

National Portrait Gallery

Self-Portrait Commission Project



Teachers' Notes

Information for a KS4 Self-Portrait Project

This project sets students the task of creating a self-portrait and following a commission brief from the National Portrait Gallery. These project notes are based on a term-length Year 10 project put together by a teacher at Acland Burghley School working with the National Portrait Gallery through the *engage* Watch This Space teacher placement.

The project is divided into two parts. The first part looks at the idea of a formal portrait, while the second part looks at the concept of a fictive portrait and the different ways each can be realised. These notes can be used for guidance for another project in its entirety or parts of it can be used for smaller art activities around the themes of portraiture and identity, formal portraiture, commissioning portraiture or self-portraiture.

Self-Portrait Project for Y10 GCSE in Applied Art and Design

Introduction: Commissioning Portraits

The National Portrait Gallery has commissioned contemporary portraits of people who have made a significant contribution to British history and culture since 1979. The Gallery has commissioned 140 portrait paintings, sculptures, drawings and works in mixed media, and about 120 photographs. The first commissions were of members of the royal family, politicians and other establishment figures, but in the last decade or so figures from the performing arts, sport, intellectuals, trade unionism and charities have also been commissioned.

Project Objectives

- To enable students to identify and make links between historical and contemporary art practices.
- To develop students' understanding of 2D visual-language and its codes and conventions when applied to portrait images.
- To develop students' abilities to use constructions of the self as a starting point to generate original work and to be able to recognise how other artists do this.
- To develop students' ability to successfully manipulate and control 2D media, processes and technologies.
- To extend students' understanding of the vocational possibilities within the field of painting and photography.

Project Brief

You have been commissioned to create a 2D self-portrait for display at the National Portrait Gallery in London. You have been asked to submit 2 images: one should be a **formal portrait** for public display; the other should be a **fictive portrait** for your private use.

Formal Portrait – A formal portrait in this context is a naturalistic representation of a person that includes symbols about the sitter's status and personality, but concentrates on the image of the sitter. Historically the portrait derives from the idea of how a sitter should be presented to the public.

Fictive Portrait – A fictive portrait in this context is a representation of a person that could be surreal or abstract. It can draw on the same symbolism as a formal portrait but stresses a more personal idea of the self and focuses on aspects of a person's life rather than a naturalistic rendering of the sitter.

Consider the NPG

What is the National Portrait Gallery? What kind of images does it collect and display? Who (which members of society) are represented in the gallery?

Consider Art & Design

Where do you see portrait images? Who makes portraits? Why? How do we use them? Where do you go to see them? Why are/ how are portrait images important?

Formal Portraiture The Public Self



Oil on canvas, 2413 mm x 1524 mm
Bequeathed by Viscount Dillon, 1932
NPG 2561 © National Portrait Gallery, London

Elizabeth I 'The Ditchley portrait' by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger (c.1592)

This portrait is a good example of a traditional painted portrait and is known as the 'Ditchley Portrait' since Elizabeth is standing on Ditchley, the house of her courtier, Sir Henry Lee. It commemorates Elizabeth's visit to Ditchley in September 1592.

Elizabeth was 59 when this was painted but looks much younger. She stands on a map of England, signifying that she rules it, which in turn sits on a globe with ships and sea monsters in the sea. The globe is a sign of her imperial powers, while the stormy weather on one side of the painting and the calm on the other is a symbol of Elizabeth bringing England through tumultuous times to calm and peace.

Class Discussion

Using the above portrait and/or others get the students to discuss portraiture and identity. Draw attention to the way in which Elizabeth's public image is intertwined with that of England. Below are some suggestions to initiate debate.

- Identity – interests, hopes, aspirations, culture, music, food, habits, emotions, beliefs,

friends, family history, race, gender, skin colour, time lived, objects important to you.

- What do you associate with British identity?
- How is identity recorded? – ceremonial photographs, family albums, objects, diaries, birth certificates, passports, id cards, snap shot photographs, text/picture messaging.
- How can you visually explore identity in a portrait? – hair, make up, style, clothes, fashion, experiences, body language, poses, props, location.
- How do you want to appear? And to who? What would you want to communicate about yourself to everyone? How would you promote your achievements and aspirations in a portrait for public display?
- What can you learn about how others in the past have visually communicated ideas about their public persona? Look at symbols and codes together with pose, costume, jewellery and objects.

Programme of Study

1. Consider – Commissioning a Public Portrait

Divide the students into groups and ask them to create a visual and keyword map of what portraits and identity mean to them. Ask them to

think about why people commission portraits of themselves.



Oil on Canvas: 2215 x 1687 mm
Purchased by the NPG in 1967
NPG 4574 © National Portrait Gallery, London

Thomas Hope by Sir William Beechey (1799)

Hope stands in Turkish dress (gold turban, red and green cloaks, richly embroidered waistcoats, brown trousers, red slippers, a long pipe in left hand, right hand on the hilt of a dagger tucked into a cummerbund) against a background reminiscent of Istanbul with minarets and cypresses.

Thomas Hope (1770 – 1831) was an art collector and connoisseur, who was born in Amsterdam. He was immensely wealthy due to his family business, which was based in Holland, but his real passion was for travel and art. In 1787 Hope made his first journey to Italy and spent the rest of his life studying art in countries around the Mediterranean. Hope travelled extensively in the Islamic Ottoman Empire, today known as Turkey, and while there Hope wore local dress and abandoned his Christianity.

Hope moved his family to London in 1799 after the French occupied Holland and bought a town

house on Duchess Street where he exhibited the art works he collected to the public. This portrait was commissioned by Hope to be on display along with his art collection.

William Beechey (1753 – 1839) was a portrait painter who worked between 1776 and 1839. He was a successful artist who attracted royal commissions and worked in the style of Joshua Reynolds.

Questions:

What can you see in this portrait of Thomas Hope?

Why do you think the artist paints Hope in this way and in this setting?

Why do you think Hope commissioned Beechey to paint him and put this portrait on public display in his house?

Formal Portraiture The Public Self

2. Research, Collect & Explore

Moving on from the class discussion, ask the students to research different kinds of portraits using a variety of resources (internet, magazines, newspapers, artbooks) thinking about and finding examples for these questions: What is a portrait? Who makes them? What different uses are there for them? How is the sitter's identity portrayed?

After the above research, Students are to choose 6 different examples of portraits, which should



be a mixture of traditional and non-traditional images of painted and photographic portraits. Students are to present the portraits with analysis, clearly explaining their understanding of them and making comparisons between them, looking at medium and context.

Use this portrait as an example of a historical portrait in which the artist was commissioned to present the private life of a man (an intellectual thinker) for both a public and a private purpose (a marriage portrait and to accompany a publication).

Oil on canvas, 879 x 641 mm
Purchased by the NPG in 1992
NPG 6179 © National Portrait Gallery, London

John Evelyn by Robert Walker (1648)

John Evelyn commissioned this portrait of himself in 1648 to accompany a treatise on marriage that he had written for his 13-year-old wife Mary Browne. It shows Evelyn in antique dress holding a skull, an emblem of *vanitas*, which was substituted for a miniature of his wife some years after the portrait was finished. The Greek motto 'Repentance is the beginning of wisdom' and a Latin quotation from Seneca on preparing for death was also added.

John Evelyn (1620 – 1706) was a writer and scientist, best known for his diaries that provide a fascinating commentary on the Civil War and Restoration of the monarchy. Evelyn became one of the founder members of the Royal Society (a scientific group) in 1661. Evelyn was also a Royalist, though he later disliked public life and thought the court corrupt.

Vanitas refers to a genre of still-life painting in which skulls represent the transience of earthly pleasures and this genre can be used in portraiture to suggest the inevitability of death for sitter, artist and viewer.

Robert Walker (1599 – 1658) was a portrait artist who worked during the Civil War and was generally favoured by Parliamentarians, though he used the style of the Royal painter, Van Dyke.

Questions:

What image of himself do you think Evelyn has asked Walker to portray and why?

Why do you think Evelyn had the skull and quotations added later?

Does he look like he is concerned with 'worldly' matters? Does he look like a scientist?

Formal Portraiture The Public Self

3. Practice: The Face

The main feature of a formal portrait in western art from about 1500 has been a naturalistic likeness of the sitter's face. Ask students to look at the importance of the face in the portraits they have collected.

Introduce students to the formal process of creating a proportionally accurate drawing of the face. Use A4 pencils, with measuring notes. Students can then apply understanding with an A1 charcoal drawing.

Continue the focus on the face through photography. Work with lighting and digital cameras so that students can explore the way that facial expression can convey aspects of character. Get students to work in pairs and

make photographs of each other, exploring and documenting a wide-range of emotions.

4. Stories and Portraits

Ask students to collect and bring in portrait images of themselves, their family and extended friendship networks. These should include, where possible, images of previous generations in their families. These images will be photocopied and scanned and used (with their earlier photographs of the face) to create a series of composite images using collage and a range of painting-media.

The following portrait was commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery. Get the students to think about how the sitter is portrayed and why the portrait was commissioned.



Oil on linen: 1219mm x 1219mm
NPG Commission
NPG 6352 © Estate of Bhupen Khakhar

Salman Rushdie the Moor by Bhupen Khakhar (1995)

Salman Rushdie is portrayed in the centre of the painting surrounded by scenes from his novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh*.

Salman Rushdie (b.1947) is a critically acclaimed and popular writer in English, though he was born in India. His best known novel is *Midnight's Children* which won the Booker Prize in 1981. His novel *The Satanic Verses* is infamous for its alleged blasphemy against the prophet Muhammad and being the cause of the Fatwa issued by the orthodox Islamic leadership of Iran

in 1989, which was essentially a death sentence. It is significant that Rushdie is pictured within the creative imagination of scenes from his novel *The Moor's Last Sigh*. Rushdie's portrait illustrates the power that words and the imagination can have in the political and religious world.

Bhupen Khakhar (1934 – 2003) was an Indian artist based in Baroda. Khakhar produced narrative paintings drawing on pop art and traditional forms of Indian and western art.

Formal Portraiture The Public Self

Salman Rushdie the Moor: A Formal or Fictive Portrait?

This is an example of a formal portrait commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery to be kept for posterity and to be displayed to the general public. However, rather than illustrating Rushdie's status and ideas in terms of dress or symbols, Khakhar positions Rushdie in the centre of one of his fictional worlds.

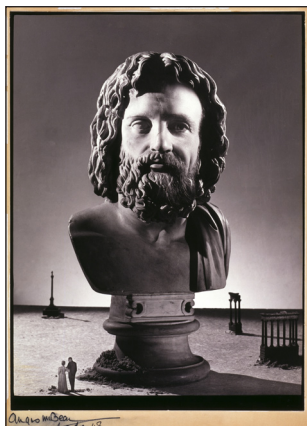
Khakhar was a friend of Rushdie and this portrait does not glamorise Rushdie's appearance but presents him, like a Byzantine Icon, in the centre of one of his fictional creations. The image of the Rushdie is not naturalistic and draws on traditional forms of Indian narrative art. The ideas of formal and fictive portraiture are here merged.

5. Evaluate and Practice: Oil Painting

Students are to review their portrait images and evaluate the messages conveyed and the application of their practical skills and techniques. Students should identify the most successful aspects of their work and then create one final composite image using PhotoShop. This image will then be realised as a finished oil painting to fulfil one half of the brief for a self portrait from the National Portrait Gallery.

Students have an introduction to working with oil paint, learning how to manipulate and handle the paint. These skills will then be applied to their final composite image. Printed on to acetate and projected using an OHP on to canvas, students will work on this painting as their final outcome.

Fictive Portrait The Private Self



Bromide print 394 x 292 mm
Purchased by the National Portrait Gallery in 2001
NPG P935 © Estate of Angus McBean

Angus McBean by Angus McBean (1948)

The photographer Angus McBean has transposed his face onto that of portrait bust in the Greco-Roman style. The bust is set in a miniature landscape of classical ruins and two small figures so that it is larger than life.

Angus McBean (1904-1990) began his career in the theatre as a mask-maker before becoming a full-time photographer in the 1930s. The Surrealist Exhibition in 1936 was an influence on McBean's portraits and McBean is well known for his theatrical portraits from the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1960s McBean photographed the Beatles for their first album. McBean produced self-portrait Christmas cards between 1934 and 1985 and the image above is one dating from 1948. McBean used theatrical props in the composition of these cards to create a fictional and frequently surreal image of himself to send to friends and business associates.

Class Discussion

Use the McBean portrait to look at the difference between creating an image for the public and a private image for use with friends, family and business acquaintances. The points below help explore what a fictional self can be and how it is represented in visual culture, particularly through photography.

- What is fictional/ imaginative self – does it draw on the reality of a job or profession, or personal stories? Can it be idealised or mythologised?
- How can you manipulate the way you look? Look at actors, idols, film/ TV/ sport/fashion/ art/ science/ music, theatre.
- Consider leaders, whether political or religious icons, business or other examples of leadership – how do they present themselves? Do you think they present a public or private face, or one that draws on both?
- Why do you think artists are particularly interested in presenting a private and/or fictional form of themselves to the world?
- Photography – what is the process of photography? Who does it involve? Audience, sitters, photographer – who are they?
- What is involved in manipulating images – think about budget, stylists, hair and make-up, models, props, producer, photographer, film, processing, lighting, cropping/ framing/ scale.

Fictive Portrait The Private Self

Programme of Study

1. Consider – Creating a Fictive Portrait

Working in groups, ask students to create a visual and keyword brainstorm exploring what a fictional self could mean and looking at how private selves can be displayed in portraiture.



Use the image of Paul Merton as stimulus for discussion around the idea of the public/private self and portraiture.

Bromide print 250 x 240 mm
Given to the NPG by Trevor Leighton in 1994
NPG x47390 © Trevor Leighton/ National Portrait Gallery, London

Paul Merton by Trevor Leighton (1994)

Paul Merton is holding a rubber dolphin so that it almost covers him.

Paul Merton (b.1955) is a comedian most well-known through his performances as a team captain on *Have I Got News For You* from 1990. Merton was previously a comedy writer and a regular stand-up at The Comedy Store. Merton's humour, as seen in *Paul Merton - The Series*, combines surreal stories, sight gags and improvised quick fire repartee. Paul Merton hosts *Room 101* and continues to be a team captain on *Have I Got News For You*.

Trevor Leighton (b.1957) is a photographer who specialises in portraiture and fashion

photography. He is well known for his Jokers series of photographs of comedians and comedy writers.

Questions:

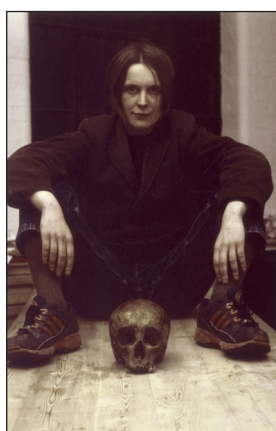
How does this image capture a sense of Paul Merton's public persona?

Merton's comedy is based on his quick and surreal humour delivered in a deadpan 'normal' style. Do you think there is a contradiction between Merton as comedian in the public eye and as a private individual? Which image of Merton does this portrait display?

Fictive Portrait The Private Self

2. Research, Collect & Explore

Extending earlier studies of portraits, students are to research photographic images of one person/character. These portraits should aim to show a range of different expressions and be made by different photographers in different contexts. Ask students to consider the following in the portraits they have collected: background,



Sarah Lucas ('Self-Portrait with Skull') by Sarah Lucas (1997)

Sarah Lucas wears jeans and trainers and stares out at the viewer with a skull between her legs.

Sarah Lucas (b.1962) is an artist well known for her large-scale collages, photographs and arrangement of everyday objects in unusual poses. This image is one of twelve self-portrait images in which Lucas appears in a different guise, for example holding a fish or crouching on a toilet, and is known as the *Vanitas* image due to the use of a skull.

lighting, props, body language/ facial expression, scale/ cropping/ framing, why the portrait was made and who for (was it commissioned by the sitter?).

Compare and contrast this image with the earlier portrait of John Evelyn (or use alone). Both portraits could arguably be portraits of a skull, or vanitas, as much as the sitter.

Iris print, 737 x 482mm

Given to the National Portrait Gallery by Sadie Coles HQ in 2001
NPG P884(8) © Sarah Lucas, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London

Questions:

Do you think this is a public and/or private image of the artist?

Look at the clothes and expression of the sitter and think about whether she looks feminine or masculine? Or worried about the inevitability of death?

Matthew Collings has suggested that Sarah Lucas's self-portraits convey a sense of emptiness. Is that the case in this image? Why?

Fictive Portrait The Private Self

3. Practical Exercise: The Figure

Introduce students to the formal process of creating a proportionally accurate drawing of the body. Use pencil, with measuring notes. Students then apply their understanding to series of quick poses in A1 charcoal drawings.

Follow the formal drawing exercise with a digital photography workshop in which students use lighting, props, hair, makeup, and dramatic expression (of face and body) to make images of each other. The aim is to help students develop



Madame Yevonde by Madame Yevonde (1940)

On the left hand side is a still life composition made up of photographic chemicals and camera lens. Yevonde sits in a gold 'old-master' frame holding a film negative. At the top of the picture is one of her 'Goddesses' pictures and represents Hecate, who was the goddess of the underworld with powers in sorcery and dark magic in Greek mythology.

Madame Yevonde (1893 – 1975) was an innovative portraitist and leading colour photographer in Britain, achieving great renown in the 1930s for her use of the Vivex colour process. Yevonde's motto was 'be original or die!' This self-portrait draws on her work as a photographer and presents an image of her as a modern Hecate, with photography as her dark arts. It is also a vanitas portrait with butterflies, symbols of the quickness of time and life, flying around her image.

their visual understanding of the ways in which they can use exaggeration/ disguise to explore fictional selves. Get students to work in pairs and make photographs of each other, exploring and documenting a wide-range of poses.

4. Stories and Self-Portraiture

The image below may help students to think about how the background, framing and presentation can be used in their final fictive portrait.

Colour dye transfer print, 378 x 305 mm
Purchased by the National Portrait Gallery in 1995
NPG P620 © Yevonde Portrait Archive

Questions:

Do you think the portrait is haphazardly ordered or are all the props carefully positioned?

What framing tools are used in this portrait?

How is Yevonde's identity seen in the portrait?

Ask the students to think about the background or location in which the sitter chooses to be photographed and how that conveys ideas about their identity. Ask them to source a range of different backgrounds in ICT so that they can analyse the effect of inserting their self-portrait photographs into a setting using PhotoShop.

After creating a suitable backdrop, students can continue to work in PhotoShop to experiment with their images using cropping and framing tools. Ask them to evaluate how the meaning of a photographic image can change through this process and whether such changes aid the presentation of identity in a portrait.

Fictive Portrait The Private Self

5. Evaluate and Practice: Fictive Portraiture

Students should review their fictional photographic self-portrait to reflect on the messages conveyed within their work and the application of their practical skills and techniques.

Having identified the most successful aspects of their work students should then create one final composite image using PhotoShop. This image should reflect an idea (or ideas) about themselves and their interests that they would either want conveyed to a group of people they know and/or to convey an image about themselves as an artist.

Bibliography

Books

- Sandy Nairne and Sarah Howgate, *The Portrait Now* (National Portrait Gallery, 2006)
- Susan Morris, *A Teacher's Guide to Using Portraits* (English Heritage, 1992)
- Liz Rideal, *Insights. Self Portraits* (National Portrait Gallery, 2005)
- Jacob Simon, *Icons and Idols: Commissioning Contemporary Portraits* (National Portrait Gallery, 2006)
- Matthew Collings, Sarah Lucas (Tate Publishing, 2002)
- Terence Pepper, Angus McBean *Portraits* (National Portrait Gallery, 2006)

Websites

- *Icons and Idols: Commissioning Contemporary Portraits* exhibition page on the National Portrait Gallery website <http://www.npg.org.uk/live/woiconsidols.asp>
- A Drawing Self-Portraits resource <http://www.npg.org.uk/live/edbowen.asp>
- A KS1 and KS2 resource but useful as links the portrait collections in the Bowes Museum, Compton Verney, The Holbourne Museum of Art, Waddeson Manor and the Wallace

Collection <http://www.museumnetworkuk.org/portraits/>

- Dryden Goodwin's website – a contemporary artist who recently completed a NPG commissioned portrait of Stephen Redgrave <http://www.drydengoodwin.com/drawing.htm>
- The web page of the National Portrait Gallery in America, a good comparison to British collecting <http://www.npg.si.edu/>
- The icons of England website is an interesting starting point with which to consider English cultural identity <http://www.icons.org.uk>

Groups at the Gallery

Learning Services book group visits from schools, colleges and adult organisations. We require a minimum of two weeks notice for visits. Groups are defined as ten adults/children or more

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