Portraiture and Social Context - A Case Study
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The exhibition of a portrait of a convicted killer in Dublin in 2003 was held to be offensive by many. Maggie Deignan examines the context and the reactions.

In May 2003 a portrait was displayed at the 173rd exhibition of the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA), Dublin, by artist Mick O’Dea, a member of the Academy. The man portrayed, Brian Meehan, is a prisoner in Portlaoise who was found guilty of the murder of a prominent Irish journalist, Veronica Guerin, and sentenced to life imprisonment. The following exploration does not set out in any way to argue against the extremely serious nature of the crime of the prisoner portrayed. Its objective is to focus attention on an issue highlighted by the case: the offence caused by the social context of the painting. This involved a broad adoption of a singular viewpoint by the media and those members of the public who voiced opinions on the matter.

O’Dea has a history of working with prisoners, dating back to 1985. He has worked on the National College of Art and Design art programme in Portlaoise prison, and has occasionally undertaken workshops for the Artists in Prisons scheme. In July 2002, he engaged in one such workshop in Portlaoise with two prisoners who were interested in painting portraits. Over the course of his eight days there, five men volunteered to sit / model for the painters. O’Dea worked alongside the men he was teaching and all three produced paintings which they would later publicly exhibit.

The two prisoners who had participated in the project exhibited their work in a group exhibition of prisoners organised by the VEC in the Town Hall in Portlaoise later that year. The portraits showed very good resemblance of their sitters. There was no adverse public reaction to any of the exhibits.

In May of the following year, O’Dea selected six of his own works to exhibit in that year’s RHA show. Although the exhibition is an open-submission show involving a selection process, members such as O’Dea are not subject to this procedure. One of the works he selected was a portrait which he had painted during his prison project. This went on display in May.

The controversy began when retired Garda Detective Inspector Gerry O’Carroll phoned into the live RTÉ Radio One programme Liveline on Monday 26 May to express his outrage at the exhibition of the portrait of the prisoner, which he had been informed was on display. He described the sitter as an “evil, evil man,” and said that the exhibiting of the portrait was “grossly offensive…at the very least, it is in appalling bad taste. At worst, it’s grossly offensive and highly insensitive.”

Many people phoned the radio programme to express similar viewpoints. There were calls to have the painting removed from the exhibition. O’Dea was contacted to
respond, which he did. He defended his painting. On the subject of the identity of his sitter he said, “I don’t particularly look into their case myself, I am not a detective.” He added, “he sat very still. I found him very co-operative of the job being required. He gave me his full attention.” On his approach to portraiture he said, “my portraits are not formal portraits. They’re not about power or glorification. I try to show the common humanity of all people.”

O’Dea says that although he was aware of the potential of this particular painting to cause controversy, he considered it amongst his best of the year’s work. He is also of the opinion that there can
IT emerged this week that a notorious killer was on the streets of the public eye.

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be a problem for artists of self-censorship in the interests of political correctness, which he wished to avoid.¹

In the week that followed Star, Daily Mirror, Sunday World, and the Irish Times all published articles on the subject. The issue was again discussed on Liveline, RTÉ 1, on The Gerry Ryan Show, RTÉ 2, and on Morning Ireland, RTÉ 1. On the Morning Ireland programme, the junior Minister for Defence, Willie O’Dea, spoke vehemently against the inclusion of the portrait in the exhibition.

The RHA members, in response to the furore, held a meeting on Tuesday, 27 May, at which they unanimously decided not to remove the painting. A spokesman for the RHA said,

_We have no rule or diktat in this academy about censoring an artist’s work. Each member of the academy has an equal standing but the artist Michael O’Dea made the final decision to keep the picture up, backed unanimously by the other members._³

The portrait remained on display at the Academy until 28 June.

**Portraiture – issues of social context, ‘good taste’ and sensitivities**

Broadly, three issues of concern were highlighted by the controversy.

1. What is the commonly perceived nature and function of the portrait?
2. What is it about this particular instance that gave rise to the unprecedented level of media attention?
3. What preconceptions underlie the terms ‘good’ or ‘bad taste’?

Regarding the first issue, in Aidan Dunne’s view, “what emerged from the controversy is a popular view of the portrait as an accolade and an honour.”⁶ There is ample testimony to this proposition in the art galleries of Europe, and in Ireland’s National Gallery where many rooms have walls hung with portraits of landed gentry. This paean to social success and possession has a broad correlation in portraiture today, as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century landlords and the ruling establishment have been gradually replaced by businessmen, politicians and more recent establishment figures.

John Berger treated portraiture contextually by facetiously putting a ‘trespassers will be prosecuted’ sign on a reproduction of the Gainsborough painting of “a richly attired eighteenth-century couple on their estate.” The reason he did this was “just in case we should mistake this for a painting about the beauties of the English countryside...In this way Berger invites us to read the painting as a celebration of possession, of ownership.”⁷

Even with the apparent relaxation of rigid social codes today, portraits often contain subtle hints as to the status of the sitter. It is significant that the attire of the prisoner in the RHA portrait was commented on by the media. “It shows the convicted killer in relaxed pose, hands clasped together, resting on a pair of white shorts he wears, while staring into space.”⁸ Another report observed an additional detail – “shorts and a black jumper.”⁹

The homage to success and ownership is not the sole traditional purpose of portraiture. A strong sense of moral purpose was another element of portrayal. An argument in relation of ‘sitter to society’ was put forward by painter Jonathan Ritchardson in his writings. He said, “Painting gives not only the persons, but the characters of great men. The air of the head, and the mien in general, give strong indications of the mind.” Its function, he said, was “partly to improve and instruct us and to excite proper sentiments and reflections” like “a history, a poem, a book of ethics, or divinity.”¹⁰

The sense of moral purpose in portraiture has continued to the present day to be commonly desirable or even mandatory, as suggested by the reaction to the RHA portrait. Dunne wrote that O’Dea’s portrait “does nothing to either demonise or excuse its subject.”¹¹ O’Dea himself has said that “My portraits are...not about power or glorification. I try to show the common denominator of humanity of all people.”¹² It is this non-judgmental attitude, it would seem, that does not comply with the traditional goal of ‘improving and instructing us’, and the ordinariness may not give the ‘strong indications of the mind’ that would correspond with the viewers’ notion of a criminal mind. If, as Wilton suggests, it is the case that “a likeness committed to canvas is a public injunction to emulation or abhorrence,”¹³ perhaps in the prisoner’s case, the sitter would have had to appear evil, or tortured by guilt, or in some way disreputable.

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² See CIRCA 109, Summer 2004, p. 67.
to satisfy this requirement, or at least be firmly shown to be in a prison context instead of the featureless spaces, devoid of social props, that O’Dea uses to focus on the essence of the person.
the particular context of the RHA may point to the cause. Firstly, the portrait was painted by an artist upon whom had been conferred the establishment accolade of Royal Hibernian Artist. O'Dea was described on radio and in newspaper reports as "a highly respected Irish artist." 7

Secondly, the RHA is regarded as a prestigious venue. There are references to it throughout the controversy as “one of the country’s top galleries,” which has been “promoting arts in Ireland more than 170 years.” 8 Another report stated that "the line between humanitarian thoughtfulness and misguided thoughtlessness was blurred when the Meehan portrait was displayed at the Gallagher Gallery in Dublin’s Ely place this week." 9

Thirdly, the exhibition did not have a prison theme. In the RHA show, the portrait of the prisoner, Brian, Portlaoise (no. 330), was juxtaposed with dignitaries such as The Honourable Mr Ronan Keane, Chief Justice (no. 397), His Eminence, Desmond Cardinal Connell, Archbishop (no. 393), and ex-politician, a bust of Charles J. Haughey (no. 225).

All these factors combined, it appears, led to the consensus of opinion of the section of the public who expressed their views, and of the media, that ‘appalling bad taste’ was demonstrated by the exhibition of the portrait.

‘Good taste / bad taste’ – context and content

What constitutes good taste or bad taste, and whose sensitivities are offended by ‘bad taste’? Taste in the present context can be seen to be associated with the perception of the artist’s credentials and of the venue. The sitter’s identity was publicly judged to render the portrait a tasteless exhibit in such a social context.

As already stated, there is no suggestion here of attempting to diminish the severity of the prisoner’s crime. However, because the unique combination of elements highlighted real issues that usually only partially surface, it is useful to use this case to explore the popular assumption that taste is a given and fixed entity and that sensitivities stem from a singular viewpoint.

The arbitrary and subjective nature of what constitutes good or bad taste can be highlighted by focusing on the social and political context of certain portraits. Returning to the National Gallery: it contains an abundance of portraits of eighteenth-century landed gentry, the majority of whom would have acquired land through allegiance to the Crown, and subsequently through inheritance. This occupation was effected by the subjugation and dispossession of the native Irish people. The new landowners commissioned their portraits to be painted in celebration of their elevated positions in society, to hang in their houses and later, in some instances, in gallery spaces.

Considering their role in the oppression of the native population, should their display be considered a matter of good taste? If taste in portraiture is to be judged by whether it offends sensibilities rather than on the merit of the artwork by aesthetic criteria, maybe opinion would weigh in favour of labelling such portraiture ‘tasteless’, or maybe not. This judgement would inevitably involve some degree of viewer subjectivity.

A comparison can be made between the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century establishment and today’s equivalent, the dignitaries, politicians and businessmen who are honoured or who honour themselves by commissioning their portrait or portrait busts. The rise to high positions in society has, in some cases been controversial, and involved elements of white collar crime. The National Crime Forum Report, 1998, described white collar crime as a type of crime “wrongly perceived as victimless,” and continues, “its perpetrators are often well educated, well-off and privileged in the sense that they have ready access to the means to protect themselves from detection and from punishment its perpetrators are often well educated, well off and privileged, aren’t prosecuted.” 10 These crimes, it adds, have necessitated one official tribunal after another. Researcher Paul O’Mahony suggests that these crimes “are so extensive that it is a real possibility that the illegal gains from ‘white collar crime’ far exceed the gain from the more acknowledged and feared areas of robbery, burglary, and larceny,” and that research has “added evidence, which suggests that the Irish courts may well discriminate in favour of the socially more advantaged.” 11

Many people in today’s society may not find public homage in the form of portraiture to politically and economically successful personages particularly ‘sensitive’ and in good taste, if social context rather than aesthetic criteria prevails.

As mentioned, in the RHA exhibition itself there was a portrait bust of ex-politician Charles J. Haughey.
Haughey is a figure who has been embroiled in controversy for decades, and has had a high profile at tribunals, where corruption of an extensive nature throughout the years of his leadership was revealed.

There was another portrait in the RHA exhibition which had the potential to offend the sensibilities of a certain section of the population. This was of Cardinal Desmond Connell, who had also been involved in controversy due to his role relating to the sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests who were under his supervision. It had emerged as a matter of fact that for years the clergy, including Connell, had had reports of the activities of this minority of offending priests, but did very little to stop them, and never informed the Gardai. The victims of these offences have for years been fighting for justice from Church authorities and for admissions of responsibility in the face of Church denials. It is possible that these victims, and members of the public who sympathise with their experiences, could have sensitivities regarding that particular exhibit, maybe even seeing it as ‘grossly offensive’, an accusation levelled at O’Dea’s portrait.

O’Dea did not demobilise his subject. He shocked, not by setting out to shock, but by allowing a social pariah to symbolically join the ranks of citizens respected by many people. Dunne observed, “When English artist Marcus Harvey exhibited a giant portrait of the convicted murderer Myra Hindley, composed of the hand prints of children, it was calculated to shock... But in O’Dea’s case, it is the identity of the anonymous-looking sitter and, apparently, the sheer conventionality of the image that caused controversy.”

Elizam Escobar has written, “good taste becomes meaningless, merely a euphemistic code fashioned in order to impose an ideology, to prohibit and keep in check any dissent or disruptive intentions.” In the case of portraiture, the dominant cultural and economic forces have shaped the perceptions of an artform that is capable of myriad expressions. O’Dea’s “crime” is that he is seen to have disregarded the dominant, commonly accepted cultural conventions, giving rise to the irony that a painting that has been described variously as “ordinary,” one of “that most staid of painterly genres,” and displaying “sheer conventionality” has had the power to invoke such passions.

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1Declan Fahy, Daily Mirror, 27 May, 2003, p. 7
2Eamon Dillon, Artful dodgers, Sunday World, 26 May, 2003, p. 13
3Jenny McQuaile, Portrait of Guerin killer stays, Star, 28 May 2003
4Mick O’Dea, personal communication
5McQuaile, op. cit.
6Aidan Dunne, Artscape, Irish Times, 31 May, 2003
8Ryan Tubridy, Art’s Meehan streak, Sunday World, 1 June, 2003, p. 14
9Fahy, op. cit.
11Dunne, op. cit.
12McQuaile, op. cit.
13Wilton, op. cit., p. 26
14Dunne, op. cit.
15Brian Maguire, Tales from the Big House, Irish Arts Review, Winter 2003, p. 73
16see also Katherine Thompson, New York: Brian Maguire, Bayview Project, CIRCA 103, Spring 2003, pp 84-86
17Tubridy, op. cit.
18Fahy, op. cit., p. 7
19Tubridy, op. cit.
21Paul O’Mahony, Crime and punishment in Ireland, 1993, p. 234
22Garda O’Carroll, in Fahy, op.cit
23Dunne, op. cit.
25Ryan, op. cit.
26Tubridy, op. cit.
27Dunne, op. cit.
28Dunne, op. cit.