

Call for papers: Scientific portraits and portraits for science

A conference taking place on 20 March 2026 at the Royal Society, 6-9 Carlton House Terrace, SW1Y 5AG, London
9.30 am – 5.00 pm

Deadline for submissions (extended): Sunday 28 September 2025

Many long-established learned societies and academic organisations have collections of portraits, and the Royal Society is no exception, with extensive holdings of primary images (such as oil paintings, watercolours, and sculpture busts) and secondary material (including engraved prints and photographs). Very little recent research has been undertaken on such artworks, and what it meant to scientists in this, and in similar collections, to have their images recorded and displayed for posterity.

The Society is interested in how portraits have been created, used and collected by scientists in the course of their work. Most obviously, this may have been for medical purposes (as part of case studies, for example); within images captured as part of expeditions; or for other reasons. Since science is an international activity, this suggests issues of diversity and Empire, and the presence or absence of pictures of peoples from around the world.

The Royal Society is joining with the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) and the Understanding British Portraits Subject Specialist Network, in holding a 1-day conference to explore themes of representation, portraiture and science. The event should enable an interdisciplinary gathering of historians of art, and historians of science.

We welcome proposals for 15- to 20-minute papers on themes related to portraiture, 17th-21st centuries, including:

- How scientists have been represented; how they may have curated their own images, and how far their portraits might have incorporated scientific content.
- Detailed studies of individual portraits, from formal works to caricatures of scientists
- How portraits have been collected and displayed, by individuals and institutions; how collectors have exchanged images, and cultivated associations with the famous.
- Portraits of underrepresented individuals or groups, including women involved in scientific endeavours; or those acting outside metropolitan elites.
- International portraiture, and how Empire and race have impacted the way portraits have been made and seen.
- The role of portraits in scientific illustration and associated ethical issues.

Please submit proposals (not exceeding 300 words, including a biographical note of c.50 words) for 15- to 20-minute papers to library@royalsociety.org by Sunday 28 September 2025, with the subject line 'proposal for conference paper'.

Financial support will be available, based on need, to help speakers cover expenses related to attendance, including accommodation, transport and care costs. We welcome papers from all stages of research careers.