories/generations-of-power-the-mason-children>

Mrs. Richard Patteshall and Child, by Thomas Smith

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Thomas_Smith_\(attrib.\)_-_Mrs._Richard_Patteshall_and_child_\(1679\).jpg](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Thomas_Smith_(attrib.)_-_Mrs._Richard_Patteshall_and_child_(1679).jpg)

Queen Elizabeth I ('The Ditchley portrait'), by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Queen_Elizabeth_I_\(%27The_Ditchley_portrait%27\)_by_Marcus_Gheeraerts_the_Younger.jpg](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Queen_Elizabeth_I_(%27The_Ditchley_portrait%27)_by_Marcus_Gheeraerts_the_Younger.jpg)

Robert Gibbs

<https://collections.mfa.org/objects/34062?image=0>

Additional Reading and Works Cited

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