

Subject Matter

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

When an artist chooses something or someone to depict in their artwork, they are essentially choosing the subject matter for that work of art. In this lesson, you will learn about:



BIG IDEA

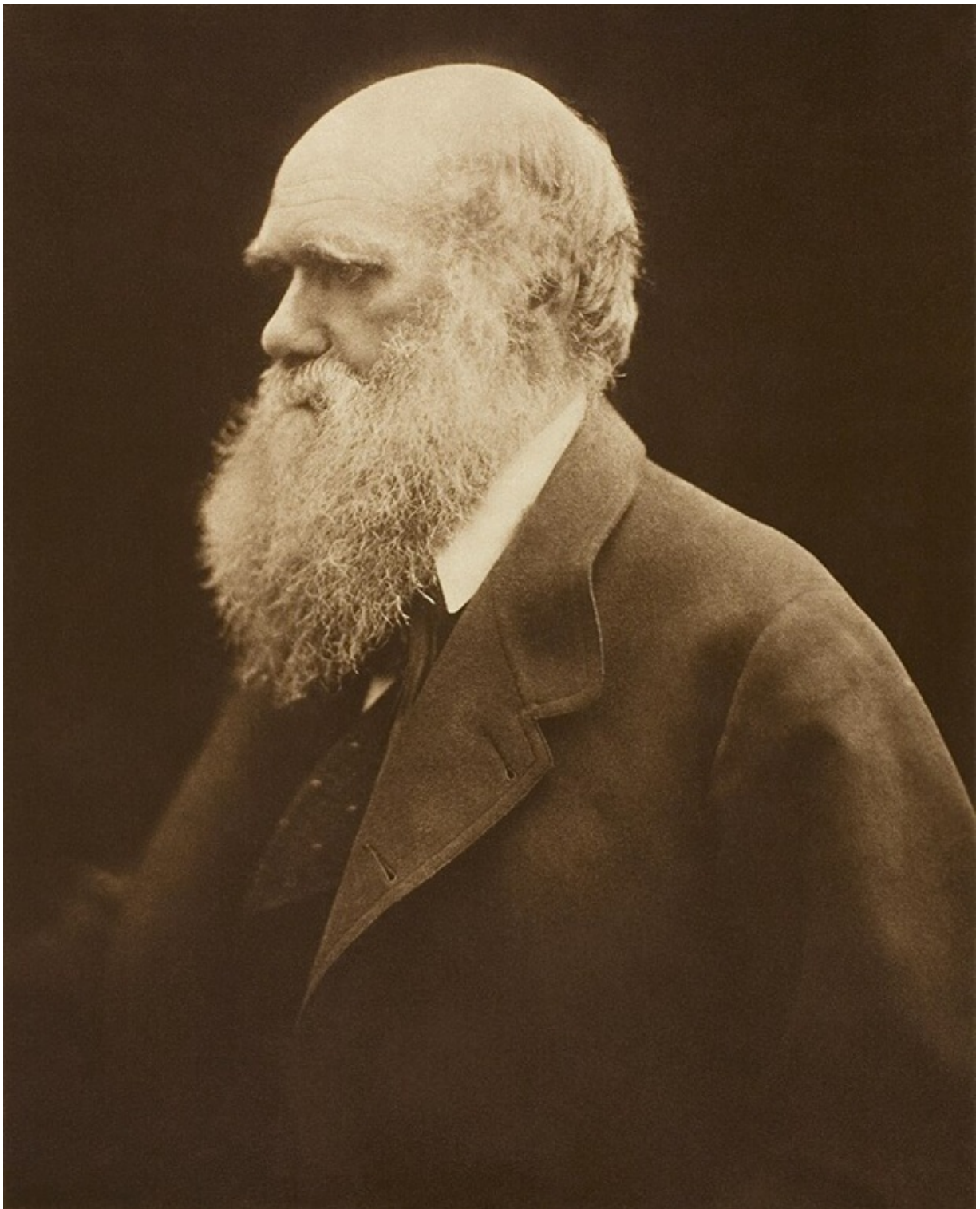
The **subject matter** of a work of art is the content the artist is choosing to depict.

1. Portrait vs. Self-Portrait

A **portrait** is a work of art that *portrays* a person. When an artist depicts another person in a piece of art, it is simply called a portrait. But when the artist puts himself or herself on the canvas, it is a **self-portrait**. It is important to understand the difference. A portrait is an image of a person (or sometimes an animal) created by someone else.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Below is a portrait of Charles Darwin by the photographer Julia Margaret Cameron.

Note that while technically all Cameron did was point the camera at Darwin and take the photo, there are still many elements of individual style in the way that she chose to pose him, the background, and the choice of photographic printing technique.



Julia Margaret Cameron

Portrait of Charles Darwin

Taken 1868, printed 1875

Carbon print

When an artist paints a picture of himself or herself, this is called a self-portrait. Essentially, the artist is the subject matter in his or her own work of art.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Below is an example of a self-portrait of the artist Mary Beale from the late 17th century.



Mary Beale

Self Portrait



TERMS TO KNOW

Portrait

An image of an individual.

Self-Portrait

An artist's portrait of himself or herself.

Subject Matter

2. Still Life vs. Landscape

It is also important to differentiate between a painting that is still life and one that is landscape. **Still life** is a painting of arranged, inanimate, or still objects.

➞ **EXAMPLE** This is a still life painting by the Mexican artist José Agustín Arrieta. It is an example of *costumbrismo*, or scenes of everyday life. Notice how detailed this painting is and how it includes fruits commonly grown in Mexico, such as tomatoes, avocados, bananas, olives, and guava. The artist has also worked very hard to depict different textures in this image, including wicker, glass, ceramic, and chicken feathers.



José Agustín Arrieta

Still-Life

1870

Oil on canvas

In contrast, a **landscape** is a painting of the countryside.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Below is an example of a landscape from 1894 by the Russian painter Isaac Levitan.



Isaac Levitan

Above the Eternal Peace



TERMS TO KNOW

Still Life

A work of art that depicts artfully arranged inanimate objects.

Landscape

A work of art that takes the countryside as subject matter.

3. Narrative

A **narrative** is a work of art that depicts a story. Common themes include stories from the Bible, some other Christian stories, classical myths from ancient Greece and ancient Rome, and regional folklore.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Take a look at this Indian miniature painting depicting a scene from the life of Krishna, who is one of the most important Hindu deities and is usually depicted with blue skin. He is surrounded by *gopis*, or cowherd maidens, who dance around him in a scene known as Rasalila. This is a story from the life of Krishna taken from the Gita Govinda that has often been the subject of works of art. The *gopis* hear Krishna playing the flute and leave behind their chores and daily duties to dance with him in the forest. Through the use of iconography and the image of Krishna surrounded by multiple women, a viewer familiar with Hinduism would easily recognize the narrative depicted in this image. The *gopis* represent perfect devotion to Krishna, so this image functioned as a visual aid to

someone practicing Hinduism.



Krishna with gopis in the forest of Braj

Indian miniature painting

1730



TERM TO KNOW

Narrative

The visual depiction of a story in works of art.



SUMMARY

Artists choose subject matter in order to depict something specific in their artwork. In this lesson, you learned about **portrait vs. self-portrait**. A portrait is an image of someone else, whereas in a self-portrait, the artist is the subject matter, and he or she paints himself or herself. You also learned about **still life vs. landscape**. Remember, a still life is when the subject matter is arranged and inanimate, or still. On the other hand, a landscape uses the countryside as its subject matter. Lastly, a **narrative** is a work of art that uses a story as the subject matter.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Landscape

A work of art that takes the countryside as subject matter.

Narrative

The visual depiction of a story in works of art.

Portrait

An image of an individual.

Self-Portrait

An artist's portrait of himself or herself.

Still Life

A work of art that depicts artfully arranged inanimate objects.

Subject Matter

The content of a work of art; what the artist chooses to depict.