

Problems of Identity in Portraiture:

Once the identity of a portrait is lost - particularly one painted over four hundred years ago - it is very difficult to rediscover. The process of rediscovery often relies upon the existence of other identified portraits, or documentary evidence.

One of the ways in which portraits can be identified is by matching the likeness of a sitter with authenticated portraits. However, it is important to remember that a portrait is a single artist's impression of a particular person at a particular time and the resulting likeness relies upon both the skill of the artist and the patron's instructions on how they wish to be represented. It is also important to establish whether a portrait has undergone any restoration work since it was created, as this can mask the true appearance of the original sitter.

Other types of research that can help to identify portraits involve researching the provenance of the pictures and seeking documentary evidence such as inventories which can tell us about the whereabouts of paintings in the past. However, it can be particularly difficult to link paintings mentioned in documents with certainty to surviving examples.

How to Research portraits

These are some of the factors to consider in attempting to find out more about historic portraits:

Biography of known sitters

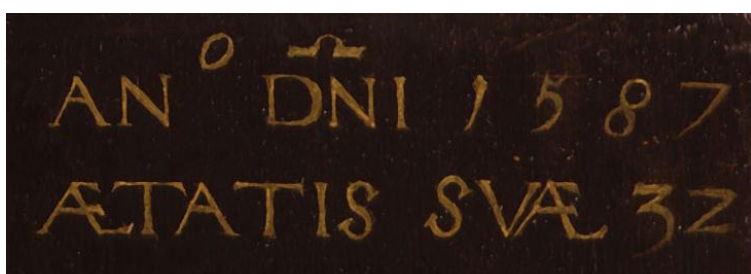
If you have an idea of who the sitter might be, finding out their birth and death dates is important. Information about the lives of important figures in British history, for instance, can be found in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODNB). You can then consider if the portrait is the right date to depict that sitter.

Dating

Comparing the portrait with others of a similar type can help establish a likely date, as can the costume of the sitter and the style of portrait.

Inscriptions

The text painted on to the surface (or marks on the back) can help to provide a date for the work. A common form of inscription for sixteenth and early seventeenth century portraits provides both the sitters age and the date of the painting in Latin (for example the inscription *Anno Domini 1587, Aetatis Suam 32* can be found on the portrait formerly thought to be John Gerard, on display in this room and pictured below.



Provenance

Tracing the history of the ownership or provenance of a portrait can provide further research leads. (See 'Provenance' fact-sheet for more information.)

Find an artist

Unless a portrait is signed it is very difficult to identify an artist. This is because few artists in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century signed their work.

Condition and physical production

A physical examination by an art historian or conservator may reveal further details about the portrait such as whether it has been partly re-painted or altered over time. (See 'Conservation' fact-sheet for more information.)

Iconography and Coats of Arms

Symbols in the portrait can point to the identity of the sitter or provide clues about why a portrait was created. See the example below:



Portrait of an unknown man, formerly known as John Gerard, by an unknown artist, Oil on panel, 1587, NPG 1306 (on display in this room)

The coat of arms in this portrait was thought to be invented. However, further research has indicated that a similar coat of arms has been used by branches of the Langton family in Yorkshire and Lancashire. Although a more certain link with the Langtons has yet to be established, this information provides new potential sitters to research.

Researching Early British Portraiture

Sometimes there are simply not enough clues to be able to identity the sitter as with the example below:



Portrait of an unknown man, formerly known as Cornelius Johnson
by Cornelius Johnson,
Oil on canvas, 1636, NPG 1887
(on display in this room)

The artist Cornelius Johnson painted businessmen and minor gentry. This portrait was previously thought to be a self portrait of Johnson but it does not match other likenesses of him, nor does it resemble any other identified sitters that he is known to have painted.

This portrait has no inscription or heraldic device. The sitter lacks distinctive costume, hairstyle and features except for the fact his doublet appears to be black satin, suggesting he enjoys a moderate to high status in society. At present the identity of this seventeenth-century male remains a mystery.



The National Portrait Gallery's Heinz Archive and Library

If you are interested in undertaking research on a British portrait make an appointment to visit the National Portrait Gallery's Heinz Archive and Library.

The National Portrait Gallery's Heinz Archive and Library at a glance

- Contains over 1 million records of British portraits
- Continues to record and track British portraits worldwide
- Approximately 15,000 new records are added annually
- Contains published and unpublished materials relevant to British portraiture
- Contains records detailing the Gallery's activities since its foundation in 1856

Want To Visit?

Information about visiting can be found on the National Portrait Gallery website at www.npg.org.uk/research. Visitors are required to contact the Heinz Archive and Library to make an appointment. If it is your first visit you will be asked to fill in an Access Agreement Form and show identification, such as a passport or driver's licence.

Heinz Archive and Library opening hours:

Tuesday-Friday, 10:00 – 17:00
(by appointment only)
phone: 020 7321 6617
(Type Talk: 18001)
fax: 020 7306 0056
archive@npg.org.uk

Location:

Orange Street
National Portrait Gallery
St Martin's Place
London WC2H 0HE

If you are unable to get there in person a written enquiry service is available:

Head of Archive and Library
National Portrait Gallery
St Martin's Place
London WC2H 0HE
Email: archiveenquiry@npg.org.uk