Gertrude Stein’s Portraits and Photographic Theory

In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,* Gertrude Stein recounts through the narrative voice of her lifelong partner, Alice,

[Gertrude] has written portraits of practically everybody she has known, and written them in all manners and styles.

[The first portrait] Ada was followed by portraits of Matisse and Picasso, and Stieglitz who was much interested in them and in Gertrude Stein printed them in a special number of Camera Work (sic). (114)

Throughout her writing career, Stein created literary portraits of Matisse, Picasso, and other prominent artists and celebrity figures of the early twentieth-century avant-garde movements. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,* authored by Stein and not Toklas, was also one of her experiments with the genre. In total, Wendy Steiner has counted 132 portraits of individuals, excluding the landscapes and still-life pieces that Stein also dubbed “portraiture” (65). Additionally, Stein provided extensive documentation—lectures, essays, and other materials—that discussed her ideas about the genre.

Stein so radically revolutionized the tradition of verbal portraiture that she claims to have “invented” the genre (Knapp 95). Knapp adds, “Stein’s claim…is, despite the works of her predecessors, to a certain degree true.” According to Knapp, unlike
traditional portraiture, Stein’s portraits convey “no moral or ideational values, no verbal concision or grammatically correct mannered images” (95-6). Traditional verbal portraiture relies on “conventional associations”—heroic traits or mythical allusions, for example—to portray a subject; but in doing so, it creates a “non-individualizing” portrait (Steiner, 8, 16). Additionally, while traditional painted portraiture is able to evoke “the immediacy” of the subject being rendered through visual likeness, traditional portraiture at best is merely descriptive of a person’s physical or psychological characteristics (Steiner, 12). Stein, in response, replaces value-laden nouns with pronouns, visceral adjectives and verbs with general ones, and employs a number of techniques to diminish the “distinction between subject and portrait” (Steiner, 6). “The thing that is important is the way that portraits of men and women and children are written, by written I mean made. And by made I mean felt” (Stein, “Portraits and Repetition” 165).

Yet, although Stein’s portraits are so unconventional as to elicit a response from a New York Globe Critic who described them as “weird,” “unreadable,” and “childish,” (Hapgood 681), they nonetheless retain the essential elements of portraiture—if not achieving them at an unprecedented level. According to Haselstein, despite the portraits’ “radical constructivism,” they are nonetheless “grounded in referentiality,” the most fundamental aspect of portraiture (723). In Steiner’s words, “Stein [creates] a conception of the individual which both necessitate[s] and for the first time permit[s] imitative literary portraiture, demonstrating a necessary connection between mimetic representation and the individuality of the portrait subject” (Steiner, 45). In essence, her ultimate goal is to create a textual portrait that manages to evoke the same autonomy and
immediacy as her subject, a sense of individuality that Stein considers "exact resemblance."

For these reasons, scholarly research has turned to Stein's portraiture as both the focal point of her oeuvre and as a key to understanding other works of hers. Most of these studies have performed close readings of these portraits by connecting them to Cubism, to the broad context of Modernism, or to Stein's own public pronouncements in her popular lectures when she toured the United States in 1934. Indeed, while Steiner and others have demonstrated that Stein appropriated Cubist visual theories, scholarship has yet to explore the relationship between Stein's portraits and photography.

Stein's well-documented relationship with avant-garde photographers and the overlapping thematic concerns between her writing and photographic theory suggest that she employed the metaphorical "lens of the camera" to achieve her idea of a portrait's "exact resemblance" to a human subject. Many of Stein's acquaintances were prolific avant-garde photographers, including Man Ray and Alfred Stieglitz. In fact, Stieglitz published two of Stein's first portraits, "Matisse" and "Picasso," in the 1912 Special Number of Camera Work as the "raison d'être" of the issue (660-1). Additionally, Stein, who was interested in ideas of perception and the modern, would have been greatly interested in photography as both a revolutionary new technological innovation and as a new artistic medium that redefined ideas about time, authentic representation, and the accidental—problems which Stein sought to reconcile in her verbal portraiture. Despite writing very little about photography, Stein undoubtedly considered the implications of the camera, especially in her portraiture, in which issues of authenticity, representation, and referentiality are dominant thematic concerns.
This paper examines two of Stein’s portraits through the “lens of the camera” to better understand Stein’s techniques for accomplishing her texts’ “exact resemblance” to their human subjects. First, I explore the publication *Camera Work* and issues in photographic theory contemporary to Stein in order to illuminate the art-historical context in which Stein’s portraits first appeared. Next, I use this contextual platform to analyze one of her portraits that appeared in *Camera Work*, “Picasso” (1912), to show how Stein’s concerns about the literary genre directly converse with photography. Finally, I end my study with an investigation of Stein’s second portrait of Picasso, “If I Told Him: a More Completed Portrait of Picasso” (1923), to reveal how Stein’s changing ideas about portraiture culminate into a more sophisticated representation of her subject by employing techniques specific to photographic theory. As Stein’s theoretical explorations in representation, immediacy, and autonomy draw closer to implicitly photographic qualities, her portraiture manages to obtain the “exact resemblance” that she tries to obtain.

**STEIN & *CAMEO WOIRK***

The critical context in which Stein’s portraits first appeared, *Camera Work*, urges the reader to consider the possible thematic relationships between literary portraiture and photography. Stein’s decision to debut her portraits in a journal dedicated to artistic photography, instead of introducing them in a literary or even broadly modernist publication, implies that Stein to some degree considered her portraits “photographic” representations.
Alfred Stieglitz, editor-in-chief and founder, released the first issue of *Camera Work* in 1902. In an effort to draw a distinction between artistic and professional photography, Stieglitz ironically titled the publication after the term assigned to professional photographers, “camera workers” (Roberts 12). According to Roberts, it was “the first photographic journal to be visual in focus,” publishing high quality photographs by photographers of Stieglitz’s inner circle, along with “the best possible critical writing” on photographic theory (13-14). The publication dedicated numerous issues to specific photographers or schools of photographers (19). Initially, *Camera Work*, as the name might imply, was reserved exclusively for photography.

By 1910, however, the journal expanded its scope to include reproductions of other modernist art forms (Roberts 18). Trachtenburg marks this transition from pure photography to a broader range of contemporary avant-garde art as “an event signifying the coming-of-age of photography within an already existing system of discourse” (84). He notes that previously, “worry about the legitimacy of photography as an art stimulated the culminating development of *Camera Work*.” Indeed, Stieglitz intimated this concern in the opening statement of the first issue of *Camera Work*. Titled “An Apology,” it reads:

*Camera Work* is proposed to issue quarterly an illustrated publication which will appeal to the ever-increasing ranks of those who have faith in photography as a medium of individual expression, and, in addition, to make converts of many at present ignorant of its possibilities. (104)

Because of the photograph’s inescapable reference to reality, critics considered it subordinate to other artistic mediums, especially in light of the trend toward
abstractionism in painting and sculpture. The pervasiveness of this commonplace belief in art criticism is evidenced by the number of articles, published throughout the span of Camera Work's fourteen-year existence, that concern themselves with disproving it. In the article "New Tendencies in Art," published in Camera Work 22 (1908), J. Nilsen Lauvrik recalls the general reaction to the photographs at an art exhibit in which modernist photography, painting, and other visual mediums were displayed side-by-side:

And here, too, pictorial photography was shown on a level with paintings and etchings...Many mistook [them] for mezzotints at first glance, only to discover to their amazement and mortification that these were merely photographs they had been admiring.

Not a few remarked the superiority in quality of the [photographic] portraits by Steichen and White, which led one art critic into the error of calling them reproductions of paintings, evidently on the presumption that nothing like [these portraits] could possibly be done with a camera.

Lauvrik's own emphasis on "merely photographs" betrays the popular commonplace doubt in photography's artistic qualities. Furthermore, "reproductions of paintings" is another operative phrase in this excerpt: among most critics, photography was considered, at best, a mechanical way of imitating, but not recreating, reality.

In terms of art, this translates into the problem of opacity, the gradation from "transparent" to "opaque" art. Since Plato's distinction between "the image ('copy')" and "the thing depicted (the 'original')," fine art has been held to a standard of authenticity in which it must prove its autonomy from its subject of reference (Sontag 154). Because a
work of art differs both in essence and substance from the subject it represents, art
theorists (including Gertrude Stein) demanded art assume its own independence.

According to Barthes, “the Photograph...is the absolute Particular” because it
“always carries its referent with itself” (5). In other words, we are always looking at a
photograph of something that exists in reality, whether it has been abstracted through
various processes of manipulation or not. George Baker calls this quality of photography
its “inherent indexicality;” that is, a photograph always operates as a sign of its referent
(75). Similarly, the verbal medium inherently functions as a complex network of signs as
well. Wendy Steiner argues that “the use of language is symbolic in that words are related
to their referents through a socially agreed upon convention” (12). Even in an incoherent
sequence of words, each word refers to something.

Painting, though often representational of reality, is not inherently indexical; a
brush stroke, for example, does not inherently signify an object in reality or idea (Steiner,
Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance 11). It is only through establishing a
relationship of brush strokes, color, and other conventions that a painting may come to
signify an exterior thing. Because of this, “We don’t see through paintings” (Walton qtd.
in Freeland 103); paintings exhibit an opaqueness that gives them autonomy because their
components are not inherently referential. Photography, however, is intrinsically
referential of its subject. Susan Sontag describes photographs as “a trace, something
directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint...never less than the registering of an
emanation (light waves reflected by objects) - a material vestige of its subject” (154). The
very method by which photographs create imagery implies directly referencing, even
recording, reality. And yet, despite the intrinsic referentiality of both writing and
photography, Gertrude Stein and her contemporaries in photography sought to achieve autonomous, “opaque,” Modernist portraiture.

Stieglitz similarly sought to convince art theorists to consider photography’s (and moreover portraiture’s) potential as a modernist, albeit representational, art form. In the 1912 Special Number issue in which he included Stein’s Picasso and Matisse portraits, Stieglitz lauded her work as the “common denominator of comprehension” and the “Rosetta stone” to the “intellectual and esthetic attitude which underlies and inspires the [modernist] movement” in the visual arts (661). Haselstein explains that the “Rosetta stone” metaphor to Stein’s portraits recognizes “both the familiar and the incomprehensible and show[s] them to be versions of each other” (731). Although I agree with Haselstein’s interpretation, I think Stieglitz’ metaphor begs a deeper level of comparison between Stein’s prose and photography. In an avant-garde movement that progressed toward abstraction, Stieglitz wanted to justify the inherently referential art mediums’ place in art, and the first example of “abstractionism” and non-mimetic representation in these art forms was indeed Stein’s portraiture. In his “Rosetta stone” metaphor, Stein refers to both the artistic (or pictographic) potentiality of Stein’s work, while also acknowledging its functionality as referential prose. Thus, using Stein’s portraiture as a “Rosetta stone” for photography, Stieglitz encourages the art critics, suspicious of photography’s merits, to consider the modernist possibilities of inherently representational art forms.
A Reading of “Picasso”

Stein’s first portrait of Picasso that appeared in the Special Number of Camera Work is one of her most examined portraits (Hoffman 164). More than likely, the portrait’s popularity is credited to Stein’s well-known, intimate friendship with the artist, making the portrait more accessible to readers and scholars. In addition, this portrait, although still experimental and convoluted, reads more coherently than many of her other ones. Readers who are unacquainted with Stein’s theories about portraiture and the specific techniques she employs can extrapolate information about the subject of the portrait. Indeed, even those unfamiliar with Picasso can “make sense” of the portrait (Walker 83). Without trying to simplify the portrait, Steiner delineates the basic information: “Picasso had a following...[who] knew he was working and bringing something out of himself, [and] the ‘something’ was ‘heavy,’ ‘solid,’ ‘complete,’ and meaningful” (75). She explains, “Even lacking knowledge of Picasso’s painting one would recognize this as some form of creativity activity” (76). Thus, despite the abstracted nouns and concepts, the themes of the portrait are nonetheless clear, and a reader familiar with Picasso is able to see the relevance of the portrait to the artist’s life.

However, it is predominantly through form that Stein seeks to give her portrait autonomy, creating an “exact resemblance.”

One of the most notable features of Stein’s “Picasso” portrait is her use of the past progressive and past perfect progressive tenses. Her use of these particular tenses implies actions in the past that were sustained for an extended period of time; thus, she suspends the action in time.
Some were certainly following and were certain that the one they were then following was one working and was one bringing out of himself then something. (Stein, “Picasso” 333)

She effectively creates a sense that, as we “look” at this portrait of Picasso, we are witnessing a series of continuous, moving actions—working, following, and bringing. The verbs are, in fact, the focal point of the portraits—they dominate the text. In “Poetry and Grammar,” Stein explains that verbs are “on the move,” and thus, they animate the portrait, giving it an opacity and autonomy that mimics its subject (qtd. in Steiner 59). In her essay, “How Writing is Written,” she adds, “I was trying to get a present immediacy without trying to drag in anything else. I had to use present participles” (444). Although we are looking into the past, signified by “were” and “was,” we perceive the “photographic” moment in which actions are taking place.

In Barthes’s Camera Lucida, he explains this time-sense as the photographic noeme “this-has-been” (79). He explains, “The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent...[that] touch[es] me like the delayed rays of a star” (81). When we look at a photograph, what we see is a “past state,” with “state” being the operative term (82). We describe a photograph as a moment “when I was visiting my cousins at the beach,” or “when my sister was five years old and was swinging on the swing set.” Although we are aware that these events took place in the past, we describe them as a continuous past rather than an isolated moment, a single event. The essence of the photograph, and indeed its uniqueness, is the ability for it to invoke a sense of “presence” from the past.

Just as the “this-has-been” noeme permits the photograph to be an “emanation of the referent,” verb tense in Stein’s portraiture also gives the portrait autonomy. Stein uses
the past progressive and past perfect progressive tenses to invoke this photographic sense
of the “past state,” an arrested point in time in which the reader examines continuous
actions taking place. The auxiliary verbs “was” and “were” imply a past state of being,
while the participles, such as “working” or “following” imply incessant movement.
Bridgman clarifies that the gerund “at once represents an entity and a continuous action”
(qtd. in Steiner 74). This representation of “an entity and a continuous action” is precisely
what Stein wanted to achieve in her portraiture.

Stein not only focuses on verbs in order to “animate” her early portraits; she also
uses them because they can, according to her, “make mistakes” (qtd. in Steiner 59).
Steiner explains, “‘Being something’ for a part of speech is thus its ability to be
changeable, to create referential or grammatical mistakes” (59). Stein recycles participles
ending in “—ing” because they can function as both companions to auxiliary verbs or
stand-alone as adjectives or gerunds. In “Picasso” they operate as all three. For example,
in the line, “One whom some were certainly following was one working...who had been
all his living had been one having something coming out of him,” “were...following”
functions as a verb, “living” functions as a noun, and “coming” modifies “something”
(333). Although their functions are clear, Stein believes that these words’ flexibility gives
them the capacity to be misinterpreted. Indeed, in some instances, the function of the
participle is obscure. For example, in the line, “one who was completely charming,” the
word “charming” can function as either an adjective or a verb (Stein, “Picasso” 333).
Picasso (“one”) could be actively charming the “some” who were following him, or Stein
could be describing him as a “charming” person. In this phrase, the reader is forced to
make an interpretive decision that might result in a “mistake.” Stein is fascinated with
this concept of the accidental because it gives the words their own autonomy by suggesting a human quality.

By contrast, Stein avoids using nouns in her early portraiture because she believes that nouns cannot make "mistakes" (Steiner, 57). Steiner explains that because nouns carry external associations or have a "marked referential value"—that is, they involve memory and distinct ideas about class or appearance—, the portrait shifts the attention from its own "aesthetic" identity to purely referentiality (57-8). In other words, the use of nouns makes the portrait itself more transparent, that is to say, more referential, rather than opaque. To avoid this, Stein replaces all nouns with pronouns such as "one" or "some," forcing the reader to rely solely on the information provided in the portrait. In this way, she preserves the autonomy and the opaqueness of the portrait while nonetheless preserving the aim of the portrait genre: to render an existent subject.

Stein’s use of the accidental was one of the many ways she overturned traditional portraiture norms. Wendy Steiner notes that traditional painted and literary portraiture "both habitually conceive of the individual not as being at one arbitrary moment of his existence, but as an essence beyond the accident of the moment" (9). She concludes, "As a result the presentation of the subject does not correspond to any actual moment in [the subject’s] life, where accidentality and irreverence are omnipresent...so that the portrait represents a mental fabrication and not an existent being immediately perceived" (11). Thus, Stein sees accidents or "mistakes" as a necessary mode to achieving the humanness, and therefore the same autonomy, as the subjects she portrays.

In fact, the advent of photography marks the moment that authentic accidents could occur in art. The camera has the ability to capture mistakes because the
photographer must briefly relinquish control of the image to the eye of the camera when
the shutter is released (Sontag 52-3). The subject of the portrait might blink at the
moment of the flash, or, in Lyall Bush’s case, one’s mother might look through the
bathroom window in the background as he is photographing his younger brother in the
foreground. Bush reflects, “No form invites the random better than photography” (79).
Photography’s sensitivity to light, its instantaneousness, and the relationship between
photographer and camera lend itself to unintended consequences. Sontag writes,
“[Photographs] owe their existence to a loose cooperation (quasi-magical, quasi-
accidental) between photographer and subject—mediated by an ever simpler and more
automated machine” (53). Stein’s employment of “mistakes” in her portraiture cannot be
divorced from the context of photography’s emergence as an art capable of encountering
accidents.

In many ways, Stein’s “Picasso” portrait is also a self-portrait. Stein draws
parallels between herself and the subject of her portrait. She writes in her notebooks,
“Not express yourself like Matisse but be giving birth like Cézanne and Picasso and me”
(qtd. in Knapp 99). Indeed, “birth” is one of the motifs of the Picasso portrait: the
“something” Picasso is creating in the portrait is “coming out of him” (Stein, “Picasso”
333). In addition, the “something” to which Picasso is giving birth seems to resemble
Stein’s own artistic endeavors. Knapp adds: “She saw his work as an autonomous
energetic entity in and of itself” (Knapp 99). This “autonomous energetic entity” is
precisely what Stein was trying to achieve in her portraiture. This overlap suggests that
Stein saw her action of writing of the portrait—an autonomous entity—as analogous to
Picasso’s creating a “solid,” “charming,” “perplexing” thing.
"IF I TOLD HIM: A COMPLETED PORTRAIT OF PICASSO"

Stein published a second portrait of Picasso titled, “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso” in 1923. In “Portraits and Repetition,” Stein recalls that it was “different from those I had done in the beginning...[it was] less concentrated, [it] moved more” (193). To be sure, the revised portrait of Picasso is more dynamic and abstracted than the first. While “If I Told Him” is shaped by some of the same theoretical ideas Stein uses for “Picasso,” they are modified by the years of experimentation that separate the two portraits. The “Completed Portrait of Picasso,” more than anything, complicates these initial musings on the subject of portraiture and introduces new ones.

Perhaps the most relevant modification to her portraiture in terms of photography was her introduction of the noun. In “Portraits and Prayers,” Stein recounts how she becomes confronted by the perception of “looking,” by the visual aspect of the subject (191). She eventually acknowledges that recognizing the “visuality” of “separate, independent objects” is vital to faithfully rendering her subjects, who can not only be “felt” or perceived through action, but can be seen (Steiner 62). In other words, in order to achieve full autonomy, Stein has to create a face, or maybe a body, that can act out the verbs in the portrait; but she has to do so without using nouns that refer to the subject itself. The nouns that create the visual dimension of the portrait must be independent.

Stein’s misgivings about visual perception as capable of contributing to autonomy are resolved in photographic theory. In Camera Lucida, Barthes describes the photograph’s relationship to memory in a way that is related intimately with Stein’s concerns about portraiture and immediacy. He writes, “Not only is the photograph never, in essence, a memory...but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes counter-
memory” (91). To be sure, the photographic portrait represents, and in many cases mimetically resembles, its subject. But the photograph is also an object in itself, a fully contained moment: all the information we need about a photograph is in the image itself. Barthes explains in an anecdote:

One day, some friends were talking about their childhood memories; they had a number; but I, who had just been looking at my old photographs, had none left. (91)

In other words, as Barthes elucidates, in the photograph, “nothing can be refused or transformed” (91). It is a visual entity in which the “nouns”—or objects presented to the viewer—do not need, and in fact refuse, external reference.

Stein comes to the realization that nouns could “very exactly [relate] themselves” to the subject without describing them (“Portraits and Prayers” 191-2). Using nouns that had no identifiable reference to the subject, she was able to include a visual element that rendered immediacy without the burden of memory (Steiner 62). In “If I Told Him,” she includes nouns such as “queens,” “curls,” “trains,” and “miracles,” inviting mental images that can exist purely in the portrait. Because these nouns have no direct correlation to Picasso—indeed, they have no discernable relationship with each other—the reader can enjoy the mental images and melodic sounds of the words as she moves through the portrait without having to rely on memory. In this way, the portrait achieves both a fuller autonomy through gaining its own visage and a greater sense of “immediacy” through tangible presence.

Stein also heightens immediacy in her portraits by bringing them into the present. While in “Picasso,” Stein uses the past progressive and the past perfect progressive tenses
to imply a series of continuous actions in the past, “If I Told Him” is completely invested in the present tense. With the exception of the lines at the beginning that muse over the idea of “If I told him,” Stein writes exclusively in the present tense, using phrases such as “shutters shut” and “have hold and hear, actively repeat it all” (13, 16). She suggests that the portrait is “happening” at the moment we read it.

Traditionally, both visual and verbal portraiture portray the subject as a static, timeless being (Steiner 9). Steiner writes, “Both [types of portraiture] habitually conceive of the individual not as being at one arbitrary moment of his existence, but as an essence” (9). Thus, Steiner argues, traditional portraiture is “conceptual” rather than “immediate” (10). Stein is overtly aware of this dilemma because, as I have argued, one of the main goals in her portraiture is to create the sense that the subject is present, thereby establishing the portrait’s autonomy, and, by extension, the subject’s.

This ability to render an “arbitrary moment” of a subject’s existence in art stems directly from the invention of photography. The camera’s capacity to capture the present instantly, to capture the “now,” revolutionized the way artists perceived time. In Camera Lucida, Barthes calls this one of the “surprises” of photography (33). Although, as he mentions, many painted portraits attempt to “arrest” important figures in historical moments in time (33), the medium of painting is technically limited because it involves a long process of creation; it cannot immediately recreate a point in time. Additionally, as I discussed, traditional literary and painted portraiture seek to establish traditional character values, so even a painted historical “moment” is at best a rhetorical exercise that operates on socially established values. On the other hand, “taking advantage of its instantaneous action, the photograph immobilizes a rapid scene in its decisive instant”
Barthes aptly rephrases this statement later in the book, “Every photograph is a certificate of presence” (87). This uniquely photographic quality of instantaneous creation and the ability to evoke the “present moment” establish an unprecedented sense of immediacy that Stein seeks to recreate in her portraits.

Not only does she achieve this by placing “If I Told Him” in the present tense, but by emphasizing the “moment.” The repetition of “now,” “actively,” and “presently” makes the reader aware that she is experiencing the portrait at the present moment in time. These words often stand alone in a line, achieving an almost photographic sense of the present. Each time “now” or “presently” constitutes an entire line, it represents a self-contained moment in the present. The rapidity with which the reader experiences this “moment” mimics that of the camera shutter capturing an instant.

Stein’s transition to the present tense in “If I Told Him” authenticates, and indeed modifies, Stein’s use of mistakes. Because the portrait is “happening” as we read it, the “mistakes” that we make more closely resemble the chance moments at which accidents occur in photography. As in “Picasso,” verbs still dominate the text and occupy various parts of speech. The line “Now to date now to date. Now and now and date the date,” is particularly interesting, because it not only plays with the word “date,” alternating between a noun and an imperative verb, but because it also plays with time-sense as well. We understand “now” as the present, but “date” as a noun can refer to a past or future moment; and when it is used as a verb, it occupies the present.

Finally, Stein’s modification of the accidental gives way to nouns. Steiner remarks, “She began to see that nouns could make ‘mistakes’ too” (61). In “If I Told Him,” Stein does something that seems to contradict all of her previous notions about
portraiture. Not only does she use a noun to draw a distinct comparison with the referent of the portrait—she uses a proper noun with powerful historical significance: Napoleon. In the third line, she writes:

If Napoleon if I told him if Napoleon. Would he like it if I told him if I told him if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him. If I told him if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him. If I told him would he like it if I told him.

In this line, Stein undoubtedly encourages the reader to compare Napoleon to Picasso, but to make interpretive mistakes in doing so. Given the grammatical constructions of the sentences, the reader cannot be certain if “him” refers to Napoleon or Picasso. For instance, in the first sentence, “him” seems to refer to Napoleon; but the following sentence diminishes the reader’s certainty: “him” could now easily apply to Picasso, too. In this way, Stein resolves the issue of resemblance by questioning our convictions about the accuracy of the comparison. Additionally, by causing the reader to encounter the accidental, not only with verbs and temporality, but also visually, she finally achieves a self-contained portrait that is an entity acting in the present moment: an immediate, “exact resemblance.”

As is the case with “Picasso,” Stein’s second portrait of the painter, titled “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso” is in many respects not only a representation of the artist, but a portrait of Stein’s evolving theories about the genre. She uses variants of the phrase “exact resemblance” throughout the text, calling attention to the genre of the work itself. In addition, the motif of trains—the dominant mode of transportation during Stein’s portrait writing—not only appears in this portrait, but in Stein’s published
lecture, “Portraits and Repetition.” She writes, “But the strange thing about the realization of existence is that like a train moving there is no real realization of it moving if it does not move against something and so that is what a generation does it shows that moving is existing” (165). Indeed, “If I Told Him,” is not only a completed portrait of Picasso, but also a completed treatise on Stein’s theories about portraiture.

The relationship between Stein’s portraiture and modernist photography was not only thematic, but contextual as well. Both verbal portraiture and photography struggled with the same criticism of the modernist art community, which condemned their referentiality. Yet, both mediums were able to eventually justify their place in the modernist movement by gradually resolving these issues. In Stein’s earlier portrait “Picasso,” she relies heavily on the idea of continuous actions in the past and “mistakes,” techniques that both undoubtedly draw upon photographic theory. However, in her later portraits, such as “If I Told Him,” she more successfully achieves her goal of dynamic movement in the present and learns to introduce a visual aspect that does not contradict but enforce her theories of autonomy and immediacy. Indeed, as she comes closer to this fuller realization of an authentic portrait, she draws more obvious parallels between her techniques and photographic theory. She seems to discretely and playfully pay homage to this idea in the line,

Shutters shut and open...Shutters shut and shutters and so shutters shut
and shutters and so and so shutters and so shutters shut and so shutters shut and shutters shut and so. (13)
Like the eye of a camera capturing a complete, present, and immediate moment, her portraiture seeks to create a self-contained image as unique as the subject himself. And in many ways, this resembles the evolution of the eye of the camera: from a static moment captured by a picture to a series of “continuous presents” that compose a film. Indeed, Stein’s theory about rendering the present adapts from the photographic moment to the movement embodied by cinematography. In theorizing her use of “repetition,” she uses the metaphor of the individual picture frames that comprise a moving image to describe her invention of the “continuous present,” although she contends she had never seen a film when she formulated the idea (“Portraits and Repetition,” 176-7). It is my guess that photographic theory of the “moment” encouraged her to move towards these ideas as she resolved problems in portraiture theory. As Stein herself writes:

The composition we live in changes but essentially what happens does not change. We inside us do not change but our emphasis and the moment in which we live changes. That is it is never the same moment it is never the same emphasis at any successive moment of existing. (“Portraits and Repetition, 195

Just as Stein’s portraits represented the same movement and individuality of the subject she portrayed, her portraits themselves can be viewed as a succession of frames evolving toward a more complete image. Just as the eye of the camera evolves from capturing the arrested moment to a moving image, so too, did Stein’s portraits.


