

Being a Professional Mathematician

Visual representations of mathematicians – worksheet

- 1) Draw a sketch of a mathematician.

What do the sketches say about your idea of a mathematician?

Search Microsoft clipart or Google Images for “mathematician”. What kind of images come up? What attributes define the images as mathematicians?

- 2) Look carefully at the portrait of Emilie du Chatelet reproduced at www.BeingAMathematician.org/du_Chatelet.

Does she look like a mathematician? Why, or why not?

Does she look like a woman who enjoys parties and social life?

What features in the painting relate to these questions?

Now listen to Patricia Fara’s account of du Chatelet.

- 3) Find some portraits or photographs of mathematicians. For example, you might look up specific mathematicians on Wikipedia, look at pictures in the MacTutor History of Mathematics archive (<http://www-history.mcs.st-and.ac.uk/>).

Think about the images. Bear in mind that some may be posed photographs or paintings intending to document someone for posterity while others might be casual snaps. For these questions, paintings or formal portrait photographs may be more revealing than snapshots.

Look also at some of the commissioned photographs “Faces of Mathematics” at <http://www.ma.hw.ac.uk/~ndg/fom.html>

For each image you are considering:

Do the images make the viewer think they are looking at a mathematician? If so, how?

What (if anything) do the images tell you about being a mathematician?

- 4) In his recent book *Duel at Dawn: Heroes, Martyrs and the Rise of Modern Mathematics* (Harvard, 2010), Amir Alexander argues that portraits of Abel, Galois and János Bolyai (which you can find on the MacTutor website (<http://www-history.mcs.st-and.ac.uk/>) depict “misunderstood heroes whose inner fire and profound insights set them apart from their uninspired fellow men”.

Do you read the portraits in this way?

Can you find other portraits of nineteenth-century mathematicians which support the view of mathematicians that Alexander describes? Can you find images which don't conform to that view?

Do the “Faces of Mathematics” at <http://www.ma.hw.ac.uk/~ndg/fom.html> present contemporary mathematicians in this way?

Do these images tell us anything about how mathematicians see themselves?

- 5) What does Arthur Sasse's famous photograph of Einstein sticking his tongue out tell us about Einstein? And about the public image of mathematicians?
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Einstein_in_popular_culture)

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