

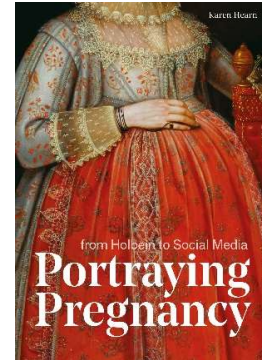
Portraying Pregnancy: from Holbein to Social Media

Karen Hearn

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Portraying Pregnancy: From Holbein to Social Media was written to accompany an exhibition by the same name at the Foundling Museum, which ran from January 2020 until its premature closure due to the global outbreak of novel coronavirus in mid-March. As such, it treads a very difficult line in speaking to both academic audiences and public audiences. Despite the title, the focus of this book is not pregnancy but rather the woman who is pregnant. This is partly pragmatic. Apart from a short period in the seventeenth century and the final decades of the twentieth, pregnancy was simply omitted from most portraits. Yet this focus on the woman, rather than her physical state raises some interesting theoretical and historical points. Many of the portraits discussed in this book do not show pregnancy (inasmuch as a rounded figure or distended abdomen) yet by correlating information about the production of the portrait and the lives of the women depicted Karen Hearn shows that they are indeed portraits of pregnancy. In many of her case histories, a first pregnancy appears to have triggered a desire to capture the moment, even if the pregnancy itself is indicated solely by the symbolic gesturing of a hand to the abdomen, or the careful placement of a rose. The exclusion of pregnancy from portraits, Hearn argues, forces us to think about the visibility of pregnancy in textual as well as visual sources and demands a reassessment of the public roles that women undertook whilst pregnant across historical periods. Moreover, it requires that we think about the emotional toll of giving birth throughout history, and the possibility that each portrait of pregnancy was potentially the last portrait of the mother until the rapid reduction of maternal mortality rates in the second half of the twentieth century. Indeed, as Hearn points out the experience of the final sitter in this book – Serena Williams – shows that the relationship between birth and life remains fragile even in these clinically sophisticated times. Hearn's case study format also allows for a consideration of the artist that produced each image, their relationship with the sitter, and the situation in which the portrait was produced. This offers remarkable insights into social attitudes to pregnancy; from Mrs Parker's need to have a full-length portrait to decorate a room in 1773, to the outcry that accompanied Annie Leibovitz's naked portrait of a pregnant Demi Moore in 1991. These portraits have the capacity both to extend our understanding of prevailing attitudes towards pregnancy, and to fundamentally change them.

The book is structured to provide both historical context, and art historical detail on individual women and artists. These chapters vary in length, with the contextual ones covering several pages whilst the individual details are often restricted to just a single page. As someone that is reading the book at a desk 200 miles away from the associated exhibition in London, this is a little jarring. I would prefer to read a section on the historical contexts of

pregnancy portraits, and then dive into a separate section of well-researched and interesting case histories on the finer details of each image. I can see, however, that within the physical context of the exhibition, this structure works well. It allows the museum visitor to quickly identify the period in which an image was produced, and to read more about the wider importance of such an image without having to grapple with the specificities of historical periodisation. This book therefore provides an interesting and well-written introduction to the history of pregnancy, and to those wishing to get acquainted with the history of art particularly in relation to the symbolism and traditions of female artists and the depiction of women. It is easy to read, not too heavy on historiographical detail and (as one might expect) beautifully illustrated.

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