Caricatures enter the stage

Human beings have scribbled on walls and drawn ugly people since long before the Renaissance, but as we have seen, the word *caricature*, like *graffiti*, has Italian origins. This is where our modern concept of caricature originated. Leonardo da Vinci, artist and man of science, was fascinated by human anatomy. He is known for his painting of the beautiful Mona Lisa, a motif that itself has been parodied countless times, but he was equally interested in ugly and grotesque-looking people. No type of human appearance was unfamiliar to da Vinci. It is said that he used to follow people with deformed features on the street in order to study them. This may perhaps sound creepy, but the 15th and 16th centuries offered little other than the examples daily life itself could furnish. Some of da Vinci’s grotesque drawings have survived the past six hundred years, among other things as copies, because his grotesque depictions quickly became popular. In retrospect, however, it is not clear what motivated da Vinci to produce drawings of deformed human beings. Were they pure anatomical studies, or were they exaggerated or humorous in some way? No matter what, they can be seen as a starting point for the broader Western tradition of caricature and satire, not least because they exerted such great influence.

In the 1590s, artist brothers Annibale and Agostino Carracci ran an art school in Bologna, Italy. During their breaks, they would often draw human heads they called *ritrattini carichi*, which can be translated as ‘small, loaded portraits’. As early as the 17th century, Italian art experts defined caricatures as drawings in which some facial features were deliberately altered to create a comic effect. Since certain features are exaggerated, however, a caricature also becomes truer than a more naturalistic portrait. In his essay *The Principles of Caricature* (1938), pioneering art historian E.H. Gombrich points out the extent to which caricature breaks with earlier views on art. Now it was no longer skill alone that determined the artist’s stature, but the ability to extract the most typical and characteristic traits of a human being – identifying a person’s essence, that which makes us most recognizable and sets us apart from others.

Thus, based on pictorial evidence by famous artists, we can assert that caricature as a phenomenon made its breakthrough in the 17th century. But a caricature is not automatically a satirical drawing.

As I mentioned in the introduction, anyone can have a caricature drawn of themselves, but it is not satirical simply because it is ugly or exaggerated, or because it is a perfect rendering, depending on the eye of the beholder. If you have your caricature drawn somewhere in a touristy street, the artist rarely knows anything whatsoever about the person who happens to be sitting in front of them in a rickety deckchair. To call a drawing satirical, something more is needed, it must have a message. The Carracci brothers, like da Vinci, drew ugly people, and presumably many others who are now forgotten, but it does not seem that these artists had any message beyond portraying the peculiarities of grotesque faces. It was intriguing to break with expectations of beauty. It was groundbreaking, and showed that a good artist did not necessarily have to draw pretty motifs to be considered skilful.

But once you have made a less than flattering drawing of a person, the thought of drawing a famous person in a similar way is just a step away. And in highly religious societies, such as Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries, some of the most illustrious and powerful figures were the heads of the church. The most powerful of them all, of course, was the Pope.