



This resource is for use in the classroom and is divided into two parts:

- **Part 1:** gives some suggestions for investigating portraits.
- **Part 2:** describes some supporting classroom activities.

*Boy at Marbles* by John Sell Cotman

## Part 1: Investigating Portraits

### 1. Introducing portraits

Start by getting the children to think about what a portrait is and why people have their portraits painted. Children can begin by looking at themselves first. Imagine that their portrait is going to be painted and they are meeting the artist to discuss what they want. Think about:

- How do I see myself?
- What image of myself do I want to show to others?  
(e. g. 'I want to show people that I am really keen about playing sports' or, on a more abstract level, 'I want people to know that I am kind'.)
- How do I want the artist to paint me?  
(e. g. head only or full-length? What expression on my face? How will I pose? What will I wear? Do I want to be with my family and/or friends, or with some of my possessions?)

### 2. Looking at the painting itself

Exploring through questioning.  
Build up a profile of what kind of person is shown in the portrait.  
Use clues in the portrait to make some guesses. Think about:

- **Pose**  
Look at body language, both the overall stance and also smaller details such as hand position. Ask the children to adopt the pose to see how it alters them and changes the message they give off.
- **Expression**  
Introduce the idea of how we feel emotions on the inside, but can show them on the outside. Look at emotions conveyed, if possible with mirror and masks as well as faces. Children may need a range of words to help them express different emotions.
- **Background**  
What has the sitter chosen to have in his/her portrait besides their own image? Children,



**Mr and Mrs John Custance of Weston, near Norwich, with their daughter Frances,**  
William Beechey

house and grounds, coat of arms, dogs, horses? These need pointing out as they can get ignored by the children as they concentrate on the sitter.

- **Clothes**

Have a careful look at what the sitters are wearing and the materials their clothes are made from. What do these things tell us about the sitter? Try to decode the messages given by clothing, including different types of fabric. Do you think they are rich or poor? Do you think

they would dress like this every day? Is he/she wearing modern clothes, so when do you think he/she was alive? What do they tell us about the kind of job he/she does? What sort of person is this?

- **Accessories/props**

Sometimes people are painted with personal items. These act as message-bearing items about jobs, interests etc. What do they tell us about their personality? Some more symbolic items may need further interpretation – useful to introduce some common symbols such as dog = loyalty, and the idea that one symbol can have multiple meanings, e.g. rose = beauty, love, youth. (Hall's Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art is a useful tool.)

- **Composition of pairs and groups**

Sometimes a portrait has more than one person in it. Look at who is in the centre, the largest, nearest the front, directly looking at the viewer, being looked at by others in the portrait. What sort of group is it? Who is the most important person?

EVERYTHING in the picture tells you something.....

What kind of job does s/he do?

What kind of house does s/he live in?

What kind of hobbies does s/he enjoy?

What kind of person is s/he? (eg, kind, friendly, conceited, rude)

- Use any background information you have on the artist and sitter to help inform the discussion.



**Autumn** by Frederick Sandys

## Part 2: Investigating Landscapes

### Classroom activities

- Use postcards of other portraits and compare them with the portrait which you have been looking at. Children can look at similarities and differences. If portraits have several people in them you can ask children to think about how the people are related. Do they know each other - are they friends, family, strangers? What do they think of each other? What possessions are included in the painting? Do children in the painting look comfortable/playful?

- ‘Construct’ a room setting in which you would like your portrait painted. Children can bring in some of their belongings and arrange them. Then they can pose in the setting. They can draw each other in these settings.

- Children can create their own portrait, using any medium and/or technique - paint, charcoal, collage (eg, use real fabric for clothes).

- Explore whether portraits tell the ‘truth’ about sitters and introduce the concept of flattery. Use other portraits of a sitter, produced in different circumstances, for comparison; or contemporary written descriptions of the sitter (from sources as unbiased as possible – diaries, letters etc.)

- Explore meanings, especially of commonly used symbols in portraits: dog = loyalty; column/pillar = consistency, strength; rose = love, beauty, youth; book = learning, sometimes authorship; pen and ink = writer; intense light on the forehead = active brain



**The Purple Globe**  
**Artichoke Flower** by  
John Randall Bratby

of writer (just as a light-bulb is used in a comic to denote a brainwave); sword = soldier, justice; palm branch = peace; dove = peace, gentleness; ermine = purity, virginity; Roman robes. = statesmanship. (Again Hall's Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art is a useful tool.)

- Explore how emotions are conveyed through appearance and body language. Ask for two volunteers. Whisper an emotion to them (angry, sad, overjoyed, scared) and ask them to make a facial expression to show this – the rest of the class have to guess what it is. Many pupils have a limited usage of words to denote mood. Build up vocabulary of a range of character or mood words that children might find useful in the study of portraits. Nouns: pride, confidence, determination; adjectives: affectionate, strict, anxious, shy, pensive, solemn etc.

- Make your own group pose. Divide class into groups – each group to be given a pre-written card which gives: a) Type of group b) What they are doing together

For example:

- You are a group of friends, at a birthday party, watching the party boy or girl blowing out the candles on the cake.
- You are a five-a-side football team and you have just won the league. You are posing for a press photo with your trophy.

For five minutes each group will need to work on their composition, thinking of pose and expression. Then imagine that someone presses the camera button, and the group FREEZE.

Bring the class back together and get each group to act out their group pose in turn. The rest of the class work out the answers from the pose, facial expression, gestures etc. – just like the painted portraits.

- Look closely at the way clothing and textiles are painted in portraits. How has the artist made the materials look realistic. ( Folds, ruffles and decoration add movement and texture and light reflects from the surface). Look at a range of fabrics, lay or drape them and try to paint them showing folds and movement and light effects. Mix different colours, tones and shades of paint .Try to create different effects by blending wet paints or scumbling using an almost dry brush.

*All pictures featured in this document are in the collections of Norwich Castle Museum.*

**Other Useful websites**

[www.museumnetworkuk.org/portraits](http://www.museumnetworkuk.org/portraits)

[www.portraits.specialistnetwork.org.uk](http://www.portraits.specialistnetwork.org.uk)



***Portrait of Robert and Elizabeth Buxton***  
by Frederick Yeates Hurlstone

For further information about school workshops available at  
Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery please visit

[www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk](http://www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk)

To make a booking please contact our  
school bookings line 01603 493636



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