

# TWELVE TWENTIETH-CENTURY PORTRAITS

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Information and Activities for Secondary Art Teachers

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**Chris Ofili (1968-)**

Self-portrait, 1991

Oil on canvas, 1019 mm x 442 mm

NPG 6835

# Twelve Twentieth-Century portraits

## New Influences

The invention of photography in the mid-nineteenth century, affected the market for representational portraits. Artists began to experiment with new styles, techniques and fashions in painting. The French Impressionists were the first to break the mould, and were followed by pioneers of abstraction such as Malevich, Mondrian and Kandinsky. British artists were slow to pick up on the new trends but gradually, thanks to artists such as James McNeill Whistler, Roger Fry and Percy Wyndham Lewis, avant-garde approaches began to filter across from continental Europe. The National Portrait Gallery is especially rich in works by artists of the Bloomsbury Group as well as owning works by many well-known portraitists who have been instrumental in changing and developing the genre.

## Individual Style

Unlike portraits painted in other centuries, those produced in the twentieth century tend to be painted wholly by each individual artist whereas in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries collaborations were common. Twentieth-century works tend to reflect more of an artist's individual stylistic achievement. Due to the pervasive influence of the photographic portrait, the twentieth-century painted portrait developed a slightly different brief. Artists have gone down a multitude of roads to try to resolve the problem of creating a likeness whilst retaining their artistic integrity. Naturally 'pot-boilers' still exist, as do works that obviously flatter sitters, works that merely document a sitter's prestige and of course portraits that simply reiterate the photographic through technical prowess.

The portraits which merit our consideration here are those which provoke in the viewer a dual insight: firstly gaining knowledge of the sitter's appearance and personality, and secondly a feeling of the painterly mood and style of the artist. The ultimate goal is to blend the two successfully. However, our response is subjective and so opinions will differ as to the success of the following works.

## Information and Activities for Secondary Art Teachers

# Twelve Twentieth-Century portraits

### Augustus John (1878-1961)

William Orpen (1878-1931),  
exhibited 1900  
Oil on canvas, 991 x 940 mm  
NPG 4252



This painting by William Orpen of the artist Augustus John, straddles the turn of the century. It is a classic mixture of old and new, and consciously based on Whistler's portrait of Thomas Carlyle (1872-3, Arrangement in Grey and Black, No 2. Glasgow Museum and Art Gallery). John and Orpen were friends, having trained together at the Slade, and both belonged to the New English Art Club.

John, a lively, romantic and flamboyant artist is posed in a relaxed but controlled manner, sitting on an ordinary wooden chair. Although indoors, as the background indicates, he wears a heavy outdoor coat and his hand rests elegantly on his jaunty hat. The sombre background sets off the light

on his face and hands. The repeated verticals enclose the rounded figure whose form and posture is echoed in the shapes of the wood making up the chair. The colour range is subdued, except for the bright red vertical band on the right-hand side. This contrast of red against the darkness of the remaining areas of the picture brings a balancing dynamic to the whole composition. John's brooding, confident and determined look with his unruly hair and pointed beard create a visual foil with the vibrant red strip. Contrary to what one might expect, there is no formal sign of John's artistic status - no brushes, no palette, no studio. John is said to have disliked the portrait.

## Information and Activities for Secondary Art Teachers

# Twelve Twentieth-Century portraits

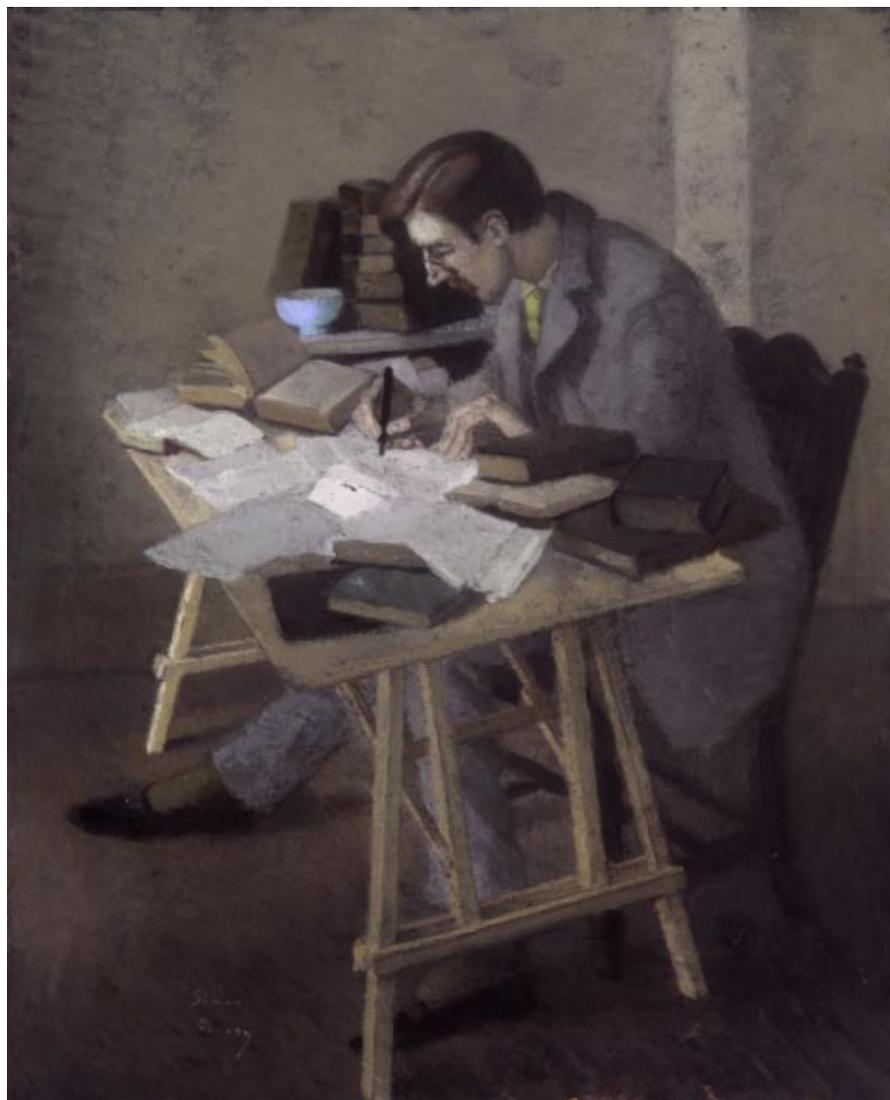
### Lytton Strachey (1880-1932)

Simon Bussy (1870-1954), 1904

Oil on canvas, 533 x 432 mm

NPG 4595

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This small pastel of Strachey shows him hard at work on a basic trestle table littered with books and papers. With pen poised and long fingers tensed over his manuscript, this famously long-legged artist and critic bends over his work. There is no doubt that he is a writer. Indeed, his work is in the middle of the drawing (diagonal lines taken from each corner would meet almost at his black pen), emphasising the level of his concentration and coaxing us into the world of the picture.

The colour mood is low key; dusty greys, taupe and mauves blend with ochre and brown. The medium of pastel has an atmospheric quality. Two single clear and bright colours arrest

our gaze: his yellow tie and the delicate sky blue, oriental-type bowl on the shelf behind him. These, the direction of his concentrated bowed head and the white of the papers again pull our eyes to the centre of the drawing.

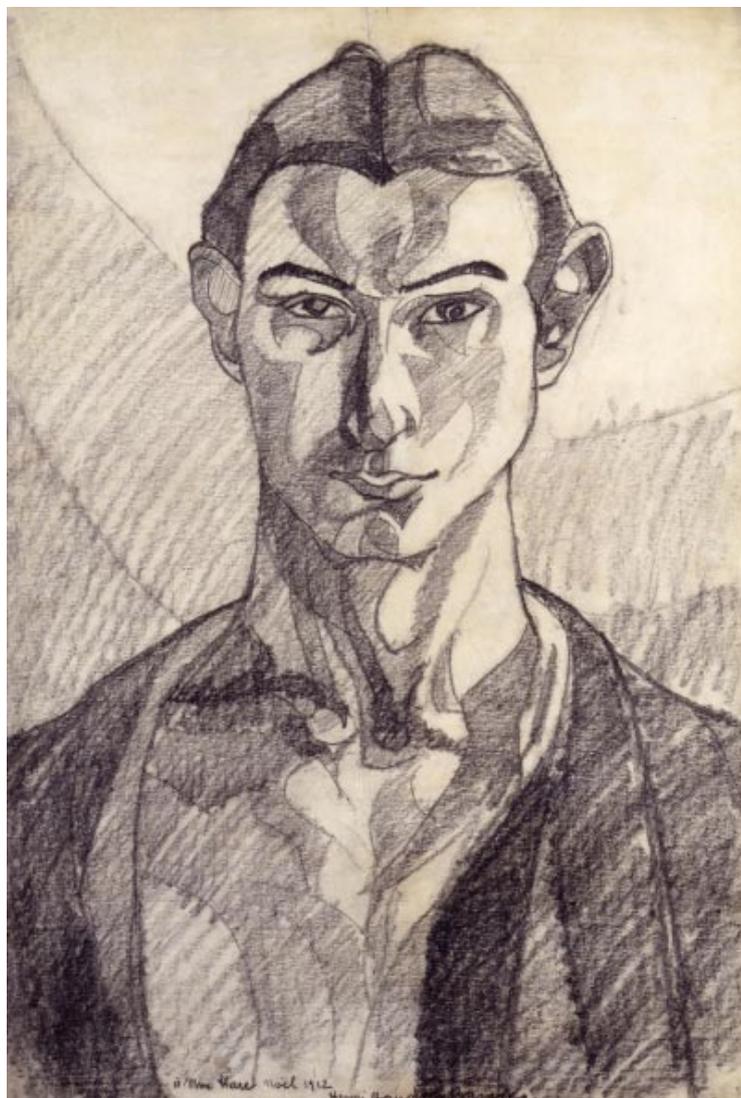
Bussy was born in France. After studying (under Moreau) and exhibiting in Paris, he came to London in 1902. He arrived with a letter of introduction to Lady Strachey, and the next year married her daughter Dorothy, Lytton's sister. From 1907 onwards he exhibited regularly in London and Paris, including shows at the Goupil and Leicester galleries. He collaborated with Roger Fry in the Omega workshop.

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# Twelve Twentieth-Century portraits

### Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891-1915)

Self-portrait, 1912  
Pencil, 559 x 394 mm  
NPG 4814



The French sculptor Gaudier-Brzeska was the son of a carpenter. A prolific draughtsman, drawing from life in order to inform his sculpture, he is famous for his over life-size stone carved hieratic head of Ezra Pound (1914). An admirer of Rodin and later influenced by Epstein, he was part of the angry anti-Bloomsbury group Blast. His death in the First World War, ended his brief but dazzling contribution to modernist sculpture.

We can see that this is a sculptor's drawing from the way the form and structure of the head and shoulders are mapped out with a view to later reproduction in three dimensions.

Gaudier-Brzeska does this by organising his tonal areas in advance, and then shading the pure linear study. The self-portrait is lively because we can sense the speed with which he has used the charcoal to make the intense blacks and softer grey areas. The work is clear, elegant and refined. There is a purity about the roughness and simplicity of the medium combined with the confrontational stare of the subject's eyes. It has the feeling of a working drawing; the sculptor understanding the three-dimensional planes of the body, and then rendering them into flatness with the illusion of a second dimension.

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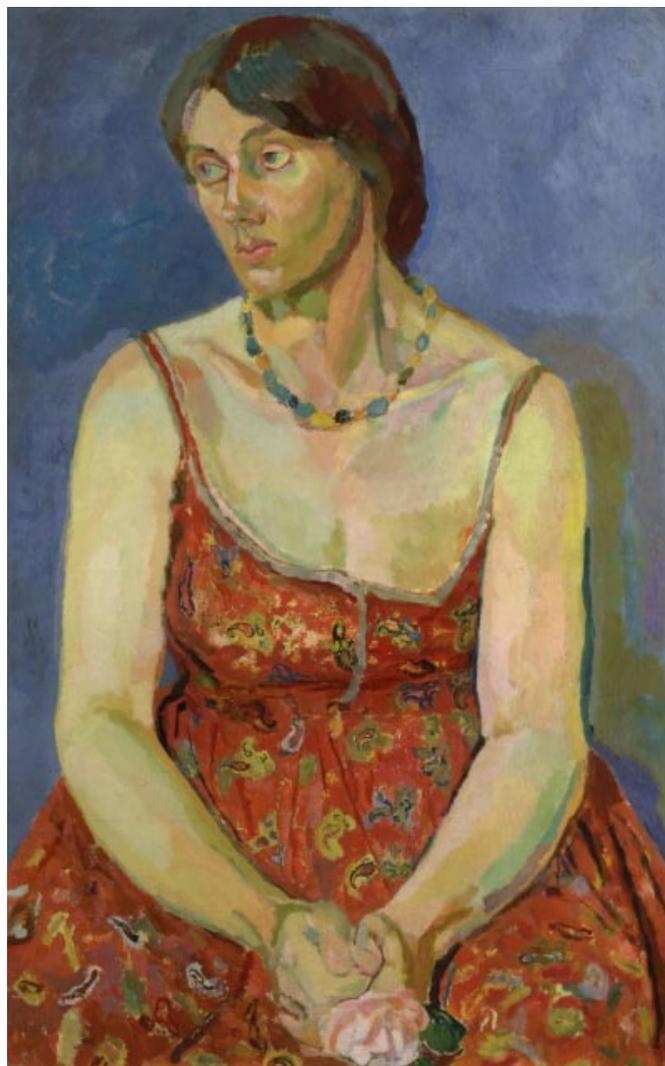
# Twelve Twentieth-Century portraits

### Vanessa Bell (1879-1961)

Duncan Grant (1885-1978), c. 1918

Oil on canvas, 940 x 606 mm

NPG 4331



The artist Vanessa Bell was part of the Bloomsbury Group along with her sister Virginia Woolf, her husband Clive Bell and her lover Duncan Grant, who painted this portrait. It is therefore a special type of portrait - a personal, visual document made by one artist of another with whom he has an intimate relationship. We see Vanessa Bell in a loose, red, paisley-patterned cotton frock, her hands loosely clasped together on her lap, holding a rose, with her wide-eyed gaze turned away from us. Grant uses green colours in the flesh tones, an Impressionist device to render skin more lifelike. The dress is sleeveless, so that her uncovered arms make distinctive shapes against the blue background, the colour of which is reminiscent of that used in early icons of the Madonna.

Grant's painting style evolved from a deep admiration for the Post-Impressionists and the Fauves, and one can see echoes of these influences here. He studied at the Westminster School of Art (1902-5), then visited Italy, spent a year in Paris and then a term at the Slade. He showed six works in Roger Fry's second Post-Impressionist exhibition, and also worked for him at the Omega workshop. He collaborated with Vanessa Bell on a number of artistic schemes (often decorative) throughout his long and productive artistic career. Their daughter Angelica was born in 1918, the year that this portrait was painted.

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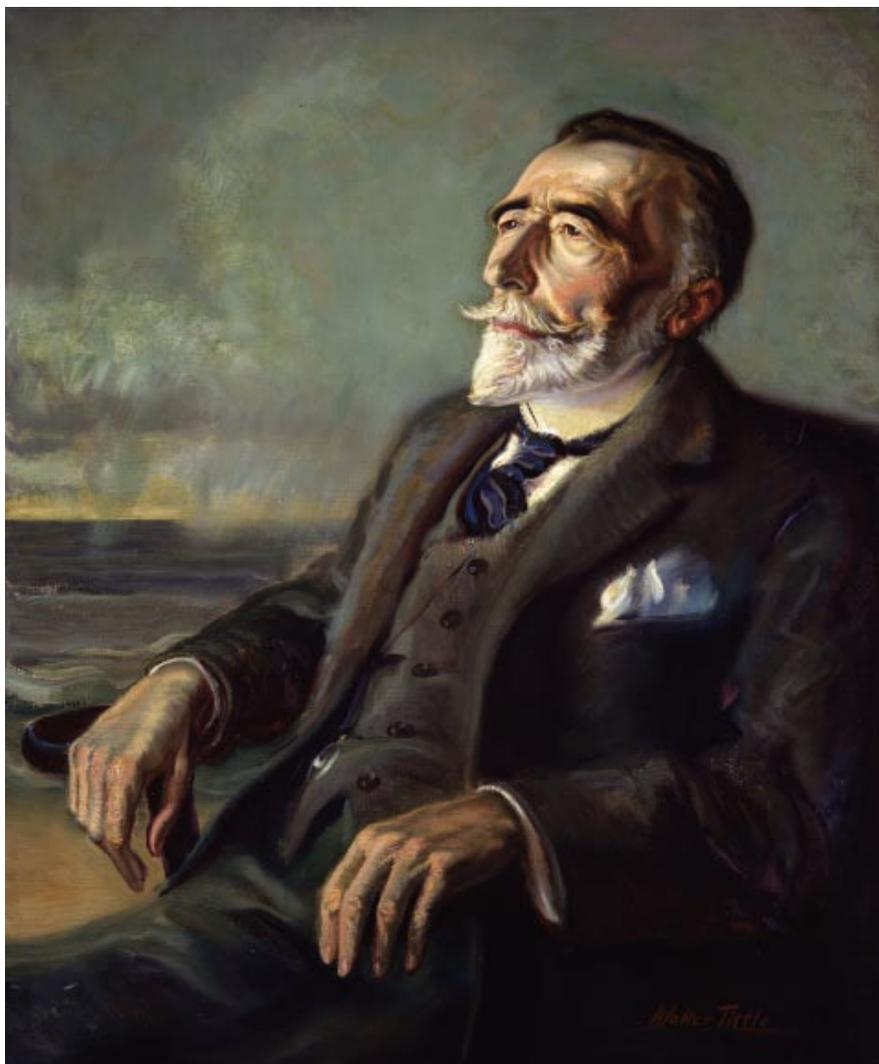
# Twelve Twentieth-Century portraits

### Joseph Conrad (1857-1924)

Walter Tittle (1883-1966), 1923-4

Oil on canvas, 851 x 699 mm

NPG 2220



Joseph Conrad was a writer, but here is shown without the standard props of desk, pen and paper. Instead, he seems to be sitting in a chair looking into a bright light against an almost surreal background of sea and sky. His hands hang loose on the chair-rests and glow in sympathy with his brightly lit face which is characterised by his well-trimmed and pointed white beard. The sharp white of the handkerchief, cuff, collar, and monocle, stand out against the sombre colour of his suit and waistcoat. Despite the suit, there is a faint air of the old sea captain about him, reinforced by his determined look, the heavy-lidded eyes, strong nose and beard. This, combined with the background

of billowing rain swept clouds, evokes some of the essence of Conrad's writing; the broadness of his imagination and the mysterious depths of 'Nostromo' and 'The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'', as well as the circumstances of his life.

Tittle was an American artist who specialised in portraits of British and American politicians and literary men. Particularly fond of etching as a medium, he used dry-point to record the features of President Roosevelt in 1942-3. He was also known for his illustrations and cartoons, contributing over many years to magazines such as 'Life' and 'Harper's'.

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# Twelve Twentieth-Century portraits

**G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936),  
Maurice Baring (1874-1945) and  
Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953)**  
Sir James Gunn (1893-1964), 1932  
Oil on canvas, 1,511 x 1,105 mm  
NPG 3654



This group portrait of three authors illustrates how an artist ensures a balanced composition when dealing with the complex visual dynamics of a group. Gunn makes Baring's balding head the apex of a triangular structure; with the seated Chesterton and Belloc as the base. The white paper on the table is a simultaneous focal point for us and the sitters, reinforcing their complicity and concentration. The painting leaning against the wall behind them is visually useful as its 'L' shape echoes that of the wall and the dado rail. All the sitters gaze downwards. We follow their gaze and notice details in the work: the reflections in the shiny table top; the pinstripes on Chesterton's trousers repeat in the table leg and finally the three areas of colour; wall, floor and sitters.

Gunn said of the portrait; '... Mr Chesterton with his radiating geniality, his air of the witty philosopher, and the Inverness cloak that adds to his massive bulk, is of course an inspiration to any portrait painter. Then I found Belloc's powerful and masterful head a real intellectual exercise. In the Honourable Maurice Baring, I aimed at the suavity of the ex-diplomat and the man of the world, who has travelled, written extensively on Russia, cultivated the arts and made his place also among the poets ... I found all three excellent subjects. Of course, one expects that from such men, each of whom is an artist in his own sphere.'

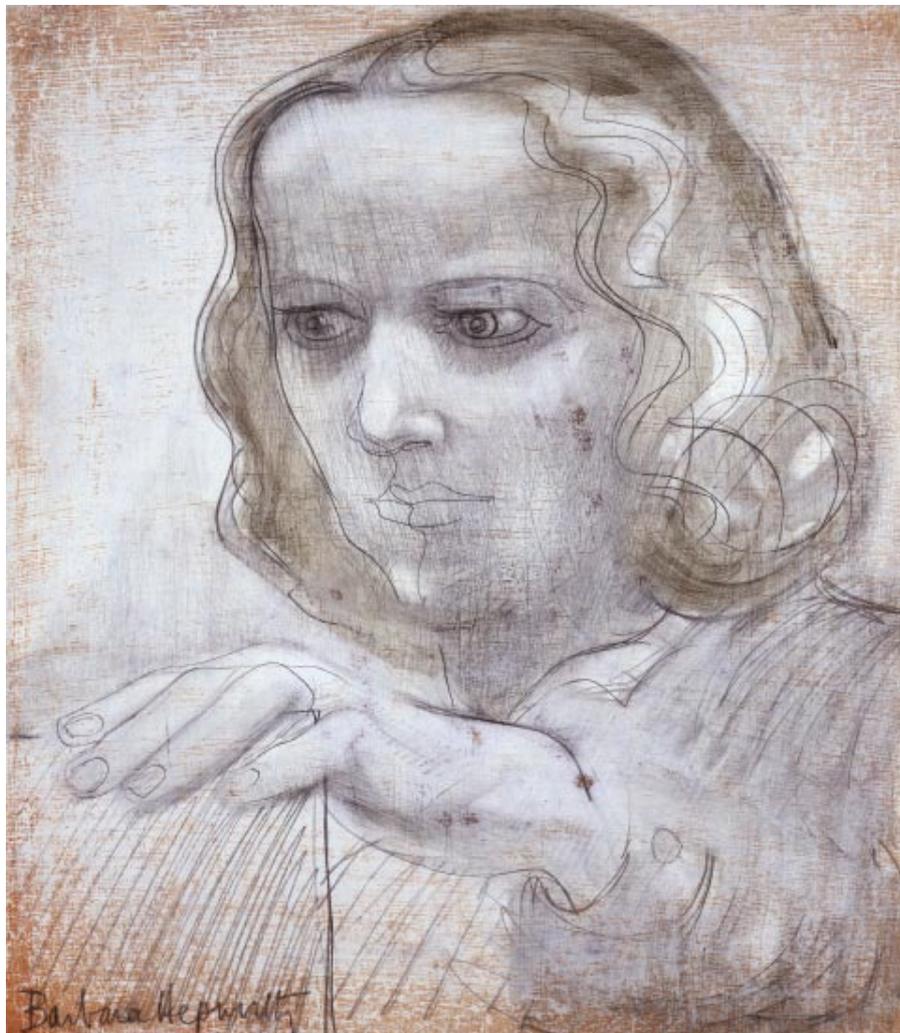
Gunn was born in Glasgow and studied both there, in Edinburgh and at the Academie Julian in Paris. In 1961 he was made an RA.

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# Twelve Twentieth-Century portraits

### Dame Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975)

Self-portrait, 1950  
Pencil on gesso on board,  
305 x 265 mm  
NPG 5919



Barbara Hepworth was a sculptor, she joined the Seven and Five Society in 1931, where her pioneering abstractions paralleled the work of Henry Moore and Ben Nicholson (her second husband); she was especially known for her subtle use of the 'hole'.

The board on which Hepworth draws has a thin coating of gesso. Into this the artist has made brisk pencil marks indicating her hand holding the board on which she draws - a classic method of self-portrayal. The surface texture is full

of intentional scratches and dents giving the work a rugged three-dimensional quality. In places the white gesso is rubbed down and an orange paint glows around the edges. Water mixed with the pencil on plaster produces a tone suggesting soft shadow. A tint of brown ink darkens the colour of her hair, brush strokes give it direction, and these are enhanced by heavy swirling pencil. The eyes are clearly delineated and there is a strong highlight to the nose. The whole is a vivid, confident drawing: lively, vigorous, relaxed and yet controlled. The portrait is signed on the lower left-hand side.

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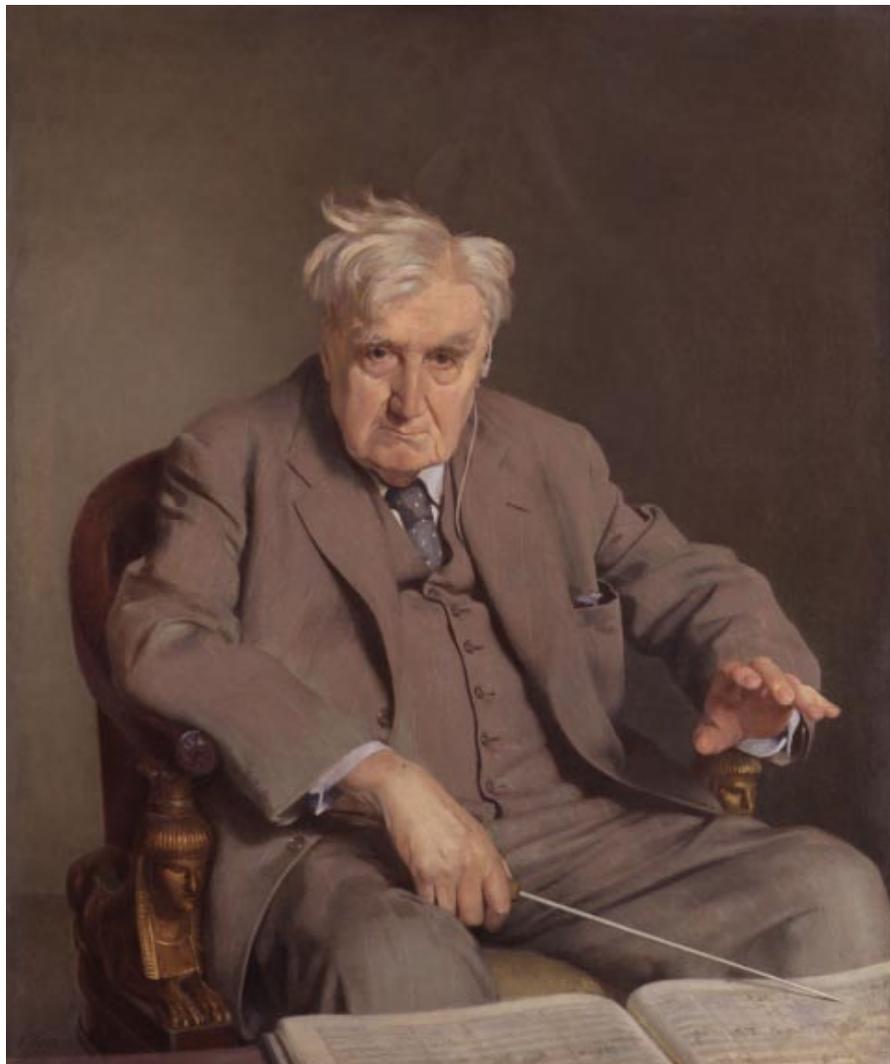
# Twelve Twentieth-Century portraits

### Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Gerald Kelly (1879-1972), 1958-61

Oil on canvas, 1,067 x 889 mm

NPG 4829



This portrait shows a composer in an active role, baton in hand. Kelly's picture is traditional in style and has visual links with the portrait of Monsieur Bertin by Ingres. Ralph Vaughan Williams is gesturing with his baton as if conducting; a music score is open before him on a table. The roundness of his body is contained within a round-backed chair, the arm of which is decorated with a golden sphinx. The paintwork is precise and delicate. The sitter's unruly hair is rendered with deft strokes of the brush, the left hand is foreshortened skilfully, and the colours are subdued. Looking carefully, you will notice that he is wearing a hearing aid. Rather than ignoring his deafness, Kelly has faithfully included this device which adds poignancy to the portrait.

Born in London in 1879, the son of a vicar, Kelly was educated at Eton and then read English at Cambridge. Deciding to be a painter he went to Paris where he met Renoir, Monet, Degas and Rodin through the art dealer Rurand-Ruel. He also met Sickert, Sargent and Maugham who encouraged him to travel to Burma. Pictures he painted there helped him to make his reputation on returning to England in 1909. He became an associate RA in 1922, a full member in 1930 and succeeded Munnings as President from 1949-54.

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# Twelve Twentieth-Century portraits

### Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II (B. 1926)

Pietro Annigoni (1910-1988), 1969  
Oil on canvas, 1,981 x 1,778 mm  
NPG 4706



Annigoni's portrait of Elizabeth II provoked an uproar when it was first exhibited in 1969. Since then, people have come to appreciate the stately quality it possesses. There is no specific background to this work. Annigoni indicates a sky and a horizon and has his subject dressed in a regal cape, decorated with a minimum of honours. The Queen is portrayed without the normal prerequisites of a royal portrait: the crown, sceptre and orb; nor does he employ the old-fashioned Van Dyckian device of showing her mounted on a horse. The resonance of the red cape against the blue background is strong and we can appreciate colour parallels with the Grant portrait of Bell, although the latter is lighter in treatment. Annigoni employs the full force of his experience to create a modern royal portrait which marries the human and the slightly surreal; the normal woman with the unique inheritance of royalty. The

work is large and imposing. The Queen dominates the canvas and her expression is cool and confident; a triangular figure, alone in an abstract open space, the solitude reinforcing her unique perspective.

Annigoni was born in the suburbs of Milan in 1910. He studied at the Accademia Delle Belle Arti in Florence in the late twenties and early thirties, becoming disenchanted with 'modern art'. He met a Russian artist, Lokoff, who shared his oil-tempera techniques with Annigoni. By mixing oil paint with secret quantities of egg yolk and wine, Annigoni learnt to suggest the qualities of High Renaissance Old Master painting. In the late fifties his portrait work became sought after by high society. Other famous sitters included Pope John XXIII and President Kennedy.

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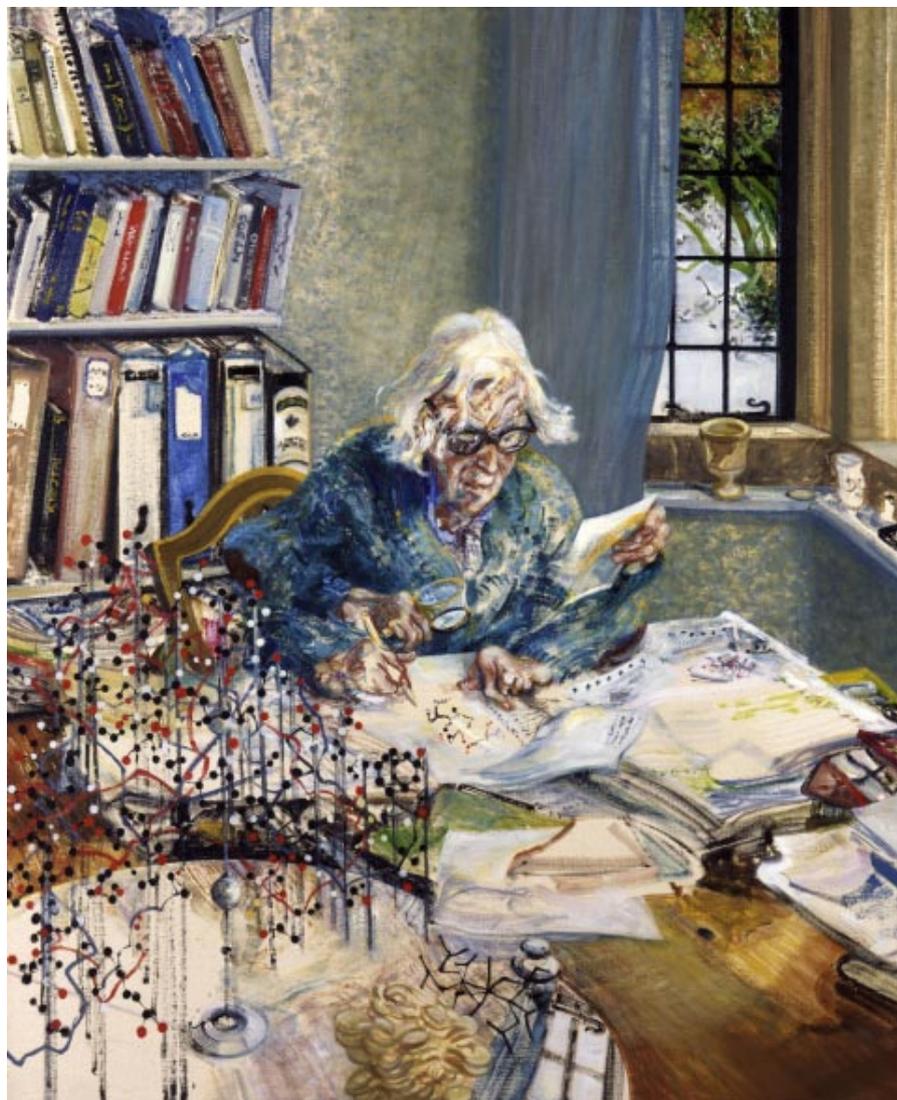
# Twelve Twentieth-Century portraits

### Dorothy Hodgkin (1910-1994)

Maggi Hambling (b. 1945), 1985

Oil on canvas, 932 x 760 mm

NPG 5797



Dorothy Hodgkin was a chemist and crystallographer. In 1949 she published the three-dimensional structure of penicillin, and in 1964 she was awarded the Nobel Prize for her work on the structure of Vitamin B12. In 1969 she discovered the structure of insulin; a model of which we see in the foreground of this portrait. Hodgkin is shown at her desk, her arthritic hands jumping. The four hands are a convenient artistic invention visually suggesting the scientist's dynamism. Her desk is laden with papers, behind her the bookshelves are loaded with books and files and out of the window we can see into the back garden. The portrait provides us with a view of the workaday surroundings of

someone who looks like a friendly grandmother, who is that, but is also someone who has achieved world status and recognition within her field of research and discovery. It is this juxtaposition between the humble woolly blue cardigan and the implication of the molecular structure of insulin which gives this portrait a true resonance.

Maggi Hambling was born in Suffolk and studied under Lett-Haines and Cedric Morris at the East Anglian School of Painting and Drawing (1960-2), then at Camberwell (1962-7) and finally at the Slade (1967-9). She was the first Artist in Residence at The National Gallery 1980-1.



## Twelve Twentieth-Century portraits

**Chris Ofili (1968-)**

Self-portrait, 1991

Oil on canvas, 1019 mm x 442 mm

NPG 6835



Born in Manchester, Chris Ofili studied at Chelsea School of Art (1988-91) and Royal College of Art (1991-3). He was included in the Whitworth Young Contemporaries (1989, 1990 and 1991) and the NPG's BP Portrait Award (1990 and 1991). Also in 1991 he won a British Council Travel Scholarship to Zimbabwe. Ofili uses collage and paint to comment on ugliness, conventional beauty and identity with diverse references to popular culture and African art. He is

famous for using elephant dung as a support and decoration on his paintings. He was included in the Sensation exhibition at the Royal Academy (1997) and won the Turner prize in 1998. The purchase in 2005, by the Tate gallery of The Upper Room, an installation of 13 paintings by Ofili in a specially-designed room caused controversy as the artist was on the board of Tate trustees at the time of the purchase. Ofili now resides in Trinidad.

# Twelve Twentieth-Century portraits

## Activity

### Questions



The following types of questions can be asked while viewing the images to stimulate discussion about the portraits. As you consider each work, it is important to remember that you are looking at a digital reproduction of an original artwork. The scale will generally be different, and neither texture nor colour will be totally accurate:

- Why do you think that artists still choose to paint portraits when photography exists?
- What do you think that a portrait should show?
- Do you think that a commissioned portrait can be as successful as a portrait painted for its own sake, from artistic desire rather than for money?
- How much of the sitter do we see?
- Do you think that it matters if only part of the sitter (eg. head and shoulders) are portrayed as opposed to a full-length portrait?
- Can you tell what medium has been used?
- If you had the choice of commissioning a painting or a photograph of yourself, and money was no object, which medium would you choose?
- How old do you think the work is?
- How long do you think it took the artist to make?
- What is the scale of the original?
- What (if anything) is in the work in addition to the portrait?
- How is the sitter dressed?
- How is the figure lit? Where is the light coming from?
- What type of colours has the artist used? Does this give the portrait a particular kind of emotive quality?
- Is anything particular conveyed to us through the pose of the sitter?
- Is likeness important or do you think that it is sufficient for other aspects of a sitter's personality to be conveyed by means such as colour, scale and symbols?
- Does this make these emotive aspects more important than the purely physical ones?