Dawn: […] So, great. Thanks again for giving your time today. And, as I said, the first thing I’d like to do is just, if you wouldn’t mind giving a brief introduction to your research background, specifically, if you can, with respect to either portraiture or these textual accounts that we’re going to talk about?

Interviewee: Cool, yes, so I’m an art historian. I work on British art, modern and contemporary. My publications and research so far has tended to focus on the Edwardian period, up until the post-War period. And my particular area of specialism is in the relationship between text and image, and how this informs the viewing experience for audiences. So I haven’t worked on portraiture directly – well I’ve used portraiture in my work that’s been within my teaching – but I have researched and written about the way in which written material related to exhibitions affects how works of art are experienced and interpreted. So I’m particularly interested in talking about the labels that accompany the artworks that you’ve selected, and thinking about how that verbal interpretation is trying to shape an experience of what that visual work is going to be like.

Dawn: Excellent, thank you so much for that. So we will go straight on, if that’s okay, to talk about the accounts on the sheet. What I’ll do is I’ll ask you a series of questions. Each one is in two parts. So the first is going to be a very general question and feel free to answer that with respect to any period or portraits that you might see fit, and then I’ll follow this up with a question that relates to the specific accounts. Those two questions might come together – we will see how it goes. So first of all, I’d like to ask: who participates in portrait sittings, in your view, and what are their various roles?

Interviewee: As in, who’s involved in that? That would be of course the artist, making the portrait, the sitter, who is depicted. But I think you might also find there’ll be tertiary people, depending on the medium in which the portrait is made, so if it’s painting, you’d expect it to be, in the period that we’re talking about, a single artist. But if we go into prints then it’d be those people manufacturing and distributing the prints as well. And I think we’ll also find that in a lot of cases there might be someone who introduces the sitter to the artist, who brings those two people together.

Dawn: Great. Okay so with those kinds of roles in mind, if we could look at the account in number one – so this is a sitting of Winston Churchill to Graham Sutherland – I wondered how you would describe the role of the artist here, and how you would describe the role of the sitter?

Interviewee: This is a difficult one for me to describe because I know the backstory and the surrounding story, so it’s hard for me to divorce that knowledge from the text that I’m seeing in front of me. I think in the text you get a sense of the fact that there wasn’t an agreed unified vision between the sitter and the artist. But my response is going to be inflected by the fact that I knew that Churchill destroyed the painting afterwards because he hated it, and that Sutherland’s practice… He’s chosen as an artist because of his prominence in the post-War period and the wartime period, his prominence as an artist representing aspects of Britain and the war effort, so it makes sense that they’d ask him to paint Churchill. But his style is kind of at odds with that monumental tradition of painting statesmen, so… I’m sorry, I’m going off on a tangent, but…

Dawn: No that’s completely fine, and it’s completely fine to draw on any background knowledge you might have, so don’t worry about that, that’s great. Do you think the roles of Winston Churchill and Graham Sutherland – are they what you would expect of an artist and a sitter, or…? Perhaps that’s too general a question, but it would be good to get your thoughts.

Interviewee: It’s one example; I don’t think there’s any one particular dynamic you can talk about. Traditionally, I guess you’re meant to argue that this sort of relationship puts the artist in a position of power because they’re the one representing and it’s, in one sense, their vision of a sitter, but on the other hand, portraits historically have been commissioned and the sitters or their representatives have had lots of say over how that representation looks. The fact that Churchill himself was such a large character, also the fact that he was also an artist, inflects that power dynamic in a different way, I think, with Sutherland.

Dawn: Great, that’s an interesting point. Okay so we’ll move on but carry on thinking about the various roles in portrait production. I was wondering – how would you understand the role of author? If I say that someone is the author of the portrait, does that mean anything to you? Or what might that mean?

Interviewee: I guess in that sense, it’s like who’s determined the contents of the portrait and I think in that case, you wouldn’t have a single author, if we’re using the semiotic idea of the portrait as text, that would be of course the artist as the producer, the sitter in terms of what they want to show, the sitter or their representatives in terms of what control they’ve had over the content, and even the extent of the socio-political environment in which the portrait’s produced, so the dominant style of the time in which the artist is working but also the kind of badges of status and class that are evident in the appearance of the sitter themselves, which will be determined by the historical period.

Dawn: Okay, great. There’s a lot to take into account. So keeping in mind the idea of author, there’s a couple of accounts numbered two – feel free to take some time to read them obviously. In these accounts - and obviously you might have some background knowledge, which is fine - I wondered, who would you say is the author and what makes you come to that decision?

[…]

Interviewee: Again, that’s the same point, isn’t it. It’s about seeing the painting as a text, it’s about having that multiple layers of authorship. So I’d repeat my answer to the first question there, I think.

Dawn: Okay, sure. Great, okay. So if we carry on thinking about the various people and parties who are involved in portrait production. A general question - who do you think benefits from portrait production? So we were talking about the different roles; who of those are beneficiaries?

Interviewee: Well I guess if the function of the portrait is to make some sort of comment on the identity and status of the sitter, you could argue that if the portrait is successful in that aim, there’ll be something of added prestige for the sitter there, that it’s an expression - depending on where the portrait is going to be shown, of course – it could be an expression of their status and their importance. It could be an expression of their taste and erudition, how fashionable they are in terms of what portrait painter they’ve chosen. I think that’s particularly relevant when we think about Sargent. And, in turn, this could be beneficial to the artist. Portrait painting is normally….

[…]

Interviewee: So the last point I made regarding that is it could be them demonstrating their level of fashion, cultural knowledge, like where Sargent’s involved. Then on the other hand you’ve got benefits towards the artist. When we talk about portraiture, a lot of which will be commissioned, so that’s going to be bread and butter money for artists. For some artists, where they might have an experimental wing of their practice but they’re using portraiture to fund that. For some artists they’ve made a career out of portraiture themselves and that might propel them into a kind of upper-middle class, upper-class lifestyle in terms of their status and their wealth – I think Sargent’s another good example of that in the period we’re talking about. I think… There’s lots written about portraiture and the idea of artists accessing different circles for social advancement or professional advancement. I think that stands quite well. [Redacted]’s work on that is really good I think, in the Victorian period, and I would concur with those comments. There’s the networking opportunities for artists as they’re brought into contact with influential people. So you could say that it’s not only about them getting that commission and having that sitter and doing that work but that might also lead to further commissions or meetings with a wider range of patrons or supporters, the opportunity to get in exhibitions and so forth. And then of course, on the other hand, if the artist is represented by a dealer. And the kind of benefits that the dealer can enjoy from having a successful artist who’s painting the great and the good, might raise the viability of their commercial enterprise. So obviously, in the period that we’re talking about, not all artists, by any stretch of the imagination, would be represented by dealers because the market in Britain is quite different from the dealer-orientated market in France but there are certainly some artists that are either represented or associated with particular dealers. And there is that economy that’s going on there as well. I think you also get portraiture playing a large role in some of the big exhibitions as a kind of draw for audiences, so I’m thinking particularly around the coronation in the ‘30s, the Royal Academy, when they had their summer show, which is normally contemporary art invited or submitted year by year, they had a big section of royal portraiture, including a lot of historic work, as a kind of celebration of the coronation. And in that sense, we’re seeing the wider operation of the field of art there. That’s maybe, you could say there’s an economic angle because people pay for attendance, people pay for the catalogue, but you could also say there’s a wider educational or cultural ambition behind that, seeking to engage a wider audience in the history and culture of the country.

Dawn: Brilliant. Thank you. There’s so much I want to respond to but I need to keep quiet in this case, so thank you for that answer. If we can take it back to some specific portrait-sitting accounts then, I’ve got three and they’re numbered under the number three. So in these specific portrait sittings, who do you think is benefitting from portrait production and what would be your reasoning?

Interviewee: It’s hard to say what is the right thing to comment on here because we’re only getting one side of the story. In each case, we’re only hearing from the sitter or someone associated with the sitter. So they’re looking at it from that perspective. Almost like flattery to the sitter, like the sitter’s doing a favour for the artist or for someone involved. I know that’s not quite the case with the Hitchcock story but it’s still like the sitter’s the one who’s benefitting or the sitter’s the one who’s doing the favour. So I think I would want to know the other side of the story. Like does Epstein remember that deal with Davies being like that? Would he agree that that’s correct or does he have a different opinion of it? Did William Nicholson agree that Marie Tempest was doing him a favour, that his status was yet to be made at that point, or does he have a different view on the matter? So I think we’re only getting one side of the story here, so I couldn’t make the claim based on that.

Dawn: Great. I should say, if in any case you feel you don’t have enough information, that’s also very useful to hear. So that’s great. Okay, so still thinking about those people and parties involved in portrait production, we’ve touched on this a little bit, but how helpful do you think is the idea of power or power relationships in describing their interaction?

Interviewee: I think you completely need that. You can’t talk about it without that. And I think there’s different levels on which that might happen. You could talk about socio-political power relations and think about it in the particular historical context in which the portrait was made, so that would need to be considered, but there’s also theories on power and the power of the gaze and power relating to gender, where we bring in feminist theory, psychoanalytical theory and post-structuralist theory as well that I think is helpful to unpick that. When you get representations of people of a different race from what the artist is then we’d also need to turn to thinking about race in terms of power relations, and depending on the period that might involve drawing on post-colonial scholarship or critical race theory to do so.

Dawn: Mhmm. Great. And so again, the second part of the question, looking at some examples. So we’re on number four. Who do you think holds power in each of these interactions and what would make you say that, or is it not possible to say? These ones are quite long so do take as much time as you need.

Interviewee: It varies doesn’t it? I think with the first one about Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and John Singer Sargent, you get that sense of the artist and the sitter being slightly at odds with each other. The question then is what happened to the portrait. If she’s not 100% happy with it, what then ha– did she commission the portrait herself? Did she end up keeping it? Was it not a commissioned portrait? Did he end up exhibiting it in other places? Who was looking at it? What conditions under which it was saw? We need to know that information to be able to fully comment on this idea of power relationship. You could make the argument that as a male painter in that time period, with her as a female painter [sic], there’s that unbalanced gender dynamic but I think that would oversimplify things. And actually that would do a disservice to her by suggesting her own agency was so severely reduced. It’s clear from that commentary that she was able to advocate for herself, but we need to know the rest of the story to understand the full nuances of it. So the next one, that seems to fit a bit more easily into that pattern of the agency of the artist over the sitter, partly because we know more information about it, it’s told us about the exhibition context of that. And I think you do get that sense of the discomfort of the sitter being clearly expressed and that discomfort relating to dislike of being represented in a certain way, a kind of worry about their own appearance, particularly manifest when the painting’s shown to others. So I think you do get a clearer sense of a dominant artist and an uncertain sitter there. But I would stress that that view is coming through because of the commentary about its exhibition. We can’t ignore the life of the object here when we talk about power. And then finally, we’ve got that sense in the final one about Montgomery as a powerful person. The artist is flattered by his patronage. That feeds into issues about class and governance and power in that sense but again we need to know what happened to the painting to be able to say more clearly what’s going on with the power dynamic there.

Dawn: Okay. Great. And what exactly would you be looking for in terms of the exhibition context that would tell you who has a certain kind of power?

Interviewee: My point being that the exhibition context is part of that power relationship because it brings the audience into play and the audience has power as well. Certainly, critics have power in terms of the way in which they guide and shape our response to art and exhibitions is going to be an important way in which critics are able to exercise that power. So what I’m trying to get at here is it’s a mistake to think about power relationships as just being about the artist and the sitter. There are many more people involved in that.

Dawn: Okay, thanks for expanding, that’s great. Okay so we’re changing direction a little bit here. And a very general question – is the portrait sitting an ordinary or an extraordinary event?

Interviewee: It depends.

Dawn: Yep. On what does it depend?

Interviewee: The sitter. The artist. The setting. The function of the portrait. Everyone’s characters. The reason why the portrait’s being made. Everything.

Dawn: Everything.

Interviewee: Yeah, it’s completely contingent on the circumstances.

Dawn: Mhmm. Okay. So then, it will be helpful then to look at some specific sittings. So there are three in number five. Do you think these are ordinary or extraordinary events in the lives of their participants, and what makes you draw that conclusion?

Interviewee: When you say participants, do you mean everyone involved?

Dawn: Yep. The participants we talked about earlier, so when we were talking about the different people involved in portrait production.

Interviewee: Okay well starting with the final one – William Michael Rossetti to William Rothenstein, again, I’ve got quite a bit of background knowledge on this. Par for the course. Both of them were incredibly well networked. Knew everyone. […]

Interviewee: Both of them knew everyone, incredibly well networked. Very used to talking to famous writers, painters etcetera. William Rothenstein did two series of publications of portraits. This is part of his general practice at this time. I assume it’s around about the 1898 mark, when he was publishing those portraits of famous literary figures. So William Michael would have been one of probably, I think it was about - it’s between 19 and 25 sitters that he did for that book. So I don’t know… It’s part of his general professional practice at the time. Second one, I don’t know, how would you say whether that is an exceptional circumstance? It’s happening in a social location, it seems. The idea that tea and supper’s involved, it’s clearly happening in a domestic environment, it’s happening in a family home. It seems as much a kind of personal, social interaction rather than a professional thing.

Dawn: Is there any particular information that’s missing, do you think? To make that judgment?

Interviewee: How would you know what’s unusual or exceptional for that particular person? It’s a value judgment. And it’s going to be different from each [view?], it’s going to be subjective. And with the final one, well, same situation. Montgomery would have been painted multiple times. He’s in a position that would require that. He would probably consider it part of his job, I would say, to be represented. And Salisbury, it describes him here as a veteran painter of royals and presidents. So again, that’s part of his job. So there’s clearly a kind of commercial and economic professional mechanism at work there.

Dawn: Okay, great. Thank you, that’s really great. So, next question. And there’s just two more sets of questions in this part. So the next question is: how would you define the portrait?

Interviewee: An artistic representation of a named individual.

Dawn: Okay, great. And with that in mind, or with defining the portrait in mind, there is one account in number six. And I’d like to know whether you think the painting to which it refers is a portrait, why or why not, and do you need any more – is there sufficient information here to know, or not?

Interviewee: Well I don’t know what it looks like. But on the basis of what Lucian Freud’s work generally is like, when his work is figurative, it is of a named individual, so in that loose sense of a definition of a portrait, yeah, that would work. But of course, I’d need to see the painting to clarify the fact that the woman is actually in that painting, but it sounds like she is from the description. It doesn’t matter whether the sitter feels it’s only half representative of themselves and mostly a vision of the artist, the fact that it is a figurative work of a named individual puts it in the category of portraiture.

Dawn: Okay. Great. And so the last pair of questions in this section -

Interviewee: Oh sorry, can we just go back to that one?

Dawn: Yeah, of course!

Interviewee: Just going off on a tangent here, it’s very weird that she said the model does not make a very big contribution when talking about Lucian Freud’s work because my understanding of it is that his sitting regime is incredibly gruelling, or was incredibly gruelling, that it goes on for hours, or that it went on for hours, and it was very physically demanding of the model and psychologically demanding being subjected to that long period of scrutiny and very uncomfortable environment. So the idea that the model doesn’t make a very big contribution is an odd thing to say about his work, which makes me wonder was her experience – did he paint her in a different way than what he normally did? Sorry.

Dawn: No, that’s interesting. I’m wondering what ‘contribution’ means in that sense. But yeah, thank you. And do hop back if you’ve got an extra comment because that’s great. So the question I was about to ask is: how would you define the portrait sitting? I know we’ve been talking about portrait sittings but we’ve not defined it. In your view, what is the portrait sitting?

Interviewee: An occasion, in a particular space, in which the artist renders a visual representation of the sitter. It suggests that the actual sitter will be physically present because of the term sitting, that they are sat in front of the artist, but that almost seems like a misnomer in a way because perhaps an artist would just do a preliminary sketch or take a photograph from which to work, or perhaps they might only have this sitter in front of them for the face and paint the body separately, or they might even draw the portrait from a number of different sources. They might not even see the person physically in front of them while they create it. So that’s a wee bit of a… It should mean something very specific, which is that the person in the portrait is sat there in front of the artist and the artist is painting them or sculpting them at that particular moment. But actually I think when you look at how portraits are created, there’s going to be much more deviation from that. So I guess it’s whether everyone is using it in the same way, that term, or not.

Dawn: Sure, okay, great. And so, in order to drill down on what we really think is a portrait sitting and what isn’t, looking at these three accounts in number seven, are these accounts of portrait sittings? Why or why not? I suppose I’m also thinking about when the portrait sitting starts and ends. How big is it?

Interviewee: Well again it depends what definition you want to use. The word suggests that there should be a physical meeting of artist and sitter. Then there’s the question of what happens at physical meetings. How would you characterise physical meetings that happen after the portrait might have technically been completed? So the second one might fall into that. Maybe that later meeting would cause the artist to go back and change something, you don’t know. I think there’s no concrete answer to that. You could say it’s any kind of physical interaction between the artist and the sitter that has some bearing on what the portrait ends up like. But as I said, you don’t need to have that physical sitting in order for a portrait to be created.

Dawn: Okay, great. And just, this third one, sitting of William de Morgan to Evelyn de Morgan, does that strike you as a portrait-sitting account?

Interviewee: It doesn’t mention the production of the portrait. Maybe we should say that sitting is related to the production of the portrait, whereas that third one is about the dissemination of the portrait, as far as I can understand it.

Dawn: Sure. Alright, great. So that wraps up the bit where we’re looking at the portrait-sitting accounts, so thanks so much for giving your view on those. The next thing I’d like to do is just ask a few - four or five - general questions about portrait-sitting accounts and your experiences of this material or similar material. […]

[…]

Dawn: Okay, alright then. So my first question in this more broad section is: what would lead you to believe that a particular portrait-sitting account is credible? Or not credible. And feel free to refer back to any of the ones we’ve looked at to say this is definitely credible or this is not.

Interviewee: I think generally you wouldn’t find any one singular definitive account of it because we’ve already talked about how multiple people are involved in it. So really you’d need a range of accounts from the different participants in that portrait in order to get a full picture of what’s happened. That’s not to say these accounts individually wouldn’t be credible but that they wouldn’t tell the whole story. Even if an account contains inaccuracies in it, those inaccuracies are still going to be useful from a historical point of view, of trying to work out the different views and approaches of those involved in it. But that’s why you need multiple accounts to understand what was happening.

Dawn: Okay, great. Do you come across these kinds of accounts much in your research, or any kind of similar material?

Interviewee: I’m sorry Dawn, I’m going to have to say that I don’t come across a huge amount of this in my research because as you know I don’t research portraits, but I would come across things like, say, gallery labels, or, I guess, artists’ memoirs where they talk about making particular artworks, first-hand accounts of artworks being made – to some extent.

Dawn: Okay, sure. And have you used them or anything? Or could you see yourself using them in your research?

Interviewee: The ways in which these sort of things feature in my research is where they’re published. Thinking about how the publication of this information can inflect on our understanding of the artworks and shape our response to them. So the sort of language that’s used in these accounts, what kind of words crop up, what kind of specialist terminology might crop up that shows the kind of trend of aesthetic thought of that period, what sort of audience these accounts are aimed at and the ways in which they might perhaps change people’s responses to artwork. I’m just trying to think if there’s any examples in what we’ve looked at so I can demonstrate what I mean. I think those that focus on a personable side of the artist and their social engagement with the sitter. I think you notice that with Sargent, for example, you notice that with Salisbury, where that account is contributing to the professional identity of the artist. Sargent is shown to be this very personable, elegant socialite, which contributes towards his professional character, and Salisbury is shown to be a pro, who deferentially represents the great and the good, which again is contributing towards his professional identity as an artist. So that’s the way I would be looking at these accounts.

Dawn: Great, okay, that’s really useful. Thanks for drawing those examples out. So talking about the accounts we’ve looked at, again, are there any that we looked at today that you found particularly surprising and if so why was that? Or particularly interesting?

Interviewee: I’ve already pointed out that Churchill one, having known the backstory. It’s funny that, you wouldn’t think… because I know that he was very critical and disliked that painting. He seems to be being very polite here because there’s a joke there, isn’t he, ‘am I going to be a cherub or a bulldog’? Well, he knows that he’s the bulldog, he knows he’s not a cherub. That hides his dislike of the painting in a way, and the comedy, so I wonder who he said that to, because he was clearly being very polite about it, which is unusual for him. And the other one is that one about Lucian Freud, I’ve already pointed out why I thought that was surprising.

Dawn: Great, okay, thanks that’s brilliant. And then the last question actually, in this general section, is: are there any other domain experts you might want to consult about this material in order to understand it better? People from other fields.

Interviewee: Where you want to drill into the historical context, a historian would help you out with that. In particular when it comes to thinking about paintings of the great and good and status and all that kind of business in a particular historical moment. Really, you’d want to speak to museum and gallery professionals because what we don’t get here is a sense of the artworks as objects. And what knowledge and information the kind of material composition of the artworks, the provenance of the artworks, even the framing of the artworks, can bring to our understanding here.

Dawn: Okay, great. Thank you. Thanks for your answers there, that’s brilliant. So we’re just on the last part now, which is where I’ll invite you to reflect on what we’ve talked about so far and raise any questions you think have been missing. So keeping in mind that we’ve been discussing portraiture and the portrait sitting, are there any questions you think I should have asked about these accounts that I didn’t?

Interviewee: About the accounts that you’ve selected, maybe not. But I would have liked to have known more about the exhibition context of the artworks.

Dawn: And you said ‘of the accounts I’ve selected’, are there different kinds of accounts you think should be in here?

Interviewee: Well it depends what you want to talk about. I think... say in number seven, where it’s about sitting, the final one goes very much into commerce and copyright, but that’s the only one that really seemed to deal with that. And that’s perhaps something that was less represented was the commercial side of portraiture. We get the sense of the artist, we get the sense of the sitter, we get the sense of the social circles that lead those portraits to happen, we get a little bit of a sense of the kind of power circles that lead portraits of the great and good to happen, but we’re not getting a sense of the kind of commercial mechanisms under this, like where are the dealers, where are the critics in this scenario?

Dawn: Okay, brilliant. Thank you. And finally then, bit of a free-for-all, is there anything else you’d like to say about the accounts or about the discussion?

Interviewee: The discussion was great, thank you very much. It was really interesting. It’s nice to do a fun thing. In terms of the accounts, it is really interesting that you’ve drawn a lot from the National Portrait Gallery, which presumably is object information for these, and how intensely focused they are on the sitter, which is obviously… looking at the references here, we’ve got, a large range of the footnotes are going towards the NPG descriptions. And obviously that’s a function of the National Portrait Gallery is to give you the history of interesting people who’ve lived in the country, so it makes total sense that their descriptions would focus on the experience of the sitters rather than anything else. That does only tell a part of the story. And I do want to know about the works as objects. I do want to know about their provenance and their exhibition history. What sort of audiences were they put in front of? Did they hang in someone’s private home? And was that private home a ginormous aristocratic mansion in the country or was it a little semi in the London suburbs? Or did it hang in the National Portrait Gallery from the word go? Was it immediately acquired by that? Did it hang in the RA at some point? Was it in a public gallery? All of these kind of questions. And what sort of stylistic approaches, what sort of materials is the artist using? Is this all oil paint? Are there any different types of portraiture going on here and how are they being circulated? That’s not clear and I would like to know more about that. And that’s not a criticism of what you’ve done because you’ve obviously got a particular goal in mind but… It’s just to recognise that there are other parts of this story, other than that sitter-artist dynamic.

Dawn: Absolutely. Great, thank you so much. […] Thank you so much for participating and giving your opinions, I really appreciate it. It’s been lovely to meet you. […]

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