



An Introduction to Portrait Reading

A pre-visit lesson compiled by the National Portrait Gallery for school programs.

The National Portrait Gallery's Education Department offers school groups the opportunity to experience the museum's exhibitions through innovative programming. Gallery educators take an interactive approach to school programs, with the gallery experience comprising a dialogue between the facilitator and students.

To get your students *looking at* and *reading* portraits, we have provided key terms, as well as copies of four portraits from our collection. (Note: the portraits may or may not currently be on view.) For each portrait, we have provided questions to pose to your students in order to prepare them for their visit to the museum. The questions can be altered at your discretion. You can *read* all the portraits or just one prior to your visit.

Please remind your students that at a museum they can feel free to ask questions, interact with their gallery educator, walk, look, and listen. Discuss with them that it is not appropriate to yell, run, or wander away from the group, and be very clear that they need to stay at least an arm's length away from walls, labels, pedestals, columns, etc.

Key Terms

Portrait: A likeness or image of a person that is created by an artist

Image: A picture of something or someone

Sitter: The person or people who are in a portrait

Symbol: Something representing something else by association; objects, characters, or other concrete representations of abstract ideas, concepts, or events

Other Terms

Museum label: A written explanation of an artwork (you will find it next to the artwork)

Commission: To request and fund the creation of a portrait

Drawing: A type of artwork made with dry materials, such as pencil, pen, charcoal, or oil pastels (a type of crayon)

Painting: A type of artwork made with wet materials, such as paint or watercolors

Print: A type of artwork in which ink is placed on a stamp that the artist creates and then is transferred to paper or other material

Photograph: An image, especially a positive print, recorded by a camera and reproduced on a photosensitive surface

Sculpture: The art of carving, modeling, welding, or otherwise producing figurative or abstract works of art in three dimensions

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Guide for Classroom Discussion

Biographical Information and Questions for Portrait of Michael Phelps



Michael Phelps (born 1985) set a world record during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games for the most gold medals won in one Olympiad. He brought home eight gold medals, surpassing U.S. swimmer Mark Spitz's previous record of seven in 1972 at the Munich games. Phelps has a total of fourteen medals, the most currently held by any Olympian. This image was taken, along

with a portfolio of photographs of the U.S. Olympic swim team, for the August 8, 2004, issue of the *New York Times Magazine*.

- What is the sitter doing in this portrait?
- What is the setting for this portrait? How do you know?
- What type of a portrait is this (painting, drawing, photograph, sculpture)? How would this portrait be different if it were black and white rather than color?

Biographical Information and Questions for Portrait of A. Philip Randolph



A. Philip Randolph (1889–1979) was a black labor organizer and leader of the civil rights movement. He was once considered by his opponents to be the “most dangerous Negro in America.” He co-founded *The Messenger*, a militant magazine dedicated to the labor unionism and socialism among African Americans, in 1917. *The Messenger* was instrumental in advocating for the establishment in 1941 of the Fair Employment Practices Committee, which was the first federal effort to eliminate racial discrimination from the workplace. In 1925 Randolph became the general organizer of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first African American labor union chartered by the American

Federation of Labor. (*The Messenger* eventually became the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters' official publication.) Randolph was a catalyst for demanding the stop to segregation in the armed services.

- Where is this man looking? Why might he be looking in that direction?
- Describe what's behind him. What might it represent or tell us about the sitter?
- What emotions do you feel when looking at this portrait?
- At what point in the sitter's life do you think this portrait was created?

Teachers: Tell the students that this portrait was created in 1945, after he organized a protest in 1941 to end the exclusion of African Americans from the armed forces.

Biographical Information and Questions for Portrait of Isaac Singer



Isaac Singer (1811–1875) patented the sewing machine in 1851. (The sewing machine was first introduced by Elias Howe in 1846.) Singer’s machine could sew 900 stitches per minute, more than twenty times as fast as a skilled seamstress sewing by hand. Singer commissioned this portrait while living in Paris; his clothing reflects his financial success and personal extravagance.

- What are the first colors you notice?
- What is he wearing? How would it feel to wear this? What is he leaning on? What might these symbols tell us about him?
- Take a minute to pose like him. What does it feel like?
- If you could add symbols to the background of this portrait, what might you add?

Biographical Information and Questions for Portrait of Phillis Wheatley



Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753–1784) was brought to the American colonies as a slave in 1761. She learned to read and began writing poetry within two years of her arrival. Wheatley is the first African American to publish a book and first American woman to earn a living from her writing. The publication of her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) drew the praise of George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and the French writer Voltaire, and also helped Wheatley gain her freedom. This portrait served as the frontispiece for her book.

- What words do you see around the sitter? Beneath the sitter?
- What symbols do you see? What might they represent? (*Examples include: book, feather quill with inkwell, piece of paper, table and chair, colonial dress, and mop hat bonnet. Ask follow-up questions about what these symbols represent.*)
- What do you think the artist wanted us to know about the sitter?
- What do you wonder about this portrait, or what questions do you have?



Michael Phelps by Ryan McGinley, 2004
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution
©Ryan McGinley, courtesy of Team Gallery



A. Philip Randolph by Betsy Graves Reyneau, 1945
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of the Harmon Foundation



Isaac Singer by Edward Harrison May, 1869
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of the Singer Company



Published according to Act of Parliament, Sept. 1, 1773 by Arch.^d Bell.

Bookfeller N^o 8 near the Saracens Head Aldgate.

Phillis Wheatley by an unidentified artist, 1773
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution