

Art, Books, and Creativity (ABC) Curriculum

Lesson 4: Portraits

Grade Levels

3 to 5; 6 to 8; 9 to 12

Subjects

Visual Art; English/Language Arts

Lesson Overview

Students will explore portraits and learn how artists provide clues to help us understand the people portrayed in their art. By observing the subject's clothing and facial expressions, the objects around them, and the space they occupy, we can infer much about his or her identity, personality, and role in society. Students will create self-portraits using a folded, one-sheet book form.

Guiding Questions

- What can we tell about people by looking at their portraits?
- How do writers communicate about people?

Length of Lesson

Two or three 45-minute periods

Key Connections

Visual Arts

- Portraits contain clues about the people pictured in them that can tell us things about the subjects' cultures, identities, traditions, and roles in society.
- Portraits can express how people think about themselves and their world.
- Portraits can include symbols that reference interesting aspects of the people in them.
- When creating a portrait, an artist makes many artistic choices that affect how we understand the image.
- Artists make choices about media, style, background, and embellishments to visually describe themselves or others.

Writing

- Written texts contain clues about the people described in them that can tell us things about the subjects' cultures, identities, traditions, and roles in society.

- Biography and autobiography are written works that describe interesting aspects of the people in them.
- Writers make choices about writing style and format to describe themselves or others in writing.

Instructional Objectives

Visual Arts

Students will:

- Identify parts of a portrait and use art terms to describe them
- Explore ways artists express identity in portraits
- Interpret a portrait through observation and discussion
- Create a self-portrait in the form of a book
- Use symbols to express their roles in society, traditions, and aspects of themselves or other people
- Understand the meaning of a symbol

Writing (Optional Activities)

Students will:

- Use descriptive vocabulary to describe a portrait and/or self-portrait
- Use vocabulary from descriptive writing to create a poem or other piece of writing
- Use word choice to express their roles in society, traditions, and aspects of themselves or other people
- Understand the meaning of a symbol

For the Teacher

Looking and Seeing

Some things to notice when looking at Lavinia Fontana's [*Marriage Portrait of a Bolognese Noblewoman \(Livia de' Medici Bandini?\)*](#):

- **Color:** Red and yellow are warm colors, which draw our attention and set the subject off from the cool gray tones of the background.
- **Texture:** Velvet fabric, metallic ribbons, sparkling jewels, and dog's fur represent a range of surfaces and touch sensations.
- **Pose:** The subject is standing, and her face is slightly turned away from the viewer.
- **Background:** The plain, dark background isolates the subject in the painting and focuses our attention on her.
- **Symbols:** The artist uses the image of a dog in the painting to symbolize faithfulness.
- This portrait shows a young woman (the subject) just before her marriage. In sixteenth-century Bologna (Italy), when this picture was painted, it was customary for women to

wear red wedding dresses. That's how we know it is a wedding portrait. It shows a young woman at a point of transition in her life, when her role in society is about to change from daughter to wife.

For additional artworks to include with this lesson, please view this [art gallery](#). To read about the artists and works included in the gallery, search the artist's name at [nmwa.org](#). To learn more about the featured artist, check out [Lavinia Fontana's artist profile](#).

About Portraiture

The purpose of portraits has continually changed over time. In early times, portraits expressed the beliefs and values of society or showed a person's social status, rather than how they actually looked. As centuries passed, portraiture evolved, and artists began to express more of the subject's individuality.

During the Renaissance (fifteenth and sixteenth centuries), artists learned how to paint more realistically, and portraits began to look more like the person represented and to express his or her personality. It was during this time that many women took up the art of portraiture, and a number of women artists made their living by painting portraits.

When the camera was invented in the nineteenth century, it became possible for everyone, not just artists, to make realistic portraits. Artists came to believe that portraits did not have to be realistic in order to be a good representation of a person. They began to experiment with the expressive qualities of color, line, and shape in portraits. Today artists continue to experiment with the elements of art to explore personality, express identity, and speak to social and political issues through portraiture.

By thinking about how an artist created a portrait (how they used color, line, shape, form, space, value, and texture to express ideas, moods, and feelings) we can gain insight into what the artist wanted to express and even how the artist may have felt about the subject.

Vocabulary

- **Portrait** is a picture or representation of a specific person. It can be rendered in any medium, such as pencil on paper, paint on canvas, sculpture, photograph, or collage.
- **Self-portrait** is a picture of the artist by the artist.
- **Subject** is who or what the artwork is about. It can be a story, an idea, a person, an emotion, or a feeling. In a portrait or self-portrait, the subject is often referred to as the sitter.
- **Pose** is the way the subject's body is positioned in an artwork.
- **Identity** is how a person sees or thinks of herself or himself. Identity can also refer to how people represent themselves to each other.
- **Foreground** is the part of the picture that seems closest to the viewer.
- **Background** is the part of the picture that seems farthest from the viewer.

- **Symbol** is an object or thing that has meaning more than the thing itself. A dog might represent fidelity in addition to being a pet; it is a visual sign for an idea or concept.
- **Elements of art** are color, line, shape, form, space, value, and texture. Artists use these tools to create all visual art: representational, abstract, and non-representational. (Review the [vocabulary list](#) for definitions of individual elements of art.)

Instructional Plan: Observe, Create, and Reflect

Observe: Quick Write

Before beginning the lesson, show Lavinia Fontana's [Marriage Portrait of a Bolognese Noblewoman \(Livia de' Medici Bandini?\)](#) to students. Give students a few minutes to respond to the image. Use any of the following prompts:

- Imagine there is a thought bubble above the woman's head. What do you think she is thinking?
- What do you think the woman is looking at?
- Imagine you are the dog in the picture. What are you about to do?
- What is something you notice about the woman in the picture? I notice....

Introduction

Before discussing Fontana's *Marriage Portrait of a Bolognese Noblewoman (Livia de' Medici Bandini?)*, ask the class to come up with a definition of **portrait**. Almost everyone has experienced portraiture, either by being in a portrait or making one of someone else, usually a photograph. Ask students to recall different occasions they have been in portraits (school photos, sports photos, and family occasions). Ask what they expect to see in a portrait. What makes a good portrait? Should a portrait always show the person as they are? Should a portrait give us clues about the person? Should it make the person look better than they do in real life? Why or why not?

Observe: Look and Discuss

Ask students to look closely at Fontana's *Marriage Portrait of a Bolognese Noblewoman (Livia de' Medici Bandini?)* and begin describing and interpreting what they see. [Visual Thinking Strategies](#) is a highly effective method for facilitating productive conversations about art with your students and introducing new vocabulary in a meaningful way. Following the conclusion of this initial exploration of the work, you may wish to revisit certain concepts in more depth using some of the questions below.

- Who is the **subject**?
- What is the subject wearing? What can you tell about her from her clothes?
- Describe her facial expression. Is she looking out at us? What might the expression say about her mood?
- Describe her **pose**. Is she making any gestures? Does she seem to be posing for the portrait?
- How much of her body is shown? Is just the face shown? Is most of the body shown?

- How old do you think she is? What do you see that makes you think that?
- What other objects do you see? What are they? How do you think they relate to the woman?
- Why do you think the artist included them? Could they be **symbols**? If so, what do they represent?
- What, if anything, is in the **background**? Why do you think the artist chose a plain background?
- Describe the place the subject seems to be. Is the woman inside or outside? How can you tell?
- Is it a realistic portrait of the woman? Does it look like the artist showed any flaws or do you think the artist made her look better than in real life? How can you tell?
- What do you think the artist wanted you to know about the woman's **identity**? What do you see in the painting that makes you think this?
- What else do you notice?

Summarize the ideas the class came up with and describe the woman in the portrait. Tell students that by analyzing clues such as clothing, expression, pose, and the objects in the painting, they have interpreted a work of art. *The method they just used to look at and talk about the portrait can be used when looking at all kinds of art.*

Create: Self-Portrait Book

For the Teacher

In advance of this project, you may wish to view this [“how-to” video](#), which provides a step-by-step demonstration of how to create a self-portrait book. You may find it helpful to show the video to your students in class instead of or in addition to providing them with the written directions below.

Supplies

- 8 1/2 -by-11-inch colored copy paper, one sheet per student
- Pencils, colored pencils, crayons, markers
- Student journals

Activity

1. Begin by placing the strip of paper horizontally on the desk in front of you. (One of the paper's long sides will be closest to you.)
2. Fold the paper in half *loosely* by bringing the two short sides together, but do not press down to crease the paper. Instead, pinch the top of your paper at point where the fold would be in order to mark the middle of the paper. Then open the paper back to its original position.
3. Fold the left side of your paper toward the middle, lining it up with the slight mark you made in step one and press firmly to crease the paper. Leave the flap closed. Then, do

the same with the left side of the paper. Your paper should now have a set of “doors” that open to reveal a blank, unfolded area of the paper.

4. Keeping the two flaps closed, take the top right corner and fold it toward the center where the two flaps meet, creating a right triangle. Repeat this process using the upper left corner. Sharply crease both of the folded edges you just created. Your paper now resembles a vertical rectangle topped by a triangle.
5. Unfold the two right triangles. On the right side, open your “door”/flap to the point where the diagonal crease meets the folded edge. Press the folded edge above that point inward/to your left to reverse the fold. As you press inward, the paper should fold along the diagonal creases you made in step 4. (Hint: If your paper doesn't fold easily, return to step 4 and more firmly crease the diagonal line. Then try step 5 again.)
6. When the fold is properly reversed, the right triangle will be between the front flap and the paper behind it. The fold will be a valley fold that is parallel to the bottom edge of the paper.
7. Repeat these steps to reverse the fold on the left side of your paper.
8. Once both folds are reversed, your book will resemble an arrow pointed upward, with no diagonal creases visible.

Self and Symbols

How can you use clues like pose, setting, background, and symbols in your book to express something about yourself?

The outside of the book has clues that reveal aspects of personality and/or identity. Have students create one or more symbols that express something about themselves and sketch them on the outside of the book.

- What do students want others to know about them?
- What clues will they use to express these traits?

Students will create a self-portrait on the inside of the book. Ask students to begin with the basic parts of the portrait: the body, pose, and gesture. Next, have them add details such as facial expression, clothing, background, and other objects. Have them think about what colors they will choose and how the colors may influence how people understand their self-portrait.

- What background will they choose (their bedroom or favorite place)? What will their choice say about them? What will the background say about them?
- How will they use color to affect the mood?
- What facial expression will they use?
- What parts of the body and pose will they choose to include?

Let each student choose a medium, such as crayon, marker, pen, or colored pencils, to complete the images in the book.

Reflect

When students have finished their self-portrait books, display them in the classroom. Discuss what each book tells about the person who made it. Ask a few students to explain what they did to express identity in their self-portraits and ask other students to make observations about their classmates' work. Have students use sentence stems when talking about each other's work, for example, "I notice...." or "I wonder...."

Lesson Extensions

Visual Arts and Writing

- Ask students to identify examples of **value** in Fontana's *Marriage Portrait of a Bolognese Noblewoman (Livia de' Medici Bandini?)*. Where has the artist used lighter and darker shades of the same color to suggest a **three-dimensional** form? (The roundness of the arms and of the skirt is created by the color change from light to dark/center to side.) Then, have them practice showing value using colored pencils or crayons.
- Ask students to describe or draw some different **textures** they see in *Marriage Portrait of a Bolognese Noblewoman (Livia de' Medici Bandini?)*. Have them consider: What do they think the dress would feel like if they could touch it? What about the sleeves of the dress or the woman's ruffled collar? How did the artist create the illusion of different textures?
- Ask students to write an explanation of the use of **pose, background, or symbols** in their self-portrait books. What do their choices say about them? What aspects of their personality did they want to express? Do they think they were successful? Is there anything they would add or do differently now?
- Ask them to respond to the question: How is a portrait like a book?

Social Studies/History

- Have students create a portrait of one of the various people from a particular period of American history. What symbols would they use to tell something about the person? Use clothing, background, pose, setting, expression, or objects as clues to the person's identity.
- Ask students to create a portrait of an important historical state figure and show his/her background, importance, or social role through pose, gesture, color, and background.