

## Portraits with a difference

## teachers' notes

### 1) The Sikh connection

The Sikh connection with this resource is the portraits of Queen Victoria's Indian subjects which she commissioned in 1886 from the Austrian artist Rudolf Swoboda. They include a number of portraits of Sikhs. These tiny portraits are displayed at Osborne House, Isle of Wight, alongside the famous Winterhalter portrait of Maharajah Duleep Singh, making a striking contrast between portraits of the famous and the obscure.

Pupils can also compare Swoboda's portraits with the more conventional image of a Sikh taken by early Victorian photographers Hooper and Western a generation before.

### 2) Curriculum

KS3 Art & Design Unit 7A: Self-image. The resource supports work on using visual information to express ideas of identity and how other artists have addressed these themes. It takes pupils through the usual headings related to portraiture: content, form, material and impact.

KS3 Citizenship Unit 04: Britain - a diverse society? The resource supports work on identifying the characteristics of a community and appreciating the value of diversity. It suggests an activity, creating a portrait 'series', which is equally applicable to the school and local community.

### 3) Artists

This resource draws on the work of five artists:

#### Rudolf Swoboda

Painter, Austrian, 1859-1914. Swoboda was a well-known painter in the Orientalist tradition. Queen Victoria first commissioned him to paint several of the Indian craftsmen who were brought to Windsor as part of the Golden Jubilee preparations in 1887. She then paid for him to visit India to paint more of her Indian subjects. It was probably Swoboda to whom Rudyard Kipling referred in his description of two 'Austrian maniacs' who thought they were 'almighty' artists aiming to 'embrace the whole blazing East'.

#### August Sander

Photographer, German, 1876-1964, famous for his large-scale project *People of the 20th Century* (Menschen des 20 Jahrhunderts) - more than 600 images - and as the founder of the concept of visual categorization of 'social types'. He wrote 'we know that people

are formed by light and air, by their inherited traits, and their actions. We can tell from appearance the work someone does or does not do; we can read in his face whether he is happy or troubled - It is not my intention either to criticize or to describe these people, but to create a piece of history with my pictures.'

### **Steve McCurry**

Photographer, American, 1950-. McCurry's career was launched by the photographs he took in rebel-controlled Afghanistan in 1979 just before the Russian invasion, and he has since worked in many areas of international and civil conflict. He joined the prestigious Magnum Photo Agency in 1986. He writes 'Most of my pictures are grounded in people. I look for the unguarded moment, the essential soul peeking out, experience etched on a person's face. I try to convey what it is like to be that person, a person caught in a broader landscape that I guess you'd call the human condition'.

### **Jitka Hanzlova**

Photographer, Czech, 1958-. Her work on *Rokytník* depicted the small Czech village where she grew up and her portraits of women in various countries in *Female* have won her acclaim in Europe and America. In her latest work, *Forest*, she has moved beyond her community to its surroundings, the Moravian woods of her youth, and to the physical processes that keep the world going.

### **Eileen Perrier**

Photographer, British, 1974-. Of Ghanaian and Dominican descent, Perrier specialises in questions about placement, cultural identity and diversity. She writes 'My work has drawn upon the long tradition of African portraiture since my first visit to Ghana in 1996. My objective was to communicate a less preconceived impression of what it is to be a person of African descent. Colour photography was my gateway into showing a vibrancy and realness not readily found in the media's reportage, black and white imagery at this time.'

## **4) Themes**

It may help pupils to brainstorm some of the underlying ideas before starting to use this resource. Themes which they may need to consider during their work include:

- How much is a person just the sum of their particular identities? Is there an essence of the person that exists beyond all the different social categories to which the person belongs?
- What is the relationship between an individual image and group identity? Can one person really represent a social group, a profession or a nation?
- Is being portrayed / having your photograph taken an entirely benign experience? What are the circumstances in which one could be demeaned by it?

- What would be the modern equivalent of Swoboda's commission?

## 5) Classroom use

The first part of the resource presents the work of three artists, Swoboda, McCurry and Sander. It also contrasts Swoboda's portraits with early photographs of Indian people.

Then pupils are asked to start planning their own work, to create a 'portrait series' based on a social 'category' of their choice. They are taken step by step through the decisions they need to make about subject, medium, context, dress and accessories, technique, pose and expression. Works by all five artists are used to illustrate these points.

Pupils' work is likely to concentrate on photography, though other materials, such as drawing and collage, are also considered.

Pupils can work individually or in groups. It is suggested that pupils identify subjects for their 'portrait series' either from within the class, or from their family and friends. Some may need help identifying an appropriate theme for their series - it could be a visual characteristic, such as physical appearance, or a social characteristic, such as liking games. Teachers may need to offer arbitration if some pupils are required to feature in more than one group!

## 6) Differentiation

Pupils could find out more about how these artists' work on identity and community relates to other aspects of their work. For example, Swoboda also painted conventional court portraits, such as Queen Victoria's grand-daughter Princess Alix of Hesse, the future Tsarina Alexandra of Russia  
<http://www.royalcollection.org.uk/eGallery/object.asp?imgbuttonsearch=&radioAll=0&startYear=&searchText=Swoboda&title=&rccode=&makerName=&category=&collector=&endYear=&pagesize=20&object=407496&row=51>

The idea of a 'portrait series' would lend itself well to work in the local community, such as people who share a particular occupation, stand at the same bus stop etc. It would be useful to discuss with pupils the additional issues this would involve, e.g. practicalities of setting up the photograph, securing permission and showing the sitters the finished result.

## 7) Weblinks and bibliography

There are lots of online resources on portraiture. This is just a selection:

<http://www.museumnetworkuk.org/portraits/>

Created by a network of museums, including the Wallace Collection. Includes a fun interactive on Queen Victoria's day out.

<http://www.mylearning.org/interactive.asp?journevid=144&resourceid=194>

From Sheffield Museum and Art Gallery. Includes a light-hearted interactive to show the importance of different facial features.

[http://www.npg.org.uk/webquests/launch.php?webquest\\_id=15&partner\\_id=portrait](http://www.npg.org.uk/webquests/launch.php?webquest_id=15&partner_id=portrait)

One of the new WebQuests from a consortium of national museums. Called 'Beyond Portraits', this takes the student through creating their own abstract or mixed media portrait.

## 8) Additional notes, page by page

### 1) Home page

Rudolf Swoboda, 'A peep at the train', 1892, oil on canvas  
The Royal Collection © 2009,  
90.5 x 55.9 cm  
RCIN 403759

<http://www.royalcollection.org.uk/eGallery/object.asp?imgbuttonsearch=&radioAll=0&startYear=&searchText=Swoboda&title=&rccode=&makerName=&category=&collector=&endYear=&pagesize=20&object=403759&row=56>

This is a rare group portrait by Swoboda. Its title has come in for some discussion, since the only sign of the train is the merest hint of a railway line in the bottom left corner. See Mark Tully's review of a recent exhibition of Swoboda's paintings in the National Gallery:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2002/nov/09/art.artsfeatures>

### 2) What's it all about?

This page introduces the key questions about individuality v social grouping. How do we know that Heinrich Hoerle is a painter, without the trappings of his trade? How comfortable do we feel identifying a group who are recipients of welfare assistance? When Eileen Perrier took her photographs in Wentworth Street, she advertised to make sure she had a diverse cross-section of people - how ethical is that?

<http://www.eileenperrier.com/page3.htm>

(top left)

August Sander, *Recipient of Welfare Assistance*, 1930, gelatin silver print  
22.3 x 15.4 cm (8 3/4 x 6 1/16 in.)  
1999.49.4

National Gallery of Art, USA

<http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pinfo?Object=107757+0+none>

(top right)

Eileen Perrier, from series Wentworth St Studios, 2008

**need individual title or identifier? photo type? size?**

<http://www.saatchi->

[gallery.co.uk/blogon/art\\_news/eileen\\_perriers\\_wentworth\\_st\\_studios\\_at\\_the\\_whitechapel\\_gallery/5860](http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/blogon/art_news/eileen_perriers_wentworth_st_studios_at_the_whitechapel_gallery/5860)

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