

“Americans Now”: You be the Critic

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 intent and content of an art exhibition and write a formal review that summarizes their analysis.

Portraits:

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>

Lesson Procedures: Writing an Exhibition Review

Students will use the portraits and the introductory label information (in Background Information above) to write a review of the “Americans Now” exhibition.

1. Divide students into groups and give each group time to explore the exhibition, either in person or on the NPG website <http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/americansnow/index.html>
2. Once they have spent time exploring the exhibition, have each group write a review of the show, using the following guidelines:
 - Local context: start your review with name of exhibition, name of artist(s) represented, name of curator (if known), location of exhibition.
 - Readings, interpretations of the exhibition: what is the installation “about?”
 - Information about the artists represented.
 - Observations, assessments, critiques of the works on view. *Choose a minimum of three portraits to highlight in your review as you browse the exhibition.*
 - Important references in the works (What is the back story on the images you have chosen? The portrait’s back story is often found in the label text.)
 - Assessing the curatorial objectives of the show (see the introductory information above and on the website to determine the curatorial objectives.).
 - Critiquing the success of the curatorial practice. In your opinion, has the National Portrait Gallery created an exhibition that meets its own stated objectives?

Consider these ten rules as you write your review:

1. Ask yourself, “What does the reader want to know?”
2. Decide on the overall point you want to get across to the reader.
3. Be ruthless when editing—don’t be precious about your “art.”
4. Don’t write about yourself; it’s the exhibition you are reviewing.
5. Ask yourself, “What makes my review unique?”
6. You don’t always need to be a smart aleck—sometimes it’s better to write as if you’re chatting to your friends.
7. Compare to other similar products (i.e., other exhibitions)—but not too much!
8. Strong, quotable sentences are great, but let them come naturally.
9. Be specific!
10. Don’t be afraid to state the obvious.

(From <http://jonathandeamer.com/2007/06/12/how-to-write-great-reviews/>)

3. Have students share their reviews and discuss similarities and differences between them.

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.