

PORTRAITS, PAINTING, PHOTOGRAPHY AND GERHARD RICHTER

Information and Activities for Secondary Art Teachers



Selbstportrait (Self-portrait)

Gerhard Richter, 1996
Oil on canvas, 51 x 46cm
Flowerman Collection, Sato Tatsumi
© Gerhard Richter, 2009

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Teachers' Notes



This resource is one in a series from the National Portrait Gallery that looks at the relationship between photography and portraiture. The exhibition of portraits by Gerhard Richter is an opportunity to consider how photographs inform his painting and for us to make comparisons with artists in the National Portrait Gallery who have similar concerns and working methods.

In this resource we review the work of artists in the collection whose reliance on photography has been documented. These are the Victorian painter G.F. Watts (1817-1904), his friend the photographer Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879), the ground breaking work of Walter Richard Sickert (1860-1942) and the commissioned portrait by Jason Brooks (b.1968).

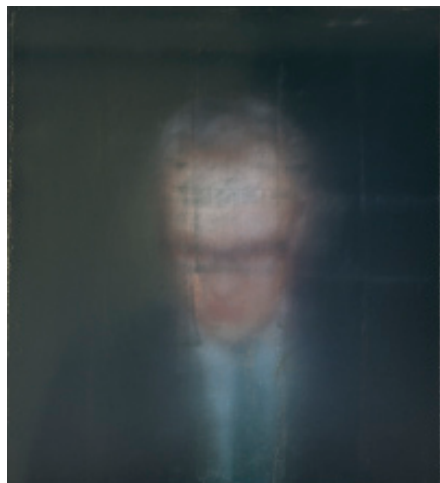
We compare their working practice with that of Gerhard Richter, whose exhibition, *Gerhard Richter Portraits* (26 February - 31 May 2009), includes paintings made in response to photographs. This is the first time that a large scale exhibition concentrating solely on his portraits has been mounted. His work investigates the fracture between image and meaning, with intimate portraits of his family and early works using images sourced from the media, including a newspaper picture of Jackie Kennedy.

Frau mit Schirm (Woman with Umbrella)

Gerhard Richter, 1964
Oil on canvas 1600 x 950mm
Daros Collection, Zurich
© Gerhard Richter 2009

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Gerhard Richter



Selbstportrait (Self-portrait)

Gerhard Richter, 1996
 Oil on canvas, 51 x 46cm
 Flowerman Collection, Sato Tatsumi
 © Gerhard Richter, 2009

'Over more than four decades, Richter has assembled what he calls his Atlas, a vast archive of photographs, some of which were clipped from newspapers and magazines, while others were taken by him. These photographs are weapons in a personal war against forgetting. They are the inspiration behind many of his most memorable paintings, the subject of which is often perception itself, the act of both looking and looking away. Through the distortion of photographic representation, Richter attempts to show how the eye can both illuminate and deceive. The past, he seems to be saying, is endlessly unstable. The image, photographic or otherwise, is always artificial. There is no truth, only interpretations, which applies as much to our own personal narratives as it does to the hauntedness of the German past.' ('Measuring the Richter scale' by Jason Cowley, 6 May 2002, News Statesman, on the occasion of 'Gerhard Richter: 40 years of painting' at the Museum of Modern Art, New York')
<http://www.gerhard-richter.com>

The relationship between photography and Gerhard Richter's paintings is central to his work. It is clear that he is at the forefront of the substantial body of contemporary artists who rely on photography to create their figurative work, for example Chuck Close and Julian Opie. Richter has created a powerful body of work rooted in the ordinary, everyday reality of the observed world. But at the same time, during the painting process his photographically derived images were manipulated in subtle ways including blurring, in which sharp definition was deliberately obscured. As a result, paintings that allude to photography seem strangely removed from reality. In this way, his work posed questions about the nature of photography, identity, and the way images of the real world are perceived and understood. As Richter has said, his work engages with 'persistent uncertainty'.

The catalogue to the exhibition in London goes some way towards unravelling the relationship between the paintings and the photographs taken of his sitters. On p.111 Richter comments on his use of blurring paint and why he does this.

'I blur things to make everything equally important and equally unimportant. I blur things so that they do not look artistic or craftsman-like but technological, smooth and perfect. I blur things to make all the parts a closer fit. Perhaps I also blur out the excess of unimportant information.'

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Gerhard Richter

Activity

Discussion points



Looking at Richter's self-portrait (see page 3 of this resource), consider that this man is one of the most famous European artists alive today. If this were you, discuss how you would like to be seen by the general public, now and in the future? Why you might want to leave behind such a relatively small-sized painting that showed you painted 'out of focus', wearing a white shirt and tie under a dark jacket, with grey hair and glasses? Richter is known as a retiring man and perhaps this is reflected in his self-portrait. Looking at the self-portrait by Doris Zinkeisen (1898-1991) what might you think of her personality?



Do you think the actual paint surface might be interesting to look at and experience? Can you see the vertical and horizontal lines on the surface that indicate that he has scraped the paint away from the surface? Why do you think an artist would do this? What do you think he has used as a painting support (canvas or board?) And what medium has he used? (oil or acrylic?).



Self-portrait

Doris Clare Zinkeisen, 1898 – 1991
© estate of Doris Clare Zinkeisen
NPG 6487

Projects



Cut a piece of paper or board the same size as the Richter self-portrait. Take a mirror and draw your self-portrait in pencil on the paper. Now, using 'grisaille' (white, black and grey) colours (see Sickert's self-portrait also in this resource) 'reveal' your own painting style. Describe your style, is it detailed? Blurred (like Richter's) or perhaps impressionistic?



During the Renaissance in Italy, people believed that 'every painter paints himself', (*ogni dipintore dipinge se*) - that each work of art automatically reveals the hand of the artist and their stylistic signature. This is, in a way, what self-portraiture is all about. Find other words that describe individual painting styles.

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National Portrait Gallery artists

Sir John Frederick

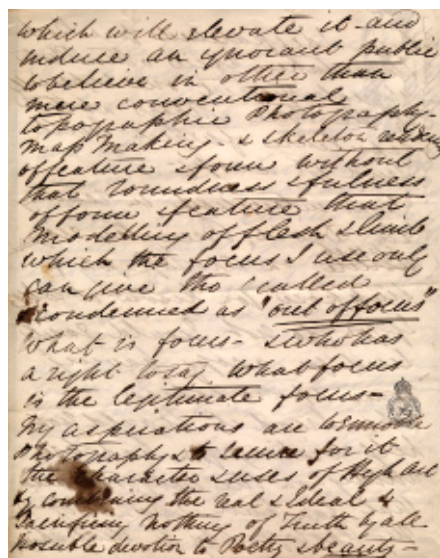
William Herschel

1st Bt by Julia Margaret

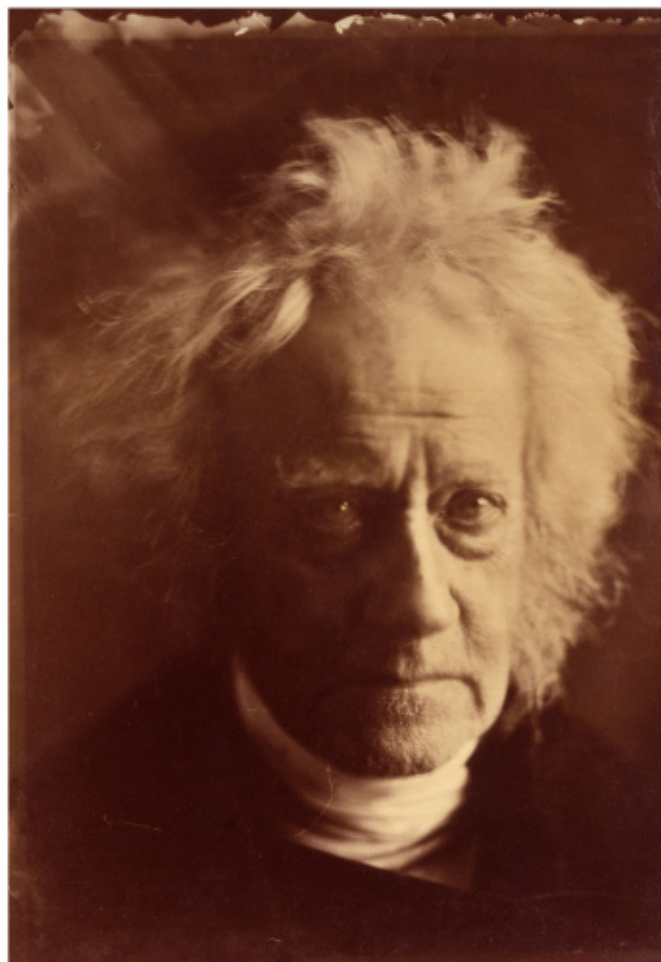
Cameron, 1867

albumen print

NPG P201



The letter Cameron wrote to him dated 31 December 1864.



Julia Margaret Cameron and George Frederic Watts

At the National Portrait Gallery we have many examples of artists who have used photography to help them paint portraits. The relationship between the photographer **Julia Margaret Cameron** (1815-79) and the painter **George Frederic Watts** (1817-1904) is fascinating because the gallery owns correspondence between them in which they discuss the new medium of photography, and also proof that Watts used photographs as reference material for his portraits.

Cameron took up photography in her forties, saying that she wanted to create works of art with this then new medium. In a letter she wrote to the mathematician and astronomer, Sir John Herschel (1792-1871), she discusses her aspirations as a photographer, and rejects criticism that her work is 'out of focus'.

'What is focus - & who has a right to say what focus is the legitimate focus - My aspirations are to ennoble photography and to secure for it the character & uses of High Art by combining the real & Ideal & sacrificing nothing of truth by all possible devotion to Poetry & beauty -'

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National Portrait Gallery artists

Cecil John Rhodes

George Frederic Watts, 1873

NPG 1407



Chlorobromide print on cream
card mount:

Cecil John Rhodes

Elliot & Fry, 1897

NPG X127477



Watts was a friend of Cameron, and the National Portrait Gallery has a collection of his correspondence:

<http://www.npg.org.uk/research/archive/private-papers/the-watts-collection.php>

Examples of his encouragement of Cameron can be seen at:

<http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/about/primary-collection/documents-relating-to-primary-collection-works/npg-p125aw.php>

And his criticism of her photographic work on: <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/about/primary-collection/documents-relating-to-primary-collection-works/npg-p125bw.php>

Watts was open about his own use of photography, in a letter from Cecil Rhodes (who was a famous imperialist and statesman in South Africa) to George Frederic Watts, (12 May 1898), he wrote:

'I have sent photographs to your house so that you can begin on Tuesday without me'.

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National Portrait Gallery artists


Portraits by Watts
at the National Portrait Gallery


It is thanks to **Watts** that the National Portrait Gallery has such a strong collection of nineteenth-century portraits, as he bequeathed his set of 'Hall of Fame' paintings to the Gallery, including his portrait of Cameron. The image shows some of these on display in the Victorian Galleries. As these works are all of the same size and have the same type of frame, they have a unity not unlike the unity one sees in carte-de-visite photographs.





Activity

Discussion points

-  Examine the idea of an intentionally out of focus or blurred portrait. Consider both the photographs of Cameron and the portrait paintings of Richter. Is it important to know the details of facial features rather than the essence of someone's personality created in paint? Why do you think an artist would choose to make the subject indistinct?

-  What are the advantages and disadvantages of viewing a whole group of paintings by Watts or Richter? Why would an artist make a body of work? Why would the NPG choose to display the works in a group?

Projects

-  Find out about 'focal length' in photography and experiment with taking photographs of a selected subject using five different focal lengths.
-  Research the 'carte-de-visite'. Select a carte-de-visite image and write a brief biography of the person portrayed. Comment on the background of the picture, any props, titles or signatures. Try to imagine what difference colour would make to these portraits.

National Portrait Gallery artists

Walter Sickert

Walter Sickert was a very different type of artist from Watts. He did not rely on photography as a substitute for a portrait sitting. He was genuinely interested in the type of 'slippage' that occurs when translating a photograph into a painting. He wanted and saw the benefits of reproducing what one might see as superfluous information or ambiguities within an image. He made this comment about his working method; *'Ah yes, people think I paint from photographs, yes, so I do when I've teased what I want out of them'*.

The actress Dame Peggy Ashcroft recounted; *'He would suddenly see something in a scene which to him, was very pictorial. He did a most curious picture of me as Lady Teazle, in which I am just a figure right on the footlights, complete distortion, and this was obviously what interested him. I'm almost a blank'*.

The artist Ciceley Hey, who modelled for Sickert, remarked; *'Well then the photographer took two or three photographs, went away to develop them. Then I went back a few days later when he had an enlargement of the photograph, and he'd got it squared up as he did his drawings, then I stood again. He drew on top of the enlarged photograph and it was that he used for the preliminary cartoon; two separate photographs'*.

These three quotations come from *W.R. Sickert Drawings and paintings 1890-1942*. Penelope Curtis, Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1989. ISBN 1 85437 008 1

Sickert was an avant-garde modernist who in his later years championed the use of photography and, in particular, newspaper reproductions to create his artworks. He was in these ways, an artistic precursor of Richter. Helen Lessore wrote interestingly about the reasons for his attraction to the newspaper photograph.

'The newspaper photographs which inspired him in his old age and which consist of numbers of minute but visible dots and have a curiously patchy, blurred, almost textile appearance, are actually reminiscent of the abstract tapestry of his own etchings of long ago, and it is probable that, both in themselves and because of this echo, they helped to clarify and bring at last to the surface of his consciousness that particular pictorial character which was a large part of his painterly identity.'

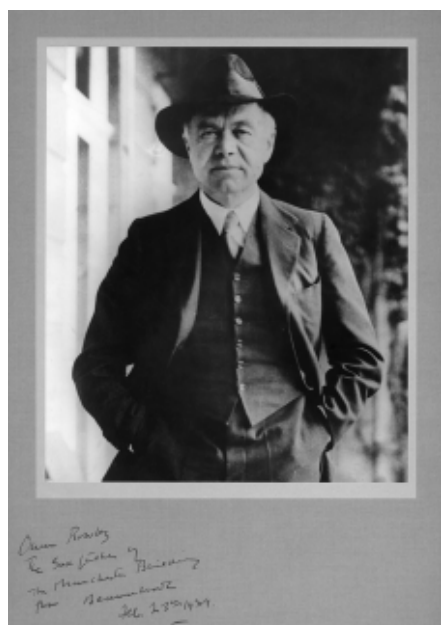
Late Sickert paintings 1927-1942. Arts Council of Great Britain, 1982, ISBN 0 7287 0301 7

It is difficult to imagine how cutting-edge this use of 'second hand' photography appeared in the 1930s because today the photograph facilitates (and is embedded) in our lives in many ways, for example in magazines and on Flickr, but Sickert's stance was unique and peculiar at the time.

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National Portrait Gallery artists

**William Maxwell Aitken, 1st Baron
Beaverbrook, Statesman and
newspaper proprietor**
Walter Sickert, 1935
NPG 5173



Beaverbrook by an unknown
photographer, 1934



Here we consider Sickert's portrait of William Maxwell Aitken, 1st Baron Beaverbrook (1879-1964) and Sickert's own self-portrait painted when he was aged seventy.

The photograph was taken at Beaverbrook's country mansion Cherkley Court in Leatherhead, Surrey. Beaverbrook was a press baron, a self made millionaire businessman and

politician. Sickert changed the background in his painting, inserting instead the view of the sea at Peter-in-Thonet near his studio on the Kent coast. In reality Beaverbrook never visited him there.

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National Portrait Gallery artists

Self-portrait

Walter Sickert, 1930
NPG 3134



A photograph of him, Gwen Ffranon-Davies and a friend reproduced in 'Sketch'.



Looking at Sickert's self-portrait we are distinctly aware of the check pattern of his suit and the way he carries himself. He has added a walking stick and retained a 'cropped' arm from the person who was in the photograph next to him.

National Portrait Gallery artists

Activity

Discussion points



Look carefully at the paintings and the photograph from which they derive. Why would you make a painting if you already have a decent photograph of the sitter? Does photography reflect an absolute reality? Should we believe what we see in a photograph? What does a painting add that a photograph cannot give us? Both paintings rely on black and white photographs as source material. Do you think that this affected the colours that Sickert consequently used to paint the portraits?



Look again and comment on the pose, background and general look of the paintings. Do you think that it is important to have a good photograph from which to work? What constitutes a 'good' photograph? Do you think that if the artist is using photography for making paintings that the photograph should be taken by the artist?

Projects



Find a photograph of an important person reproduced in a newspaper. Think about how you make your selection as this picture will be the basis for a painting. Try and find a photograph that explains in visual terms the social situation of the sitter, for example, perhaps it contains a football representing a footballer or a newscaster in a TV studio? Concentrate on how the pose communicates power. Now square up your image and enlarge it (making it at least 4 times bigger). Using acrylic paints, reproduce the photograph.



Research the paintings of Bob Bechtle, Vija Celmins and Chuck Close. These artists all use photography in different ways to help to create their work.

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National Portrait Gallery artists

↘ Jason Brooks

Sir Paul Maxime Nurse ('Paul')

Jason Brooks, 2008
acrylic on linen, 1710 mm x 2710 mm,
NPG 6837



Sir Paul Maxime Nurse

James F. Hunkin, 2001
R-type colour print
NPG x126354.
(This is not the photograph that
Brooks used for his painting, but
is a useful visual comparison.)



The portrait of **Sir Paul Nurse** on display at the National Portrait Gallery.



Robert Rauschenberg wrote the following about the relationship between painting and photography:

'Photography is like diamond cutting. If you miss you miss. There is no difference with painting. If you don't cut you have to accept the whole image. You wait until life is in the frame, then you have permission to click. I like the adventure of waiting until the whole frame is full.'

Robert Rauschenberg Photographs,
Thames & Hudson, 1981, ISBN 0 500 54075 6


In the twenty-first century, British artist **Jason Brooks** has mastered the art of 'translating' photography into painting. His super-realist magnifications of sitters impose on us and demand our attention by confronting us through their large scale and imposing their presence in our space. From a distance the painting is sharply defined, but close-up it is made up of abstracted forms. Brooks uses his own large-format photographs as the source material for his painting, although he does not regard himself as a photorealist. 'My work is ephemeral,' he says 'and that relates to photography, the funereal aspect of photography, capturing that frozen moment.'


(Quotation taken from the press release (22/05/08) accompanying the unveiling of the portrait of Sir Paul Nurse).

National Portrait Gallery artists


Activity


Discussion points

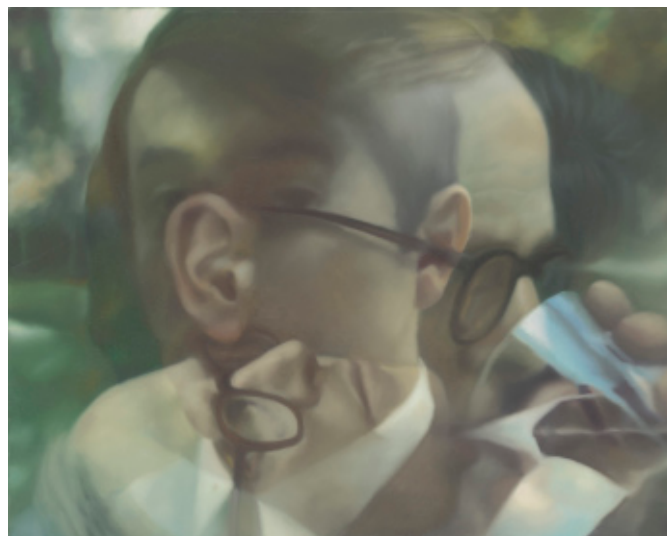
 Talk about how important clothes are for communicating aspects of your character. Discuss the type and colour of clothes you might prefer to wear for your self-portrait. Bear in mind that a self-portrait is not only a private but also a public revelation, what type of clothes (or lack of clothing?) Would seem most suitable to you? Notice the open shirt in this and the almost businessman-like attire in Richter's self portrayal. What do these clothes signify?

 Discuss the different scales of the artworks reproduced in this resource. Talk about how different it can be to see an artwork in real life and to see one reproduced on the web or in print. Notice the scale of the Brooks painting, how does the scale of his work relate to that of advertising hoardings?

Projects

 Make two drawings of yourself from photographic sources. Base the first one on a photograph of you at a wedding or dressed up for a party or wearing very smart clothes or on holiday. Base the other one on a photograph of you wearing your pyjamas or the type of clothes you wear when you are relaxing at home. As this is a self-portrait, how do you prefer to be seen? Draw sketches for a third work where you invent clothing that you could never possibly afford to wear and own.

 Collect (or take) four black and white images of different people who are staring straight into the camera. Make sure that the images are of the same scale, and that you have two males and two females. Crop them so that they are 'landscape format' (like the Brooks). Now compare them, making notes about their features, how much of their ears you can see and how much of their neck and shoulders you can see. What can you discern about the personality of the sitter? Looking at the double portrait of Gilbert & George in Gerhard Richter: Portraits at the National Portrait Gallery combine or overlap your images to create a composite portrait.



Gilbert & George

Gerhard Richter, 1975

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra © Gerhard Richter 2009

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National Portrait Gallery artists

Gilbert & George asked Richter to paint a series of eight portraits of them in 1975. Richter took the original photographs himself using multiple exposures, an effect that characterises the resulting portraits that seem somehow to simply echo the sitters and be a mechanical reproduction. The movement suggested in the painting occurs because of the way the imagery is juxtaposed, not by the way the paint is applied to the canvas.



Now compare the Richter portrait with that by Patrick Heron of T.S. Eliot from the NPG collection reproduced here. What are the similarities and differences?



Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965)

Patrick Heron, 1949

Oil on canvas NPG 4467 © Estate of Patrick Heron
DACS/ Collection National Portrait Gallery

Further information and associated activities concerning this painting can be found at:
www.npg.org.uk/assets/files/pdf/teachers-notes/NPGTeachersNotes_PracticePortraiture.pdf

You can hear Jason Brooks answering questions about his work if you click on:
www.npg.org.uk/richter/audio