

## Studying the Portrait

### Self portrait in Van Dyck Costume aged about twenty

c.1753-4

Joseph Wright of Derby (1734-1797)

*Oil on Canvas*

Self portraiture allows the artist to present him or herself to the world as they would like to be perceived. In a sense they can become who they want to be. This can be achieved in a variety of ways: What they choose to wear, posture, facial expression and technique of painting, all present us with visual clues about the artist.



It also presents a challenge to the artist to achieve a certain likeness. They can continue representing themselves throughout the course of their life. Artists who have painted many self portraits leave us with a personal account of their lives. Wright painted a series of self portraits during his lifetime, the last being a year or two before his death.

### ‘Reading’ the portrait

In this painting Wright has chosen a pose often used by kings, cavaliers or other notable gentlemen. His very upright position with left hand forward and right hand downward could almost suggest he is seated on a horse. The right elbow follows the same direction as his eyes, toward the viewer, while his body faces forward with his cape flowing behind.

In this posture he would have his hand on his belt (a pose often used as a sign of confidence) or could easily be holding the hilt of a sword. This is further suggested by the sword hanger worn diagonally from the shoulder across the torso.

### Who was Van Dyck?

Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641) was born in Antwerp. He spent six years of his youth in Italy studying the Italian masters before settling in England in 1632. This move was at the request of King Charles 1. During this time he painted portraits of the King, Queen Henrietta and their children as well as many personages of the court. Van Dyck became a great influence in portraiture and is thought to be one of the important founders of British painting.

## Why is he in costume?

On first appearance there seems to be nothing unusual about this portrait of Joseph Wright, we see many historical characters painted in this very grand style. However the artist has dressed himself in costume, and not of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century but of about 130 years earlier in the time of the artist Van Dyck.

The style of the generic ‘Cavalier’ outfit which Van Dyck painted many of his sitters wearing became very popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and was termed a ‘Fancy Dress’ costume. Plain satin was increasingly popular for men’s and women’s dress and the lace edged collar and cuffs add curving decorative lines. Wright would later paint many portraits of sitters wearing lace costume in which he developed great skill.



Van Dyck was also well known for painting men with short pointed beards and this particular kind of beard became known as a ‘vandyke’ (an anglicized spelling of the name).

The artist Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788) was also influenced by Van Dyck and he painted a number of portraits in this fashionable costume of the time, notably in his painting *The Blue Boy*, c1770.

## What do we know about the artist at the time it was painted?

When Wright painted this portrait of himself around 1753 he had just completed two years training in London with the artist Thomas Hudson (1701-1779) at his fashionable studio. On his return to Derby he spent his time painting family and friends, before returning to London to complete his studies. As a young man of twenty he would have wanted to be taken very seriously as an aspiring portrait painter in the hope of a successful career.



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**Self portrait in Van Dyck Costume aged about twenty**  
Joseph Wright, 1753-4  
*Oil on Canvas*

**Portrait of Thomas Hudson**  
Joseph Wright, c.1751  
*Black and white chalks on light blue paper*

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**Study of a Man’s Left Hand in His Waist coat, with lace cuff**  
Joseph Wright, 1757-60  
*Black and white chalks on light blue paper*