



# LESSON #1 Identifying Portraits

## VOCABULARY WORDS

**PORTRAIT:** A WORK OF ART (A DRAWING, PAINTING, PHOTOGRAPH, SCULPTURE, OR ANY OTHER REPRESENTATION) OF A PERSON, A GROUP OF PEOPLE, OR EVEN AN ANIMAL

**SELF-PORTRAIT:** WHEN AN ARTIST HAS CREATED A REPRESENTATION OF THEMSELF

*Portraits are supposed to "look within," but in my opinion very few people have an interior significantly different from the outside portrait."*

~Jon Witcomb

## WHAT IS A PORTRAIT?

A **portrait** is a work of art (a drawing, painting, photograph, sculpture, or any other representation) of a person, a group of people, or even an animal. The most common type of portrait is of a person. A **self-portrait** is when an artist has created a representation of him or herself. Throughout history, portraits were used to keep records of family members and even government rulers and leaders. The first portraits date back to ancient times. Some of the oldest surviving portraits are funeral paintings of people who had died in Egypt. Later, artists began to make portraits of different members of society. Traditionally, portraits were only made for the wealthy and powerful people in society. Eventually artist began to create portraits of themselves and of people who weren't considered to be rich or influential.

## WHAT MAKES A GOOD PORTRAIT?

Portraits usually show what a person, also known as the subject, looks like as well as revealing something about the subject's personality. Many historic portraits show the subject with a serious expression on their face. It was believed that a serious face would show an expression of good character and moral quality. To give the viewer a better idea about the subject's occupation, interests, or social standing, artists will sometimes include symbolic images in the portrait. Images like household objects, animals, plants and books give the viewers hints about the subject's character, religion, personality, and social status. Portraits also vary in size, some are relatively small while others are extremely large and were made to hang in a large room or even in a museum.

## WHAT ELEMENTS GO INTO THE CREATION OF A PORTRAIT?

Portraits can take a long time to complete and often it requires the subject to sit in front of the artist several different times. Portraits can show the subject in a full body, half length, head and shoulders, or head view. The subject can also be in a profile (or side view), half turn, three-quarter, or full face position. The subject can also be clothed or nude; indoors or out; standing, seated, or reclining; or even mounted on a horse. The artist must consider these factors before beginning work on the portrait.

One issue that portrait artists have dealt with for many, many years is whether or not to depict a subject in their true likeness or whether to enhance their features to be shown in a more flattering manner. Some artists have made it their practice to create a realistic portraits, showing the details and imperfections of the subject. Other artists have chosen to create more flattering portraits, while others have focused on one particular quality or trait of the subject in their portraits. Portrait artists will continue to capture the image and likeness of people for many years to come.

LOOKING AT PORTRAITS

Using your knowledge about portraits, let's examine a few.



*Untitled*, Mischa Askenazy, oil on canvas, 1943

This is a portrait created by Mischa Askenazy and is part of the Carnegie Art Museum's permanent collection. Take a few minutes to examine the portrait and then on a separate piece of paper, complete the instructions below.

1. Describe the posture and position of the sitter in this portrait.
2. Describe, in detail, the expression on the subject's face. In your opinion, what is the subject thinking?
3. What does the clothing say about the subject?
4. What do you think the sitter does for a living? What part of the portrait makes you think that?
5. What makes this portrait unique? Are you interested in this portrait?

Now let's compare Askenazy's portrait with another portrait by artist Sherry Loehr, which is also part of the museum's permanent collection. On your separate piece of paper, complete the instructions below.

6. Compare the posture and position of the subject in Loehr's portrait to that of the sitter in Askenazy's portrait. How are they similar? How are they different?
7. Describe, in detail, the expression on the subject's face. In your opinion, what is the subject thinking?
8. What does the clothing worn by Loehr's sitter tell you about the subject?
9. What do you think the subject does for a living? What part of the portrait makes you think that?
10. Choose one of the portraits and write a letter as if you are the subject. The letter can be written to a friend or family member explaining what is taking place in your/subject's life, what they are feeling, and what will happen in the near future.



*Late Afternoon*, Sherry Loehr, acrylic on paper, 1997