Teachers’ Notes

THE VICTORIANS
(Rooms 21 – 29)
Portraits as Historical Evidence

These guided discussion notes reflect the way in which the National Portrait Gallery Learning Department works when using portraits as historical sources, with pupils of all ages. As far as possible, pupils are encouraged through questioning to observe in detail and to form their own hypotheses; a small amount of information is fed into the discussion at appropriate points to deepen their observations.

These notes therefore consist of a series of questions, with suggested answers; where there is information to add this is shown in a box. The questions, perhaps slightly rephrased, would be suitable for pupils at both primary and secondary level; what will differ is the sophistication of the answers. The information will need rephrasing for younger pupils and it may be necessary to probe by adding extra questions to get the full interpretation of the picture. Please note we cannot guarantee that all of the portraits in these notes will be on display at the time of your visit.

Please see www.npg.org.uk/learning/digital for these and other online resources. Other guided discussions in this series of online Teachers’ Notes include:

- Tudors
- Stuarts
- Georgians
- Regency
- Twentieth Century and Contemporary

These guided discussions can be used either when visiting the Gallery on a self-directed visit or in the classroom using images from the Gallery’s website, www.npg.org.uk/collections.

All self directed visits to the Gallery must be booked in advance by telephone on 020 7312 2483. If you wish to support your visit with the use of Teachers’ Notes please book in advance, stating which notes you wish to use in order for us to check that the appropriate Gallery rooms are available at the time of your visit.
MARY SEACOLE

by Albert Charles Challen
oil on panel, 1869
9 1/2 in. x 6 1/4 in. (240 mm x 180 mm)
Purchased with help from the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund, and Gallery supporters, 2008
Primary Collection
NPG 6856

What can you tell about her age from this portrait?
Older woman, with some white in her hair; the back of the painting actually has the date 1869 on it, making her about 64 years old.

What is she wearing that might give you some clues about her life?
Her medals from the Crimean War and her red Creole scarf.

What do we call a face viewed from this angle?
A profile; pupils could think about the different possible angles for a portrait and give their opinions.

How would you describe her face?
Lined and wrinkled, shiny skin, quite narrow eyes, red lips and so on.

What sort of expression does she have?
Proud and self-confident, maybe slightly weary; pupils should say how it appears to them.

What might she be thinking about?
Any aspect of her life that pupils choose – her childhood in Jamaica, her boarding house in Kingston, her time in Panama, her work in the Crimea, being welcomed in Britain on her return and so on.

How was the painting found?
The rediscovery of the painting is an amazing story. An art dealer bought a framed print in a car boot sale in Oxfordshire. Puzzled to see a signature and the date 1869 on the board that backed it, he took it out of the frame. This revealed that the ‘backing board’ was actually a painted portrait, with the artist’s signature on the reverse. Without identifying the sitter he sold the portrait again in a local auction. There, another dealer bought it. Because of the date and the medals, to identify the sitter he sent it to a historian working on women in the Crimean War. She at once recognised it as Mary Seacole. She purchased the portrait and very generously placed it on long-term loan at the National Portrait Gallery. In 2008 the Gallery acquired the portrait and it entered the Collection.

How do we know that it is Mary Seacole?
The portrait is of a black woman of the right age to be Mary Seacole, who would have been in her mid sixties when it was painted. There is one known surviving photograph of her, taken a few years later, which shows a very similar face. The miniature medals worn in the portrait are recognisable as the British Crimea, the Turkish Medjdie and the French Legion of Honour. Mary Seacole was known to have received these honours. Additionally, her red scarf is an emblem of her Creole identity. Unfortunately we know very little about the artist and nothing of the circumstances in which the portrait was painted or how it came to be hidden behind the print.

For further information see: http://www.npg.org.uk/assets/files/pdf/learning/NPG_MarySeacole_InFocus.pdf
Which of the people in the picture is Florence Nightingale?
The women near the centre, in the grey dress.

How can you tell it is her?
Looks in command, very visible.

Who is the solider, sitting up on his stretcher, pointing towards?
Florence Nightingale.

How has the artist made her the centre of attention?
Put her near the centre of the picture, dominant pose, shines a lot of light onto her, makes the soldier point at her.

What else is happening in the picture?
Wounded soldiers are arriving.

Does the building look like a hospital to you?
No.

Do you think it would have been comfortable to be in hospital here?
No.

How do wounded soldiers get to the hospital?
On foot, helped by their comrades.

Why do you think they have to walk up the hill?
No ambulances.
What other signs are there that they are short of supplies?
Handkerchiefs used for bandages.

How can you tell that the painting is not in England?
Mosques in the background, costumes of people to both sides.

What is the weather like?
Sunny, looks hot.

How has the artist used the dogs to show that it is hot?
Lying down, exhausted.

Do you think that the artist asked all these people to remain still while he painted this scene?
No.

How do you think he would have worked?
Making sketches and then using them to paint his picture later.

He also painted himself in to the picture; he is not a part of the main scene, but has shown himself watching what is happening.
Can you find him?
Looking through the window.

Why do you think that he put himself in?
To show that he was really there, authenticating the scene that he painted.
‘THE SECRET OF ENGLAND’S GREATNESS’

by Thomas Jones Barker
oil on canvas, circa 1863
66 in. x 84 1/8 in. (1676 mm x 2138 mm)
Purchased, 1974
Primary Collection
NPG 4969

There are issues about racial attitudes raised in this picture which teachers may wish to discuss in greater depth with pupils - these notes merely concentrate on the portrait as an historical source.

Who can you identify in the picture?
Victoria and Albert, behind Albert is a lady in waiting, the two politicians are Lord Russell - taller, and Lord Palmerston – shorter.

From which part of the world does the Prince come from?
Africa, suggested by his appearance and the leopard skin.

How can you tell that he is a Prince?
Rich fabrics and fur, jewels, dagger.

Why is the Queen Victoria connected with Africa?
British Empire, she rules part of it.

What is actually happening?
Victoria is giving the African Prince a Bible.

Where is Victoria looking?
At the Prince.

Where is the Prince looking? At the Bible.

Who is the most important person in this picture, and how has the artist made them look more important than anyone else?
Queen Victoria. Size, light on her, at front of the picture, Prince kneeling to her, her active role.

On her wrist she wears a cameo portrait of an older man (not Albert) - who might that be?
Her father.

Where is the whole picture meant to be happening - in England or in Africa?
What clues suggest this?
England - furniture and surroundings; preponderance of English people, Queen Victoria being shown as the most important person in the picture.

When it was painted this picture was called “The Secret of England’s Greatness” - what, according to the picture, is the secret of England’s greatness?
The Bible.

What does it tell you about Victorian attitudes towards religion?
Pre-eminence of Christianity.

What does it suggest about Victorian attitudes towards other cultures?
Seen as inferior to Britain.

The event shown in this picture did not, as far as is known, ever actually happen - so why did the painter paint it, do you think?
Sums up a very powerful Victorian idea.

Do you think the painter agreed with the attitudes shown in the picture?
Yes, almost certainly.

This painting was very popular and was reproduced a lot - why do you think that was?
The painting shows beliefs which were widely and strongly held in Victorian times - also it is an attractive, colourful image, with a touch of exoticism.
Is the portrait of the Brontë Sisters as well painted as the other portraits in these notes?
No, clearly not.

In what ways are the faces less skilfully portrayed than in other portraits?
Skin colour, poor use of light and shade, eyes set very wide apart, not three dimensional in appearance.

There is a part of the body which the painter has deliberately and very obviously hidden - what is it?
Hands - some hidden behind the table, Charlotte’s under a book.

Does the furniture in the room look real?
No - the table is extremely sketchy.

What has happened to this portrait since it was painted?
Folded up.

How many folds were made?
Three.

Why do you think the picture was treated like this?
Because it was a poor work of art.

This is one of the National Portrait Gallery’s most famous portraits - why do you think this is?
Because of the sitters - from left to right Anne, Emily and Charlotte Brontë.

Look carefully at the lighter vertical strip running between Emily and Charlotte - what can you see in this area?
Another head.

Is this male or female?
Male.

Who might it be, do you think?
Their brother, Branwell.

What has he done to his portrait after painting it?
Painted over his own head.

Why can you see it now?
The paint had thinned over time.

Why do you think Branwell might have wanted to paint himself out of the picture?
Dissatisfied with his own life, wasting his talents on drinking and drug-taking.

Does this look like the kind of portrait that would have been used as a frontispiece for the Brontë sisters’ books to show what the authors looked like?
No.

What reasons can you give for your answer?
Obviously a poor portrait would be unsuitable. Also, the Brontës had to publish under male pseudonyms, to get their work accepted, like Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell.

What does this tell you about early Victorian attitudes towards women?
Despite having a woman monarch many Victorians felt women were incapable, the Brontës helped to change this attitude by proving that women could be successful writers.
What is Landseer doing?
Making sculptures of lions.

Where are the lions now?
Trafalgar Square, London.

What are the Trafalgar Sq. lions made of?
Bronze.

Is Landseer working in bronze in the portrait?
No.

What do you think he is using?
Clay.

Describe how the clay sculptures would have been used to make the bronze lions?
Landseer would have made a mould from the clay sculpture, and then poured molten bronze into it.

Where do you think Landseer went to see the real lions?
The zoo at Regents Park. There is a story that the lion at the zoo died before Landseer had finished his obversations so he had to base his lion’s paws on a pet cat’s.

What did he do to help him remember what they looked like?
Drew them and put the drawings on the studio walls.

What is lying on the floor on the left of the picture?
A lion skin.
How does this portrait show that Dickens is a writer?
Desk, books, paper etc.

What is Dickens actually doing in the portrait?
Thinking, waiting for inspiration.

How has the artist shown this?
Light on the face, head tilted bad, expressionless.

How do modern comic books show that someone has an idea?
A light bulb above his/her head – this is the same sort of technique as in Dicken’s portrait.

During his childhood Dicken’s family were so poor that he was sent out to work; what tells you that he is now better off?
The type of clothes, the room, the furniture, curtains.
The photograph was taken in 1857, at the launch of Brunel’s ship “The Great Eastern” into the River Thames; what does the photograph show you?
Brunel standing in front of large chains.

Why has the photographer not included the whole ship?
It was too big - Brunel would have appeared far too small in the picture.

How has the photographer shown that the ship is massive in size and weight?
The size of the chains, and the way they fill the entire background of his picture.

The photographer has used the chain as a symbol of power; what does this tell you about Brunel?
Suggest his skills to have created such a huge ship.

What is in focus (clear and sharp, not fuzzy) in the photograph?
Brunel - the type of cameras available at the time produced this effect.

Was Brunel aware that the photograph was being taken?
Yes - the size of the camera and the length of time he had to remain still meant that he had to be aware - not looking at the camera is a deliberate decision, not an accident.

How would you describe the expression on Brunel’s face - does he look worried?
No, he looks relaxed and confident although later the launch actually went very wrong.

What else, besides his face, makes him look relaxed?
His pose, hands in pockets, and chewing the cigar.

Is he wearing his best clothes or his working clothes?
Working clothes - look at the mud on his trousers and shoes.

What is he telling you about himself by choosing to wear working clothes on this important occasion?
That he is going to join in the action, that he does not mind getting his hands dirty.

The photographer was sent by a newspaper - why do you think this was?
To record a major feat of engineering; “The Great Eastern” was five times larger than any ship previously built, so its launch was news.

In what way is this photograph different from a modern newspaper photograph?
In colour and shape - Victorians liked sepia (brownish) prints, and curves rather than corners.

Do you think that this photograph is more real than the painting of Florence Nightingale at Scutari?
It shows an actual moment of historical time, but the pose, expression and background have been carefully chosen so in many ways it is just as composed as the Scutari painting.