

## DIX PORTRAITS

The artists' book *Dix Portraits* (1930) presents ten prose portraits by Gertrude Stein, in English and in a French translation, along with ten visual portraits of her "sitters." Pablo Picasso and four younger members of Stein's artistic milieu provided the visual material. With the exception of Picasso, the contributing visual artists were not well known: Christian Bérard, Eugene Berman, Pavel Tchelitchew, and Kristians Tonny. The artists' book was conceived, in part, to enhance the foursome's visibility and professional credibility as a group (**Fig. 4**).

The critic Waldemar George, who reviewed the group's Paris exhibitions in the late 1920s and early 1930s, described the four artists as "neo-romantics," or, alternately, "neo-humanists."<sup>1</sup> Another member of Stein's circle, the American composer Virgil Thomson, made the following attempt to elucidate George's terminology: "Neo-Romantic and Neo-Humanist . . . mean that these painters, while painting whatever they painted, expressed also the way they felt about it. Their subjects were generally people. . . . And they rendered their subjects naturalistically, at the same time infusing these with a personal sentiment."<sup>2</sup> George's neologisms conveyed the artists' visible commitment to the human figure, as well as to bodily sensations and emotional states; this emphasis set them apart from dominant modernist schools with highly theorized formal agendas, such as cubism, neoplasticism, and constructivism.

Although the label *neo-humanist* never took hold, *neo-romantic* captured the imagination of critics and collectors and helped forge a group identity for a cohort of artists, loosely affiliated with Stein, whose disparate practices defied formal categorization.

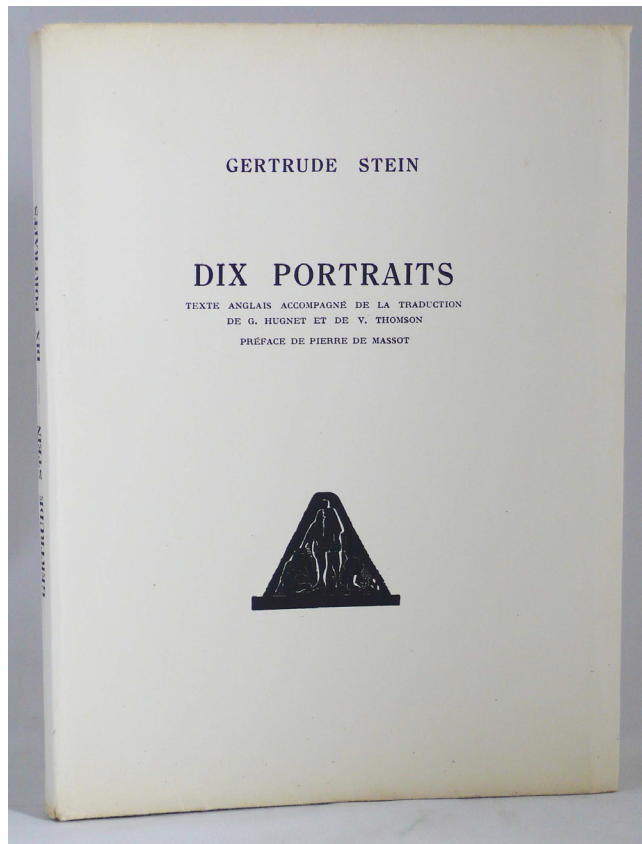


FIGURE 4  
Gertrude Stein, *Dix Portraits*, 1930.

Berman, Bérard, Tchelitchev, Tonny, and other kindred spirits in the disciplines of dance, music, and poetry achieved critical visibility under the banner of neo-romanticism in both France and America of the 1930s and 1940s.

The deaths, midstride, of Bérard in 1949 and Tchelitchev in 1957 stopped neo-romanticism's forward momentum. Another factor contributing to the movement's decline, according to the group's New York dealer, Julien Levy, was the ascent of abstract expressionism in the 1950s, which "carried away, like a tornado, everything else good or bad, in its path as an international school."<sup>3</sup> Yet neo-romanticism did not disappear from sight, or critical discourse, overnight. As late as 1974, the New York Cultural Center organized a neo-romantic retrospective featuring Eugene Berman's brother, Leonid.<sup>4</sup> The poet James Schuyler, who reviewed the exhibition for *ARTnews*, grappled anew with the problematic logic of the group's artistic identity. After describing neo-romanticism as "a 'school' which, unlike the Surrealists, was bound by neither dogma nor true affinity of style," Schuyler went on to note how little—other than their joint exhibitions—bound these artists into a group.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Mario Amaya, the director of the New York Cultural Center, noted in his introduction to the catalogue, "The four artists had little in common

stylistically and their subject matter differed as well. What they did share was something that no label could define: a certain attitude to mood that loosely speaking could be called Romantic in so far as it was involved with feeling, emotion and a highly personal attitude toward subject matter.”<sup>6</sup> Here is what the director did not say: the word *romantic* had other implications for these men; their friendships with one another were “romantic” in the everyday sense, and indeed charged with erotic energy.

The sexual orientation of the neo-romantic circle was an “open secret,” to borrow Eve Sedgwick’s felicitous phrase, a secret that could be publicly acknowledged only in coded ways.<sup>7</sup> The men had a great deal more in common than critics and curators could publicly admit—thus the judicious choice of such adjectives as *romantic*, which made sense on multiple levels. *Romantic* is a particularly apt term in that it summons up far more than erotic (in this case homoerotic) longing and affiliation. The ties this group formed, in other words, cannot be understood in strictly sexual terms. As Michel Foucault argues in “Friendship as a Way of Life,” conceiving of same-sex interactions and bonds in a narrowly sexual way “cancels everything that can be troubling in affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship, things that our sanitized society can’t allow a place for without fearing the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force.”<sup>8</sup> The word *romantic* conjures up some of the things that brought and held this group together: passionate love and friendship; shared notions of artistic freedom, emotional authenticity, and extravagant sentimentality; and the pursuit of liberation from social conventions. The book they co-created in 1930, *Dix Portraits*, bound them together for the first time in an artistic enterprise. The project celebrated their regard for one another and their adoration of the diva Gertrude Stein. The publication, with its exclusive focus on portraiture, also reclaimed a place for the personal—and, indeed, the interpersonal—in modern art.

*Dix Portraits* contains a selection of the literary portraits Stein created from 1913 to 1929.<sup>9</sup> The subjects represented, in the order of their appearance, are Picasso, Guillaume Apollinaire, Erik Satie, Tchelitchew, Thomson, Bérard, Bernard Faÿ, Tonny, Georges Hugnet, and Berman. The book’s first section presents the original (English) versions of Stein’s texts. Ten visual portraits representing Stein’s subjects, appearing in the same order as the textual portraits, constitute the book’s second section. These visual portraits are the bridge between Stein’s English texts and their French translations, which appear in the book’s third section. Only one hundred copies, out of the letterpress edition of five hundred, contain plates; these copies are numbered, printed on velum, and bear the signatures of all contributors.

Stein’s word portraits, published in French translation for the first time in *Dix Portraits*, have benefited from expert scholarly analysis, whereas the visual portraits produced for the collectors’ edition by her artistic collaborators have not. Concentrating on that visual program and its purposes shifts the spotlight away from Stein to illuminate a circle of protégés who helped build the author’s reputation in America along with their own artistic philosophy.

The book is exceptional in several ways. For one, the number of visual artists (five) contributing to *Dix Portraits* sets it apart. In the early twentieth century, the *livre d’artiste*

typically featured the work of a single visual artist that illuminated a text. The relationship between the figures and the text in *Dix Portraits* also contributes to the unconventional character of this project: the drawings, although they represent the subjects of Stein's ten literary portraits, do not imitate her nondescriptive formal strategies. Yet the visual portraits, like Stein's literary portraits, evoke the immediacy, or presence, of their subjects.<sup>10</sup> They do not illustrate, but rather emanate. They bear witness to the neo-romantics' engagement with one another, and with portraiture itself—a genre that materializes the artist's private transaction with a complicit subject while providing a public record of that exchange.

Paradoxically, although portraiture as a genre evolved historically in response to concerns about permanence—the consolidation of power, establishment and perpetuation of social standing, transmission of a legacy—the individual portrait may nonetheless depict a particular moment in the sitter's life and an intense, but more or less fleeting, encounter with the portraitist. The informal character of the portraits reproduced in *Dix Portraits* contributes to this effect of transience. The neo-romantics valued the portrait genre for its ethos of immortalization, to be sure, but also for its absorption of the unique qualities of fleeting human connections.

For Thomson's lover, the portraitist Maurice Grosser, the genre had what amounts to mystical significance: "A portrait may be painted well or ill and still succeed. . . . It is obtained . . . by looking at the man from a special point of view. To get it [right], a peculiar state of sympathy of a mysterious and almost magical nature must be established and maintained between the painter and his sitter. How this is done not even the most experienced portrait painter understands."<sup>11</sup> Thomson glossed Grosser's observation in his memoirs, adding a comment on the neo-romantic circle: "Our novelty consisted in the use of our personal sentiments as subject matter."<sup>12</sup> More than one observer remarked that the handling of paint in portraits by members of this group could awaken the sense of touch. Responding to the voluptuous surface of a work by Berman as if it were indeed skin, one critic extolled "a warmth in the pigment itself which makes one want to touch rather than applaud the painting."<sup>13</sup> About Tchelitchev's portraiture, the artist's biographer Parker Tyler noted, "It is as if, in certain fine portraits like the heads of Boris Kochno and Serge Lifar, he felt his way with his hands rather than his eyes."<sup>14</sup> Portraiture, in the hands of the neo-romantics, embodied alternative ideals to those of modernist abstraction.<sup>15</sup> Without a doubt, the neo-romantics' daily experience of interdependence and difference—as social and artistic misfits, sexual dissidents and, in the contexts where they pursued their careers, foreigners—made them suspicious of abstraction's core ambitions: autonomy and universalism.

Whereas formalist critics such as Clive Bell questioned whether portraiture and other forms of "descriptive painting" could legitimately be considered major works of art—"because it is not their forms but the ideas or information suggested or conveyed by their forms that affect us"—the neo-romantics (in a scenario that artists such as Andy Warhol and David Hockney would repeat a generation later) revalorized portraiture.<sup>16</sup> One of the most sociable and body-oriented of genres, portraiture effectively registered the bonds of

affection and sexual desire that inspired the neo-romantics, defined them as a group, and brought them productively together.

In 1931, a year after the publication of *Dix Portraits*, the architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock Jr. observed that in an art world where Picasso (master of both cubist abstraction and postwar neoclassicism) “bulked largest,” it seemed natural that emerging artists would react by turning away from these cerebral movements, “in the direction of the expression of sentiment” through neo-romanticism.<sup>17</sup> But there is more to the emergence of neo-romanticism than the swing of some stylistic pendulum.

The critical discourse constituting modernism as an intelligible field at that time highlighted the efforts of major modernists to wrest visual art from mimetic constraints, and thus from the socially determined conventions of legibility. The neo-romantics—whose same-sex relations had no socially recognized legitimacy and whose affective bonds had not yet achieved widespread legibility—felt neither implicated in nor empowered by the universalizing thrust of “pure” abstraction or the idealizing conventions of neo-classicism. In an attempt to infuse the cultural domain with “warm personal feeling, sentimental love, spontaneous sympathy, faithful comradeship, playful libertinage, domesticity, tolerant rivalry, and affectionate bickering”—modes of intimacy Thomson viewed as highly “usable in art”—the neo-romantics embraced portraiture.<sup>18</sup> This proclivity, as well as their sexual orientation, set the neo-romantics apart from (and, indeed, at odds with) the main currents of contemporary practice. Unlike some prominent European modernists who engaged the genre of portraiture—Otto Dix, Man Ray, Matisse, Francis Picabia, Picasso, Lyubov Popova, and Gino Severini, to name just a few—the neo-romantics did not view portraiture as a site of artistic revolution or a vehicle for cultural critique. Like the painters of the Bloomsbury group before them, they championed portraiture for its capacity to posit kinship, affirm friendship, register episodes of intense interpersonal attention, and render homage.

The idea for an artists’ book paying tribute to Gertrude Stein’s literary portraits and their subjects originated with neither the author nor the contributing artists. Virgil Thomson and Georges Hugnet—a poet, bibliophile, bookbinder, and publisher—pitched the project to Stein in 1929. Desperate to see her work published, Stein accepted the proposal with little hesitation. The visual collaborators, too, were quick to recognize career advantages. The venture provided the neo-romantics with a common focus and a platform from which to launch a veritable movement. “For we were a coterie,” the novelist Bravig Imbs, another member of Stein’s interwar circle, remembered, “and most of us young enough to think it very important. We were all going to be great artists and we . . . had all given our homage to Gertrude.”<sup>19</sup> *Dix Portraits* is one of the sites where the loose professional affiliations and tight personal relations among these gay men (and one lesbian woman) could visibly cohere. It represents an intentional family portrait. The book’s covers bound the neo-romantics together and made a public statement about the “new affective attitude” that united them and attached them to Stein.<sup>20</sup>

Although Stein undoubtedly viewed the publication of *Dix Portraits* as a means of boosting her literary career (little of her work had been published at the time of the book’s

release), she also had other motives, as did her collaborators. The account of how the collaboration came about that follows may help clarify the stakes for all concerned.

Hugnet had recently founded a small publishing house, Éditions de la Montagne. The enterprise associated him with a flourishing private press movement led by champions of modernist literature and the arts. Their ranks included Sylvia Beach (Shakespeare and Company), Annie Winnifred Ellerman, known as Bryher (Brendin Press), Nancy Cunard (Hours Press), Robert McAlmon (Contact Editions), Adrienne Monnier (La Maison des Amis des Livres), and Virginia and Leonard Woolf (Hogarth Press). Hugnet, with the assistance of Thomson, assumed the daunting responsibility of translating Stein's English prose portraits into French. The two men had already translated long passages of Stein's *Making of Americans* and Éditions de la Montagne had recently published these excerpts as *Morceaux choisis de la Fabrication des Américains, histoire du progrès d'une famille* (1929).<sup>21</sup> This achievement gave Hugnet and Thomson the confidence to propose a compilation of Stein's portraiture. Stein—satisfied with Hugnet and Thomson's translation skills, and pleased with two other recent book collaborations (one with Juan Gris, in 1926, and the other with Élie Lascaux, in 1928)—agreed to enter into a collaborative project involving the young artists who paid her court during these years.<sup>22</sup>

Thomson, the self-appointed spokesperson for the group, saw Stein's earlier artist books, especially *A Book Concluding with As a Wife Has a Cow: A Love Story* (conceived with Gris) as a turning point in her work toward the "description of emotion in the neo-romantic manner." The writing in *A Book Concluding with As a Wife Has a Cow*, Thomson pointed out, relies on "repetition, subtle and exhaustive, for much of its power, just as Romantic music does. It also avoids picture-words—the nouns of image and the verbs of motion. It is full of prepositions and pronouns, of adverbs and auxiliaries, of all the kinds of words that express connection."<sup>23</sup> *Dix Portraits*, Thomson contended, would intensify the expression of connection. It would strengthen the connections among the neo-romantic artists as well as Stein's connection to their would-be movement.

Hugnet invited Pierre de Massot to write the preface for the volume. Massot—allied with such sexual outlaws as André Gide, Jean Cocteau, Jacques Viot, and René Crevel—was inclined to look favorably upon Stein and her queer neo-romantic coterie.<sup>24</sup> As Massot affirmed in his autobiography, *Mon Corps ce doux démon* (written in 1932, but not published until 1959), "Most of my friends are, to employ Marcel Proust's terminology, Gomorraheans. No accident. Far from it. I seek, I have always sought, the friendship of inverts of both sexes, whatever their social class, for they benefit from an extremely acute intelligence and sensitivity, and freedom for them is not a hollow word."<sup>25</sup> A member of *la haute homosexualité littéraire* and a cultural nonconformist with ties to Dada and surrealism, Massot evidently appreciated Stein's literary and sexual eccentricity. He took the opportunity Hugnet offered to shake a finger at contemporary criticism—which, he generalized, "emits erroneous judgments, veritable contradictions, to speak plainly, and, on the way out, bequeaths to posterity testimony that is, without exaggeration, worthless."<sup>26</sup> He asked readers of *Dix Portraits* to resist forming hasty opinions about Stein's difficult



FIGURE 5  
Pablo Picasso, *Self-Portrait*, 1930, in *Dix Portraits*.

prose and leave behind their “prejudices about so-called hermeticism inculcated by sophists or imbeciles.”<sup>27</sup> Massot denounced, too, literary isolationism, and a widespread ignorance in France about works written in other languages. The bilingual volume, his preface proclaims, would enable French readers to experience innovative English-language work by an author thought to be “virtually untranslatable.”<sup>28</sup> “It is remarkable,” Massot stressed, “that the translators have managed to accomplish their objective so brilliantly.” He singled out, as an example of the translators’ prowess, the “astonishing portrait of Picasso, so successful that the translation and the original text are one.”<sup>29</sup> Massot concluded his preface with a flawed but oft-repeated axiom articulated by Mabel Dodge in 1913: “The famous prose portraits of Miss Stein evolve out of Picasso’s rigorous cubism of 1910.”<sup>30</sup>

Stein, affirming this link with Picasso (the first artist for whom she herself had sat), placed her portrait of Picasso (“If I told him / a completed portrait of Picasso”) first in *Dix Portraits*. Although her earlier attempts to collaborate with Picasso had come to naught, Stein succeeded in convincing the artist to contribute to *Dix Portraits*.<sup>31</sup> The other collaborators were in accord, seeing the advantages of associating themselves with Picasso as well as Stein.

Picasso laid the groundwork for the book’s visual program with a set of three images, beginning with his own self-portrait (Fig. 5). This pen-and-ink sketch (a scribble, really) depicts the artist in profile, his head propped on one elbow. A dwarf goose-steps across the foreground of the drawing. This pint-size figure may be understood as a satirical evocation of Stein’s neo-romantic courtiers, whom Picasso by inference “dwarfed.” Stein’s poem, first published in *Vanity Fair* in 1924, begins: “If I told him would he like it. Would he like it if I told him.”<sup>32</sup> In the drawing, Picasso’s face turns sharply to the side, as if, with this display of disregard, to answer the question, “No, not really.”



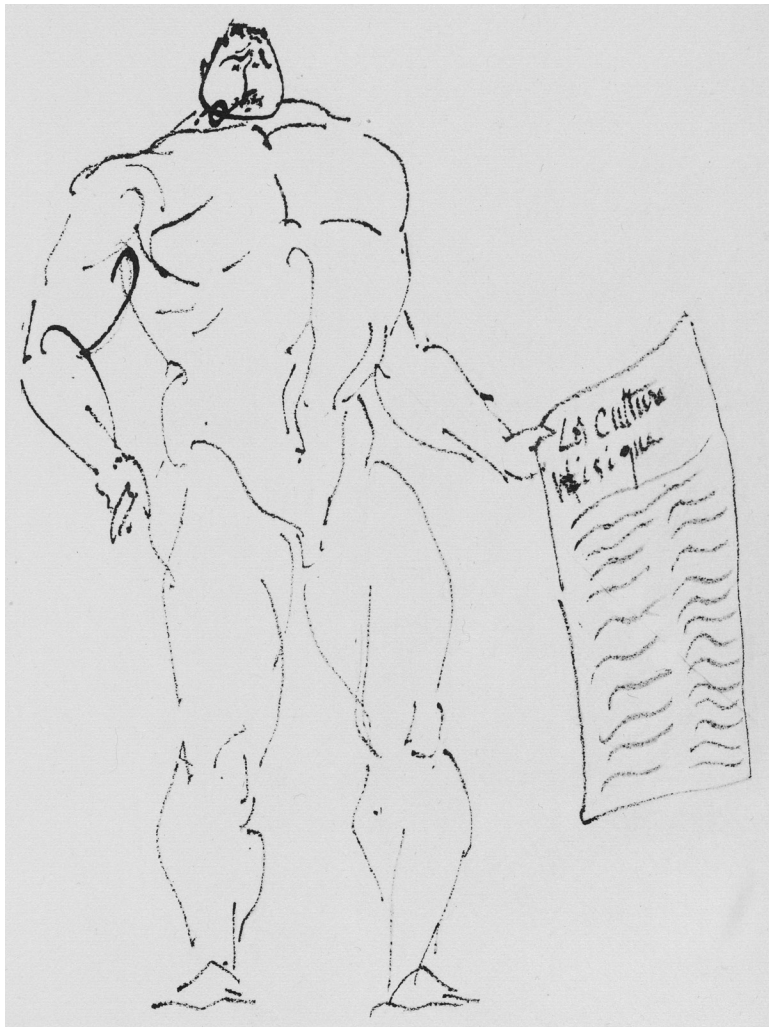


FIGURE 6  
Pablo Picasso, *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire*, 1930, in *Dix Portraits*.

The second Picasso drawing represents Apollinaire, endowed with a body of Olympian proportions befitting his name, his Greek origins, and his vanguard literary stature (Fig. 6). The poet holds a writing implement in his right hand; the left hand unfurls a page of text bearing the (misspelled) heading “La Culture Fisique,” an allusion to Apollinaire’s robust physicality and literary “muscle.” Apollinaire gains even more stature in relation to the enigmatic dwarf on the preceding page.

A portrait of Erik Satie completes the trio furnished by Picasso (Fig. 7). Like the first two drawings, this one—with its simplified outlines and exaggeration of the sitter’s





FIGURE 7  
Pablo Picasso, *Portrait of Erik Satie*, 1920, in *Dix Portraits*.

traits—also gestures toward caricature, although it is more formal than the other two. The portrait of Satie (1920) is one of several portraits executed in the same style by Picasso in the course of his involvement with the Ballets Russes. The portrait circulated in programs and promotional material for the ballets Satie composed.<sup>33</sup> Satie's collaboration with the Ballets Russes made him a figurehead of musical modernism. The composer's portrait is the only one of the ten visual portraits in *Dix Portraits* not created explicitly for publication in this volume. In it Satie is seated in a conventional three-quarters pose, with his hands, fingers entwined, resting in his lap. Outsized and stumpy,

those hands look more like a tradesman's than those of a pianist and composer. Rosalind Krauss has argued that Picasso's hard-line technique in this and other drawings he executed during this period betray "the robotic character of a mark made in the course of tracing."<sup>34</sup> And, indeed, but for the expressive distortion of Satie's hands, one might suspect Picasso of using a photographic template here. The mechanical character of this line drawing—which, for Krauss, seems to have "lost any connection with the draftsman's own distinctive hand"—underscores the derivative condition responsible for portraiture's low position in the hierarchy of creative practices.<sup>35</sup>

In their different ways, each of Picasso's three contributions to *Dix Portraits* (an off-hand sketch, a humorous caricature, and a seemingly mechanical drawing) undermines the seriousness of the *Dix Portraits* undertaking. The drawings betray Picasso's ambivalence about collaborating with Stein and her neo-romantic coterie in the creation of what amounts to a portrait pantheon. Yet because the collection was to some extent a tribute to him, and because his participation pleased the first and most influential of his patrons, Picasso chose not to refuse Stein's invitation to collaborate.

Picasso's primacy in *Dix Portraits* as both portrait subject and portrait object had strategic as well as symbolic importance for the other collaborators. His name alone had the power to validate the others by association. The table of contents could be viewed as a speculative genealogy that locates the neo-romantic painters Bérard, Berman, Tchelitchew, and Tonny in Picasso's line of descent. It similarly situates Thomson in the line of Satie, and Hugnet in Apollinaire's lineage.<sup>36</sup> If the youths lacked the flair of their avant-garde elders, their shared connection to Stein supported the claim of inter-generational kinship. Moreover, the younger generation's disciplinary scope—poetry, music, theater, and the visual arts—displays the same versatility that characterized their avant-garde elders. And the cosmopolitanism of the younger artists (Bérard came from France, Berman and Tchelitchew from Russia, and Tonny, although Paris-born, was of Dutch stock) conformed to an avant-garde pattern that the critic André Warnod had recently identified. Writing about foreign artists such as Picasso who animated the Paris scene in 1925, Warnod coined the phrase *l'École de Paris*.<sup>37</sup> About the School of Paris, the critic asserted, "Later, art historians will determine its nature and research its constituent elements, but we can affirm its existence and the force of attraction that makes artists come to us from all over the world."<sup>38</sup> The neo-romantics both contributed to the expansion of the School of Paris and plotted eccentric trajectories in and beyond it.

*Dix Portraits*, in juxtaposing the neo-romantics with Picasso, related the younger artists to the historical avant-garde, at the same time distinguishing them as a different sort of school—one that Schuyler later described as "a non-school."<sup>39</sup> This label could apply to many other loosely allied artistic communities, from the School of Paris to the New York School. Yet in those cases the assumption of affiliation survives largely unchallenged. In contrast, in the case of the neo-romantics—a school organized along social rather than formal lines—the legitimacy of their collective identity underwent critical

examination from the onset. By binding *Dix Portraits* into a single volume, rather than publishing a series of illustrated monographs, the contributors insisted on a collective identity while acknowledging the distinctiveness of each individual artist.

The decision to create a high-end collectors' book, as opposed to a more ordinary illustrated volume of Stein's word portraits, was influenced by the group's horizons of social, artistic, and commercial possibility. Although a less expensive edition could have benefited from wider circulation, in 1930 there was not a wide audience for Stein's writings, or for the artwork of the neo-romantics. Hugnet, Thomson, and the artistic contributors conceived of the book as a cult object that would circulate hand to hand to foster connections with and among an international community of collectors. Following the example of high-end modernist presses, as well as fin-de-siècle publishers of limited editions for collectors, Hugnet established Éditions de la Montagne as a productive space outside the profit-driven cultural marketplace, where commercial failure could be viewed as a sign of success—an affirmation of qualities that cannot be monetized.<sup>40</sup> Hugnet, however, by taking into his own hands the publication and distribution of work produced by fellow members of Stein's circle, circumvented cultural gatekeepers who did not share their enthusiasm for Stein or their neo-romantic values.

*Dix Portraits* targeted a reading/viewing community that remained relatively untouched by the deepening international economic crisis—an elite transatlantic sector of collectors conversant with modernist developments in art and literature. These matrons and patrons of the arts saw themselves not as passive consumers but as active agents engaged in a shared project of modern cultural production. Influential figures such as A. Everett Austin, the director of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut; Alfred Barr Jr., the first director of New York's Museum of Modern Art; the influential gallerists Peggy Guggenheim and Marie Harriman; the architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock Jr.; the writer, editor, ballet impresario, and philanthropist Lincoln Kirstein; the New York art dealer Julien Levy; the author and Taos art colony founder Mabel Dodge Luhan; the connoisseur and critic James Thrall Soby; and the novelist, critic, photographer, and cultural orchestrator Carl Van Vechten exemplify the edition's American readership.<sup>41</sup> For such collectors, *Dix Portraits* put a face on the new generation of painters that came of age in the 1920s and 1930s, when Picasso's status as "the old master of modern painting" was already well established.<sup>42</sup> The book's visual program and thematic focus on portraiture participates in a resurgence of figuration in modernism after Picasso. Unlike the idealizing figuration of neo-classicism, or the abstracted figuration of cubism, figuration as practiced by the neo-romantics celebrated the particularities of personal bodies and sentimental bonds.<sup>43</sup>

The first of the book's seven neo-romantic portraits is a self-portrait by Tchelitchew (Fig. 8). Soby, in his book about the neo-romantics, *After Picasso*, identified Tchelitchew as the group's artistic leader. Tchelitchew's position in *Dix Portraits*, following right after Picasso, validates this characterization.<sup>44</sup> The pen-and-ink drawing exhibits Tchelitchew's technical abilities; its lines are at once economical and expressive. A smudge under

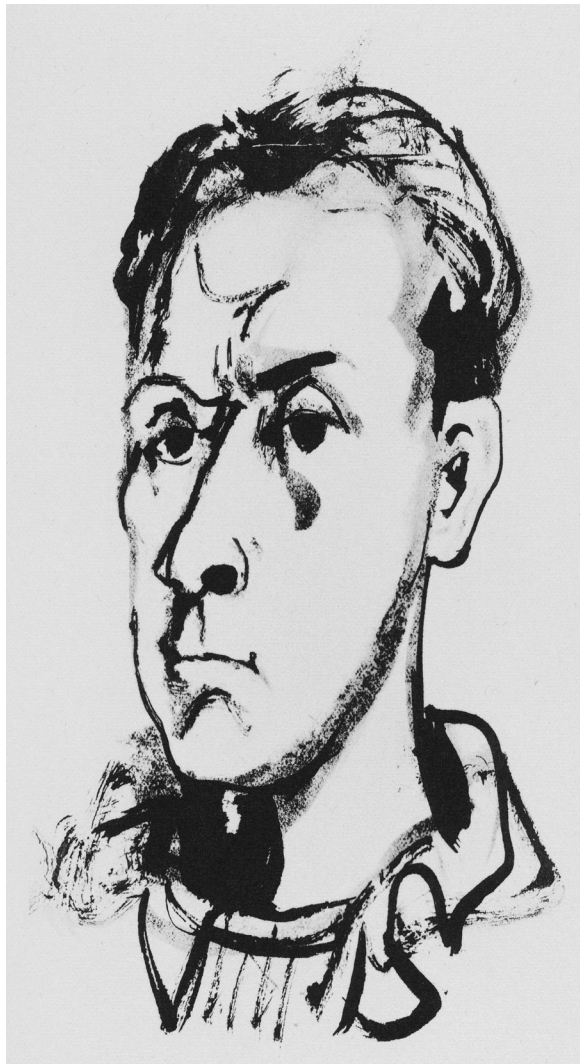


FIGURE 8  
Pavel Tchelitchew, *Self-Portrait*, 1930,  
in *Dix Portraits*.

one heavy-lidded eye captures the melancholy to which the Russian artist, Soby claimed, “is naturally heir.”<sup>45</sup> A flair ascends from between two deep frown lines to the heights of Tchelitchew’s brow, hinting at the artist’s intellectual brilliance. In this way, the drawing seems to hold intellectuality and emotionalism in productive tension. Hitchcock, who worked with Soby to organize an exhibition of the neo-romantics at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in 1931, was sensitive to the dynamic equilibrium of affect and intellect in Tchelitchew’s work. “His nostalgia was to a certain extent forced through a process of formalization,” Hitchcock wrote in the Wadsworth exhibition catalogue.<sup>46</sup> “It could not be expressed with instinctive ease; it had to be more ambitious, colder, and without the

quick emotional release of less intellectual painters.”<sup>47</sup> It is worth noting that this understanding of Tchelitchev’s creative process, which implicitly values intellectual over emotional resources, reflects cultural hierarchies that the neo-romantics, including Tchelitchev, did not endorse.

Hitchcock, when making his observation about Tchelitchev’s relatively cerebral character, undoubtedly had in mind Bérard—arguably the most emotional painter of the group. The portraits by Bérard that follow Tchelitchev’s in *Dix Portraits* invite comparison in the terms that neo-romanticism’s two most vocal supporters, Hitchcock and Soby, set forth. In contrast to Tchelitchev’s more rigorous approach, Bérard builds up “an atmosphere of sentiment . . . not altogether explicable in terms of technique.”<sup>48</sup> Bérard’s pen and ink drawings for *Dix Portraits* replicate the effects that characterize his easel portraits; these formed the basis of his reputation as a painter “whose art is projected directly on the human.”<sup>49</sup> Hitchcock acknowledged the evocative power of paintings representing sitters “intimately known by the artist” while conceding Bérard’s apparent “disregard of plastic values.”<sup>50</sup> Soby, too, noted that the evocation of mood, rather than plastic values, was the top priority for Bérard. His palette, Soby elaborated, “often remained in a narrow range of greys and blues” and he “sometimes treated his canvases with candle grease to create smudgy atmospheric effects.”<sup>51</sup> In his drawings for *Dix Portraits*, Bérard deploys ink washes and “impatient wavering lines” to similarly heighten the emotional charge of his portraits.<sup>52</sup>

Bérard’s portrayal of Virgil Thomson bears the hallmarks of a practice, eccentric even within the domain of modernist portraiture, that, according to Hitchcock, “stood in no direct relation to Cubism, Expressionism, or Surrealism, the forms into which twentieth century non-academic painting had crystallized in Europe” (Fig. 9).<sup>53</sup> Bérard presents Thomson’s head in medallion-like profile against a murky background, accentuating his distinctive features: high hairline, bulging forehead, hook nose, pursed lips, and pointed chin. If this treatment of Thomson’s physiognomy is far from flattering, the intensity of the artist’s regard imbues the portrait with pent-up power. At the same time, the unruliness of Bérard’s technique registers a level of spontaneity that suggests the ease of his relationship with the notoriously prickly Thomson.

Known for his ability to conjure “elegiac and temporal moods,” Bérard created portraits that bear the imprint of the moment when they were painted.<sup>54</sup> As Soby put it, the portrait subjects exude an “intense animation held momentarily quiet.”<sup>55</sup> This sense of suspended motion pervades the self-portrait that follows Thomson’s portrait in the book (Fig. 10). The drawing represents Bérard from behind, paused at his easel, as if to contemplate a work (a portrait, of course) in progress. The self-portrait does not offer up a likeness, a recognizable face, but rather relies on a recognizable style and legible signature to perform the work of self-representation. That style includes the artist’s refusal to color between the lines. Of equal note, this self-portrait spotlights a specific artistic vocation: that of the portraitist. In the context of *Dix Portraits*, Bérard’s self-portrait makes



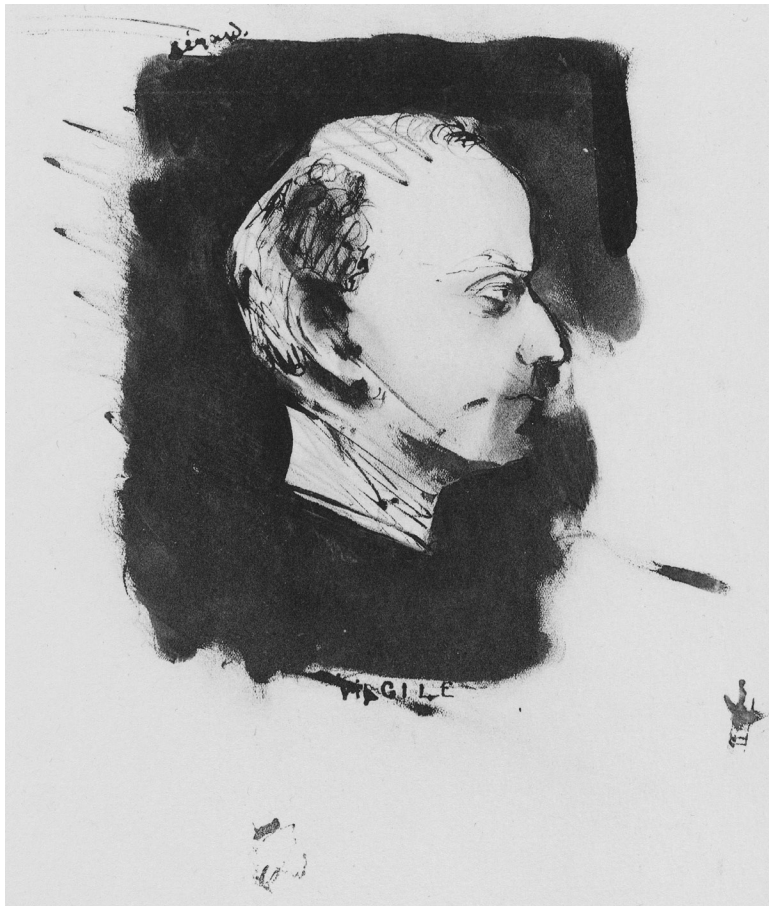


FIGURE 9  
Christian Bérard, *Portrait of Virgil Thomson*, 1930, in *Dix Portraits*.

explicit the key role portraiture played in the interrelated projects of individual and group identity formation. At the same time, it deemphasizes the mimetic function of portraiture, prioritizing recognition over resemblance.

Because of his professional identification with the socially accessible genre of portraiture, and because of his advantage as a native Parisian with connections to several dealers, Bérard's reputation was better established than those of the other neo-romantics prior to the release of *Dix Portraits*. Tonny, only twenty-three at the time of this collaboration, and four years younger than Bérard, had just begun to attract attention in art world capitals for the precision and originality of his drawings. Some of Tonny's extraordinary works on paper, small scale and easy to transport, had already made their way into important private collections in the United States, including those of Barr, Harriman, Hitchcock, Levy, Soby, and Van Vechten.





FIGURE 10  
Christian Bérard, *Self-Portrait*, 1930, in *Dix Portraits*.

Tonny perfected a novel transfer technique that earned him great admiration among collectors.<sup>56</sup> He used it to render his two contributions to *Dix Portraits* (Figs. 11 and 12). He drew the portraits with a stylus on the reverse side of pigment-coated paper; the pressure of the stylus transferred the image to a second paper underneath. He executed such drawings virtually blind, since only light tracings showed on the exposed side of the paper. The process, as Soby observed, “gives drawings a dramatic quality that . . . increases the fantasy of his subject-matter.”<sup>57</sup> He pronounced Tonny’s transfer drawings “comparable in quality to the work, in any medium, of any artist his age.”<sup>58</sup> But it was



FIGURE 11  
Kristians Tonny, *Portrait of Bernard Faÿ*, 1930, in *Dix Portraits*.

not the feat of transference alone that intrigued Tonny's devotees. Using what Hitchcock described as his "curious half-blind graphical method, which partakes as much of engraving as of ordinary drawing," Tonny developed a perverse pictorial language teaming with grotesques and symbolically charged objects.<sup>59</sup> On the modernist scene, Tonny stood out as a brilliant anomaly, as much for the novelty of his imagery as his method.

Tonny's transfer technique and the nightmarish content of his drawings call to mind practices explored by surrealist contemporaries. The blank surface of the paper on which he "engraved" provided, in Soby's words, "no interruption to the easy flow of his subconscious mind."<sup>60</sup> Tonny's transfer process, Hitchcock agreed, "seems itself to have created the active, humorous, and violently animated tiny beings that crowd his page, composed solely by a sort of subconscious scenario."<sup>61</sup> Hitchcock and Soby, the two critics who advocated most actively on Tonny's behalf in the United States, often shared the same critical perspective, as I have noted. Both drew on surrealism as a reference for Tonny's work and described his process as "subconscious." Yet, Tonny's work never quite fit the surrealist frame. On closer look, Hitchcock came to understand, his dreamscapes contrasted "curiously with the cerebral quality of over-civilized surrealist dreams."<sup>62</sup> Soby, too, distinguished Tonny's cosmology from "the ghoulish paraphernalia of the Surrealist



FIGURE 12  
Kristians Tonny, *Self-Portrait*, 1930, in *Dix Portraits*.

*séances*.<sup>63</sup> Both critics identified Tonny's practice, instead, with the "Netherlandish tradition of lusty fantasy, the tradition of Bosch and the elder Bruegel."<sup>64</sup> Like the outlandish scenes conjured up by the masters of the Northern Renaissance—Bruegel's *Fall of the Rebel Angels* and Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*—Tonny's drawings appeared to Soby "bewitched by sinister emblems and symbols of the Black Sabbath and full of phalli and miniature eroticisms."<sup>65</sup> This evocation of the masters of the Other Renaissance implies the coexistence of multiple forms of artistic practice, even in the increasingly monolithic context of modernism, centered in Paris between the two World Wars. At the same time, by aligning Tonny with the figurative traditions of Northern Europe, Soby and Hitchcock rejected the impulse to relegate the artist's work, on formal grounds, to the outskirts of surrealism. Tonny shared neither the psychoanalytic nor the political preoccupations of French surrealism and overlapped socially with the milieu in Paris very little, if at all.

Tonny aligned himself, instead, with the neo-romantics—as much for social as artistic reasons. It was his romance with the art dealer Georges Maratier that brought him into

the neo-romantic fold, and into contact with Gertrude Stein. (Maratier, who owned a Place Vendôme gallery, brokered many of Stein's art purchases in the 1920s and 1930s.) In 1928, Tonny wrote to Stein about his affair, after sailing with Maratier in a cruising dinghy from Normandy to Holland: "I believe I have at last found an inspiring friend. And what an improvement, neither poet nor painter! . . . I am once again full of ardeur and projects and my anemic spirit from before the vacation has vanished with the wind. Ah, this wind! It brings all sorts of ideas . . . Next year, if we have a larger sailboat as I hope, we will invite all the future celebrities: Bébé Bérard, Bravig, Virgil, Hugnet . . . etc. . . . We'll found a school. . . . It's Hugnet's dream, *une école*."<sup>66</sup> The *Dix Portraits* initiative can be understood as a step toward forming a school, whose members Tonny imagined cruising in the larger boat with him, Maratier, and Stein.

From a hotel where the men lingered for several days, Tonny and Maratier addressed a postcard to Stein's wife, Alice B. Toklas. Across the top Maratier scrawled "Sans Histories—Grand calme [No conflicts, perfect tranquility]. Georges (Fig. 13)." Beneath this heading a sketch pictures a small boat dubbed "Tonny," sails billowing, with a pair of sailors, fused like Siamese twins, at the helm. A single heart beats at the center of the compound figure's chest, and pen strokes radiate outward to convey the incandescent energy generated by this union. One of several arms raises an outsized cap high over the sailors' two heads in a salute: "Très Bien!" (Very well. Yes, sir!). The other side of the card bears a photograph of their hotel (Hotel Floralia, in Aalsmeer; Fig. 14). A streak of water and single mast in the background mark the hotel's proximity to a network of inland waterways. A pair of male figures sketched in pen and ink personalize the photograph. The men straddle the parapet of the brick edifice, with its terrace café and wrap-around balconies below. They are formally dressed (one wears a tie); their hands are joined, bridging the gap between them. Their legs are spread, knees slightly bent, as if to steady them. The bulges in their trousers register the current of eroticism that passes between them. A rectangular frame wings each figure at shoulder height. Perhaps these "canvases" were meant as visual metaphors for the spaces of their art-centered careers, or even their relationship. Nearly blank, but not quite, they bear marks, beginnings, gestures toward as-yet-undefined outcomes. The sidewalk in front of the hotel provides space for an enigmatic inscription in Maratier's hand: "une goutte de sang sur mon poignet gauche" (a drop of blood on my left wrist). The phrase hints at some kinship ritual, an exchange of blood between "brothers," or other blood oath.

A year later, Maratier assisted Hugnet at Éditions de la Montagne in the production of *Dix Portraits*.<sup>67</sup> It is likely that he even invested money in the project. He was one of the several more or less invisible facilitators contributing to the launch of neo-romanticism. Had there been eleven portraits in *Dix Portraits*, Maratier would have been a worthy candidate.

Instead, another facilitator, Bernard Faÿ, made it into this pantheon of "future celebrities." Faÿ's usefulness to Stein partly explains his presence here. By 1930, Faÿ had already undertaken the full translation of Stein's monumental *Making of Americans* and had



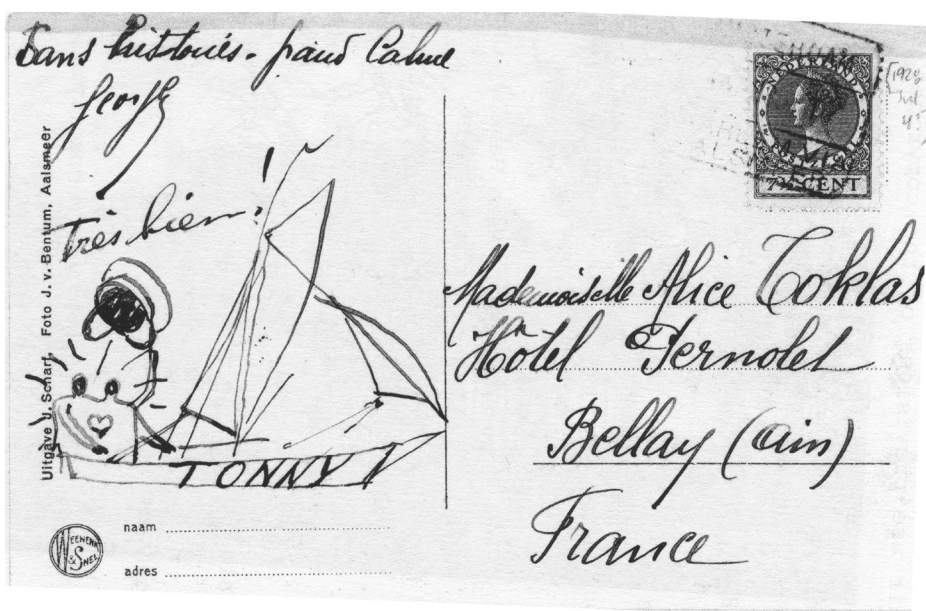


FIGURE 13

Kristians Tonny and Georges Maratier, postcard to Gertrude Stein, back, 1928.

FIGURE 14

Kristians Tonny and Georges Maratier, postcard to Gertrude Stein, front, 1928.

begun to groom her for public performances.<sup>68</sup> It was also Faÿ, when he was lecturing at Harvard, who first introduced Thomson to the modernist music of Satie, Georges Auric, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, and Arthur Honegger. Faÿ's inclusion in this volume, otherwise devoted to artists, was no doubt also predicated on Thomson's debt to him. The first of Tonny's two contributions to *Dix Portraits* pictures Faÿ, mustachioed, in a field of attributes evoking the historian's frequent transatlantic voyages and his research interest in American military and political history (see Fig. 11). These are the traits by which the artist knew Faÿ, and by which he introduced Faÿ to the readers/viewers of *Dix Portraits*.

Tonny's self-portrait, which follows the relatively recognizable representation of Faÿ, presents, not a likeness of the artist (see Fig. 12), but a composition bristling with arrows, harpoons, sharpened pencils, erect paintbrushes, and pointed draftsman's tools and teaming with human forms, avatars, absorbed in mysterious creative tasks that fuse the identifiable with the unidentifiable. There are bodies of water with ships and islands viewed from multiple "psychological" perspectives.<sup>69</sup> Hitchcock remarked that such apparently impenetrable "perspective defying compositions" are only "superficially incoherent."<sup>70</sup> Even the most obscure of Tonny's drawings, he argued, exhibits "a felt interrelation and a semi-inevitability," and he claimed that "the sure elegance of the line. . . [is] nowhere . . . more definite and expressive than where it depicts objects that are almost inconceivable."<sup>71</sup> As with dreams, it is not only form and figure but also feeling that creates effects of coherence out of chaos. Hitchcock concluded: "The whole is infused with the same emotional tone and held together by a sense of sentimental values."<sup>72</sup> Expressed differently, Tonny used formal means to conjure up figurative scenarios that make emotional sense, thereby establishing his artistic kinship with the other neo-romantics.

If Tonny, because of his transfer technique and disconcerting iconography, stood apart from the easel painters in the neo-romantic group, Berman was unique because his practice typically bypassed the human figure in preference for an iconography of empty streets, empty houses, and empty vessels resembling theatrical backdrops before or after the play. Yet Hitchcock contended that these pictorial properties "not only in themselves but in their interrelations reek with habitation."<sup>73</sup> The "thick and colored" atmosphere Berman summons up, Hitchcock wrote, "is rich with life that continues regardless of the momentary absence of people. . . . The full complexity of human relations lies here imminent and invisible."<sup>74</sup>

According to Waldemar George, Berman's attraction to architecture evidenced the painter's "desire to impose the rhythm of [his] thought on the rhythm of the world and to affirm [his] anthropocentrism."<sup>75</sup> Lest we miss the explicitly masculine character of that anthropocentrism, George spelled it out in stereotypical terms: Berman's subjects "address themselves more particularly to masculine minds. . . . Hence the choice of military and civil motifs in which men occupy a preponderating place. Hence the feeling for architecture . . . devoid of all vain ornament."<sup>76</sup> These settings sometimes frame both male and female human surrogates, though, in the form of classical statuary. Disproportionate and out of scale, the superhuman figures modify the optical relation between the architectural



setting and the onlooker, to depart, as George put it, from realism's "control of the visual consciousness" and transcribe human forms in monumental "slow motion."<sup>77</sup> When human subjects per se appear in Berman's work—as "athletes who pull themselves together before some great fight, school-boys on the eve of an examination, adolescents condemned to perish before knowing the plenitude of physical existence, young grooms or cavalry soldiers who dream at night of their restive horses"—they play, George claimed, "only a secondary role," intervening "as module, as measure."<sup>78</sup> If portraiture, with its much more primary reference to human bodies and transactions, played only a minor role in Berman's oeuvre, the human figure, the male figure, always haunts his canvases.

The two portraits Berman contributed to *Dix Portraits*, the last two visual contributions to the book, are among the relatively few straightforward portraits the artist produced. Nevertheless, his portrait of Georges Hugnet exhibits great sensitivity (Fig. 15). Berman's strong calligraphic line defines Hugnet's upturned profile. The poet's wide eye gazes skyward, as if he were searching for words, or inspiration. Berman's sure hand pictures every hair in place on his sitter's head, evoking Hugnet's concern for grooming and personal appearance. Thomson, in his autobiography, describes Hugnet as "small, truculent and sentimental . . . a type at once tough and tender."<sup>79</sup> The choirboy face, unblemished in Berman's drawing, shows Hugnet's youth and tenderness but bears no trace of truculence or toughness. The overall effect of the portrait is one of candid affection. The portrait achieves the neo-romantic ideal of expressing emotion without, as Soby put it, "losing in sentimentality the poignancy of sentiment."<sup>80</sup> Writing about Berman and his refreshing capacity to engage emotionally, to touch, in an era defined by the "cerebral revolutions of the Picasso generation," Soby concluded, "there is no need to despair about the state of post-cubist painting."<sup>81</sup> He predicted—inaccurately as it turned out—that Berman would "pass in esteem the more ambitious" artists of his generation.<sup>82</sup>

The self-portrait Berman contributed to the collection does not provide indisputable basis for Soby's optimism. Berman, like Bérard, chose to represent himself here in the act of self-representation (Fig. 16). Berman's self-portrait, the last in the book, seems unresolved. Do the outlines, drawn over several times, betray hesitance and uncertainty? Or a determination to get it right? The modeling is so heavy in places that it obliterates the facial features. The pose is stiff and the proportions awkward. His eyes, fixed on a mirror as he paints, make a display of looking hard. Yet something about the portrait's lack of resolution registers the imminence (and risks) of the genre. That the consummate portraitist John Singer Sargent purportedly described the portrait generically as "a picture in which there is just a tiny little something not quite right about the mouth" suggests the extent to which every portrait courts failure. Failed portraits provoke uneasiness or embarrassment in the viewer, akin to that of witnessing a live performance flop. Berman dares to approach that edge.

This willingness to take risks (and embrace vulnerability) was certainly one of the qualities that attracted a small but devoted cadre of collectors, dealers, and patrons to the neo-romantics. They acquired *Dix Portraits* for their own collections, gave it as a gift to

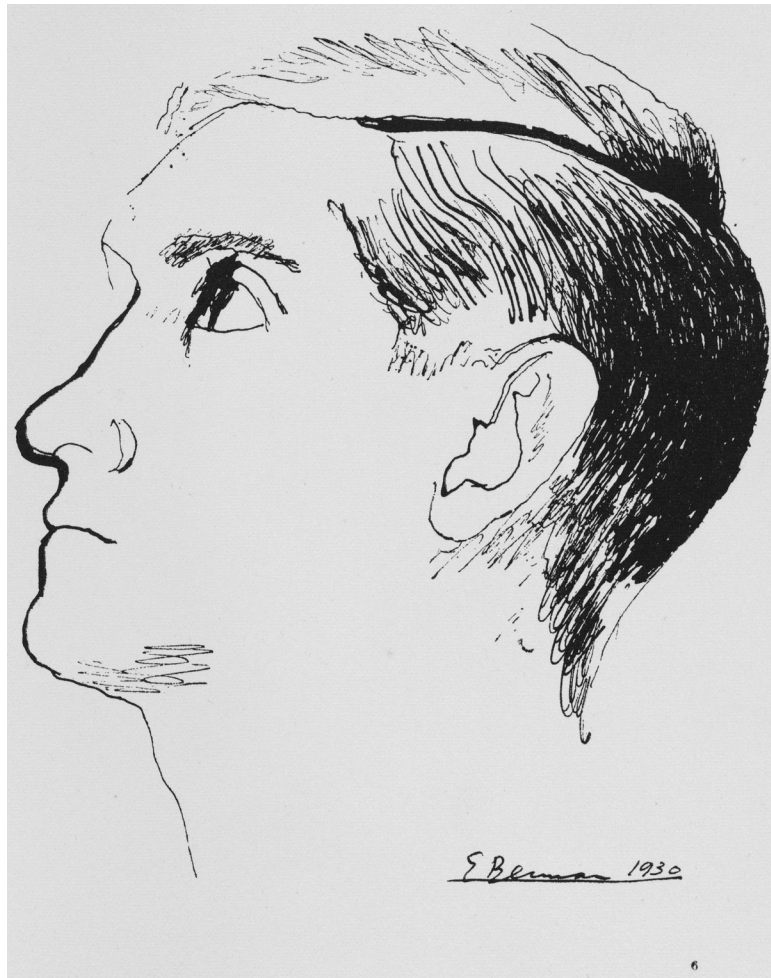


FIGURE 15

Eugene Berman, *Portrait of Georges Hugnet*, 1930, in *Dix Portraits*.

others, wrote books and reviews about the artists, organized exhibitions of their work, published catalogues, collaborated in and publicized their theatrical events, courted dealers, and contributed to magazines (such as *View*) featuring their work and expanding their influence.

Soby, Hitchcock, Austin, and Levy played key roles in establishing neo-romanticism on the other side of the Atlantic. Levy, whose New York gallery showcased photographers and various experimental realists, discovered the neo-romantics through Hitchcock and lent a number of the works in his collection to the group exhibition that Hitchcock and Austin organized at the Wadsworth Atheneum in 1931.<sup>83</sup> Soby published his book *After Picasso*, codifying neo-romanticism as a feature of the modernist canon, four years later.



FIGURE 16  
Eugene Berman, *Self-Portrait*, 1930, in *Dix Portraits*.

Soby, like Levy and Hitchcock, championed experimental figurative schools. His book presented neo-romanticism and surrealism as correctives to cubist abstraction and neoclassicism. “After thirty years, a reaction against the hypothesis of ‘painting as architecture,’ for which Picasso primarily stands, is historically inevitable,” the book begins. Soby’s introduction proposes the neo-romantics and surrealists as “the most tangible and successful reaction to appear thus far against Picasso’s Cubism and its later ramifications.”<sup>84</sup> Throughout the book, Soby emphasized the affinity between the neo-romantics’ melancholy figurative output and Picasso’s turn-of-the-century Blue Period. Stein’s literary portrait of Berman in *Dix Portraits* also underscores the neo-romantics’

reverence for a precubist phase of modernism's development: "They painted Blue. Which was quite blue through you," Stein wrote, as if speaking to Picasso even in her portrait of Berman—and, what is more, calling out the prior claim on one of Berman's artistic hallmarks.<sup>85</sup> For Soby, the rehabilitation of blue-ness represents the restaging of a turning point in modernism's history: a divergence from abstraction as modernism's inevitable outcome. The neo-romantics followed paths rejected by many modernists of the time, Soby explained, to "turn painting as far as possible from machine-constructivist aesthetics" toward the human.<sup>86</sup>

Waldemar George, the first critic of international stature to devote attention to the group he dubbed neo-romantics, rejected any dichotomous opposition of abstraction and figuration, with its attendant binary, *avant-garde/arrière-garde*. He insisted that the neo-romantics' figurative work represented "neither a decadence nor a development" in relation to modernism, but rather an artistic direction "that is simply distinct."<sup>87</sup> George's reviews appeared in the journal *Formes*, which he edited and published in both English and French. Presented as "an international review of plastic art," *Formes* nevertheless represented mainly Paris-based perspectives.

Soby's critical interests, on the other hand, were quite American. His preoccupation with modernism's formalism, if ultimately self-defeating, made sense in an American art-historical context. Soby was doubtless aware of the exhibition on abstraction that his colleague Alfred Barr Jr. was planning at the Museum of Modern Art.<sup>88</sup> Less than a year after Soby published his book about post-Picasso modernism, Barr staged a strategic defense of abstraction with the 1936 exhibition "Cubism and Abstract Art" and introduced the now famous "Barr chart" on the catalogue's dust jacket. The two texts, Barr's *Cubism and Abstract Art* and Soby's *After Picasso*, can be viewed as artifacts of a conversation about both the history and the future of modern art.

Taken out of the context of Barr's eclectic curatorial and pedagogical career, the "Cubism and Abstract Art" schema, as I stressed in the introduction, was widely perceived as an all-encompassing statement about modern art and its two logical outcomes: nongeometric abstraction and geometric abstraction.<sup>89</sup> Figuration, in this context, appeared to occupy art's past, not its future. Soby, in *After Picasso*, adopted uncritically the formalist terms of an emerging debate that increasingly cast abstraction and all manner of representation as opposites. Soby thus contributed to the mounting perception of figuration as a cohesive stylistic reaction to abstraction rather than a set of practices with its own independent (and divergent) agendas. This said, Soby had cause to adopt this polarizing rhetoric, for the neo-romantics themselves framed their practices as correctives to the dehumanizing and universalizing effects of abstraction. Certainly neo-romanticism, with its insistence on the human subject, the particular, and the ephemeral, did not fit the "Cubism and Abstract Art" initiative Barr outlined.

Of the two figurative schools advanced by Soby in *After Picasso*, only one (because of its abstract manifestations) appeared on Barr's chart: surrealism. In *After Picasso*, Soby afforded neo-romanticism and surrealism equal emphasis. From today's perspective, this

parity seems unjustified: although surrealism is a household term, neo-romanticism is not. Yet in 1935, before modern art was fully codified, a case for neo-romanticism's equal importance was not hard to build. Evidence included a Galerie Druet group show featuring the neo-romantics in 1926. In 1928, Tchelitchew's designs for the Russian Ballet production *Ode* earned critical acclaim. Waldemar George published his series of articles about the group in 1929 and 1930. Bérard showed in Paris at Galerie Vignon, in May 1930; at Galerie Pierre Colle, in May 1931; and at Galerie Bonjean, in May 1930 and May 1931. In New York, Julien Levy Gallery exhibited the neo-romantics, along with surrealists and magic realists beginning in 1931, and Levy promoted the group during two decades he described as "those crucial years between Dadaism and the apotheosis of MoMA-ism."<sup>90</sup> The neo-romantics participated in exhibitions at other New York galleries as well, including a group show at Balzac Galleries, also in 1931. Marie Harriman's New York Gallery devoted a solo exhibition to Tonny's work that same year. In 1934 Julien Levy Gallery featured Tchelitchew's paintings in a solo exhibition, and fanfare greeted the premiere of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, the opera created by two major proponents of neo-romanticism, Stein and Thomson.

In 1935, then, when Soby published *After Picasso*, the neo-romantics' alternative forms of modernist practice appeared to have some historical traction. These forms were sometimes ephemeral, and often interdisciplinary, collaborative, and theatrical; they were always figurative and, in that figuration often implicates the human figure, they were, at bottom, social. Evaluating the significance of neo-romanticism requires reading the stakes and contradictions back into debates that now appear resolved. Further, it means asking how the impulse (or sometimes even the compulsion) to resolve debates functions culturally.

I am arguing that the neo-romantics, with their social queerness, disciplinary eccentricities, national fluidity, and failure to cohere along stylistic lines, unsettle our ideas about what constitutes a "school," a "movement," and, indeed, modernism. The portraits they created in *Dix Portraits* embody both the emotional cohesiveness of the group and its formal incoherence. We might view Berman's self-portrait, with its rather touching irresolution, as a figure of neo-romanticism—and its inability, or perhaps underlying unwillingness, to project a unified public image.

According to Thomson, the artistic movement he and Hugnet attempted to launch with *Dix Portraits*, along with the figurative renaissance the neo-romantics and their supporters envisioned, ultimately failed for "lack of a personnel sufficiently tough to face, as artists, a lifetime of persecution from the collectors of pre-World-War-I modern art—in other words from the Picasso marketeers."<sup>91</sup> In reality, the neo-romantics can be deemed "failures" only if they are judged by capitalist rules. In many ways, they themselves foreordained their failures—and did so proudly—by making artistic and sexual choices that disregarded the rules of the fine art marketplace, and with them a whole chain of social norms. Bérard, for one, chose to focus his creative efforts on theater design, and to work in a professional "climate of artistic (and sexual) cooperation" that, to quote Thomson, "caused class barriers

for a little time to disappear.”<sup>92</sup> The same could be said of disciplinary and national barriers. Yet even Thomson, who praised Bérard’s “high-level collaborative artwork” for theater, judged his abandonment of painting as a failure “to live up to his genius.”<sup>93</sup> To the extent that such failures as Bérard’s point to alternative possibilities in ostensibly hegemonic cultural contexts, failure can be understood as a perverse form of success. Moreover, because failure exposes the criteria for success (what Michel Foucault referred to as “codes of normalization”) that otherwise remain invisible, it has subversive potential.<sup>94</sup>

Feminist, postcolonial, and queer theorists have recognized this. Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, illuminates the radical potential of failure in relation to the (unfaithful) reproduction of gender codes.<sup>95</sup> Saidiya Hartman, in *Scenes of Subjection: Slavery, Terror, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, recognizes failure (the failure to produce efficiently) as a strategy for jamming mechanisms of racial oppression.<sup>96</sup> Judith (Jack) Halberstam, in *The Queer Art of Failure*, identifies failure as a quintessentially queer form of cultural critique, arguing that “success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily with specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation.”<sup>97</sup> From each of these perspectives, failure reveals the hidden stakes of success, along with capitalism/patriarchy’s “hidden histories.”<sup>98</sup> In contexts where success equates with permanence, failure is the place where transience, instability, incertitude, and mortality reside. The neo-romantics’ embrace of the figure and body-centered (therefore transient) pursuits such as fashion and theater arts can be understood as modes of resistance to what Thomson described as the “French immortality-mill.”<sup>99</sup>

This is not to suggest that the politics of the neo-romantics and their proponents were necessarily radical in other ways. They ran the gamut. In France during the Occupation, the fervently antifascist Hugnet, for instance, supported the Resistance by turning his printing press into a cottage industry that produced false passports and identification papers, while Fay implicated himself in the administration of the fascist regime. On the whole, the neo-romantics spoke “both to and for the *grande bourgeoisie*,” Thomson acknowledged, “and if their politics were conservative, in some cases even royalist, their avoidance of political action was . . . strict.”<sup>100</sup> The neo-romantics viewed the arts (and homosexual culture) as territorially neutral—free zones where barriers of class, ethnicity, race, age, gender, nationality, and political affiliation broke down under pressure from creative and sexual forces. The notion that the artist (or the homosexual) is somehow inherently classless—not implicated in social hierarchies—is, of course, highly problematic. In France, the neo-romantics’ patrons were, by and large, aristocratic bohemians, and in America their champions represented an intellectual elite.

The alliances formed in France in the making of *Dix Portraits* engendered collaborations in America throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The chapters that follow consider in depth two such undertakings—Thomson and Stein’s opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* and the magazine *View*, edited by Charles Henri Ford, Tchelitchew’s lover. Individually, and in various new configurations, the neo-romantics continued to defend the place of the human body and its desires in contemporary art.



Their deviation from cultural norms, though, exacted costs. Influential critics—foremost among them, Clement Greenberg—denounced the “regressive” forms of pictorial eccentricity practiced by the neo-romantics and affiliated artists, such as Florine Stettheimer and Joseph Cornell. The ascent of the New York School in postwar America as heir to the powerful School of Paris, and the concurrent success of abstract expressionism as a media phenomenon, militated against serious consideration of alternative approaches to modern art making, particularly figurative modes. In the late 1940s, Maurice Grosser recalled, “Surrealism and Neo-Romanticism . . . were still much in public view, and although abstract art had already strong support from the museums, art schools, and universities, figurative painting was still being taught and its practitioners still highly respected.”<sup>101</sup> Admittedly, Grosser’s own investments in figuration and his intimate proximity to the neo-romantic circle might have skewed his historical perspective. However, many other critics and chroniclers of the period shared this point of view. For example, the art and theater critic Sheldon Cheney maintained that he saw experimental figuration as “the broader main channel of Modern painting.”<sup>102</sup> At the same time, some of the American critics who wrote about figurative practices had openly antagonistic agendas.

For example, Greenberg, in his review of Berman’s exhibition of oils and drawings at Julien Levy Gallery in 1943, took the opportunity to affirm backhandedly his own formalist vision for the future of art. The passage quoted below epitomizes perfectly the mid-century critical campaigns that advanced “pure” abstraction at the expense of figuration (deemed mimetic and/or derivative). Of equal importance, this passage activates, with key words such as *decadent*, the homophobic conditions that enabled Greenberg to successfully nominate America’s first generation of art heroes.

Eugene Berman, Neo-Romantic, is, I suppose, a painter. But we can save trouble by taking him as a simple specialist in *frissons* for the cocktail hour. Given that he has discovered essentially nothing about his art that Raphael didn’t know, he is very dexterous. . . . He can paint any way he wants to, provided the way has already been discovered by someone else. The prescription for Berman’s thrill this year, and thrill it is, is to take a Florentine master, clean him thoroughly, rearrange the figures, reheat and remix the subject, and then freshen up everything with Böcklin syrup. Piquancy is also gained by doing the canvas without ground or underpainting while yet striving after the same effect. There is an effect, a wonderful-rich effect, but it belongs to journalism and mode. It is as if Time Inc. were rewriting and simultaneously imitating the Harvard Classics. Berman’s pictures, crowded as they are into a relatively small space, are too overpowering, too decadent, too spurious, and, really, too well done to be dealt with in measured words. If this is art, the age is doomed.<sup>103</sup>

The neo-romantics’ commitment to figurative genres, enmeshed in social life and bourgeois décors, their unambivalent engagement with theater and fashion design, (not to

mention their homosexuality, and their foreignness) made them easy targets for American critics with competing agendas. Michael Duncan, the curator of a twenty-first-century exhibition devoted to neo-romanticism and its legacy, came to the same ineluctable conclusion. “The blatant theatricality of their works,” Duncan recognized, “. . . clearly irritated those of rigorous sensibilities, among them the critic Clement Greenberg, who railed against the neo-romantics’ connections to fashion and high society.”<sup>104</sup> And those connections were central to neo-romantic practice. Bérard, Tchelitchev, and Berman created décors for major ballet and opera productions, and even cinema.<sup>105</sup> Their paintings appeared as fashion-shoot backdrops in *Town and Country*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, and *Vogue*.

Because works by many critically sanctioned artists also appeared in fashion magazines—including those of Jackson Pollock, featured in *Vogue*, March 1951—other factors must have fueled Greenberg’s vehemence in heaping critical disapproval on the neo-romantics. As the passage from Greenberg’s review of Berman suggests, judgments about the neo-romantics’ embrace of theater and fashion couched judgments about something else: the same-sex alliances and attractions that linked many members of this milieu. The accusation that these are derivative painters, imitators—as in Greenberg’s formulation that Berman was capable of painting “any way he wants to, provided the way has already been discovered by someone else”—corresponds uncomfortably with stereotypes of homosexuality as a sterile imitation of heterosexuality. With striking frequency, critical coverage of the neo-romantics deployed code words such as *decadent*, *morbid*, *inverted*, *hypersensitive*, *neurotic*, and *narcissistic*.<sup>106</sup> To homophile scholars of modernism, such as Duncan, such terms “read as euphemistic descriptions of an effeminacy and homosexuality that critics such as Greenberg hoped would be expunged from the art world as a result of what was described as the rigor, strength, and masculine physicality of artists like Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman.”<sup>107</sup> As analysis of critical responses to *View* magazine in Chapter 3 makes even plainer, Greenberg, for one, deployed homophobic rhetoric strategically. In part as a result of this strategy’s success, by the late 1950s, figurative painting had become, in the portraitist Grosser’s words, “an underground practice.”<sup>108</sup> And a claim that Grosser had once made about the neo-romantics seemed far-fetched in a critical context where formalism dominated: “By reintroducing humanity and personal feelings into an art that had become dehumanized, the Neo-Romantic painters made . . . the most important contribution to painting since the innovations of the great Moderns, and one which will have much influence in forming the painting of the second half of our century.”<sup>109</sup> However unlikely it sounded at the apex of the Greenbergian era, Grosser’s prediction about the neo-romantic’s legacy eventually came to pass. Openly gay artists such as Andy Warhol and David Hockney, whose work resuscitated the human figure in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, did reactivate the affective and interpersonal dimensions of artistic practice that the neo-romantics had defended in earlier decades. In the same time frame, the rise of feminist and social-historical methodologies, and the impact of identity politics on the cultural domain, invited scholarly reexamination of such body-oriented representational practices as portraiture.

Since then, the efflorescence of figuration in a range of media has prompted critical reappraisal of artists who bucked abstract trends in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s to work in realist modes.<sup>110</sup> The neo-romantics doubtless warrant such reevaluation. But rather than realign these artists with standards of success they rejected, or absorb them into an updated progress narrative, the chapters that follow continue to explore the significance of their insistent deviations from artistic and social norms, thus illuminating lost passages of modernism's history.