

Looking at Portraits

What is a portrait?

The word portrait has been said to derive from the French “trait pour trait” which means both ‘line for line’ and ‘trait for trait’. This neatly summarises two essential aspects of a portrait, it should resemble the sitter’s external appearance accurately ‘line for line’ but also show their internal character ‘trait for trait’.

A portrait is like a piece of theatre. The costume, props and staging can tell you much about the sitter and the artist. These guidance notes use a theatrical framework and aim to help you get a richer experience when you look at portraits.

1. Staging

- Costume: What is the sitter wearing - a uniform, best or casual clothes, fancy dress, jewellery?
- Props: What is the sitter holding? What other objects are shown in the portrait?
- Scenery: Where has the painter placed the sitter?

2. Character

- Is the ‘sitter’ sitting or standing?
- What does the sitter's body language tell you (relaxed/uncomfortable)?
- What aspects of the sitter's character can you infer from the portrait?
- Where is the sitter looking?

3. The Artist

- What materials (media) has the artist used?
- What type of brush strokes has the artist used, is the paint thick with bold brush strokes or smooth with finer brush strokes?
- What colours are used and why?
- How has the artist used symmetry, lines and shapes to convey character?
- Are there repeat patterns (echoes) in the portrait?

4. Viewer Experience

- Is the sitter close or distanced from you the viewer?
- Does the portrait evoke an emotional reaction/feeling in you?

Group Portraits

When looking at group portraits the above framework is relevant. But in addition, look at the positioning of each person in the group and what that tells you of the relationships between them.

Edward McGuire (1932 -86)

Portrait of Seamus Heaney 1939 – 2013 (1974)



1. Staging

The sitter is wearing neutral clothes that are hard to date and that do not distract. (Heaney himself said these were clothes he had never owned.)

The book, table and tablecloth are the only props and they sit between the sitter and the viewer. The formal country house setting and the view of birds and leaves outside the windows give a slightly surreal atmosphere to the portrait. McGuire said the leaves were privet painted large.

2. Character

This portrait is a good physical likeness of a younger Heaney. What is Heaney seated on? Does he seem cramped? The odd setting, the apparent lack of a seat, may suggest depth and mystery, a man not easily read.

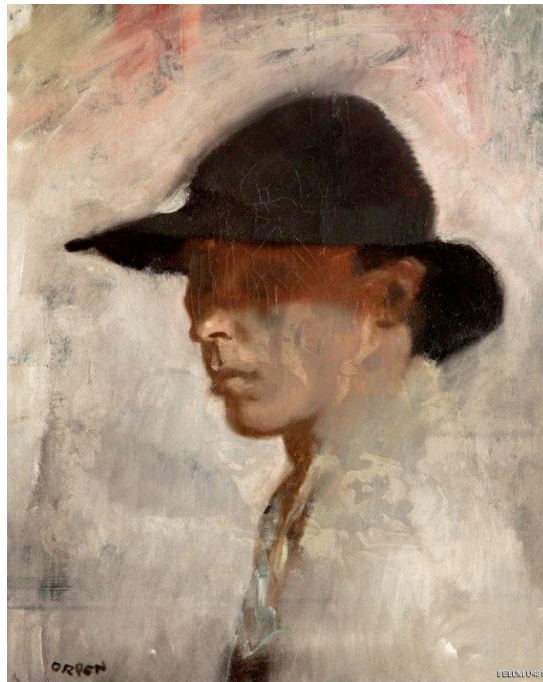
3. The Artist

Fine exact brush strokes, with a slightly surreal dimension in the background, are typical of McGuire's work. He kept stuffed birds in his studio. The foreground colours are restrained, with strong forceful colours in the giant privet outside the window, perhaps suggesting the sitter's rich interior life. Patterns of lines and squares appear throughout the painting, in the sitter's clothes, floor boards, table, tablecloth and window. The portrait is not symmetrical, although it first appears so, with the sitter placed slightly to the right-hand side.

4. Viewer Experience

Does the sitter look you in the eye, or stare through you? He maintains distance with the table and book in between. The portrait evokes a sense of dignity, of reserve, of a man of depth with a rich interior life and a depth of feeling for nature.

William Orpen 1878-1931
Self Portrait painted 1905-10



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1. Staging

The background is vague and indistinct. The only object in the painting is the artist's hat which shades his eyes. The artist has placed himself in a nondescript unidentifiable place, a nowhere almost.

2. Character

This painting is a good likeness, although the eyes, the mirrors of the soul, are not shown. The sitter's face is sideways on to the viewer although his shoulders are almost turned away. From the posture and the hidden eyes the painting conveys a private man who reveals little of himself.

3. The Artist

The artist uses bold brush strokes that are clearly visible. All outlines appear to be blurred apart from the nose and lips which are painted in fine detail (the artist considered himself ugly and particularly disliked his slightly protruding lower lip). The use of light is intriguing, the lower face and shoulder reflect light from the right hand side but no light appears on the hat, it seems to soak up the light and is a very striking flat black shade. The curves of the hat are echoed in the curve of the shoulders; the colour of the jacket is echoed in the background colour; and there are balancing uses of red/pink at the top of the portrait.

4. Viewer Experience

The sitter looks away from the viewer, his eyes are not shown, making it difficult to get a sense of the man. While the sitter is close to the viewer the style of the painting creates a sense of distance. William Orpen was an official war artist during World War I, and was deeply affected by the horror of what he saw. This painting appears to convey a man apart from the everyday world keeping his own secrets and experiences close.

Francis Stuart (1902-200)
Neil Shawcross (b 1940) 1978



©The Artist

1. Staging

A chair and two animals, nothing to identify place. The sitter wears a plain business suit and a regular shirt and tie. The background is absolutely plain, it reveals nothing.

2. Character

The painting is a good likeness of the sitter. His body language seems relaxed although the posture is unusual with the position of the legs similar to those in Egyptian wall paintings. The hard chair suggests a formal rather than a relaxed posture. The firm chin conveys a strength of character, almost a stubbornness that contrasts with the softness of the rabbit on his lap and the inquisitive and open gaze of the cat.

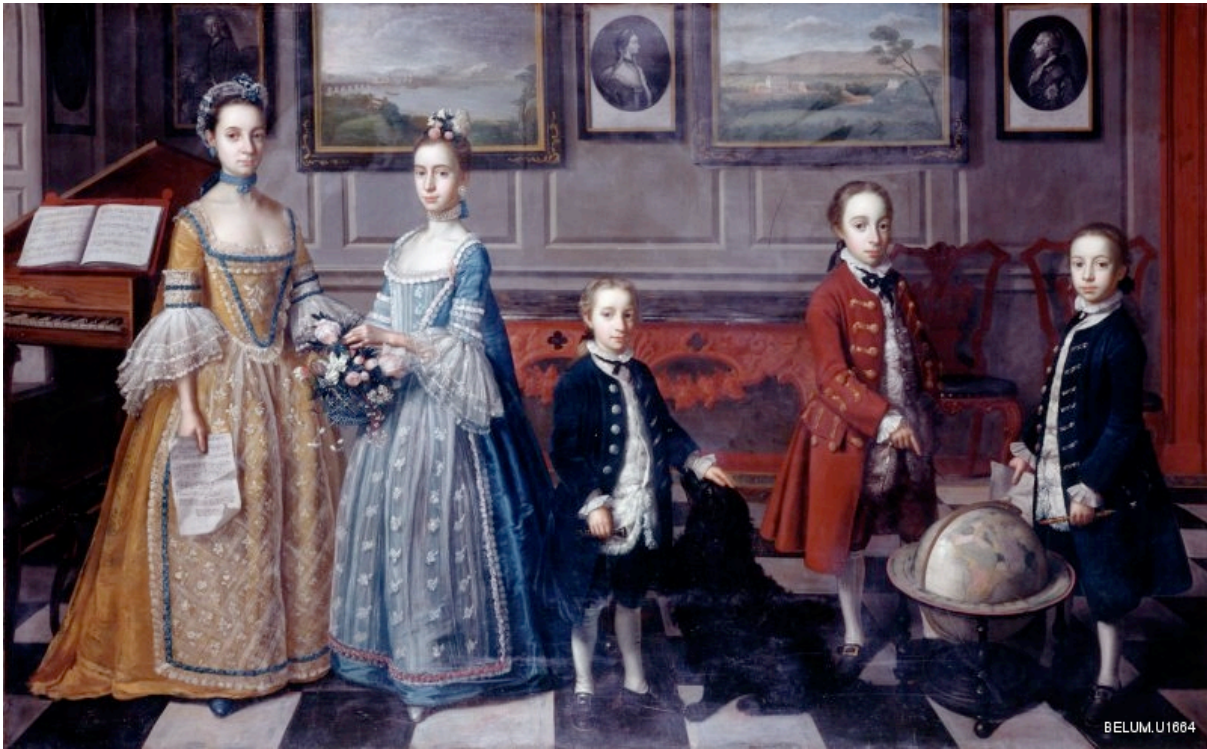
3. The Artist

Oil on canvas with a deliberate blurring of lines and thick blocks of contrasting colour on the face (the eyes, cheeks and nose particularly). The artist uses a limited colour palette, yet the painting appears colourful. The painting conveys a sense of balance through the two contrasting animals, the leg of the chair under the left hip and the chair post over the right shoulder.

4. Viewer Experience

The sitter's eyes are hard to see, and he appears to look away from the viewer. Intriguingly both animals stare directly at the viewer. The sitter is close to the viewer, although the two animals form a slight barrier. The viewer is left with a sense of a man of firm opinions unafraid to show a softer side.

The Family of Thomas Bateson, Esq. (1705–1791) *Strickland Lowry (1762)*



©NMNI

1. Staging

This portrait of the Bateson children is a fascinating record of the interior of the Bateson home at Orangefield, Co. Down, near Belfast. The clothing, the furnishings, the wall paintings all convey wealth and prosperity.

2. Character

It is not possible to tell if this 1762 portrait captures a true likeness of the sitters. The five children are standing in what to 21st century eyes is an unimaginative line up. The portrait tells little of the character of the five unsmiling children but much of the wealth of their family.

3. The Artist

The brush strokes of the oil painting are fine and show great detail. The artist uses light to show the five children in great detail with their clothing and background furnishings receiving an equal attention to detail. The two groupings show the standard accomplishments expected of girls and boys of that era, the girls in pretty dresses with an interest in music, literature and flowers and the boys with animals, world issues and perhaps trade/ travel. The repeated wall panels in the background and the landscapes and silhouettes echo each other as do the chequerboard squares in the floor.

4. Viewer Experience

All five children look straight at the viewer. They stand close to the viewer but their expressionless faces have no emotional depth. The positioning of the two girls suggests a close relationship between them, but the three boys each stand separately perhaps suggesting the independence they will be expected to achieve on maturity. The viewer is left with a sense of the Bateson's prosperity rather than a sense of the children's personalities. Perhaps to the 18th century viewer this portrait conveyed more of the children's personalities.