

Teacher Resource Guide

Portraits

The
Nelson-Atkins
Museum
of Art



Fairfield Porter, American (1907–1975). *The Mirror* (detail), 1966. Oil on canvas. Gift of the Enid and Crosby Kemper Foundation, F86-25.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

A brief stroll through the Nelson-Atkins reveals that artists have an enduring interest in making images of themselves and their fellow humans. Portraits—pictures of specific individuals—have long offered artists a way to demonstrate their technical ability, exercise visual and psychological discernment, and make a living. For the sitters being depicted, portraits can advertise their status or allow them to leave their mark on the world.

Portraits have a lot to offer teachers and students, too. They can be rewarding vehicles for exploring identity, visual symbolism, and social history. This guide is meant to support a portrait-focused school visit to the Nelson-Atkins. It can also be used for classroom study with digital reproductions, if a museum visit is not possible. Included in the guide are thumbnail images of selected portraits from the museum's collections, along with background information on each work and suggested activities and discussion prompts for exploring portraiture.

PORTRAITS & IDENTITY

Artists often seek to capture both physical likeness and personal qualities in a portrait. And, because portraits have traditionally been created on commission, the resulting images often reflect the will of the sitter as much as that of the artist. All of this means that portraits have a lot to say about identity. In addition to showing what someone looks like, a portrait can convey information about their profession, hobbies, beliefs, social status, or cultural background. Portraits can send a message about who someone is or how they want others to see them. By analyzing portraits and creating original works depicting themselves or others, students can explore the complex and multifaceted nature of identity.

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To schedule a tour:
nelson-atkins.org/educators/school-tours

SELECTED PORTRAITS FROM THE NELSON-ATKINS

Ralph Earl, *General Gabriel Christie*, ca. 1784

During the American Revolution, artist Ralph Earl fled Connecticut for England due to his Loyalist sympathies. Through his patron John Money and the artist Benjamin West, Earl soon gained numerous portrait commissions from important military personnel, including Gabriel Christie, one of Canada's largest landholders prior to being stationed in London in 1776.

Earl's commanding image of Christie derives from contemporary English portrait painting that was elegant but informal. Engaging the viewer directly, Christie stands straight-backed with his walking stick driven into the ground in a pose that reflects his gentlemanly status. The loosely brushed pastoral landscape may depict the area around Windsor Castle, where Earl spent the summer of 1784 as part of Benjamin West's large circle.



Kehinde Wiley, *Saint Adrian*, 2006

"My works quote historical sources and position young black men within the field of power." —Kehinde Wiley

An admirer of historical paintings in museums, Kehinde Wiley was struck that as a black man he was unable "to see a reflection of myself in that world." Thus, he set about to make a change. His works reimagine famous paintings, substituting a contemporary African American man or woman for the traditional white figure. Such images challenge viewers to think about the dynamics of status, race, and representation.

This painting is based on the 16th-century artist Hans Holbein the Younger's depiction of Saint Adrian (see image at right). As in Holbein's image, Wiley's figure holds a sword and anvil, taking on historical attributes of power and heroism.



Peter Hurd, *José Herrera*, 1938

Born and raised in Roswell, New Mexico, Peter Hurd painted the people and landscape of nearby San Patricio, where he maintained a cattle ranch. José Herrera was a farm hand on the Hurd ranch for more than 20 years. Hurd painted his friend many times and once called him "one of the most paintogenic people I know." Here he is shown looking directly out at the viewer against a panoramic view of the Hondo Valley. Filling up much of the composition, Herrera appears as strong as the mountain range behind him. The painter's use of tempera accentuates the effects of arid land and air integral to the scene. Hurd convinced his famous brother-in-law Andrew Wyeth also to adopt the medium.



Paul Raphael Meltsner, *Paul, Marcella and Van Gogh (No. 2)*, ca. 1937

This self-portrait by New Yorker Paul Meltsner features not only likenesses of his stately wife and charming wirehaired terrier, Van Gogh, but also a view of one of the artist's industrial scenes, which brought him considerable fame in the 1930s. Holding a hammer instead of a typical brush and palette, Meltsner expresses identification with workers like the one included in the painting behind him. The composition's smooth and volumetric forms, which appear like products of an assembly line, tie Meltsner more subtly to proletarianism, a celebration of workers' culture that attracted many American artists throughout the period. Meltsner's style translated easily and successfully into the widely accessible medium of printmaking, a pursuit that further strengthened his affiliation with 1930s proletarianism.



Unknown, *Sojourner Truth*, 1864

Sojourner Truth, who escaped slavery and gained fame as a social activist, used photographs as a tool for advancing causes that were important to her. She sold prints of her likeness and used the profits to fund speaking tours, where she spoke at rallies and meetings to win public support for abolition and women's suffrage.

In this image, Truth depicts herself as the picture of middle-class respectability, dressed in a neat, modest gown and shawl. Knitting, which was a common domestic activity for women at the time, further identifies her as an industrious and capable lady. The knitting project she holds suggests that she values and identifies with women and their labor, which was in keeping with her feminist views.

Truth's right hand, held in a central position at her waist, had been permanently disabled in an accident while she was still enslaved. Her decision to display it prominently in this photograph would have been a reminder to viewers of the horrors of slavery and of Truth's own strength in continuing to work with her hands despite her injury.



Cara Romero, *Naomi*, 2018

"With the *First American Girls* series, I wanted to create dolls and/or action figures that reflect our culture, beauty and diversity as Native American women. One that pays attention to all the details, historical accuracies, and accessories. Not just a pan-Indian look. Not what you find in a truck stop. Those dolls just never do us justice.

It definitely is a goal of mine to create thoughtful content that makes people think of preconceived notions of Native America, that challenges perceptions, that creates multiple narratives, that comes from a place of empowerment and celebration—a celebration of resistance."

—Cara Romero



Charles Wilbert White, *Goodnight Irene*, 1952

Performing for an intimate audience of one, Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter plays *Goodnight Irene*, his signature ballad. While he sings about the emotional toll of unrequited love, his companion closes her eyes and rests her head near his. Although the woman’s face and arms are solidly rendered, there is no evidence of the rest of her body. Is she simply a figment? Is she the elusive Irene conjured by Lead Belly’s longing lyrics: “Goodnight Irene, goodnight Irene, I’ll get you in my dreams?”

Charles Wilbert White created this portrait three years after the legendary musician’s death. He painted Lead Belly in his prime playing a popular late-1800s folk song that he was the first to record in 1933. In addition to celebrating an icon of American music, *Goodnight Irene* is a key example of White’s socially conscious art. White aimed to affirm the humanity and beauty of African Americans throughout his career. *Goodnight Irene* highlights the artist’s ability to invest his subjects with steadfast dignity and universal resonance.



Wendy Red Star, *Fall* from *Four Seasons Series*, 2006

“When I made *Four Seasons*, it was based on this feeling of isolation and really missing my home community on the reservation. I knew in a very messed-up way where I could find comfort and that was at the natural history museum. I had this gut feeling that they probably had some Crow objects there.

I noticed when people were looking at Native objects that they were sort of spoon-fed to believe that Native people don’t exist anymore, just like the Brontosaurus bones in the gallery nearby. When I was standing in that gallery, I was thinking how strange this all was—being Crow and standing next to those Crow moccasins, when I have my entire outfit in a closet a few miles away that could easily be in one of these glass cases.” —Wendy Red Star



CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES / BEFORE A MUSEUM VISIT

Get Familiar with Portraits

To familiarize students with the concept of portraiture and its relationship to identity, view the following two videos as a class:

What is a Portrait? from the Scottish National Portrait Gallery (youtu.be/s6KHng25_D0)

Defining Portraiture: How Are Portraits Both Fact and Fiction? from Smithsonian Education (youtu.be/6RvIU5konxU)

Discuss as a class:

In the first video, one of the speakers suggests that a portrait is “a representation of identity fixed in time.” What do you think that means? Do you agree?

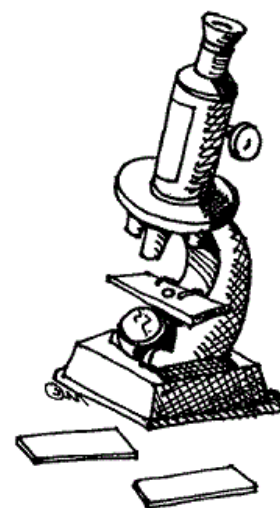
In the second video, the speaker suggests that all portraits have an element of fiction. Why might that be? Would you want someone to make a completely “honest” portrait of you? Why or why not?

Learn to “Read” a Portrait

By paying attention to the details an artist includes in a portrait, we can often learn a lot about the sitter. Introduce students to the process of “reading” a portrait using the acronym S.C.O.P.E.

Setting	The location or surroundings the sitter is shown in
Clothing	What the sitter is wearing
Objects	Any objects shown around the sitter
Pose	The position of the sitter’s body
Expression	The emotion or attitude conveyed on the sitter’s face

Display a reproduction of one of the portraits in this guide and lead students in examining each of the S.C.O.P.E. details. What might those elements say about the person shown in the portrait?



Consider Identity

Portraits can reveal important aspects of a sitter’s identity. But, the complex nature of identity means no single image can capture every facet of who someone is. Get students thinking about identity with a brainstorming activity:

Give each student 20 Post-it notes (or have them cut a sheet of paper into 20 pieces) and ask them to write a different word that describes who they are on each one.

Once each student has 20 words, have them work individually, in small groups, or as a class to group those words into categories (i.e. age, gender, race, interests, personality, etc.). Discuss: How many categories did you identify? Which category do you feel impacts your identity the most?

Next, explain that all of us have multiple layers to our identities:

- How we see ourselves;
- How others see us;
- How we *want* others to see us.

Instruct students to sort their 20 words into three columns, based on which layer of their identity each word describes. If a word applies to multiple layers, it can go in between columns. Discuss as a class: If someone made a portrait of you, which column would you want them to rely on for inspiration?

Discover Portrait Artists

Several of the artists whose works are featured in this guide use portraits as a way to comment on identity and the social issues related to it. Kehinde Wiley, Cara Romero, and Wendy Red Star present their sitters in ways that challenge or play with traditional portraiture conventions and preconceived notions of identity. Invite students to use web-based sources to research these three contemporary artists, whose work they can see during a visit to the Nelson-Atkins.

IN-GALLERY ACTIVITIES

Get to Know a Portrait

Challenge each student to find one of the portraits featured in this guide during their museum visit, or to choose another portrait that intrigues them. Instruct students to spend several minutes observing their chosen portrait using the S.C.O.P.E. process as a guide. Then, have them free write about their portrait for 10-15 minutes to record their thoughts. Topics to address in their free writing could include:

- Details in the portrait that might help us understand the sitter’s identity
- Any interpretations about the sitter’s identity you can draw based on those details
- What drew you to this portrait
- Any connections you see between the sitter and yourself
- Questions you would like to ask the sitter or the artist who created this portrait

Compare Portraits

Have students practice their analytical skills by comparing and contrasting two portraits. Choose one of the portrait pairs below and direct students to view each work in the pair:

Saint Adrian by Kehinde Wiley and *General Gabriel Christie* by Ralph Earl

Discuss: How are these portraits similar to one another? How are they different? What message does each one send about the sitter? How does each one convey a sense of strength or power?

Paul, Marcella and Van Gogh (No. 2) by Paul Meltsner and *Goodnight Irene* by Charles Wilbert White

Discuss: Both of these portraits depict artists—one features a painter, and the other a musician. What clues indicate each sitter is an artist? Which portrait puts more emphasis on the sitter’s identity as an artist? What other aspects of each sitter’s identity are visible in these portraits?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES / AFTER A MUSEUM VISIT

Compare Portrait and Text

The portrait of Sojourner Truth included in this guide provides one window into the life of this remarkable individual. Written texts can also offer insight into who Truth was. After giving students a chance to analyze the photograph of Truth, have them read the written accounts of her famous “Ain’t I a Woman” speech, delivered in 1851 (view online at [tolerance.org/classroom-resources/texts/aint-i-a-woman](https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/texts/aint-i-a-woman)).

Discuss: What new information about Truth’s identity can we learn from this text? How does it support or differ from what we surmised about her based on her portrait?

Create a Self-Portrait

Using the identity words students brainstormed before their museum visit, students can trace their faces onto overlapping sheets of acetate and use acrylic paint pens to fill in features and details that represent the different layers of their identities. Students can then write poems or short personal narratives to accompany their portraits.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Just Like Me: Stories and Self-Portraits by Fourteen Artists Edited by Harriet Rohmer

A great introduction to portraiture and identity for younger students, this book features self-portraits and first-person biographical texts from fourteen different artists. Available in the ERC.

Portraiture Shearer West

This historical overview of portraiture from the ancient world to today provides a thorough, heavily illustrated introduction to the genre. Available in the ERC.

Beyond the Face: New Perspectives on Portraiture Edited by Wendy Wick Reaves

This book, published by the National Portrait Gallery, comprises scholarly essays that explore different aspects of portraiture from early caricatures through the introduction of photography and up to the selfies of the 21st century. Available in the ERC.

Looking at Portraits Curriculum The J. Paul Getty Museum

getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom_resources/curricula/portraits

Find portrait-centered lesson plans, images, and discussion questions for various grade levels in this online curriculum, which emphasizes connections to English Language Arts.

“Reading Portraiture” Guide for Educators National Portrait Gallery

npg.si.edu/teachers/classroom-resources

This site offers downloadable resource guides, student worksheets, and lesson plans that can be adapted to work with any portrait.

Google Arts & Culture Topic: Portrait artsandculture.google.com/entity/m01dv4h

View a rich selection of portraits from museums around the world.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Activities suggested in this guide may address the following learning standards:

Visual Arts Standards (KS)

- Anchor Standard 6: Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.
- Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.
- Anchor Standard 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
- Anchor Standard 10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

Visual Art Standards (MO)

- Communicate ideas about subject matter and themes in artworks created for various purposes.
- Analyze and evaluate art using art vocabulary.
- Explain the connections between Visual Art and Communication Arts, Math, Science or Social Studies.

English Language Arts Standards (KS)

- Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

English Language Arts Standards (MO)

- Draw conclusions, infer, and analyze by citing textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

Social, Emotional, and Character Development Standards (KS)

- Identify and assess personal qualities and external supports.

Personal and Social Development Standards (MO)

- Understanding self as an individual and as a member of diverse local and global communities.

WORDS TO KNOW

Sitter	A person who poses for a portrait.
Commission	The act of requesting an artist to produce a work of art for pay.
Setting	In a portrait, the location or environment in which the sitter is shown.
Expression	A look on someone's face that can suggest emotion or attitude.
Conventions	Widely accepted ways of representing forms and ideas in art.
Portrait	A representation of a person. A portrait typically attempts to capture a particular individual's likeness or personal qualities.
Self-portrait	A portrait of an artist made by that same artist.
Identity	Who a person is, including the qualities, conditions, beliefs and experiences that set them apart from others.

Image credits

Page 2: Ralph Earl, American (1751–1801). *General Gabriel Christie*, ca. 1784. Oil on canvas. Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 33-169. Kehinde Wiley, American (b. 1977). *Saint Adrian*, 2006. Oil on canvas. Promised gift of John and Sharon Hoffman, 175.2016. Hans Holbein the Younger, German (1497–1543). *St. Adrian*, ca. 1520–1522. Pen and ink with gray wash and white heightening on paper. Louvre Museum. Peter Hurd, American (1904–1984). *José Herrera*, 1938. Tempera on panel. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert B. Fizzell through the Friends of Art, 39-35. Page 3: Paul Raphael Meltsner, American (1905–1966). *Paul, Marcella and Van Gogh (No. 2)*, ca. 1937. Oil on canvas. Gift of Oscar Serlin, 40-2/2. Unknown. *Sojourner Truth*, 1864. Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2005.37.105. Cara Romero, North American Indian, Chemehuevi (b. 1977). *Naomi*, 2018. Inkjet print on Legacy Platine paper. Gift of Steven and Keely Rosenberg, 2018.27. Page 4: Charles Wilbert White, American (1918–1979). *Goodnight Irene*, 1952. Oil on canvas. Purchase: acquired through a lead gift provided by Sarah and Landon Rowland through The Ever Glades Fund; major support provided by Lee Lyon, in memory of Joanne Lyon; Sprint; James and Elizabeth Tinsman; Neil D. Karbank; and The Sosland Family; Generous support provided by John and Joanne Bluford; The Stanley H. Durwood Foundation; Gregory M. Glore; Maurice Watson; Anne and Cliff Gall; Dr. Sere and Mrs. Maryjane Myers and Family; Gary and Debby Ballard; Dr. Loretta M. Britton; Catherine L. Futter, in memory of Mathew and Erna Futter; Jean and Moulton Green, Jr., in honor of Rose Bryant; Dr. Willie and Ms. Sandra A. J. Lawrence; Randall and Helen Ferguson; Dr. Valerie E. Chow and Judge Jon R. Gray (Ret.); Gwendolyn J. Cooke, Ph.D.; Dwayne and Freida Crompton; Leodis and N. June Davis; Kimberly C. Young; Tom and Karenbeth Zacharias; Jim Baggett and Marguerite Ermeling; Rose Bryant; Tasha and Julián Zugazagoitia; Antonia Boström and Dean Baker; Sarah Beeks Higdon; Kathleen and Kevin Collison; Katelyn Crawford and John Kupstas; Kimberly Hinkle and Jason Menefee; Stephanie and Brett Knappe; Jan and Michael Schall; and Michele Valentine, in memory of Marcella Hillerman, 2014.28. Wendy Red Star, North American Indian, Crow (b. 1981). *Fall*, 2006. Archival pigment print on Sunset fiber rag mounted on dibond. Purchase: the A. Keith Brodtkin Fund for the Acquisition of Contemporary American Indian Art, 2015.33.1.



EDUCATOR RESOURCE CENTER

The ERC at the Nelson-Atkins can help you expand your pre- and post-visit activities to connect students' museum experience with your classroom curriculum.

The ERC offers:

- Curriculum consultations
- Circulating resources
- Professional development workshops

ERC Hours: Thursdays and Fridays, 3—7 pm / Saturdays, 10 am—2 pm / And by appointment

Visit nelson-atkins.org/educators/resources for info.