

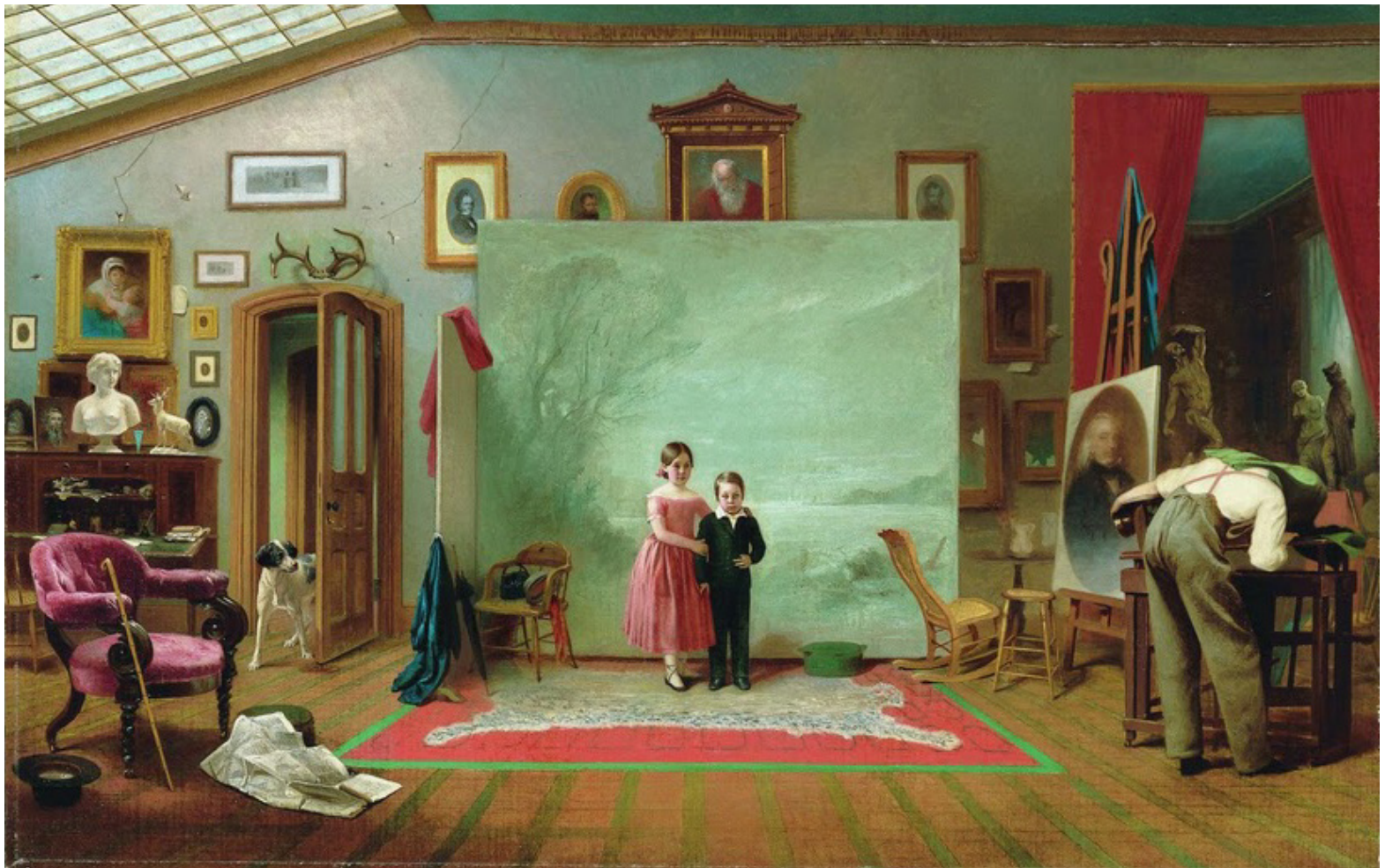
Interior with Portraits (1865)

Thomas Le Clear (1818-1882)



LOOK

SPEND AT LEAST 5 MINUTES JUST OBSERVING. READ THE PAINTING LIKE A BOOK.

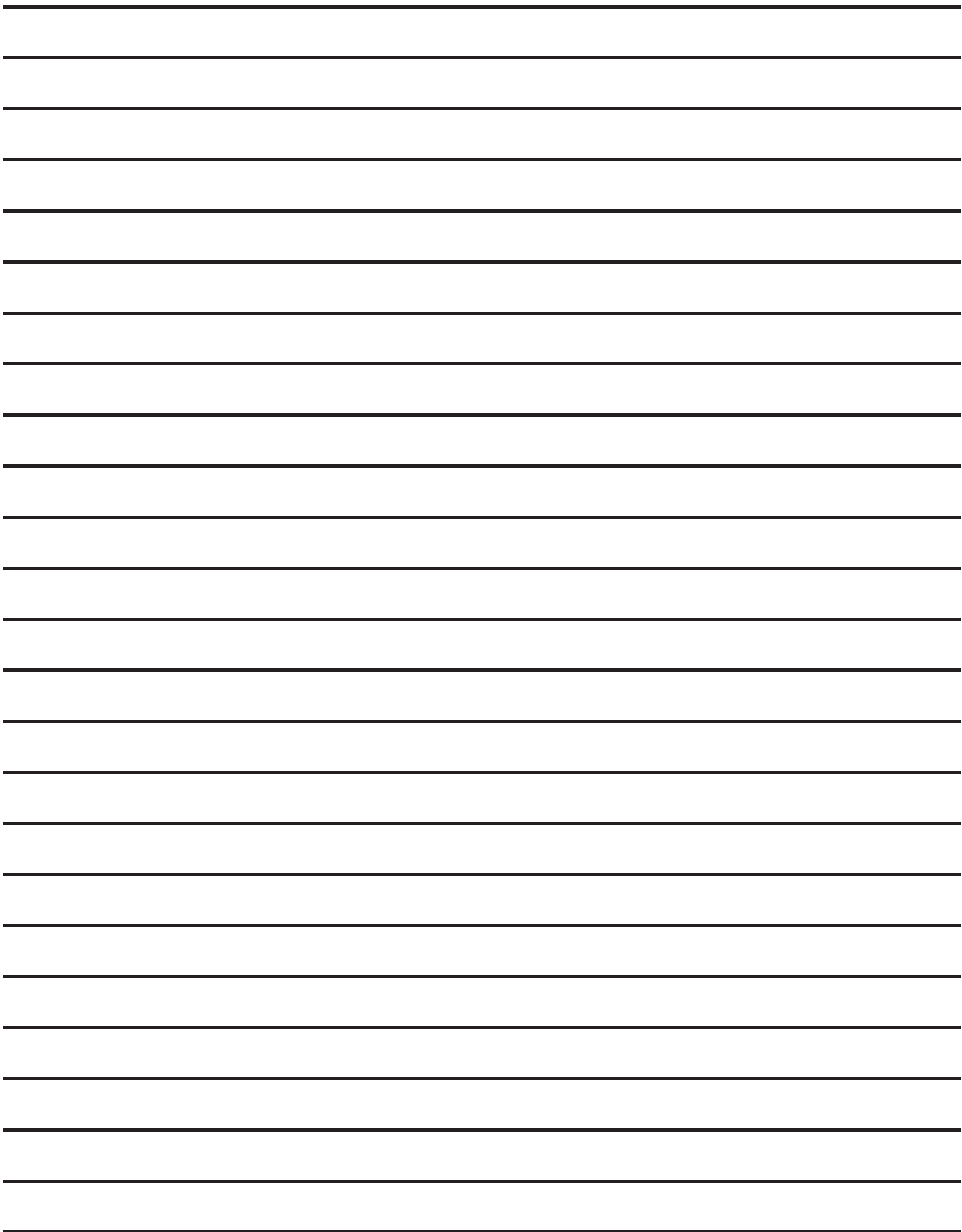


Thomas Le Clear , Interior with Portraits, ca. 1865; oil on canvas, 25 7/8 x 40 1/2 inches; Collection of Smithsonian American Art Museum.

What details do you see?

What characters?

Describe the setting.



THINK

LET'S DIVE INTO THE HISTORY AND COMPOSITION OF *INTERIOR WITH PORTRAITS*. To understand this painting more clearly lets break it down.

This painting consists of **three** frames.



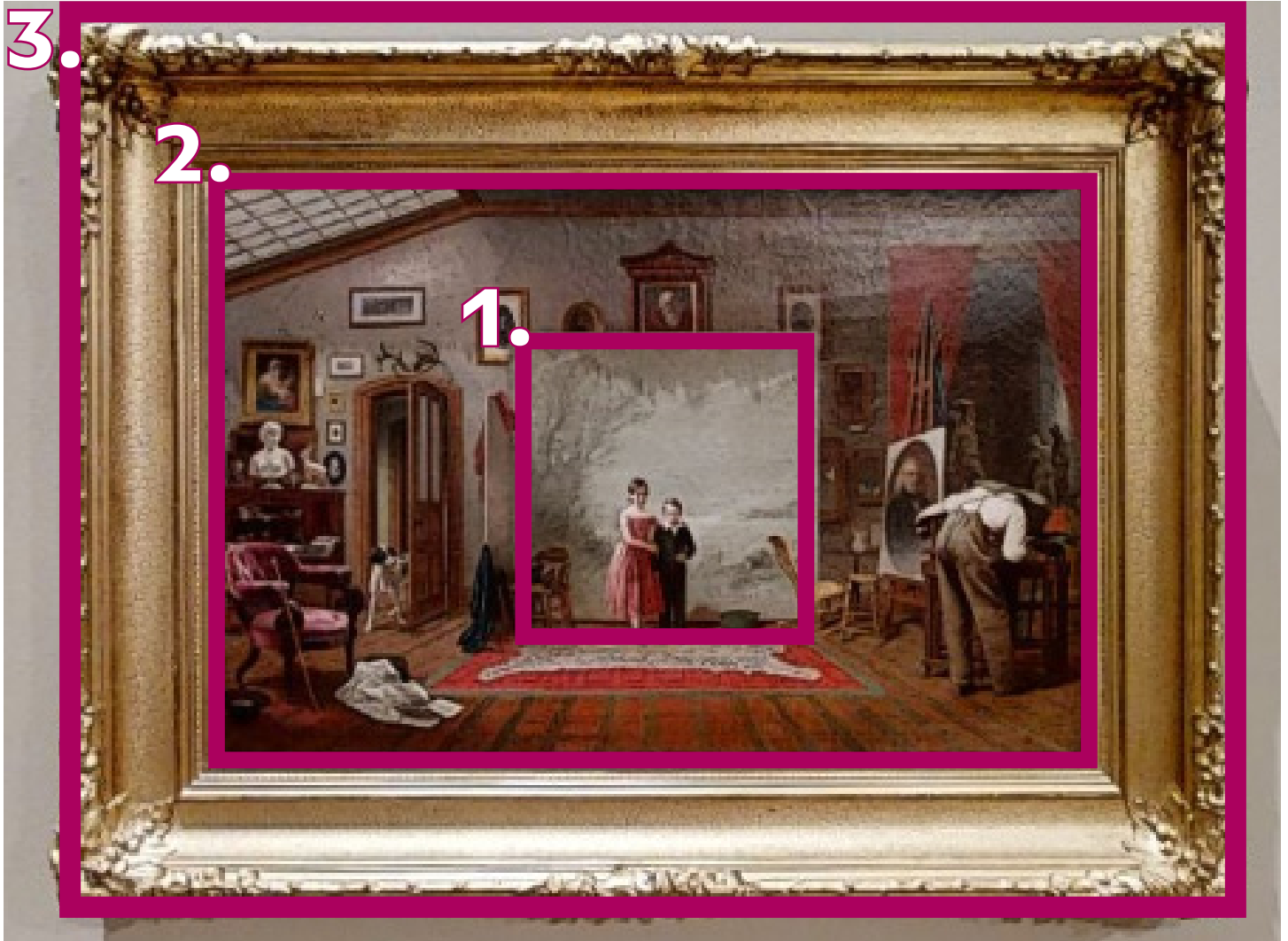
1. The frame of the painted backdrop and the edge of the rug.



2. The frame of the room itself.



3. The physical frame surrounding the painting.



FOCUS ON FRAME 1.

The two children are locked into place in front of the painted backdrop. The older sister's gaze is towards the photographer, her arm entwined with her brother's stiff arms. The little boy's gaze is seemingly fixed on us (the viewer) or the painter, Le Clear - but not the photographer. The boy has become the painter's subject and not the photographer's, making it seem as if we are viewing a moment before the photo was captured. This gaze to the viewer breaks up moment happening within the first frame.

FOCUS ON FRAME 2

We see what is an artist's studio. Notice how the objects around the room, while haphazard at first glance, have conveniently created an allegory, a story with a hidden meaning, illustrating the battle between photography and painting during this time.

Photography was a new media, taking a photo was not the same as it is today. Today, we can fit a whole camera into our pockets and snap hundreds of pictures in a minute. Back in 1865, most photos were created by daguerreotype. Daguerreotypes invented in the 1830s, uses a polished, silver plated sheet of metal and is easily recognized by its mirror-like surface. The plate has to be held at the correct angle to the light for the image to be visible, and the image is extremely sharp and detailed. While the process used for capturing the likenesses of the two children was probably daguerreotype, the process illustrated by the photographer in the painting was probably the wet collodion process.

Painting and photography back then was were always at odds when it came to portraiture, you could be traditional and have your portrait painted and have it be a similar likeness to yourself or you could have your photo taken and have a startlingly life-like image.

Interior with Portraits is really two stories intertwined. The first being the children having their portraits taken by the photographer. The second, the painter, painting the children being photographed by the photographer.

What makes these narratives that much more interesting is that fact that this painting wasn't painted with the subjects in the room, or even alive. The artist based the likeness of the children on an old daguerreotype.

The children's older brother, Franklin Sidway, commissioned Thomas Le Clear to create the painting on the occasion of the boy's death. The boy pictured died in 1865 at the age of 26, no longer a young child as portrayed in the painting. The sister had died earlier, in 1849, at the age of twelve.



FIND

NOW, KNOWING THAT LE CLEAR PAINTED THESE PORTRAITS WITH PHOTOGRAPHIC references, let's look back at the relationship of the photographer and the painter. We'll find hidden symbols in the painting that reinforce this relationship.





1. THE SKYLIGHT

The skylight offers illumination to the studio.

Could this be the painter's studio?

2. THE BUST

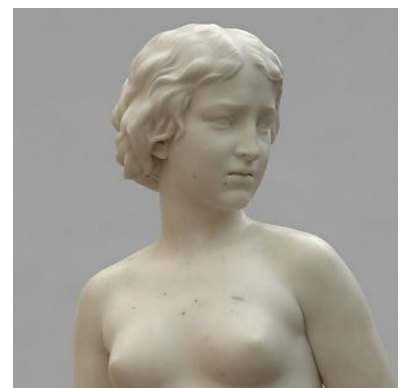
The bust of Erastus Dow Palmer's *White Captive* (1859).

Could this be a jest from the artist about the 'captivity' of the children being photographed?

3. THE DOG

The dog is looking in the direction of the photographer.

Could this be the presumptive owner?



Erastus Dow Palmer, *White Captive*, ca. 1859; marble, 65 x 20 1/4 x 17 inches; in Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

4. THE FRAMED PORTRAIT

An elaborately framed painting looks down judgmentally on the scene below.

Could this be judgment for the use this new process of photography?

5. THE BACKDROP

The landscape painting within the painting is monochromatic—or tonalist. Such painted backgrounds were first introduced into Anglo-American portrait photographs as early as 1842, but was used in the mainstream by the 1860s. Some photographers during this time called this use of backdrop as poor taste.

Is this another jest by the artist to bring up the seriousness or aesthetic of photography vs. painting during this time?

6. THE BOY

The boy's gaze toward us or the painter, shifts this scene being about photography and shifts it to painting. His gaze gives us the assumption that this painting was happening from life, that his attention was drawn to the painter.

Does this painting represent a moment before the camera takes the photo? Is the boy now the painter's subject or the photographer's?





7. THE UNFRAMED PORTRAIT

Is this a reference to older forms of portraiture "from life"?

8. THE PHOTOGRAPHER

The identity of the figure on the right is disguised by a green cloth. He prepares to take the children's photo by adjusting the lens of the camera.

Does he know of the painter's existence, or is he using the painter's studio to take the photo?

9. THE SCULPTURES

Casts of the classical Venus de Milo and Borghese Gladiator can be seen in the back room to the right.

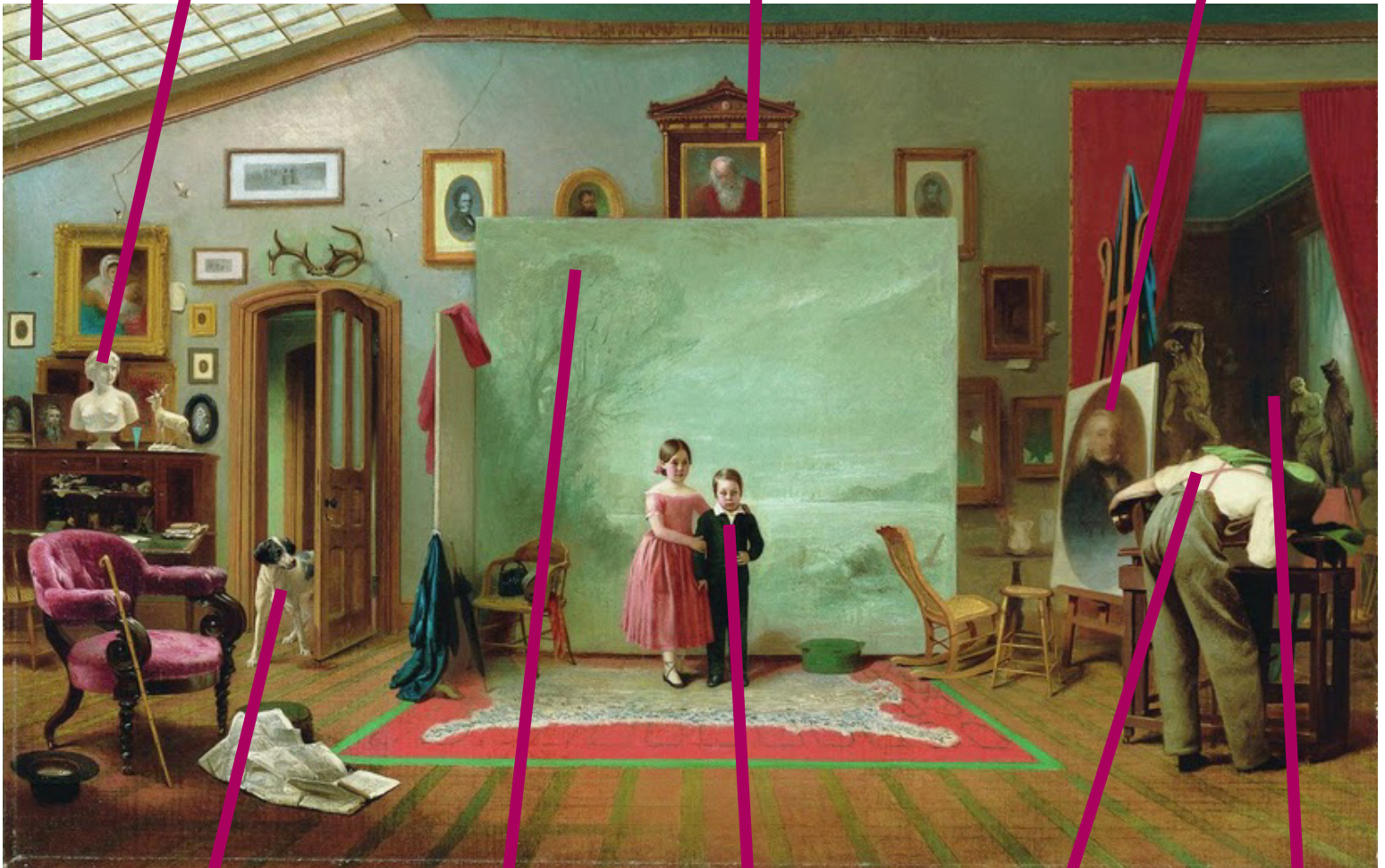
Do they reference even older forms of portraiture 'from life' and likeness?

1.
THE SKYLIGHT

2.
THE BUST

4.
FRAMED PORTRAIT

7.
UNFRAMED PORTRAIT



3.
THE DOG

6.
THE BACKDROP

5.
THE BOY

8.
THE PHOTOGRAPHER

9.
THE SCULPTURES

BURCHFIELD CONNECTS

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