



The Perfect Portrait Reference Photographs

A Collector's Guide to the right photographs for Creating a Beautiful Commissioned Portrait

A portrait painting begins long before the first brushstroke touches the canvas. It begins with a photograph.

The quality of your reference images plays a significant role in the beauty, character, and emotional impact of the finished painting. While a skilled artist can work from a variety of photographs, exceptional reference images allow for greater depth, accuracy, and expression, resulting in a portrait that feels truly alive.

Whether you are commissioning a portrait of yourself, a loved one, a child, or a cherished pet, this guide will help you select photographs that will lead to the strongest possible painting.

More Than a Pretty Picture

Many people assume the best reference photo is the most polished or professionally edited image. In reality, the most successful portrait references are often the simplest.

What matters most is that the photograph captures personality.

A wonderful portrait is not merely a likeness. It captures something deeper—a quiet expression, a familiar gaze, a joyful smile, or a moment that feels unmistakably like the person you love.

When selecting photographs, choose images that evoke an emotional response. If a photograph makes you smile every time you see it, there is a good chance it may become a beautiful portrait.

Natural Light Is Best

Whenever possible, choose photographs taken in natural light.

Soft window light or outdoor shade reveals form, color, and subtle facial features far better than harsh flash photography.

Natural light allows an artist to see:

- Skin tones accurately
- The structure of the face
- Eye color and detail
- The gentle transitions between light and shadow
- The mood and atmosphere of the subject

Avoid photographs taken with strong camera flash, as flash often flattens features and removes the subtle shadows that create dimension.

Ideal Lighting

- ✓ Near a large window
- ✓ Outdoors on a bright but overcast day
- ✓ Outdoors in open shade
- ✓ Soft morning or evening light

Avoid

- ✗ Direct midday sun
- ✗ Heavy shadows across the face
- ✗ Strong backlighting
- ✗ Flash photography

Sharp Focus Matters

A portrait painter can only paint details that are visible.

Please provide the highest-resolution images available. Original files directly from your camera or smartphone are always preferred.

When viewing your photo, zoom in on the eyes.

Can you clearly see the eyelashes, eye color, and reflections in the eyes?

If so, the photograph is likely detailed enough to create a beautiful portrait.

Avoid

- X Screenshots
 - X Social media downloads
 - X Heavily compressed images
 - X Blurry photographs
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The Eyes Tell the Story

The eyes are often the emotional center of a portrait.

Choose photographs where the eyes are clearly visible and well-lit. Even when a subject is smiling, laughing, or looking away, visible eyes help create a stronger connection between the portrait and the viewer.

For pet portraits, sharp and expressive eyes are equally important. A dog's curious gaze or a cat's quiet watchfulness often becomes the heart of the painting.

Expressions That Feel Authentic

One of the most common mistakes is selecting a photograph because it appears formal or "perfect."

Instead, look for authenticity.

Expressions That Feel Authentic continued

Ask yourself:

"Does this photograph feel like them?"

The most memorable portraits often come from:

Natural expressions rather than posed smiles. This is very important, take a look at some of the old masters' work that you love and I'm sure you won't see great big toothy smiles.

Why? Because a posed smile can hide a person's deep truth, personality and recognizable presence.

Instead try to capture;

A thoughtful glance.

A quiet natural smile.

A playful expression.

A look that family members instantly recognize.

These moments create portraits with lasting emotional value.

Include Multiple Reference Images

Even when one photograph will serve as the primary reference, additional images are extremely helpful.

Please provide several photographs showing:

- Different angles
- Various expressions
- Hair details
- Eye color
- Clothing details
- Jewelry or meaningful accessories

Include Multiple Reference Images continued

For pets, additional images can help show:

- Fur texture
- Markings
- Eye color
- Body structure
- Personality

These supporting images allow the artist to better understand the subject and create a more accurate and lifelike portrait.

Avoid Heavy Filters and Editing

Modern phone filters can dramatically alter colors and facial features.

Whenever possible, send original, unedited images.

Artificial filters often change:

- Skin tones
- Eye color
- Hair color
- Contrast
- Lighting

The goal is to paint the person as they truly are, not as a filter interprets them.

When possible, sending actual photographs along with digital copies ensures accurate color as digital photos often appear different on devices than an original photograph.

For Children's Portraits

Children grow and change quickly, making portrait commissions especially meaningful.

When photographing children:

- Work quickly and naturally
- Let them play and interact
- Photograph them in natural light
- Capture genuine expressions
- Take many photographs

Often the best image is not the one where they are perfectly posed, but the one that captures their unique spirit.

For Pet Portraits

Patience is the secret ingredient.

Photograph your pet at eye level whenever possible rather than looking down from above.

Choose images that show:

- Sharp eyes
- Clear fur detail
- Good lighting
- Distinctive markings
- Characteristic expressions

The best pet portraits often celebrate not only what a pet looked like, but who they were.

When in Doubt, Send More

One of the greatest advantages of working with a portrait artist is that you do not need to choose the perfect photograph alone.

If you are uncertain, simply send several favorites.

Together, we can determine which image—or combination of images—will create the strongest and most meaningful portrait.

A portrait commission is an investment in memory, connection, and legacy. Taking a little extra care when selecting your reference photographs ensures that the finished painting captures not only a likeness, but the spirit of the person or pet you hold dear.

There is nothing more magical than the joy of helping transform your cherished photographs into a timeless work of art.

I look forward to this exciting journey with you!