



Smithsonian American Art Museum

## Portraits of Noteworthy Character

Amy Mooney

Postdoctoral Fellow (at National Portrait Gallery)

Columbia College Chicago

*“The personal appearance is a matter of the first concern. We see what a man is, before we see what he does or says.”*<sup>1</sup>

My book, *Portraits of Noteworthy Character*, examines the central role played by portraiture in fostering social mobility in the United States during an era of class, ethnic, and racial tension. In particular, I consider the overlooked social function of the portrait from the 1880s to the 1950s, when U.S. civic organizations, like Hull-House, utilized art to assist their migratory and immigrant populations. Believing that the models provided in portraits could uplift and change society, diverse institutions such as The Chicago Character Guild and the Harmon Foundation launched a multi-tiered educational campaign encouraging African Americans and immigrants from eastern and southern Europe and Mexico to fashion self-images conforming to Anglo American middle-class norms. Examining literary and visual texts in tandem, I look to case studies, conduct manuals, photographs, and painted portraits that offered the promise of citizenship, equality, and happiness to those who adopted the specified codes of appearance and behavior. My study breaks new ground in understanding the social utility of portraiture by tracing the impact of these efforts on artists and their audiences. The conventions of costume, iconography, gaze, and pose that continue to influence popular portraiture today reflect a complex historic framework fraught with aspirations for social equality that deserves further consideration. Accordingly, my study will illuminate the genealogy of our contemporary notions regarding self and society.

<sup>1</sup> *The Canons of Good Breeding* (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1839), 12.