

Introduction

Reading portraits is a curriculum document developed for middle-school students with an integrated focus on the key learning areas of Arts and Studies of Society and the Environment.

Reading portraits has been developed as a result of a creative partnership between the Australian War Memorial, the National Portrait Gallery and the ACT Department of Education and Community Services for use with the exhibition, *Up front: faces of Australia at war*.

The exhibition is on display at the National Portrait Gallery at Old Parliament House until 30 August 1998; it will then travel throughout Australia.

Reading portraits provides teachers with a framework of open-ended activities to facilitate the development of visual literacy and critical thinking in their students. The open-ended approach allows the study unit to be used with all portraits.

The collaborative team included the following educators: Wendy Cave, Vicki Willis, Tania Nelipa, Kathleen Phillips, Esther Davies, Sandy Clugston, Ann Owner, Virginia Lavarack, and Pamela Clelland Gray.

Rationale for *Reading portraits*

This unit has been developed to enable teachers to give students the skills and confidence to read portraits. Portraits are an easily accessible and rich source of social and cultural information.

A deliberate choice has been made to integrate teaching and learning strategies across key learning areas

with a middle-school focus.

The material can also be presented to younger and older students.

Through open-ended activities students will have opportunities to demonstrate a range of learning outcomes. At the close of the study, students will demonstrate their understanding of three broad concepts:

- Portraits document continuity and change
- Portraits are painted for different reasons
- The interpretation of a portrait is dependant upon the viewer's perspective.

Through their understanding of these concepts, students will develop the life skills of visual literacy and critical thinking.

How to use *Reading portraits*

Reading portraits is a unit of work consisting of four components. To achieve an understanding of the concepts, it is suggested that all four components be completed. However, each component has merit and value and may be used individually.

It is suggested that each component commence with an assessment of students' prior knowledge; this assessment could be in the form of a group "brainstorm" of responses to the particular component's key questions. These responses should be recorded (e.g. wall display, learning

journals) without teacher input and kept for the final reflection phase of the teaching cycle. It is important that students revisit their initial responses and reflect on their former understandings.

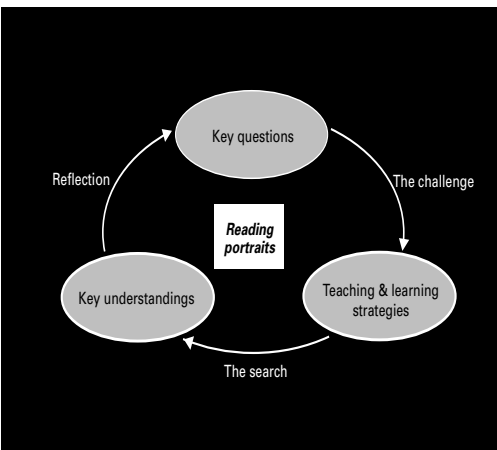
The unit consists of four components:

- Portraits and preservation
- Portraits and technology
- Portraits and society
- Portraits and time, continuity and change.

Each component consists of:

- Key understandings
- Key questions
- Teaching and learning activities.

The following diagram suggests a process for using each component.



PORTRAITS AND PRESERVATION

KEY UNDERSTANDINGS

- Portraits preserve memories.
- Portraits preserve biography.
- Portraits preserve history.
- Portraits commemorate individuals and events.
- Different cultures record and preserve their memories in different ways.

KEY QUESTIONS

- When do people record memories?
- Where do people keep their recorded memories?
- Why do people record memories?
- How do people record memories of the past?
- Who keeps these records of the past?
- Why is it important to keep memories and records of the past?

TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- Establish and share prior knowledge through brainstorm of key questions.
- Ask each student to answer the following questions: What did you look like when you were a baby? How do you know what you looked like then? What proof or evidence do you have?

Key activity: illustrated time line

- With the class or in groups, brainstorm the events that could be recorded. Read *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* to illustrate how objects trigger memories.
- List a variety of ways to illustrate memories of events, e.g. drawings, photographs, stories, birthday cards, a favourite toy.
- Ask students to assemble and share time lines which should include pictorial or photographic references to themselves and relevant others.
- Focus on the key questions. Through discussion, link the activities to the key understandings; emphasise *that different cultures record and preserve their memories in different ways.*
- Use the sketched portraits or photographs included in the time lines to explore key understandings related to portraiture.

Case study

One way to focus students on the portraits displayed in *Up front: faces of Australia at war* is to view a short segment of an Anzac Day (or similar) parade.

- Discuss: Why do we have this parade?
- How else do we commemorate people and events of the past? Accept all responses and lead students to consider the role of portraits in commemorating or recording the past.

Activity: a box of memories

- Students create and assemble a box of objects that tell a visual biography of one of the portrait subjects: for example, a box might contain a letter or postcard sent home, a military medal and canned food.

Encourage students to share and explain their box of memories. In this discussion, the teacher uses the key questions to make links to the key understandings.

PORTRAITS AND TECHNOLOGY

KEY UNDERSTANDINGS

Portrait production responds to available technological resources, i.e. materials, tools and techniques.

The reasons for the production of a portrait will influence the artist's choice of materials, tools and techniques.

KEY QUESTIONS

- What materials and tools can be used to make a portrait?
- What factors influence an artist's choice of materials and tools in making a portrait?
- What constraints and or limitations might be placed on an artist when making a portrait?

TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- Establish prior knowledge through brainstorm of key questions.

Key activity: making a portrait

- Display a variety of portraits made with a range of materials, tools and techniques (photographs, paintings, sculptures, drawings).
- Ask students to identify the different materials, tools and techniques used in production.
- Ask students to list their responses.
- Use the key questions to explore and clarify the list.
- Have each student create a tool such as a bamboo pen, a painting tool, or drawing stick. Ask them to use this tool to create a portrait.
- Portraits and tools should then be displayed. Students can explain the effects and constraints they experienced when using the tools.

Case study: commissioning a portrait

- Explore the concept of a commission with the students. Focus on:
 - who would pay for (commission) the work;
 - why they wanted the portrait of this person or people;
 - what materials would be used to make the portrait.

Record responses

- Focus on one of the portraits from *Up front* and work through the same focus questions. In this discussion, the teacher uses the key questions to make links to the key understandings.

PORTRAITS AND SOCIETY

KEY UNDERSTANDINGS

- Portraits tell stories of individuals and groups.
- Portraits tell what the artist and the society values.
- Portraits document changes in what a society values and how it thinks.

KEY QUESTIONS

- Who is portrayed?
- Whose stories do portraits tell?
- What stories do portraits tell?
- Who decides who will be portrayed?
- Who decides how the subject will be portrayed?

TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Establish prior knowledge through brainstorm of key questions in response to a diverse selection of historical portraits, including photographs, paintings, drawings and sculpture.

Key activity: art detective

Select one portrait and discuss the issues of when and where the portrait was made. Encourage the students to hypothesise about why it was made in this way at this particular time and place.

- Introduce the case study *Up front: faces of Australia at war* postcard portrait pack and repeat the above activity.
- Have the students then act as art detectives with the *Up front* portraits.
- List clues which give information about the contemporary society. Clues might include clothing, uniforms or insignia, accessories, background, and the ways in which people of different age, gender, military rank or social position are represented.

With the understanding that clues provide information about the contemporary society, have the students create portraits which incorporate the information they have listed. Students can then act as art detectives and read each other's portraits. The teacher uses key questions and encourages the discussion to make links to the key understandings.

PORTRAITS AND TIME, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

KEY UNDERSTANDINGS

- People have always portrayed themselves and others.
- Portraits can document change and continuity.
- Portraits are a resource for interpreting history.

KEY QUESTIONS

- Why have people always portrayed themselves and others?
- What do portraits have in common?
- What aspects of a portrait can identify its place in time?

TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- Establish prior knowledge through brainstorm of key questions.

Key activity: portraits through time

- Students study earlier school photographs and list the changes in clothing, appearance, hairstyles, poses and backgrounds that have taken place since the time the photograph was taken.
- To explore a wider historical perspective, collect a variety of portraits from different periods in time, e.g. Ancient Egypt, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, as well as the 20th century.
- In pairs, ask students to be art detectives and use visual clues to place the portraits in a chronological sequence. Record the visual clues

that support their decisions. Ask the pairs to share, test and discuss their sequence with the whole class.

Case study: a portrait in time

- Choose any portrait from *Up front* and place it in the sequence already established. Discuss what this portrait tells about its particular time and place.
- Compare the two group portraits, *Australian Soldiers in Egypt* and *A Sunderland crew comes ashore at Pembroke dock*, to explore the key question: What aspects of a portrait can identify its place in time? Discuss differences in clothing, architecture, technology, place, expressions, pose, gesture. Lead the discussion back to the key questions.
- Compare the portraits of *Sir Ross McPherson Smith* and *WAAAF Cook*. Focus discussion on the issue of choice. Who makes the choice about what the person in the portrait (subject) looks like? It could be the artist, the subject, or the commissioning agent. Lead the discussion to consider formality, clothing, pose, physical attributes, props, background, expression, suggestion of authority or power, values of the artist and the subject.
- In pairs, have the students construct a dialogue between the artist and the sitter of one portrait. The students may then present their dialogue for the class in written form or through role-play. During the presentations, the teacher uses the key questions and discussion to make links to the key understandings.

UNIT CULMINATION - CREATE A PORTRAIT GALLERY

This experience will enable students to demonstrate their understanding of the broad concepts:

- Portraits document continuity and change.
- Portraits are painted for different reasons.
- The interpretation of a portrait is dependent on the viewers perspective.

A celebration of student learning might include the following:

- Ask the students how they want to be remembered?
- Each student develops a commission outline describing how they would like to be portrayed. This may include image, pose, materials, background and accessories.
- All students then become artists and use the commission outlines to create a portrait. The students can complete self-portraits or negotiate to undertake a portrait commission of another student. All forms and styles of portraiture should be accepted, including collage, drawing, photographs, sculpture, and painting.
- Exhibit portraits in a school portrait gallery. Invite other classes, staff, parents and the wider community to view the exhibition. Students become interpreters who guide visitors and help them to read their portraits.

Resources

The Australian War Memorial

The National Portrait Gallery,
Old Parliament House

An invitation to look: learning resources for Up front: faces of Australia at war, The Australian War Memorial and the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, 1998.

Australia remembers, (teaching kit), Department of Veterans' Affairs, Canberra, 1995.

Family photographs.

General reference material

John Berger, *Ways of seeing*, London, 1972.

Richard Cotter, *Studies of society and the environment: history*, Queensland, Jacaranda, 1997.

Robert Cumming, *Annotated art: the world's greatest paintings explored and explained*, London, Dorling Kindersley, 1995.

Robert Engwerda, Richard Cotter, *Studies of society and the environment: Australian history to 1975*, Queensland, Jacaranda, 1998.

Glen Israel, *Artwise: visual arts 7-10*, Queensland, Jacaranda, 1997.

Sandra Jane, *Photography production and appreciation*, Queensland, Jacaranda, 1996.

National statement on studies of society and the environment for Australian schools, Melbourne, Curriculum Corporation, 1993.

National statement on the arts for Australian schools, Melbourne, Curriculum Corporation, 1993.

Mary-Jane Opie, *Sculpture*, Great Britain, Collins Eyewitness Art, 1994.

Norbert Schneider, *The art of the portrait*, Cologne, Germany, Taschen, 1994.

Jonathon Stephenson, *The materials and techniques of painting*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1989.

Jude Welton, *Looking at paintings*, Great Britain, Collins Eyewitness Art, 1994.

Story books

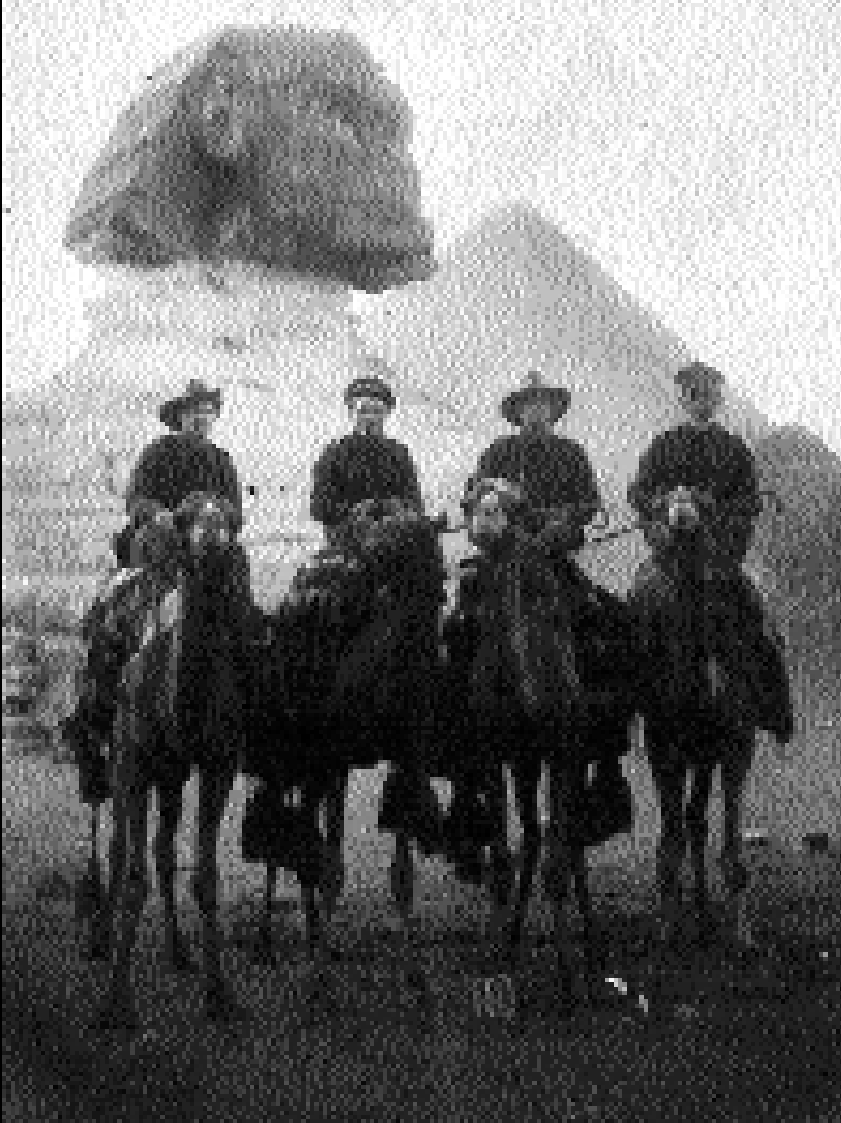
Mem Fox and Julie Vivas, *Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge*, Sydney, Omnibus Books, 1989.

Rachel Tonkin, *What was the war like Grandma?* Melbourne, Reed for Kids, 1995.

Nadia Wheatley, Donna Rawlins, *My place*, Melbourne, Longman, 1997.

Margaret Wild and Julie Vivas, *Let the celebrations begin*, Sydney, Omnibus Books, 1990.

Central to this unit are the five portraits in the *Up front* postcard pack. However, the open-ended activities of the *Reading portraits* study unit can be used with all portraits. You can find portraits every where!



Reading Portraits

Photographer unknown *Australian soldiers in front of the Sphinx and the Great Pyramid, Egypt* [c.1915]
gelatin silver photograph printed as postcard 14.1 x 9.0 cm
Australian War Memorial (SC02031)

up front

faces of **australia** at war



NATIONAL
PORTRAIT
GALLERY

