

## “Americans Now”: Self-Portrait Remix

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:

- Examine contemporary portraiture and identify, compare, and contrast visual elements in the portrait.
- Create a Self-Portrait Remix in the style of Kehinde Wiley that incorporates elements of an older portrait.

### Portraits:

LL Cool J by Kehinde Wiley, oil on canvas, 2005

Please visit the “Americans Now” exhibition at

<http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/americansnow/index.html>

### Materials

- “Reading” *Portraiture Guide for Educators* may be found at <http://www.npg.si.edu/docs/reading.pdf>
- Images of older Western portraits, by artists such as Francisco Goya, Hans Holbein, Edouard Manet, Johannes Vermeer, John Singer Sargent, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, Anthony Van Dyck etc.
- **\*Supply students with paper and art materials when necessary.**

### Background Information about the “Americans Now” exhibition

Celebrity and fame, so we are told, are fleeting. Yet many of today’s newsworthy figures are also people of great accomplishment who inspire us and whose achievements will last. This installation, centered on portraits from the National Portrait Gallery, presents today’s faces in a variety of forms and media, from painting, prints, drawing, and photography to digital and generative video projections. Many of the subjects are famous—including LeBron James, LL Cool J, Toni Morrison, Willie Nelson, Conan O’Brien, Martha Stewart—while others are not. Instead, they are outstanding individuals in the realms of science, business, government, and the arts. The artists who made these portraits are among the most talented of their generation, including Chuck Close, Shepard Fairey, Red Grooms, Elizabeth Peyton, Martin Schoeller, Alec Soth, Mickalene Thomas, and Kehinde Wiley. We invite you to join us in speculating about which subjects presented here will still be well known one hundred years from now—President and Mrs. Obama, for instance—and which subjects might only become footnotes to history. As you view the web exhibition or go through this installation in the museum, you join the National Portrait Gallery staff in thinking about the challenges involved in collecting contemporary portraits.

For more information about the creation of the “Americans Now” exhibition, see

<http://www.npg.si.edu/docs/classroom11.pdf>

## **Background Information about the Portrait of LL Cool J**

Rap star and actor James Todd Smith changed his name to LL Cool J (short for “Ladies Love Cool James”) at age sixteen, when he released his first single, “I Need a Beat.” In the late 1980s, the success of his recordings helped make Def Jam a major label: his broad popular appeal and nine consecutive multiplatinum albums were significant in transforming rap from an underground genre to a mainstream cultural force. Beginning in 1993, he included gangsta rap in his repertoire. He has also crossed over to acting, both in film (*Toys*, *Halloween H20*, *Rollerball*) and television (*In the House*, *30 Rock*, *House*); currently, he is a regular in the series *NCIS: Los Angeles*.

For most of artist Kehinde Wiley’s very successful career, he has created large, vibrant, highly patterned paintings of young African American men wearing the latest in hip-hop street fashion. The theatrical poses and objects in the portraits are based on well-known images of powerful figures drawn from seventeenth- through nineteenth-century Western art. Pictorially, he gives the authority of those historical sitters to his twenty-first-century subjects. In 2005, VH1 commissioned Wiley to paint portraits of the honorees for that year’s Hip Hop Honors program. Turning his aesthetic on end, he used his trademark references to older portraits to add legitimacy to paintings of this generation’s already powerful musical talents. Inspired by Ron Chernow’s biography of John D. Rockefeller, LL Cool J wanted this portrait to have a pose similar to John Singer Sargent’s painting of the philanthropist.

## **Lesson Procedures: Self-Portrait Remix**

Students will analyze the portrait of LL Cool J by Kehinde Wiley and will create self-portraits in Wiley’s style by incorporating elements from images of older Western portraits, by artists such as Francisco Goya, Hans Holbein, Edouard Manet, Johannes Vermeer, John Singer Sargent, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, Anthony Van Dyck etc.

1. Introduce students to the portrait of hip hop artist LL Cool J by Kehinde Wiley (found on the “Americans Now” website). Explain that one characteristic element of hip-hop culture is remixing or sampling from past works in order to create a new sound or image, and that Kehinde Wiley works within this tradition by basing his portraits of hip hop stars and anonymous black men on older works of Western art. Discuss with students how Wiley asks his subjects, including LL Cool J, to choose an older painting to use as the basis of their own portrait. If possible, show students the portrait of John D. Rockefeller by John Singer Sargent (easily available on the Internet) that LL Cool J chose as the model for his portrait; have students compare and contrast the two images. What aspects of the older portrait did Wiley incorporate into his portrait of LL Cool J?
2. Give students a collection of older Western portraits by artists such as Goya, Holbein, Manet, Vermeer, Sargent, Ingres, Van Dyck etc. Images of works by these artists are easily available on the Internet or in art books. Ask students to choose one portrait from the collection that they want to use as the inspiration for their own self-portraits. They should choose an image that can be used to express something about themselves. For example, rapper Ice T chose a portrait of Napoleon as the model for his portrait by Kehinde Wiley because he saw himself as a little guy taking on the world. LL Cool J

chose the Rockefeller pose because he wanted to be seen as an entrepreneur as well as an entertainer.

3. Once students have chosen their image, ask them to choose two specific elements from that portrait (examples include something in the background, a color, facial expression, object, pose, clothing, etc) to incorporate into their own self-portrait. They should think about how the elements can be adapted to express something about themselves.
4. Students will then use art materials to create their own self-portraits, incorporating the two elements that they identified in the step above. Alternatively, students can write a paragraph describing why they chose the portrait they chose as their inspiration, what their self-portrait would look like, how they would incorporate the two elements from the portrait in the exhibition into their own self-portrait, and what the use of these elements would express about themselves.
5. If time permits, have students share and explain their self-portraits.

## **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.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.