Dawn: […] So, thank you very much again for giving your time today. It’s brilliant to have you here. Before we begin to talk about portrait-sitting accounts, would you mind saying a little bit about your research background, with respect to portraiture?

Interviewee: Yeah, sure. So I have worked with portraiture as a curator, mainly, for around fifteen years. So I have worked with portraits from all periods. I was [redacted] at the National Portrait Gallery, where I worked across all periods from the sixteenth century to the twenty-first century, and that was in all media as well, so paintings, graphic art, and sculpture. And then I [redacted] looking at sixteenth- and seventeenth-century portraiture. [Redacted]. And then, since then, I’ve moved away from the early modern period, and for the last seven years I’ve focused on twentieth- and twenty-first-century art, but I have changed my focus to graphic art [redacted]. And that’s works of art in the Western tradition, so I work with American, British and European art, mainly. So that includes some portraiture but it’s also not exclusively working on portraits. But I also maintain an interest in painted portraits as well, and I get involved in that partly though my own research interests but also I’m involved with [redacted] about twentieth-century portraits.

Dawn: Brilliant, thank you so much. I should say, I’ll be saying very little in this discussion as it’s really about getting your view on the topics. So please don’t be concerned if all I’m saying is ‘thank you’, ‘great’ and so on. So thank you, that was brilliant. The next part, then, of this discussion is a series of questions around portraiture, based on the examples of portrait-sitting accounts on your sheet. And each of these questions is made up of two parts. First, I’ll ask you a very general question. And please feel free to answer that one with respect to any periods or portraits that you see fit. And I’ll then follow this up with a question that relates to the specific accounts that are written there. So, the first question is: who participates in portrait sittings, in your view, and what are their various roles?

Interviewee: Okay, I think the obvious first answer to that would be the artist and the sitter themselves. Portraits can be of a single individual or they can be of a group of people, so sometimes that might be sitters. So they would be, I would say, the primary participants. But then you may have other people involved. There may be somebody who’s commissioned the portrait, there may be somebody who’s paying for it, there may be a group of people who’ve commissioned it, there may be an artist’s assistant involved, or assistants, either involved in helping to physically make the portrait or to just assist in the practical planning around it. And then I guess…. Yeah, if you’re just talking about the sitting, I would say they would be the main participants, yeah.

Dawn: Brilliant, okay, thank you. And with that in mind, then, if we have a look at number one, which is an account of Winston Churchill sitting to Graham Sutherland, I was wondering, how would you describe the role of the artist here and how would you describe the role of the sitter? Is this what you’d expect of the artist and the sitter’s role?

Interviewee: I think it’s interesting that right from the beginning, the sitter is asking questions of the artist about what sort of interpretation they’re going to go with. And I don’t necessarily think that’s unusual. I think that some sitters are going to be interested right at the beginning as to how they’re portrayed. And I think, particularly, confident public figures are going to be concerned - perhaps more concerned than some other people - as to how they’re portrayed. So I think it’s not necessarily unusual to get a sitter asking an artist how they’re going to be portrayed. But I think it’s interesting the way he phrases it because it’s not necessarily phrased as a conversation, so it’s not saying ‘can we talk about how you’re going to paint me?’, it’s ‘how are you going to paint me?’. So he’s understanding, or just accepting perhaps, that the artist really has an element of control in this, that he doesn’t necessarily have a say in, and that there is a certain amount of freedom that the artist has. So he’s interested in how he’s going to be portrayed but he’s not necessarily trying to control it or to direct it. And also it’s a kind of humorous question as well because it’s self-referential. He’s thinking about how he’s portrayed in the media. And as somebody who is portrayed so frequently, he’s very much aware of his public image, so he’s making a joke about that as well. And in terms of the artist’s reply, I think, again, it’s quite a playful reply. I think it suggests that… If I was to read this without any knowledge of the figures involved, I would think, ‘oh they probably have some kind of prior relationship’. It seems quite an easy relationship. It seems quite cheeky in some ways, especially of somebody like Churchill. I think if it was an artist that didn’t know Churchill at all then you would think, ‘oh that’s quite bold, to make that kind of reply’. But I think it shows that there’s a mutual respect between the two of them, a mutual understanding between the two of them, that this is something that the artist and the sitter will come to together, that the finished work of art will be something that they’ve almost collaborated on - so it depends partly on what the artist sees but partly on what the sitter gives to the artist. And again, the comment by the artist, the later comment to Lord Beaverbrook, is again quite playful. And he’s acknowledging that Churchill, I think deliberately, chose to show him a certain side of him. So without explicitly saying ‘I want you to portray me as the bulldog’, that’s what he gave to the artist and that’s what the artist took from it. So I think it’s a really fascinating exchange and very much encapsulates that kind of collaborative relationship.

Dawn: Brilliant. Thank you so much, yeah there’s some really interesting insights there. I’ll move on for now. There’s always things that I want to pick up on, but in the interests of fitting everything in, I will ask you the next question, which is: continuing to think about the various roles in portrait production, how would you understand the role of author?

Interviewee: I think in terms of using the term ‘author’ with any kind of work of art, I would see that as referring to the artist because I think… It is maybe a bit more tricky with portraiture because portraits are more often commissioned, so I think it depends on the type of portrait as to how much an artist can be described as an author when it comes to portraiture. I think sometimes, if an artist is very much given a very detailed brief of what they need to produce, then perhaps you can argue that the artist isn’t the author of that work and perhaps there isn’t a single author of that work. But I think, in instances where the artist has more freedom with a portrait, then I think they could be described as an author because they’re the ones that are deciding on most - in some cases, all -elements of the work: how big it is, what medium it is, how they’re going to portray the sitter, and all the other choices to be made. So I think… yeah, it’s an interesting question. I think there perhaps isn’t always a single author of a portrait, but I think there can be.

Dawn: Great, alright, thank you. So now if we maybe put this into practice or try this out with some examples, there’s two accounts under number two: sitting of Frank Swettenham to John Singer Sargent and sitting of the Royal Family to John Lavery. And I was wondering, who would you say is the author of the portrait and why, in each case? Please feel free to take as long as you need to read through the accounts.

Interviewee: Okay. I think the first one I would say that Sargent is the author of that portrait because you can see that he’s very much exerting his own freedom in terms of the development of the painting, and it’s based on his own knowledge of the sitter and his own relationship with the sitter so it’s quite a personal response to that person. And he’s repainted the copy, he’s asking for further sittings, he’s altering the uniform, so I think he would be the author of that. The second one… It seems like the King and Queen are very involved with the development of the painting, to the point of actually applying paint themselves. They seem to be quite – to use a modern term – micromanaging the development of the portrait. And… I think it’s very hard to tell with just that extract. I think it’s almost impossible to tell because that’s only one example. Apart from saying that they’re coming to the studio a lot to assess the progress of the painting - but that could mean anything from just coming to see what it looks like at every stage – maybe they’re just curious to see its progression. Or it could mean that they’re coming to actually make suggestions and comments and ask for changes along the way. And although we get this example of on one occasion they applied blue paint… Again, we’re not really given the context of that. Why did they apply blue paint? Was it because they were unhappy with what it already looked like? I think it’s just lacking in information. And I think there’s an implication that they’re controlling the development of the portrait and that the artist doesn’t have that much freedom, in which case I guess you could argue that they’re not the author. But again, John Lavery’s still creating the picture so he’s still creating it and even if the sitters are giving instructions along the way, it’s still his creation. So I think I would need more context for that, to come to a conclusion about how much freedom he had.

Dawn: Great, alright, thank you. And you’ve reminded me, in fact, it is very helpful for me to know if you’re looking for something in the account that you don’t have, to let me know what extra information you need. So great, thank you. Okay, once again then, thinking about the various people or parties involved in portrait production, ‘who do you think benefits from portrait production?’ is the general question.

Interviewee: I think the sitter very much can benefit from portrait production. And I think, particularly when talking about historical portraits, generally portraits were painted to show the status of a sitter or to celebrate a sitter or for them to display… almost as a sort of public relations exercise, and to widen their fame and to change the way in which they were seen. So I think probably the sitter would be the person that comes to mind the most. But then I think obviously the artist as well. So, always, to get an important commission for a portrait would be something that an artist would always want, particularly, traditionally, would want to get a commission because not only is that going to bring them money but it’s also, if it’s a commission from an important person, it’s going to bring them a certain amount of kudos and also it’s going to act as a kind of endorsement of their work, so they’re more likely to get more work in the future from other people. So the artist would benefit. Obviously there are occasions when, if a portrait isn’t done well, or if it’s not received well, then it might backfire in that the artist might not benefit, and it might be the opposite. But also I think, if there’s a third party who commissions the portrait, they could benefit from a portrait, particularly if it’s commissioned perhaps as a gift to somebody, as a gift for the sitter, or if they’re trying to flatter the sitter in some way, or show allegiance or show their loyalty, then that can be beneficial to them. I think if we’re thinking about more modern portraits and portraits today, I think sometimes groups of people can benefit from a portrait, so, for example, if there’s a portrait of somebody who is particularly representative of a certain group of people within a population, for example, a civil rights leader or a feminist figurehead, then a portrait of that person can be beneficial to a certain cause or a certain group of people within a population. So I think there are all sorts of… And then obviously art is made to be looked at and to enjoy, so there’s always… thinking of the viewer and the people who are going to see this portrait as well, so whether that’s a portrait that’s going to be seen in public or if it’s something that people are going to have in private, then there are going to be people who benefit from just enjoying it.

Dawn: Great, thank you. That’s a really interesting point about representation as well. Alright, great. So looking at the accounts in number three, with some of these ideas around benefitting in mind, in each case, I’d like to ask who you think is benefitting from portrait production and what makes you draw that conclusion? Yeah, again, take your time to read.

Interviewee: Thanks. Okay. I think with the first one, with Marie Tempest and William Nicholson, I think it’s beneficial to both the sitter and the artist. The sitter benefits – she gets a portrait of herself. She’s asked for the portrait so it’s obviously something that she wants, probably as an actress, as someone who’s rising in terms of her career, she… or, actually, no, ‘when her status as an actress was assured’, so okay so she’s already made it but she’s probably trying to consolidate that fame and trying to achieve the trappings of someone who’s at that point in her career. So she would benefit from having a portrait of herself because it consolidates that. And then the artist, as it says in the extract, she ‘did him a favour by sitting to him’ because he was not somebody who probably would be commissioned for major portraits at that time. So she’s giving him a leg-up, in a way, by asking him to do the portrait, and so hopefully that will mean he becomes better known and gets more work as a result of it - so that’s both of them. I think the second one is probably both of them as well. So it seems that Epstein has asked Davies to sit for the portrait, that the artist wants him to sit for a portrait because he says ‘I sat on the condition’ so it seems that the artist has been the one that’s instigated that. And then they’ve negotiated this deal whereby the sitter gets something out of it, so he gets one of the resulting bronze casts at a decent price, so the sitter benefits – he gets a work of art by Jacob Epstein and a portrait of himself, which, again, as a public figure is quite an important thing to have. And it seems that the artist wanted that portrait sitting to happen, so I would say both of them benefit from that. And then the third one, I think the person that seems to benefit the most from this is Alfred Hitchcock, who commissioned the portrait, so he’s commissioned this portrait because he’s embarrassed or ashamed of this deal that he did where he sold on the rights to this script, so he was feeling guilty about it, so he wanted to do something for Michael Balcon. So he commissions this portrait, but I think… he’s obviously then coming away from it feeling better about the whole situation, so he’s benefitting from it, but he wouldn’t have commissioned that for that reason if it wasn’t something that he thought that Michael Balcon would want. So it’s a gift, in a way. It seems that he knows that that would be something that the sitter would want as well, so the sitter is benefitting from it, probably. It’s probably, or possibly, something that the sitter himself wouldn’t be able to afford to commission personally. And it’s also flattering, I guess, to have somebody else commission a portrait of you, especially somebody well-known like Alfred Hitchcock. Yeah, we don’t really know anything about whether the artist benefitted. I think he said ‘I had Jacob Epstein do a bust’. It sort of implies that… I don’t know, ‘I had’, to me, maybe implies a sense that he had to persuade the artist to do it. I don’t know. It’s unclear there how the artist felt about that particular commission. But he got paid, so, it’s work, so he benefitted in that he got a job, I guess.

Dawn: Great, alright, thank you. Yeah, loads of food for thought. It’s always quite hard for me not to respond and start going off on a tangent. But great, thank you for that really interesting answer. So, once more then, thinking about the various people or parties involved in portrait production, how helpful do you think is the idea of power or power relationships in describing their interactions?

Interviewee: I think it’s a really interesting and helpful way of looking at portraits and understanding how portraits are made because I think power really does come into portraiture in a really fundamental way. So when we were talking before about who’s the author of a portrait, if an artist has very little power in the scenario, then it’s usually because they’re being commissioned to make a portrait in which they’ve been given very clear instructions and that they maybe aren’t an artist who is able to have much of an impact on how the portrait turns out, so they may not be a very well-known artist or they may not be the type of artist that would be considered to be an artist in their own right. I guess there’s a group of portrait artists that are considered maybe more as artisans rather than artists, where they’re just producing a portrait to a very clear set of instructions. And I think, in those instances, the artist themselves doesn’t have a huge amount of power. And that will very much depend on who the sitter is and who’s commissioning the portrait. So obviously if it’s a royal sitter or something like that, somebody with a lot of power, somebody perhaps even like, these days, a Hollywood star or a very wealthy corporate figure, then even artists who might be able to be quite free in their work, away from this particular commission, they might feel that they’re unable to exert any power in this situation, if the sitter is much more powerful than them or if the person commissioning the portrait is more powerful than them. And then you get cases where - I think, particularly with modern and contemporary art - where the artist is a very big name and – I’m thinking of artists like Lucian Freud, for example - whereby the portrait is very much their work of art and they’ve chosen somebody who they want to paint or draw or make a print of. And it’s very much the artist, I think, that has the power in that situation. Obviously, the sitter can say ‘no’, but I think, once that process begins, it’s the artist who would probably decide how the painting or the work of art progresses. So I think, looking at any portrait, or trying to understand any portrait, you do need to think about the power relations within the making of it and who has the power. Sometimes it can be equal, or there can be elements that the artist has more power over than others. And then I think you need to think about how those power relations not only affect the making of a portrait but the finished work of art as well, and how that is likely to have affected the way in which a sitter is portrayed. So I think it’s just really important and very useful to think about it in that way.

Dawn: Brilliant. Okay, thank you so much. So let’s now apply those thoughts to some examples and try to tease out what makes you think that someone holds power in a portrait-sitting interaction and maybe what types of power they might hold as well. So, looking at the accounts in four, then, yeah, who do you think holds power in each of these interactions and what makes you draw that conclusion?

Interviewee: Okay, I think with the first one, it’s interesting, there’s a sort of power struggle going on, I think, with the first one. And I think, ultimately, the artist wins. The sitter clearly does have a certain amount of power. She’s able to make suggestions and arguments as to how she should be portrayed, so the clothes she wants to wear and the fact that she doesn’t want to wear jewellery. But I think throughout that extract, there’s a clear suggestion that the artist wins most of these arguments, so he added the necklace even though it was something she didn’t want. It says he ‘begged for some jewellery’, which kind of suggests that she’s the powerful one, but I think the fact that he’s able to add that necklace does suggest that really he has quite a lot of power over her. And then the situation with the hands, it says, ‘she was annoyed to find Sargent had painted her with affected, tapering hands’ and exclaimed ‘they are nothing like mine’ but it doesn’t say that she insisted that they be painted out or changed. He’s making concessions in that he’s hiding one, but he leaves one, and it’s not the way she would’ve wanted her hand to be portrayed. So she does have power, she’s not just sitting there mute, just putting up with everything. She’s obviously somebody who’s confident and established enough to be able to make these suggestions, but she’s ultimately drowned out by the will of the artist. So, a bit of a struggle, but… And then the second one, I think it’s interesting. It’s almost like she’s allowing herself to be painted even though she doesn’t really want to be. She’s not interested in… or, it’s not that she’s not interested in, but she sort of distances herself from the portrait. She makes it clear that she didn’t want to sit, she doesn’t think she should be painted, and she doesn’t really care what happens to the painting. So, there’s a suggestion that the artist has the power in that he’s able to do what he wants with the portrait to a certain extent, because she’s not getting involved. However, I think the fact that she consented to be painted in the first place, given that she has these views is… The portrait wouldn’t have happened if it wasn’t for her agreeing to be painted so… And it begins with, ‘It was a great event for me to meet Gertrude Jekyll, and I remember thinking her exactly the person I should like to paint. It wasn’t an easy job, however’ so it suggests that he had to probably do quite a bit of work to achieve his aim of painting her. So I guess she had power in that she was the one that made it happen by agreeing to be painted, but then I think he has the power over the finished painting because she’s washing her hands of it really. Then the third one, I think the power here seems to be all resting with the sitter. He commissioned the portrait, he flies the artist to him, so he’s not even having to go anywhere. I think - when I was talking before about portrait artists who are not necessarily seen as being artists in their own right, they’re almost just like craftsmen making these portraits to quite detailed guidelines - it seems like the sense that Salisbury here is filling that role in that he’s a painter of royalty and presidents so he’s used to, probably, people just telling him how they want to be painted, and they even set the boundaries in terms of how many sittings there are and where the sitting’s going to take place. The artist themselves has very little say here, in that. But he seems happy enough to do it. I guess he’s just… that’s the way he works, that’s his M.O., that’s his profession. And he seems really happy to have that commission and to be flown over and all the rest of it, but I think, yeah, the sense is that the power there is all with the sitter.

Dawn: Brilliant, thank you. I think you’ve identified some really interesting parameters for measuring power there in terms of, yeah, control over dress, control over when and where, these kinds of things. So thank you, that’s great. Okay, this is a very general question coming up, which is: is the portrait sitting an ordinary or an extraordinary event?

Interviewee: Hm. I think it’s always extraordinary. You could argue that it’s ordinary for people like kings and queens, perhaps military leaders, who are portrayed often, and these days, I guess famous film stars or whatever have photographs taken for *Vogue* or whatever all the time and the rest of it. There are certain people who probably have their portrait painted or taken or drawn or whatever quite frequently, but I still think it’s an extraordinary thing because I think every time somebody has their portrait taken, every time someone sits for a portrait, it’s going to be a different experience. And the way it happens and the relationship with the artist is always going to be different. And I think, even those people who sit for portraits frequently… it’s never going to be frequent enough that it’s not extraordinary. I think it’s never going to be something that’s mundane, I don’t think, even for people like that. And I think for lots of people it would be, if they ever sit for a professional portrait, it’s going to be a once-in-a-lifetime event or a twice-in-a-lifetime event, so it will be even more extraordinary for some people, but I think it’s always unique, so, for that reason, it’s extraordinary.

Dawn: Brilliant, okay, thank you. And so let’s look at some examples of sittings. One of them we’ve just seen, so it’s the Montgomery and Salisbury example, and two more. And I’d like to ask, do you think these sittings are ordinary or extraordinary events in the lives of their participants, and what makes you say that?

[…]

Interviewee: Okay. I think it’s interesting because both examples, I think, are examples of somebody having a portrait taken in quite an informal way, so in a domestic, probably, location, certainly in the first one and probably in the second one, and by somebody that they know. So it’s not an official portrait where somebody has to go somewhere for a sitting and it’s all quite carefully planned in advance. They both sound quite casual or informal in terms of the way they’ve come about. But I think - just going back to what I was saying before about portraiture, I think, always being quite an extraordinary experience - I think it probably is in both of these situations as well, because we get the sense that…. Well, actually, in the first one, in the Rupert Brooke one, we don’t know whether or not she’s painted him before. It’s possible that she’s painted him before, but it does say ‘perhaps partly to cheer him up’ so it’s obviously something that he enjoyed, whether he’d been painted before or whether she just thought it might cheer him up, it’s something that they would think he would enjoy. And I think…. I don’t know if you can enjoy something that’s ordinary. I think it’s something that’s quite a special thing to happen to him, something that’s different from the everyday. He’s obviously having a bit of a hard time, he’s not really enjoying his everyday life that much, or that’s the implication - and this is something to just make him feel better. And so I think it’s probably something that’s unusual and something out of the ordinary that he would enjoy. I think the second one… it is described in a quite ordinary way and it’s described in a way that suggests that the sitter has been through this process before, probably with the same artist. ‘He is a rapid worker’ suggests that he’s got experience of this, and the fact that he’s very matter of fact, ‘happened between 11 and 4, a full interval for lunch and then he just about finished it’, does make it sound very ordinary. But it’s still extraordinary enough to note down, it’s still extraordinary enough to make a note of and to describe. And even if you’re in that environment where lots of people are painting each other’s portraits all the time and you’ve been through this before, it’s still interesting enough to document. And so I think there’s probably… as I was saying, I think, for some people, having their portrait painted is going to be more extraordinary than for others, and perhaps this is a situation where it’s perhaps less extraordinary, but it’s clearly still something notable.

Dawn: Okay, brilliant, yeah. So if I just ask a quick follow-up, if these are all on a spectrum of extraordinary, do you think maybe… you used the term informal and formal – would that be a better way of distinguishing these different kinds of sittings do you think, than ordinary, extraordinary?

Interviewee: I think informal and formal is a good way of describing portrait sittings but it doesn’t necessarily… I think you can still have an informal sitting and it to be extraordinary. I don’t think it necessarily correlates in that way. So I think, you can still have something out of the ordinary that is informal.

Dawn: Yep, sure, so if we were to plot these three sittings, the Salisbury, the Ewald and the Rothenstein, to give the artists, on an extraordinary and an informal spectrum, where do you think they might be?

Interviewee: Oh yeah, sorry, I didn’t talk about the Salisbury one. I think the… yeah, the Salisbury one clearly is a very formal sitting. It’s a professional commission, the artist has been flown to the sitter, which, particularly in those days, would have been quite a big thing. And I think, again, the sitter is somebody who is obviously used to sitting for portraits, but they have commissioned this themselves and they’ve flown the artist, who is a ‘veteran painter of royalty and presidents’, so someone who is highly esteemed, highly respected. This does seem to be quite a big commission for the sitter, so I would say it is extraordinary. If I was going to rank them, I would say that that would probably be the most extraordinary of the three, just because it does seem to be - even though the sitter may have sat for portraits before - it seems to be quite a major commission and quite an important portrait that he’s hoping to get from it. So that would probably be the most extraordinary and the most formal. I think the second-most extraordinary, I think would be the Rupert Brooke one, just because, again, it seems less like something that happens every day - it seems like a treat or something slightly out of the ordinary. Although, I would probably say that was probably the most informal of the three, because I think with the third one, although that seems perhaps the most ordinary in that it seems much more a common occurrence, or something that happens frequently in the sitter’s world, it’s still the professional artist coming to the premises and doing a professional job, whereas the Rupert Brooke one seems much more of a friendly… not necessarily unprofessional but friendly, informal thing. It’s not a commission, it’s more about personal relationships, I guess.

Dawn: Great, thank you. Thank you for having a look through those, that’s really helpful. We have two more questions left in this two-part question section. So the next one is, how would you define the portrait? Not to put you on the spot too much!

Interviewee: How would I define the portrait? I would define the portrait as a portrayal or a depiction of a particular individual or group of people. So that doesn’t necessarily mean an image of their physical body… I think it can be an image of something else but something that is meant to represent that person. It can be abstract as well as figurative, but I think it’s meant to represent a particular person or group of people. I think… and again, not all images of people are portraits because I think if it’s an image of a person that isn’t a specified, or a specific, person then I think I wouldn’t call that a portrait.

Dawn: Brilliant, okay, thank you. So, looking at the account in number six, do you think the painting to which this account refers is a portrait? Are you able to say from the account? And what leads you to draw your conclusion? I’m thinking just from the account, in this case, but if you know the portrait then feel free to speak on it.

Interviewee: I think it’s really difficult. I think, from the account and from my own knowledge, I would think it exists in a grey area of what is portraiture and what is just an image of a figure. I think Freud would often make portraits of people, and we know who those people are, and there are elements of the sitter’s personality coming through the portrait, as there does seem to be in here. The fact that the sitter says ‘The results were only half me’, suggests she believes there are elements of her in the finished painting. But she knows that it’s not all her and it’s not just a portrait of her, perhaps, that it’s something more than that and that the artist has projected other things on to it that, maybe, she feels, aren’t related to her. And the fact that she uses the term ‘the model’ suggests that that’s almost the way the artist saw her, or the way she felt that she was being viewed is that she was just a model for this painting, which I think would mean that it isn’t a portrait because it’s not meant to necessarily portray a specific person. But I think, as the extract suggests, I think it’s a grey area because I think it’s a bit of both, and I think that’s true of a lot of his work, so, yeah…. But it’s interesting because I think, with this extract in particular, this is the sitter’s view and we don’t know what the artist intended or what the artist thought of the finished work, so… She’s saying ‘I think’, so this is her view and not a consensus, not a final word. So it might be that the artist doesn’t think that there’s anything of her in there and that she was just the model and it’s not a portrait at all, or it might be that the artist views it as a portrait. So it would be good to try and get some more information about that, I think.

Dawn: Great, thank you. Yeah, that makes sense. And is there anything the artist could say that would affirm your view on that, or it’s still an open question?

Interviewee: I think titles of paintings, or works of art, can really help, so if it was just called, say for example, *Nude on a Bed*, or something, and it was the artist that gave it that title, then I think we might assume that the artist did not intend it as a portrait, whereas if the artist gave it the sitter’s name then we would assume it was a portrait. So that would help.

Dawn: Brilliant, okay, thank you. Yeah, that grey area is very interesting, I think. Okay, so last question in this section. The first part is: how would you define the portrait sitting?

Interviewee: How would I define the portrait sitting? I think I would say that the portrait sitting is when the sitter gives the artist the access that they need to create the portrait, so that might be a sitting in a traditional way, where they actually, literally are in the same room and the sitter is in a chair or on a bed or whatever, and the artist either paints them directly or takes drawings or even photographs. There’s that kind of sitting, which I guess is the traditional way of defining a sitting. But I think there might also be - especially these days, maybe, where artists might work more from photographs, or maybe an artist will make a portrait of somebody without actually physically being with them - There might be other ways of providing the artist the access they need, so providing images or information about them, providing opportunities for them to talk about how they might want to be portrayed. All those kind of things I think could be argued that that’s part of the sitting.

Dawn: Hm, great. Yeah, that’s a really nice open definition, thank you. And, so, to finish this section then, are the accounts in number seven – are they portrait-sitting accounts? Do you think what you’re reading about is part of the portrait sitting? And why or why not? I suppose I’m, yeah, thinking about the extent of the sitting maybe.

Interviewee: Okay. Yeah, I think the first one… my first feeling was that it wasn’t part of the sitting and that it was something that happened after the sitting, because it seems to be an exchange that’s taking place to mark the ending of the sitting, and the fact that the inscription in the book is ‘in memory of being sculpted in relief’ suggests that you’re looking back at the sitting having happened. But I guess, thinking about that broad definition of a sitting and thinking about the relationship in full between the artist and the sitter, and the collaboration between the artist and the sitter, you could also argue that it is part of the process and that, rather than it being something that comes after the sitting, it’s the end of the sitting, so it’s the final exchange within the relationship, and it’s marking the end of that collaboration. So, yeah, I think I would describe it as that. I think it’s the sitter just saying something about their experience of this collaboration between artist and sitter, and giving something back to the artist, so… and also saying something about how they felt about it as well, the fact that it’s a great relief. I think the second one… It’s a similar thing but I probably wouldn’t include that because, I think, it’s not a collaboration in the same way, so it’s not part of the collaboration, it’s not part of the relationship. It’s something that they talked about during the sitting, so the recommendation of the book, I think is part of the sitting, but I think her reading of it comes afterwards - it’s when the sitting is finished. Then the final one, let me just read this again because it’s [?]... I think this is part of the sitting because I think it’s part of the contract. The discussion is part of the agreement and the contract between the sitter, the artist and, in this case, the publisher. So it’s defining the terms of the contract, which I think is part of the sitting because it’s part of the agreement and part of the collaboration.

Dawn: Great, thank you. Yeah, you’re using some language that I’m really interested in - exchange and contract and things like that. Thank you, those are really thought-provoking answers. […]

[…]

Dawn: Okay, brilliant, thank you. So that brings us to the end of our part two. […]

[…]

Dawn: […] So, part three is, yeah, just a few broader questions about portrait-sitting accounts and your experiences of them, if you have come across them. So the first question is: what would lead you to believe that a particular portrait-sitting account is credible? Or not credible?

Interviewee: I think it would depend on the source of the account and whether or not it was a first-person account or came from somebody else. So, if it was an account in a memoir, for example, and it was written by the sitter, or the artist, and it was their description of the sitting, then I would assume that was credible, but I would also be careful because if something has been written after the event or many years after the event… I would assume it was credible but not necessarily 100% accurate, I think, because, obviously, time and memory changes things. And also, I think you have to always remember, if it’s just one person’s account, that it’s one-sided, so it’s going to be their perception of something. If it was an account that was written at the time, so, in a diary, for example, or some kind of report… a letter…. again, if it was written by one of the parties involved, I would assume it was credible and I would perhaps assume it was more credible than a memoir that was written many years afterwards. But also then I would probably think about who’s the intended reader. If it was an account, say, something written to the person who’d commissioned the portrait, then they might be wanting to present a certain version of events that maybe… perhaps they’d be more candid if they were just talking to a friend or a family member or something. So I think you need to think about those things. If it was an account… I’ve often, more recently, used interviews in the media, where sitters have talked about sitting for artists - thinking of Freud, for example, or Auerbach or somebody like that that [redacted] - I’ve often found accounts in newspaper interviews, and again I would consider them to be credible because they’re usually first-person accounts and I would assume that the journalists have done their due diligence and fact checked, and so I have cited those sources. I think where I would be more careful is when it’s just a third party describing a portrait sitting, because stories can get lost in translation or are misremembered, and obviously people who are involved in them can misremember them as well, but I think it’s more likely that when it’s somebody else describing somebody else’s story then it’s less likely to be fully accurate. I think it’s just the closer that the source is to the original situation, I think the more credible it’s likely to be.

Dawn: Great, okay, so you touched on using some of these accounts in your work. Maybe, before we talk about that a bit more, I’ll just chuck another word in the mix. So we’ve talked about credibility, we’ve talked about accuracy. If I throw in ‘usability’, is there a line there where something becomes so distant from the portrait sitting or so not credible that it is not useable? Is that line the same as credible?

Interviewee: I don’t think so. Hold on, let me think. Yeah, I think… Something is not going to be useable to me, I think, if it’s told at lots of removes from the original account, so if it’s, say, somebody who’s describing a friend of a friend sitting for a portrait by Lucian Freud then I wouldn’t use that account because there’s no direct connection there and it’s really hearsay or rumour. It could be accurate but there’s no guarantee there that there’s any accuracy. But I think, in terms of time having gone by… so if I find an account of a sitter describing a sitting from fifty years earlier, I think I would still find that useable because I think it’s really interesting to hear people’s reflections with hindsight, and I think you just have to be careful how you frame it. So if you’re going to reference something like that, I think you just need to make sure that you give the context. And again, even with what I was saying about a friend of a friend describing a sitting, you could use it, particularly if there’s very little information out there about a sitting. If that’s the only piece of information you have, you could still use it, but you need to give all these caveats [and say?] ‘Well, it’s possible that this happened, there is an account’ but you have to weigh up the likelihood of that being accurate. So I think… there isn’t a line. I think you just… there’s things that I’m more likely to use than others.

Dawn: That makes sense. Thank you, that’s a really really useful reflection. So, back to your use of these accounts in your research, you’ve mentioned newspaper articles, which is really interesting. Are there any other experiences you might have had that you can speak about? Do you come across these kinds of accounts often, or are they actually quite rare?

Interviewee: I don’t come across them a huge amount, I would say, but that’s partly because the kind of research I’m doing now, I’m not really doing a lot of in-depth research into a portrait. I think if I was to do a lot of research on a particular portrait then I think, for modern and contemporary works, a lot of these accounts do exist. But then there are also certain artists for whom you never hear from the sitters at all - those kinds of accounts just aren’t out there. So I would say that the ones that I use the most are things like newspaper interviews or memoirs. And sometimes I’ve used conversations with people who’ve sat for portraits, so they’re not written accounts, as such, but they’re just unpublished oral accounts, where I’ve spoken to people who’ve sat for an artist. And I wouldn’t necessarily cite those because I’m not a journalist, I’m not like… But I would use that as background knowledge and background information as to how an artist works, to help me to understand an artist’s practice. So that can be helpful. I think it’s slightly different when you’re working as a curator because I think you’re looking for interesting things that you can put into a label and help people to understand a portrait better, and so if you can find an account of a sitting that says something really interesting about the finished portrait, then I think I’m more likely to use something like that. But often, the details of a sitting, like the practical details of how many times a sitter went to the studio, or how long they sat for… Those kind of things are not really going to add much to the way in which a viewer sees a painting on the wall of a gallery, so I’m less likely to use those kind of really really detailed accounts, I think.

Dawn: Thank you, that’s a great professional perspective. So, great. So thinking about the accounts we talked about today, or we saw today, are there any that you found particularly surprising or particularly interesting? If not, that’s fine.

Interviewee: No, I think they’re all really really fascinating. It’s a subject that I find really fascinating. I think the one about the King and Queen applying the royal blue paint is interesting. You don’t come across that very often, a sitter physically getting involved in the making of a portrait in that way, even if it was just a little tiny dab of paint or whatever, that’s really fascinating. And the fact that the artist presumably can’t say no to that… they have to accept that the sitters are going to do that. That was really interesting. And I think the one about Alfred Hitchcock, I think was really fascinating because I don’t think you come across that very often where there’s a portrait being commissioned almost as part of managing a business relationship, essentially, especially modern portraits, and I’m sure it happens. And that idea of smoothing out a professional relationship by making this gesture and giving him this gift of a portrait is just really interesting. I think, yeah, all your questions about power are really fasc... Yeah, the Sargent and Elizabeth Garrett Anderson tussle is fascinating, especially because that is a woman sitter, as well, I think that’s particularly interesting that she’s a professional woman and that she doesn’t want to be seen in this very feminine way - she wants people to see her as she is, as a doctor. Or, is it a doctor? Yeah. And… yeah, I think the accounts that interest me the least are things like the Montgomery one, where it’s more of a traditional kind of commission, where a well-known establishment painter is commissioned. Although, that is a sweet account, in that… ‘with all the enthusiasm of a schoolboy’, and the fact that he gets the map as a gift, you can kind of sense the giddiness of the [?]… he’s probably trying to play that down, but…

Dawn: Is that because that one feels more standard… more usual?

Interviewee: Yeah, I think so. I think it’s just not particularly surprising. There’s nothing in it that I think, ‘oh that’s…’ I think if I was thinking of traditional establishment early-twentieth-century portraits or nineteenth-century portraits, I would think of that kind of commission, and an artist like that being almost summoned to go and paint an important person’s portrait.

Dawn: Great. I love the way you framed that Hitchcock one, that’s brilliant. Okay. The last question then in this part three: are there any other domain experts – and I mean not individual people but more like fields of study – that you might consult about these portrait-sitting accounts in order to understand them better? Or, not these ones specifically but about this kind of material?

Interviewee: Let me think… What kind of thing do you mean?

Dawn: So I mean, if we were coming at this from another discipline, someone might read an account and say ‘Well I have no knowledge about painting so I can’t interpret this, I’m afraid. I need an art historian’. I mean, for us, or for you, are there any other disciplines or disciplinary knowledge that you feel you need to draw on in order to analyse these? Or not? Are they firmly in the domain of art history?

Interviewee: Yeah, I don’t think they’re firmly… Yeah, I think when you’re looking at things like portraits of public figures, so members of the Royal Family or Prime Ministers like Churchill, or military leaders, I think you need to look to historians as well and look at what’s going on at that time, what’s happening to the sitter when that particular portrait was commissioned or whatever, or painted, also why it is that they might want a portrait at that particular time, whether it’s got a propaganda value, all those kind of things. So you need to think about the history behind it and how historians might interpret those portraits and also the way in which the artists themselves are viewed by historians, at that time if they had particular allegiances to particular factions, for instance. I think with some… like with the Rossetti one, I think you might think about… obviously they were artists, but the circle that he moved in – I think you need to think about it in a broader cultural way. So you need to think about… And I think this would be true if you were looking at any particular group of artists, so if you were thinking about the Bloomsbury Group or any sub-culture, in that way, you need to think about the way in which they lived their lives and how portrait sittings would’ve fitted into that. So that’s art history to a certain degree, but you’re also thinking about literature and social history and the ways in which they lived their lives. Is portraiture… was it a conventional thing that they were doing or is it particularly unconventional? Were they commissioning portraits in the same way that people outside of their group might have commissioned portraits or was this a particularly unusual sub-culture that did things in a very different way? So I think you need to understand the wider cultural perspective. And I think if you’re looking at a portrait of somebody who is a poet or an actress then you need to understand, to a certain degree, how they are seen within their profession, as well, so it is helpful to look beyond art history and think about the position these people have within their professions and within their world, like within the literary world or the theatre world or [things?] like that.

Dawn: Brilliant. Great, thank you. So, final part now, just two questions, and this is an opportunity to reflect on what we’ve talked about and to raise anything that I might’ve missed out. So, yes, the first question is: are there any other questions you think I should’ve asked or themes I should’ve touched upon?

Interviewee: I don’t think… Nothing’s coming to mind. I think you’ve covered quite a lot of really interesting themes around these type of accounts. So no, I think… yeah.

Dawn: Okay, great. And is there anything else you’d like to say about the accounts, or about our discussion?

Interviewee: I just think these kind of accounts are so important and they’re so rich in terms of the information that they contain, and even if not always 100% reliable in terms of facts, I think it’s always fascinating to examine in detail the relationship between an artist and a sitter in a portrait, and the other relationships that affect the outcome of a portrait. And I don’t think you can ever truly understand a portrait fully until you have looked at these things. And so I think it’s always really frustrating if you want to know more about a portrait and you have no way of knowing what a sitter thought of it or how they were involved in the making of a portrait, so I think these accounts are really precious and I think the idea of having something whereby they’re more available to people, or they’re easier to find, easier to locate… because they can be very disparate and they can be very difficult to find. And I think, yeah, that the more we collate them and add them to the record, I think the better for everyone. Because they don’t have to be used… People can choose not to use them. But actually, the more information we have about works of art, the better.

Dawn: Thank you, that’s brilliant. [I?] obviously agree with a lot of that. Thank you so much. Thank you for your really thoughtful and interesting answers. And you obviously bring a unique perspective so I really appreciate you taking the time to contribute today. […]

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