



Talk

Take a look at some twentieth century portraits painted by Picasso.

Pablo Picasso's "Portrait of the Artist's Mother" is proof that the artist was capable of painting a portrait in a classical, realistic style. In the 20th century some artists felt bored with the old way of painting portraits. They craved novelty, a fresh approach – something original, even rebellious. Shape, color and form became more important than painting every single reflection of light on the magnificent fabric of a royal child's robe.

New movements in art appeared. One of them was cubism – a style whose principal and most famous exponent was Picasso.

Read more about cubism: <http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/c/cubism>



Creative expression

Students draw a portrait of a well-known person on the basis of an oral description.

Description of our mystery man:

"Straight as an Indian, measuring six feet two inches in his stockings, and weighing 175 pounds... His frame is padded with well-developed muscles, indicating great strength. His bones and joints are large, as are his hands and feet. He is wide shouldered but has not a deep or round chest; is neat waisted, but is broad across the hips and has rather long legs and arms.

His head is well-shaped, though not large, but is gracefully poised on a superb neck. A large and straight rather than a prominent nose; blue gray penetrating eyes which are widely separated and overhung by a heavy brow. His face is long rather than broad, with high round cheek bones, and terminates in a good firm chin. He has a clear though rather a colorless pale skin which burns with the sun. A pleasing and benevolent though a commanding countenance, dark brown hair which he wears in a cue.

His mouth is large and generally firmly closed, but which from time to time discloses some defective teeth. His features are regular and placid [...] His movements and gestures are graceful, his walk majestic, and he is a splendid horseman."

George Mercer (companion-in-arms and friend of Washington), 1760

(it describes what the president looked like when he was a young man).

[Source: Albert Bushnell Hart, ed., *Tributes to Washington*, Pamphlet No. 3 (Washington, D.C.: George Washington Bicentennial Commission, 1931), 6-7. James Thomas Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man* (New York: Signet, 1984), 37-39]



Presenting results

Compare your portraits of George Washington.

How did portrait artists work in the past?

The situation in the past was very similar to the one students found themselves in when completing the above exercise. There were no films or photos showing George Washington, and every artist who painted him had their own style, unique imagination, and different idea for a portrait. Some of them hadn't even met the president – they just relied on written or oral descriptions, or were inspired by portraits painted by other artists.

You can link this with the way courtroom sketch artists work, which was mentioned in the film at the beginning of the lesson. Sketch artists cannot (or rather aren't allowed to) use a camera either, but they always meet their models in person when observing trials. Even though they don't have much artistic freedom in this line of work and are supposed to depict the situation in a realistic way, they can still show their personal style to a certain degree.



Video/ Slide show

Watch a film featuring an artist who uses modern technology to create portraits. Talk about creating portraits.

Portrait

"In fine art, a portrait can be a sculpture, a painting, a form of photography or any other representation of a person, in which the face is the main theme. Traditional easel-type portraits usually depict the sitter head-and-shoulders, half-length, or full-body. In most cases, the picture is specially composed in order to portray the character and unique attributes of the subject. Like any genre of painting, portrait art reflected the prevailing style of painting. That said, in very simple terms one can detect two basic styles or approaches in portrait-painting: the 'Grand Style' in which the subject is depicted in a more idealized or 'larger-than-life' form; and the realistic, prosaic style in which the subject is represented in a more down to earth, realistic manner."

(Source: Neil Collins MA LLB, Art Encyclopaedia, <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/genres/portrait-art.htm>)



Conclusions

Check if you guessed the occupations of the people in the paintings correctly.

Portraits in the past

In the past people represented in portraits were often shown with accessories and everyday objects associated with their profession – for example, a scholar with a book and a pen, a soldier with a sword or a painter with a brush and a palette. Another thing that can tell us about the role/profession of a person we can see in a painting is their clothing. Some things they are wearing (like a crown, an ornate dress or a uniform) are a clear indication of what they did for a living. However, this is not a universal rule, as not every portrait is so easy to interpret.

Official portraits

In the past, portraits fulfilled an important representative function (and currently still do). The best artists charged quite a substantial amount of money for their work, so only the wealthiest people could afford to commission a portrait.



Analyzing

PBL in Arts: Why do people sit for portraits? The students set off on a tour - hunting for portraits in their local area.

Types of portraits

The students can come across all kinds of portraits in their search.

Variations on the number of people depicted:

- portrait of an individual - the traditional and most common way of understanding the term "portrait": an image of an individual person
- group portrait - shows several people, for example, a family, a king and a group of officials, or a group of friends
- self-portrait - when an artist produces a likeness of themselves, we call it a self-portrait. In European art, its beginnings date back to the middle ages; self-portraiture has flourished since the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries, when the perception of an artist's role changed (from that of a mere craftsman to an artist-celebrity: an acknowledged master and Renaissance era humanist). One of the forms of self-portrait is caricature, especially popular in the twentieth century. Broadly speaking, self-portraits serve two main purposes: self-analysis and self-promotion (hence self-portraits with symbols of the trade: brushes, easels, cameras, etc.).



Jan van Eyck - Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife (1434), source: [flickr](#)

Variations on the subject:

- official portrait - a representation of a monarch/political leader/noble person/celebrity, emphasizing their function and importance. It often includes symbols or objects associated with their role.
- fictitious portrait - a representation of a person/people the artist has never met: for example, an artwork showing a mythical hero or an ancient politician/philosopher (unless produced by his contemporaries).

- historiated portrait – a portrait in which the portrait subject or subjects are depicted as historical or mythological figures; they were especially popular in the XVIIIth century. They often take on some of the moral weight of historical painting.

[Source: <http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/aat/>]

Apart from being found in artworks (from paintings and sculpture to contemporary photography), portraits can also be found **on everyday objects** – decorating buildings, tombstones, jewelry, craft objects, banknotes, posters, cosmetics, food packaging, etc.

Historical portraits

The art of portraiture has evolved over the years, but back in the 16th to 18th centuries it was governed by a set of strict rules:

- By having an official portrait painted, a political leader was, in a way, showing their power and importance; therefore they would not want to be painted with empty hands, which symbolize poverty. Instead, a representation of a king or duke would also include precious items of symbolic importance – a sword, a crown, jewelry, a scepter, maybe a book, plus images of coats of arms, etc.
- Wide smiles were not shown, as showing one's teeth was considered to be bad manners. A subtle smile with a closed mouth (its corners only slightly raised) was allowed, but most officials were portrayed with serious, even sinister, looks on their faces. These portraits avoided showing the model's emotions.
- The importance of clothing was also considerable. Elaborate clothes were made not only for adults, but also for children, although small boys and girls used to be dressed in the same kinds of children's clothes until they reached a certain age. In Europe, little boys used to wear dresses as long as they remained under women's supervision. Royal children would start wearing mini-versions of "adult clothes" as early as the age of 2 or 3, whilst children from less wealthy and prominent families would usually have to wait about 5 more years to wear their first "adult clothes." The moment when a boy was given his first pair of trousers, as a rite of passage, was often a festive occasion.
- In the 18th century, it was quite fashionable to be portrayed as an ancient hero, god or goddess. Men wanted to be painted with the well-sculpted body of Hercules, and women – as beautiful as Aphrodite, the goddess of love (even if in reality they were not exactly beauty queens...).