

“NOT MERELY AS A DREAMER, BUT AS A DOER” MARTIN LUTHER KING’S METHODS OF ACTIVISM

Compiled by the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

TARGET GRADE LEVEL: 5–12 in United States history classes

OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, students will be better able to:

- Identify and analyze key components of a portrait and relate visual elements to relevant historical context and significance.
- Analyze the different forms of activism that Martin Luther King Jr. used in his fight for civil rights.
- Apply King’s methods to contemporary examples of injustice.

PORTRAITS

Martin Luther King Jr. with Coretta Scott King and their daughter Yolanda on the steps of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church by Dan Weiner, gelatin silver print, 1956

Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph Abernathy ride the first integrated bus in Montgomery, Alabama by Ernest Withers, gelatin silver print, 1956 (printed later)

Time magazine portrait of Martin Luther King Jr. by Boris Chaliapin, watercolor and pencil on board, 1957, after photograph by Walter Bennett

Martin Luther King Jr. shortly after his release from Reidsville Penitentiary, Georgia by Jack Lewis Hiller, gelatin silver print, 1960

Martin Luther King Jr. by Yousuf Karsh, gelatin silver print, 1962

Martin Luther King Jr. at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom by Bob Adelman, gelatin silver print, 1963

Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh and Martin Luther King Jr. by an unidentified photographer, digital inkjet print, 1964 (printed 2007)

March against the Vietnam War, New York City by Benedict J. Fernandez, gelatin silver print, 1967 (printed 1989)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

Information about the exhibition “One Life: Martin Luther King Jr.”

Under the inspired leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968), nonviolent protest became the defining feature of the modern civil rights movement in America. A brilliant strategist, King first demonstrated the efficacy of passive resistance in 1955–56, while helping to lead the prolonged bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, that succeeded in dismantling bus segregation laws. Fresh from the victory that brought him national recognition, the charismatic King cofounded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and took the lead in directing its civil rights initiatives. In a carefully orchestrated campaign of peaceful protest to expose and defeat racial injustice, King awakened the nation’s conscience and galvanized support for the landmark civil rights legislation of the 1960s. Honored with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, he took a public stand against American involvement in the Vietnam War and also became a vocal advocate for those living in poverty. King’s words were as powerful as his deeds, and his moving

and eloquent addresses, which gave hope to millions, continue to inspire people throughout the world.

Curator’s Statement by Ann M. Shumard, Senior Curator of Photographs:

As we mark the fiftieth anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and Martin Luther King Jr.’s iconic “I Have a Dream” speech, I believe it is important to remember King not merely as a dreamer but as a doer. In his thirteen years of public life as an advocate for civil rights, economic opportunity, and world peace, King motivated others not only by communicating his vision for a brighter future but by acting boldly to challenge injustice. Despite enormous odds and the ever-present risk of failure, King led by example, exhibiting courage and character as he maintained his steadfast commitment to passive resistance and nonviolent action. Anyone can dream of a better and more just world. Martin Luther King Jr. dedicated his life to making that dream a reality.

Portrait Information

Martin Luther King Jr. with Coretta Scott King and their daughter Yolanda on the steps of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

While at Boston University, King met Coretta Scott, an Alabama native who was studying voice at the New England Conservatory of Music. After overcoming resistance from “Daddy” King, who had expected his son to choose an Atlantan as his bride, the couple married in June 1953.

King began looking for employment opportunities in academia and in the ministry during his third year in Boston and was invited to preach trial sermons at several churches, including the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. The youthful King captivated the Dexter congregation when he preached there in January 1954, and in April he agreed to accept the church’s pastorate, following completion of his doctoral coursework. King delivered his first sermon as resident pastor there on September 5, 1954. The Kings welcomed their first child, Yolanda, in November 1955.

Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph Abernathy ride the first integrated bus in Montgomery, Alabama

King proved to be the ideal choice to orchestrate and sustain the Montgomery bus boycott. As a relative newcomer to Montgomery, he was able to bring together all factions of the black community without regard to past rivalries. Through inspirational addresses delivered at mass meetings in Montgomery’s black churches, King galvanized support for the boycott and clearly articulated the case for nonviolent action, declaring, “We must meet the forces of hate with the power of love; we must meet physical force with soul force.” He found a strong ally in fellow Montgomery minister Ralph Abernathy, and during the course of the boycott the two men forged a strong working relationship and a deep friendship. Continuing for an unprecedented 381 days, the bus boycott ended only after the United States Supreme Court ruled bus segregation unconstitutional. When the first integrated bus rolled through Montgomery on December 21, 1956, King and Abernathy sat side by side.

Time magazine portrait of Martin Luther King Jr.

The success of the Montgomery bus boycott catapulted King into the national spotlight. In February 1957, *Time* featured his portrait on its cover and published an in-depth profile describing the twenty-eight-year-old pastor as “one of the nation’s remarkable leaders.” The

article declared that “King reached beyond lawbooks and writs, beyond violence and threats, to win his people—and challenge all people—with a spiritual force that aspired even to ending prejudice in man’s mind.” When asked about the inspiration for his actions, King replied, “The spirit of passive resistance came to me from the Bible and the teachings of Jesus. The techniques of execution came from Gandhi.” Just a month before the *Time* article appeared, sixty black ministers from across the South had gathered at King’s invitation in Atlanta to cofound what became known as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)—an organization dedicated to utilizing nonviolent direct action to challenge and defeat racism.

Martin Luther King Jr. shortly after his release from Reidsville Penitentiary, Georgia

One of the most frightening episodes in King’s early civil rights career occurred in October 1960, after he was arrested during a student-led protest at Rich’s department store in Atlanta. Refusing to post bail, King and the students vowed to remain in the Fulton County jail until all charges were dropped. While negotiations were under way to secure their release, a judge in neighboring DeKalb County ordered that King be held for violating probation for an earlier traffic citation. After a brief hearing, the judge revoked King’s probation and sentenced him to four months’ hard labor. Manacled and shackled, King was later transported to Georgia’s Reidsville Penitentiary. Fearing for his safety in the notoriously violent state prison, King’s supporters sought help from presidential candidate John F. Kennedy, who placed a reassuring call to Coretta King. But it was Robert Kennedy’s forceful call to the DeKalb judge that resulted in King’s release.

Martin Luther King Jr. by Yousuf Karsh

A man constantly on the move, Martin Luther King was most often photographed in action by those covering the events of the civil-rights movement. This likeness by renowned portraitist Yousuf Karsh is a different kind of image—a formal portrait that utilizes pose and lighting rather than environment to identify King as a leader and a visionary. Karsh made the photograph in August 1962, when King returned to Atlanta following the prolonged and dispiriting struggle for desegregation in Albany, Georgia. With very little time to work, Karsh photographed his subject in the only space available—a corner of King’s Ebenezer Baptist Church. Recalling the circumstances of that sitting, Karsh noted, “Nowhere could [King] relax when constantly beset by friends and aides wishing him well, commiserating on his difficulties, congratulating him on his return, and planning new strategy.”

Martin Luther King Jr. at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

On August 28, 1963, more than 250,000 people gathered in the nation’s capital for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The brainchild of longtime civil rights activist and labor leader A. Philip Randolph, the march drew support from all factions of the civil rights movement. Originally conceived as a mass demonstration to spotlight economic inequalities and press for a new federal jobs program and a higher minimum wage, the goals of the march expanded to include calls for congressional passage of the Civil Rights Act, full integration of public schools, and enactment of a bill prohibiting job discrimination. The program at the Lincoln Memorial featured an impressive roster of speakers and closed with King. Midway through his address, King abandoned his prepared text and launched into the soaring expression of his vision for the future, declaring, “I have a dream today.”

Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh and Martin Luther King Jr. at the Illinois Rally for Civil Rights, June 21, 1964

Two days after the U.S. Senate passed the Civil Rights Bill of 1964, Martin Luther King spoke before a crowd of more than 57,000 during a rally at Soldiers' Field in Chicago. While declaring that approval of the landmark legislation heralded a "dawn of new hope," King reminded his listeners that "passage of the civil rights bill does not mean we have reached the end of the civil rights struggle. We have come a long way in our journey, but we have a long, long way to go." King's address was preceded by remarks from Notre Dame University president and United States Civil Service Commission member the Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh. One of many white members of the clergy to participate in the rally, Hesburgh told the crowd, "We want to strive for human dignity with you." At the close of the program, King and Hesburgh clasped hands in solidarity while singing "We Shall Overcome."

March against the Vietnam War, New York City

King watched with growing dismay as U.S. military involvement in Vietnam escalated throughout 1965 and 1966. He abhorred the war on principle and worried that national resources needed to combat poverty and advance the cause of civil rights were being consumed by the Pentagon. Both as a Nobel Peace Prize recipient and as the world's foremost advocate for nonviolence, King felt compelled to take a public stand against the war.

In an impassioned address delivered at New York City's Riverside Church on April 4, 1967, he denounced U.S. action in Vietnam, declaring, "If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read Vietnam." On April 15, King walked arm in arm with Dr. Benjamin Spock (*left*) and Monsignor Charles Owen Rice of Pittsburgh (*right*) as they and thousands of protesters marched from Central Park to the United Nations Plaza, where King addressed a mammoth antiwar rally.

LESSON PROCEDURE

1. Warm-Up Discussion

Have the class generate a definition of the word "activism" and then brainstorm about some of the various forms that activism can take and the methods that activists use. Generate and record a list of possible methods. Then have students discuss and generate a list of examples of contemporary activism against injustice.

2. Image Analysis

- Give students copies of the "Martin Luther King's Methods" worksheet.
- Working individually, have students browse the web exhibition and complete the worksheet, using the images to list and analyze various forms of activism practiced by Martin Luther King Jr.
- If time allows, have students conduct additional research into King's life (using print and/or computer sources) and add to their list of methods that he used to fight for civil rights.
- Divide students into groups and have them share the results of their worksheet (and research, if applicable).

3. Activity: Design an Activist Campaign

- Revisit the list of contemporary examples of injustice that the class generated during the warm-up, and have students (working individually or in groups) choose one issue to research.
- Have each student or group design an activist campaign designed to call attention to and protest their chosen example of injustice. Their campaign must include the following:
 - At least two different forms of activism, using King’s various methods as inspiration and model.
 - A written plan of action in which they describe how they will implement these methods.
 - A visual representation of at least one aspect of the plan.

NATIONAL STANDARDS OF LEARNING

Standards in History for Grades 5–12

Era 9: Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s)

Standard 4: The struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties

Era 10: Contemporary United States (1968 to the present)

Standard 2: Economic, social, and cultural developments in contemporary United States

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.7

Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social science.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.7

Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.9-10.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.6.7

Integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue



WORKSHEET: MARTIN LUTHER KING'S METHODS

Browse the web exhibition and choose four images that reflect four different methods that Martin Luther King Jr. used to advocate for his cause. Use your selected images to complete the worksheet below.

Image and Artist	What is King's method of activism? How is this displayed in the portrait?

Which of these forms of activism do you think is the most effective? Why?