

What is a Portrait?

We can find portraits in most stately homes, museums and art galleries, as well as in our own homes. Portraits can be paintings, drawings, sculptures or photographs which record our changing identity and aspirations. In earlier times, many people would have had only one portrait painted in their lifetime, if at all, so artists were selected with great care and expectations were high.



Portrait of a Man, by William Ramsden Brealey

Portraits are artistic representations of people. They can be created in any media, from traditional oil paintings, to photographs, sculpture and even mixed media. Portraits can show part figures, usually showing the sitter's head and shoulders, but they can also depict the whole figure. They can also illustrate more than one person, in a group portrait.

When making a portrait the artist aims to show the sitter's appearance as well as some elements of their character. Portraits often relate to a message, which the artist or person who commissioned the work wished to relay, such as the beauty of a daughter being wooed by a king, or the wealth and power of a monarch.

Drawing a Face

There are some basic rules you can follow to help you draw faces. Follow these simple steps to draw the front view of a face (the measurements can be easily adjusted to create your individual portrait or to draw an angled face).

- 1 There are many different facial shapes, but the basic shape is an oval. You can adjust the oval to make it more square, round or heart-shaped according to your sitter (the person that you are drawing). Start by drawing this shape.
- 2 Divide the face into two vertical halves, this will help you position the nose and the other features.
- 3 Then divide the oval into two horizontal halves, this creates the eye line.
- 4 Draw another horizontal line halfway between the eye line and the bottom of the chin, this is where the bottom of the nose will be and shows you where to position the ears.
- 5 If you draw another line in the centre of the bottom quarter, the mouth will sit a little above this line.

Finer Details

- 1 To position the eyes, divide the width of the face, along the eye line, into five. There is usually one eye width between the eyes.
- 2 The base of the nose is often as wide as the space between the inside corners of the eyes.
- 3 If the sitter is not showing any particular expression, the corners of their mouth will line up with their pupils.
- 4 Ears sit from the eye line to the bottom of the nose, so make sure they are big enough!

Reading Portraits

There is no right or wrong way to 'read' a portrait, but they often contain many clues that can reveal information about the sitter's life and achievements. To illustrate this, let us examine *Self Portrait* by William Ramsden Brealey.



Self Portrait with a Side View by William Ramsden Brealey

Colour: His shiny pink cheeks contrast with the green background, which makes him seem full of life. The use of green and yellow tones in the face help to give a three dimensional effect.

Pose: Brealey is seen from the side, so he is obviously looking at something. Consider what this might be.

Facial Expression: His eyes are alert and his mouth is slightly open, suggesting that he

is concentrating on the subject he is painting.

Costume: He is dressed quite smartly for an artist, you could start a discussion as to why this might be.

Props: The palette and paintings provide information about his profession.

Background: When compared to other portraits there are few background details, this helps the viewer to focus on the central figure.

Composition: Brealey chose to paint just his upper body, focusing our attention on his face.

Social Context: When 'reading' a work we bring our own expectations, for example that artists will be dressed in paint splattered clothes. But when delving deeper into the meaning of portraits it is useful to discover the social and historical context of the time to fully understand the depiction.

The Misses Vickers by John Singer Sargent (1856-1925)

Sargent was raised in Italy by his American parents. His talent for drawing took him to Paris where he spent ten years painting the French gentry. When his famous painting Madame X was badly received, Sargent moved to London.

He became a portraitist to the rich and famous in both Britain and America. He enjoyed this status for over twenty years before shocking his audience by announcing that his

remaining years would be devoted to landscape and mural studies.



Portrait of Three Young Women, by John Singer Sargent.

This group portrait was painted to mark the twenty-first birthday of Mabel Frances Vickers (centre). She is shown with her sisters Florence, aged 18, on the left and Clara, aged 19, on the right.

The portrait was unusual for the time, showing the sitters in informal poses and subdued lighting. When Sargent showed the painting at the Paris Salon in May of 1885 the critics snubbed it. The following year in London at Royal Academy's exhibition it was voted the worst picture of the year by a visitors' poll.

The contrasting expressions and poses of the three sisters give the painting an atmosphere of tension. This is amplified by Sargent's use of perspective, which projects the figures forward out of the dimly lit room they occupy. This portrait was painted at the Vickers' family home in Bolsover Hill, Sheffield.

The Misses Vickers was painted in 1884 and is a very large scale work, being 138 by 183 cm. It is painted in oil on canvas.

The Monk by Count Tamburini (1885-1936)

Count Tamburini was born of noble birth in Florence, Italy in 1885. At the age of fifteen he won a national art contest and Victor Emmanuel III, King of Italy, commissioned him to paint his portrait. The young artist was following in his father's footsteps as court painter to the Italian throne.



Portrait of a Monk by Count Tamburini

He became an artist of international acclaim and in 1901 set out for Canada to paint the Prime Minister, Sir Wilfred Laurier. The following year he traveled to America to paint the Archbishop of New York.

These journeys started a lifetime of travel, painting some of world's most illustrious people of the time, including Queen Marie of Romania and Czar Nicholas II and his family.

Tamburini married miniature painter Dolores Dolja Dunifer in 1914 and the young couple settled in New York, although they continued to travel extensively. Tamburini himself died from an accidental death in 1936.

As well as portraits, Tamburini painted allegorical compositions and landscapes.

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Portrait of J G Graves by David Jagger (1891-1958)

