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Self Portrait in Straw Hat – Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun (1782; National Gallery)

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/elisabeth-louise-vigee-le-brun-self-portrait-in-a-straw-hat>





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- What can we tell about this lady just from the clues the artist has given us? Is she rich or poor? Happy or sad? What does she do for a job? How do we know? **She looks rich because of her clothes (silk dress and lace shawl) and earrings. She looks happy with smiling red lips and rosy cheeks. She is an artist because she is holding a palette and brushes. Her name is Elisabeth.**
- Who do you think painted this painting? **She did!**
- Why do you think she painted it? **Maybe to show off to people what a good artist she was.**
- Do you think Elisabeth really dressed like this when she painted? **She probably would not have had such a fancy dress – and would almost definitely have been wearing an apron.**
- Pose exactly like Elisabeth. Look carefully at what she is doing to get it absolutely right. You need to be nice and straight with your shoulders relaxed. Your eyes need to be looking straight ahead and your mouth should be slightly open and smiling. Most important, your left hand needs to hold your palette *and* brushes while your right hand is at an angle in front of you with your fingers slightly apart. Why is she doing this with her hand? **It is important to point out that because Elisabeth was a professional artist she needed people to pay her to paint them. Her hand is perhaps beckoning potential sitters to come and get their portrait painted by her. Maybe it is reminding her clients that she will need to be paid for creating their portrait. She was incredibly successful and painted royalty and nobility all over Europe including in London.**
- What is strange about the paints on the palette? **They have not been used even though this painting is finished.** Why has she done that? **To make it look neat and tidy. She did not want to give the impression that she was a scruffy person.**

Follow on ideas

- Imagine Elisabeth stepped out of the painting. What do you think she would say to you? What questions would you have for her? She was a very modern lady, over two hundred years ago. Maybe she could tell you about some of her travels and the interesting people she met.
- Discuss how you would choose to pose in your own portrait.
- Life in Lockdown activity: Elisabeth painted this portrait of herself outside but in reality she was in her studio. Because it is so much harder to spend time outside during the lockdown use your imagination to paint yourself in an outdoors scene without leaving the house. Remember that Elisabeth gave herself fancier clothes in her portrait than she would really have been wearing so think about what you would like to wear if you could wear anything.



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Topic links

- Portraits/Self-Portraits
- Fashion
- Identity