

READING HELEN'S PORTRAIT



Helen's Office

In this portrait, Helen is working in her office. It was taken in 1955, when Helen was 64 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.) Click on the image to see the portrait in more detail. Look at it for thirty seconds. Then turn away from the page 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:

- What is Helen wearing?
- What does the dog look like? Do you know what breed she is? Who do you think she's staring at?

- Can you describe the chair Helen sits in?
- Can you name any of the objects on the desk?

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

You probably noticed the many piles of paper on the desk and on the daybed behind Helen. But did you remember the typewriter, the small Japanese doll, the two sculptures, the paperweights, and the plant?

Did you remember the bookcases on the wall to Helen's left? They holds several small art objects as well as books.

Bring the portrait of Helen to life

Set up a table or a desk in your house and make it look as much it can like Helen's office. Find some props to put on the desk that look like what you see in the portrait. Try a drinking glass for a vase, Lego bricks to build the various objects, and a big black box for the typewriter.

Sit down in the chair and imagine it's 1954. You are Helen. 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?

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 artist choose to take the portrait in Helen's office?

Probably because Helen spent a lot of time in her office, writing essays, letters and speeches. She wrote about justice

and fairness for all people, regardless of poverty, race, or ability. The piles of papers on the desk and the daybed show that she has been very busy. Did you noticed that some of the paper piles were tied with string? Why might Helen do this?

3. Look closely at Helen's facial expression. From the list, choose three adjectives that describe her best.

Stern	Formal	Dignified
Happy	Calm	Relaxed
Serious	Uncomfortable	Determined

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 always said her main occupation was writing. Throughout her lifetime she wrote 11 books and 475 speeches and essays. Generally, she wrote her own first drafts, and then Annie helped her edit them. Sometimes other people helped too. She always typed the final draft herself.

The dog in the portrait is Ettu, a German Shepherd. Helen adopted her from The Seeing Eye, a dog guide training school in New Jersey. Ettu wasn't a guide dog, but she was an excellent pet. Helen called her "a paragon of dog excellence."

Write about it

- If Ettu could talk, what do you think she might say to Helen? For example, does she wonder why Helen would rather stay in a room with lots of paper in piles when she could go outside and play?
- Ettu is clearly looking directly at the photographer. What would she like to say to the photographer?

