

U.S. History—1600 to Gilded Age

High School Self-Guide

At the National Portrait Gallery, we examine portraits as texts filled with visual clues that can lead us toward a richer understanding of the featured individual and his or her era. This guide will help you facilitate “Reading Portraiture” experiences with your students as you explore our *American Origins* and *America’s Presidents* exhibitions and consider how portraits tell the story of the United States from 1600 to the Gilded Age. Pick up a map at our Visitor Service desk and let’s get started.

READING PORTRAITURE

The questions 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:
 - What can we learn about the sitter and his or her era based on the elements of portrayal that we see in the portrait? What can we tell about the sitter’s accomplishments or personality?
 - 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 among the sitters and their eras?

IN THE GALLERY

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 to the Gilded Age.

Highlights/staff recommendations: Pocahontas, Benjamin Franklin, Sequoyah, Noah Webster, Yarrow Mamout, Susan B. Anthony, Frederick Douglass, Ulysses S. Grant, Harriet Tubman, Chief Joseph, Walt Whitman, Belva Ann Lockwood, Thomas Edison, Mark Twain

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

- How did the role of portraits change from Colonial America to the Gilded Age? What different types of portraits were produced as the country and technology developed?
- What groups or movements are represented here? Which groups are not represented?
- What factors may make it difficult for the Portrait Gallery’s curators and historians to create an exhibition that is more inclusive? Think about how these portraits came to exist, who is being represented, and the different reasons that portraits were made throughout the early history of the United States.
- What is this exhibition saying about American identity?

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, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln

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

- Compare and contrast the portraits of the presidents with portraits of European rulers. How are they similar? How are they different?
- What is a legacy? How do these portraits convey the legacies of our former presidents?
- What are the similarities and differences among the various portraits in terms of how the presidents are portrayed?
- What does it mean to look “presidential”? Which portraits look more presidential? Why?
- How does the visual representation of the president change from the era of George Washington to that of Abraham Lincoln?
- How does the era in which the portrait was made affect the ways in which the president is portrayed?