

The Zurich Portrait Prize

About Portraits

WHAT IS A PORTRAIT?

A portrait is an artwork that features a person or a group of people as its main subject. Portraits can be made using all kinds of materials, from painting to photography to collage to sculpture and much more!

WHAT IS A SITTER?

A sitter is a person who poses for an artist to produce a portrait. Sometimes the sitter pays the artist to make a portrait of them. Other times, the artist invites someone to sit for them and makes their portrait. Often the sitter is called the subject if the person is not actually "sitting" for the portrait, but rather engaged in an activity.

WHAT CAN A PORTRAIT TELL US?

Portraits often show us what a person looks like but they also do lots more. Portraits can tell us about how a person thought of themselves, how others thought of them, and if the person is no longer alive, how they are remembered. They can capture an idea of a person, what they may stand for, their mood or their personality. Choices relating to the colour, background, objects surrounding the sitter, and the sitter's clothing, for example, all influence the atmosphere of a portrait and the impression it makes on its viewers.

WHAT IS A SELF PORTRAIT?

A self-portrait is a portrait in which the artist is the main subject of the artwork. Just like a portrait of another person, it can be made in any medium and include as much or as little information as the artist wishes. Sometimes artists make self-portraits to express their personality or style. A self-portrait does not necessarily have to be a straightforward image of the artist's face. An abstract or symbolic depiction chosen by the artist to represent themselves can also be classed as a self-portrait.

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WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM PORTRAITURE?

We can learn a lot about people, social history, art history and much more. How and why portraits are made continues to evolve to this day. In art history, portraits were often used to represent power and status. In more recent history, portraiture comes in infinite forms and it is no longer a marker of status but a way of exploring another person's life.

WHAT CAN A PORTRAIT DO?

A portrait can do many things. It can give a sense of importance to a person and their life; it can highlight what is important in a person's life; it can make a person more widely known; and it can memorialise a person's character or achievements.

HOW ARE PORTRAITS MADE?

First of all, portraits are made by looking at and understanding the sitter. Artists can make them using a variety of different materials, including drawing, painting, sculpture, and photography. Artists might prefer to work from real life, with the sitter in the room, or from a photograph, or from their imagination.

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN!

Think about a portrait that you would like to make to tell a person's story, or your own story. What kind of material would you use for your portrait? Consider how you might like to represent the sitter's body language and facial expression. What other objects might you like to include? How will colours play a role in your piece? Would a painting be the best medium for your portrait? If so, should it be small, medium, or large in size? Should the person be sitting or standing? Should they be inside, outside, or in an imaginary place? What should they be doing: sitting, standing, jumping, or maybe even dancing? It's up to you and the choices are endless!

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Looking at Portraits

There is no right or wrong way to look at a portrait, but by paying attention to a few key aspects, the viewer can pick up on many visual clues that tell us about the sitter's life and achievements. Take this portrait of **Nano Nagle** as an example. Nano Nagle was a pioneer of Catholic education at a time when teaching Catholic students was against the law in Ireland. She defiantly set up schools all over Cork City. She employed teachers at her own expense and she travelled each day on foot to teach. At night she would visit the poor in their homes, travelling the unlit lanes and dangerous quays, offering what help she could.

FACIAL EXPRESSION

Her rosy cheeks contrast with the brown background, which makes her appear full of life. Her small smile makes her seem kind.

PROPS

She is shown helping a child to read, holding a book open and gesturing to the page. This alludes to her role as an educator.



COSTUME

Nano is wearing a cotton bonnet and plain black dress. She was a wealthy woman but is not dressed as an ostentatious manner, perhaps hinting at her humble personality.

COLOUR

The colours of the piece are homely and warm, suggesting a friendly educational environment.

COMPOSITION

Although the portrait features three other people, Nano Nagle is the main focus. This is indicated by her size - she is the tallest by far, and by the fact that only her gaze meets the viewer's. All of the other subjects look down at their books or needlework.

BACKGROUND

She is represented seated on a chair, evoking a classroom setting. The artist may have chosen to include a view of Cork out of the window to represent the fact that Nano Nagle helped not just the students in one classroom but many people across the city.