



## HOW TO READ A PORTRAIT



Grades 9–12

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### I. Introduction

Portraits are often more than likenesses of people. At their best they are filled with clues about historical and cultural context, about the artist's interests and abilities, and about the person(s) in the portrait.

### II. Objective

- ◆ Students will learn a system of critical analysis for describing, interpreting, and evaluating portraits which focuses their attention and yields information about the artwork.

### III. Standards Assessed

#### Visual Arts Standards

California Department of Education, adopted January 2001

According to the California Visual Arts Standards, students in art classes should learn a variety of arts disciplines. Obviously students should be involved in making art, but they should also be taught about the history of the art, its cultural context, and about criticism and aesthetics. Not all of this can be done at once, and teachers should remember that for themselves and the students' art education is a cumulative process. This lesson on portraiture addresses several of the visual arts standards for grades nine through twelve; they are as follows:

#### **Standard 1.0**

*Artistic Perception:* Students will “develop perceptual skills and visual arts vocabulary.”

**Standard 3.0**

*Historical and Cultural Context:* Students will “understand the visual arts in relation to history and culture.”

**Standard 4.0**

*Aesthetic Valuing:* Students will “analyze” and “make informed judgments” about art.

**Standard 5.0**

*Connections, Relations, Applications:* Students will “apply what they learned in visual arts across subject areas.”

**IV. Materials Needed**

In order for students to discuss portraits at school, they need to see the artworks. A few of the most famous portraits are on the Huntington web site, e.g.: The Blue Boy and Pinkie (<http://www.huntington.org/ArtDiv/HuntingGall.html>). Some post-card size and larger reproductions of these and other portraits can be purchased at the Huntington Bookstore. Slides made from reproductions are very useful. If the teacher concentrates on the Huntington Gallery, the ideal book from which to make slides, transparencies, or color copies is *British Paintings at the Huntington* (available in the book shop).

**V. Lesson Activities**The Docent Tour

When the students visit the Huntington Galleries, trained docents will lead them on their tour. The purpose is not to present information to the students but rather to jointly gather information and interpret it together. Students will be asked about what they see, to interpret, and to make judgments about the artworks. The discussion method outlined below will help students develop the skills necessary to analyze and talk about art.

Teacher-led Group Discussions

A critical approach to reading a portrait consists of three steps: 1) Gathering information, 2) Interpreting the information, and 3) Evaluating the artwork.



Jonathan Buttall: *The Blue Boy*  
(1770)  
Thomas Gainsborough  
(Huntington Gallery)



Sarah Barrett Moulton: *Pinkie*  
(1794)  
Thomas Lawrence  
(Huntington Gallery)

### Gathering Information

Many pairs of eyes are better than one. Ask students to look at a portrait and tell one thing they see but don't repeat what any other student has said. The students will come up with lots of information. Remember: the point is to gather data, not to give it meaning—that comes later. When students run out of things to say, there still may be important things left unmentioned. In such a case, the teacher needs a list of questions to trigger student responses. Depending upon the portrait, here are some possibilities:

1. What is the person wearing?
2. What can you say about the pose: casual, playful, formal?
3. Are there signs of an occupation or avocation?
4. What are the physical dimensions of the canvas?
5. Is the sitter pushed up against the picture plane or further back into the picture space?
6. Is the sitter facing forward (frontal), three quarter, or profile?
7. What beside the portrait is in the picture: animals, weapons, tools?
8. Is the portrait a full-body portrait, half body, or just the face?
9. Is it an individual portrait, a couple, or a group such as a family?
10. And any other questions you think necessary.

Interpreting Information

Now that the students have gathered lots of information, it's time to ask what it all means. There will be differences of opinion, and that should be encouraged as long as the opinion can be justified by information in the painting. Examples follow:

1. If a person is wearing very beautiful clothing, it might be a person showing off his/her expensive dress; it might indicate class or status; or it may indicate a painter's ability to paint fabric. There are various good responses. Examples from the Huntington collection:

- Thomas Gainsborough—Jonathan Buttall: The Blue Boy (Huntington Gallery)
- Sir Anthony Van Dyck: Anne (Killigrew) Kirke (Huntington Gallery)

2. If a portrait is very large, it may mean that the person is important or wealthy. Various answers are acceptable. Examples from the Huntington collection:

- Sir Joshua Reynolds—Diane (Sackville), Viscountess Crosbie (Huntington Gallery)

3. If a portrait contains older people, middle age, young adults, and children, it is probably a family portrait, and may indicate pride of place and success. Encourage various answers.

4. If a portrait is mainly of the face, it may be an attempt to capture the sitter's personality, their happiness, thoughtfulness, seriousness, playfulness, innocence, etc. Examples from the Huntington collection:

- George Romney—Emma Hart, later Lady Hamilton, in a Straw Hat (Huntington Gallery)

5. If a portrait contains animals, it may mean that the sitter is proud of his livestock, racing horse, or pedigree dog. It may indicate compassion or nurturing or be a symbol of fidelity. Examples from the Huntington collection:

Allan Ramsay—Girl with a Parrot  
(Huntington Gallery)

Evaluation: Is it a good painting?

This is generally a difficult task for teachers and students. Important works of art, especially those in a museum tend to intimidate the viewer. How should a work be judged? Start by using some traditional criteria for judging art. Ask the following questions:

1. Is the portrait realistic? Realism is still a very good test of an artist's ability. If the student thinks realism is important, then the work can be judged accordingly. The less the painter flatters or exaggerates, the more realistic.

- Example from the Huntington collection: Compare John Singer Sargent's Portrait of Pauline Astor (Scott Gallery) with Thomas Eakins' David Wilson Jordan (Scott Gallery).
2. Does the portrait teach a lesson? Some people think that art should be didactic. If a work teaches a lesson, is it a moral lesson, an economic lesson, just what is the lesson? Is the artwork successful in teaching the lesson?
    - Example from the Huntington collection: Francis Hayman: The Industrious Farmer. Note: If any of the engravings in Hogarth's series *The Harlot's Progress* or *The Rakes Progress* are on display, they are excellent examples of didactic art.
  3. Are the formal properties of the portrait satisfying? Form and formal properties are very important aspects of art. To make students aware of formal properties, ask the following questions:
    - Is there a balance between near and far? Is one side of the canvas given more weight than the other, and if so what acts as a counterweight?  
Example: Thomas Gainsborough, *Penelope (Pitt), Viscountess Ligonier* (Huntington Gallery)
    - Is the figure comfortably placed within the dimensions of the canvas?  
Example: Thomas Eakins, *Riter Fitzgerald*, (Scott Gallery)
    - Are there satisfying lines of force, such as a figure standing and a dog lying down, an arm pointing, or diagonals that direct the eye? These lines give balance as well as variety to the picture.  
Example: John Singleton Copley, *The Western Brothers*, (Scott Gallery)
  4. Does the portrait communicate a feeling or an emotion? If the student believes that art should engage one's feelings, then the success or lack of it can be used to judge art. For example does the artist successfully express the happiness of the child, the fatigue of the worker, the gentleness of the loving father, the anger of the abused wife, etc?  
Example: Richard Cosway, *Margaret Cocks*, later *Margaret Smith* (Huntington Gallery)  
There are many other criteria for judging, such as creativity, craftsmanship, color combinations, and many more. Students may use their own criteria, but an important part of the lesson is that they explain their criteria and evaluate accordingly—not an easy task.  
Also remember that the best artworks satisfy more than one criterion. An excellent portrait may be formally satisfying, contain a lesson, be realistic, and communicates a feeling, as well as be highly creative and skillfully done.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

*Student Assignment: Gathering Information about a Portrait*

**Directions**

Select one portrait that you especially like. Take notes using the following outline:

Name of the portrait: \_\_\_\_\_

Artist's name \_\_\_\_\_

Year it was painted: \_\_\_\_\_

Make a list of all the things you see. Don't interpret them; just list them. For example:

1. What is the person wearing?
2. What can you say about the pose: casual, playful, formal?
3. Are there signs of an occupation or avocation?
4. What are the physical dimensions of the canvas?
5. Is the sitter pushed up against the picture plane or further back into the picture space?
6. Is the sitter facing forward (frontal), three quarter, or profile?
7. What beside the portrait is in the picture: animals, weapons, tools?
8. Is the portrait a full-body portrait, half body, or just the face?
9. Is it an individual portrait, a couple, or a group such as a family?
10. Other things you see:

Interpreting the Portrait:

Now that you have gathered the above information, what meanings can you find in the painting? Think about (but don't be limited to) the following questions:

1. What does the person's clothing indicate?
2. If it is a very large portrait, what does that indicate?
3. If there are things other than the sitter included in the painting, what do they indicate?
4. If there is an animal included, what can it symbolize?
5. By looking at the face or the pose, what can you tell about the personality of the sitter?
6. From what you see in the painting are there other meanings?

Evaluation:

Is the portrait a good work of art? Let the following questions act as a guide, but don't be limited by them.

1. Do you think a portrait should look "real?" If so, does the portrait you are looking at look realistic? For example, does the fabric look real? Does it hang naturally? Do you sense the weight of the body? Are the proportions of the body those that seem natural to you? What are the other realistic qualities?
2. Do you think art should tell a story? If so, does the portrait you are looking at tell a story? Does it suggest a lesson you should learn? If so, what is it?
3. Do you think an artist should communicate a feeling he/she has? If so, how does the portrait make you feel about the subject?
4. Are you satisfied with the formal qualities, such as balance, stability, and variety? What are the formal qualities that impress you?
5. What are the other aspects of this painting that are especially well done?

Writing Assignment**Directions:**

Assume that you are writing an article for publication in a newspaper. You have been to the Huntington Museum and you are submitting an article on one of the portraits you have seen. You have collected notes on it, which you can use as your source material. Write a critique in which you describe the painting, interpret it, and evaluate it. All of this should be in prose with proper transitions, punctuation, and correct spelling. Your paper can follow the same outline which you used to take notes.