

READING HELEN'S PORTRAIT



Six Years Old

In this portrait, Helen is seated in a very ornate chair. It was taken in 1887, when she was six years old and may be the earliest photo ever taken of Helen. 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 twenty seconds. Then minimize 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?
- Describe the dog in Helen's lap. Can you guess what breed he is?
- Do you remember what Helen's dress looked like?

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

Did you notice that Helen's dress has a white lace border at the bottom and puffed sleeves?

It's hard to tell, but it looks like Helen has her arm around the white dog.

Bring the portrait to life

Find some costumes and props that look like what you see in the portrait. Perhaps there is something in your own closet or your sister's closet that resembles Helen's white dress. Convince your dog to take part – if you can. (You can also use a stuffed animal.) If you have a younger sister or brother, they might agree to portray Helen.

Pay attention to the details. What is Helen doing with her hands? Now that you're in the photo, imagine it's 1887, and you're Helen. (You can invent some details.) What do you smell around you? If there is something to touch, describe it.

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

If you could invent a title for this for this portrait, what would it be?

From the following list, pick three words that describe how Helen looks.

Sad

Calm

Kind

Happy

Excited

Thoughtful

Uncomfortable

Sweet

Carefree

Obedient

Gentle

Excited

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

More about it

Many people who write about Helen Keller report that she was wild and unruly and only changed her behavior after she met Annie Sullivan. Does the child in the portrait look wild and unruly? In her autobiography, Helen admits she did have flashes of temper and naughtiness, but she also writes about loving the flowers in bloom, pulling pranks with her friend Martha, and gathering the eggs from the chickens.

Did you notice the position of Helen's feet? She appears to be kicking them, perhaps because she had to stay still for so long. People also write that she had no way to communicate with her family, that she was locked in a dismal world without sight and without hearing. Actually, she had about 60 signs to communicate with her family, and she could tell people apart by the vibrations of their footsteps.

Helen holds a small white dog in her lap. We do not know the dog's name or breed. Helen said her first dog was Belle, and we have portraits of Helen and Belle together. Perhaps this dog belonged to the photographer, and he gave it to Helen to hold so she would remain still while he worked.

Write about it

1. Do you think this portrait has been made in the photographer's studio or in Helen's living room. Why?
2. Imagine you're Helen. What are you thinking about? Do you know what is happening?
3. Imagine that, just for now, Helen can talk. She asks you, "What is a photograph?" Write down your explanation.

Between the portraits

When Helen was six years old, her parents hired Annie Sullivan to teach her. Helen was very strict, but she loved Helen very much. In the next few months, Helen learned thousands of words. She also learned to speak, although never very clearly.

Annie took Helen to Boston so that she could learn with other blind children at the Perkins School for the Blind. Later Helen went to a school for deaf children in New York. In 1900, she started her studies at Radcliffe University. Radcliffe is now part of Harvard University. Annie accompanied Helen to all her classes, spelling the professor's words into her hand.

While she was at Radcliffe, Helen wrote her first book, *The Story of My Life*. She also wrote hundreds of articles for magazines and newspapers.

Helen and Annie continued to live together. They were often short of money. Donations and gifts from friends and well-wishers paid for their expenses.

