

Portrait I

Overview: Students will practice identifying essential elements.

Goals: This lesson will

Support concepts & skills: identifying main idea, generating essential questions, use various sources to acquire information about a topic.

Fulfill Learning Standards: ELA 9, 19, 26; History and Social Sciences 16, 5.3, 7.3, 8.4; Visual Art 2, 5.1, 6, 8.

Practice: analysis, write with a clear focus, use details in writing,

Familiarize students with: portraiture, the idea of essential elements, and individual uniqueness.



*Mrs. Charles McEvers
(Mary Verplanck)*
John Singleton Copley

Objectives for Students: Students will

Be able to: observe closely to discover unique details; decode a source (painting, story) to discover essential elements.

Understand: that portraits (descriptions, biographies) can both communicate accurate information about a person, or can misrepresent them.

Key Questions (to be answered by students):

1. What is it that makes this thing unique? What qualities make a person unique?
2. In what ways do artists reveal information about a person in a portrait?
3. What details can I include in a description that will communicate the essential elements of a person?

Materials Needed: Potatoes, Potato Activity Instructions sheet, Portrait worksheet

Museum Objects: Any portrait will work, but the following are especially recommended:

- Object shown is *Mrs. Charles McEvers (Mary Verplanck)* by John Singleton Copley, oil on canvas, 1771, Director's Fund Purchase in honor of the extraordinary service of Ronald M. Ansin, Museum Trustee 1971-2003, voted by his fellow trustees December 2003 (2003.7)
- *Mrs. Sarah Clayton* by Joseph Wright of Derby, oil on canvas, 1769(?) (1953.1)

Pre-Museum Visit – The Potato Activity; it will allow students to focus on the idea that any thing is unique, and has identifying characteristics. Reflection: “Could you draw or paint a portrait of your potato? What characteristics would you include? How would a picture of a potato be different from a PORTRAIT of your potato? How could you make sure that people knew that you were painting a portrait of YOUR potato and not just any potato?” (See notes below for Potato Activity Instructions.)

Unique Person Activity: Set up pairs of students to work together. Ask the partners to identify together the special things about each other – details about their appearance, their personality, what they like to do, what they are good at, the kind of mood they are often in, what they tend to do or how they tend to act. You may have to do one in front of the group so that they will understand, and to model steering away from the negative. Then ask them: “If you were going to

draw a portrait of your partner what details would it be important to include so that we would learn about who they are?"

At the Museum – Visit the portrait gallery, and look at the portraits there. Pick one portrait to focus on as a group, for example, the Copley portrait of Mrs. Charles McEvers or the Wright portrait of Mrs. Sarah Clayton. Ask the students a series of questions to focus them on the painting (See Questions listed after Potato Activity Instructions).

Begin to focus them on the idea of a portrait -- something that shows the essential elements of a unique individual. "Do you think this is what she really looked like? Why do you think that? What essential elements did the artist include to show us that he was painting a portrait of Mrs. McEvers and not just a picture of a woman? We know what she looks like, because the artist has included enough detail so that we might even recognize her on the street if we saw her. But do we know anything about her beyond her appearance? What are the clues in the portrait that may be telling us something about her besides what she looks like? What do you think her personality was? Why do you say that? What do you think she was interested in? Why do you think that?" (We see not only her likeness, but also the painter has made choices about her clothing, the setting, the objects in the painting, even the colors or textures may say something about her.) (See Notes below for questions to use.)

The next activity can be done by individuals, pairs, small groups or the whole group together. Choose another painting in this room, and use the Portrait worksheet to see what you can tell about these individuals from the portraits of them. Choose from works of art by Copley, Webster, Wright, Sargeant, Chandler, Vuillard, Bellows, or Norcross.

Ask a Museum Educator to meet with your class and talk about who these people were and what clues are in the paintings. The Vuillard painting is an interesting example, because we do not get a very strong or explicit likeness of his mother, but we do get lots of clues about who she is. The Chandler painting, however, shows a likeness in the faces, but generic bodies and a setting that probably has little to do with these specific children.

The Norcross painting *My Studio* is an interesting double portrait. It is a portrait of her father, but it is also in some ways a portrait of herself, because the objects in her studio can tell you something about who she is. What do the objects tell you about Eleanor?

Post-Museum Visit – Part Two of the Portrait Worksheet – Students will write a short paragraph that is a character description of the person in the portrait.

Supportive Material: Importance of the Individual: Uniqueness (Potato Activity Instructions) sheet, Portrait worksheet

Documentation and Assessment Options: Pre- and post-test: What is a portrait? If any of the activities are repeated, you could count the number and significance of the details the students were able to identify in each successive activity.

Other Works of Art in the Museum that could be used with this lesson:

It would also be interesting to look at the Roman copy of a Greek portrait head depicting Sophocles (on loan from the Harvard Art Museums), and ask the Museum Educator to talk about the evolution from Greek to Roman art, contrasting an ideal beauty with a focus more on the individual likeness. Also, the Pre-Columbian sculpture of the man with the scar is another interesting example of a portrait of an actual person. Sometimes painters were hired to make the subject seem heroic or otherwise change or distort the portrait. Ask a Museum Educator to discuss this with the students.

Links to Other Curriculum:

ELA: Literature – Students should begin to be able to identify the essential elements of characters in fiction. They could construct “word portraits” of a character of their choosing in a book you are reading.

History: Biographies are essentially portraits of people. Focus on biographies of people linked to historical period or culture being studied. It would be interesting to discuss what is included and what is left out of biographies, and how the writer’s bias can distort the portrait. They may be able to identify instances in contemporary life that distort a person’s “portrait” (such as political ads or political cartoons, satire, commercials).

Art: Create self-portraits or portraits of their partner, and make sure to include details that reveal who they are. Help the students understand that choices about color, shape, line, composition, and texture can communicate something about the person. The choice of setting, and objects in the setting can also say something about the person. Photographic portraits, distorted or abstract portraits.

Author of the lesson: Anne Rhodes

IMPORTANCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL: UNIQUENESS

Instructions for Potato Activity

1. Pick one potato out of the pile.
2. Examine your potato very carefully, noticing every distinguishing characteristic.
(Do not write anything down.)
3. Put your potato back in the pile.
4. After someone mixes them all up, find your potato.
5. If you locate it, take it with you and find a partner.
If you can't find it even after the pile has been reduced, find a partner.
6. Without looking at your potato again, (if you found it), tell your partner what the distinguishing features of your potato are. If you haven't found it yet, go back to the pile and see if you can find it now.
7. Discuss with the group your strategy to find your potato and how you recognized it.

Questions to Use for Discussing a Portrait

(Use any or all to get students engaged with the painting.)

What do you notice first about this? Why do you think you noticed that?

What kind of a person do you think she is? What do you see in the painting that makes you say that?

What part of the painting is most interesting to you, and why?

What other things do you notice in the painting besides the woman? Do you think those things were chosen on purpose? Why do you think each was included?

Do you think this is what she really looked like? Why do you think that?

What essential elements did the artist include to show us that he was painting a portrait of Sarah Clayton and not just a picture of a woman?

Portrait Worksheet

You may find some clues about this unique person that the artist has included in the painting. Clues about what this person looks like, and also clues about something more about them, maybe something about their personality, their likes or dislikes, even their fears, or something about what they do, where they live, or how they are feeling. Look carefully at the portrait, and notice as many clues as you can. Use the back of this page if you need to. Get as many clues as you can so that you can write about this person when you get back to the classroom. Write the clues you notice here:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

Based on these clues you will write a short paragraph describing this person, not what they look like (brown hair, blue eyes, etc.) but who they are and what is unique about them.