



Joan Carlile (1606–1679)
'Portrait of a Lady wearing an Oyster Satin Dress' c.1650
oil on canvas

ArtSpark

ignite ideas and imagine

Discover '**Portrait of a Lady wearing an Oyster Satin Dress**' a painting from c.1650 by Joan Carlile.

This is one of 14,000+ works of art from the Government Art Collection which are displayed in UK Government buildings in over 130 countries; that is nearly every capital city around the world!

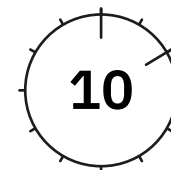


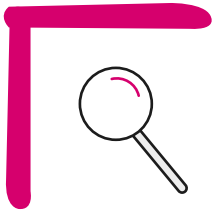
Ready to find out more?

Read online, download or 'pick and mix' any activities that you like. Try them at home, at school or with friends.

You don't have to do them all in one go!

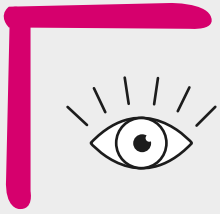
Look out for this icon for 10-minute quick and easy activities...





10 facts about... Joan Carlile

- * 'Portrait of a Lady wearing an Oyster Satin Dress' is the earliest work by a female artist in the Government Art Collection. Celebrating the centenary of the 'Representation of the People Act' in 2018, the Collection bought works only by women.
- * Carlile's 'Portrait of an Unknown Lady' is also the oldest work by a woman in the Tate Collection.
- * Born Joan Palmer, Carlile (1606–1679) was one of the first professional female portrait painters in England.
- * Several of Carlile's paintings have been rediscovered: 'Portrait of a Lady wearing an Oyster Satin Dress' was once owned by a collector in France. Who knows which other Carlile works are yet to be found?
- * Carlile's life was largely shaped by politics and her family connections. Her father worked for the Royal Parks of St James's (under James I) while her husband, the poet-dramatist, Lodowick Carlile, was also connected to the Royal Parks and the Royal Household. Joan may have started working professionally after Lodowick lost income during the Civil Wars and Commonwealth of England. [Read more here](#)
- * In 1654 the Carliles moved to Covent Garden, London, where many artists lived, including the miniaturist Samuel Cooper (1608–1672) and portraitist Mary Beale (1633–1699).
- * Telltale qualities characterise Carlile's work – how she paints curls of hair, or gives equal importance to the background as to the 'sitter' (the person being painted).
- * The 'Oyster Satin Dress' features in other paintings by Carlile. Perhaps she had an artist's 'dressing up box', and the dress was a studio prop? Further evidence that she was a professional painter. [Look at another dress painted by Carlile](#)
- * Research continues into who the woman is in the Collection's portrait. It could be Elizabeth Murray, Countess of Dysart (1626–1698) who owned Ham House, in London. A keen collector, she bought Carlile's work and often sat for the artist. [A miniature portrait of Murray attributed to Carlile is at Thirlestane Castle.](#)
- * Murray's involvement in The Sealed Knot, and in court espionage is a heady tale! She cannily used her connections to support Charles II – her efforts to support his return to the throne in 1660 resulted in her reward of a pension of £800 a year for life. [Read more here](#)



Starter questions to help explore the artwork



Here are some questions to encourage you to look closely for clues.

There are no right and wrong answers: say what you see!

- Where are we? (Inside or out? A private or public space?)
- When in time are we? How can we tell?
- Is the sitter comfortable, do you think?
- How old does she look to you?
- Do you think she's rich or poor? Happy or sad?
- What do you imagine her dreams are?
- Does she have a secret? What is it?
- Do you think the sitter and the artist know each other? (What gives you that impression?)

Hot seat

If you are exploring these ideas as a group, try this:

A volunteer agrees to be in the hot seat, and to answer questions as if they are the sitter. (They can be male or female - this is about imagination)...

Your turn: 2 into 1 poem

Using the ideas you came up with as a group, write two short poems responding to the portrait – one as the sitter and one as the artist.

First, imagine, 'I am the sitter'.

Use all the senses: what can you feel, see, smell, hear? What are you thinking about? Imagine what you did before sitting here, and what you plan to do afterwards.

Next, ask the same questions as the painter.

Afterwards, read through what you have written. Can you perform the 2 parts in a way that shows what they have in common, and what makes them different?

Make up a title that includes both parts.

Women writing women



Artemisia Gentileschi, Italian, 1593–c.1656

'Self Portrait as a Lute Player' c.1615–18

Oil on canvas, 30¹/₂ x 28¹/₄ in. (77.5 x 71.8cm)

height x width

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT

Charles H. Schwartz Endowment Fund, 2014.4.1

© image: Allen Phillips/Wadsworth Atheneum

The following poem by Jacqueline Saphra is from her book, 'Veritas: Poems after Artemisia'. Born 13 years before Joan Carlile, Italian Baroque artist Artemisia Gentileschi is now recognised as one of the most progressive painters of her generation.

'She offers up her truth, immortalised to please the patrons, art in her hands, as if she's soft enough for men to idolise. It's all a sham, but still, she has to live. She plays her parts so well, sinner, saint – use or be used. Swollen with motherhood, fresh from childbed, she pays her bills in paint and flesh. She orders what she can't afford: beloved of all colours, ultramarine to tint her days, tincture of quick relief from dark and doubt, a blue of self-esteem to feed her faith in what she can achieve. This is a woman's lot; she lives with it. She does the work, sharpens up her spirit.'

Your turn: things to think about

Gentileschi was often the model in her own paintings.

- Why would she use herself as the model?
- What are the differences between self-portraiture and painting someone else?
- What does Saphra's poem suggest about being a female professional painter in the 17th century?
- What similarities can you see in Carlile and Gentileschi's paintings? And what differences?
- Saphra includes what she sees in the painting, what she knows from history, and what she thinks and feels as a 21st century woman. Can you find examples of each?


Out of the blue



Check out these colourful facts

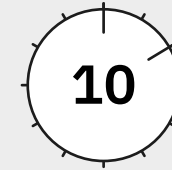
- Ultramarine is a deep blue pigment originally made by grinding lapis lazuli into a powder, and was the finest and most expensive blue used by Renaissance painters. Charles I gave £500 worth of ultramarine to Carlile and Van Dyck (equivalent to about £60,000 today.) In 1640 it could have bought 78 horses, or 92 cows! [Calculate here](#)
- The male satin bowerbird creates a 'bower' to attract a female. It's not a nest, but an artwork, and to make it attractive he decorates it with blue things. Flowers, shells, parakeet feathers. Sometimes he paints things blue using pigment ground up from fruit pulp with his beak. Birds will even raid decorations from picnic tables up to 10 miles away!
- 'Curating' (from the Latin word curare, 'to take care of') means to select, organise and present something to tell a story. In 2011, artist Cornelia Parker curated

part of a Government Art Collection exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery, London. She arranged 70 artworks according to the colours of the rainbow (plus black and white). The show's title, 'Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain', is a mnemonic (a way of remembering something, using words that begin with the same letters) to recall the colours of the rainbow.

 [Watch Parker introducing the work](#)

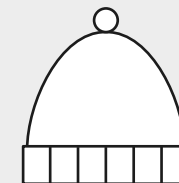
Your turn: be a curator

- Explore the [GAC online](#), using 'blue' as a filter.
- Select the works you would show in your own exhibition: give it a title.
- Choose 6 blue works to tell a story – make up a story that these artworks can illustrate.



Your turn: be a bowerbird

- Find as many blue things as you can at home – cups, socks, hats, cleaning products, ornaments (remember to return everything afterwards!)
- Arrange your collection in a way to attract someone's attention.
- Order it according to a system (light to dark, alphabetically, by size...)
- Take pictures, if you like.



Miniatures



Elizabeth Murray's home, Ham House, has the 'Green Closet', the only example in Britain of a picture closet with its original collection of 87 highly-prized miniatures, including 'An Unknown Lady in a White Dress', previously attributed to Joan Carlile. [Read more](#)


Your turn: create a miniature

Carlile was an early professional female painter. **Create miniatures of women you know who were 'first' at something.**

- Talk to friends/family. Ask them 'What do you remember being first at?' e.g. using a computer, travelling abroad, eating a new food?
- Write down their story to display alongside your portrait of them.

Need some inspiration?

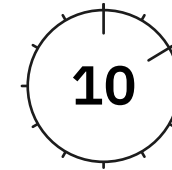
Sophie Herxheimer is a writer and artist who collects people's stories, drawing as she listens, to illustrate their stories.

 [Watch Sophie in action](#)

To make the portrait, you need: paints, jam jar lid, piece of card, ribbon/string, tape.

- Stick the loop of ribbon to the flat side of the lid for hanging.

- Draw around the lid on the card so your portrait fits. Keep it tiny: some miniatures are as small as an egg.
- Paint a portrait. When dry, cut it out and fit inside the lid. Try making a 'frame' using plasticine and foil.



Your turn: get Borrowing

The Borrowers are a tiny family in a children's novel by Mary Norton. They live in the walls and floors of a house and survive by 'borrowing' from the big people.

You'll need a timer and a cup

- In 10 mins, find small (and safe) things at home e.g. look in a pencil case, a sewing kit; in the kitchen, bathroom, or recycling box...
- Everything must fit in the cup!
- After 10 mins, imagine how a Borrower can use things. A soap tray as a hot tub? A stamp as a portrait?

Dutch School (previously attributed to Joan Carlile)

'An Unknown Lady in a White Dress'

1645-50 oil on copper

© image: National Trust/Christopher Warleigh-Lack

A prop, a place, a portrait



Dame Ethel Walker (1861–1951)

'The Red Skirt' oil on canvas

© Courtesy of the artist's estate/Bridgeman Art Library

Joan Carlile paid equal attention to people and backgrounds in her paintings. She also often used the same prop (the white satin dress) in several portraits.

- How many different ways can you think of to use a prop and a place in a portrait?

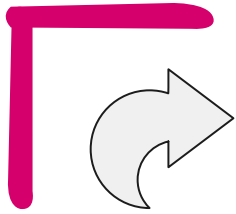
Take a look at 'The Red Skirt' a painting by Dame Ethel Walker (1861–1951)

- What effect does the red skirt make?
- What does it tell us about the woman and the place?

Your turn: go on a photoshoot



- Work in pairs or small groups, with a camera.
- Select a prop – an item of clothing, a length of fabric, or a sheet or blanket.
- Find a place with an interesting background, indoors or outside.
- Take ten photos of each other (a third person can be the photographer's assistant).
- Find ten different ways to create a portrait, featuring the same piece of fabric, and paying equal attention to the background.
- Afterwards, share the photos and discuss the results: which work best, and why?



What next?

Places to visit

- **Thirlestane Castle** - [Information](#) about the Maitlands and the history of the castle.
- **Ham House** - [Discover here](#)
- **Material Shop** - Visit the haberdashery department of a large store, or your local market.

More to explore

- **[‘Invisible Agents: Women and Espionage in Seventeenth-Century Britain’](#)**
Nadine Akkerman, Oxford University Press
- **[‘Veritas: Poems after Artemisia’](#)**,
Jacqueline Saphra (Hercules Editions 2020)
- **[Bidisha article on Sophie Herxheimer](#)**
- **[‘An Illustrated Guide to Linda Nochlin’s “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”](#)** first published in ARTnews in 1971
- **Musical miniatures:** [Look](#) at this Indian miniature ‘ragamala’ painting that was made around the same time that Carlile was working
- **Ragamala paintings** are the visual part of an art form from medieval India that includes poetry and music, depicting Indian musical styles called ragas. [Listen to a raga here](#)
- **Nancy Honey’s photographs of 100 women, with interviews by Hattie Garlick:** [Find out](#) how Honey uses pose and setting to tell a story

The Government Art Collection is the most dispersed collection of British art in the world. On show in UK Government buildings in nearly every capital city, the Collection promotes British art and supports British cultural diplomacy, culture and values.

- / One national collection
- / Over 14,000 artworks
- / On show in over 130 countries

www.artcollection.culture.gov.uk

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