Australian portraits 1880–1960 highlights the richness and variety of Australian portraiture over 80 years, from the late 19th to the mid 20th century.

The 12 paintings selected for this education resource show how approaches to portraiture altered and developed during a period of change. The portraits reflect significant moments in Australian history and provide representations of our culture, our character and our interests. Some are images of wealthy or important individuals others are intimate portraits of artists’ families and friends or revealing self-portraits. In these works the artists use the genre of portraiture to explore the formal and technical aspects of painting in a variety of ways.

The ability to recognise and respond to faces and facial expressions is crucial to the dynamics of portraiture. Our ability to read emotions and moods in faces is partially what makes viewing faces in paintings so fascinating and appealing.

Likeness is central to many definitions of portraiture. The word ‘portrait’ comes from the Latin protrahere: to draw forth, disclose, reveal, to capture the inner essence or to visualise the invisible. A portrait may be a likeness to the visual appearance of a face or body or an evocation of the physical presence of an individual. It may also be a depiction of character or personality, the mood of a person, their spirit or soul—or the sum of all of these.

Most portrait painters have wanted to depict more than a mere physical likeness and more than a character study; they have wanted to create a work of art, an aesthetic object.

Following a visit to the exhibition Australian portraits 1880–1960, the education resource will assist secondary students to examine the question ‘what is a portrait?’
Robert Dowling (1827–1886)

Miss Robertson of Colac (Dolly) 1885–86
oil on canvas
103 x 127.6 cm
acquired with the assistance of the Masterpieces for the Nation Fund, 2010

Robert Dowling was Australia’s first locally trained colonial artist and the most successful portrait painter in Australia in the 1880s. Dowling was also the first Australian to achieve success at the Royal Academy in London. Miss Robertson of Colac (Dolly) was one of Dowling’s last paintings.

Dowling showed Dolly seated in a garden setting surrounded by objects that reflect her lifestyle and status. Originally, Dolly was depicted wearing a white dress. She later requested the colour of the dress be changed to brown so she would look more grown up. Dowling agreed to do this and in reworking the painting he added a number of new elements, including the cushion Dolly is leaning against, a fashionable Japanese tea service on the tea table with a plate of vanilla slices, a book and her faithful dog.

The lushness of the garden, Dolly’s pose with one foot peeping out from beneath her dress and the possessions placed nearby all contribute to create an impression of Dolly’s character at a significant time in her youth.

Activities

Look at another Australian portrait painted by a different artist in the 1880s and compare it with this painting.

How have these two artists shown you something about the personalities of their subjects?
Tom Roberts (1856–1931)

An Australian native 1888
oil on canvas
127.2 x 76.2 cm
purchased through the Joseph Brown Fund, 1979

Tom Roberts’s portrait of a fashionably dressed young woman evokes the colours and textures of the Australian bush. This is likely to be a portrait of the then unestablished contralto singer Ada Crossley. It is significant that the artist did not identify the sitter in the title. Roberts wanted to convey the character of an Australian who was young and forward-looking. He said that, when looking at art, those works which held him were portraits where the ‘intense feeling of humanity holds all through’, and he thought it important to convey a sense of the living presence of a person.

Roberts is particularly well known for his paintings that reflect Australian nationalism, such as Shearing the rams 1890 and his commission depicting the opening of the first Federal Parliament of Australia in Melbourne in 1901. At the time of Federation, a number of other Australian artists were also interested in exploring and expressing what it meant to be Australian.

Activities

Look at the face and posture of this woman. Copy her pose and expression. How do you feel?

Australian identity was topical for artists and writers in 1901. Investigate why this was the case and reference other works by Roberts with a nationalist theme.

Roberts was a good friend of the artist Frederick McCubbin. Find the portrait painted by McCubbin in this exhibition and compare it to the portraits by Roberts. Look carefully at the painterly approach and colours used in the works by these two artists. What differences can you see? What similarities can you see?
George W Lambert (1873–1930)

*Chesham Street* 1910
oil on canvas
62 x 51.5 cm
purchased 1993

George W Lambert was one of Australia’s most brilliant, witty and fascinating artists. He lived and worked in London for about 20 years and returned to Sydney in 1921 as the most successful expatriate Australian artist of the era.

Lambert liked to entertain, to have fun and to be the centre of attention. He once made his exit by cartwheeling in a flowing cape across the centre of a room. He enjoyed dressing up and acting out roles.

In this bold self-portrait, Lambert is posing as if for a doctor’s examination. He has placed himself in the centre of the composition looking down, so the viewer has to look upwards at his striking naked chest. He is literally baring his chest for his audience, appearing both daring and vulnerable. This dramatic effect is enhanced by the way Lambert has used a limited range of colours and strong contrasts between light and dark tones.

**Activities**

The knowledge we have of our own face and body by inhabiting them is quite different from the image we see in the mirror. Do you think you can show in a drawing or painting what it feels like to be you?

Create two self-portraits: one by doing a series of quick sketches without looking in the mirror, expressing what it is like to be you; and the other by studying your face in the mirror and trying to render it as accurately as possible.

Discuss why artists paint self-portraits? How is this self-portrait daring?
E Phillips Fox (1865–1915)

The green parasol 1912

oil on canvas
117 x 89.5 cm
purchased 1946

E Phillips Fox was born in Melbourne and studied art there as a young man before travelling to Europe to continue his studies. He exhibited his work in Edwardian London and Paris, as well as in Australia.

The green parasol shows Fox’s friend Edith Anderson sitting in the garden of the artist’s home in Paris. Fox has used short, textured brush strokes and bright patches of colour to evoke the heat and light of a warm summer afternoon. Edith is sitting comfortably in the cool green shade under her parasol.

Many artists have questioned whether a painting should idealise the subject or be a realistic likeness: should the subject represent humanity more generally or be a picture of a specific person? Some portrait titles do not indicate who the sitter was so that the viewer looks at the painting as a whole rather than focusing on the identity of the person. These works are still portraits, and we often know who the subjects are, but the artists who titled their works in this way wanted their paintings to be regarded first and foremost as works of art.
A woman in a brown straw hat is looking at you. Framed beneath the wide brim, her gaze is steady. The faint flush in her cheeks and chin hints at the warmth of the day. She is Jeanne Morel, wife and muse of the artist Rupert Bunny.

This postwar portrait shows a middle-aged woman whose hair is contained under a practical sunhat. The non-specific title suggests that Bunny may have been interested in painting Jeanne as an exercise exploring, colour, form and texture. Bunny repeats the blue-green of Jeanne’s eyes in her looped beads and floral kimono-style jacket. The fabrics are thinly painted with quick brushstrokes leaving some of the canvas visible. The texture of the fabric contrasts with Jeanne’s smooth, opaque, creamy skin.

Activities

Look at the relationship between the background and the figure. What are the differences in the brushstrokes and patterns that the artist has used in these areas?

Photograph a friend from a distance and then from up close. Compare the effect of these viewpoints.

Can you find Bunny’s signature in this painting? Many artists of his era created monograms inspired by Japanese printmaking. Design your own monogram or signature stamp.
Margaret Preston (1875–1963)

**Flapper** 1925  
oil on canvas  
77.3 x 58.5  
purchased with the assistance of the Cooma–Monaro Snowy River Fund, 1988  
© Margaret Preston estate. Licensed by Viscopy

In this portrait, Myra looks directly out of the frame. The title of the painting suggests that she is a flapper, a young bohemian woman of the 1920s. Her cloche hat, pulled down to reveal a glimpse of her trendy bobbed haircut, was a common item of a flapper’s apparel. But Myra is not quite flash enough in her homely woollen dress and knitted tights to be a fashionable flapper of the 1920s. She is, however, a self-possessed young woman. Margaret Preston used strong contrasts and flat shapes with dark outlines in this painting of Myra to create a bold modern portrait.

Preston was one of the leading modernists in Australia and in the early 20th century. At a time when many male artists continued to use traditional approaches in their work, women such as Margaret Preston, Grace Crowley, Grace Cossington Smith and Elise Blumann distilled aspects of what they had learned from their studies and travels overseas to create modern works of art.

**Activities**

Using the internet to find other works by Margaret Preston. What other subjects interested her?

Find the portrait by Agnes Goodsir in this exhibition. Describe how the two artists’ works convey the characters of their respective subjects.
The sitter for this portrait is relaxing in a high-backed chair and gazing calmly towards the viewer. Looking at her hands and face, we can see how the artist Grace Crowley used light, shade and shape in this portrait to create a sense of volume.

One of the important lessons for Crowley when she was studying in Paris at the academy of cubist painter Andre Lhote was to develop a plan for her paintings. The composition of the background was part of the design and was as important as the figure in the foreground.

In the pose of the sitter and in Crowley’s use of the round-backed chair, Portrait study also makes reference to Madame Devaucay de Nittis 1807 by 19th-century neo-classical artist Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres. Andre Lhote encouraged his students to analyse the composition of the old masters, and evidence of Crowley’s regard for Ingres’s work exists in the form of a postcard of Madame Devaucay de Nittis that she kept throughout her life.

Crowley returned to Australia after studying in Paris and continued to challenge herself throughout her life, always trying new ideas and approaches to painting.

Activities

Where have shapes been repeated and where do they intersect in this painting?

Use the internet to find an image of Madame Devaucay de Nittis by Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres. Discuss the similarities and differences between the image and Grace Crowley’s Portrait study.

Research the golden mean and create your own cubist work of art using the golden mean to construct your composition.
Albert Tucker (1914–1999)

Self-portrait 1937
oil on paperboard mounted on composition board
56.4 x 42.8 cm
purchased 1983
© Barbara Tucker, courtesy Barbara Tucker

Born in Melbourne in 1914, Albert Tucker’s formative years were shaped by the poverty that affected many Australians during the Great Depression (1929–32).

Self-portrait 1937 shows the artist at the age of 23. At first sight, he seems confident because he used strong colours to depict himself and presented himself with a wide-eyed stare. His neat appearance and his carefully combed hair give us the impression of an urbane young man of his time—yet this is contradicted by his unshaven chin. The way Tucker’s head is tilted forwards so that he has to look up gives the impression that he is not entirely self-assured. Tucker’s presence dominates, with the head and body filling the canvas.

Activities

Compare this portrait to the one Tucker painted four years later. Describe some of the differences and similarities.

Think about the different roles you play with different friends. Look at Tucker’s self-portraits and describe the different aspects of himself that he evoked in each portrait.

What do you see as the differences between the two works? What do you see as the similarities?
Albert Tucker’s *Self-portrait* 1941 is almost unrecognisable as a portrait. The structure of the artist’s face is made from a series of close-up interlocking planes that crowd the composition, creating a cramped and claustrophobic atmosphere. Tucker uses bold colours—blood reds and acid greens and yellows—and stark contrasts to create the features.

At this time, Tucker was inspired by international approaches to art such as Cubism, Surrealism and German Expressionism. He experimented with these techniques.

The social issues of his time also had an impact on him. Looking back, he explained some of the social influences on his work.

The whole world, and all the people I knew, seemed to be seething with ideas and energies and experiences; and my own mind was a seething mess … the highly emotional, overwrought expressionist paintings suited my state at the time.

**Activities**

Paint your own abstract self-portrait. Spend some time looking in the mirror and think about how you might simplify and distort your own features.

Paint a portrait of someone you know, including some things that are important to them.
Sidney Nolan was fascinated with the Ned Kelly story and worked with it as a theme for more than 30 years. His series of paintings evoking the life of Ned Kelly is well known. They are often bright and bold and show dramatic events, including police chases, the Kelly Gang escaping in disguise and the famous siege at Glenrowan where Kelly was finally captured and the rest of the gang were killed.

Many of Nolan’s paintings feature Ned Kelly in his homemade armour. This portrait is a stark contrast to most of Nolan’s Ned Kelly paintings. The sombre man wearing a dark suit resembles a police photograph, preserved in Beechworth gaol records, of Kelly at the age of 18.

Unlike many of the artists in this exhibition, Nolan did not work directly from life; rather, he referred to a photograph to paint an image that is inspired by history.

Activities

What do you think Nolan was interested in expressing about Ned Kelly’s character when he painted this portrait?

Use the internet or your library to find images from the National Gallery of Australia’s Ned Kelly paintings. Compare this portrait of Ned Kelly with the images you find.

Do you think Kelly is a hero or a criminal?
Dušan Marek (1926–1993)

*My wife* c 1952
oil on plywood
36 x 29 cm

gift of James Agapitos OAM and Ray Wilson OAM, 2007
© estate of Dušan Marek

Dušan Marek immigrated to Australia in 1948 on the *SS Charlton Sovereign*. On board, he met the beautiful young Helena Jakubova, a fellow refugee from Prague, and they became inseparable companions.

Marek was a Surrealist artist who explored psychological, emotional and spiritual states in his work. *My wife* is a portrait of the fair-haired Helena Marek. Her head has been simplified into a series of flat shapes and the yellow-and-green colour scheme is enlivened by the brilliant red of Helena’s multiplied lips. Dušan Marek appears to have portrayed his wife at the moment she turns her head, presenting us with a combination of profile and front views dominated by a single detailed eye.

When Helena commented on the small mouths and large eye, her husband responded, ‘you appeared to see everything but say little’.

**Activities**

Look at the features (mouth, cheeks, eye, hair) of the woman in this portrait. What do you think these features indicate about the character of Helena Marek?

Use the internet to find images by two or three surrealist artists.

What about this painting do you think makes it surreal?

Think about someone of whom you would like to paint a portrait. If you were going to take a similar approach to Marek, what physical attributes would you feature and why?
Ian Fairweather (1891–1974)

*Portrait of the artist* 1962
synthetic polymer paint and gouache on cardboard mounted on composition board
92.4 x 72.9 cm
purchased 1976
© estate of Ian Fairweather. Licensed by Viscopy

*Portrait of the artist* was painted when Ian Fairweather was living in isolation in a makeshift hut on Bribie Island, north of Brisbane. He settled there in 1953 after years of travel and encounters with different cultures, particularly in Asia. These travels in Asia inspired Fairweather to explore Chinese calligraphic painting techniques, literature and language as well as comparative religions.

In *Portrait of the artist*, Fairweather built up the surface—layer upon layer, dark over light and light over dark—to create a dense and powerful image. His face is embedded in the painterly surface. The loose, expressive brushstrokes are reminiscent of Chinese calligraphy and abstract expressionist painting.

Fairweather worked with quick-drying materials like ink, gouache and synthetic polymer paint on readily available materials such as paper and cardboard.

**Activities**

Choose one other self-portrait in this exhibition and compare it to Fairweather’s. Discuss the different approaches the artists have taken.

Look at the surface of this painting. Look at the different kinds of brush strokes and the different textures of the paint.

Paint your own portrait in a similar manner.
Create a portrait

Use this card to create a portrait of someone important to you. Think about the variety of approaches used by artists in this exhibition and decide what would be the most appropriate approach to take for your portrait.

Think about what aspects of the person’s character or history you want to explore and create a portrait that reflects this. What will they be wearing? Will they have a hat? Will you depict them in a setting that reflects something about their personality? What will you title your work?

Use this side of the card to make some notes about who your portrait will portray.