Zara’s Masterpiece: The Art of the Portrait

Learning objective: To understand the techniques of portraiture, including proportion, facial expression, and the use of light and shadow to convey character.

Zara the zebra has been studying famous historical portraits. She wants you to analyse the faces in her sketchbook before you create your own. Read the descriptions of the portrait techniques below, then use your artistic knowledge to answer the questions. Finally, complete the creative portrait task.

Word bank: Proportion · Expression · Chiaroscuro · Composition · Symmetry · Tone · Medium · Perspective

1. Zara notices that the eyes are often placed halfway down the head in a realistic portrait. Explain why understanding 'proportion' is vital for an artist trying to create a realistic likeness. (2 marks)

2. If an artist uses 'chiaroscuro' (a strong contrast between light and dark), how does this change the mood of the portrait compared to one with flat, even lighting? (2 marks)

3. Compare and contrast a portrait that captures a person laughing with one that captures them looking serious. What specific facial features change in each? (2 marks)

4. Justify your answer: Does a portrait always need to look exactly like the person being painted, or is it more important to capture their personality? Explain your reasoning. (2 marks)

5. What might happen if an artist painted the nose or mouth significantly larger than the rest of the facial features? How would this affect the viewer’s perception of the character? (2 marks)

6. If you were commissioned to paint a portrait of Leo the Lion, which specific features or colours would you highlight to represent his personality as a brave, gentle leader? (2 marks)

Draw: Using a mirror or a photograph of a friend, draw a portrait using different levels of 'tone'. Focus on the shadows under the chin, the side of the nose, and the eye sockets to create a sense of depth and three-dimensionality.

Extension challenge: Research a historical figure from the Victorian era. Write a short paragraph explaining how you would use colour, composition, and clothing to tell their story within a single portrait. If you had £20 to buy art supplies, which two items would you choose to create the best textures for skin and hair, and why?