



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Portraiture: Representing Interiority in American Culture, 1850–1920

Sarah Blackwood
Patricia and Phillip Frost Predoctoral Fellow
Northwestern University

My research project traces the path-breaking ways in which painters Thomas Eakins, Thomas Wilmer Dewing, and James A. McNeill Whistler—along with writers Henry and William James, Kate Chopin, and Harold Frederic—altered the genre of portraiture. Together, these leading writers and artists became concerned in new ways with the accurate representation of interiority—defined in my work as the inner psychological life of human beings—and turned to the portrait to address that concern. The portrait crystallized the encounter between surface and depth, appearance and “truth,” that fascinated artists and writers who worked within (both following and challenging) the tenets of late-nineteenth-century realism. Influenced by and contributing to the burgeoning discourse of modern psychology, the aesthetic depictions of inner life found in literary and visual portraiture helped to develop the modern concept of psychologized interiority. To make this argument, this project draws connections between literary and visual portraiture of the period. I contend that, far from an untroubled endorsement of the new language of psychology, the realist portrait interrogated this language and its relation to aesthetic representation.

The proposed project makes a significant contribution to interdisciplinary scholarship. It insists that the relationship between writers and visual artists in the late nineteenth century was productive and broad, rather than combative and parochial. It defines “realism” broadly, as a set of contradictory representational techniques variously indulged in and rejected by the artists and writers under consideration. Finally, it argues that, far from a self-contained or specialized art form, portraiture was central to evolving notions of personhood and subjectivity between 1870 and 1920.