

Be the Curator

Ideas for Teachers: Resource Guide

Compiled by the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Target Grade Level: 4–12 in social studies and American history classes

Overview

In this activity students are introduced to the role of a curator in a museum. They then take on the role of curators themselves by organizing a thematic exhibition of artwork from the National Portrait Gallery.

Objectives

After completing this activity, students will be able to:

- Understand the roles of the museum curator and the exhibition designer in a museum
- Work collaboratively to relate artworks to one another and find a common theme
- Write museum labels that clearly communicate ideas to an audience
- Estimate, measure, and calculate scale

Materials

- How to Write a National Portrait Gallery Label
- Museum Exhibition Planning Guide
- Museum Exhibition Planning Materials Set:
 - Paper and pens
 - Graph paper
 - 11x17 exhibition layout document
 - Colored pencils
 - Scissors
 - Glue Sticks
 - Rulers

Lesson Procedure

Introduction

1. Define ‘exhibition’ as a class.

Ask the class what they see when they visit a museum, how things are organized and explained etc. Make a list of the words or phrases students use to explain what they think a museum exhibition is. Ask several volunteers to combine key words from the list into a definition.

ArtLex.com defines an exhibition as “a public showing of a piece or a collection of objects.”

2. Introduce students to the roles and careers of museum curators and exhibition designers. Students will take on these roles during the culminating activity.

3. Introduce students to the mission and collection of the National Portrait Gallery by visiting the museum or museum website:
<http://npg.si.edu/inform/overview.html>
<http://npg.si.edu/collection/permanent.html>
<http://npg.si.edu/exhibit/current.html>
4. Analyze museum labels from the National Portrait Gallery (NPG). Discuss how label information and style relates to the type and mission of the museum.

Museum Exhibition Activity

Divide the class into groups of between four and six students. Provide each group with a copy of the Museum Exhibition Planning Guide and Materials Set. Instruct the groups to:

1. Select a theme for their model exhibition based on the collections of NPG.
2. Select one artwork per person, based on that theme, to include in their exhibition. There must be a minimum of five works in the exhibition.
3. Look up the size of the artwork using the Gallery's search collection website or estimate the size in the galleries.
4. Create a miniature sketch of each artwork to scale. Measure out the shape on graph paper using a 1" scale so that 1" of graph paper is equal to 1' 0" of the actual artwork.
5. Decide as a group on the layout of the exhibition using the exhibition layout documents.

Questions to Consider:

- How do the objects work together to tell a story?
 - Which object would make a strong opening statement?
6. Write an exhibition title and introductory label as a group based on the label analysis completed during the introduction.
 7. Pick two objects to write extended labels about, using the NPG guidelines for label writing.
 8. Hang your exhibition, complete with objects, labels, and title, on the exhibition layout documents.

When each exhibition is completed, encourage students to view each group's work. Then ask volunteers to explain what they think the theme of another group's exhibition might be to assess how clearly that theme was communicated.

Content Standards addressed in this Activity:

Visual Arts

NA-VA.5-12.4 Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures
NA-VA.5-12.5 Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others
NA-VA.5-12.6 Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines

Language Arts

NL-ENG.K-12.4 Communication Skills
NL-ENG.K-12.5 Communication Strategies

Math

NA-MATH.6-12.Number and Operations: Compute fluently and make reasonable estimates
NA-MATH.6-12.Measurement

Museum Exhibition Planning Guide

Describe your exhibition.

What is its focus (e.g. art, history, biography)? What is its goal?

What is the theme of your exhibition?

What is the title of your exhibition?

How will it explain the theme of the exhibition and grab visitors' attention?

Write the introductory label for your exhibition on a separate sheet of paper.

What do visitors need to know before they enter the exhibition so that they can understand your theme?

List at least five objects that will be a part of your exhibition. Connect each one to your theme.

1.

Connection:

2.

Connection:

3.

Connection:

4.

Connection:

5.

Connection:

National Portrait Gallery Museum Label Writing Activity

When writing labels for exhibitions at the National Portrait Gallery, curators and historians use many different resources to gather the information needed for the approximately 140-word labels. In this exercise, students will use the information culled from the portrait, written biographies, and researched primary sources to create an NPG museum label.

NPG Museum Label Writing Formula

- Sitter's name life–death dates (years only)
- *Born* <location>
- Biographical/historical, portrait/artist information (**No more than 140 words**)
- Artist (life–death dates)
- Medium, date portrait was created
- Credit line information (for example, “Gift of..”)
- NPG accession number

Sample Labels:



Pocahontas, c. 1595 – 1617

Born near present-day Richmond, Virginia

Created during Pocahontas's travels in England with her husband, John Rolfe, this engraving depicts her in English garb. Through its portrayal of the Indian princess, the print suggests that the New World could be seamlessly integrated into the British empire. The inscription provides both her Native American name, Matoaka (Pocahontas was a nickname meaning "playful one"), and her Christian name, Rebecca, and identifies her father, Prince Powhatan, as the emperor of Virginia. The engraving is in *Bazilioologia: A Booke of Kings* (1618), a collection of portraits of British monarchs and notables, attesting to the admiration Pocahontas generated among her contemporaries.

Simon van de Passe, 1595 - 1647

Engraving, 1616

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

NPG.73.44



Pocahontas, c. 1595 – 1617

Born near present-day Richmond, Virginia

Pocahontas, the Indian princess who allegedly saved the life of English colonist John Smith, survives and flourishes as an example of an early American heroine. While Smith may have embellished the story of his rescue, the importance of Pocahontas to relations between colonists and Native Americans is undisputed. Following her conversion to Christianity and marriage to Englishman John Rolfe, Pocahontas journeyed to England with her family to demonstrate the ability of new settlers and native tribes to coexist in the Virginia colony. While in England, Pocahontas sat for her portrait, which was later engraved. That print served as the basis for this later portrait. The painter included an inscription beneath his likeness, copied from the engraving, but through an error in transcription misidentifies her husband as Thomas, the name given to their son.

Unidentified artist (possibly after Simon van de Passe)

Oil on Canvas, after 1616

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; transfer from the National Gallery of Art: gift of the A.W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, 1942
NPG.65.61