

SUMMARY

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THE IMAGE AND THE SOCIAL ROLE PLAY:
PORTRAITURE AND THE RESEARCH
ON IDENTITY IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

The paper is an attempt at presenting rewards brought by art-historical research into how people manifested, corroborated and defined their social status in the old times. The argument concentrates on portraits and related images (e.g. tombs, memorial monuments, seal imagery etc.), that is, artworks that by their very essence were intended to present the identity of the portrayed. The author demonstrates, on various examples, in the form of sculptures and paintings dating from the High and Late Middle Ages, that a person's identity in the portrait may have been defined by far more features than the most strictly codified ones, such as armorial devices, insignia and attributes. Information about the social status of the person portrayed may have been conveyed also by the pictorial formula of the representation, the format of the image or the chosen physiognomical type. Thus, potentially every element of a portrait was a sign that currently can be deciphered only by a narrow group of specialists but for contemporaries was part of a visual code they were able to read more or less intuitively, because it responded to the needs of their time and was inherent to the artistic convention of that epoch. The discussion leads to a conclusion that an analysis of portraits and related images may bring many valuable facts about how people in the Middle Ages defined and manifested their social identity, that is, how they understood their role in the society and how they represented that role in images. Such an analysis requires not only knowledge about conventional forms of dress, insignia, or armorial devices, that is an ability to interpret elements whose symbolical value is relatively stable, but also involves taking into account such properties of images that are impossible to understand without reference to pictorial tradition. Portraits presented people not the way they were like or how they looked, but the way they wanted to be seen; they constructed the sitters' identity in relation to ethical and moral norms associated with their social status and function they fulfilled in the society. Thus, portraits became a sort of masks, which commemorated the person in the mirror of various roles played in his or her lifetime. These roles were perpetuated in artistic conventions characteristic of a given epoch in which they originated, and these conventions were developed not that much by means of codified acts of imbuing particular objects represented in paintings with meaning but rather by artistic practice consisting in constant borrowings and repetitions of formulae that function in the pictorial sphere.