

Mastering the Art of the Portrait

Learning objective: To analyse facial proportions and explore how artists use tone, texture, and expression to convey personality in a portrait.

Use your knowledge of facial anatomy and artistic techniques to complete the following tasks. Refer to the word bank to ensure your descriptions are precise.

Zara the zebra is observing the way light hits a face. She notes that the eyes are typically positioned halfway down the head, and the width of the head is roughly five eyes wide. When creating a portrait, artists must consider not just the physical features, but the mood created by the lighting and the angle of the subject. A subtle shift in the angle of the mouth or the shadow under the brow can completely change the narrative of the image.

Word bank: proportions · symmetry · chiaroscuro · mid-tone · texture · expression · foreshortening · composition

1. Zara suggests that the eyes should be positioned halfway down the head. Explain why understanding these standard human proportions is a vital starting point for a portrait artist before they attempt a stylised or abstract piece. (2 marks)

2. Compare and contrast the effect of using soft, diffused lighting versus strong, directional lighting (chiaroscuro) in a portrait. How does each affect the viewer's perception of the subject? (3 marks)

3. If you were to draw a portrait of Max the monkey looking up towards a tree, how would the technique of foreshortening change the way you draw his facial features? (2 marks)

4. Justify your answer: Does a portrait have to be a realistic representation to be considered a 'successful' piece of art? Give one reason to support your argument. (2 marks)

5. What might happen if an artist chose to exaggerate the features of a subject, such as making the eyes disproportionately large? What effect would this have on the mood of the portrait? (2 marks)

6. Describe the specific textures you would use to differentiate between a subject's skin, their hair, and a piece of silk clothing in a detailed portrait. (2 marks)

Draw: Using a mirror or a photograph of a friend, create a detailed pencil sketch of a _____ portrait. Focus specifically on the 'mid-tones'—the grey areas between the darkest shadows and the brightest highlights—to give the face a three-dimensional appearance.



Extension challenge: Research a historical portrait painter from the 17th century. Write a short critique comparing their use of composition to a modern-day digital portrait. Which elements remain consistent, and which have evolved due to new technology?