

CONTEMPORARY PAINTED PORTRAITS

Information and Activities for Secondary Art Teachers



Alfred Brendel
Tony Bevan, 2005
NPG 6720

Information and Activities for Secondary Art Teachers

Teachers' Notes



These notes focus on particular aspects of contemporary portraiture as revealed in the BP Portrait Award Exhibition.

They concentrate on aspects of portrait production and commission.

They are intended to help students look at painted portraits and enable group discussion.

They can also be used to assist teachers with technical aspects of making portraits in the artroom.

There are questions and discussion points that can be adapted to meet students' needs. The suggestions for projects are designed to lead on to further areas of research into portraiture. Consult this link for more information about contemporary commissions:

<http://www.npg.org.uk/live/collcommissioningintro.asp>

The notes are particularly relevant to the following groups: Students of Art and Design at Key Stage 3 and 4, G.C.S.E., A and AS Level students.



We concentrate on five specific aspects of creating portraits. Each aspect is dealt with separately.

Each section takes as its first example a first prize winner of the BP Portrait Award, the winner's commissioned painting and a painting from the National Portrait Gallery Collection that relates to the particular theme being discussed.

There are talking points, information and suggested practical activities.

In the five artists' work, we consider the following important aspects of all portraits, be they contemporary or historic.

↳ Symbolism

↳ Scale

↳ Palette

↳ Style & Pose

↳ Artist/sitter relationship

The last section looks at issues specifically related to commissions.

Based on teaching experience at the National Portrait Gallery in certain cases where key terms or words may well not be within the pupils' vocabulary we have suggested an appropriate substitute to use in discussion with students.

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Symbolism

The way a sitter 'sits' (whether they actually stand or sit, the posing for a portrait is referred to as 'sitting') in a portrait conveys information about him or her. This consideration of the pose is essential to the structure of the work, standing or sitting determines shape and size of canvas. The position of the head, body and limbs can tell us things about the character of the sitter. Additional 'symbolic' references can give us more clues. These hints can be ambiguous (unclear) as with Lloyd's painting of Penelope. Is she bored sitting for her portrait or merely completely absorbed in watching the mini TV screen? Her pose is certainly relaxed, and her clothing unpretentious and comfortable. The pose, the TV and her chair, all point to a feeling of relaxation tempered (affected) by a kind of voyeurism on the part of the viewer. Are we intruding on a private moment of her reverie (dreamlike state)?



BP first prize, 1997
Penelope watching TV
James Lloyd

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Symbolism

Sir Paul Smith

James Lloyd, 1998

NPG 6441



The Sitter: Sir Paul Smith (b.1946). Clothes designer; founder of Paul Smith Ltd Nottingham (1970), wholesaler in 34 countries with shops in London, Nottingham, New York, Paris and the Far East. Member of the Design Council and the Government appointed Creative Industries Taskforce; knighted 2000.

The Portrait: Paul Smith sits in the corner of Lloyd's studio, the wrong way round on the chair. His long splayed legs (Smith is over six feet tall), echo the V shape of the corner. He appears almost boxed in, as if hiding behind the bolt of beautiful green-mauve silk balanced on the floor equidistant (half way) between his legs (his socks match the underside of the silk). The silk contrasts with the scruffy background of the studio, and the regularity of cloth designs on both Smith's suit and the brocade is at odds with the lino floor which is a mixture of yellow fake marble and parquet, all paint spattered. This pose draws attention to his height, the bolt of cloth must stand around one and a half metres high and from this we can roughly surmise (work out) his actual height.

Leaning to the side and on one elbow, could make us think that he is relaxed, but also suggests that this is someone informal and 'left of center' – he is known for his innovation in the fashion business and often wild 'out of the box' thinking with regard to retail traditions. This approach has underpinned his success.

The prominent hand could be seen to indicate that this is someone who respects the handmade, and the power of artistic ideas and production. The cloth is a symbolic representation of his work, literally a tool of his trade. He is primarily a fashion designer, famed for the particular patterns used in the cloth, especially stripes, with which he creates his clothes. His feet are firmly on the ground, he is a serious businessman, who has created an empire of fashion over the last thirty-five years.

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Symbolism

The Sharp Family

Johan Zoffany, 1779-1781

NPG L169



Both of James Lloyd's portraits use the triangle to anchor his compositions. Johan Zoffany (1733–1810) was also keen on this formula for painting, and in this example of a group 'Conversation Piece', the triangular flag is behind William Sharp, who commissioned the painting. This painting operates as a complex visual symphony of colour and form, the triangular format being the main compositional plan.

The Sharp family gave fortnightly concerts from the 1750s on board their sailing barge, the *Apollo* at Fulham. William Sharp, surgeon to George III, is seen at the apex (top) of the triangle, hat raised, wearing the 'Windsor' uniform; his instruments are the French horns which rest on the piano. Of his three brothers, Dr John Sharp is on the right (he was the cellist); Granville Sharp, the famous philanthropist and slavery abolitionist, holds his flageolets (a woodwind instrument) in his right hand, his clarinet is on the piano; while James Sharp, an engineer, holds the serpent, an unusual instrument that looks like a snake.

The three Sharp sisters complete the orchestra: Elizabeth at the piano, Judith with music in hand and, above to the right, Frances with a theorbo or perhaps an angelica. Their instruments identify them, while the shape of the composition defines the orchestra to which they belong. Zoffany's dog Roma sits at the base of the canvas looking out at us. For more information about this group portrait see: <http://www.npg.org.uk/live/portpracgrp.asp>.

For more information on eighteenth-century musical instruments see: <http://www.bate.ox.ac.uk/>

Symbolism

Activity

Discussion points



How does the shape of the canvas influence the portrait?



What happens within the portrait when there is more than one sitter? For example, the Sharp Family by Zoffany.



Think about the type of symbols that you could include in order to convey pertinent (important) messages about the following sitters: a prime minister, a rock star, a gardener.

Projects



Looking at the portraits, make structural diagrams of the poses in three paintings.



Looking at the portrait of Sir Paul Smith, make a tonal drawing of his figure as it appears in the space of the room. This will help you notice how his dark presence sinks into the background of the work. Think about and discuss the composition of other paintings that use the triangle to 'ground' their sitter(s). Notice also the relationship that the Sharp family have to their instruments and how their body language accommodates and communicates this. Notice too, how the red flag behind William Sharp reinforces his dominant pose at (literally) the head of the family. He is in front of this cloth as opposed to Smith behind his.

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Scale

The size of a portrait is important, but small is not necessarily indicative of importance – think of miniatures of Queen Elizabeth I and your own passport or travel identity photograph. Some painted portraits are large especially those that are destined to hang in important places or are needing to attract attention, such as work placed on billboards.



BP first prize, 2000
Two Women in White
Victoria Kate Russell

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Scale

Fiona Shaw

Victoria Kate Russell, 2002

NPG 6609



The Sitter: Fiona Mary Shaw (b.1958). Irish born actor, graduated from RADA in 1982. Often hailed as one of the finest classical performers in Britain. Her stage appearances are characteristically controversial and powerful, notably her title roles in *Richard II*, *Electra* and *Medea*; all collaborations with director Deborah Warner. Theatre awards include two Laurence Olivier awards for best actress. Although foremost a stage performer, she has made film appearances in the *Harry Potter* series in which she plays the hero's wicked Aunt Dursley

The Portrait: The actress was painted in her London home, where sittings took place two to three times a week over a period of three months. The painting measures 72 in. x 48 in. (1828 mm x 1220 mm), such a large painting could signify a larger than life character. In this instance as the sitter is presented in her underwear, we are given slightly mixed

messages. Can we assume that she is a powerful figure even without the costume or the character of a part she might play? Does the scale and 'characterless' setting induce us to focus on her rather impish expression? Does the scale coupled with the fragility suggested by semi-nakedness enable us to come closer to her real-life character? Does the plain drapery background imply a stage set to be imagined?

Whatever our replies to these suggestions, the portrait is unpretentious but the scale is not. We must assume that this bold assertion of canvas not only gives space to describe the figure, but allows the artist to enjoy the rendering of drapery pattern surrounding her sitter.

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Scale

Activity

Discussion points



Compare the commissioned portrait with the non-commissioned portrait by Russell. How many similarities are there? Look at the colour scheme and the use of fabric.



How and where are the sitters posed?



Is it better to have a full-length portrait or a simple head? How does the scale of the work contribute to a decision like this?

Projects



Look at some billboard advertisements and think about whether these would function equally well on a smaller scale. What is the biggest picture you have ever made? Try and produce one twice that size.



Think about other large paintings you might have seen that rely on scale for their impact. List these. The large work by John Ulbricht of Louis Mountbatten, Earl Mountbatten of Burma measures 1626 mm x 1143 mm. It was painted in 1968, and is a perfect example of using scale to suggest power. Here the artist also employs severe cropping which seems to bring his face right up close to us.



**Louis Mountbatten,
Earl Mountbatten
of Burma**

John Ulbricht, 1968
NPG 4617

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Palette



BP first prize, 1991
Three Seated Figures
Justin Mortimer

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Palette

Harold Pinter

Justin Mortimer, 1992

NPG 6186



The Sitter: Harold Pinter (b.1930). Playwright, director and (from 1949–57) actor. *The Birthday Party* (1957), *The Caretaker* (1960) and *The Homecoming* (1965) are among his best known plays; he has also written several volumes of poetry and among his screenplays are those for *The Servant* (1962), and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981). Awarded Nobel Prize for Literature 2005; his acceptance speech included a powerful denouncement of American foreign policy.

The Portrait: The vibrant bright red-orange background in this portrait of Pinter immediately grabs our attention. The sea of books naturally evokes (suggests) his profession and might also refer to his creative mind. Pinter appears as a cut out head and shoulders, his expression a far away look. When portrayed, authors often appear to be in trance-like state or else gazing out of windows, as if waiting for inspiration, as in the example of Charles Dickens (following page).

The bright red could also refer to Pinter's political leanings, the author is a long time Labour party supporter. Painted in a square format, the red pigment takes up more than half of the painted space. Traditionally this colour signifies anger and heat and so with the blue books, we have 'hot' and 'cold' emotions suggested.

Justin Mortimer made the following comments about his experience of portraying Harold Pinter.

'I was in my third year at college when I painted it, about twenty-one years old. I remember getting on the tube from the Slade, with my paints and going to the mews in Holland Park. The study was upstairs and in real life the wall behind Pinter was painted a sort of fawn colour, it had a Gwen John painting on it, a wire mesh mask and cricket paraphernalia. [Pinter is a great cricket fan.]

Initially I painted all of that in, but then decided to get rid of it. It's the first time that I used a colour field background. I remember plastering on that thick red paint. There were about twelve sittings. The sea of books are actually a pile of other people's scripts stacked on a shelf above the radiator, I wanted them to be a metaphor for literary life. I wanted the folds on his neck and his collar to relate to the scripts.'

Information and Activities for Secondary Art Teachers

Palette

Activity

Discussion points



Do you think that an old artist will paint a better portrait than a young artist? (Maclise was 31 years old when he painted Dickens who was even younger.)



Why do you think that the traditional shape of a portrait canvas is an upright rectangle?



Looking at the *Three Seated Figures*, what do you notice about the way that the heads are posed? Do you know what the back of your head looks like?



Charles Dickens
Daniel Maclise, 1839
NPG 1172

Projects



Go into the library and make drawings of the books on the shelves. Now look at how the people in the library move around the space or sit or stand in it. Notice other types of printed or reproduced matter in the building, perhaps videos, CDs, newspapers or magazines. Concentrate on how these things look when they are piled up or gathered altogether – they do not make equal lines or nice regular shapes even though individually they might seem to be very similarly shaped.

Choose someone who is your friend or relation whose portrait you would like to make. Focus on one aspect of their life that might represent their work and/or interests in the portrait. Choose a colour that relates to them. Make a portrait that repeats this idea of 'piling up' the object that represents the person's work and use 'their' colour on the objects.



Make a colour wheel using paint. Write down the different emotional states (for example – happy/sad) that different colours suggest to you. Paint a self-portrait in your favourite colour, using the tonal variations to make up the face in the way that Mortimer uses peachy pink on Pinter's face. You can use any colour you like. Notice how much of the Peg Woffington portrait uses the white and red drapery to the same effect as the colour in the portrait by Mortimer. She was an actress, confined to bed for the last three years of her life. Do you think that the red velvet drapes might also be a reference to her previous life on stage?



Margaret (Peg) Woffington
Unknown artist, circa 1758
NPG 650

Style & Pose



BP first prize, 1984
Portrait of an Artist's Model
Peter Edwards

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Style & Pose

Kazuo Ishiguro

Peter Edwards, 1995

NPG 6332



The Sitter: Kazuo Ishiguro (b.1954). Novelist who was born in Nagasaki, Japan and came to England aged six. After studying creative writing at the University of East Anglia he was a community worker in Glasgow before publishing his first novel, *A Pale View of Hill* (1982), a highly personal view of Japanese history and society. Other works include *The Remains of the Day* (1989, winner of the Booker Prize and made into an award-winning film starring Emma Thompson and Sir Anthony Hopkins), *The Unconsoled* (1995) and *When We Were Orphans*, published in 2000.

The Portrait: This painting has a very textured surface. Peter Edwards uses thick paint on his work as his 'trademark' but also as a way of making his sitters literally appear to be more three dimensional and realistic within the picture plane.

Unlike the sea of books behind Pinter, Ishiguro is shown with a more traditional bookshelf. This rigid linear backdrop acts as a foil (contrast) to the relaxed pose of the writer. Sharp lighting illuminates his face on the left side, making a strong contrast with his dark pullover. This lighting together with the raised hand and arm create a diagonal line which cuts from the top left to the bottom right hand side of the painting. The diagonal crosses the vertical books giving the work dynamism by suggesting action whereas in fact Ishiguro is placid, seeming to be in a calm, pensive mood.

Style & Pose

Activity

Discussion points



Elizabeth Bowen (writer)
André Durand, 1969
NPG 5134



Sybille Bedford (writer)
Lucinda Douglas-Menzies, 1990
NPG X46471



James Joyce (writer)
Gisèle Freund, 1939
NPG P435



Do you think that Peter Edwards considers the hands of his subjects to be as important as their facial features?



Do you think that sharp lighting onto one side of the face is a flattering way of portraying a sitter? Half close your eyes and as you squint at the portraits, notice where the artist has concentrated the light.



Discuss the relationship between the sitters and their backgrounds. Describe how they are sitting and try out these poses for yourselves.

Projects



Look at pictures of people in magazines, books or newspapers that show a person leaning on their hand or somehow posing in relation to their hands and arms. Notice if the weight of the head is being borne (taken) by the hand and arm or not. Notice how this information is communicated to the viewer via (through) the picture. Make two drawings, one of the pose bearing the weight, and the other more like that of Kasuo Ishiguro, where the hand seems to work as part of the structural composition of the painting, connected to the head but not really supporting the weight of it.



Look up the word 'impasto' in the dictionary. Using acrylics and PVA, make a painting based on one of your drawings.

Artist/sitter relationship



BP first prize, 1995

Krishenda

Ishbel Myerscough

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Artist/sitter relationship

Dame Helen Mirren

Ishbel Myerscough, 1997

NPG 6415



The Sitter: Dame Helen Mirren (b.1945). Stage and screen actress; her distinguished career ranges from the Royal Shakespeare Company to Hollywood roles. Her film career includes performances in Stephen Frears's *The Queen* (2006), for which she won an Oscar, Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989), Robert Altman's *Gosford Park* (2001) and *Calendar Girls* (2003). Mirren has been vocal in human rights issues particularly for women in third world countries and addressed the United Nations in New York against arms sales to Africa. She was made a Dame of the British Empire in 2003.

The Portrait: This simple head and shoulder portrait of the actress Helen Mirren, appears as a stark cut out because of the dark black backdrop. This could emphasise her theatrical background as it appears to put her head in a spotlight, while simultaneously (at the same time) drawing attention

to her posing 'out of role' or 'as herself'. The difficulty with commissioned portraits is precisely this, if the artist does not know the person that they are painting – or is only familiar with them through TV or the stage, then how can they make a portrait that can show the real character of the sitter? An actor shows us many faces, if they are good at their trade. An artist can give an inspired and realistic portrayal of a person, but not necessarily give an insight into the true character of the sitter. Myerscough had not met Mirren before the painting was commissioned, but made a series of preparatory drawings towards her painting. There is an illuminating interview with the artist regarding her portrait of this famous and much-loved British actress on the Gallery's 'Portrait Explorer' CD-Rom. In it, Myerscough says that her linear portrait looks naïve. With this comment in mind, compare the painting of Mirren with that of Anne Boleyn (by an unknown artist, about 1533-1536) (see next page).

Artist/sitter relationship

Activity

Discussion points



Do you think that the portrait looks like Helen Mirren? Does anyone know the true character of another person, or even themselves?



How important is 'likeness' in a portrait? What do you think are your most recognisable features?



Do you think that it is important to know the person you are going to paint? Is painting a person from a photograph you have taken a reliable way to produce a portrait?



Anne Boleyn
Unknown artist,
1533-1536
NPG 668

Projects



Decide on someone that you would like to paint. Make a simple line drawing of them, without using any shadow. Now invent 20 questions that you could ask them about themselves, even if you do know them, pretend that you don't. Try to incorporate the knowledge that you have gained about them into your painted portrait.



Find two pictures of a TV star that you like, the first one 'in role' and the second one as they might be shown in, for example, a *Hello* magazine photo-shoot. Look at the images closely and see if you can decide which is most like them in your opinion. Can we really tell what people are like from their portraits?

BP Portrait Award Exhibition and commissions



Alfred Brendel

Tony Bevan
NPG 6720

Brendel/Bevan commission by the National Portrait Gallery in 2004.

From the beginning of the commissioning consultation process it was clear that Alfred Brendel was not going to be satisfied with a conventional portrait and indeed he was reticent about sitting at all. However, he was taken with the raw strength and authenticity of Bevan's vision. Although many of Bevan's paintings are based on direct observation, both of himself, his family and friends, this is the first time that the artist has ventured into the realm of the portrait commission. Uncertain about whether he would produce something that pleased both the sitter and himself this was a challenge pushing the boundaries of his normal concerns with painting a head. Pictorial and stylistic precursors for the work can be cited such as the sharp diagonal line of pigment cutting across the bottom of the canvas which is a reference to Goya's *A Drowning Dog* (1820-23) also present in Bevan's earlier *Horizon* series. The finished portrait is the result of an intense period of work over a year during which Bevan produced a series of preparatory sketches from life followed by drawings and paintings based on the sketches.

BP Portrait Award Exhibition and commissions

Activity

Discussion points



Here are some questions to help focus students' attention on issues related to the BP Portrait Award Exhibition and commissions. The related activities are designed as a visual exploration of the subject.

- Find out what the word 'commission' and 'copyright' mean.
- Were you able to have your portrait painted by any artist, living or dead, who would you choose?
- Describe why you would choose this artist.
- If your portrait could be done in any non-painting medium, how would you choose to be portrayed? For example, in film, photography, silkscreen or sculpture? Might the choice of medium somehow reflect you the person?
- What would you wear for your portrait sitting? Working clothes, best clothes, or fancy dress?
- If the artist required you to wear something specific or act out some role or adopt (take on) a certain body language, would you agree to this or would you like to be the one to decide how it should be?
- What expression would you choose to have? Happy, sad, serious, astonished, bored, other?
- What 'symbolic device' might you employ? In other words what object might reflect your interests? Might you be holding something like a book, a football, an iPod...?
- What type of environment (place) might you be in? Indoors, outdoors, at home, school, other?
- How could you guarantee (make sure) that the portrait reflects you more than the artist reflecting him/her self?
- Who has their portrait made? What type of person and for what reason? Who would pay for this? A political party? A relation? A business partner? A friend? Might it be a commission?

BP Portrait Award Exhibition and commissions

Activity

Discussion points



Think about these five points in relation to being commissioned to paint a portrait of someone :

- **The contract or agreement between the commissioner and sitter and artist**
(the first two could be the same.) Reflect on:
The time it would take to paint.
The size of the work.
The type of paint to be used.
The payment, and if this is made in stages.
Access to sitter, and the number of sittings required.
- **Copyright.** This belongs at law to the artist for as long as they live, plus the end of seventy years after they die. However perhaps the commissioner might negotiate otherwise, for example, by paying extra for the copyright. Can you think of times when this might happen or why one would want to own the copyright?
- **Symbols.** Might you use these within the work to help characterise the sitter?
For example, Justin Mortimer portraying Pinter with a sea of books behind him and Peter Edwards using a bookshelf for Ishiguro.
Think about other possible examples for portraying : a chef, an architect, a bus driver, a postman, a gardener and a travel agent.
- **Failure.** What do you think happens if the sitter doesn't like the work or if the commissioning body (such as the gallery or committee) don't think that the portrait is satisfactory, and the negotiations collapse? What about if the artist isn't happy with it?
- **Photography.** Should you use this in order to help with getting a likeness and formulating the composition of the work?

BP Portrait Award Exhibition and commissions

Activity

Projects



Now that you have discovered the important points about the business of portrait commissioning, invent the following for yourselves.

Write a paragraph about each of these potential portrait situations, the perfect scenario and the perfect disaster.

Choose from the following list of sitters,
Her Majesty The Queen.
Your mother/father/sister/brother/family member.
Your best friend.
A famous singer/actor/sportsperson.

Now write out a contract detailing a commissioning copyright agreement.



Make two portraits of the same person, one with the sitter posing for you and the other only from a photograph of them. Compare the two and try to draw conclusions.