

U.S. History–20th Century

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 own students as you explore *The Struggle for Justice* and *20th Century Americans* and consider how portraits tell the story of the United States in the modern era. Pick up a map at our Visitor Service desk and let’s get started.

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:
 - 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 between the sitters and their eras?

IN THE GALLERY

The Struggle for Justice (2nd Floor)

“The Struggle for Justice” showcases determined men and women—from key nineteenth-century historical figures to contemporary leaders—who struggled to achieve civil rights for disenfranchised or marginalized groups.

Highlights/staff recommendations: Rosa Parks, George Washington Carver, Cesar Chavez, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Kate Millet

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

- What is an activist? Think about the different forms that activism can take.
- What groups or movements are represented here? Which groups are not represented?
- How do artists illustrate the struggle for justice? In which portraits are sitters shown in the midst of conflict? In which portraits are they shown celebrating achievements or progress?
- Are the issues associated with the portraits in this exhibition part of our current political and social discussions today? How are these issues the same or different from the past?

20th Century Americans: 1900–1930 and 1930–1950 (3rd Floor)

These galleries, arranged chronologically, showcase the major cultural and political hallmarks of the 20th century.

Highlights/staff recommendations: Juliette Gordon Lowe, Gertrude Stein, Alexander Calder, *Signing of the Treaty of Versailles*, Edith Halpert, Frida Kahlo, Mary McLeod Bethune, Charles Drew

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 two rooms?
- How did 20th century technological and cultural innovations affect portraiture? What are some of the differences between portraits of early America compared to portraits of the 20th century? What are the similarities? How has the way portraits are viewed and used changed over time?
- How are major events like World War I, World War II and the Great Depression reflected in portraiture?