

READING HELEN'S PORTRAIT



The Apple Tree

In this portrait, Helen and Annie are sitting in a small tree in an open field. It was taken in 1904, when Helen was 24 years old. Click on the image to see the portrait in more detail.

At first glance

You can do this on your own, but it's better with a partner. Each of you should look at the portrait for thirty seconds. Then turn away from the screen and quiz each other. How much can you remember? It's likely that your partner will remember different details than you do.

Questions to ask after your first glance:

- Who else is in the photograph?
- What are Annie and Helen wearing?
- What do they seem to be doing?
- What is in the background?
- Are there any objects in the portrait?

Now go back and look at the portrait again. What did you miss?

- Both of them are holding the book.
- Helen's fingers are on Annie's face.
- Apples are hanging from the trees. (What season of the year is it?)

Bring the portrait to life

Find some costumes and props that look like what you see in the portrait. Anything works bedsheets for long dresses, a chair for a tree. Convince your dog to take part – if you can. You can also use a stuffed animal.

Pay attention to the details. Copy the position of Helen's fingers on Annie's face.

Now imagine it's 1904, and you're Helen. What do you smell around you? If there is something to touch, describe it. How do you feel being up in the tree? (Excited or scared?)

During the quarantine, the Getty Museum challenged people to come up with their own versions of famous paintings at home. [Click here](#) to see how they did it.

Think about it

1. If you could invent a title for this portrait, what would it be?
2. Why did the photographer take the portrait outdoors in a tree?

Probably because Helen was very fond of the outdoors. In her autobiography, she wrote: "Nature is a feeling, a love and an appetite." When she was young, she and Annie would often take their lessons outside.

3. Why is there a book in the portrait?

The book is a symbol of learning. Helen and Annie are both holding it. This shows how much Helen depended on Annie as a reader and as a learner.

4. From the following list, choose three words that describe how Helen and Annie look:

Stern

Calm

Kind

Happy

Uncomfortable

Thoughtful

Proud

Dignified

Carefree

Formal

Gentle

Excited

Share your list with another person. If you chose different words, explain why.

5. How did the dog get up there?

Learn more about it

This portrait was taken right after Helen graduated from college, when Helen and Annie were living on a farm in Wrentham, Massachusetts. [Click here](#) to see another photo of Helen taken the same day.

The dog in the portrait is named Phiz. He is a Boston Terrier, and he was given to Helen by her classmates at Radcliffe. He sometimes went to class with Helen and Annie, and he slept through the lectures at Helen's feet.

Helen has her fingers on Annie's face and throat so she can understand what Annie is saying. Her thumb feels the movement of Annie's vocal cords. The first finger feels the shape of her lips, and her second finger feels the puff of air in her cheek. [Click here](#) to see how Annie and Helen used this method to teach Helen how to speak.

Write about it

The person or people in a portrait photo don't move or change their expression until the photographer is finished. But what happens afterwards? Write the dialog – the conversation -- Helen might have with Annie while they were sitting in the tree or while they walk back to the house.

- Are they deciding where to go after the photographer takes the portrait?
- Are they sharing a secret?
- Are they talking about Phiz?

Between the portraits

In 1913 Helen and Annie began to travel around the country giving speeches. Helen spoke about the needs of people who were blind and deaf. She also spoke about helping the poor, improving education, and giving women the right to vote. She spoke against war, child labor, and intolerance. She continued giving speeches for 50 years.

Helen and Annie continued to live together. When Annie married John Macy, he became part of the group. They were often poor. Sometimes their famous friends would give them donations.

To raise money, Helen and Annie traveled with a vaudeville troupe for two years. Vaudeville is a live theater made up of dancing, singing, and specialty acts. Helen's and Annie's act was to show the audience how Annie taught Helen to speak. [Click here to see it.](#)

