

Looking at Portraits

Slide 1 – Looking at Portraits

A portrait is an artwork about a person that shows us who they are. When we look at portraits, there are a lot of things we might want to look out for including:

- Style
- Format
- Background
- Colour
- Objects
- Expression
- Materials

Artists make decisions about all of the above, in order to best present their sitter- meaning that each portrait is entirely different. It is unique to the person that it portrays.

The talented artists who created the portraits of the Windrush Generation used an amazing range of different styles, formats, materials, and details to ensure that they honoured the person in their work.

Slide 2 – Portraits that are realistic

Alford Gardner
Oil Paint on Canvas
Artist Chloe Cox

This is a portrait of Alford Gardner. He was born in Jamaica and first came to the UK during the Second World War when he joined the RAF and trained as a motor mechanic. After the War he returned to England on the *Empire Windrush* and worked in engineering companies in Leeds and Bradford until he retired.

The portrait is painted using oil paint on a piece of canvas but looks so real that you might mistake it for a photograph.

The artist, Chloe Cox was 23 years old when she painted it. She likes to take photographs of a person and choose one to base her portrait on. Look at how brilliantly she uses the oil paint to create the illusion that we are looking at different textures. His woollen jumper looks so soft you can imagine what it would feel like to touch it. Every tiny detail of his skin and hair has been carefully copied.

What makes the portrait look even more like a photo is how it captures a split second when he looks up and is about to break into a warm smile.

Slide 3 – Portraits that are not realistic

John Richards (“Big John”)

Chalk, Charcoal, Paint and Ink, Water on Paper flat on the ground

Artist Deanio X

Not all portraits are meant to look exactly like the person they are about.

Look how different the portrait of John Richards is.

Deanio X is an artist based in southeast London. He makes art that looks very different from more traditional paintings. He uses art to look at black history and culture in new and challenging ways.

Rather than a piece of canvas on an easel he put a sheet of paper flat on the ground and used pieces of chalk, charcoal, paint and ink to draw and colour the portrait in a free and spontaneous way. He then splashed on water that has spread the ink and paint across the paper randomly.

Instead of being like a photograph this portrait looks like it was made by Nature; like a rock or a mountain that has been battered by the rain, wind and storms over many years. John Richards (called ‘Big John’ by his family and friends) has remained strong throughout his life and no matter what difficulties he faced. Deanio X, the artist was impressed by his ‘dignity, strength and resilience’. Instead of showing us exactly what he looks like the artist is comparing him with something strong and impressive which tells us so much about John Richards and the kind of man he is.

Slide 4 – Style and format

Each artist creates with their own style, which makes every portrait unique.

The person in a portrait is known as “the sitter” even if they’re not sitting down.

Artists can choose to make portraits in different formats. These include;

- Bust-length portrait - a close-up view of the person’s head and shoulders
- Half-length portrait - a wider view of the top half of their body (a half-length portrait)
- Full-length portrait - a standing pose to show their whole body (a full-length portrait)

Slide 5 – Style and Format (2)

Gilda Oliver (left)

Acrylic paint on canvas

Artist Clifton Powell

Gilda Glover is sitting down in this half-length portrait. You can see the top of the chair above her shoulders. In this pose we are shown enough of her clothes to see she is very stylishly dressed but at the same time the portrait focuses closely on her face. The artist, Clifton Powell has used acrylic paint on canvas. He took a photograph to make sure that he painted her accurately, but he says that it is only by meeting the person and chatting with them that you can really capture their expression and personality. Most important for him are the person's eyes and so the artist asked her to take her glasses off for the portrait.

Gilda Glover left Jamaica by plane in 1955 and went to Birmingham, where she became a health-care support worker for the NHS. Although she often suffered abuse from staff and patients, she decided to combat racism by showing nothing but respect and kindness in return. She has devoted her life to caring for other people. The artist wants us to feel this when we look at her portrait.

Delisser Bernard (right)

Oil on canvas

Artist Honor Titus

Full-length

Delisser Bernard is shown standing up in his portrait and this gives a very different impression. When the American artist Honor Titus came from Los Angeles to Wolverhampton to meet Mr Bernard, he was struck by how tall he was and how he stood upright with a very straight back. He had been a military man during the Second World war when he volunteered to join the RAF aged only 16 years old and came to England for the first time. After the war he returned to England on HMT Windrush, settling in Wolverhampton where he worked on the buses and in the car industry.

The portrait shows us what it is like to meet this tall man. We seem to be looking up at him from below, seeing the brim of his hat from underneath. He wears a fedora hat that was made popular by African American jazz musicians when Delisser Bernard was a young man, which gives him a cool look.

Slide 6 – Choosing a background

Edna Henry (left)
Oil on linen
Artist Amy Sherald

Sometimes the background of a portrait is just a simple block of colour surrounding the sitter. The light blue in the portrait of Edna Henry makes the beautiful pink of her dress and jacket stand out even more by making such a strong contrast. Her smart dress and pearls are very appropriate for a lady who has always dressed for church every Sunday and is a respected elder of the community. She has lived in Cardiff in Wales since moving from Jamaica in 1961. The American artist, Amy Sherald usually paints stories and people from her own country, particularly Black American stories. But she felt very privileged to make this portrait showing the dignity and power of a British lady whose hard work and struggles have many similarities with black people in America.

Delisser Bernard (centre)

Sometimes a blue background in a portrait can be meant to be the sky, to look like the sitter is outdoors. It is definitely the sky in the background of Delisser Bernard's portrait because the artist has included white clouds. A closer look reveals white dots in the sky which are stars, telling us it is night-time.

Jessie Stephens (right)
Oil on linen
Artist Sahara Longe

In contrast, there is an indoor background to the portrait of Jessie Stephens, which gives us a glimpse of her living room. This is where the artist Sahara Longe first met her and noticed many certificates and awards in frames on the walls. These are included in the portrait to recognise Mrs Stephens's lifetime of service to the community, particularly her work on the local Police Liaison Committee on which she has done so much to bring people together.

Slide 7 – Choosing colours

An artist's choice of colours and which are put next to each other can create a portrait that is beautiful to look at, or even remind us of something about the person.

Jessie Stephens (left)

In her painting of Jessie Stephens, Sahara Longe was careful to paint the shade of her pink suit correctly but completely changed the colour of the wall of her sitting room and the chair, making them darker. This makes sure Mrs Stephens stands out from the background and so does the clever use of a bright red outline around the sitter and the chair.

Laceta Reid (right)

Oil, duct tape and crystal tape on four cork panels

Artist Serge Attukwei Clottey

Serge Attukwei Clottey has done almost the exact opposite in his portrait of Laceta Reid, where the colours black and white have taken over the picture so much that his jacket seems to merge with the background. This was inspired by Mr Reid's description of how he adapted himself to his surroundings to make a new place his home. The place he now feels most at home is Wales, having lived there since he left Jamaica in 1957.

The black and white patterns are made using duct tape, which is typical for the artist, Serge Attukwei Clottey who was born and brought up in Ghana. When he was young, he made art out of duct tape, cardboard or whatever he could find around him instead of traditional art materials that were too expensive. He thought about the duct tape used to seal cardboard boxes that had brought products over huge distances from across the world, and how Laceta Reid had made a similar journey.

These colours remind us about the life of the sitter in the portrait. At the time he travelled to Britain as a young man black and white cheque was very fashionable for clothes and design. It also reminded the artist of photographs taken at that time which were all in black and white.

Slide 8 – Including Objects

Objects shown in the background of a portrait can often tell us or remind us about the person. We have seen how the certificates and awards on the wall behind Jessie Stephens illustrate her life of achievement and the honours she has been awarded.

But sometimes artists can add in objects that were not there when the portrait was being made.

Linda Haye (left)

Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas

Artist Shannon Bono

The portrait of Linda Haye is closely based on a photograph taken in 1993 on her first day working at the Police Complaints Authority. She was the first Black woman appointed to that

job. But what was a very plain background in the photograph has been transformed by the artist who painted her.

The artist, Shannon Bono paints portraits that tell the stories and celebrates the achievements of black women. She has done this by adding a pile of books in the bottom left corner of the portrait to remind us that Linda Haye was a high achiever in education. The portrait also includes two sprigs of a purple flower called *lignum vitae* which is the national flower of Jamaica. An object is called a symbol when it is used to represent or stand in something else. A flower, like a flag can be the symbol of a country. We are also reminded of Jamaica, particularly its beaches by the bright yellows and blues that Shannon Bono has painted and sprayed across the portrait..

Carmen Munroe (right)

Digital, silkscreen and glitter print on Hahnemuehle Photo Rag

Artist Sonia Boyce

Flowers are also used as a symbol in the portrait of Carmen Munroe. They have been added at the bottom to look like the type of floral bouquet given to an actress after a great performance on stage. Carmen Monroe has been a successful actress since the 1960s. At a time when black actors and actresses faced rejection and few opportunities, she led the way in opening new doors and with her friends founded the most important Black theatre company in the United Kingdom. Her career in theatre, film and television has made her very famous and recognised by generations of fans in Britain.

These flowers were created by Sonia Boyce on a computer, but based on the floral pattern of the blouse that Carmen Munroe was wearing when they met. This portrait is created from a digital photograph, combined with computer graphics and made into a silkscreen print with additions of glitter powder. Sonia Boyce is another black woman who has reached the top of her profession. As well as being an artist she is Professor of Black Art and Design at the University of the Arts, London and has been made a Royal Academician at the Royal Academy of Art.

Slide 9 – The Sitter’s Expression

Artists often want us to recognise the expression or mood of the sitter in the portrait. It is the person’s face more than anything else that tell us this. Whether they look happy, sad, proud or anything else is usually caused by something that has happened in that person’s life when the portrait is made. Most portraits are made to commemorate something important for the person. It could be anything from a wedding, funeral, getting a new job or being part of a celebration like the 75th anniversary of the first arrival of the Windrush Generation in Britain.

What are the different expressions you can see in the faces of the Windrush Generation portraits? Some are smiling, some are not. Do their faces look happy, caring, humble, dignified or something else?

Carmen Munroe's face has a very emotional expression in her portrait. The digital photograph it is based on was taken when she sat in a cinema looking up at the screen which was showing a clips of her work as an actress in film and television over 60 years. All of the memories she relived when watching this showreel clearly stirred many emotions like happiness and sadness, loss and celebration, which the finished portrait by Sonia Boyce captures so brilliantly.

Like the portrait of Carmen Munroe, some of the sitters in the other portraits are looking at something or someone we cannot see. Their gaze is directed outside the portrait. In most of them, however, they look straight ahead which makes it feel like they are looking directly at us.

Sahara Longe painted Jessie Stephens facing forwards to look straight at the viewer because this is how Mrs Stephens always speaks to everyone she meets.

When the eyes of a person in a portrait feel like they are looking at you it can be like meeting them. They seem to be looking at us as closely as we are looking at them. It makes us feel closer to them.

Slide 10 – The Materials Used

Every portrait is unique, and both the materials used as a surface as well as what's being used to create the portrait can tell us a great deal about the sitter or the artist.

Laceta Reid (left)

Oil, duct tape and crystal tape on four cork panels

Artist Serge Attukwei Clottey

The artist chose to use materials that had an important connection to himself and his style in Mr Reid's portrait. Growing up in Ghana, the artist couldn't afford the expensive art materials used to make traditional pieces so would use whatever he could find around him. He thought using duct tape, that is used to seal boxes and packages that go around the world, had a connection to Mr Reid's journey from Jamaica to Wales.

Professor Sir Godfrey (Geoff) Palmer (right)

Acrylic, charcoal, oil pastel, and foil on newspaper, mounted on canvas.

Derek Fordjour

Newspaper and charcoal were the materials used by artist Derek Fourdjour in his earliest work because that was all he could afford. When he was growing up in Memphis in the USA paint was too expensive. Since becoming a successful artist and teacher he now uses not only

paint but a large number of other materials in his art. These are used in one layer on top of another in a very complicated artistic technique.

His portrait of Sir Godfrey Palmer is a good example of this:

He typically starts with squares and rectangles of corrugated cardboard on newspaper that is glued to a piece of canvas and then covered in spray paint.

A layer of paper is then glued on top on which he draws the portrait and colours it with acrylic paint and spray paint.

Next it is covered in newspaper and small pieces of paper stuck all over it.

On top of this he redraws the portrait in charcoal (using a stencil).

He then makes cuts and tears all over the picture and these reveal patches of the different layers underneath.

The final stage is to make painted and drawn marks with spray paint, charcoal, acrylic, and oil paste.

The reason for making the tears and cuts that show the layers beneath is to give the finished portrait a very richly-textured surface that is unusual and fascinating to look at.

Although Derek Fourdjour has used the same materials and techniques in many of his other paintings, he thinks they have a special meaning in the portrait of Sir Godfrey Palmer after meeting him and hearing about his life.

The newspaper visible beneath the surface of the portrait reminds us of the journey he made in 1955 from Jamaica to join his mother in London. The night before he left his great aunt wrapped newspaper around his chest beneath his clothes to keep him warm when he reached the much colder climate of England.

After studying hard he started a long career as a research scientist, rising to become the first Black university professor in Scotland. In 2014 he was made Sir Godfrey Palmer.

Just as the portrait gives us glimpses of the many layers underneath, so the artist Derek Fourdjour hoped Sir Godfrey would share stories and memories that give glimpses into his extraordinary life.

