What’s Inside

Welcome to the Fall 2011 “extended” edition of NPG in Your Classroom. In this issue, we focus on the role of the museum curator. We have so much great information to share with you that we had to add a few extra pages! Learn about the different responsibilities of the NPG curatorial staff and find out how a teacher used NPG resources to create a project in which her third-graders curated their own displays. Then use our featured portrait of Helen Keller to transform your own students into curators.

We welcome submissions from teachers, so please e-mail our School and Teacher Program Coordinator at whitebz@si.edu if you have a story to share about how you’ve used NPG in your classroom.

Upcoming Teacher Workshops:
For Teachers by Teachers
Workshop presented with Metro DC teachers
Saturday, January 28, 2012
9:30 a.m.–3:30 p.m.

Have you ever wondered how fellow teachers are utilizing the National Portrait Gallery’s collection in their classroom? Here is your chance to find out! Join us for this one-of-a-kind workshop where local teachers will share their ideas for integrating portraiture into the classroom and model successful strategies they have implemented with their students.

Be the Curator
Workshop presented with the Smithsonian American Art Museum
Saturday, March 10, 2012
9:30 a.m.–3:30 p.m.

Museum curators communicate ideas through exhibitions. Join educators from the National Portrait Gallery and the Smithsonian American Art Museum for a day-long workshop on incorporating exhibitions into classroom teaching. Discover how curators make their decisions—including selecting artworks on a certain theme, arranging them to tell a story, and writing labels to accompany them. Participants will then place themselves in a curatorial role and create their own exhibition, using works in both collections. Participants will also brainstorm about ways of incorporating a “Be the Curator” activity into their classroom lessons and receive teaching resources.

What’s New at NPG

Seeing Gertrude Stein: Five Stories
Through January 22, 2012

“Seeing Gertrude Stein” features more than fifty artifacts and one hundred works by artists from across Europe and the United States detailing Stein’s life and work as an artist, collector, and distinctive style-maker.

150th Commemoration of the Civil War: The Death of Ellsworth
Through March 18, 2012

This exhibition recounts the death of Colonel Elmer E. Ellsworth in Alexandria, Virginia, the first Union officer to be killed during the Civil War. Ellsworth’s death at the hands of a local innkeeper made headlines throughout the country. He became a martyr in the North and an inspirational figure for legions of Yankees marching off to war.

The Black List
Photographs by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders
Through April 22, 2012

Timothy Greenfield-Sanders has created photographic portraits of individuals who are meant to represent the current African American experience. The portrayals provide insight on the struggles, triumphs, and joys of black life in the United States.
Fun. Exciting. Great. Usually eight-year-olds use these words to describe extra recess, but recently my third-grade class used them about a biography project. Although biography was once viewed by some children as a dry part of our Virginia social studies curriculum, teaching about American heroes this past year was a dynamic and memorable experience for my students.

Back in January 2011, I attended the National Portrait Gallery’s “Be the Curator” workshop. NPG had partnered with the Smithsonian American Art Museum to present the concept of teaching a content area through art in order to give students ownership of their work. The main idea is that once a teacher determines the content to use for the project, students combine art with their research to then create a museum display. While in the workshop, teams of teachers practiced going through the steps of this process. We learned that this could be applied to all grade levels and student needs.

My current classroom in Arlington is composed of a diverse student body. With this in mind and my goal to teach about famous Americans, I visited my school library and searched for a biography about each hero. I pulled books with a variety of reading levels so that all students could participate, reading biographies that met their needs.

Next, pairs of students were given a portrait of their hero from the NPG collection and asked to research their hero, compiling a list of three important facts for a caption to accompany the portrait.

Once the caption was edited and put into a final copy, each pair of students selected a colored construction-paper background that went well with
their portrait; this is where “being the curator” came into play. The children used these backgrounds to frame their portraits and captions. Students were asked to consider how color would influence their team’s vision for the museum display and also to determine if their museum pieces should be put together in a simple format or a more contemporary one. (Vertical vs. horizontal alignment was considered, as well as the angles at which the museum pieces were glued down.)

The children loved pretending that they were museum curators. They were excited from the beginning and took their roles seriously. Once their work was displayed in our “museum” (the hallway bulletin board), the children proudly looked at one another’s work. A few weeks later, we reviewed what we did by presenting our projects in class; each pair reflected upon why they chose the color of their background and the format in which they set up their displays. The maturity with which they presented their work showed how much value they placed on this project and the deep responsibility they felt toward their work.

After interviewing my class about this project, one of my students said, “It was really fun doing the project because even though you didn’t know much about the person, once you got to study them it was really fun. I learned a lot. I really liked [being a curator] because you could learn about art and history, and this helped with [my] reading and writing skills.” I couldn’t have summed up this project better myself. I highly recommend this type of project to all educators who desire to engage their students in a meaningful and deep way. Forgo a book report, and try to “be the curator.”

Meet the NPG Curators

As teachers and students become curators in their classrooms, they often want to know more about the professional curatorial staff at the National Portrait Gallery. Curators at NPG are divided into three departments—Painting and Sculpture, Prints and Drawings, and Photographs. Regardless of department, a curator’s main responsibilities are to maintain the museum’s existing collections of objects, research and acquire new objects for the collection, and showcase these objects in exhibitions. While the job description of an NPG curator might not look very different from that of a curator at another museum, NPG curators emphasize that the museum’s small staff and the unique way in which it showcases both art and history create an environment where collaboration is key.

The word “curate” comes from a Latin root meaning “to care for.” Wendy Wick Reaves, curator of prints and drawings, emphasizes this linguistic origin when she discusses the curators’ roles as stewards of our collection. In addition to their research, curators have a “custodial role” in making sure that our objects are properly housed, well-cared-for, and accessible. Although curators can take a variety of academic and professional paths to the job, Reaves says that the most important requirement is an “intuitive understanding of and passion for objects.”

Unlike many museums, the Portrait Gallery did not have a collection in place when it was created by an act of Congress in 1962. Therefore, acquisitions have been and remain a crucial responsibility for the curatorial staff. Curators search for portraits of sitters who will help further NPG’s mission of “telling the history of America through individuals who have shaped its culture.” In the museum’s early years, the focus was on acquiring portraits of the most famous figures in American history. But now, according to Ann Shumard, curator of photographs, “one of
the great things about having actively collected for more than four decades is that NPG has assembled a wonderful collection of pictures of people everyone knows, people you would expect to see in the National Portrait Gallery. Our challenge now is to expand this collection to include individuals of historic importance who may not be household names but who deserve to be.”

Objects come to the attention of our staff in a variety of ways. Sometimes dealers or individuals looking to sell or donate a particular work will approach curators. Curators also visit galleries, attend auctions, and browse catalogues with an eye toward filling a particular void in our collection. Brandon Fortune, chief curator, points out the difficulties of trying to acquire major works on a limited budget, but also touts our successes, including the recent purchase of a portrait of Benjamin Henry Latrobe, an important early American architect who had long been absent from the collection. Fortune also emphasizes the importance of cultivating relationships with potential donors. For example, our portrait of Thomas Jefferson by Mather Brown had been in the Adams family since it was painted for John Adams in 1786. In 1968, its owner, Charles Francis Adams, loaned the painting to NPG for our opening exhibition. When our curatorial staff made Adams aware of the museum’s interest in owning a good life portrait of Jefferson, he bequeathed it to NPG. It became part of our collection in 1999.

Sometimes curators pursue objects in a more dramatic fashion. Ann Shumard had long been on the hunt for a photograph of Harriet Tubman. She knew that some were in existence, but they rarely came up for sale. Shumard periodically checked online sites, but her searches yielded nothing worthwhile. One morning, however, she was surprised to see a photograph of Tubman pop up on eBay, with only three days left to bid. She quickly contacted a dealer with whom she’d worked in the past, as well as some outside experts on African American objects. “Everyone agreed that this was a treasure,” says Shumard. “No one had seen a photograph like this on the market for years and years, so we decided we should ‘go to the mat’ for it.” The dealer agreed to bid on NPG’s behalf, and the night that the auction closed, Shumard sat at her computer anxiously watching the bidding. “Our dealer placed the bid at the very last second and he got the photograph!” she remembers. “It’s such a valuable addition to our collection.”

Once a work has been identified as available, curators present their acquisition proposals to the Curatorial Committee, which consists of both curators and staff historians. Wendy Wick Reaves describes this as being “the most serious vetting moment” in the acquisitions process, saying that “you’d better be prepared to defend yourself on both historical and aesthetic grounds.” The committee assesses a potential acquisition on a number of factors, including the historical significance of the sitter, the visual merit of the object, the number of other portraits of that sitter already in the collection, and whether the portrait was created from a life sitting (or from an original negative, in the case of photographic prints). Reaves explains that because NPG spends federal dollars, all potential acquisitions are vetted “very consciously and carefully. We take into consideration the visions of the museum director, the NPG Commission, the Secretary of the Smithsonian, Congress.” The committee then makes recommendations to the Portrait Gallery’s Commission, a governing board that meets twice a year and makes the final decisions on additions to the collection.
Once objects are acquired, curators also ensure that they are seen by the public in exhibitions, both permanent installations—such as “American Origins” and “America’s Presidents”—and temporary themed exhibitions. The permanent exhibitions were conceptualized by teams of curators, historians, educators, and exhibitions staff when the museum was closed for renovations (2000–2006). Temporary exhibitions come about in a variety of ways—some grow out of a curator’s particular interest research, some are proposed by and collaborated on with colleagues outside the museum, some are suggested by historians or by the museum’s director. No matter the origin, an exhibition is an opportunity to expose visitors to a new facet of NPG’s collection, to go deeper into an area of American history, or to introduce the public to new artists and ideas within the world of portraiture.

Depending on their media, curators face different challenges when it comes to acquiring and exhibiting their objects. Paper objects like prints, drawings, and photographs are extremely light-sensitive, and can’t be on view for long periods of time. Therefore, the curators in those departments have to rotate their objects more frequently and to ensure that they are housed properly when they are not on view. According to Brandon Fortune, “curators of painting and sculpture collect things that are often the best-known portraits in the collection [because] the public sees them much more often.” So her responsibilities include a special emphasis on “adding to our knowledge about these iconic pieces.”

Despite these small differences, NPG curators frequently work together across departments. They speak enthusiastically about the frequent opportunities for collaboration. “Because our staff is small, the boundaries are very porous,” says Ann Shumard. “A photography curator at a larger museum would probably never get to curate non-photographic work,” but Shumard has had the opportunity to work with artists in a variety of media. Wendy Wick Reaves points out that lately, more and more NPG exhibitions are conceived as collaborations between departments. Brandon Fortune praises the “open exchange of information and ideas among NPG curators, historians, educators, and the exhibitions staff” and notes that this atmosphere is part of the legacy of Carolyn Carr, the deputy director and chief curator who retired in October, after twenty-seven years of service to NPG. “Carolyn really encouraged the interactions, collaborations, and collegiality that are hallmarks of working at NPG.”

Smithsonian
Donald W. Reynolds Center for
American Art and Portraiture
National Portrait Gallery

Eighth and F Streets, NW, Washington, DC
Open daily except December 25,
11:30 a.m.–7:00 p.m.
Gallery Place/Chinatown Metro
npg.si.edu
Helen Keller (1880–1968)

Helen Keller by Charles Whitman, platinum print, 1904
**Helen Keller (1880–1968)**

Most famous for her personal triumph over the limitations of both blindness and deafness, Helen Keller was one of the twentieth century’s leading advocates for individuals with disabilities. Born in Alabama in 1880, she was left both blind and deaf at nineteen months as a result of what the doctors then called “brain fever” (probably scarlet fever). As a small child, she was viewed as unteachable and left to run wild, her inability to communicate prompting frequent rages. Reading of the Perkins School for the Blind’s success with another deaf-blind girl, her parents ultimately asked the school to send Helen a teacher. Twenty-year-old Anne Sullivan, herself partially blind, arrived at the Kellers’ plantation in March 1887. Sullivan’s first goal was to get Keller to understand the connection between words (which she signed into Keller’s hand using a manual alphabet) and their meaning. After a month of struggle, a breakthrough came at the water pump. By that summer, Keller had learned the entire alphabet and was writing her first letter, to her mother.

Keller’s remarkable progress did not stop there. With Sullivan as her tutor and companion, she furthered her education at various northern schools, learning to read braille and mastering the art of manual lip reading. She enrolled in Radcliffe College in 1900 and graduated cum laude in 1904, having taken the same exams as every other student and written a best-selling autobiography along the way. She then launched into a lifelong career as author and lecturer, raising awareness and money for a variety of often-controversial causes, including women’s suffrage, pacifism, the labor movement, and socialism. In 1924, she became the official spokeswoman for the newly formed American Federation for the Blind; she would serve in this role for the rest of her life. Keller’s work helped profoundly alter the public’s perceptions about the capabilities and worth of individuals with disabilities.

This image of Keller appeared as the frontispiece for her article in Century magazine in January 1905. Entitled “A Chat about the Hand,” the piece focused on how Keller used her sense of touch to understand and communicate with her world. “Paradise,” she declared in the first paragraph, “is attained by touch; for in touch all is love and intelligence.” Underscoring the importance of touch for Keller is the book written in braille on her lap.

---

**Learning to Look**

1. Describe the objects that surround Keller in this photograph. Why do you think the photographer chose to include them? What do these objects tell us about Keller?

2. This photograph appeared as an illustration to an article by Keller called “A Chat about the Hand.” What is she using her hands to do in this photograph? Based on what you know about Helen Keller, why would her hands have been so important to the way she experienced the world?

---

**Activity**

Imagine that you are the curator of an exhibition on Helen Keller’s life and legacy. First, list the various stages of her life (for example, childhood, education, career, impact) that you will need to include in order to tell her story. Then think about how you will tell that story through images and objects. What sorts of pictures and artifacts will you include? Once you have generated that list, sketch out a layout plan for the exhibition, giving consideration to the question of which parts of her story require more space and attention than others.

All images are from the National Portrait Gallery.