

## ‘Abstract’ portraits



A learning resource featuring works from the National Portrait Gallery Collection, one of a series focusing on particular artists or themes which has changed the way we think about the art of portraiture.

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## Introduction

This resource looks at the broad themes encapsulated in the idea of an 'abstracted' portrait and questions whether such a portrait is possible and viable.

A variety of themes group different types of portraits that could be termed 'abstract'. The portraits selected in this resource are all in the Collection of the National Portrait Gallery. The resource is aimed primarily at teachers of pupils studying GCSE and A level art. Those studying art history may also find the images, concepts and discussions of relevance to their study. The content aims to give teachers information on the significance and stories of the sitter and artist, the purpose of the image and its impact at the time, and to examine connections between those sitters, artists and their images.

The general enquiry questions together with themes and ideas for further discussion between teachers and students are designed to encourage ways to research, develop and record ideas and personal responses.

Finally, there are web links for additional research. This resource complements and supports the learning programmes developed by the National Portrait Gallery.

### 'Abstract' portraits in context

Can men and women be represented in 'abstract ways'? Is the essential function of a portrait that it communicates what the sitter looks like and that it can be used for identity purposes? If this factor is subverted and the portrait no longer has this function, can it be true to the genre? Recognisable features from distinctive and famous faces can help make an 'abstract' portrait look more realistic and believable. In the 'abstract portrait' the reliable aspects of portraiture such as verisimilitude (appearing realistic) are not primary requirements and so qualities such as atmosphere, colour and paint surface emerge as the focus. Aspects of a sitter are emphasised depending on the media used for the portrait and other examples are included as comparisons.

## 1: A conceptual portrait



### A Geonomic Portrait:

#### Sir John Edward Sulston

Marc Quinn

Sample of sitter's DNA in agar jelly  
mounted in stainless steel, 2001

NPG 6591

These dark ochre spots suspended in jelly are the results of an inward voyage of discovery, a quest to map and sequence years of research towards discovering the make-up of the 'Human Genome'; all of the genes (known as the genome) of our species Homo Sapiens. This genetic blueprint for building a human being was completed in 2003, and the leader of the UK team was Sir John Sulston (b.1942). Computer coding lies behind much of the way that we operate in the world today, and knowledge of human sequencing has had spiralling effects on our known world, often in ways that we cannot see with the naked eye. Although we might comprehend the science and be familiar with images that communicate it to us, we often accept things at 'face value' without question (for example, we have the impression that we 'understand' fractals because we have seen pictures of them). Conceptual portraits such as this break through the boundaries of traditional thought and portraiture.

**Context: when, where and who created it and why?**

This unusual portrait made in 2001, was created by Marc Quinn in collaboration with scientist and Nobel prize winner (2002) Sulston, because he is world-renowned for his work on the Human Genome Project that decoded human genetic sequencing. It could not have been created without Sulston's involvement as Director of the Wellcome Trust Sanger Centre (until 2000). Sulston used standard methods of DNA cloning, saying 'there is ample information in it (the portrait) to identify me uniquely' (NPG archive correspondence). Marc Quinn was chosen for this commission because of his previous work using biological material. Quinn's self-portrait, *Marc Quinn ('Self')*, NPG 6863, known as 'Blood Head', was later acquired for the Gallery. This work is reiterated every five years (see Quinn's [website](#) for further details).

**Content: what do we see, how is it made?**

Sulston is portrayed as a suspension of microscopic matter in yellowish jelly displayed on a flat stainless steel support. The darker ochre spots appear randomly on the surface. The colonies of a sample of Sulston's DNA (taken from a semen sample) were precipitated in agar jelly, each spot in the portrait is a clump of bacteria containing part of the DNA.

**Analysis: what can we deduce from it?**

The Sulston portrait is literally the genetic substance of the person who discovered the science of gender sequencing shown here as spotty marks in the agar jelly. 'It is the absolute reiteration of the sitter's identity', Sulston says, 'We have very similar DNA and yet we have very specific differences that make us individual' (NPG archive correspondence). The Gallery was required under the provisions of the Human Tissue Act to obtain consent from the living for the storage and use of the human tissue for display, this was given by Sulston on 25 September 2006. This law is designed to protect the individual from misuse of genetic material.

## Comparisons

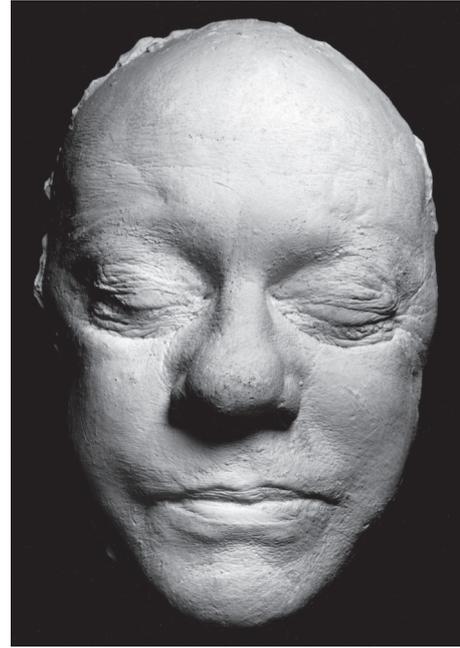
Further examples of abstract three-dimensional portraits such as the life mask by Marc Quinn and the death mask by Roy Noakes of Alan Rawsthorne might be considered to be 'true' portraits, but these lack the vitality of the eyes (said to be 'the window to the soul'). The mask can be used to verify and reflect the accurate scale and physical modulation of a person's three-dimensional face. These artifacts result from a three-dimensional print or impression taken directly from life with clay or other soft material, results look either asleep or blank because the eyelids are closed. The death mask is an immediate and final cast, each crease in the jowl is an echo of the original, this is exact verisimilitude without colour. The scale is absolute and the result is utterly lifeless yet fully real.

© Marc Quinn. Photography by Todd-White Art Photography, courtesy White Cube, London



### Marc Quinn ('Self')

Blood (artist's), liquid silicone, stainless steel, glass, perspex and refrigeration equipment, 2006  
NPG 6863



### Alan Rawsthorne

Roy Noakes  
Plaster cast of death-mask, 1971  
NPG 6333

## 2: Dominant features

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### Edith Sitwell

John Banting  
Gouache, 1943  
NPG 5962

This painting in gouache offers a stylised image of poet Edith Sitwell (1887–1964) drawing attention to the stark angularity of her features. There is a recurrence of the shape of her hooked nose that is echoed in the black triangular eyes. The work purports to be of a sculpture as the whitish head sits on a round plinth. Colour and brushstroke create the atmosphere within a work and can communicate information about the sitter represented.

### Context: when, where and who created it and why?

John Banting's painting was inspired by a piece of bone. He had a habit of collecting and anthropomorphising bones. He thought that the angular found object resembled Sitwell, and decorated it with glass eyes, mounting it on a plinth, jokingly adding a notice, 'Portrait of Edith Sitwell. Price £1,000'. This sculpture belonged to fellow artist Barbara Ker-Seymer who recounted the story and mentioned that Virginia Woolf remarked in her diary that Edith was 'like a clean hare's bone that one finds on a moor with emeralds stuck about it' (letter from NPG archive 1987).

**Content: what do we see, how is it made?**

There are no clues communicating that this is a portrait of a poet. The painting in gouache on board shows grey shadows suggesting the modulation of the 'face' and the nose is clearly outlined. The open space behind the 'portrait' could be interpreted as a peachy yellow sunset sky or as abstract coloured background. The brushstrokes of the background are horizontal with similarly directional marks to the centrally-spaced head.

**Analysis: what can we deduce from it?**

Like artists' styles of painting, sitters can also have their own 'trademark look'. Here both Banting's love of bone structure and Sitwell's features combine to create an unusual Surrealist portrait. In fact, this work was lent to the Dada and Surrealism exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in 1978 before it was acquired by the Gallery.

**Comparison**

Sitwell's distinctive features are recorded in the drawing by Wyndham Lewis that was described by Sitwell's brother Sacheverell (in a letter to David Piper, 2.8.1966, NPG archives) as Lewis's 'best drawing but not inspired by love, but hatred – though I don't know why'. Her hat and clothes feature as adjunct to the overall angular pattern of the image.

© Wyndham Lewis and the estate of the late Mrs G. A. Wyndham Lewis by kind permission of the Wyndham Lewis Memorial Trust

**Dame Edith Sitwell**

(Percy) Wyndham Lewis

Pencil, 1921

NPG 4464

### 3: Mixed media and text



Copyright © Estate of Roland Penrose / National Portrait Gallery

Above:

**Sir Roland Algernon Penrose**

Self-portrait (1900–1984)

Mixed-media on paper, c. 1948

NPG 6388

Left:

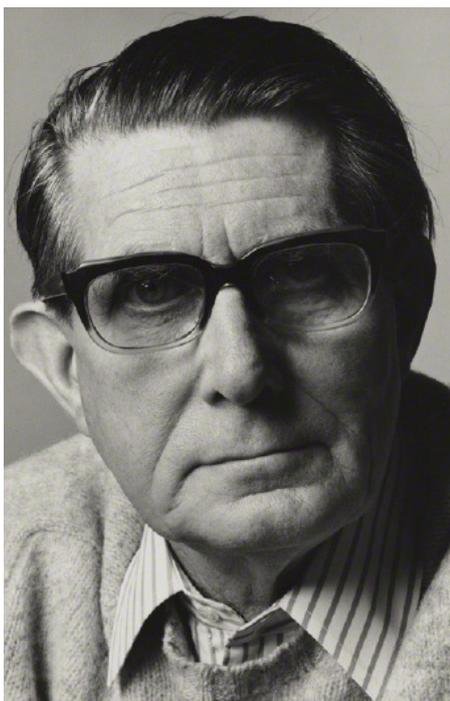
**Roland Penrose**

Adrian Flowers

Bromide print on card mount,

October 1970

NPG X4168



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Roland Penrose's mixed media self-portrait reflects his broad range of interests in art, literature and technique. He was an artist, writer, poet and art collector. His first wife Valentine Boué was a French poet and his second, Lee Miller, an American photo-journalist and artist. He was also a supporter of the Spanish Republican cause and involved in fund raising for the anti-fascist forces. A Surrealist, he was instrumental in organising the London International Surrealist Exhibition 1936 and during World War II taught and researched aspects of camouflage.

**Content: what do we see, how is it made?**

Pencil outlines the chunky letters of the artist's name – ROLAND. This lettering is displayed vertically and is reflected as if in a mirror, emphasising the idea of the self-portrait. The 'O's of 'Roland', form eyes and the space between the reflected 'A's makes a backdrop for a blue-coloured mouth. He signs the work in yellow crayon in mirror-writing in the bottom right-hand corner. This schematic face looks more like a cartoon dog than a person; the piece feels spontaneous. The background is a busy mix of print and flat watercolour. There is evidence of wax resist underneath the range of browns, yellows and venetian red. A flurry of darker paint frames the head and links to a background of mesh-like print. Is it the artwork itself that is an equivalent to a self-portrait?

**Context: when, where and who created it and why?**

The artist and critic Roland Penrose (1900–1984) was friends with avant garde artists including painters Pablo Picasso, Max Ernst, Georges Braque, Joan Miró, and the Surrealist poets André Breton and Paul Éluard. He relayed their innovations to like-minded artists here in Britain through exhibitions, writing and the Institute of Contemporary Art which he founded a year after he created this self-portrait. At a time without internet, visual information travelled slowly and people were obliged to visit exhibitions in person in order to see and appreciate new trends in painting.

**Analysis: what can we deduce from it?**

A range of materials creates a reciprocal selection of different types of portrait. As a self-portrait it bears no resemblance to Penrose the man, but it does spell his name out in letters emphasising his artistry as well as his identity. Leonardo da Vinci felt that all of his output was a kind of self-portrait commenting, 'Ogni dipintore dipinge se' ('every painter paints himself') (L. Rideal, *National Portrait Gallery Insights: Self-portraits*, NPG, 2005, page 7). In a sense Penrose is claiming the same thing. This portrait also has an echo of camouflage about it, reflecting Penrose's work in World War II.

**Comparison**

The photograph (page 8) shows Penrose in close-up. We can use this image of him to identify his glasses, thin lips, determined stare and sticking-out ears. We also get a sense of the squareness of his head.

#### 4: Pattern and form



**(John) Peter Warren Cochrane**

Howard Eliot Hodgkin  
Oil on canvas, 1962  
NPG 6888

The sitter, Peter Cochrane, a gallery director at Arthur Tooth and Sons, kept this portrait from the time it was painted in 1962–63 until it was acquired by the National Portrait Gallery in lieu of tax in 2010. Howard Hodgkin held his first solo exhibition at Tooth's (as it was known) in 1962. Hodgkin became one of Britain's most successful artists representing the UK in the 1984 Venice Biennale, winning the Turner Prize in 1985, he became a Knight in 1992, a Companion of Honour in 2003 and had a Tate retrospective in 2016.

**Content: what do we see, how is it made?**

The work tries to push the idea of the abstract oil painted portrait, subsuming it into expressions of colour and surface brushwork. Paul Moorhouse (NPG curator of twentieth century portraits) suggested that the portrait was loosely derived from the famous World War I recruitment poster of Lord Kitchener, pointing his finger with the caption 'Your country needs you'. The sitter almost appears to be part of a board game, with dots for eyes and a snake-like shape for his pale ovoid pate.

**Context: when, where and who created it and why?**

During the 1950s and 60s, Peter Cochrane (the sitter) was responsible for bringing international artists to London including Jean Dubuffet, Asger Jorn and Ellsworth Kelly. British artists Allen Jones, Peter Kinley and Howard Hodgkin were also championed by Cochrane.

**Analysis: what can we deduce from it?**

The small portrait shows how artists experiment with the picture plane in order to test out colour variations, styles of painting, composition and here a plain background colour against pattern. The 'light bulb' head is stark against the more uniform orange backdrop, the complementary colours of green and orange are enhanced by the white rectangles. The round forms balance the straight lines.

**Comparisons**

These three works further expand the different painterly approaches to using oil-paint in portraiture. Freud's unfinished painting gives a notion of three-dimensionality through the tonal and sequential brush marks. The horizontal direction of the darker background brush-marks propels the painted head into the foreground, the lighter tints activating the surface. The swathe of atmospheric warm colours in the Rawsthorne portrait seems to represent a head with a shirt collar, with an additional head behind the first form, making the backdrop mirror-like. This type of paintwork is in direct contrast to the raw impasto of the Bomberg that also employs very dark outlines and textured chiaroscuro.

**Alan Rawsthorne**

Isabel Rawsthorne  
(néé Nicholas)  
Oil on canvas, 1966  
NPG 6175



© The Lucian Freud Archive

**Lucian Freud**

Self-portrait (unfinished)  
Oil on canvas, c. 1985  
NPG 7019

**Self-portrait with pipe**

David Bomberg (1890–1957)  
Oil on board, c. 1932  
NPG 6653

## 5: Mass and material



[Sir \(Francis\) Osbert Sacheverell Sitwell, 5th Bt](#)

Frank Owen Dobson, 1994 (1922)

Bronze

NPG 6321

Artistic developments in painting in the early twentieth century fed into the evolving position of sculpture. Changes in overall artistic perceptions and technological developments also affected the traditions of sculpture as a discipline. This work bears the strict angular hallmark of the innovations of Cubist forms, the radical re-working of visual idioms in scale and medium.

### Content: what do we see, how is it made?

The original plaster model was rescued from Frank Dobson's studio after the blitz and described by T. E. Lawrence as 'the finest portrait bust of modern times'. Made from delineated polished bronze, the head sits on a plinth, soft rounded contours contrasting with the geometric angles of the rectangular stand. The reflections animate the piece creating contours that communicate further movement.

### Context: when, where and who created it and why

In 1920 Dobson exhibited alongside [Wyndham Lewis](#) with 'Group X' (see page 7 for Lewis's drawing), he was the only sculptor included. Dobson and Sitwell became neighbours in the 1920s after the former moved from Cornwall to Chelsea. Osbert (the middle Sitwell sibling) sat nearly every day for the bust, over a three-month period from the end of 1921.

### Analysis: what can we deduce from it?

Dobson was regarded as the successor to Henri Gaudier-Brzeska who was killed during World War I. This position was ratified by critic Roger Fry who wrote in the *Burlington Magazine* (1925), that Dobson created 'true sculpture and pure sculpture', taking the debate away from formal portraiture. Does the character of cast bronze or the sitter communicate calm confidence?

### Comparisons

Other sculptures offer alternative senses of volume, proportion and materials such as a diagonal plinth and a green patinated surface. The portrait by Moody gives us some insight into the empathy that can exist between blood-brothers who are artist and sitter respectively. Renée Mendel first modelled from life in clay, then in wood from photographs of Joyce and sittings from a friend who resembled the writer. She called the sculpture *The Intellectual, or Man with Umbrella*.



[Sir William Turner Walton](#)  
[Maurice Lambert](#)  
Bronze head, c. 1925  
NPG 5913



[Harold Moody](#)  
Ronald Moody  
Bronze head, 1997 (1946)  
NPG 6380



[James Joyce](#)  
Renée Mendel  
Wooden statuette, 1934  
NPG 5883

### General enquiry questions

- 1 Why might an 'abstract portrait' be considered an impossible concept?
- 2 How does colour affect the form of the portrait?
- 3 Which aspect of an 'abstract portrait' do you consider to be the most important? Line, colour, tone, volume and why?
- 4 Without an exact likeness of the sitter, what might be the key challenges for an abstract portraitist?
- 5 Would the choice of medium have greater significance for an 'abstract portrait' than that of a more traditional portrait?

### Themes and ideas for further discussion

- 1 Abstraction and scale
- 2 Abstraction and the 'unseen'
- 3 The abstract mark
- 4 Constituent materials of abstraction
- 5 Form and mass in abstraction

## Further research

An NPG resource: *The practice of portraiture* (information and activities for secondary school art teachers). The abstract portrait is the focus on page 3:

- [npg.org.uk/assets/files/pdf/teachers-notes/NPGTeachersNotes\\_PracticePortraiture.pdf](https://npg.org.uk/assets/files/pdf/teachers-notes/NPGTeachersNotes_PracticePortraiture.pdf)

Glossary of materials:

- [npg.org.uk/collections/explore/glossary-of-art-terms/glossary-of-art-terms-a.php](https://npg.org.uk/collections/explore/glossary-of-art-terms/glossary-of-art-terms-a.php)

Painting in Style Webquest:

- [npg.org.uk/webquests/launch.php?webquest\\_id=22&partner\\_id=portrait](https://npg.org.uk/webquests/launch.php?webquest_id=22&partner_id=portrait)

Roland Penrose:

- [tate.org.uk/art/artists/sir-roland-penrose-1755](https://tate.org.uk/art/artists/sir-roland-penrose-1755)

Wellcome Collection:

- [wellcomecollection.org/exhibitions/medicine-now](https://wellcomecollection.org/exhibitions/medicine-now)

The Human Genome:

- [genome.gov/10001772/all-about-the--human-genome-project-hgp/](https://genome.gov/10001772/all-about-the--human-genome-project-hgp/)

British Library National Sound Archive:

- [bl.uk/subjects/sound](https://bl.uk/subjects/sound)

A brief history of abstract art:

- [tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/brief-history-abstract-art](https://tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/brief-history-abstract-art)

Marc Quinn's self-portraits made of frozen blood:

- [marcquinn.com/artworks/self](https://marcquinn.com/artworks/self)

## National Portrait Gallery Learning

For more information about the varied programme of school's events and learning resources see:

[npg.org.uk/learning.php](http://npg.org.uk/learning.php)

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*Front cover picture:*

**Alan Rawsthorne**

Isabel Rawsthorne (*née* Nicholas)  
Oil on canvas, 1966  
NPG 6175

*Back cover picture:*

**Dame Edith Sitwell** *detail*

(Percy) Wyndham Lewis  
Pencil, 1921  
NPG 4464