

## In focus: Sir Anthony van Dyck



A learning resource featuring works from the National Portrait Gallery Collection, one of a series focusing on particular artists whose practice has changed the way we think about the art of portraiture and who have in turn influenced others.

## Introduction

It can be useful to look at developments in portrait painting through the lens of a single, significant artist, appreciating their techniques and innovations, the way that they have been influenced by the advances of others and how in making their contribution they in turn influenced others.

This resource focuses on a limited number of paintings and details taken from them. It includes questions about the practice and historical context of the artist, with suggested lines of enquiry and ideas for classroom activity, plus links for further research. The aim is to support teachers in encouraging students to investigate the artist and their practice in-depth. The narrow focus on a selection of portraits by Sir Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641) enables a concentrated view exploring qualities of his unique autograph style. This resource coincides with the acquisition of his self-portrait for the nation by the National Portrait Gallery and the major three-year national tour celebrating the acquisition. **Van Dyck: A Masterpiece for Everyone** gives visitors in Margate, Manchester, Birmingham, Newcastle, Edinburgh and London the chance to see the portrait and appreciate this important work in the context of British history and art.

The portraits reproduced cover four important areas of portraiture; the self-portrait, the three-quarter portrait, a full-length portrait (that includes an invented exterior setting with symbolic attributes) and child portraiture.

Two of the portraits selected are representative of the special friendship that van Dyck had with Sir Kenelm Digby (1603–1665) who also commissioned van Dyck to paint his wife, enabling us to compare two very different representations.

This resource seeks to explore the following key questions for teachers:

- What made his technique unique and special?
- Who influenced him and how?
- Why is he famed as the greatest portrait painter of his time?
- How did a painter from Antwerp become so significant in the UK?
- What was his impact on future painters?
- What was the impact of his portraiture?
- What is his legacy now?

## General context

Elizabeth I (1533–1603) favoured the miniaturist Nicholas Hilliard (1547–1619), and her father Henry VIII (1491–1547), Hans Holbein the Younger (1497/8–1543), whose portraits evoked people who seem really to occupy the space of the canvas in a three-dimensional way. James I's (1566–1625) wife, Queen Anne of Denmark (1574–1619) patronised artists such as the painter Paul van Somer (c. 1576–1621), architect Inigo Jones (1573–1652) and playwright Benjamin Johnson (1573?–1637). Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel (1585–1646) was an art connoisseur, introducing Sir Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) to King James I and so in turn van Dyck.



**Thomas Howard, 14th Earl of Arundel, 4th Earl of Surrey and 1st Earl of Norfolk**

Sir Peter Paul Rubens  
Oil on canvas, 1629  
NPG 2391



**Sir Anthony van Dyck**

Self-portrait  
Oil on canvas, c. 1640  
NPG 6987

Born in Antwerp, van Dyck was employed in a number of European countries, but stayed longest in England, where he made his home in Blackfriars, London from the beginning of his second visit in 1632, until his death in 1641 (with a break in Antwerp in 1634–5). While his predecessors from the Low Countries and Germany had brought a variety of painting innovations to Britain, it was van Dyck who transformed British portraiture by banishing the stiff Tudor and Jacobean images, and developing his distinctive fluid, shimmering style that came to dominate portraiture in Britain until the early twentieth century. Charles I knighted him and gave him regular work (plus £200 per year from 1633) and this high profile favour secured his status allowing him to expand his artistic vision. Before him, Daniel Mytens (1590–1647), van Somer and Cornelius Johnson (1593–1661) were England's most respected portrait artists.

Van Dyck would paint all of his paintings when they were destined for important clients or close friends, but like others before him, when responding to multiple commissions, he used the services of studio assistants for mixing paint, organising canvases and painting the less important parts of the process. This is what 'after van Dyck' and 'studio of' means in the context of the array of reproductions and versions of the same painting that exist. Both Rubens and van Dyck ran busy studios and recycled successful poses in their commissioned portraits, the generic pose of the seated courtier soldier holding a baton of office in his right hand and a helmet in his left is one that can be traced back to Titian (c. 1485/90–1576).

## Wealth and status

Charles I understood that image was important in terms of communicating power, and in his case what was known as 'The Divine Right of Kings', which meant that he was chosen by his Christian God to rule his country. Today he might be celebrated as someone who had understood the importance of marketing his image and solidifying his brand. Van Dyck provided Charles I with the most up-to-date visual statement of power, in the same way that Holbein had done for Henry VIII.

Wealth and status are communicated in van Dyck's work by lofty architectural backdrops and beautifully rendered fabrics. He updated the equestrian portrait for Charles I, so that the diminutive monarch (who was around 163 centimetres tall) was aggrandised on his horse, forcing viewers to raise their gaze upwards to him. Van Dyck was also close friends with courtier Endymion Porter (1587–1649) and included him in a double portrait (in the Prado Collection) that he painted c. 1635, he showed their hands resting on a stone boulder symbolising their unwavering friendship. Van Dyck became famous for painting hands elegantly, these are often used in portraiture to signify aspects of power and character as in this instance when connected to specific objects. The symbolism of hand signals is ancient and the handprint itself is often used as an identifying mark. For the portrait with Porter, he used an oval canvas on its side, and for his self-portrait he turns the oval upright in the fashion used for miniature paintings.

## Van Dyck, his influence and impact

Famous in his own lifetime, van Dyck's work characterises our image of the court of Charles I. His ability to paint floating silks and elegant men and women is world renowned. Broadly speaking, van Dyck's legacy is associated with that of Rubens and could be described as having 'Baroque energy', their work literally enlivened the art scene. They produced paintings typified by movement and sinuous line later hailed by British born William Hogarth (1697–1764) as, 'The line of beauty and grace'. Specifically, van Dyck gained work experience in Rubens's studio and came to London through connections made here by his master. Both artists originally worked for James I, and on 5 July 1632 during van Dyck's second visit to London, he was knighted by Charles I (becoming 'Sir') and made 'principalle Paynter in ordinary to their Majesties'. This was the highest position for a painter to achieve and on 20 April 1633, he was given a gold chain and medal worth £110.

The self-portrait on which the Hollar engraving is based (see front cover) confirms these accolades by prominently displaying the chain (a public recognition of wealth and status) while the artist points to the sunflower that symbolises his devotion to his patron, Charles I. This image became popular through reproduction as a symbol of the royalist cause. The key to this work is devotional, it signifies dependence on royal patronage and celebrates royal political allegiance. An equivalent image today might be co-opted for a promotional party political tweet. Van Dyck's output has been described as a propaganda machine for the royalist cause. The sunflower is reiterated on the elaborate gold leafed frame that surrounds the National Portrait Gallery's van Dyck self-portrait. The frame is thought to have



**Gerlach Flicke; Henry Strangwish (Strangways) detail**  
Gerlach Flicke  
Diptych, oil on paper or vellum  
laid on panel, 1554  
NPG 6353



**Sir Anthony van Dyck**  
Self-portrait  
Oil on canvas, c. 1640  
NPG 6987



**Thomas Gainsborough**  
Francesco Bartolozzi, after Thomas Gainsborough  
Black and red crayon with pencil and grey wash on paper, c. 1797  
NPG 1107

been specifically designed by him for the painting. Van Dyck's self-portrait is flanked here by two other portraits: on the left, a work on panel painted eighty-six years before and although relatively accomplished, the hand holding the palette is stiff and primitive against a flat, uniform blue background. The date marking and descriptive text at the top links it to the type of portraits with gold embellished headings produced by Holbein. On the other side is a copy of a self-portrait drawing by Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788), which replicates the oval and uses a similar pose to that of his hero, van Dyck. Created approximately 157 years later, this image shows a fashionable ruffled neck bow, straggly hair, alert eyes and a background of two-tone, shadowy grey. If we compare the three we can trace both the stylistic change of clothing and of portrait style. Gainsborough's fluent, confident portrait reflects van Dyck's influence. It is said that he announced on his deathbed, 'I am going to Heaven and van Dyck is of the company'.

Van Dyck's self-image bears a straightforward gaze as he looks us calmly in the eye. There is a melancholy in this painting that permeates much of his portraiture, his sitters possess a kind of delicate abstracted feeling. The paintwork on van Dyck's clothing, contrasting with that on his face and loosely worn hair, is direct and vigorous. He uses the sharpness of the impasto white to energise the composition and the white stripes against the darker fabric of his jerkin convinces us that he is turning himself sideways on, in the pose known as *contrapposto*.

## Portraits of royal children

Van Dyck was also very responsive to children, creating charming group portraits and portraits of siblings that evoke the innocence of childhood. His oil sketches and paintings of children manage to suggest their tender age and innocence (sometimes using symbols) despite the fact that these were royal children wearing formal court dress. Looking at the works reproduced below, we can see how van Dyck revolutionised the art of portrait painting.

Painting children is notoriously difficult and van Dyck had a flair for capturing their animated innocence. The sea change in painting young people is obvious in the following comparison: the early work is naive, tight and lacks modulation; the later work is relaxed, confident and three-dimensional.



**King James I of England and VI of Scotland**

Unknown artist

Late 16th century (1574)

NPG 63

Both paintings employ symbols of power: the hawk represents breeding and an ability to control a bird of prey, while the mastiff, physically bigger than the child, the future Charles II, (1630–1685), is equally important as the hand on its head represents dominance and control of an animal previously used by the Romans as guard dogs. The early work has traditional (for the period) gold text, that of van Dyck has a complex backdrop, and his original (in the Royal Collection) shows the children full length standing on a Turkish carpet. We can also see how fashion has changed in the sixty years that separate the paintings. The high ruff of James I has given way to the elaborate lace of the fallen collar and the clothes in general are less structured. All the children look like tiny adults as their clothes follow the grown-up fashion of the time. Despite this, van Dyck's portraits have a sense of movement and are less formal. The oil sketches (in the Royal Collection) that he made of children are very animated.



#### Five Children of King Charles I

After Sir Anthony van Dyck

17th century (1637)

NPG 267

## Sir Kenelm Digby



**Sir Kenelm Digby**  
Sir Anthony van Dyck  
Oil on canvas, c. 1640  
NPG 486

## Biographical context

Sir Kenelm Digby (1603–1665) was a natural scientist, astronomer and founding fellow of the Royal Society, who wrote the Society's first authorised publication, *A Discourse Concerning the Vegetation of Plants* (1661). His real interests lay in alchemy, researching methods to turn ordinary metals into gold, and a 'sympathetic powder', that could (he claimed) heal a wound by being applied to the weapon that had inflicted it. Digby married Lady Venetia Stanley (1600–1633) against his family's wishes and she died nine years later possibly from drinking his 'viper wine' as a type of beauty elixir, a kind of latter-day Botox equivalent. Digby was a close friend of van Dyck, who painted another portrait of him with a sunflower, a symbolic device he had previously used as a homage to the king. In the 1620s Digby had done naval service and raised funds for the crown (in 1639) and in Paris in 1641, he defended the honour of Charles in a duel with a French nobleman, Lord Mount le Ros. In short, Digby was an all-round 'Renaissance man'.

## The painting

Van Dyck supplemented the training he had received from Rubens when he went to live in Italy between 1621 and 1627. There he studied the techniques and painting compositions of the Italian Renaissance masters, in particular those of Titian. Van Dyck's sketchbook drawings of these paintings is now in the British Museum Collection. When we view the pose used for his friend Digby, we can see it is one derived from Titian's portrait of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V (1500–1558). Both Rubens and van Dyck repeat this formula pose in further images of important men.

Digby is portrayed here as a soldier in armour, one hand resting on a helmet, the other holding a baton of office. The head is at a three-quarter angle with the eyes engaging us directly. The light comes from the left-hand side illuminating his right hand temple, becoming softly modulated with shadowing at the edges to reveal the square shaped head. A different white tint occurs on the simple collar tied high up around his neck that falls onto the collar of the armour. Here the more subtle white absorbs and reflects the light. Yet another type of white occurs in the brilliant lead *impasto* paint that is laid on thickly to suggest the reflection of the grey metal catching the light.

Looking closely we can see active brush marks that indicate the stiff dry quality of the paint that differs from the smooth more oily quality used on the collar and temple. There is an echo in the shape of the softly curled goatee beard and the similarly malleable white linen collar. Both of these are rendered simultaneously soft and stiff by the way the painter gives attention to the detail of shape, form and shadow. These subtleties and Digby's limpid almost melancholic gaze function together giving us a feeling about the quality of Digby's sympathetic character. Overall his figure stands apart from the background (to the left a soft, dark brown colour that turns lighter in tone on the right). Van Dyck's skill in painting communicates the variety of textures from skin and hair to cloth, metal and stone.

## Lady Venetia Digby



**Lady Venetia Digby**  
Sir Anthony van Dyck  
Oil on canvas, c. 1633–1634  
NPG 5727

## Biographical context

Lady Venetia Digby (1600–1633), Kenelm Digby's wife, was noted for her beauty and intelligence. However she was also the subject of scandal, and was said to have been the mistress of Edward Sackville, 4th Earl of Dorset (1591–1652) while engaged to Digby, who was abroad at the time. The tale of Digby's romantic attachment to Venetia and the rebuttal of this rumour are detailed in *Loose Fantasies* (c. 1628, British Library Manuscript Harleian 6758), her husband's memoirs. Lady Venetia died suddenly – possibly after drinking her husband's 'viper wine'. Digby was distraught and van Dyck painted her on her death bed (now in the Collection of the Dulwich Picture Gallery), later writing that this 'is the Master peece of all the excellent ones that ever Sir Anthony Vandike made, who drew her the second day after she was dead; and hath expressed with admirable art every circumstance about her, as well as the exact manner of her lying, as for the likenesse of her face; and hath altered or added nothing about it, excepting onely a rose lying upon the hemme of the sheete, whose leaves being pulled from the stalke in the full beauty of it, and seeming to wither apace, even whiles you looke upon it, is a fitt Embleme to express the state her bodie then was in'.

## The painting

This allegorical portrait in an outdoor setting, was commissioned by Digby after Lady Venetia's death. The focal point rests with her portrayed as Prudence, with her white skin and white slip, but it is hard for the eye not to wander into other parts of the picture. The composition encourages us to circle around, querying what is happening. She is simultaneously being crowned, victorious over vice, while resting her foot on a baby *putto*. Here the actions form part of the story of the work: she is crowned with a circlette of laurel leaves, by the trio of angelic *putti*, who frolic in the sky, swathed in blue silks, fluttering in tune to their wings. Beside her on the ground is the cowering two-faced deceit fixing us with his angry eye, on his head a mask in profile representing envy. The spurned babe represents profane love, seeming to weep through closed eyes, his torch barely alight and his wings clipped.

Venetia herself is resplendent. She caresses a pure white dove, referencing the quotation from the book of Matthew 10.16, 'Behold I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves'. The symbolism is clear: she is purity and wisdom combined, representing the virtue of prudence in a dangerous world of deceit, envy and lies. Her glossy pink satin wrap (painted with red lake pigment) protects and encases her like a royal stole. The fabric shines and glows, rich and opulent focussing our attention on her as a central character. The fabric seems alive, like the snake that slithers across it. This complex work with its variety of different painted surfaces depicts trees, leaves, puffy clouded skies, intricate curls and white feathers. It is the same dimension as the entire portrait of Sir Kenelm Digby, measuring approximately 100 × 800 centimetres. Her face is tiny in comparison to his and starkly white, her neck encircled by pearls created by *impasto* lead white blobs each with their own grey shadow. It is thought that the driving force behind the concept of the composition was Digby himself.

## Comparing painting details

Van Dyck was familiar with the methods and materials used in a large studio where many high-level commissions were being handled. He became a consummate professional having learned how to run such a commercial studio from Rubens. Rubens was not only an artist but also a businessman and diplomat, therefore it was important for him to be able to delegate work efficiently in order to maintain the smooth running of his operation, even when he was out of the country (he lived in Antwerp). All of this training was ingrained in van Dyck's practice at an early age and it can be assumed that he learnt much apart from painting – such as appropriate courtly behaviour – from Rubens.



**Sir Kenelm Digby** *detail, eye*  
Sir Anthony van Dyck  
Oil on canvas, c. 1640  
NPG 486



**Thomas Howard, 14th Earl of Arundel, 4th Earl of Surrey and 1st Earl of Norfolk** *detail, eye*  
Sir Peter Paul Rubens  
Oil on canvas, 1629  
NPG 2391

If we compare van Dyck's technical treatment of the eye with that of Rubens, we can appreciate his less florid, more refined style. Van Dyck's paint is more subtly applied and perhaps this is because Rubens often worked on large-scale wall paintings that needed to be viewed from a distance. His work is often characterised by fleshy bodies and large confident bravura brushstrokes. Both of these paintings are of sitters who were emotionally close to the artists and so we can assume a certain amount of mutual trust and honesty in the process of creating these portraits.



**Sir Kenelm Digby** *detail, mouth*  
 Sir Anthony van Dyck  
 Oil on canvas, c. 1640  
 NPG 486



**Sir Anthony van Dyck** *detail, mouth*  
 Self-portrait  
 Oil on canvas, c. 1640  
 NPG 6987

This second comparison of van Dyck's work shows how even the best creators rely on tried and tested methods of achieving their aims. Firstly, being familiar with a specific angle of pose, and then using a limited array of tones to recreate the features. Under the bottom lip, the goatee beard makes a shadow that heightens the contrast with the brown/pink colouring. Van Dyck uses a variety of earth colours to link the modulated palette of the skin and beard hair.



**Sir Kenelm Digby** *detail, hand*  
 Sir Anthony van Dyck  
 Oil on canvas, c. 1640  
 NPG 486



**Lady Venetia Digby** *detail, hand*  
 Sir Anthony van Dyck  
 Oil on canvas, c. 1633–1634  
 NPG 5727

These details of hands reveal van Dyck's use of a grey ground (coloured under-painting) to help create the illusion of three-dimensions. The original grey colour is painted all over the canvas and used as a mid-tone in his painting. He adds highlights and uses a rich, deep, red-brown (this may be burnt sienna that gets its name from the Tuscan hills surrounding Sienna) to outline form. The earth colours can be clearly seen outlining the hands and their digits in these two examples.

### General enquiry questions

- How did van Dyck revolutionise the art of portraiture in the UK?
- How does portraiture evidence change in fashion and art?
- Why might paintings be painted by more than one person?
- Is it true that van Dyck would paint all of his paintings only when they were destined for important clients?
- How can individual parts of a portrait (like hands) reveal aspects of personality and power?
- In what way did Charles I control his image as a brand? Relate this to contemporary marketing practices.
- Is it only the figure in a portrait that communicates information about the sitter?
- How does the choice of shape and orientation of the canvas affect the final portrait?

### Ideas for the classroom

- Experiment with three different shapes and orientation of canvas (or paper support) for the same image.
- Using collage, investigate the use of different styles of dress on the same figure.
- Do a self-portrait and create three frames for it that are of different colour, texture and shape. How do these frames influence the way we read the self-portrait?
- Do a self-portrait drawing that takes 20 minutes and then swap your work with the person next to you. Now copy their drawing and study the way that their stylistic differences emerge in your own drawing and that yours stay despite copying from something different.
- Investigate new forms of portraiture that use drawing and stop-frame animation. Make your own of a person that you know well. How different is a moving image to a static one?

### Further research

- [npg.org.uk/whatson/van-dyck/tour/full-tour.php](http://npg.org.uk/whatson/van-dyck/tour/full-tour.php)
- [npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp04604/sir-anthony-van-dyck?search=sas&sText=van+dyck&OOnly=true](http://npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp04604/sir-anthony-van-dyck?search=sas&sText=van+dyck&OOnly=true)
- [britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=708557&partId=1](http://britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=708557&partId=1)
- [royalcollection.org.uk/collection/search#/2/collection/404405/the-five-eldest-children-of-charles-i](http://royalcollection.org.uk/collection/search#/2/collection/404405/the-five-eldest-children-of-charles-i)
- [bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/artists/anthony-van-dyck-11005/paintings/slide-show#/5](http://bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/artists/anthony-van-dyck-11005/paintings/slide-show#/5)
- [nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/anthony-van-dyck](http://nationalgallery.org.uk/artists/anthony-van-dyck)
- [tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/17/van-dyck-and-tapestry-in-england](http://tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/17/van-dyck-and-tapestry-in-england)
- [theframeblog.com/tag/mortlake-tapestry/](http://theframeblog.com/tag/mortlake-tapestry/)

### Endymion Porter

- [museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/endymion-porter-and-anthony-van-dyck/4f405157-fc39-45bd-a82f-6e70e978968b?searchid=4cee83b1-af24-3094-09fd-e63d16e06392](http://museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/endymion-porter-and-anthony-van-dyck/4f405157-fc39-45bd-a82f-6e70e978968b?searchid=4cee83b1-af24-3094-09fd-e63d16e06392)

### Sir Kenelm Digby

- [nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/353062](http://nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/353062)

### Lady Venetia Digby

- [dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk/explore-the-collection/151-200/venetia,-lady-digby,-on-her-deathbed/](http://dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk/explore-the-collection/151-200/venetia,-lady-digby,-on-her-deathbed/)

## National Portrait Gallery Learning

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National Portrait Gallery

St Martin's Place

London WC2H 0HE

Telephone:

020 7306 0055

Recorded information:

020 7312 2463



Front cover pictures

Left:

[Sir Anthony van Dyck](#)

Wenceslaus Hollar

Etching, after Sir Anthony van Dyck self-portrait, 1644

NPG D1326

Right:

[Sir Anthony van Dyck](#)

Self-portrait

Oil on canvas, c. 1640

NPG 6987

Back cover picture

Above:

[Anthony van Dyck](#)

After Sir Anthony van Dyck

Line engraving, 18th century

NPG D28264