

Every Portrait Tells a Story

Compiled by the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Target Grade Level: 4–12 in visual arts and English language arts classes

Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be better able to:

- Identify and analyze key components of a portrait.
- Utilize portraits and imagery in storytelling.

Portraits:

Please visit the “Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition 2009” at <http://www.portraitcompetition.si.edu/index.html>

Exhibition images can be viewed at <http://www.portraitcompetition.si.edu/exhibition2009/AllFinalists.aspx>

Materials

- “*Reading*” *Portraiture Guide for Educators* may be found at <http://www.npg.si.edu/docs/reading.pdf>
- ***Supply students with paper and art materials when necessary.**

Background Information for Teachers

The “Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition 2009,” which runs through August 22, 2010, is the result of an open competition in which the National Portrait Gallery asked artists throughout the United States to submit likenesses of people close to them. From more than 3,300 entries from every state, a jury of experts chose forty-nine works of art in a variety of media, including painting, sculpture, drawing, video and new media, and photography. They are as diverse as America and represent many stylistic approaches. The artists whose works are exhibited here use portraiture or self-portraiture to explore complex issues of identity, while they also test the boundaries of figurative art. These faces compel our curiosity and document the dynamic relationship between artist and subject. Ranging from quietly pensive to wildly expressive, these creative approaches to the art of portraiture assert the power of human connections.

Lesson Procedures

When choosing portraits for use as visual prompts in discussion or writing activities, consider what concepts and/or content you want to emphasize. Some images may be more character-driven—a perfect opportunity for students to practice shaping well-rounded characters. Others will encourage attention to setting. Portraits that contain more than one sitter will help students create multiple characters and envision relationships between their characters, but portraits with one sitter can also inspire stories with multiple characters. No matter which portrait you choose, encourage students to bring their own interpretations to the image.

1. Before displaying the chosen portrait (or asking students to choose a portrait), engage students in a discussion of what makes a good story. As they come up with some of the concepts listed below, emphasize any or all of those they are currently studying. Possible concepts they will consider include:
 - Setting
 - Plot
 - Back story
 - Characters
 - Theme
 - Point of view
 - Literary devices
2. Introduce the concept of a story graphic to the students. A story graphic functions as a visual map that helps your students see their story in its entirety before they begin writing. It is “written” picture by picture, with limited text. Through it, the writer can convey key elements of plot, story flow, major characters, and emotional tone. Because there is a strong visual element to a story graphic, this technique works well when you are using a portrait or other visual prompt to help students generate their story. Share an example with your students so that they understand what they are expected to produce.
3. Assign students a portrait or have students choose a portrait from which to create their own story graphic. (The portrait can be the same for all students or different for each student.) Ask questions to help students begin thinking about their story. Have them consider the following elements of the portrait:
 - Facial expression
 - Clothing
 - Pose
 - Direction of gaze
 - Setting
 - Objects
 - Colors
 - Relationships between sitters

Encourage students to use these elements to create a character, to imagine a setting (both in terms of physical location and in terms of time period), and to begin to shape a plot.

4. Give students time to draft their story graphic. After they have worked for the desired amount of time, have them share their story graphics in small groups and get feedback from their peers.
5. Finally, have students use their story graphics to draft their complete story. Stories may be revised following peer or teacher review and then shared with the class. Are the students surprised at how many different kinds of stories were inspired by the same image? Were certain ideas and themes common to several students?

National Standards in Visual Arts

NA-VA.K-4.2 USING KNOWLEDGE OF STRUCTURES AND FUNCTIONS

Achievement Standard:

- Students know the differences among visual characteristics and purposes of art in order to convey ideas.
- Students describe how different expressive features and organizational principles cause different responses.
- Students use visual structures and functions of art to communicate ideas.

NA-VA.K-4.3 CHOOSING AND EVALUATING A RANGE OF SUBJECT MATTER, SYMBOLS, AND IDEAS

Achievement Standard:

- Students explore and understand prospective content for works of art.
- Students select and use subject matter, symbols, and ideas to communicate meaning.

NA-VA.K-4.6 MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN VISUAL ARTS AND OTHER DISCIPLINES

Achievement Standard:

- Students understand and use similarities and differences between characteristics of the visual arts and other arts disciplines.
- Students identify connections between the visual arts and other disciplines in the curriculum.

NA-VA.5-8.2 USING KNOWLEDGE OF STRUCTURES AND FUNCTIONS

Achievement Standard:

- Students generalize about the effects of visual structures and functions and reflect upon these effects in their own work.
- Students employ organizational structures and analyze what makes them effective or not effective in the communication of ideas.
- Students select and use the qualities of structures and functions of art to improve communication of their ideas.

NA-VA.5-8.3 CHOOSING AND EVALUATING A RANGE OF SUBJECT MATTER, SYMBOLS, AND IDEAS

Achievement Standard:

- Students integrate visual, spatial, and temporal concepts with content to communicate intended meaning in their artworks.
- Students use subjects, themes, and symbols that demonstrate knowledge of contexts, values, and aesthetics that communicate intended meaning in artworks.

NA-VA.5-8.6 MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN VISUAL ARTS AND OTHER DISCIPLINES

Achievement Standard:

- Students compare the characteristics of works in two or more art forms that share similar subject matter, historical periods, or cultural context.

- Students describe ways in which the principles and subject matter of other disciplines taught in the school are interrelated with the visual arts.

National Standards in English Language Arts

NL-ENG.K-12.4 COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

NL-ENG.K-12.5 COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

NL-ENG.K-12.8 DEVELOPING RESEARCH SKILLS

Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

NL-ENG.K-12.12 APPLYING LANGUAGE SKILLS

Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

Key Terms

Artist: A person who produces works in any of the arts that are primarily subject to aesthetic criteria. A person who practices one of the fine arts, such as a painter or sculptor.

Portrait: A likeness of a person, especially one showing the face, which is created by an artist.

Sitter: A person who poses or models, as for a portrait.

Symbol: Something representing something else by association; objects, characters, or another concrete representation of an abstract idea, concept, or event.