

Art History

High School Self-Guide

We are surrounded by portraits every day—from those on the dollar bills and coins in our wallets to the selfies found in social media and the photographs of our loved ones. Historically, portraiture was an important symbol of power and wealth. Now, readily reproducible and ever-more accessible through photography and modern printing techniques, portraiture has become democratic.

This guide will help you and your students think about how we perceive and commemorate people from our history and will ask you to consider how portraiture has changed and remained the same over the past two centuries using highlights from the National Portrait Gallery’s collection.

Take a map from one of the Visitor Services desk. Begin in *American Origins* on the first floor and take a close look at the self-portraits that were created in the nation’s early years, when the influence of European culture mingled with the spirit of the country’s recent independence. On the second floor, explore *America’s Presidents* and note how the depictions of our nation’s leaders have evolved over time. In *20th-Century Americans*, on the third floor, you will find portraits in all mediums: prints, photographs, sculptures, painting and more.

READING PORTRAITURE

The prompts below will help you encourage your students to “read” a portrait before reading the museum label or other sources. They can also be used as a springboard for broader conversations about art, history, and biography.

1. Start by having your students identify the specific choices that artists make when they create portraits. We call these choices the Elements of Portrayal, which include clothing, pose, facial expression, setting, objects, hairstyle, color, medium, scale, and artistic style.
2. Building on the students’ observations and visual descriptions, discuss the sitter using some or all of the following questions:
 - By using the elements of portrayal and looking closely at this portrait’s composition, what can we learn about the sitter and his or her era? What can we infer about the sitter’s accomplishments or personality?
 - How does the artist’s choice of medium affect the portrait? How might you view the sitter differently if the artist had used a different medium?

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- How does the artist want us to remember or think about the sitter? What artistic choices support your answer to this question?
- How is this portrait similar to or different from other portraits near it in the gallery? What might those similarities and/or differences reflect about the similarities and differences between the sitters and their eras?

IN THE GALLERY

Questions to consider throughout your tour:

- How have technological and cultural innovations affected portraiture from Colonial America to the present? What are some of the differences and similarities between portraits across the span of American history?
- Consider the evolution of portraiture. How was it used in the past and today? How is it used?
- Why is portraiture still relevant as an art form today?

American Origins (1st Floor)

This exhibition is on view in a series of 17 galleries and alcoves chronologically arranged to take the visitor from the days of contact between Native Americans and European explorers through the struggles of independence and into the Gilded Age.

Highlights/staff recommendations: John Singleton Copley, Samuel B. Morse

Questions to consider in this space (in addition to the Reading Portraiture questions above):

- What do these artists reveal about themselves through the choices they make in their self-portraits?
- What choices would you make for your own self-portrait?

America's Presidents (2nd Floor)

The nation's only complete collection of presidential portraits outside the White House, this exhibition lies at the heart of the Portrait Gallery's mission to tell the American story through the individuals who have shaped the country.

Highlights/staff recommendations: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Richard M. Nixon, William J. Clinton

Questions to consider in this space (in addition to the Reading Portraiture questions above):

- What are the similarities and differences among the various portraits in terms of how the presidents are portrayed?

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- What is a legacy? How do these portraits convey the legacies of our former presidents? What does it mean to look “presidential?” Which portraits look more presidential? Why?
- How does the era in which the portrait was painted affect the ways in which the president is portrayed?

Twentieth-Century Americans (3rd Floor)

These galleries, arranged chronologically, showcase the major cultural and political hallmarks of the twentieth century.

Highlights/staff recommendations: Gertrude Stein, E. E. Cummings, Mary McLeod Bethune, Frida Kahlo, Rachel Carson, Shimomura Crossing the Delaware, LL Cool J, Toni Morrison, Maya Lin

Questions to consider in this space (in addition to the Reading Portraiture questions above):

- Which aspects of the American experience are being expressed in these rooms?
- In the past, the National Portrait Gallery did not collect and display portraits of living sitters unless they were US presidents. Given the Portrait Gallery’s mission to tell the story of the United States through the people who have shaped our country and culture, why might the museum have had this policy?
- Which subjects presented here do you think will still be well known one hundred years from now? Which subjects might only become footnotes in history? Why?