

KS2 Looking at Portraits: Teachers' pack

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 © Norfolk Museums Service

Part 1: Investigating portraits

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 facial expression? 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?)

Looking at the painting itself

Explore through questions. 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 the following:

- **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 the emotions conveyed, if possible using mirrors 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 their portrait besides their own image? Children, house and grounds, coat of arms, dogs, horses? You may need to point these out if the children are concentrating on the sitter rather than other details.



Autumn by Frederick Sandys © Norfolk Museums Service

- **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 the sitter is rich or poor? Do you think they would dress like this every day? Are they wearing modern clothes? When do you think they were alive? What do clothes tell us about the kind of job the sitter might have? What kind of person are they?
- **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 the sitter's personality? Some more symbolic items may need further interpretation – it may be 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?



Mr and Mrs John Custance of Norwich and their daughter Frances by William Beechey
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Everything in the picture tells you something – you can learn all sorts of things from close attention:

- What kind of job does the sitter do?
- What kind of house do they live in?
- What kind of hobbies do they enjoy?
- What kind of person are they? (e.g. do they appear kind, friendly, conceited, rude?)

Don't forget to use any background information you have on the artist and sitter to help inform the discussion.

Part 2: Supporting 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 playful and comfortable?
- Create 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 (e.g. use real fabric for clothes).
- Explore whether portraits tell the 'truth' about sitters and introduce the concept of flattery. Look at other portraits of a sitter, produced in different circumstances, for comparison. Can you find contemporary written descriptions of the sitter to see if they match the image in the painting? (Consider the bias of the written sources too).
- 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 of a 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 (e.g. 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. Examples of nouns: pride, confidence, determination; adjectives: affectionate, strict, anxious, shy, pensive, solemn etc.
- Make your own group pose. Divide the class into groups, with each group being given a pre-written card which gives the type of group and what they are doing together. For example: a group of friends at a birthday party, watching the birthday child blowing out the candles; a five-a-side football team posing for a press photo after winning the league. 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 freezes. Bring the class back together and get each group to act out their group pose in turn. The rest of the class work out who

each group was, from the poses, facial expressions, gestures etc – just like in the painted portraits!

- Look closely at the way clothing and textiles are painted in portraits. How has the artist made the materials look realistic? For example, 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.



Portrait of Robert and Elizabeth Buxton by Frederick Yeates Hurlstone © Norfolk Museums Service

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