

Portraiture: A Glimpse of Colonial America

*Based on a paper prepared for the CRS Art Appreciation Program by Meredith Wilson.
Edited in Fall 2007 by Dianne Forburger.*

VISUALS

George Washington, 1796 Gilbert Stuart

Various other Portraits in the “Portraiture” slot and small prints box

BOOKS

Portraiture, Shearer West, Oxford History of Art

American Portraiture in the Grand Manner: 1720-1920, Michael Quick

Background Information

Art and portraiture were important in the early years of colonial America. The first practical camera was not invented until 1840 and wide-spread use of cameras did not occur until years after that. For Americans in the colonial period, art provided scenes and views of their vast country that they could otherwise barely imagine. In this way, artists helped present the “idea of America” visually.

A portrait is a drawing, painting, or photograph of one or more people as the subject. Generally, the subject (or “sitter”) is formally posed. The intention was to show the appearance of the sitter and, if possible, provide some insight into the sitter’s personality. Often the background of the work is of little interest, although that is not always the case. Artists often introduce symbols or props into the scene to highlight the sitter’s expertise or interests.

Portraiture in particular provided glimpses of political, military, and literary figures who were important in helping a young country through challenging times. Not only do we have the opportunity to see what early Americans looked like, but details in the portraits can provide us important clues about the personalities of those painted and information about the eras in which they lived. We can learn about dress, demeanor, and values by observing portraits of our leaders.

(the next 2 paragraphs were lifted from from the website of the National Gallery of Art – www.nga.gov/education/american/portraiture.htm)

Portraiture was the most popular type of painting in America from colonial times well into the nineteenth century. Most early portraitists had no formal training, but were self-taught sign- or housepainters. Typically, they traveled from town to town, supplementing their income with the commissions of local landowners and merchants. Now identified as “limners,” their work provides a glimpse of early colonial life. The rising mercantile class commissioned portraits as status symbols. Sitters posed in well-appointed interiors or landscapes in their finest clothes in order to document their property, good taste, and sophistication.

The portraits of the next generation of American artists were similar in purpose, but technically more accomplished. Study abroad was often part of these artists’ training. **Gilbert Stuart** and **John Singleton Copley** were among those who traveled to Europe to study the work of the great masters and take instruction with eminent academics. Stuart excelled at capturing the personality and psychological presence of his sitters. The theatrical British Grand Manner Portrait style was adopted by Copley and then popularized in America through the work of Stuart and John Trumbull.

(the next three paragraphs were lifted from www.artfact.com/features/viewstyle.cfm?gID-33)

The first generation of painters who journeyed to America abroad in the seventeenth century are today, largely unknown by name. Works by these painters are rare, and may not be completely identified. Immigrants, of course, imported a number of paintings, but a surprising number of paintings seem to have been known as painter-stainers – not limners (who were painters of miniature portraits). They probably engaged in diverse occupations while making the first life-size portraits of colonists in New England and New York.

The earliest dated work (1664) is an unsigned portrait made in Boston of Elizabeth Eggington, which is owned by the Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford. This portrait represents a young girl in elaborate clothing, holding a feather fan and wearing a miniature image of a gentleman (probably her father). Unfortunately, this painting has sustained considerable damage or wear over the years. In somewhat better shape is a painting which also bears the date 1664 depicting a bearded physician holding a skull and an instrument known as a trephine (for cutting a hole in the skull of a patient). This painting is also unsigned, but it has been attributed to the hand of the immigrant Augustine Clement who trained in England.

Portrait painting in America after the arrival of John Smibert in 1729 made a quantum leap in artistic style. No longer was a late medieval manner of portraiture acceptable in fashionable circles in the colonies. From Smibert's influence in Boston there radiated a new approach to imagery that emphasized convincing light and shadow and baroque substance to the sitter's face and figure. Smibert's group portrait of Bishop Berkeley and his Entourage which includes an image of the painter, (Yale University Art Gallery), and the Smibert portrait of Judge Samuel Sewall (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) are prime examples of the new style imported from England to Newport, Boston and elsewhere.

The Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery (www.npg.si.edu) is a wonderful resource that everyone is encouraged to visit.

“Generations of remarkable Americans are kept in the company of their fellow citizens at the National Portrait Gallery. The Gallery presents the wonderful diversity of individuals who have left – and are leaving – their mark on our country and our culture. Through the visual and performing arts, we celebrate leaders such as George Washington and Martin Luther King, Jr., artists such as Mary Cassatt and George Gershwin, activists such as Sequoyah and Rosa Parks, and icons of pop culture such as Babe Ruth and Marilyn Monroe. They all link us to our past, our present, and our future. For anyone fascinated by famous Americans and their stories, the National Portrait Gallery is a must-visit destination.”

Two of the Portrait Gallery's permanent exhibits are of particular interest to the subject of colonial America:

- **American Origins, 1600-1900** – A “conversation about America” is on view in a series of 17 galleries and alcoves chronologically arranged to take the visitor from the days of contact between Native Americans and European explorers through the struggles of independence to the Gilded Age.
- **America's Presidents** – the nation's only complete collection of presidential portraits outside the White House, this exhibition lies at the heart of the Portrait Gallery's mission to tell the American story through the individuals who have shaped it.

DISCUSSION

- Why is portraiture important? What is the historical significance of it?
- Can you think of any famous portraits you have seen? Where did you see them?
- Why would portraits have been important in Colonial America?
 - Camera ~ 1840
 - Historical clues
 - “Idea of America”
- How do the children feel about the various portraits show in class? What moods to the portraits evoke?
- What types of people were featured in portraits?
 - Politicians/leaders, explorers, authors, wealthy persons
- Is there anything in common about how the sitters are dressed? How about the backgrounds?
- What historical clues can be found in the portraits? What personality clues?
- Discuss likenesses
 - Face in thirds, skeletal structure, muscles, shading
 - Full view vs. profile, vs. $\frac{3}{4}$ profile – which seems most common for portraits?
- Look at George Washington’s portrait
 - Hundreds of portraits of him were done by some artists
 - What stage of life is he in – young, old, new president, retired...clues?
 - What emotion does Washington display? Happy, sad, comfortable, important...
 - Which part of the painting captures your attention first?
 - Notice the storm clouds and the rainbow
 - The artist, Gilbert Stuart, had Washington pose for him to paint his face, but used another model (sitter) to paint his body.
 - Try holding the pose Washington is holding – is it easy?
 - What does Washington look like he is about to do?
 - Notice Washington’s clothing – black silk suit, not a uniform; no crown

RESOURCES

National Portrait Gallery, colonial America:

<http://www.npg.si.edu/collect/colonial.htm>

National Portrait Gallery, Teacher's Guide to George Washington's Portrait:

<http://www.georgewashington.si.edu/kids/activity1.html>

National Portrait Gallery, A Brush with History – Teacher Resource Guide:

<http://www.npg.si.edu/edu/brush/guide/unit1/index.html>

Colonial American Portrait Painters:

<http://www.artfact.com/features/viewstyle.cfm?gID=33>

Teachers Guide to American Art – Lesson 2: Colonial America:

<http://www.thinker.org/fam/education/publications/guide-american/part2.html>

National Gallery of Art – Portraiture:

<http://www.nga.gov/education/american/portraiture.htm>

Portrait Drawing Tutorials:

<http://www.portrait-artist.org/face/>

<http://www.anticz.com/heads.htm>

<http://drawsketch.about.com/library/weekly/aa121502a.htm>

http://www.sanford-artedventures.com/create/tech_proportion.html

<http://www.angelfire.com/ar/rogerart/port5.html>

PROJECT IDEAS

- 1) A few days ahead of the session, take a digital photo of each child in the class. On your home computer, you can print them out in black and white on a regular sheet of white paper (8.5 x 11.)

Have the children use cray-pas to “enhance” or “colorize” their own portrait with background, props (sports balls or equipment, musical instruments, pets, etc.). They turn out really well – a la Andy Warhol!

- 2) The students will draw the portrait of a classmate or copy a historical portrait.

Give the students light, dark and medium value pencils, white pencils and erasers. As the students to decide where the head is going to be on the page. In that area, draw a rectangle and divide the rectangle into three rectangles, as shown in the face proportion “how to” included in this packet. (Don’t include the center line, as they may want to do a $\frac{3}{4}$ profile.) Discuss some of the rules of thumb.

- 3) Have each child draw the person across from them, then switch. The person should pose as they would for a formal “sitting”. They can hold objects or tell the artist what items to draw in the background.
- 4) Have someone pose in a period costume for all children to draw – note the different perspectives based on different angles and views.

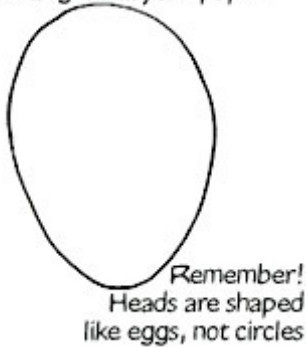
Face Proportions Tutorial

Many artists want to make realistic portraits that show how someone looks. To do this, you have to learn about face proportion. (You may want to practice drawing the basic [face shapes](#) first.)

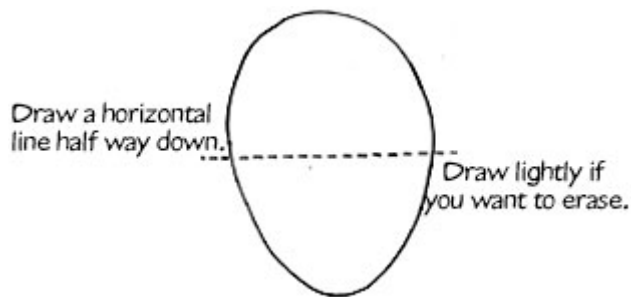
Are you ready? We'll start with a front view. (When you are done, you may want to try a profile or three-quarter view.)

1. HEAD. Draw a large head shape on your paper.

Draw large. Fill your paper



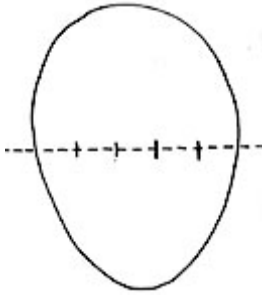
2. EYES. Eyes are halfway down the face. So use your ruler to divide your head in half with a horizontal line. Draw lightly (you may want to erase it later).



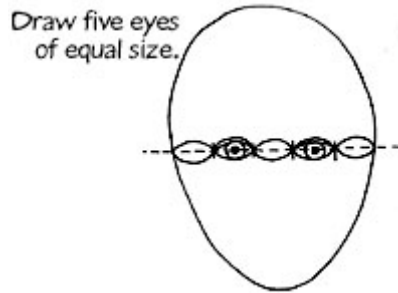
This will look a little alien until you add eyebrows and hair. But don't draw the eyes too high!



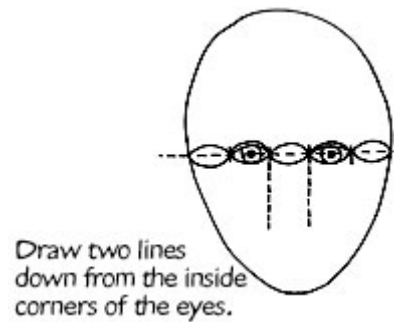
If you look at someone face on, they will have room for five eyes across the front of their face! You can divide the horizontal line into five equal spaces to figure out how big to make the eyes.



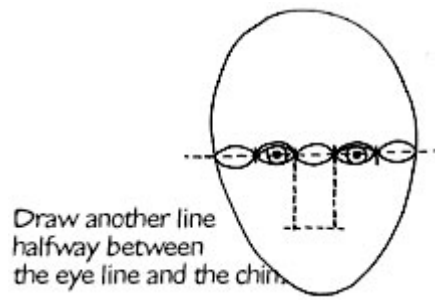
Now draw the eye shapes—you can draw five to start with to help you remember the size and spacing.



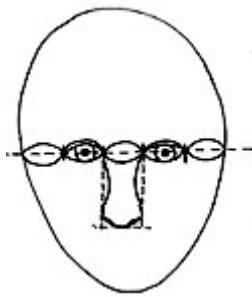
3. NOSE. The size of the nose depends on the person. The bottom of the nose is often as wide as the inside corners of the eyes. So you can draw two lines down from the inside corners of the eyes.



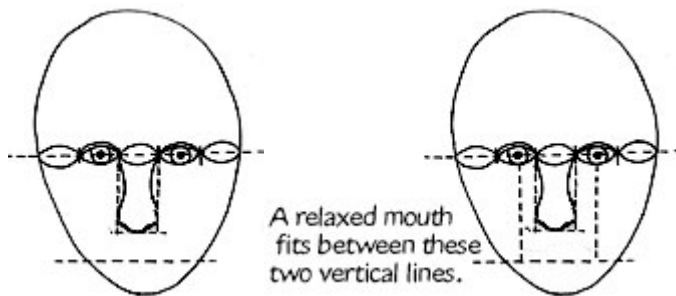
Usually, the bottom of the nose is halfway between the eye line and the bottom of the chin.



Now you have a "nose box"—draw the nose!

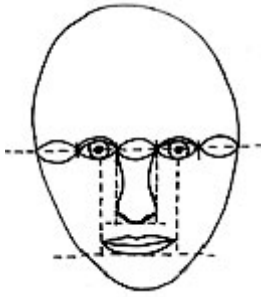


4. MOUTH. Draw another line half way between the nose and the chin.



Mouths are right above this line. The width of the mouth depends on the person's expression. But the corners of a relaxed mouth line up with the middle of the eye. Draw two vertical lines down from the pupils of the eye.

Now draw the mouth!

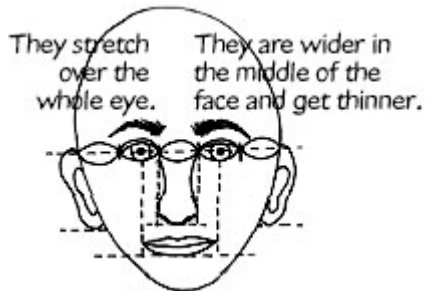


5. EARS. Ears are bigger than many people think! They stretch from the eyes to below the nose. Use the horizontal line you first drew for the eyes to line up the top of the ears. They will end between the bottom of the nose and the mouth.



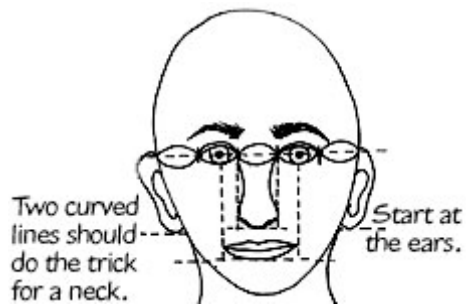
Don't be shy!
Draw the ears
big enough!

6. EYEBROWS. Eyebrows tell a lot about a person's mood. They come in all different sizes and shapes (and some people pluck them out!) A gentle arch over the eyes should do for a relaxed face.



They stretch over the whole eye. They are wider in the middle of the face and get thinner.

7. NECK. Most people draw the neck too thin. A head weighs eight pounds so necks are big and strong! Start at the ears and gently curve in then out again



8. SHOULDERS. If you have room on your paper you can draw shoulders or part of the shoulders. We actually have room for three heads on our shoulders!

Make the shoulders wide enough so you could fit another head on each shoulder.



9. HAIR. Last but not least, HAIR! You could stop now if your subject has no hair. But if he or she does, remember where the hairline is.



Good work! Now you can draw front-view portrait! Draw another and another and another until you don't need to draw the guidelines.