

READING HELEN'S PORTRAIT



Helen and Homer

This portrait of Helen was made in 1925, when Helen was 45 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.) Look at the portrait for thirty seconds. Then turn away from the page and 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:

- There are only three objects in this photo. Can you name all three?
- What is Helen wearing?
- What does the dog look like? Do you know what breed it is?
- What is on the wall behind Helen?

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

Part of a chair can be seen at the left.

Helen is holding a book. Her fingers are resting on the page.

The object on the wall is called a "bas relief." It's a sculpture of a man's head, so it's a portrait too. There are some letters on the bas-relief that are not in English.

Bring the portrait to life

Copy the bas-relief onto paper and tape it to a blank wall. If you have some shiny fabric for her dress, use it. Otherwise a bed sheet is fine. If your dog isn't willing to take part, build a giant dog out of pillows or boxes.

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.](#)

Put the chair in place, then stand before the wall with your dog at your feet. it's 1925.

- What are you working on?
- What do you smell?
- If there is something to touch, how does it feel?
- How do you feel about your day so far?

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Think about it

1. If you could invent a title for this portrait, what would it be?
2. Look closely at Helen's facial expression. From the list, choose three adjectives that describe her best.

Stern

Happy

Serious

Formal

Calm

Uncomfortable

Dignified

Relaxed

Determined

Thoughtful

Gentle

Proud

Now take a look at the dog's expression. What three adjectives describe her best?

Curious

Angry

Confused

Calm

Relaxed

Patient

Uncomfortable

Determined

Interested

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

Learn more about it

Helen is wearing a velvet dress that is trimmed at the bottom with fur. Her hair is very short. This was very fashionable in the 1920s.

Helen is holding a book embossed in braille. We can tell because of the size of the book and because the pages are white. (There are dots on the page, but we can't see them.) Helen could read braille in five languages: English, German, Greek, French, and Latin.

The portrait on the bas-relief is Homer, a poet who lived in Greece nearly 3,000 years ago. The word is Omoros, which is another name for Homer. Homer was blind. He would travel from place to place telling stories about heroes and gods. His stories were gathered in two books, called *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. You can read more about Homer [here](#) and [here](#).

Helen was able to touch many Greek and Roman statues on her visits to various museums. In a 1932 essay, she wrote, "The gnarled, bearded features of Homer are dear to me, for he, too, knew blindness."

The dog in the portrait is Seiglinde, a Great Dane. Great Danes are the biggest dogs in the world. Helen and Annie raised 11 Great Dane puppies when they lived on a farm in Massachusetts. Ten of the puppies were adopted, and Annie and Helen kept one. They named her Seiglinde, after a character in a German opera. Helen called Seiglinde the most dignified and the most intelligent of all her dogs. Annie claimed she taught the dog to say the word "Mama."

Write about it

- Imagine that Helen and Homer met each other. She is a writer who is deaf and blind. He is a storyteller, also blind, who lived 3,000 years ago. What do they talk about?
- Imagine that Seiglinde could really talk. What would she have to say?

Between the portraits

Helen published three books: *My Religion*, *Midstream*, and *Teacher*.

Helen and Polly visited sixteen countries on five continents, as a representative of the American Foundation for the Blind and the American Foundation for Overseas Blind.

During World War II, Helen, with her assistant Polly, began visiting blind, deaf, and disabled soldiers of World War II in military hospitals around the country. Helen called this "the crowning experience of my life."

