

Google Arts & Culture

Learn Together: Introduction to Portraiture and Identity

National
Portrait
Gallery



Using the lesson plan and Google Arts & Culture resources

This lesson plan is designed to support you as you explore Google Arts & Culture Stories and exhibitions related to the lesson topic. The images you will see here are just a sample of the media—texts, images, audio, and video—available to you on the Google Arts & Culture website and app. As the lesson uses only resources found on GA&C, it cannot present every aspect of a given topic. A parent or teacher might be guiding you through the lesson, or you might choose to complete it on your own.

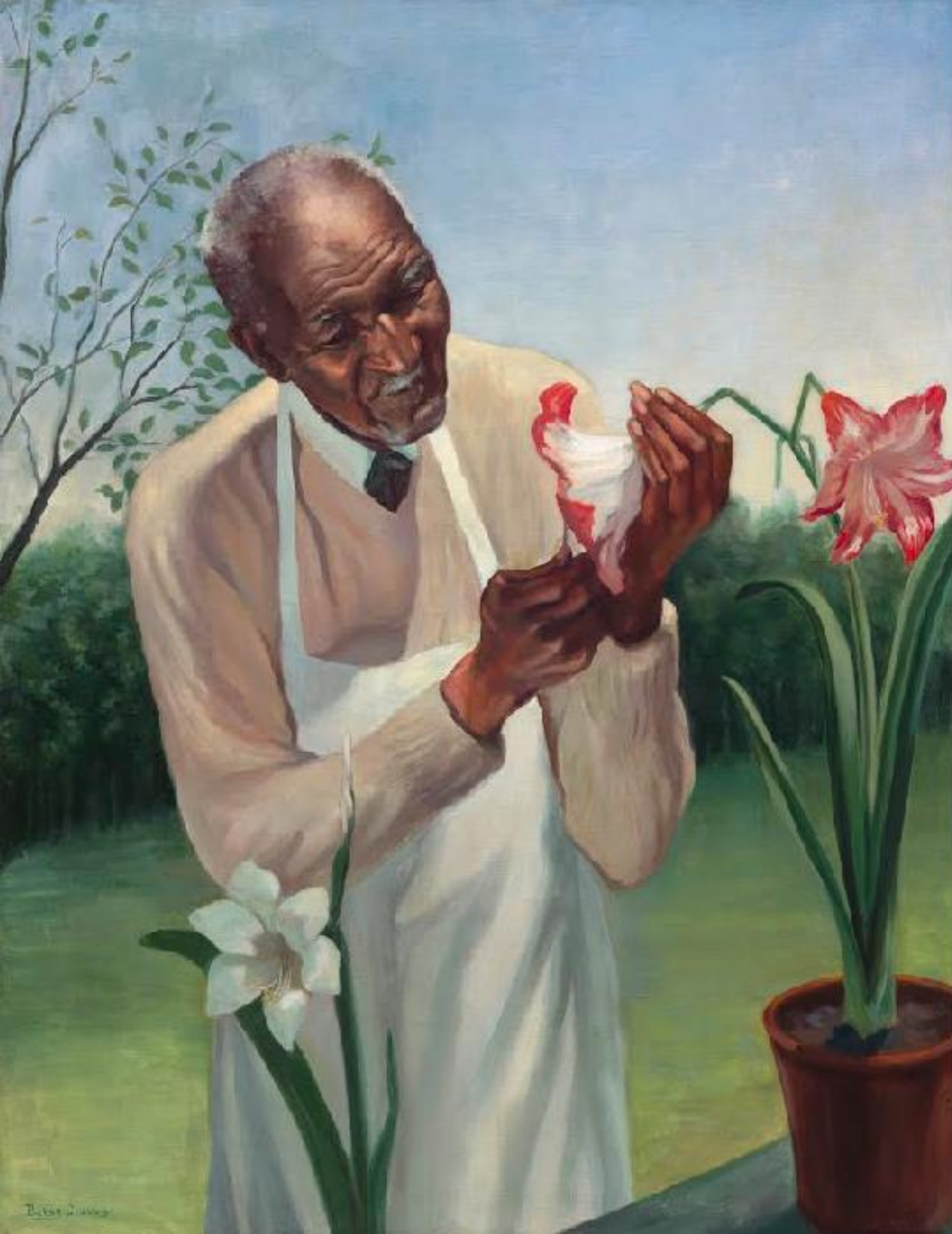
All you need to access the lesson is an internet connection and a web browser or the Google Arts & Culture app. You may want to take notes, either digitally or with paper and pen.

The lesson plan has an **introduction**, which will describe the topic and provide some background information that will help you understand what you are seeing, hearing, and reading. Then the lesson will take you on a journey from one **Story** to another, fill in some details along the way, and pose **questions** that will help you focus on important ideas. A **quiz** and a link for **exploring the topic further** are followed by **ideas for projects** related to the lesson topic that you can do at home or in the classroom.

As noted, the lesson plan includes **questions** about the main Stories, and there is also a **quiz**. You will want to write answers to the questions in a notebook or on a piece of paper. Then, you can check all your answers when you've finished the lesson.

Resources on the Google Arts & Culture website include Themes, Stories, Museum Views, items, and images.

- ❖ **Themes** bring together Stories, exhibitions, collections, images, audio, and video files that relate to a topic.
- ❖ In a **Story**, clicking on the arrows on the right and left sides of a slide will move you forward and backward. Just keep clicking to keep moving forward. (Note that in some Stories, you scroll up and down.) Audio and videos on slides will play automatically. Clicking on an image title will take you to a page with more information about it.
- ❖ In **Museum Views**, you move through a 3D space. Click to move forward. Click, hold, and move the cursor left or right to turn.
- ❖ An **item** will take you to an individual **image**, where you can zoom in and sometimes read more about the image.



In this lesson, you will learn:

- ❖ How artists use portraiture to convey aspects of a subject's individual, community, cultural, and national identity.
- ❖ Key components of a portrait and what one can learn about the subject through these components.
- ❖ The artistic choices that communicate an artist's viewpoint and influence viewers' understanding of the subject's identity.
- ❖ Strategies for reading portraiture.

You will:

- ❖ Explore Stories and exhibitions about identity and portraiture.
- ❖ Answer questions about what you have seen and read.

This lesson will take **30–45 minutes** to complete.



Learn Together: Introduction to Portraiture and Identity

Identity is a complicated thing. On the simplest level, it's who someone is: their name, their appearance, and the qualities they possess. It includes a person's choices, such as the clothes on their body, the music on their phone, or the friends at their table. It includes the beliefs, culture, history, and community that make a particular person or group different from others.

However, there is no one "true" identity. The outside world forms an idea of who a person is, and that identity may be very different from the person's own sense of identity. The world may see a person as a symbol, a representation of an idea or event, which is only one part of that person's identity. And identity changes over time as a person interacts with the world and with other individuals.

Perhaps no one is more aware of the complicated nature of identity than the portrait artist. Portrait artists set out to convey someone's identity, but the sitter/subject, the artist, the viewer's prior understanding, and the circumstances of the portrait all influence how that identity is conveyed.

In analyzing a portrait, we need to consider how the sitter or subject sees themselves, how the world might see them, how the artist sees them, and how we, the viewer, see them. All these ideas come together to convey identity in a portrait.

As you view the exhibits and Stories in this lesson, think about these questions:

- ❖ How do people form their identities?
- ❖ How can portraiture convey identity?
- ❖ How can portraiture influence how someone's identity is perceived?

[Leontyne Price, by Bradley Phillips, 1963. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution](#)



What Is Portraiture?

Portraiture is the art of making portraits.

- A *portrait* is a likeness, or image, of a person or group of people.
- The person or persons in the portrait is called either the *subject* or the *sitter*.
- A portrait is made in a certain *medium*, the materials used to make the portrait. For example, one portrait may be a photograph, while others are paintings, drawings, sculptures, or videos. Each medium allows the artist to include different details and make different decisions about the image.
- The subject and the other objects in the portrait often act as *symbols*, or objects that represent something else by association. Symbols can be abstract ideas, concepts, or events.

Click [here](#) to learn about portraiture.

Then come back to answer these questions:

1. What are the terms for the person or persons in a portrait?
2. Why are objects sometimes included in a portrait?
3. Explain this statement: "Portraits present insights into history and biography."

To learn about how some artists draw portraits of the human body, or *figure*, click [here](#).



Reading a Portrait: The Elements of Portrayal

The Elements of Portrayal are the aspects of a portrait that communicate information and impressions about a subject to the viewer. While looking at a portrait, you might consider a subject's hairstyle or clothes and wonder why they were chosen. You might look at the subject's *pose*, or how the subject sits, stands, or lies down in a particular position. You might think about the setting, too, and what it represents about the subject. You may also analyze how the colors, artistic style, and *scale*, or relative size, influence the mood and tone of a work. You might study the subject's face and think about how a smile, a wrinkled brow, or another facial expression conveys emotion.

Click [here](#) to learn about the Elements of Portrayal.

Then come back to answer these questions:

1. Think about one portrait in the lesson or the links. Describe the sitter's pose.
2. What are some Elements of Portrayal in the portrait that convey mood and tone in the portrait you chose?
3. What does clothing tell the viewer about the subject's identity?

To watch a video about the Elements of Portrayal, click [here](#).

[Franklin D. Roosevelt, by Douglas Chandor, 1945.](#)
[National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution](#)



Reading Portraiture: Fact or Fiction?

The Elements of Portrayal influence how viewers see a portrait's subject. During the creation of a portrait, the artist and sometimes the sitter make choices that shape a viewer's impression of the sitter. Those choices are influenced by many parts of a subject's identity—their personality, their social status, their ambition, and their culture. The artist's identity, and the artist's relationship with a subject, will also factor into the details that are shown in a portrait. A portrait is never entirely objective or factual. It invariably reflects a compromise between the way the artist sees the sitter and the way the sitter wants to be seen.

Click [here](#) to learn about how portraits both reveal and shape identity.

Then come back to answer these questions:

1. Why is it important to consider the Elements of Portrayal when forming an opinion about a portrait's subject?
2. According to the video, what were Gilbert Stuart's goals in portraying George Washington?
3. How can the symbols in a portrait reflect the identity of the sitter? Give an example from the portrait of George Washington.

To learn about the facts and fictions behind another famous presidential portrait, click [here](#).



[Pauline Cushman, by Mathew Brady Studio, 1864.](#)
[National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution](#)

Learning to Look: Comparing and Contrasting Portraits

It can be revealing to compare and contrast two or more portraits. You can compare different portraits of the same subject, different portraits by the same artist, or two entirely different pieces. When comparing, the viewer looks for what is similar about the portraits. To contrast the portraits, the viewer looks at what is different about them. These details can reveal a lot about the subjects, the artists, and each of their cultures and times.

Click [here](#) to see an art historian compare and contrast two portraits.

Then come back to answer these questions:

1. What similarities and differences do you see in the portraits of LL Cool J and John D. Rockefeller?
2. According to the expert, how does LL Cool J's pose influence the viewer's impression of him?
3. There are several important differences between the portraits. How do these differences convey the distinct identities of Rockefeller and LL Cool J?



[Grace Murray Hopper, by Lynn Gilbert, 1978.](#)
[National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution](#)

To listen to an interview with artist Kehinde Wiley, click [here](#). To see his work in the National Portrait Gallery, click [here](#).

Quiz

Read the questions and write your answers in your notebook or on a piece of paper.

1. What are the goals of a portrait?
2. What effect does medium have on a portrait?
3. What insights might the setting offer in a portrait?
4. What effect might a large-scale portrait have on a viewer?
5. What kind of personal information—fact or fiction—might a subject want to include in a portrait?
6. How might a viewer's existing impressions of a subject affect how that viewer interprets a portrait of that subject?
7. Why might an artist make references to earlier portraits?
8. Why might it be helpful to compare and contrast portraits by the same artist?

Explore Further

This lesson has given you some vocabulary to talk about portraiture and identity. It has also introduced you to some basic ideas about how portraits show subjects. To learn more about portraiture, click [here](#).



It's Your Turn!

In this lesson, you learned about identity and portraiture. Here are some ideas for projects that you can do at home or in the classroom.

- ❖ Pose and make a facial expression like Muhammad Ali in this photograph by Yousuf Karsh. How might he feel? How might his clothing and the setting affect the mood of this portrait? What does this portrait say about Ali's identity? Research Muhammad Ali's life. Compare your ideas from the portrait to the facts you learned about him.
- ❖ Choose two portraits of the same person. Compare and contrast the portraits. What do they convey about the individual's identity? If the portraits show the person at different ages, predict what may have happened in the years in between.
- ❖ Compose a self-portrait. Think about the objects, clothing, hair, pose, and setting you would most like to see yourself in. What do you want to communicate about your identity in your portrait?

Sample Answers

Student answers will vary. The responses below are sample answers and are not meant to be the one conclusive answer. Use the rubric on page 13 for a guide on evaluating student interpretations of portraits.

What Is Portraiture?

1. Two terms for the person or persons in a portrait are *subject* and *sitter*.
2. Objects can represent aspects of a person's identity, such as their profession or status. They can also be symbols that represent ideas that either the subject or the artist wants viewers to understand.
3. Sample answer: *Portraits show not only what a person looked like, but also details that represent their biography, or life history. These details can also represent the time in history when a person lived.*

Reading a Portrait: The Elements of Portrayal

1. Answers will vary. Sample answer: *George Washington is standing very straight with one arm gesturing as if to welcome someone.*
2. Answers will vary. Sample answer: *George Washington's unsmiling facial expression and simple black suit give his portrait a serious mood.*
3. Answers will vary. Sample answer: *Clothing, such as sports or military uniforms, can tell a person's profession. How elaborate or expensive the clothing is can tell something about their status and wealth.*

Reading Portraiture: Fact or Fiction?

1. The Elements of Portrayal are choices made by the sitter and the artist to try to communicate something to the viewer. The viewer should be aware of what the sitter and the artist hope they see.
2. Gilbert Stuart was trying to show George Washington as the first president of the United States, but he was also trying to visually define what the United States was as a nation.
3. Answers will vary. Sample answer: *Symbols in a portrait can represent ideas that the sitter believes in, such as the laws of the United States on George Washington's desk. They can also represent parts of a sitter's identity that the artist wants to show, such as Stuart's decision to show Washington in a black suit rather than royal robes.*

Learning to Look: Comparing and Contrasting Portraits

1. Answers will vary. Sample answer: *LL Cool J and John D. Rockefeller are both wearing suits and sitting in formal-looking chairs. LL Cool J is in front of a very brightly colored patterned background, while John D. Rockefeller is shown with a simple, dark background.*
2. Sample answer: *The pose shows LL Cool J as wealthy and powerful, similar to John D. Rockefeller. His facial expression also shows pride.*
3. Answers will vary. Sample answer: *The bright colors in LL Cool J's painting give the portrait a much more energetic mood than Rockefeller's dark background. This might relate to LL Cool J's fame in hip-hop culture and entertainment.*

Sample Answers

Student answers will vary. The responses below are sample answers and are not meant to be the one conclusive answer. Use the rubric on page 13 for a guide on evaluating student interpretations of portraits.

Quiz

1. *The goals of a portrait are to provide an impression of a person's physical appearance and/or to reveal aspects of the person's identity.*
2. *The medium can influence how much detail a portrait shows or what kind of colors, lines, or shapes create a likeness.*
3. *The setting of a portrait can show the sitter's possessions, natural surroundings, time, and place.*
4. *A large portrait might make a subject seem powerful or important compared to the viewer.*
5. *A subject might want to show their occupation, high social status, or power.*
6. *A viewer will interpret a portrait based on the viewer's ideas and knowledge about a subject, so they may interpret a portrait of someone whose biography they know differently than a portrait of someone unfamiliar.*
7. *An artist may be inspired by how another portrait treated a subject, and to make reference to that portrait in order to make a connection between their portrait and the previous portrait.*
8. *Comparing two portraits by the same artist can reveal how the artist portrays different people.*

[Abraham Lincoln, by Alexander Gardner, 1865.](#)
[National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution](#)



Rubric for evaluating student interpretations of portraits

	Strong Interpretation	Fair Interpretation	Needs Improvement
Answer includes:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A clearly stated inference, conclusion, interpretation, or supported opinion. • Accurate evidence using significant details from the image or text. • A logical relationship between the evidence and the conclusion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A stated interpretation or opinion. • Some evidence, or evidence that relies on less significant or more ambiguous details from the image or text. • Interpretations that rely on ideas or opinions not found in the image or text. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A simple opinion or statement of fact about the image or text. • No evidence of inference, interpretation, or drawing conclusions. • No relationship between the opinion or statement and the text or image. • No specific evidence from the text or image.
Sample answer:	<p><i>I think the portrait of Henrietta Lacks is trying to communicate hope. The artist uses light, bright colors, which feel like a sunny day, and Henrietta is smiling, which makes her seem content.</i></p>	<p><i>The portrait of Henrietta Lacks is very hopeful. The bright colors and flowers are happy symbols.</i></p>	<p><i>I like the picture of Henrietta Lacks. I think she looks pretty.</i></p>