

# “Americans Now”: Sitters at Work

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.
- Analyze the choices that artists made in order to portray sitters engaged in professional activities.
- Use their analysis to create their own portraits of significant Americans at work.

## Portraits:

Erykah Badu by David Scheinbaum, gelatin silver print, 2003

Red Grooms self-portrait, ink and white correction fluid on paper, 2008

Steve Squyres by Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon, Epson print, 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>
- **\*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 Portraits

### **Erykah Badu by David Scheinbaum, gelatin silver print, 2003**

David Scheinbaum's portrait of Erykah Badu shows the critically acclaimed musician in performance in 2003, the year in which she released her fourth album, *Worldwide Underground*, and won a Grammy Award for best R&B song, "Love of My Life (An Ode to Hip Hop)." Born Erica Wright, she became involved in singing and dancing at a young age with the encouragement of her mother, a theater actress in Dallas. Badu's debut album, *Baduizm*, was released in 1997 and almost overnight established her as one of the leading and most original female voices in R&B. Often compared to the legendary Billie Holiday, she has utilized a variety of musical styles to create a unique, richly textured sound. She has also collaborated in recent years with a number of different groups, including The Roots and Burning Spear.

### **Red Grooms self-portrait, ink and white correction fluid on paper, 2008**

In his highly energized self-portrait, Red Grooms gives us a tangible sense of something rarely depicted visually: the intellectual life of the artist. Grooms, one of a number of American artists at midcentury who helped to reestablish the figure as a subject for art, made his name with a zany, unorthodox take on representation. His paintings, prints, sculptures, and films mined a vein of comic mania hard to reconcile with cool pop art and minimalist trends. Grooms's crowd-pleasing whimsies caused one art historian to describe him as a "latter-day P. T. Barnum or Walt Disney, albeit crossed with Marcel Duchamp." Surrounding him are his visualized embodiments of people whose biographies he has recently read; Thomas Edison, Mark Twain, P. T. Barnum, and the nineteenth-century clown Dan Rice all haunt his memory.

### **Steve Squyres by Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon, Epson print, 2005**

Planetary scientist Steve Squyres has advanced the American space program through his pioneering role in launching unmanned missions to Mars. The Goldwin Smith Professor of Astronomy at Cornell University, Squyres is the principal scientist of NASA's Mars Exploration Rover (MER) mission, launched in 2003. Photographers Susan Gamble and Michael Wenyon created this panoramic image of Squyres in May 2005 by seamlessly "stitching" together a series of digital images. Taken in the scientist's office at Cornell, the portrait depicts Squyres as he participates in a conference call with members of the Mars mission team. Seventeen months earlier, the Mars Exploration Rovers had landed and begun what was understood at the time to be a ninety-day mission. However, defying all expectations, the two rovers named Spirit and Opportunity continued to provide important information. (Spirit has now gone silent.)

### **Lesson Procedures:**

Students will compare and contrast three portraits of sitters at work, and will create a portrait of another significant American at work.

1. Have students compare and contrast the featured portraits (found on the "Americans Now" website), focusing on the idea that all three show sitters engaged in a professional activity. Ask students to describe the setting, objects, pose, clothing, and facial expression in each portrait, and to list the similarities and differences between the artworks.
2. As a class or working in small groups, generate a list of the choices that the artist made in each of the three portraits to convey the idea that the sitters are working.

3. Working individually or in groups and using the list created in Step 2 above as a guide, have students choose another significant American (contemporary or historical) and imagine a portrait of their chosen sitter engaged in relevant professional activity. Students should consider elements such as setting, objects, clothing, facial expression, and pose, and should decide how they would use those elements to convey the idea that the sitter is working. Students can create an actual portrait (using art materials chosen by the teacher) and/or write a paragraph or two describing what their portrait would look like.
4. If time permits, have students share and discuss their 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.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.