

National Gallery of Art Teacher Institute 2015

Portraits as Primary Sources

Image has always been important to people in power. Portraits—contemporary or historical—can provide insights into the individual depicted and how they wish to be understood and remembered. The questions below are based on those that art historians typically use. These can facilitate visual analysis while building critical thinking skills.

- Describe the sitter's clothes. What is worn? How is clothing distinctive or perhaps symbolic?
- Consider the sitter's facial expression, gaze, pose, and gesture. What do these imply about character, mood, and status?
- Describe the sitter's surroundings. Do they suggest anything about lifestyle, accomplishments, values, social standing? If backdrop is minimal, what impact does this have?
- How large is the portrait? Does the size of the picture influence how you respond to the person depicted?
- Does composition, or the way the sitter is framed for the viewer, emphasize or single out certain features of the sitter?
- Has the artist used color, textures, or lighting effects in ways that contribute to the impressions you have gathered thus far?
- Speculate: Where do you think this portrait was intended to hang (does size provide a clue)? Who was the intended audience? Was the place of its installation public or private? Informal or formal?
- Finally, what do you think this portrait was supposed to make you believe or feel about the subject?

Thinking like a Historian

- What questions does the portrait raise that cannot be answered just by looking at it? How might you answer these questions?
- Is a portrait, by itself, a completely reliable narrator of past or present realities? Why or why not?