

OCTOBER GALLERY EDUCATION ONLINE RESOURCES

Inspired by James Barnor

Created by Marysa Dowling

Who is James Barnor?

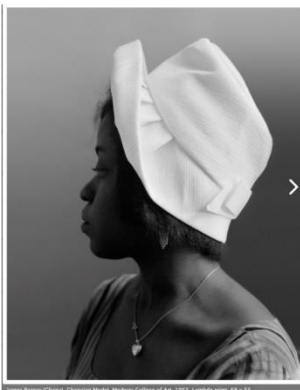
Born in Ghana in 1929, James Barnor's photographic career has spanned over 60 years. He worked as a studio portraitist, photojournalist and Black lifestyle photographer.

What influenced Barnor to become an artist?

Barnor was Ghana's first full-time newspaper photographer in the 1950's. He shot everyday life in Ghana, which was moving towards independence in the 1950's and 60's. In 1953 he set up 'Ever Young' Photographic studio, drawing a mixture of clients from families to night revellers and dignitaries. In 1959 Barnor moved to England, photographing his experience of Black British culture in the sixties, exploring London becoming a multicultural metropolis. Barnor is credited with introducing colour photography to Ghana in 1970's and since the 1990's Barnor has been based in London.

What are the main themes and materials of Barnor's work?

Barnor's portraits show a joy of life and human connection, his engagement with, and respect for his subjects is clear. His striking compositions draw us into his images. Barnor carefully considers the location and background of his portraits, telling stories about culture, location, style, fashion, music and everyday life.



Deep Dive: Portraiture

Spend a few minutes looking careful look at these three portraits on page 1.

- Describe exactly what you can see in each portrait.
- What do you think is happening in each portrait?
- Look at how each portrait is composed, where is the person situated in the frame? What has been included and why? What could be happening outside the frame?
- Who is the person (subject) in the portrait? How old are they? Where do they live? What might their name be?
- How is the person posed/ positioned? Do you think the subject decided how they would pose or did James Barnor direct them?
- Look at each subjects' clothes, what can we discover about a person and culture from clothes?
- What can the background tell us about the subject, the location, the culture?
- Look at the lighting in each portrait. Compare the similarities and differences between the lighting in each portrait.
- What can a photographic portrait tell us about a person?

Marysa Dowling

www.marysadowling.co.uk

Instagram: [@marysadowling](https://www.instagram.com/marysadowling)

Twitter: [@marysadowling](https://twitter.com/marysadowling)

As a photographer, my practice is rooted within portraiture and considers human exchange, communication and interaction. I am curious about how we use gesture to communicate with each other and the camera, alongside the ways we use our environment. I work with photography as a tool to articulate experiences about our lives, how we live them and how we choose to represent ourselves. Participation in photography is a way to assert our place in the world. My projects are often cross cultural in nature as I work in several countries cultivating the same theme. My playful and thoughtful projects aim to use photography to build connections across communities and cultures, initiating conversations and exchange through portraiture.

Recent projects include a two-year residency at Great Ormond Street Hospital. Through visual research with patients, families and staff, I explored ways in which we care, communicate and connect through our hands. Currently I am on a project connecting women in the UK and Mexico through photographic portraiture, whilst also developing my first book of a 10-year portraiture project. I have undertaken commissions and exhibited in the UK, Ireland, USA, Cuba, South Africa, Mexico, India and Lebanon. Group and solo exhibitions include The Photographers Gallery, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Tate and Belfast Exposed.



Activity

Activity: Create a Portrait

Materials: Camera or Camera Phone

Create a photographic portrait, or series of portraits, in the style of James Barnor. You could create either colour or black & white photographs (most camera phone and cameras will have a setting for black & white).

Method

1. Who will be the subject of your portrait or portraits? Could it be a member of your family or a friend?
2. How will you show us (the viewer) something about your subject through your portrait?
3. Barnor thinks carefully about the background of his portraits, telling a story about his subjects. What will be your background or backdrop? How does your subject connect with the background you are photographing them against? What story are you telling?
4. What objects or props could you use to tell us more about who your subject is?
5. Will you ask your subject to choose their own pose or direct them? You could ask them to choose their own pose then take another photograph of them where you direct their pose. Compare the differences
6. Carefully consider your composition and how you will frame your portrait. How close will you be to your subject?
7. Carefully consider the lighting. Will you use daylight or indoor lighting?
8. Will you ask your subject to consider what they are wearing for the portrait or photograph them as they already are?

Extension activity: When you are finished use the questions and prompts on page 2 to ask someone about the portraits you have made and get feedback on your work.

Don't forget to take a photo or video of your creations and share it with October Gallery Education online!

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Email education@octobergallery.co.uk