

Lucian Freud's Portraits and Haiku

by David Grayson

"I think the most boring thing you can say about a work of art is that it's 'timeless'. That induces a kind of panic in me."

- Lucian Freud¹

In 1987, a retrospective of Lucian Freud's paintings opened at the Hirshhorn Gallery in Washington, DC. In the exhibit's catalogue essay, the art critic Robert Hughes judged Freud as "the greatest living realist painter."² A *New York Times* review of the show noted that once you've seen Freud's paintings you "can never again look at another human being in quite the same way."³

In the years after World War II, when Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art were ascendant in the Western art world, the London-based Freud was steadily working in what seemed to be an old-fashioned genre: portraits. Over time, however, it became apparent that Freud was producing unprecedented work that had lessons for painters, sculptors, and other artists. Notably, for haiku poets, although Freud worked in a different medium, his approach shared important commonalities with haiku and sheds light on the form's strengths.

A first principle in haiku is that meaning is mutually created by both the writer and reader. For example, Lee Gurga has described the reader as a "co-poet" rather than simply a consumer of the haiku.⁴ Freud too viewed a portrait as a collaboration; in his case, between artist and subject. Hughes relates: "Rather than speak of painting 'from the nude'—implying distance and even a certain subtraction—Freud is careful to say 'with,' implying collaboration, a conspiracy towards the image mutually arrived at." Freud explained that "the painting is always done very much with their co-operation." He didn't insist on a specific pose for the sitter; he didn't want his subject "doing something not native to them"⁵ or playing a role.

Undressed—
 today's role dangles
 from a metal hanger.

Alexis Rotella⁶

Freud's stance is comparable to the "selective realism" stage of *shasei* advocated by Masaoka Shiki, where the poet aims to realistically capture a scene through direct observation, but also specifically focuses on the parts that the poet deems worthwhile of attention.⁷ A *New Yorker* writer, Adam Gopnik, noted that the nude in art tends to fall into two lines: "The Suspiciously Perfect and the Depressingly Truthful."⁸ The practice of *shasei* can prevent an artist from succumbing to either of these clichés, and rather see the person (or place) as they really are. Of course, scrupulous attention to detail is essential.

the thousand colors
 in her plain brown hair—
 morning sunshine

Bernard Lionel Einbond⁹

The Washington Post art critic Sebastian Smee writes: "All this he refused to think about in general terms. Rather, he wanted to set down very specific truths about what it is like to occupy this particular body in this particular situation over this particular period of time."¹⁰ Freud liked to remind people that he was a biologist at heart.¹¹ This meant capturing the material under his watchful gaze: the flesh's "distended sheen, blue discoloured veins, blotchy nipples..."¹²

her aged veins
 the steady pulse
 of crickets

Jim Chessing¹³

Acting as a faithful witness was essential for Freud because he viewed paintings as not only objects of art but also as historical artifacts. Freud characterized his work as “an attempt at a record.”¹⁴

inheritance
another generation
with that nose

Bryan Rickert¹⁵

This approach is also evident in one of his non-portraits. For “Waste Ground with Houses, Paddington,” he spent two years painting the view outside of his back window. The yard is strewn with garbage and other debris. Smee observes that it is a study in “truth and contingency: this thing here next to that thing there; this thing growing, that thing dead; this thing discarded, that thing in use; this thing smooth, that thing rough; things spilled, things contained, all of it closely observed and freshly set down.”¹⁶ Repetition was key, allowing Freud to notice and capture the smallest details.

quiet night . . .
out of the garbage can
a racoon’s tail

Olivier Schopfer¹⁷

Freud went to exorbitant lengths to achieve his vision. Portrait sessions could take months. For example, his portrait of Andrew Parker Bowles was painted over 18 months of sittings. Another subject, David Hockney, recalled, “I worked it out that I sat for him for 120 hours ... He wanted you to talk so he could watch how your face moved.” He wanted to see the sitter in a variety of conditions: hungry, caffeinated, tired, peeved, slightly drunk.¹⁸

palette knife
 an attempt to gauge the depth
 of his eyes

Anitha Varma¹⁹

Freud had another strategy as well. Historically, many artists painted those who could pay—the wealthy and the famous. Freud chose differently. He did portraits of people he knew; according to Hughes, the models were “people in his life.”²⁰ Paul Williams noted that “such perceptions as do transform themselves into haiku tend to emerge from the familiar rather than the new.” The haiku moment is experienced most easily when the poet is “surprised in the midst of familiarity.”²¹ It’s possible that Freud’s intimacy with his sitters fostered insights that he would not otherwise have had, or that another painter would have missed. Familiarity reinforced with repetition can yield fresh insights.

My oldest friend . . .
 suddenly her wrinkled hands
 are strangers to me

Margaret Molarsky²²

While acknowledging the range of commonalities of Freud’s work with haiku, it’s worth asking how much of a difference the medium makes. There is an obvious difference in the type of labor required between the two art forms. One risk might be what Adam Kern warns of: an “ocularcentric” reading of haiku, that is, privileging vision (images) over the other senses.²³ Indeed, Robert Spiess reflected that “the better haiku poets use multiple-sense imagery.”²⁴ Does looking for haiku inspiration in painting reinforce this? In Freud’s “Two Japanese Wrestlers by a Sink,” the water that’s depicted as flowing from two faucets is so vivid that you can imagine hearing it running. In fact, it’s the

falling water that is the focus, as the two wrestlers in the title are barely visible on the canvas. “Triple Portrait” features a woman with two whippets. Her forearm is resting on the side of one of the dogs, and the viewer can almost feel the smooth coats. In both of these, it is the painter’s mastery of visual-centric techniques that unlocks the other senses (hearing and touch, respectively). Every medium has limitations, and one task of an artist is to move beyond these, as Andy Warhol (a contemporary of Freud) does with an American meal staple:

soup can
my sudden craving
for grilled cheese

Jenn Ryan-Jauregui²⁵

Beyond the art, Freud’s life was one of drama, even notoriety. He was a grandson of Sigmund Freud. As a child, his family fled to England from Austria to escape from the rise of the Nazis. His friendships spanned widely different social milieus (which was mirrored in the backgrounds of his portrait subjects). Freud declared: “Tell people you’ve been alive.”²⁶ Despite his fame, the attention he gave at the easel was a way of honoring his subjects and documenting that they too were “alive.” Haiku is about transmitting some of the aliveness we witness and experience. Freud’s oeuvre can remind us of the qualities of our poetic inheritance.

Notes:

1. Sebastian Smee, *Lucian Freud, 1922-2011: Beholding the Animal* (Köln: Taschen, 2020), 32.
2. Robert Hughes, *Lucian Freud: Paintings* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1987), 7.
3. William Feaver, *The Lives of Lucian Freud: Fame, 1968-2011* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021), 197-198.
4. Lee Gurga with Charles Trumbull, *Haiku: A Poet's Guide* (Lincoln, Illinois: Modern Haiku Press, 2003), 50.
5. Hughes, *Paintings*, 20.
6. Alexis Rotella, *The Haiku Anthology: Haiku and Senryu in English*, ed. Cor van den Heuvel (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 170.
7. Charles Trumbull, "Masaoka Shiki and the Origins of *Shasei*," *Juxtapositions: Research and Scholarship in Haiku* (The Haiku Foundation: Issue 2 - 2016), 108-109.
8. Adam Gopnik, "Lucian Freud and the Truth of the Body," *The New Yorker* (February 8, 2021). <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/02/08/lucian-freud-and-the-truth-of-the-body> (Accessed December 26, 2023). Note: Published in the print edition with the headline "The Human Clay."
9. Bernard Lionel Einbod, *The Haiku Anthology*, 36.
10. Smee, *Beholding the Animal*, 7.
11. Ibid., 7.

12. Hughes, *Paintings*, 20.
13. Jim Chessing, *The View Arcade: Two Autumns Anthology 2022*, ed. Nathanael Tico (Santa Rosa, California: Two Autumns Press, 2022).
14. David Kamp, "Freud, Interrupted," *Vanity Fair* (February 2012). <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2012/02/freud-201202> (Accessed December 26, 2023).
15. Bryan Rickert, "Troutswirl" - The Haiku Foundation Blog. Haiku Dialogue. "Family Portraits - Portrait One" (September 7, 2022). <https://thehaikufoundation.org/haiku-dialogue-family-portraits-portrait-one/> (Accessed December 26, 2023).
16. Smee, *Beholding the Animal*, 43.
17. Olivier Schopfer, "Troutswirl." Haiku Dialogue. "The Haiku Mind - Wild Animals" (February 26, 2020). <https://thehaikufoundation.org/haiku-dialogue-the-haiku-mind-wild-animals/> (Accessed December 26, 2023).
18. David Kamp, "Freud, Interrupted."
19. Anitha Varma, "Troutswirl." Haiku Dialogue. "ink" (July 24, 2019). <https://thehaikufoundation.org/haiku-dialogue-ink/> (Accessed December 26, 2023).
20. Hughes, *Paintings*, 20.
21. Paul Williams, "Loafing Alertly: Observation and Haiku," *The Nick of Time: Essays on Haiku Aesthetics*, eds. Lee Gurga and Michael Dylan Welch (Foster City, California: Press Here, 2001), 21, 22.

22. Margaret Molarsky, *The San Francisco Haiku Anthology*, eds. Jerry Ball, Garry Gay, and Tom Tico (Windsor, California: Smythe-Waithe Press, 1992), 112.
23. Adam L. Kern, “‘Everything I See is Haiku’: A Review of *Well-Versed: Exploring Modern Japanese Haiku*,” *Juxtapositions: Research and Scholarship in Haiku* (The Haiku Foundation: Issue 8 - 2022), 204.
24. Robert Spiess, “Multiple Sense-Imagery in Haiku,” *Modern Haiku* 2.1 (Winter 1970), 16.
25. Jenn Ryan-Jauregui, *Failed Haiku: A Journal of English Senryu* (Volume 8, Issue 89). <https://failedhaiku.com/2023/04/> (Accessed December 26, 2023).
26. Feaver, *Lives of Lucian Freud*, 501.

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