

# What is a portrait?

## Teacher notes, activities, and discussion points

What is a portrait?

*A portrait is an image of a person.*

We are surrounded by images of people every day- on the television, in photographs, on phones, on book covers and in posters. And so, a better question might be, what makes an image of a person a portrait?

*A portrait is an artwork about a person that shows us who they are.*

A portrait reveals something about the person in the image- beyond what they look like. The artist might use different tools to make sure that the personality, story, or importance of the person in the portrait is communicated to the person looking at the portrait. A portrait goes beyond the surface to consider the person in the image.

The person in the portrait is usually called the 'sitter'. Sometimes, the artist and the sitter build a relationship- by talking to one another, sharing memories or feelings- so that the artist can build a better picture of the sitter is, and can show this in the portrait that they create.

Though we might usually think of a portrait being a painting- formal, in a frame, hanging on a wall- in reality, a portrait can be made of anything. It could be:

- a drawing on paper
- a painting
- a sculpture using any material
- a photo taken on your phone
- an image made using computer graphics

With this range of possibilities, in our image-laden world, it could feel rather daunting to be able to identify which images of people are portraits. Use the following activities / discussion points in order to help pupils gain familiarity with identifying portraiture, and some of the common features shared by portraits.

## **Activities**

1. In groups, give pupils a selection of images depicting people, to explore together. You could use:
  - Images / adverts from magazines
  - Paintings from the Royal Collection
  - A screenshot from Social Media or the television
  - Images of artworks or sculptures

Ask the pupils to consider whether the image reveals anything about the person it depicts. The pupils should begin to build up a list of which images they think are portraits- and which factors help to identify whether an image is a portrait.

The following prompts for discussion might be useful:

- Does a portrait have to be of a real person?
  - Does a portrait have to be of a person?
  - Does it have to be in any particular style?
  - Does an artist have to use any certain materials?
  - Does it have to look like the person?
2. What would the pupils in your class like a portrait of them to look like- and, more importantly, to say about who they are?

This activity could work as a poster-activity, ideas-sharing, or even creating self-portraits. Prompts for thinking about this might include considering things that are important to pupils, which might be:

- Hobbies and interests
  - Family and friends
  - Beliefs and hopes
  - Stories and memories
3. How would the pupils approach creating a portrait of another member of their class? What details would they include? What techniques would they use to tell that person's stories?

You may wish to follow the below timeline for this activity:

- Ask the pupils to get into pairs / partner up the pupils in the class, and explain the purpose of the activity
- Give all pupils a set amount of time (perhaps 10 minutes) to write some questions that they would like to ask their sitter, with the aim of finding out what is important to them- their values, their story, or their hopes

- Taking it in turns to be the artist and the sitter, the artist should ask the sitter their questions, and then swap. The pupils can take notes, and can use questions that they have not written down.
- Pupils then have a set time (20-30 minutes) to write about how they would approach the portrait of their partner- what details they would include and what materials they would use. They can sketch their ideas too if they like.
- Pupils can either present their portrait plan back to their partner or, depending on time, back to the entire class.

