

*For us the most entertaining surface in the world
Is that of the human face.*

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INTRODUCTION: DEFINING THE SUBJECT

1

A history of the face? It is an audacious undertaking to tackle a subject that defies all categories and leads to the quintessential image with which all humans live. For what, actually, is “the face”? While it is the face that each of us has, it is also just one face among many. But it does not truly become a face until it interacts with other faces, seeing or being seen by them. This is evident in the expression “face to face,” which designates the immediate, perhaps inescapable, interaction of a reciprocal glance in a moment of truth between two human beings. But a face comes to life in the most literal sense only through gaze and voice, and so it is with the play of human facial expressions. To exaggerate a facial expression is to “make a face” in order to convey a feeling or address someone without using words. To put it differently, it is to portray oneself using one’s own face while observing conventions that help us understand each other. Language provides many ready examples of figures of speech that derive from facial animation. The metaphors we all automatically use about facial expressions are particularly revealing. “To save face” or “to lose face” are typical of these. They speak of control or threat to the face, but each also goes to the very core of the individual one is referring to. And yet we are not always in control

of our faces. Faces are tied to a lifetime during which they change and are stamped by experience. But they can also be inherited, learned by rote from another (as with mother and child), and recalled when one wishes to remember a person.

In the public sphere, by contrast, faces assume other roles, conform to conventions, or subordinate themselves to the ubiquitous official icons produced by the media. These icons dictate the faces of the majority instead of seeking true eye contact with them.¹ “The face is our social part; our body belongs to nature.”² This idea immediately suggests the notion of the mask, into which we transform our own face when we wish to play a role. One can even speak of facial fashions. Thus we can see a “Face of the Age” popularized by the mass media as the homogenization of faces typical of an era. This phenomenon has existed throughout history, representing dominant, accepted types to which all have aspired.³ One example would be an ideal of beauty generic to a period in which a preference for either “plain” or “strong” faces prevailed.

2

We cannot understand “the face” solely as an individual attribute, because it is clearly constrained by social forces. The domestication of faces in the nineteenth century is thus a historical phenomenon. To counter this development, August Sander records the upheavals in German society after World War I in a book of photographs titled *Face of the Times*.⁴ This brings up the problem of how to talk about a “History of the Face.” It is a different topic from the history of European portraiture, which began in the early modern period and encountered its first crisis with the invention of photography in the nineteenth century. What, then, does “history” mean in our case? What significance can it have within the framework of this book if it extends to all faces in general? Here we begin to discover a variety of possibilities for talking about a history of the face.

The life history of an individual face is familiar to everyone. That is not our topic here. A face changes with age when creases etch themselves into the sagging skin that gradually loosens from the skull; the creases become the expressive lines, wrinkles, and contours. These are what remain from the face’s constant work of creating expression. They denote individual facial habits, which become fixed through a set repertoire of expressivity, and those habits are thus engraved in the face. In addition, a face can sometimes seem older or younger than the body that bears it, creating a sort of asymmetry that results from interplay during the course of a life.

Physiognomy is congenital and determined by skull structure. Yet the coherence in a face that we see after a long absence is sometimes made more obvious when we hear the voice, which recalls the face from the past even when it has

changed dramatically. Even though a face remains itself during the course of a life, it does not stay the same.

The “natural history of the face” (as Jonathan Cole has called it) is not my subject here, although it has been highly significant regarding the expressive powers of the face. The face that we have is just as much the expression that we give it as it is the result of evolution.

Charles Darwin, who based his findings on those of Charles Bell and Guillaume-Benjamin Duchenne de Boulogne, focuses on the idea of evolution in his *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*.⁵ In medical patients loss of functionality in the facial muscles demonstrates that the interplay of many facial muscles generates the full spectrum of expression that makes faces readable. “The successful differentiation of consciousness and . . . emotional subtlety ran parallel to the evolution of the face,” which increasingly separated expression from general body gestures and claimed it for itself. From the insights of primatology Cole deduced that the development of nuanced faces dates from the period before language and depends on “increasing complexity of social units.”⁶ The consciousness for which the face developed into a living mirror was central to the development of individuality. Facial movements that humans control are “partly primordial” and thus reflect a prehistory, but they are also partly a product of human evolution. “The more mobility and expressivity the face gained, the more refined its ability to convey feelings became.”

This evolutionary process was completed before the emergence of the cultures now familiar to us. It was in these that the face first acquired those shades of meaning that expand upon nature and interpret it. Among these are faces that are painted or tattooed, groomed and styled, affective or secretive. The same is true of masks fabricated as artifacts representing faces and worn over faces. Prehistoric funerary cults invented the mask in order to replicate a lost face upon the corpse. Not until the advent of European culture and the social history of the modern era was the mask first understood not as a substitute but rather as a facsimile, a disguise and means of concealing the face. In self-representation with the real face, however, social norms have been at work, but shaped by cultural traditions. Cultures, furthermore, also differ in their interpretation of the face, but not in the same way that different races do.

3

The cultural history of the face is a broad topic that is difficult to reduce to a single concept. Sigrid Weigel reminds us of the historical significance of the human portrait, which is always an image and also the result of an interpretation of the face. “As the external view of a being imbued with affect and feeling, the face has become

a concentrated image of the *Humanum* in European cultural history.” Precisely such an image is constantly deconstructed in the art and media of modernity. As the “emotional codes and cultural technologies” show, “the history of the face is first and foremost a history of media.” This makes it worthwhile to examine the traditional and modern artifacts and to include “images of the face” when they lead beyond “the beaten path of physiognomy.”⁷ At the same time, the face is intrinsically “a medium of expression, self-representation, and communication.” Conventions of living facial habits thus recur in the artifacts and ultimately lead back to the question of the mirroring relationship that exists between image and life.

We find a different model of the cultural history of the face in the work of Jean-Jacques Courtine and Claudine Haroche. They understand their history of the face (*histoire du visage*) as a social history of the emotions in the modern period in the West between the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁸ During this period different varieties of individuality emerged in social life. In this process, self-expression (the will to show one’s own emotions) collided with self-control (the desire or compulsion to regulate the emotions). Physiognomy provided the instructive material for a behavioral code of the face according to which the individual could go both “outside” and “inside” himself. Thus we can describe two “facial habits” that society demanded or tolerated.⁹ This observation is supported by both texts and images, where even today it is still possible to read the facial habits of a past society.

Courtine and Haroche rely explicitly on the model of a “historical anthropology.” Jacques Le Goff understood this phrase to mean a material as well as a moral history (*histoire morale*) of societies in which the living human body always represents a social reality.¹⁰ The historian Jean-Claude Schmitt, Le Goff’s successor at the *École des Hauts Études*, expanded the range of such an anthropology when he presented a first sketch for a “general history of the face, which has yet to be written.”¹¹ In doing so he presented a threefold differentiation of the face—namely, as a sign of identity, as a vehicle of expression, and, finally, as a site of a representation (literally and figuratively): “If the face is a sign in its own right, then it stands for all that we attribute to it and ultimately for all that it conceals from us.”¹²

A “historical anthropology” concerns itself with humans (and their faces) in general, but also gives us an inkling about how this topic has been incorporated into historical scholarship. Georges Didi-Huberman, by contrast, advocates the idea of an “anthropology of the face” that encompasses all eras and cultures. He warns against any “history of the face” restricted to a historical grammar of facial expression. He advises caution because in the form of a readable physiognomy, this soon turns into an ethnocentric argument.¹³ On the other hand, an all-encompassing

“grammar of the face” swiftly strains its limits when it forsakes historical context. The difference between face and image recapitulates the difference between presence and representation, for representation implies that the face itself is absent.¹⁴ And yet the living face produces an expressive or masklike representation in order to show or conceal the self. Human beings engage in the representation of their own faces. Thus, we all embody a role in life.

4

This work will discover the face in ever-changing historical contexts, although its history cannot be ordered in any linear chronology. This history is, rather, something that constantly changes and offers new insights into the subject each time. As a form of narrative, history thus presents the possibility of talking about the face and its social and cultural applications (praxis) without always resorting to generalities. In the realm of cultures there is no “history” in the singular. In this context one should really talk about “histories” in the plural, from which one can only make a selection—a selection that other histories may contradict. The focus of this study on an area of Europe has not been driven by an agenda, but is rather the product of compromise. This has been the only way to delimit the material, which is almost infinite, and to contain it within a scope that nonetheless remains barely manageable. Stepping beyond the European context leads us to confront completely new questions, which this introduction will nonetheless address with a few examples. When all is said and done, literature about the face is extremely diverse. In the area of cultural comparisons, only ethnology has provided a few models—for example, in the discourse about masks.

The concept of “history” is meant merely as a practical framework here, not as an authoritative prescription. The reader is, moreover, encouraged to notice that on the whole history remains forever elusive when one tries to pin down the topic of the face within it. In our framework we can only speak of history when we limit ourselves to a specific perspective; it changes as soon as that perspective changes. This is true, for example, of the history of the portrait. In the following pages, this topic will be viewed as a European (rather than a universal) subject and examined critically. It is also true of the history of contemporary mass media, in which faces seem to disappear and yet show stubborn persistence despite the almost constant innovations of most modern media. The history of the theater and acting also calls for a historical narrative. This is evident because in the modern age actors appear onstage without masks and must play roles from antiquity using their own faces. The history of scientific areas like physiognomy and neurology constitute subjects in their own right.

5

The history of the mask also belongs to the cultural history of the face. Nonetheless many studies of the mask never mention the face at all anymore. They seem to have a very different subject, and they even seem to contradict the history of the face. And yet the mask has always been used as a medium for the face. As such, it has accompanied the changing interpretations of the face or in some cases even caused them. This even applies to the oldest masks that we know. They did not merely replicate the face after death in clay and color but simultaneously produced an image that constituted a retrospective view of a life. In his book on masks, Richard Weihe examines the ambiguity between face and mask, calling it a “paradox.”¹⁵ In the duality of co-optation or contradiction between face and mask, “there emerges a dialectic of showing and concealing that is characteristic of the mask.” In cult ritual and the theater of Greek antiquity, a “prosopic unity” was produced by equating mask and face (the mask is the face). According to Weihe the equation of mask and person, in the modern period, produces the “*homo duplex*,” to use Émile Durkheim’s terminology: this is “the model of man who unites nature and culture within himself: *the self as a role*.”¹⁶

In a late lecture from 1938, Marcel Mauss described “the social person” (compared to the “self” [*Ich*; ego]) within the mask, which assumes a specific type or a role with which it must communicate in society. The person is a mask. By contrast, Erhard Schüttpelz reminds us that the mask is distinguished by a striking ambiguity in early societies. It can side with society (in other words, with roles and persons) against inimical nature, but can also take the side of a magically imbued nature in opposition to society. Within this framework it can either invite communication and narrow its distance from the public, or it can create a new distance.¹⁷

Considerations like these affirm a fundamental meaning of the mask, which establishes a close connection with the history of the face. The mask was predestined to interact with living faces and to address these in two ways. On the one hand we have an expression of excitement exaggerated to the point of inspiring fear, which transcends the expressive capacity of the human face. On the other hand, we find the utter peace of rapture, which calms the anxiety in the living faces of the cult audience. Both types of mask can be used in the same context, either simultaneously or sequentially. Interaction means that masks can be experienced here as faces, to which one reacts with one’s own living face, as if in an exchange of glances—in other words, instinctively.¹⁸

The ambiguity of face and mask becomes immediately visible wherever the vivid interaction between gaze and facial expression is disturbed or interrupted. This can happen in two ways, both of which produce a similar effect on us. First, it

can happen when the wearer of a man-made mask—a mask of leather, wood, or plaster—peers through the holes in the mask and looks at us with his living eyes. At that point the gaze, which we can suddenly no longer interpret, acquires an uncanny force that renders us powerless. When we find ourselves restricted to such a gaze, disembodied from the face, we are no longer capable of exchanging glances, an action that belongs to the fundamental experience of our faces. But this disruption can also happen in a second way—namely, if someone approaches us with his living face but not his real eyes. The blind thus wear invisible masks on their real faces. And this fear can also arise when the eyes are covered by dark glasses or even with artificial eyes. This variation is familiar to us from Jean Cocteau's last film, *The Testament of Orpheus* (1960). In this film the actors portraying the gods appear with replicas of large, lifeless eyes covering their own. These do not change expression, and Cocteau himself similarly transforms his living presence into a (death) mask.¹⁹ Facial expression is meaningless here; the true face is frozen into a mask when the living gaze is concealed from our own sight. We do not even need the assistance of artificial eyes, but rather, when we let our whole face become expressionless, we allow our face to become indecipherable and stiffen into a mask.

6

The man-made mask was used as a vehicle that possesses the permanence of all things, but which, in ritual, needed a living wearer with a voice and a gaze. Thus a dancer was required to bring the mask to life in performance. By contrast, the living face becomes stiff and rigid as a mask when it is portrayed; the very process of reproduction immediately yields a mask that can no longer change expression. In this second sense, the history of the face has come down to us in a tradition of masks, which represent faces but are not faces. Seen from both perspectives, this produces a type from which the face distances itself, because it exists only in life and is as multifaceted, ungraspable, fleeting, and transitory as life itself. In this book the face is the cynosure of all images, which are always subject to time and thus break down and lose the competition with the living face when confronted with the impossibility of representing it accurately.

A study that takes the face as its subject resembles a butterfly hunt and must often be content with duplicates or derivatives, which divulge very little information about the life and secret of the face. Thus, as the following arguments unfold they will not always do so systematically, but will often change course abruptly so as to include other aspects of the face. Such a process is suggested by the topic itself, if one does not want to sacrifice its many facets. Everything about the face that can be described or put into words is only a mirror for that which is not immediately there,

but which is flanked by scenery with which societies and cultures have surrounded the face. The frontispiece of this book, which comes from a film by Ingmar Bergman, depicts the search for the face as a reach into the void, for in this example the face has retreated into a distant image that the hand cannot grasp. A face is born anew with every human being. It ages and dies with that person no matter what the circumstances of life may have been at the time. All competing designs and deconstructions of the face are only episodes in its social activities; these are always survived by the face and subsequently laid to rest. Thus, the invisible center of this book—the face—can only be encountered at its societal and cultural periphery. It is the raw material of life and thus nature in its social praxis.

The chapters in this book each stand alone and discuss a particular aspect of the face in order to present a view of its manifold aspects in chronological order. They are also related thematically, in the sense that they reflect one another. This is true especially for the second part, which is devoted to the portrait as a mask and which traces this kind of mask, including photography, up to the present. It is also true for the third part, where the age of electronic media provides the context. Such connections are not immediately evident in the first part, but the context will emerge little by little through trial and error. This section begins by demanding that the reader accept face and mask as a single theme in the organizing principle of a “history of the face” and not view these concepts in sharp contrast to one another. For this reason, the masks of the self and the roles of the face are viewed from a common vantage point in part I. There then follows a break where the man-made mask is introduced as it is worn in two very different contexts. One such context is the genealogy of the mask ritual in cults, which introduces the cultural history of the face in early prehistoric times. This stands as a counterpoint to the reencounter with the mask—now as an exotic object in museums of the colonial period. After we have passed through the modern period, the mask is suddenly experienced as something foreign and unintelligible.

The performance of the mask in the theater presents the face in a dual context that is introduced in the classical use of masks and is something that remains familiar to us from the modern theater, where it undergoes an unanticipated change. In the modern age the mask *per se* has not returned to the theater, but rather the actors’ faces have taken over the stage roles of the mask. The actor’s face thus becomes the model of the original social mask at court and later in civil society. The revival of the ancient study of physiognomy as a potentially reliable science of the face reached its high point in the writings in Lavater, but ultimately left disappointment in its wake. These studies nonetheless paved the way for their scientific successors—first phrenology, then neurology. The focus thus turned away from the

face as an organ that was the subject of research rather than the communicator of a human being's character. Ultimately, the face had been overlooked for so long that a new cult of the death mask as true face introduced a modern nostalgia for the face. As a prelude to this sentiment, Rilke went so far as to write a farewell to the face after he experienced the metropolis of Paris.

The second part begins with the potentially unexpected thesis that, where other cultures use the mask, Europeans have developed the portrait in its place. The representation of the face, whether as proxy or memento, was delegated to a silent image, which outlived the face but never recaptured its life. Such a concept of the portrait contradicts the enthusiastic acceptance of the depicted face as an authentic facsimile of life—an opinion repeated like a leitmotif throughout all critical appraisals of portraiture. But this likeness was restricted to an inert surface, against which artists rebelled in the self-portrait. They suddenly realized, with horror, that by using their own face they could not portray the self they possessed in life. As a result, issues concerning the mask become highly focused in the self-portrait. Even in portrayals of his friends and models, the painter Francis Bacon engaged in a life-long struggle to free the voiceless mask and violently recapture the vivid life of the face instead of producing a mere likeness.

In his major work on the European portrait, Andreas Beyer pursued the topic to the furthest limits of art. But even he was forced to conclude that no theory of the portrait did the concept justice.²⁰ Georges Didi-Huberman further changes the theme by analyzing the intrinsically contradictory “portraits” of anonymous sitters, even of crowds, that portray the common people and thus defy representation.²¹ But even those people are forced to put their faces on view—faces that either disappear in the next moment or are about to be lost forever at the threshold of death. This ambiguity of appearance and disappearance applies to a series of pictures of very old faces that the photographer Philippe Bazin took in the 1980s. Such faces clearly have their histories behind them. In the case of newborns, however, whom Bazin photographed in a later series, their histories had not even begun and cannot be deciphered from their faces. It is only in the image that the future and former face remain fixed.²²

The asymmetry between the face and its representations is evident from the fact that faces in portraits cannot age, yet they do age with the medium: a painting collects dust, and a photograph fades. Even when an image is taken or photographed from a living face, it does not begin to live; rather, the image robs it of time, since in retrospect the face can only be viewed at the moment when it is reproduced. Oscar Wilde evoked this relationship between image and life in the unforgettable parable of his tale, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. There, by reversing

image and life, Wilde revealed the paradox that exists between the two. Through a diabolical bargain concerning Dorian Gray's immortality, it comes to pass that only his image ages over time; the face retains its youthfulness throughout life. For this reason, the libertine must conceal his portrait because it has become an undesirable mask that portrays the truth, while his own face has been transformed into a mask that denies the true span of his years on earth. In his literary history of the human face, Peter von Matt inserted an excursus on the "basic indescribability of the human face," which naturally applies to literature and verbal description. His thoughts also apply to images, although these seem to possess a closer relationship to the face.

Even photography, which seemed to fulfill the long-sought guarantee of similitude, soon disappointed expectations because it could only preserve the moment in time at which the photograph was produced. For that reason, the technologies for reproducing moving images, whether in movies, television, or private video, promised an escape from photography as mask. Yet these introduced a new obstacle, for the images captured with the camera only become fully realized once they are projected on a screen. Moreover, the life span of new technologies—compared with older photography—is dramatically shorter, and new methods of preserving images are constantly needed to extend their useful life. Accordingly, there has arisen an internal cycle between reproduction and continuous technological innovations aimed at saving the fleeting face in pictures.

The age of mass media—our topic in the third part—has unleashed an unlimited production of faces, and through the printing of pictures and the Hollywood film, has established a new cult of the face. Thomas Macho calls these public faces "exemplars" (*Vorbilder*), not in an ethical or social sense, but rather in the way we always encounter them without really meaning to.²³ "Prominent faces" have now become products of the media. Instead of addressing a single viewer, they are aimed at the anonymous masses, which strive to find their own collective face in them. At the same time the modern metropolis has made the compilation of an "archive" of facial records necessary for law enforcement agencies, lest faces disappear too quickly into the crowd. The celebrity face, on the other hand, has deteriorated into a stereotype, and despite this—or because of it—has been able to revel in its public triumph. An example of this is the illustrated magazine *Life*, which offered its readers all of the faces that were enjoying their moment in the limelight in the 1930s.

The cinematic face has its own checkered history, which is the subject of numerous studies.²⁴ In these the large portrait photograph takes center stage and is allied with the cinematic technique of montage. This context has provided new insights about the readability or opacity of facial expression. The so-called Kuleshov

effect shows how the expression of a face can remain the same and yet be interpreted quite differently depending on the context in which it appears. In Ingmar Bergman's film *Persona*, the title of which evokes an old concept of the mask, the face is not only motif and technique but also the actual subject that unfolds in the dialogue between two "similar faces," one speaking and one silent.

Mao's face provides the mirror for two quintessentially different societies that are major players on the world scene today. In China, Mao's image was politicized on several levels as the only official face. This agenda was enforced so rigorously that it became the symbol for the people and the Party as it provided a collective identity for the faceless masses. In the United States it appeared somewhat belatedly among the colorful celebrity faces in circulation in the media. The marketing of Mao's face in the art scene launched a new career as a high-priced investment opportunity. In both cases the same face provided a template onto which two systems projected their worldviews. Today, paradoxically, it has emerged in a third stage of its history, in which it is penetrating the contemporary art scene in China as an American pop icon that confronts the state-sanctioned image still being produced there.

7

We now digress somewhat from the content of this book to cast a wider net while remaining true to our subject as we take a cursory look at this topic in other cultures. To reiterate: a cultural history of the face cannot be restricted to Europe, even though the main body of discourse applies to that geographical area and to the modern period. Nothing but a comparative analysis, such as one I have attempted elsewhere, permits us to transcend a focus limited to one's own culture.²⁵ Only then can one achieve an outsider's gaze, which makes it possible to recognize the local idiosyncrasies of one's own culture. It was ethnological research on masks that pointed the way toward research on faces. The scope of this book only permits a few examples to convey some main points about how a transcultural history of the face might look.

In countries where the religion of Islam is dominant, the veil testifies to a culture of the face completely different from that of the West. Nonetheless, the memory of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan is still fresh in our minds. They tried to force the burka, the full body veil, upon all women. This situation dominated the press photos of the period, as one example taken by Santiago Lyon demonstrates. It was taken in Kabul on November 13, 1996, in front of a Red Cross station as relief supplies were being distributed (fig. 1). In this photo the face of a girl emerges from among a crowd of burka-clad women whose faces remain invisible to us, while she alone—either not yet forced to wear the veil or having neglected to do so in an

unguarded moment—looks out at the viewer with a terrified expression. It is only the hands of the burka-clad women who clutch their veils to their bodies that reveal their presence behind their viewing grids.

The photograph elicits a shocked comparison between the free face and those locked away from sight behind full veils. In reality the veil—especially after the discussion surrounding its prohibition in France—has become a political issue. For one side it is a symbol of oppression, and for the other a symbol of identity. A third path presents itself in the descriptive labels accompanying a London exhibition devoted to the theme of the veil.²⁶ In the catalog the film theorist Hamid Naficy reminds us that regulation imposed on gazes between the sexes was not confined to the veil, but in Iranian postrevolutionary film also applies to the woman's indirect or direct gaze.²⁷ The veil also immediately brings the face into play in a double sense—on the one hand, regarding the gaze *at* the female face, which the veil is meant to protect from threats by potentially abusive men; and on the other hand, regarding the gaze *of* the female face, which is liberated by its vantage point behind the veil. The veil, in its varying strictures concealing and revealing is just like a mask or makeup in that it helps to tell the story of the staging of the face.

The search for personal identity in a world crippled by cultural strictures brings another work into the mix: Pakistani artist Nusra Latif Qureshi created this work for the 2009 Venice Biennale (fig. 2).²⁸ As a symbol of her official identity, she superimposed her own passport photo onto a transparent film strip of digital prints almost nine meters long, placing her own likeness over approximately twenty colored profiles of the Mogul period taken from Indic book illustrations. She alternated these with her image superimposed upon portrait paintings of the Venetian Renaissance representing the locale of the exhibition. The title of the work offers the key to the logic of this dual dramatization. It challenges the viewer with the question, “Did You Come Here to Find History?” The work embodies the postcolonial suspicion that viewers seek only stereotypes of cultural differences, given that they themselves in no way wish to be identified with Renaissance portraits.

In this work the layering of faces resembles a palimpsest, and history disintegrates into a dubious local construct that has itself become historicized. The portraits reproduce a twofold art history, and in so doing they emerge as collective patterns of a culture of the face, which replicates its own indigenous canon. For the viewer every so-called history of the face is also, as it were, a gallery of ancestral portraits from which one catches a glimpse of other, foreign cultures. In this study a remarkable metamorphosis of the gaze develops when the artist secretly looks at us with the eyes of a Venetian portrait, thereby breaking down cultural barriers. In this



FIGURE 1 Santiago Lyon, *Frauen in Kabul*, November 13, 1996 (photograph)



FIGURE 2 Nusra Latif Qureshi, *Did You Come Here to Find History?* (2009)



FIGURE 3 William Hoare of Bath, *Portrait of the Freed Slave Ayuba Suleiman Diallo*, 1773 (Qatar Museum)

act history suddenly becomes transparent. In a new, cosmopolitan present those cultural clichés that we have inherited as images hold each other in check when they reveal the gaze of the living artist in the background.

A third and last example, which again leads us back into the past, provides eloquent testimony to the complexity of cultural interaction via the face. This painting appeared on the art market only recently and may be designated the oldest (and for a long while to come, probably the only) portrait of an emancipated slave from Africa (fig. 3).²⁹ The object under consideration is the portrait of Ayuba Suleiman Diallo (1701–1773), painted in London in 1733 and all but forced upon the model against his bitter objections. The corresponding piece is the biography of the “African gentleman” written by Thomas Bluett (the author called the sitter Job Ben Solomon). It was his objective to give Suleiman Diallo an appropriate identity as a person in both word and image, which the period of the Enlightenment deemed essential.³⁰ From this biographical description there emerges a life of adventure that can only be considered unique in the history of slavery.

Suleiman Diallo, who was of aristocratic lineage, was born in the former kingdom of Bonda, site of present-day Senegal in West Africa, where, as a good Moslem, he had been educated in the Arabic text of the Koran. In 1730 during a trip to an English ship that lay at anchor in the River Gambia, he was kidnapped by members of the enemy tribe of the Mandingo. His head was shaved and he was sold to the same English captain with whom he himself had wanted to trade slaves for paper. He eventually ended up on a plantation near Annapolis, Maryland, to which his later biographer tracked him after an escape attempt. After numerous complications all related to his ransom, he was brought to England and introduced to polite society. There he was marveled at as an exotic sensation and even made the acquaintance of Sir Hans Sloane, one of the founders of the British Museum. Once a public collection had raised enough money for his ransom, he was able to gain his freedom in 1734, and he returned to his homeland. The Royal African Company, which expected better trade relations from this gesture, mediated the transaction.

The biographer also gives an account of the portrait painted by William Hoare and commissioned by one of Job/Suleiman Diallo’s sponsors.³¹ As a good Moslem the sitter was an avowed enemy of all images and thus also of his own portrait. He finally acquiesced after it was explained to him that a painting was the only way in which a memory of him might be preserved. Once the face was finished the painter asked the sitter about the costume he wished to wear, and he insisted on his indigenous garb. When the painter said he was not familiar with such attire, Suleiman Diallo replied that Hoare would probably also paint a likeness of God, whom no one has ever seen. In the portrait he seems to be wearing his native cos-

tume of silk, which he had made to his specifications by a London tailor. For him it may have symbolized a combined sign of his social and religious identity, in a way that his mere face could not have done. In accordance with this desire, he also seems to be wearing a Koran amulet around his neck, for it was ultimately not only his religion but also his literacy that had helped obtain his freedom. In the final analysis the portrait did not bring about his cultural assimilation, for it represented him only as an exotic subject with all those attributes that we now describe as “otherness” or “alterity.”