

# Going public— portraits from the Colin Holden Collection

Printmaking flourished in the 17th and 18th centuries, becoming a powerful and effective medium that gave visual form to the people that shaped the early modern era. Wealthy, notable and influential individuals leveraged the potential of this art form to construct and project their public personas to a wider audience.

Previously, members of the upper classes may have commissioned painted portraits which were largely displayed and viewed in private residences. From 1600, however, a generation of master engravers, etchers and mezzotinters rose to prominence, creating works either from their own designs or, frequently, from the paintings or drawings of other artists. Consequently, the printed portrait came to be regarded as a desirable status symbol that carried with it connotations of cultural significance and societal influence.

Thus the luminaries of society had their likenesses immortalised onto copper plates that were then inked to produce multiple copies of a unique image. Bearing purposeful expressions and swathed in elaborate costumes, these men and women were accompanied by symbolic props and the tools of their trades. Printmakers often added common artistic motifs like decorative frames or modified elements of an original painting to indicate wealth, occupation or social status: in doing so, their portraits conveyed much more than their subject's physical features or personality. By translating painterly surfaces into complex patterns of tapered and undulating lines, precise cross-hatching and textural stippling, printmakers exploited the myriad of tonal effects achieved by wielding their tools in different ways.

Whether they appeared as illustrations in widely circulated books, newspapers and pamphlets, or were sold as affordable and collectable art objects, printed portraits fostered a greater appreciation of artistic imagery—and promotion of their sitters—via these democratic channels. With painted portraits now interpreted and disseminated through the print medium, once private images of significant individuals could enter the public realm.