

'Elias Ashmole' c. 1683  
by John Riley (1646-91)

oil on canvas, 124 x 101 cm

A zoomable image of this painting is available on our website to use in the classroom with an interactive whiteboard or projector.

[www.ashmolean.org/learning-resources](http://www.ashmolean.org/learning-resources)



### Starting questions

The following questions may be useful as a starting point for developing speaking and listening skills with your class:

- What can you see?
- What is this person wearing?
- Can you describe the colour and texture of the fabrics? Do the clothes tell us anything about the person's status?
- How would you describe this person? What clues are there in the painting to tell us about him?
- When do you think this person lived?
- If you met this person what would you like to ask them?
- A portrait is a likeness of a real person. If you were having a portrait painted what clues and symbols would you choose to put in the picture to tell us about yourself?
- The frame is made of wood. Who would have made it? What has he carved on it?



## Background information

### The painting

This imposing portrait of Elias Ashmole, founder of the Ashmolean Museum, may have been commissioned to mark the occasion of the Museum's opening by the future King, James II on May 21st 1683.

Ashmole is dressed in elegant clothes of velvet, lace and silk. His wig and lace cravat were the height of fashion at the time. The table beside him is shows some of his favourite objects. He leans on a copy of the book he wrote about the Order of the Garter. He wears one of the many chains that were given to him by members of the Order.

Ashmole stands in a proud pose and the objects shown with him in this portrait tell us that he was an accomplished and successful man. He was a lawyer and scientist. He studied alchemy and astrology and was a founder member of the Royal Society. He was in Oxford at the time of the Civil War supporting the Royalist cause under Charles I.

Collecting coins and furniture was another of Ashmole's passions. He was friends with another great collector, John Tradescant, who, like his father before him, was gardener to the Royal Family and travelled the world to search for plants for the royal gardens. On their travels the Tradescants picked up all sorts of strange and wonderful things to bring back to England. These objects formed the basis of the first museum in Tradescant's Lambeth home, The Ark.

### The historical context

Ashmole later acquired the rarities that made up the Tradescant Collection and gave them to Oxford University together with his own collection of coins and furniture on condition that a building was constructed to display them. The Ashmolean opened in 1683. Its original home was in Broad Street, Oxford now The Museum of the History of Science.



### The artist

John Riley was appointed court painter along with Godfrey Kneller in 1688.

### The frame

The elaborately carved lime-wood frame is by Grinling Gibbons, woodcarver and sculptor, who worked on St Pauls Cathedral and was appointed Master Carver to the Crown in 1693. Ashmole's crest at the top of the frame, includes Mercury and the twins, Gemini, showing his interest in alchemy and astrology.



# Ideas for creative planning across the KS1 & 2 curriculum

## Historical, geographical and social understanding

- Research daily life in Ashmole's time. Compare with today. If possible explore the neighbourhood surrounding your school and select a suitable home for Ashmole

## Understanding English, communication and languages

- Collect adjectives to describe Elias Ashmole. Build on the vocabulary collections to work on similes and metaphors. Write poetry using the collected vocabulary.
- Create a character profile of Elias Ashmole.
- Working in pairs or groups draw up a list of questions you would ask Elias Ashmole if he visited your school.
- Introduce additional portraits or photographs to the class. These could be displayed as a 'rogues gallery' or as 'wanted' posters. The children can then write detailed descriptions of the people portrayed and see if classmates can match the images to the descriptions.
- Work on role play with the children taking on the persona of characters from portraits and photographs from a variety of sources. These could be famous people from today or other chosen time periods.

## Scientific and technological understanding

- Investigating materials. Look at the fabrics, wig, gold and other materials used in the painting. Collect samples of materials where possible then sort and classify them describing their properties.

## Understanding the arts

- What is a portrait? (A likeness of a real person - there was no photography at this time) Discuss why portraits were painted in the past.
- If you were commissioning a portrait how would you want to be shown? Would you like to be portrayed full length, three quarters or head and shoulders as a bust? What would you wear, how would you sit or stand and would you show any precious possessions in the finished picture? What do you want the portrait to say about you? What symbols could you use to identify you with a group, a community, or your school?
- Make a frame for the portrait using recycled materials.
- Create a family or self portrait. These can be either painted or captured as a digital photo incorporating some of the ideas above.



Artwork inspired by John Riley's portrait of Elias Ashmole

## Mathematical understanding

- Discuss the differences between 2D and 3D images of people. Make puppets or sculptures of Elias Ashmole or other famous people.
- Investigate scale and proportion in bodies and faces.



Papier mache bust of Elias Ashmole

## Tips for introducing paintings to a class

- Reveal the painting section by section over a number of days. Each time a new detail is revealed the children can make predictions about what might be in the rest of the picture by looking at the details.
- Display the painting in the classroom for a number of days with a tape recorder or 'graffiti wall' for children to add comments or questions about the painting. Once the pupils' comments and questions have been gathered a class discussion could follow on.
- Introduce the painting to the whole class in a question and answer session designed to take the pupils into the painting as outlined on page one.
- Show the painting to the class for a minute or so and then cover it up or taken away. Ask the children to remember what they could see.
- Show the painting to one or two willing volunteers. They should then describe what they have seen to the rest of the class. Pupils could then draw what they have heard described to them and then see how well the versions match up.

## Take One Picture inspires...

Take One Picture encourages teachers to use a painting imaginatively in the classroom, both as a stimulus for artwork, and for work in more unexpected curriculum areas. Many curriculum areas can be delivered using a single image as a starting point.

The challenge is for each school to use the painting as a focus to develop culturally enriching, engaging, relevant and practical learning opportunities across the curriculum.

“ I can't wait to use TOP when I get my own class. ”

Year 3 ITE student, Oxford Brookes

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