

## The Serious and the Smirk

Portraits reveal a great deal about the sitter, the artist and the cultural context in which they were created. The Albany Institute's rich portrait collection allows students to learn about history and material culture through body language, clothing, setting and accessories.

New York State Standards:

Elementary and Intermediate  
The Visual Arts – Standards 1, 2, 3, 4  
Social Studies – Standard 1  
ELA – Standards 1, 3, 4

### OVERVIEW

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A portrait is a representation of a real person. This representation is often a likeness of the person. However, an artist could alter this representation in order to make it more flattering. Doing so was beneficial to the artist as well as the subject of the portrait.

The person in a portrait is called the sitter, although he or she is not necessarily seated. A portrait may show one individual, such as the portrait of William Van Rensselaer as cupid. Other portraits include small groups, such as the sculpture of Lincoln, Grant, and Stanton by John Rogers.

Portraits may also show large groups, such as the Hudson River Schools artists by Thomas Rossiter. This demonstrates the diversity in portraiture.

Artists have employed a variety of poses and styles over the years. Popular poses include the profile and frontal views of the sitter. Not all portraits are full-length; many finish off around the waist of the sitter. The background may be scenic, such as a landscape or interior, or simply a solid color behind the figure.

Furthermore, portraits are not always oil painted on canvas. A wide variety of mediums (or materials) have been used for portraiture, from photographs to buttons to T-shirts to mugs to decorative arts to pencil sketches and beyond. Again, a portrait is *any* representation of a real person or persons.

The purpose of the portrait often influences the execution of the portrait. For example, a family heirloom may be of finer quality, and include references to the family name and coat of arms, if any. A portrait for a loved one may be a miniature, such as the Ezra Ames self-portrait, and have a softer style and references to love. A politician might prefer a mug or button that could be used for campaigning.

The execution may also be influenced by the wishes of the artist, the sitter, and the person purchasing the portrait (if not the sitter). In all three examples above, the sitter might prefer an accentuated rendition of their likeness.

A portrait captures a person for all time, along with his or her dress, surroundings, and props. These three elements of a portrait often symbolize aspects of the sitter: his or her name, family, background, status, interests, role, and personality.

Analyzing portraiture can be like playing detective as you interpret the clues and determine the sitter's identity. This symbolism enriches the physical likeness, and thus preserves a more complete and three-dimensional representation of the sitter.

Portraits have been used for hundreds of years as a means of documentation. Before the photograph, portraits were used to preserve a person's likeness. This likeness could then be utilized as a historical document, as a family heirloom, as a tribute, and as a work of art. As explained above, the sitter could be recognized by her likeness as well as by symbolic elements in the painting.

After photography was developed, painted portraits became more rare, but portraiture continued to flourish. Photographic portraits by professional photographers are very common today, from family portraits to wedding portraits. One example is the series of portraits of the presidents of the United States. These portraits were once painted, but are now photographed.

You can learn a good deal about history and society from portraiture. Body language and facial expression give you information about the sitter's status, mood, and personality. Clothing reflects the styles of the time as well as the wealth and status of the sitter. Props are telling of the sitter's role, occupation, status, and abilities, but also of societal values. Why would a given prop be included at this point in history?

There are different ways of conveying a sitter's attributes—why was this particular prop chosen? For example, classical portraits often include scrolls to convey intelligence and literacy, while later portraits include books. This shows the development from scrolls to bound books. The inclusion of a scroll in a later portrait has classical connotations, such as an interest in antiquity. The setting also provides clues. Architecture may represent the home of the sitter or popular contemporary styles. Classical architecture has classical connotations. Ruins may symbolize the end of an era. Portraiture also documents societal prejudice. Stereotypes are often reflected in portraiture, such as the “noble savages” displayed in *Four Indian Kings*.

As you closely observe portraiture, you begin to notice a plethora of details that give you information about the sitter, the artist, the period, and the location.

## GLOSSARY

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**Background:** The portion of the painting that is in the distance and farthest from the viewer; often found at the top of the painting.

**Body language:** The gestures, poses, movements, and expressions that a person uses to communicate.

**Foreground:** The portion of the painting that is closest to the viewer; often found at the bottom of the painting.

**Frontal view:** A head-on view of the sitter, when the sitter directly faces the viewer; this pose often gives the viewer more information about the sitter than does the profile view.

**Limner:** A self-taught painter who painted portraits. From the Latin “Limm” which means to illuminate, to draw or outline in sharp detail.

**Portrait:** A representation of a real person. From the Latin “protrahere” which means to portray.

**Pose:** how the artist has positioned the sitter in the portrait (for example, profile)

**Profile:** A side view of the sitter.

**Props:** Objects included in the portrait, which often have symbolic meaning.

**Self-portrait:** A portrait that an artist paints of himself or herself.

**Setting:** The location of the sitter in the painting; the stage for the scene.

**Sfumato:** A “smoky” style in the distance created by blurring outlines; one of the elements used by Leonardo da Vinci and later artists to portray atmospheric perspective.

**Sitter:** The person in the portrait (though he or she is not necessarily sitting).

### **Pre Visit Lessons**

The Serious and the Smirk Pre Visit Lesson

For Grades 3 –8

**Learning Outcomes:**

**Students will:**

Develop an understanding of what a portrait is.

Experiment with the artistic process of creating a portrait

**Teacher Planning:** Prepare an example for the students to reference.

**Time required for lesson:** 45 – 60 minutes

**Materials/resources:** Paper (18 x 24), Drawing pencils

**Technology resources:** none

**Pre-activities:** Teacher should be aware of the basics about portraits, such as subject, background, pose, gaze, symbolic objects, etc. and the vocabulary list available on our website.

**Activity 1:** Select 8 students pretend they are posing for a portrait. Dependent on how much time you have, give each student 1 minute to 3 minutes to pose. Have some students stand, sit or have them create their own pose. While one student is posing, have the rest of the class sketch a portrait. Limit the size the student’s paper by using a large sheet and folding it into 8 squares. Explain that it is ok if the students can’t finish the drawing, but just to get the general idea of the pose.

Afterwards, begin a discussion about **what it was like to pose for a portrait:**

Was it hard or easy?

Do you think you could hold that position for an hour? A day?

What would you think about while you were posing?

Then, **talk to the artists:**

How long do you think it would take to make a complete portrait? Why?

How much more time would you need to finish one of your drawings?

Would it make a difference if the paper were larger or smaller?

When you looked at the finish portrait, what would you look at first?

**Assessment:** Students may be evaluated on understanding, implementation and participation of the activity.

**Follow-up Activity:** Use a 30-minute session and one student or yourself (the teacher) to pose for a portrait. Give the students 8.5 X 11 paper to draw the portrait.

**New York Curriculum Alignment:**

Elementary and Intermediate:

The Visual Arts - Standards 1, 2, 3, 4

Social Studies – Standards 1

ELA – Standards 1, 3, 4

### **Post Visit Lessons**

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The Serious and the Smirk Post Visit Lesson

For Grades 3 –8

**Learning Outcomes:**

**Students will:**

Experiment with the process of creating a portrait through collage.

Practice using “element of art” terms in describing others art work.

**Teacher Planning:**

**Time required for lesson:** 45 – 60 minutes (can be finished for a homework assignment)

**Materials/resources:** Paper (18 x 24), Drawing pencils, Markers/colored pencils/crayons/paint/brushes, Magazines, Newspapers, Scissors

**Technology resources:** Computers, Internet and printer (if needed)

**Pre-activities:** Teachers can create an example of a contemporary portrait, with facial pieces from pictures, magazines, etc.

### **Contemporary Portraits**

**Activity 1:** Have each student bring in some old magazines. Have the students find portraits in the magazines of all kinds of people, size, color, etc. After they have finished collecting, they can create contemporary portraits by selecting facial features, hairstyles, clothing from different found portraits. Students can also incorporate pieces of construction paper, drawings and words to produce an original portrait.

After each student has completed his or her portrait, have a critique of each. Begin the discussion with “ Do you like it?, Why or why not?” Then lead the discussion to focus on the elements of art, contemporary society and how it has evolved, etc.

**Assessment:** Students may be evaluated on understanding, implementation and participation of the activity.

### **New York Curriculum Alignment:**

Elementary and Intermediate:

The Visual Arts - Standards 1, 2, 3, 4

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## **WEB RESOURCES**

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### **Basic Information**

#### **[Access Art](#)**

A collection of visual arts learning resources. For learners of all ages and educators.

#### **[Eyes on Art](#)**

Activities and teacher resources which challenge the way you look and feel about art.

### **Terms and Symbolism**

#### **[ArtLex Visual Arts Dictionary](#)**

An online dictionary of more than 3,600 terms used in discussing art and visual culture. Images, quotations, pronunciation notes and cross references are also included.

### **Portraits**

#### **[Painting Beyond Fashion](#)**

Detailed descriptions of painting and drawing principles, which simplify the basis of portraiture and art in general.

### [Portrait Detectives](#)

Investigate different portraits and the characteristics that make them unique.

### [Portraiture.com](#)

A look into the history of portraiture and how a contemporary artist creates a portrait.

### [World Wide Arts Resources](#)

Numerous databases to search your favorite artist, artwork, location and find information and images.

### [WebMuseum, Paris: Famous Paintings exhibition](#)

Browse the different art movements and find information about the style and the works of art created during that time.

## Teacher Resources

### [KinderArt: Sixth Graders Express Themselves](#)

Students create an expressionist portrait of a friend.

### [edHelper.com](#)

For all education disciplines and grade levels. Provides activities, lesson ideas, information and much more.

### [A Portrait of Your Hero](#)

A lesson focusing on the concept of "being a hero." Includes elements of art and writing.

### [Famous Faces Portraits](#)

Step by step lesson plan to create funny famous people portraits.

### [Funny Faces](#)

A collaborative project in which students create a flip book of creative portraits.

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