

Portraits

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

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.

LENGTH OF LESSON: Two or three 45-minute periods

KEY IDEAS THAT CONNECT VISUAL ARTS AND WRITING

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

Students will:

Visual Arts

- 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)

- 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 [Portrait of a Noblewoman](#):

- 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.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Read about [Lavinia Fontana](#) on the ABC website.

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 he or she 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 she or he 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.



SUPPLIES

- Student journals
- 8½" x 11" colored copy paper, one sheet per student
- Pencils, colored pencils, crayons, markers

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. (See 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 [Portrait of a Noblewoman](#) 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 *Portrait of a Noblewoman*, 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 she or he is? Should a portrait give us clues about the person? Should it make the person look better than she or he does in real life? Why or why not?



Observe: Look and Discuss

Ask students to look closely at Lavinia Fontana's *Portrait of a Noblewoman* and begin describing and interpreting what they see. Visual Thinking Strategies (vtshome.org) 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**? (The *subject* is the person in the portrait.)
- 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**1. Self-portrait Book**

Download instructions for the [Self-portrait Book](#) and lead students through the process of creating the book form.

2. 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 backgrounds will they choose (their bedrooms or favorite places)? What will their choices say about them? What will the backgrounds say about them?
- How will they use color to affect the mood?
- What facial expressions will they use?
- What parts of the body and poses 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 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 *Portrait of a Noblewoman*—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 *Portrait of a Noblewoman*. 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.