

Portraits Podcast – *Lopsided, With Jill Lepore (Season 1, Episode 1)*

Kim Sajet

Imagine you're walking through an art museum and you see something really cool and you want to know more. You can read that little label next to the work of art, or you can touch it, smell it and feel the materials used to create it. Just kidding, you absolutely can't do that. But a new podcast from the Metropolitan Museum of Art uses the materials of art to tap all your senses. The show is called *immaterial*, and every episode goes deep into what a particular material like paper, Jade or clay can tell us about history and humanity. Go beyond the visual and subscribe to *immaterial* today.

[INTRO MUSIC]

Kim Sajet

Welcome to *Portraits*, a podcast from the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, where art, biography, history and identity collide. I am Kim Sajet.

Kim Sajet

You might know us at the National Portrait Gallery for our portraits of famous people like President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama. We unveiled their portraits with great fanfare in February of 2018.

[MUSIC]

Separate Audio Clip (Barack Obama)

"How about that? That's pretty sharp"

Kim Sajet

But as director when I walked down the halls, I sometimes worry about the portraits that are not here. The people who were deemed not important enough to be remembered as part of our collective history. If you're a man with property in the 1800s, there's a perfectly good chance that you sat for a portrait at some point. You had money, influence, and you had to keep up with the other rich, powerful or notorious people who are getting their portraits done. But if you are a well-behaved woman, Native American, disabled and immigrant, perhaps once enslaved, there's a really good chance that you did not sit for a portrait. Michelle Obama actually touched on this point at the unveiling of hers.

Separate Audio Clip (Michelle Obama)

"You may have guessed, I don't think there is anybody in my family who has ever had a portrait done, let alone a portrait that will be hanging in the gallery"

Kim Sajet

My guest today is someone who thinks about this lopsidedness for a living. Jill Lepore is a Professor of History at Harvard University and a staff writer for *The New Yorker*. And just dedicated a big chunk of

her career to excavating the stories of people relegated to the background of history, people whose lives were essentially erased. I spoke with Jill at the studios of Harvard University. Welcome Jill Lepore, it's such a pleasure to speak with you. We are doing our first podcast at the National Portrait Gallery.

Jill Lepore

Yay, congratulations! Very exciting!

Kim Sajet

Super exciting. And I thought, what better person to actually talk about the concept of the portrait as history than yourself. You make the point that so much of our history actually is really fragmented, it's arbitrary, it's really what's kind of left. It's been what has been written down, that has lasted. And even then, it's fairly, you know, challenging to find what are the remnants of the evidences of history?

Jill Lepore

Yeah, and of course, as you know, better than anyone, museums struggle with the same problem that historians struggle with. I think of it as the asymmetry of the historical record. We have this vast quantity of information, whether it's pictorial or textual about certain people, and then we have almost nothing, in some cases, absolutely nothing about other people. And it's not arbitrary. It's not an arbitrary survival, right. It's very specific.

Kim Sajet

So Jill, you're known for doing this in your history. What I find that is sort of so helpful and so unusual is that you'll take a major person out of history like George Washington and then you'll actually also fill in the background on who their family was or who they were surrounded with, such as Harry Washington, who was an enslaved person in his household or Thomas Jefferson, you talk about Sally Hemings. And at the Portrait Gallery, we think about this all the time too. We call it the presence of absence. Portraiture favored those who could vote. White men who owned land. So you know, as you mentioned, women very rarely get into history. You know, as they say, the adage well behaved women rarely make history is totally true for portraiture as well. And no big surprise, only 22% of all the portraits in the National Portrait Gallery's collection are of women. And when you get to people of color, African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, the numbers are even less. So, I find that sort of fascinating. Do you feel that this is something that you are compelled always to do? To say, okay here's this person that we know about. But who are the people that brought them forward into the light for one of a better term?

Jill Lepore

Yeah, I do. It's a real challenge. In the case of history, it's a little different. I guess I would say this, in the case of history, all those people were actually sort of systematically erased from how people wrote history. They were writing actually an account of the electorate, which was white men, really. And that's the history that they wrote. And that took a lot of, well, of course, I'm not going to pay attention to anybody else. And when people try to get the vote, I'm going to not paint. It's actually a much more sort of systematic erasure. So I think it's easier to address in the written page writing history because you can tell stories about people. And you don't have to have pictures of them. I mean, it helps to have pictures of them. But there's a lot of other kinds of evidence that are available to historian to fill in, to

offer a kind of a literary portrait, right, rather than a visual portrait. Or you can offer kind of a lot of collective information about a group of people. You can convey a lot of information about how this group of people existed, but the proxy for that in the Portrait Gallery, there really isn't exactly one.

Kim Sajet

Yeah, and there might be very few images, portraits in some cases, in fact, you'll only have someone like Frederick Douglass or Harriet Tubman or Sojourner Truth and become sort of the token African American person. And they become the one or two who get reproduced over and over again. And so that sort of society's almost saying, okay that's enough, we're done and we're going to move on. And, as you also mentioned, it was expensive to get a picture done. And so if you were an enslaved person certainly nobody was going to do your picture. It's not until photography that we see African Americans in particular, start having some presence in terms of portraiture. So let's pivot to your most recent book that came out last September: "These Truths: A history of the United States". And that actually leads me to a very interesting person that you write about in the book that we'll figure very much in our exhibition. It's called "Votes for Women: A Portrait of Persistence", that talks about women who were trying to agitate for the vote in the passing of the 19th. Amendment in 1920. We're coming up to that anniversary. And that person is Ida B. Wells Barnett. And I have a picture that's in the collection that I wanted to ask you to describe. You describe her beautifully in the book. Here's the picture that we have, could you sort of describe to us who this woman was and how she might come across in this cot to visit.

Jill Lepore

So it's an extremely well known, it's the iconic image of her. She's the daughter of former slaves, and she grew up in Memphis started this newspaper called free speech. Her newspaper offices were burned down, and she just started another newspaper. She was fearless. I mean, just incredible. She really invented the muckraking style and American journalism in her campaign against lynching. So, there's incredible defiance and just physical courage. And it's sort of kind of three quarters turned face, she has a little pre-Gibson Girl, but her hair is what is swept up in a bun in the top. And she's not confrontational with the viewer, which is unusual because she was so confrontational on the page. But what's really staggering to me looking at this image of her is she's so young.

Kim Sajet

Yes!

Jill Lepore

She's just incredibly young. She's got this very sort of classically Victorian sort of frilly fitted, quite pretty dress on with a lot of lace coloring. And so, there's a kind of delicacy and femininity here. But then the determination and the resolution in her face is just really striking for such a young person to be like, it's not as a record, it's not as scary. There's just a kind of resolve there.

Kim Sajet

There is a resolve, as you said, she's very young. And I see her as this sort of seminal woman. She also protested being at the back of the bus before we get to Rosa Parks and others with the civil rights movement. She sort of is this bridge between centuries and issues?

Jill Lepore

Yeah, I mean Frederick Douglass sort of quite explicitly passes the baton to her. Because she's a little bit like, dude, you haven't done enough. Like she wants to go quite a bit further than Douglas and she has the energy to do that. I had an interesting struggle in the book around the first time I could really introduce an African American woman who I could develop on the page as a character because she'd left a lot of writing behind and actually had been described was this woman Maria Stewart, who writes beginning in the early 1830s. She's the first woman in the United States to speak before a mixed audience of women and men, which was considered quite a scandalous thing to do. And she's agitating for emancipation and for immediate abolition. And there's no image of her that survives. There is certainly not one that has ever been found. And it felt really important to me to nevertheless have an image in that chapter. And I really struggled with this question because there is not one, and people are not interchangeable. But I had seen this really very beautiful Daguerre type; the early form of photography that starts in France in 1839 of an African American woman. And she's depicted herself and chosen as a specific prop, she's very middle-class attire and a free black woman. A book that appears to be a journal. And she has on a chain around her neck, on a gold chain a pen. So it really is a portrait in which the sitter has chosen to be depicted as a writer. And it just staggered me. I just really wanted to be able to identify this woman so that I could say this is not Maria Stewart, but here's a woman sort of-

Kim Sajet

Reclaiming her history.

Jill Lepore

There is something really important about that. Seeing faces reflected back at you. When you picture the young, African American Girl reading this book in high school, you don't want to wait to get to the 20th century or even to get to the 1890s to see Ida B. Wells, to see a person who looks anything like you on the page.

Kim Sajet

Well, I think it was interesting when you talked about seeing this portrait and this pen around her neck and you have talked, and we think about this often about sort of the objects that are within portraits embedded within portraits. I know that you've looked very closely at women with glasses, and what that signifies and how unusual that is. What does it mean when you see a 18th century or early 19th century portrait of a woman with glasses, reading glasses?

Jill Lepore

It's a very strong representation of learnedness. It can also be a representation of devotion and prayerfulness in the 18th century that you really hardly ever see anyone wearing glasses are having clinched. No almost nobody wears glasses, there might be glasses as a prop like and even in woodcuts in 17 Benjamin Franklin ministers will have them, but Franklin kind of famously has them on his face. Yes. And what I tried to say to my students, when I show those Franklin porches is like he's got like a toothbrush hanging out of his mouth. Like that's how that would have looked at people than like, people didn't walk around with eyeglasses on they were for reading. And they're for study or you know, you're

doing your account books, you're clear, because it's a signifier. It's a signifier of discernment and enlightenment. And so is this incredibly audacious thing for any woman to have them even nearby. But so for women, they often will have them in their hand with a little book. And maybe sometimes it's a prayer book. So I spent a lot of time thinking about this, because there's in 1771, Franklin sends his sister eyeglasses, and there's a long letter about what to do with them because of course, you didn't go by you didn't go to like to an optical shop. So he sent a box A sent us a set of frames and a box of lenses. And he explains, you know, no two person's eyes are fellows. So you have to put a lens in one side and lens in the other and keep adjusting until you have the two that actually fit your eye is just exactly if you had gone to the eye when you go to the doctor and they do that flip it Yeah, they say which is better ARB that you're supposed to do that for yourself. And it's there's some sort of beautiful metaphor to me about how we see and how we need to see up close and people in their faces and know who you are that you're talking to you, but you also need to have a grander vision and see the whole of society.

Kim Sajet

When we come back, Jill talks about her search for a likeness of Jane Franklin, who is that? Stay with us and find out.

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet

Hi, listeners, I'd like to make a quick pitch for your support. If you enjoy the podcast and you believe as we do that it's important to draw a fuller picture of our American story. Please consider donating online. Your support helps us to bring the hidden stories of remarkable people to life. And any amount that you can give to portraits is so deeply appreciated. You can find out how to contribute at our website at npg.si.edu/donate

Kim Sajet

Welcome back to portraits. I'm Kim Sajet. As a historian, Jill Lepore makes a habit of writing in the stories of people footnoted or even erased in the official accounts of history. But as we've heard, she also tries to find or describe their likenesses, or portraits of their contemporaries or their descendants. This was the case when she sat down to write "Book of Ages: The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin". And I asked Jill, how did she get interested in Jane Franklin in the first place?

Jill Lepore

I one day went to the library. I had to write something about Benjamin Franklin and I just started reading. Franklin is incredibly funny. He's quite a charming writer. He's very companionable. I'm like slumped down to the floor in the stacks and just pulled volume after volume, laughing out loud at Franklin. He's delightful and wonderful and just capacious. But, you know, every few pages there'd be a letter to him from his sister, Jane. And her letters to him really weren't there. I mean, it's Franklin's writings, not her writings. Who is this Jane person who is the one through line in this guy's life and I got kind of fascinated with her. And, of course, you won't be surprised to hear him that, we have hundreds of 1000s of documents chronicling Franklin's life. He was an extraordinary person. I mean, of course, he should be well chronicled. And then this kind of handful of kind of chicken scratch of what are the

remains of Jane Franklin. The remnants of relic of Jane Franklin is just this tiny. We have many portraits of Franklin. The National Portrait Gallery has this beautiful Duplessis of Franklin.

Kim Sajet

Are there any portraits of Jane?

Jill Lepore

There's actually a fascinating story about that. I looked and looked and looked because he's always sending her portraits of himself. When he's in France and he has like a little miniature done. And we know that she had portraits of him. And she's always commenting on the portraits of him and how they don't look anything like him. She's actually got a very nice eye. So it's fascinating that she is a viewer, like she survives in the historical record as the woman watching him. Anyway, so I never found a portrait of her, but I did find a portrait of her granddaughter who was also named Jane. And I found it with my mom. My mother was a portrait artist actually.

Kim Sajet

I didn't know that wow.

Jill Lepore

Yeah, an amateur, but our whole childhood was about my mother was always painting portraits. And in fact, we found this portrait of little Jane Franklin, this little Jane flag who was Jane Franklin's granddaughter, in a museum that's one town over from where I grew up. Like in the basement and unprotected. So I paid to get it restored, because it just, it's a quite important, you know, 18th century portrait on its own right. So I use that on the book jacket. But I put a little plea to readers in my acknowledgments. Like, if anyone has any Jane Franklin stuff after reading this book, could you let me know? Because I really wanted to compile it. And of course, like I have actually heard from people that have Jane Franklin letters.

Kim Sajet

That's great!

Jill Lepore

But I heard from this woman who wrote to me to say I'm in fact descended from Jane Franklin. And we have a family photo album in our house that we always just called the book of ancestors. And I looked it up and we have a photograph of the daughter of that little girl that you found the 18th century portrait of. Her name was Dolly.

Kim Sajet

Wow.

Jill Lepore

And I said, wow send it to me. What does that look like? And she sent me this like an iPhone shot of this photograph of her, was the great great grandmother, Dolly Flagg. Who was Jane Franklin's great granddaughter, and the last of her great grandchildren that she held in her arms? She writes about

holding that woman as she's a very old woman. It's maybe an 1860s. And I swear to you, it looks exactly like the Duplessis portrait of Benjamin Franklin.

Jill Lepore

Very same sort of like just the big Franklin eyes. And she's jowly in the same way.

Kim Sajet

Really?

Kim Sajet

The high forehead.

Jill Lepore

Yes, the high forehead. It's exactly the same face.

Kim Sajet

So undoubtedly-

Jill Lepore

It's uncanny. It's completely uncanny.

Kim Sajet

This actually relates to the question of this podcast; do you trust a portrait as historical record? In this case, you feel pretty good that this is in fact, a person related to Ben Franklin and possibly Jane.

Jill Lepore

Yeah, in this case, so I had done a huge amount of genealogical research. So, think about that asymmetry with this towering stack of paper, Franklin's writings and this tiny little set of scraps of his sister's writings. So I thought, I'm trying to remedy that by just making sure I've looked everywhere and turned every stone like I went to the Franklin papers and I said, you guys must have letters from her here that you've never published because why would you? She didn't write them. And I wrote to kind of Franklin collectors and said you did you collect anything that has the name Jane on it anywhere. And of course, women's lives are much more difficult to recover because they lose the family name. And also, in a case, women's stuff, and I'm sure you've seen this as well, tends to be collected if they're attached to famous or wealthy men. And then who they are and if they're the daughters of famous people, you know, and then that family affinity gets quickly erased in the historical record. So I had written to a lot of people, so I was very confident that in fact this Dolly flag was right. And then if you saw it, you'd be like, it's sort of like when you sometimes read fiction and there's a story about the kid who is you know, actually the child of the adulterous affair. No one had ever known it before. And you're like, okay, that never happens, because kids just look exactly like actual parents. So, it was like, this is a Franklin... and a lot of people had said during Jane's lifetime they went to see what a likeness there was.

Kim Sajet

Last question. Do you have a favorite portrait in the Portrait Gallery?

Jill Lepore

Yeah. This is just so predictable, but I made a trip with my youngest son to see the Barack Obama and Michelle Obama portraits.

Kim Sajet

Oh, you did.

Jill Lepore

Last year when he was 12, with a friend of mine and her son who's his best friend. I love that portrait.

[BACKGROUND MUSIC]

Jill Lepore

But it just was a joy to watch these two boys encounter it and then we hung out long enough that school groups were sort of settling in and wandering in when we got there. And watching the watching-

Kim Sajet

Yes!

Jill Lepore

I was just in tears. So, it's just a testament to the power of a portrait.

Kim Sajet

So Jill, thanks so much for talking to us about portraits as history.

Jill Lepore

Thanks so much, Kim. This has been fun and good luck with the podcast!

[MUSIC]

Kim Sajet

Thank you! So that's it for our first episode. You can find Jill's new book "These Truths: A History of the United States" at your local library or wherever books are sold. And you can find links to the portraits we discussed on our website npd.si.edu/podcast. And I hope you don't miss that exhibition that I mentioned to Jill. It's called "Votes for Women a Portrait of Persistence" and it will be showing at the National Portrait Gallery until January the fifth of 2020. Our podcast team includes the fabulous Ruth Morris, the wonderful Justin O'Neill, the talented Deborah Sisum and of course the creative Rebecca Kasemeyer. And a really big thank you to Connie Wang, our engineer at the studios of Harvard University. This podcast is in collaboration with the Smithsonian American Women's History initiative. The project is called: "Because of Her Story". Our theme music is by Jo chi. Until next time, I'm Kim Sajet.