



Interpreting historical portraits

GRADES 9–12

Art Historians can find clues in century-old portraits to learn about the sitter and the purpose of the painting. Explore *Portrait of a Woman* with the following activities:

Art Activities

Make a self-portrait

Draw a self-portrait with at least three clues to facts about you. Maybe you're wearing a sweater that says the country your grandparents emigrated from or holding a paintbrush because you love to make art! Trade portraits with a peer and see if they can guess some of these clues and what they mean to you.

Update *Portrait of a Woman*

Using what you have learned about portraits, create your own interpretation of this painting in a modern style. Today, how might she communicate that she is young or wealthy? Imagine that you are making a modern betrothal portrait. What would someone want to know about their betrothed and what might someone want to communicate?

Create a mixed media portrait

Use several different materials such as paint, paper, glitter, sand, pastels, fabric and more to create a portrait of yourself or a friend. Use materials that interest and inspire you. Start by making a sketch as a guideline for your portrait before experimenting with different media.

If you'd like to extend the lesson beyond visual art, here are some other activities:

Write about a portrait sitter (language)

We've included images of some other portraits in Agnes's collection at the end of this document. Choose a portrait that interests you and write down a list of prominent details you notice. This could include their clothing, expression, details in the background and more. Imagine you're the portrait sitter; write a diary entry about your day leading up to having your portrait painted. Use descriptive language to portray the physical elements of the portrait but also how the sitter might be feeling or acting. Read your story to a peer and try to see how your interpretations of the portraits differ.

Make a resource map for *Portrait of a Woman* (geography)

Take a map of the world and mark down where the materials depicted in *Portrait of a Woman* might have come from: the lace, coral beads, gold, paint and more. You'll need to research where these materials originate from and common trade routes in the 1600s. Trace the trading route that each material might have followed, keeping in mind that there were no planes, and land travel took a long time! Consider who was involved in making or gathering these materials and how this trade may have affected them positively and negatively. Extend this activity by making a second map showing where similar materials are made today. What things has modern technology changed the most when it comes to the availability of resources and the ease of trade?



Glossary

Lace scallops: Lace scallops are a painstakingly hand-made lace trim, used in clothing and accessories. They are made using very fine thread and needles or bobbins to make patterns out of practically nothing. The lace patterns on the edge of the collar are likely from the Burano region of Venezia.

Coral Beads: Coral beads, once thought to be plants, are a form of organic red gemstone, made from the exoskeletons of tiny organisms called coral polyps. Red coral, as seen in the red beads on the front of the gown are harvested deep in the Mediterranean Sea. Over 75% of coral beads come from this area. They are thought to be powerful accessories, symbolic of youth and fertility.

Medici collar: The stiff, standing collar, made from mesh from India. It was typically worn between the 16th and 17th centuries, and is held aloft by internal wiring, or heavy starches. Its purpose aimed to draw attention to the face, neck, and jewelry of its wearer.

Betrothal: An engagement to be married, often formal and for political purposes.