

Portraiture: People & Places in Time

Teaching Resource

Ages: 8+ (Grades 3–12)

Materials needed:

- Paper
- Pencil, marker, crayon, or pen
- Access to a mirror
- Ruler (optional)
- Materials for adding color to portrait scenes (optional)

Duration: 1 hour (includes one 15-minute activity and two 20-minute activities)

Essential Questions:

- What is a portrait? What is a self-portrait?
- What are some traditional portraiture techniques? What are some of the different artistic mediums that can be used to create portraits?
- How does an artist use colors and shapes when building a portrait?
- How does an artist use stance and expression to communicate a specific emotion or emotions in a work of portraiture?
- What can a portrait of a person or group of people tell us about a specific time and place?



Image: John White Alexander (American, 1856–1915). *Azalea (Portrait of Helen Abbe Howson)*, 1885. Oil on canvas. Gift of Mrs. Gertrude Farnham Howson, 1974 (74.19.6).

Part 1: Introducing Portraiture

Portrait painting, or **figural** painting, is a fine art genre in which the intent is to depict the visual appearance of the subject, typically a person (sometimes multiple people or even an animal). Portraits in different **mediums** and **contexts** help us understand the **social history** of different times. In addition to painting, portraits can also be made in other mediums such as **woodcut**, **engraving**, **etching**, **lithography**, sculpture, photography, video and digital media. Historically, portrait paintings were made primarily as memorials to and for the rich and powerful. Over time, portrait-making has become much easier for people to do on their own, and portrait **commissions** are much more accessible than they once were.

Every portrait is a story about a person or group of people, told without words. These artworks give us details about specific people and offer us clues about their emotions, interests, and the time and place in which they live or lived.

Look at portraits in the [HRM Collection](#):

- Rigoberto Torres, [Keon and Jeanine](#), 1995
- Sylvia Sleigh, [Invitation to a Voyage](#), 1979–99
- George Segal, [Man Leaning Against a Wall of Doors](#), 1968
- Jacob Lawrence, [The Studio](#), 1996
- Mary Frey, [Girls Sunbathing](#), 1979–83
- John White Alexander, [Azalea \(Portrait of Helen Abbe Howson\)](#), 1885
- Red Grooms, [The Bookstore](#), 1979

Look at portraits in our historic home [Glenview](#):

- Unknown photographer, [Portrait of Emily Norwood Trevor](#), ca. 1915.
- Harper Pennington, [Portrait of John Bond Trevor](#), 1893.
- Henry Augustus Loop, [Portrait of Mr. Christian Henry Lilienthal](#), 1873



Left: Rigoberto Torres (American, b. Puerto Rico, 1964). *Keon and Jeanine*, 1995. Painted plaster. Museum Commission, 1995. Right: Red Grooms (American, b. 1937). *The Bookstore* (detail), 1978–2008. Mixed media. Museum Purchase, 1980 (80.4.1).

Part 2: Discuss

Choose two of your favorite images and look again.

What is going on in these images? What do you see?

Can you tell what medium, or material, the artist used to create this work?

What makes you say that?

What details do you notice about the subject or subjects?

How do you think the subject(s) feel? What makes you say that?

What more can you find?

What questions do you have about the person or people shown in the artwork?

Further Resources for Educators & Parents

Portrait — Art Terms from the Tate

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/portrait>

Portrait — A selection of artworks and essays from the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* related to portraiture.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/keywords/portrait/>

Blind Contour Line Drawing Lesson — Mr. Otter Art Studio

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sADUGO0e_DO

Drawing a Human Face — Articco Drawing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBK6iKYEySw>

Part 3: Sharpening the Mind's Eye (Activity 1)

Duration: 15 minutes

Materials needed:

- Paper
- Pencil, marker, crayon, or pen

Introduction:

Visual artists use close observation skills in their work, both before they create and in the act of creating. Artists have to closely observe another person's face, features, **expressions**, **stance**, and surroundings when creating a portrait so they can tell the most detailed story possible about that person through imagery.

Blind contour drawing is a method of observing a subject closely while warming up your drawing hand. Just like practicing catching a ball, this activity will help you strengthen your eye-mind connection, and artists never stop working out this “muscle”! In a contour drawing, you are focusing on the main shapes and outline of your subject versus small details and the background setting. You also try NOT to look at your paper while you draw, and the drawing should be quick!

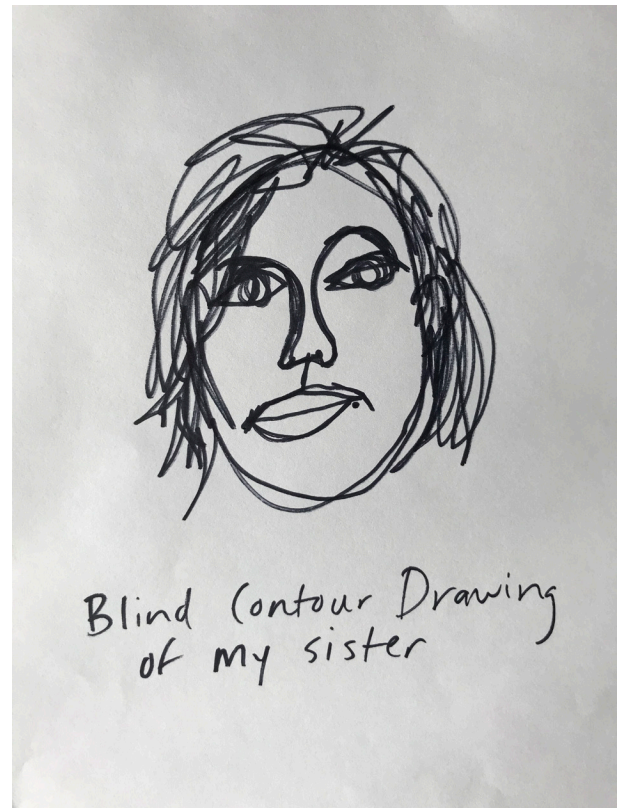
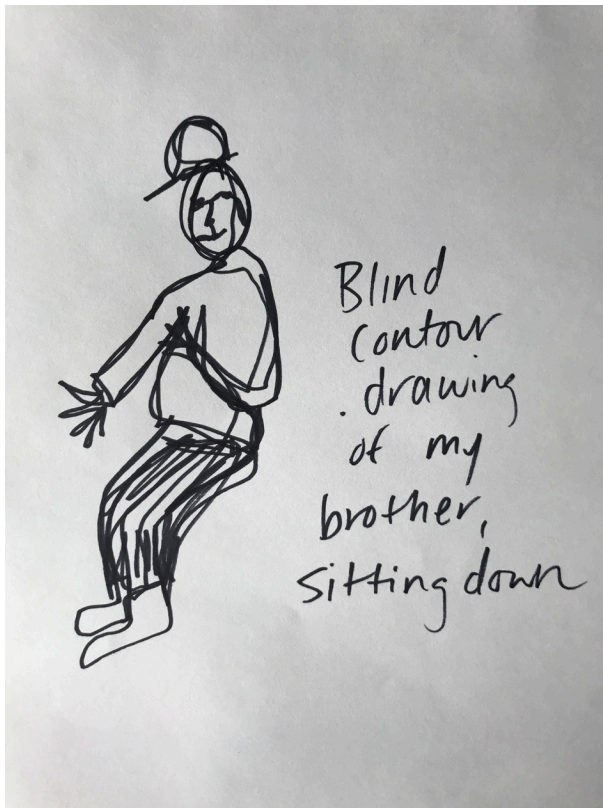
Procedure:

1. Find someone in your home who can be the subject of your contour drawing. If no one is available, you can look at a photograph of someone or even use an image of a character in a book or graphic novel.
2. Ask your subject to sit or stand, and find a comfortable place for yourself to work.
3. Use your pencil, pen, marker, or crayon to draw your subject's face. Look closely at your subject, not at your paper! Try to look at your paper no more than THREE TIMES during your whole drawing exercise.
4. For an additional challenge, try to draw your subject using only one continuous line—don't lift your pencil from the paper at all!
5. Your blind contour drawing portrait does not have to look exactly like your subject, and probably won't. Don't worry—this is to help you with your mind-hand muscle development.

6. Make as many contour drawings as you like. You can ask your subject to experiment with different facial expressions or **body language**. What do they look like when they feel happy? What do they look like when they feel bored? What about when they are confused, sad, or excited? Try doing a contour drawing of the face first, and then try one that includes the rest of your subject's body.

Share your work:

Take a photo of your contour drawing(s) and post to Instagram using the hashtags #MuseumFromHome and #Portraiture, and tag @HudsonRiverMuseum.



Left: *Blind Contour Drawing of My Brother Sitting Down* by Bridget McCormick

Right: *Blind Contour Drawing of My Sister* by Bridget McCormick

Part 4: Draw a Selfie (Activity 2)

Duration: 20 minutes

Materials needed:

- Paper
- Pencil, marker, crayon, or pen (colors optional)
- Access to a mirror
- Ruler (optional)
- Art Factory's [The Proportions of the Head](#) Guide

Introduction:

Self-portraiture is a type of portrait-making where the subject of the artwork is the artist themselves. Today, one of the most common ways people create self-portraits is by taking a selfie on a smartphone. Taking a selfie takes only a second, but in this activity you will take time to closely observe the subject (YOU!) and think about facial proportion and symmetry as you work.

Procedure:

1. Gather your paper and your chosen drawing medium (pencil, marker, crayon, etc.)
2. If you have access to a small handheld mirror, have it with you at your drawing space. Otherwise, try to work near a mirror of some kind—even in the bathroom!
3. Take time to study your own face. What details can you notice about your facial proportions? What do you notice about your different facial features? Experiment with some expressions that you make when you have different moods or reactions. How do those expressions change your features individually? How do those changes affect the whole appearance of your face?
4. For this self-portrait, you will draw your face at eye level—exactly the level you see when you look in a mirror.
5. Warm up with a blind contour drawing of your own face. Start to make the connection between observing your face closely and your hand.
6. Begin your self-portrait after reading through the information in the reference guide to The Proportions of the Head. Try out the method recommended in this guide first.
7. Work on your self-portrait slowly.
8. If you like, do more than one version, experimenting with how you add in features of your face.

Share your work:

Take a photo of your self-portrait drawing(s) and post to IG using the hashtags #MuseumFromHome and #SelfPortrait, and tag the Museum.



Self-Portrait by Bridget McCormick



Part 5: Portrait in a Scene (Activity 3)

Duration: 20 minutes

Materials needed:

- Paper
- Pencil, marker, crayon, or pen
- Coloring materials (optional)

Introduction:

Although many portraits or self-portraits focus on the subject only, other artworks that feature human subjects include people within a more detailed scene. In this activity, you will think about a place where you like to spend time, either alone or with others, and you will create a work of **genre art** that highlights the details of this scene, activity, and/or the objects that are found in this specific place.

Procedure:

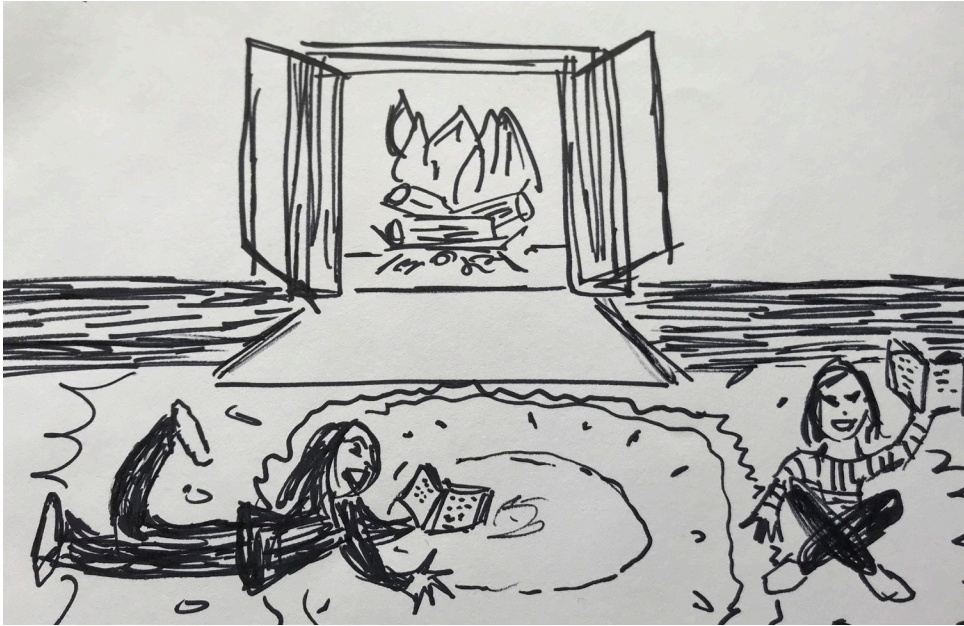
1. Start by looking for examples of portraiture in your home, like a family photograph or digital photo album.
 - What medium was used to create these portraits?
 - Who are the subjects of the portraits?
 - What about the portraits can give you a clue about when they were created and why they were created?
2. Brainstorm about a portrait that is missing from those around you.
 - What is a place and/or everyday activity that is important to you that needs to be represented? Is this a place inside your home and an activity that you do during this era of social distancing? Is it something that you usually do outside your home and want to celebrate and share?
 - What are details about the setting you can consider incorporating into your work? Do you need to include specific items or accessories to help your viewer truly understand the context of your portrait, or represent what is important to you?
 - Are you the only person, or are others part of the visual story?
 - If a viewer were to look at this drawing 100 years from now, what clues would you include so they could understand the full story of the year 2020?
3. Using the medium of your choice, sketch your scene. You can experiment by starting with the figure(s) involved, or by drawing the setting itself first. Add as much detail as possible. If you like, add color to increase detail for your viewer.

Share your work:

Take a photo of your finished portrait and post to IG using the hashtags #MuseumFromHome and #GenreArt, and tag @HudsonRiverMuseum.

Worksheet: Portrait in a Scene

Describe a scene from your own life, a moment that is important or that you would like to remember and celebrate. Who is there? What does the space look like? What is happening? How do you feel? What was everyone doing? Write out these ideas before you complete your drawing?



Reading by the Fireplace by Bridget McCormick



William McCloskey (American, 1859–1941). *Feeding Dolly (If You Don't Eat it, I'll Give it to Doggie)*, 1890. Oil on canvas. Gift of Mrs. Lillie H. Seaman, 1925 (25.97).

Part 6: Glossary

Blind contour drawing: A drawing exercise where an artist draws the contour of a subject, only briefly looking at the paper.

Body language: A type of a nonverbal communication including facial expressions, body posture, gestures, eye movement, touch and the use of space that express or convey information.

Commission: In art, a commission is the act of requesting the creation of a piece, often on behalf of another.

Contour: An outline, especially of a curving or irregular figure or shape; it also can mean the line representing this outline.

Etching: A picture made by putting ink on an etched piece of metal and then pressing paper against the metal. To etch means to carve.

Expression: A look on someone's face that conveys a particular emotion.

Eye level: The view seen when the level of a person's eyes looks straight ahead.

Figural art: Art that consists of, or forms, human or animal figures.

Genre art: The pictorial representation in any media of scenes or events from everyday life, such as markets, domestic settings, interiors, parties, inn scenes, and street scenes.

Group portrait: A portrait depicting more than one person.

Lithography: A printing process that uses a flat stone or metal plate on which the image areas are worked using a greasy substance so that the ink will adhere to them, while the non-image areas are made ink-repellent.

Medium/media: The material(s) that are used to create a work of art.

Observation: To look at something carefully and at length.

Portrait: A painting, photograph, sculpture, or other artistic representation of a person, in which the face and its expression is predominant.

Portraiture: The art of creating portraits.

Proportion: The relative size of parts of a whole (elements within an object). In portraiture, proportion of the head refers to the relative size of features like eyes, ears, nose, and mouth in relation to the surface of the face and shape of the head.

Self-portrait: A portrait of an artist produced or created by that artist.

Social history: History that focuses on the everyday experiences and lives of people.

Stance: A person's posture or the way they stand or sit in a portrait.

Symmetry: In art, correct or pleasing proportion of the parts of a thing. A human face is generally symmetrical.

Woodcut: A print of a type made from a design cut in a block of wood.

Part 7: Standards

Common Core Learning Standards

English Language Arts

Reading Informational Text:

Key Ideas and Details: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4-8.1

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4-8.10

Foundational Reading Skills:

Phonics and Word Recognition: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RF.4-8.3

Fluency: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RF.4-8.4

Writing:

Texts Types and Purposes: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4-8.1-2

Research to Build and Present Knowledge: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4-8.7-9

Speaking and Listening:

Comprehension and Collaboration: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4-8.1-3

Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.4-8.4-6

Language:

Conventions of Standard English: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.4-8.1-2

Knowledge of Language: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.4-8.3

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.4-8.4-6

Literacy in History and Social Studies

Reading:

Key Ideas and Details: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1-3

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.10

New York State Learning Standards

The Arts

Standard 1: Creating, Performing and Participating in the Arts

Standard 2: Knowing and Using Arts Materials and Resources

Standard 3: Responding to and Analyzing Works of Art

Standard 4: Understanding the Cultural Contributions of the Arts

English Language Arts

Standard 1: Language for Information and Understanding

Standard 3: Language for Critical Response and Expression

Social Studies

Standard 1: History of the United States and New York