

# PORTRAITURE INTRODUCTION

## WHAT IS A PORTRAIT AND HOW TO READ ONE

This teacher's resource explores some of the forms and functions of portraiture and considers key related themes through some exemplar portraits from the Wallace Collection, London. The resource is intended to support teaching both independently in the classroom or before or after a museum visit. It provides creative and critical ways of thinking about and engaging with portraiture, helping your class to raise key questions and make meaningful connections to the world around them. Further lines of enquiry are provided to support links across the curriculum.

The portraits on display at the Wallace Collection do not represent a complete survey of the genre of portraiture, but rather reflect the tastes and personal interests of the collectors themselves. They collected works by some of the most famous society portrait artists of their time (the 18th century): Joshua Reynolds, George Romney and Thomas Gainsborough. These include portraits of themselves, their families, and their social circle, including significant individuals in high society at that time.

The Collection also includes portraiture by Old Masters including Rembrandt, Titian, Velázquez and Van Dyck, alongside other curious examples which raise unanswered questions that art historians and conservators are still studying today.

The majority of the portraiture in the Wallace Collection is from the 17th-19th century. A few interesting links to explore further portraiture from antiquity, to contemporary work in other Collections have been suggested. The Wallace Collection is available for you to visit in person and explore further through the website [www.wallacecollection.org](http://www.wallacecollection.org).

### WORKS FROM THE COLLECTION



Studio of Agnolo  
Bronzino, *Eleonora di  
Toledo*, c. 1562-1572



Jean de Court,  
*Marguerite de France as  
Minerva*, 1555



Thomas Lawrence,  
*Margaret, Countess of  
Blessington*, 1822



Guillaume Dupré,  
*Henri IV, King of France,  
and Marie de Médicis,  
with the Dauphin*, 1603



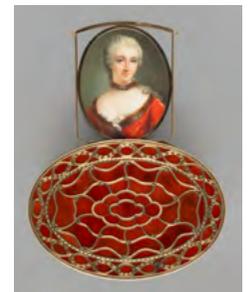
Attributed to Roger  
Schabol, *Louis XIV on  
horseback*,  
c. 1700-1705



Jean II Limosin, *Portrait of  
Louis XIII, King of France  
and Navarre*, c. 1627-1630



Michael Sweerts, *Por-  
trait of a Man, possibly  
Jean Deutz, with a Red  
Cloak*, c. 1650



Snuff box, c. 1775

# WHAT IS A PORTRAIT?

## PORTRAITURE

*'a representation or delineation of a person, especially of the face, made from life, by drawing, painting, photography, engraving, etc.; a likeness'*

Oxford English Dictionary

A portrait is a visual representation of a person. In most cases an artist has been specifically commissioned to create the portrait, from life, of a specific individual.

Before the invention of photography in the 1830s, if you wanted to document the likeness of a person, the only way to do so was in a painted, drawn, engraved or sculpted portrait. Portraiture has a long history of being employed for various functions at key moments in time. It is known to have existed 5000 years ago, when it was used in the times of the Ancient Egyptians for purposes of power and religion.

The advent of smartphones in our present day, and the ubiquitous use of apps like Instagram and Snapchat, has meant that portraiture has come to shape not only how we see ourselves, but how we communicate in our daily lives

and understand those around us.

Portraits are complex artworks and when we explore their meaning it is important to consider the artwork from a number of angles. We need to consider both the image and identity of the subject in a portrait, the process of commissioning and making, and the function and impact of the object. Below are some broad lines of enquiry, concepts and ideas that you might like to consider when working with portraits from the Wallace Collection or elsewhere.

# ELEONORA DI TOLEDO



**TITLE** Eleonora di Toledo  
**DATE** c. 1562-1572  
**SIZE** 77.8 x 58.7 cm  
**MATERIALS** Oil on poplar panel

**ARTIST** Studio of Agnolo Bronzino  
**DATES** 1503-1572  
**PLACE** Italy

## LIKENESS AND THE UNSEEN

*Does the image look like the subject?  
How is their identity and character shown?*

Portraiture's key function is mimetic, to create a likeness of the physical features, face and body of a specific individual. Whilst documenting the outer body, the artistic challenge of a portrait can also be to capture that which we cannot see from a physical likeness – the subject's social status, their virtues, their personality, and their inner world.

Portraits are complex, aiming to illustrate multiple facets about the subject at once. They represent the physical likeness of an individual person whilst simultaneously showing their broader identity, how they fit within their wider common social context and, conversely, highlighting what is unique about the individual, their character, and their hopes and aspirations.

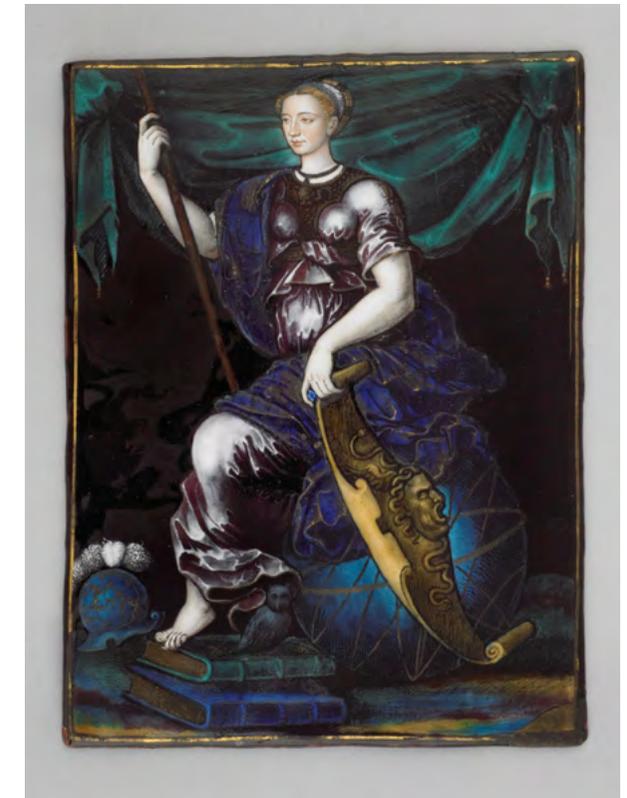
## ARTIST, SUBJECT AND PATRON

*Who made the portrait?  
Who is the subject?  
Who paid for it?*

Portraiture is special within the genres of art as it involves a direct and dynamic relationship between the commissioned artist and their subject, whom the artist usually depicts from life.

A series of 'sittings' would usually take place with the artist, a creative process which involves a series of negotiations between artist and subject (the sitter) that affect the final outcome of the finished artwork.

These conversations may also be shaped by the views of the commissioning patron, who may not appear in the artwork. A further consideration for the artist is how they themselves can use the artwork to showcase and experiment with their own talent and creativity, whilst fulfilling the demands of their brief.



**TITLE** Marguerite de France as Minerva  
**DATE** 1555  
**SIZE** 20.9 x 15.9 cm  
**MATERIALS** Foil, gold and copper, enamelled and gilded, with enlavage

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**ARTIST** Jean de Court  
**DATES** Died before 1583  
**PLACE** France



## FORM, FUNCTION AND PRESENCE

*How was it made?*

*What is its purpose?*

*How does it impact society?*

Portraits have a wide variety of forms: paintings, drawings, engravings, medals, photographs and sculptures. Portraits are found across the private and public sphere: in art galleries and public institutions, in public spaces as murals, monuments and statues, in private homes, on our mantelpieces and hidden in jewelry such as rings and locket. The modern world is flooded with images and we encounter portraits across our daily lives on stamps, in newspapers, magazines and advertising, and on coins and banknotes.

The intended functions of these objects are as varied as their forms. Across the centuries portraits have exerted an agency in the world that is more than mere visual illustrations of their subjects. They have created and exerted the power and propaganda of many powerful people, from Roman emperors, monarchs and religious leaders to the modern face of our political parties – even sometimes to the extent that, in some contexts, a portrait was used to ‘stand in’ for the absent powerful person.

Portraits have secured people’s place in the afterlife, decorating religious chapels to solicit

prayers for those depicted. These images have made and destroyed romances. From official royal betrothal portraits, to miniatures exchanged as gifts in illicit affairs, they continue to shape people’s love lives and are central to matchmaking on dating apps today.

Portraits are used to document the low and high points of society, commemorating war and celebrating heroes and heroines. These images construct ideas of national identity, today acting as a catalyst for debate, shaping how we both understand and make our collective histories.

Portraits are also used as a form of control in society, from mediating privacy and access through facial recognition software on our phones, to sophisticated surveillance imagery used by authorities, the military, and across our cities with CCTV.

This myriad of forms and functions are all united by the object’s ability to create a presence when the person depicted is absent in time and space. In this way portraits are inherently linked with memory and posterity. The image ‘stands in’ for the sitter. The portrait has an impact on the viewer, not only within their own lifetime and context, but across cultures and time.

**TITLE** Henri IV, King of France,  
and Marie de Médicis, with the Dauphin  
**DATE** 1603  
**SIZE** diameter 6.6 cm  
**MATERIALS** Gold and Bronze

**ARTIST** Guillaume Dupré  
**DATES** c. 1579-1640  
**PLACE** France

# SNUFF BOX



**TITLE** Snuff box  
**DATE** c. 1775  
**SIZE** 3.5 x 8.3 x 5.8 cm  
**MATERIALS** Gold, cornelian, ivory, gouache

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**ARTIST** Probably Johann Christian  
Neuber, Goldsmith

**DATES** 1736-1808

**PLACE** Germany

# LOUIS XIV ON HORSEBACK



**TITLE** Louis XIV on horseback  
**DATE** c. 1700-1705  
**SIZE** 43.5 x 37.5 cm  
**MATERIALS** Patinated-bronze and gilt bronze

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**ARTIST** Attributed to Roger Schabol  
**DATES** 1656-1727  
**PLACE** France

## THE VIEWER

*Who was the image intended for?  
How do we see the image today?*

When exploring the function of a portrait we should consider who would have been able to view the artwork. Whilst the public today have access to a myriad of images and artworks, be that digitally or by visiting galleries and museums in person, in the past, access to images was much reduced. Whilst some artworks would have been available and widely viewed by the general public (statues of Roman emperors, portraits displayed in churches, and works circulated in print, for example), other portraits would have had a limited audience, which might consist exclusively of privileged elites, royal courts, aristocracy and the wealthy.

Over time portraits may have been repurposed, reappraised and viewed in a different manner to their original context. For example, the impact and function of a statue of a Roman emperor on the viewer would have been quite different in its own time, compared to the modern viewer observing it removed from its original cultural context, in a public museum. Likewise, sculpture of King Louis XIV of France would have been perceived differently before, during, and many years, after the French Revolution.

## HUMAN EXPERIENCE

*How do we create meaning from portraits?  
How do they make us feel and act?*

We derive meaning and are able to communicate with each other by inferring vital information from the faces of the people we interact with. The act of looking at a portrait mirrors how we engage with the world around us. The viewer reads the artistic representation of the face in a portrait the same way they would a face in real life, assessing the features, body and clothes of a person in order to construct their own view about that person. As such, portraits are linked to our human experience, provoking an emotional and psychological response.

Portraits play an active part in helping us shape and process the world around us, acting as sources of comfort in times of grief, or objects of desire and longing when we are in love. They can also become the focus of anger, or resilience and strength in times of protest. Portraits can be subject to the emotions they provoke resulting in images being revered, censored, or even attacked, something that has taken place throughout the centuries across different cultures.



**TITLE** Margaret, Countess of Blessington  
**DATE** 1822  
**SIZE** 91.5 x 67 cm  
**MATERIALS** Oil on canvas

**ARTIST** Thomas Lawrence  
**DATES** 1769-1830  
**PLACE** England

# PORTRAIT OF LOUIS XIII



**TITLE** Portrait of Louis XIII,  
King of France and Navarre  
**DATE** c. 1627-1630  
**SIZE** 8.8 x 7.2 cm  
**MATERIALS** Foil, gold and copper,  
enamelled and gilded, with  
enlavage

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**ARTIST** Jean II Limosin  
**PLACE** France

## AUTHENTICITY

*Is it a successful portrait?*

Likeness and what might be considered an 'authentic' representation of the sitter is a fluid concept that changes over time, depending on the purpose of the portrait, the societal expectations, and conventions of a particular time and place. A 'successful' portrait may not simply be one that is deemed the truest and most faithful depiction to life. Portraits might aim to flatter or idealise the sitter. They may aim to highlight a particular aspect of the sitter's personality, embodying qualities that are deemed appropriate to the image's type and function. For example, Egyptian royal statues were believed to act as intermediaries between people and the gods and presented an idealised and stylised version of the individual, which would be opposed to our modern view of 'authentic likeness'.

Today, many images are manipulated to achieve or create a 'successful' effect – wrinkles may be removed, filters used to smooth skin tone. The question of authenticity raises ideas about our image and identity, and what is deemed pleasing or successful.

## HISTORICAL RECORD

*What does it tell us about the past?*

Portraits act as historical sources, documenting fashions and aspirations of the sitter from the past. Historical portraits provide insight into the function of portraits within the time they were made. They also help us to look back: to analyse and investigate the social conventions, artistic trends, styles and technical developments of our past.

## STATUS

*Portraiture: an artform of the highest order?*

When genres of paintings were codified in the 17th century by the French Royal Academy, portraiture was given second place. The hierarchy was in descending order of importance: history, portrait, genre (scenes from everyday life), landscape, and still life. It was believed that an artist could communicate a moral message much more clearly through a history picture, a portrait or a genre painting, than a landscape or still life. In addition, following the traditions of classical antiquity, it was believed that the highest form of art was the pictorial representation of the human form.

# PORTRAIT OF A MAN WITH A RED CLOAK



**TITLE** Portrait of a Man, possibly  
Jean Deutz, with a Red Cloak  
**DATE** c. 1650  
**SIZE** 31.1 x 23.6 cm  
**MATERIALS** Oil on copper

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**ARTIST** Michael Sweerts  
**DATES** 1618–1664  
**PLACE** France

To read a portrait we need to explore the following questions:

- What does the image tell us about the identity and/or biography of the sitter?
- What creative choices has the artist made to convey the character, life and context of the sitter?
- What was the intended purpose of the image? How would it have been viewed/used?
- What might this tell us about the power, status, beauty, virtue, taste, wealth or learning of the individual portrayed?
- How might the image have impacted the viewer in its time?
- Is the portrait 'successful'? Was the intended impact achieved in its day? How might this have changed over time?

## LEARNING TO LOOK

In order to answer the questions on the left we need to learn to read the creative choices made and visual symbols the artist has included, remembering that each component of the image would have been a conscious decision. The first step when reading a portrait is to take time to really look at the image.

### **Allow time to simply look at the portrait**

Let your eyes scan the image from top to bottom and side to side. Notice the most obvious thing that you first see. Look for small details that other people might miss.

What has the artist chosen to draw your attention to first? Why might they have done this? Note down and share any other initial questions and thoughts that are raised.

### **Look again**

Take a further few minutes to look again and consider the series of questions on the next page about the individual components of the image.

Encourage open, flexible and collaborative thinking. Return with each answer to these three overarching questions:

Why might the artist have made this decision?

What might this say about the sitter?

What impact would this have on the viewer?

# HOW TO READ A PORTRAIT

- What is the scale? Small and intimate or large and grand? What might this tell you about the person portrayed and/or the use and purpose of the image?
- What is the pose/stance of the sitter?
- How are they positioned within the image?
- Are they alone? What relationship might they have to other people in the image? How can you tell?
- What is in the background, middleground and foreground? Is it a real or imagined setting?
- Where are they looking?
- What does their gaze/facial expression tell you?
- Are there any symbols or key objects in the portrait? What might they mean?
- Notice the colour and lighting. What might the artist be drawing our attention to?
- What mood or atmosphere is being conveyed?
- What is the tone/line/form in the image? What does this add to the portrait?
- What more can we find out about the image?

**TO NE/LINE/FORM**

**OBVIOUS/DETAILS**

**POSE/STANCE**

**ALONE /OTHER PEOPLE**

**MOOD/ATMOSPHERE**



**GAZE/FACIAL EXPRESSION**

**SYMBOLS/OBJECTS**

**COLOUR/LIGHTING**

**BACKGROUND/FOREGROUND**

## MAKING CONNECTIONS

Having explored the components of the image through the initial questioning above, it is then important to make connections to its wider context and think about how the portrait would have functioned and been perceived. Encourage open ended thinking and make sure students back up their ideas with evidence from the portraits.

- What does the overall image say about the sitter?
- Is it authentic? Realistic? Stylised? Idealised?
- What has the artist chosen to tell us? What might they have chosen to omit?
- Does it have one single meaning or more? How has the artist created the meaning?
- What questions does it raise? Are the answers to be found in the image or not?
- Who might be the intended viewer of the image? Where and how would the image have been seen?
- Would everyone who views the portrait have the same ideas about the person portrayed?
- How do we view the image today? What has changed over time?

## LINES OF ENQUIRY

Broader lines of enquiry relating to the genre of portraiture can be explored with your class. Use enquiry questions to open discussions, or plenaries to reflect. They can inform teachers' planning, a gallery visit, or independent classwork. Once a specific portrait has been explored in depth, your class can identify their own enquiry questions relating to the content of a specific image.

- Can a portrait be more authentic than a self-portrait of the same sitter? How?
- Do we have a 'true' identity that is possible to be captured visually?
- Can we genuinely be moved by portraits of people we haven't met? How?
- What is the relationship between image and identity? How does one impact the other?
- Who creates the meaning of a portrait?
- How would you decide which is most important? Artist, patron, sitter or viewer?
- How might the experience of looking at the same portrait be different for each viewer?
- Is a portrait more successful at shaping power, celebrity, love or self image? Why?

- How can a single portrait capture a person's national, individual, community and global identity?
- How is it possible for people from different centuries, or cultures to have a shared experience of an artwork?
- Is portraiture the best way to share your inner world? Which other artforms might be more successful at this?
- Does the portrait exist in the imagery, or in our memory?
- Who controls your identity after you die?

## STRATEGIES FOR LOOKING

Here are a few short starter activities that can be used to support close looking at a portrait with your class:

- Cover the image and unveil small, interesting sections of the image one at a time to promote discussion.
- Look at the image together for 30 seconds then look away. Question the class on what they saw. Then return to the image for a further 30 seconds.
- Ask the class to sit back to back in pairs, positioned so that only one person is able to see the image. One person describes the image to their partner, who in turn draws an image based on the description.
- Conduct a sensory exploration of the image. What might we be able to see, hear, feel, smell or touch in the image?
- What might the artist/sitter/patron be thinking and feeling?
- Strike a pose: encourage your class to recreate the pose of the sitter. Discuss how it feels to be positioned that way. If we unpause the image, what might happen next? What would the sitter say or do? How might a different pose change the way we think of the sitter?
- Write down quick questions that you would like to ask the sitter, artist or patron.
- Compare two different portraits of the same person. What do the similarities and differences tell us about the sitter?

## KEY WORDS

### **Portraiture**

The field of portrait making and portraits in general.

### **Portrait**

A work of art that represents a specific person, or a group of people. Portraits can be made of any sculptural material or in any two-dimensional medium.

### **Self-Portrait**

A portrait an artist makes using himself or herself as its subject, typically drawn or painted from a reflection in a mirror.

### **Commission**

To request and fund the creation of a portrait.

### **Patron**

A person who pays for or commissions works of art.

### **Sitter/Subject**

A person who sits for a portrait or a bust.

### **Figure**

Bodily shape or form especially of a person.

### **Depict**

To represent people by drawing or painting them, or by making sculptures of them.

### **Engraving**

A print made from an engraved plate, block, or other surface.

### **Scale**

The size of an artwork relative to the object or person it depicts.

### **Expression**

An attitude conveyed by the set of a person's facial features. Also, a quality of inner experience, the emotions of the artist (expressive qualities) communicated through the artwork.

### **Caricature**

The art of making a drawing of someone that usually makes them look silly by making part of their appearance or character more noticeable than it really is.

### **Background**

The part of a picture or scene that appears to be farthest away from the viewer, usually nearest the horizon.

### **Middleground**

The part of an artwork that lies between the foreground (nearest to the viewer) and the background.

### **Foreground**

The area of a picture or field of vision, often at the bottom, that appears to be closest to the viewer.

### **Profile**

The side view of a person.

### **Full-length**

The entire body of the subject is portrayed.

### **Full-face or frontal**

The head-on view of a person or object.

### **Three quarters**

The head or figure posed about halfway between front and profile views.

### **Standing**

The subject is standing, as opposed to sitting or lying.

### **Seated**

The person is sitting on a chair or a similar object.

### **Silhouette**

The dark shape and outline of someone or something visible in restricted light against a brighter background.