Face to Face: Portraits from the Smith College Museum of Art

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How to Use this Packet

We hope that this packet of information will be useful for classroom lessons about portraits, or to help teachers prepare to lead their students on field trips to the Museum to look at portraits. The packet includes a list of images and supplementary information on selected portraits in SCMA’s permanent collection, as well as suggestions of ways to present the artworks in the classroom before and after your visit. We encourage teachers to be creative in adapting discussion questions and exercises to your students’ needs and abilities.

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For Further Assistance

Please note that the works of art at SCMA rotate somewhat frequently—contact us first at (413) 585-2781 or muse-duc@smith.edu to set up your visit and/or check to see which of these portraits are currently on view.

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Background Information about Selected SCMA Portraits

A portrait is a painting, sculpture, or photograph of a particular person. All pictures of people are not necessarily portraits. Portraits are made by an artist to commemorate a specific person at a specific time in their life. While many portraits strive to resemble the person they represent, some portraits attempt to abstractly capture the spirit or feeling of a particular person.

Below, you will find a few examples of portraits from the Smith College Museum of Art. These paintings will show you a few of the ways people have used portraits throughout history.

Mrs. Nesbitt as Circe

Mary Nesbitt was a woman surrounded by mystery and scandal in eighteenth-century England. Before this portrait was painted in 1781, Mrs. Nesbitt had already been widowed and had been the mistress of Augustus John Harvey, the third earl of Bristol and close advisor to King George III. Harvey died in 1779, leaving her most of his estate, including a house in Norwood. She was known for her charm, beauty, and intelligence. By the end of the eighteenth-century, she was involved in foreign policy and active in diplomatic circles in England. It was also rumored that Mrs. Nesbitt dressed as a man to help aristocrats escape during the French Revolution.

This portrait of Mrs. Nesbitt captures the museum goer’s attention with her ambiguous expression and exotic surroundings. The figure is seated in a lush wood with a leopard, monkey, and domestic cat. She wears a flowing white gown that falls off her ivory shoulders. Mrs. Nesbitt looks out at the viewer, her face in three-quarter profile. Her expression is ambiguous; the looker is not sure whether she is sad or smirking, innocent or knowing.

Sir Joshua Reynolds based his portraits on the works of the Old Masters and antique sculpture. He hoped to invoke classical values and to enhance the dignity of his sitters. Reynolds choose to portray Mrs. Nesbitt as Circe, the beautiful Greek sorceress who seduced Odysseus and turned men into captive animals. At her side is a golden chalice, representing the magic potion that transformed men to beasts which Circe offered visitors to her island. In her hand is the proverbial “magic wand.” Mrs. Nesbitt is surrounded by docile animals which refers to her enchanting power over men.

A prominent portraitist of his day, Sir Joshua Reynolds had an extensive workshop of apprentice painters and artists who assisted in the completion of his paintings. Reynolds was so much in demand that for portraits such as this, he himself only painted the face and hands. The rest was done according to his orders by assistants.
The Honorable John Erving

When this portrait was painted, on the eve of the American Revolution, both the artist and the sitter had become important men in Boston society. John Erving had run away from home in England at the age of eleven and became one of Boston’s wealthiest merchants and ship owners. He commissioned John Singleton Copley, a prominent American portrait artist, to paint his portrait.

The painting shows Erving seated at a small writing desk. His figure takes up the majority of the canvas. Erving looks at the viewer with a serious expression. However, Erving’s pose is slightly more casual as though the viewer had just interrupted him during a relaxed moment in his study.

Erving is wearing purple silk clothing, demonstrating his wealth. His contemporaries would also have been able to discern his conservative political views. While Erving’s fellow Bostonians were rebelling from England by wearing homespun cloth made in the colonies, Erving consciously chooses to have himself portrayed in a more traditional wig and imported European fabric.

Copley further emphasizes his position by placing a quill and books next to him on the desk. This lets the viewer know that Erving was a man of intellect. Erving would have hoped that by having an artist with a reputation for painting great men paint his portrait, he would be remembered as a leader in Boston society.

Portrait of René de Gas

Edgar Degas is widely known for his paintings and sculptures of graceful dancers. However, he frequently painted and sketched members of his own family. Degas was only twenty years old when he executed this portrait of his ten year old brother in his school uniform. The viewer can see that Degas was already an accomplished painter. With careful modelling, he conveys to the viewer the fleshy softness of his brother’s cherubic face. In contrast to his innocent, childlike expression is René’s stiff pose. He stands up straight with one hand on the table and another in his pocket. Already he seems to take the posture of the successful merchant he would become as an adult. On the table are schoolbooks and an inkwell. Degas uses traditional symbols, similar to Copley, to demonstrate his subject’s education and intelligence.

Although on first glance this canvas appears to be a traditional portrait, upon closer inspection the viewer will notice a unique detail. Degas has chosen to reveal his backdrop. The vertical left and right of the canvas reveal an abstract space, possibly a living room or sitting area, where Degas set up his easel. By including this detail, Degas forces the viewer to think not only about the sitter, but about the process of painting as well.
Although Florine Stettheimer trained in Europe to become a painter, her family fortune allowed Stettheimer the luxury to never become a “working artist.” Unlike Copley or Reynolds, Stettheimer never needed to paint to earn a living. This financial advantage allowed her the artistic independence to only paint what she wanted. Stettheimer and her sisters became friends with many of the great artists and thinkers of their time, including Alfred Stieglitz and Marcel Duchamp. Stettheimer commemorated these friendships with portraits. She painted them as mini-biographies and used her theatrical eye to construct unconventional portraits.

In the Portrait of Henry McBride, Art Critic, Stettheimer presents her friend several times on the same canvas. Henry McBride first appears to the viewer as the large seated figure in the center of the canvas. He is dapperly dressed in a tailored black jacket and crisp white pants. He is peering through his red reading glasses at the scores of a recent tennis match. McBride appears again in the lower right of the painting. He is seen in miniature, painting a fence that encircles him. This is a reference to a personal anecdote that McBride shared with Stettheimer about his experience painting a seemingly-never ending fence on his property.

McBride is shown a third time in the lower left corner of the painting, in the same outfit, atop a high chair judging a tennis match. This refers to one of McBride’s and Stettheimer’s shared summer pursuits. It is also a reference to McBride’s position as a prominent art critic who “judged” and “kept score” of the early twentieth century art world. The top half of the canvas is an homage to McBride’s favorite artists. On the right, the viewer finds a storm tossed sea, a swinging bell, and a windblown palm tree. These are all references to Winslow Homer. Surrounding McBride’s head are geometric cathedrals referring to the work of the American painter John Marin. On the edge of the tennis court is Stettheimer’s rendition of Gustave LaChaise’s nude sculpture Standing Woman (Elevation). The left edge of the canvas includes a bouquet of flowers and a lace curtain. These last two items were Stettheimer’s crafty way of including herself among the famous art critic’s favorite painters.

Stettheimer never intended for her work, particularly her portraits, to be seen by a museum audience. She had ordered her sister, Ettie, to burn all of her work upon her death. However, Ettie donated her sister’s canvases across the country. The Portrait of Henry McBride, Art Critic remains as an example of Stettheimer’s whimsical style and her close relationship with the sitter.
My Brother

John Wilson was born to immigrant parents in a suburb of Boston. Thanks to his neighborhood Boys Club, Wilson's artistic talent was nurtured, and he won a scholarship to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 1939. He was one of the few African-Americans in his class.

*My Brother* was painted in 1942 when John Wilson was a young art student at SMFA. Wilson reflected later:

“There were no Black images symbolizing universal truth and beauty in any art history books and museum collections that I studied at that time. I vaguely wanted to create a form that would make my people and their environment visible.”

*My Brother* is Wilson's effort to include more images from his particular life experience in the art world.

The oil on panel work is small in size, but the close-up on Wilson's younger brother Frederick's face has a strong impact on the viewer. His young face is painted with an attention to detail. The fourteen-year-old's flesh seems almost real because of Wilson's skillful handling of the paint. In contrast, the background is sketchy. There is a patchwork of paint and lightly sketched outlines of a lamp-post and city building. Despite the lack of detail, the viewer recognizes the urban environment and gains a sense of Frederick's background.

When the painting was first acquired by SCMA, a Smith professor wrote for the museum bulletin that “the artist succeeded in recording the riddle of youth - not solving, just recording.” Frederick's serious expression, like that of René de Gas, does indeed express the thoughts and concerns of his generation. Degas' portrait of his brother, through its enclosed background and careful detail of ink pot and pen shows a family's preparation for the subject's future success and comfort. By contrast, Wilson's more open, impressionist background suggests the conflicts and hopes of black youth in pre-Civil Rights America.

It is also interesting to note that the title of the painting is not *Frederick Wilson*. Instead Wilson chose to call the painting *My Brother*, which allows the viewer, no matter their race or actual relation to Frederick, to see him as an intimate member of a family.
Downloadable images

Below is a small sampling of portraits that are illustrated in this Teacher Pack and are typically on view at SCMA. We encourage you to present some of these images to your class before you come to the Museum, try our suggested hands-on activities, or create your own! These images can be downloaded from the K12 Teacher Center section of SCMA's website.

Sir Joshua Reynolds
*Mrs. Nesbitt as Circe, 1781*
Oil on canvas
Smith College Museum of Art, 1958:4
Gift of Dwight W. Morrow, Jr., Anne Morrow Lindbergh (Class of 1928), and Constance Morrow Morgan (Class of 1935)
~Cover page (in detail) and page 3

John Singleton Copley
*The Honorable John Erving, c.1774*
Oil on canvas
Smith College Museum of Art, 1975:52-1
Bequest of Alice Rutherford Erving (‘29)
~Page 4

Edgar Degas
*René de Gas, 1855*
Oil on canvas
Smith College Museum of Art, 1935:12
Purchased with the Drayton Hillyer Fund
~Page 4

Florine Stettheimer
*Henry McBride, Art Critic, 1922*
Oil on canvas
Smith College Museum of Art, 1951:198
Gift of Ettie Stettheimer
~Page 5 (image and details)

John Wilson
*My Brother, 1942*
Oil on panel
Smith College Museum of Art, 1943:4-1
Purchased
~Cover page and page 6
Before Your Visit: Discussion
Get students ready to talk about art!

Lesson Goal/Concept: Introduce your trip to the Museum and give students an opportunity to practice looking closely at a work of art.

Overall Objective: Students will participate in a teacher-led inquiry-based discussion (using digital images) so that they can explore what they will gain from a visit to the Museum.

Massachusetts Curriculum Framework Connection: ELA Language Strand, Standard 1, Discussion: Students will use agreed upon rules for formal and informal discussions in small and large groups. ELA Language Strand, Standard 2, Questioning, Listening, and Contributing: Students will pose questions, listen to the ideas of others, and contribute their own information or ideas in group discussions or interviews in order to acquire new knowledge.

Supplies needed:
~Two or three digital images of portraits (from SCMA’s collection or otherwise; perhaps well-known portrait images such as one of George Washington or the Mona Lisa will help warm students up)
~a way to project or reproduce those images so that all students can look at them together, one image at a time

Directions:

1. Begin the discussion without the images, and ask your students some of the following questions:
   ~Have you ever been to a museum before? Tell me about your visit.
   ~What kinds of things do you expect to see at the Museum?
   ~What kinds of things do you think you’ll be thinking about as you walk through the Museum?
   ~What kinds of words do you think you might hear used when talking about art?
   ~How might the feelings you have now about art change by the end of our visit?
   ~What do you want to learn from our visit?
   ~As a class, what do you think some of our goals for going to the museum should be?
   ~What can we do to make sure we meet these goals?
   ~Are there any questions you might want to ask our guides about the Museum?

2. Introduce one of the portraits by projecting or reproducing it large enough for all students to see at one time. You don’t necessarily need to know any detailed background information about the artwork before you show it to your students--you can try some of the following questions and let students know that you’ll just be exploring ideas together.
   ~What seems to be going on in this artwork? What do you see that makes you say that?
   ~What do you want to know about this artwork? How could we find out more information?
   ~Have you ever had your portrait made? How was it made? Who did you give it to?
   ~Do you think this person asked to have their portrait painted?
   ~What was their relationship to the artist? Do you think they had met before?
   ~What do you think this person was like in real life? What would they be like if you met them?
   ~How does this artwork make you feel? Describe what might make you feel that way.
   ~What can we guess about the artist from looking at this artwork? Why do you think the artist chose to create an artwork like this?
Before Your Visit: Activity
Creative Journal Entries

Lesson Goal/Concept: Encourage students to look closely at portraits and further develop their creative writing skills.

Overall Objective: Using works of art as prompts, students will write from the perspective of the person portrayed in the picture.

Massachusetts Curriculum Framework Connections: ELA Composition Strand, Standard 19: Writing: Students will write with a clear focus, coherent organization, and sufficient detail.

Supplies needed:
› Choose three digital images of portraits
› writing utensils
› lined paper for writing

Directions:

1. Choose 3 digital images available for download on the SCMA K-12 Teacher Center website. Your class may see some of these portraits during their visit to the Smith College Museum of Art. Ask students to choose one portrait to write about.

2. Assign students to write an imaginary journal entry for the person portrayed in the picture—the sitter. Students should think about and respond to the following questions in their writing, using the first person (pretending to be the sitter):

~Whom do you imagine this person to be? What is his/her name? What does he or she do?
How old do you think s/he was when s/he had the portrait painted?
~Why do you think s/he had his/her portrait made?
~What was the sitter’s relationship to the artist? Do you think they had met before the painting was made? What do you see in the picture that makes you say that?
~What was it like sitting for the artist? Where did they go? How long did it take? How did it feel in the position s/he was posing in?
~Who chose the clothes the sitter was painted in? Why?
~Did the sitter like the portrait once it was finished? What does s/he like or not like about it?
~What did the sitter do with the portrait when it was finished? Did s/he keep it, or give it to someone else? Whom did s/he give it to and why?

3. When the students have completed their writing assignments, ask for volunteers to share some of what they wrote with the rest of the class.
Lesson Goal/Concept: To consider how artists depict relationships and use composition to tell a story.

Overall Objective: Students will use Florine Stettheimer’s *Portrait of Henry McBride, Art Critic* as a model for making portraits of friends/classmates.

Massachusetts Curriculum Framework Connection: Visual Arts Strand, PreK-12 Standard 5, Critical Response: Students will describe and analyze their own work and the work of others using appropriate visual arts vocabulary.

Supplies Needed:
› white paper, construction paper, magazine clippings
› scissors
› drawing utensils
› glue sticks or Elmer’s glue
› reproduction of Florine Stettheimer’s *Portrait of Henry McBride, Art Critic*

Directions:

1. Review Florine Stettheimer’s *Portrait of Henry McBride, Art Critic*. Ask the students to talk about what they remember about this picture in the Museum.

   ~What do remember about seeing this picture? What did you first notice?
   ~What do you think Henry McBride would be like if they met him?
   ~What do you think the artist wants us to know about him, and how does she show us that?

2. Florine Stettheimer included personal stories in her picture of Henry McBride because she knew him well. Assign students to create a portrait of a classmate. One a sheet of paper, ask them to write about the following:

   ~Whom would you want to make a portrait of? Choose one person. This is your “sitter.”
   ~What are some of that person’s favorite things? Make a list.
   ~What is that person’s favorite thing to do?
   ~What is one of your favorite stories about this person?

3. Take a piece of paper and divide it in half horizontally. Divide the lower half into two sections by drawing a line. In the top half of the paper, draw or paste magazine clippings of your sitter’s favorite things. In the lower sections, on the left—draw him/her doing a favorite activity, on the right draw or paste on magazine clippings to portray a story s/he told you.

6. Without writing names on them, display all the portraits to the class. See if classmates can guess who is portrayed in the pictures.
After Your Visit: Activity 2
Portrait Poetry

Lesson Goal: To put words to an image.

Overall Objective: To have students process the portrait-making activity by making a simplified cinquain about their Stettheimer portraits.

Massachusetts Curriculum Framework Connection: ELA Composition Strand, Standard 22, Standard English Conventions: Students will use knowledge of standard English conventions in their writing, revising, and editing.

Supplies needed:
~Cinquain Graphic Organizers (one per student; see following page)
~The portraits the students made in the prior activity; or images of other portraits
~Writing utensils

Directions:

1. Process the art-making activity by asking students to write a simplified cinquain about either the portraits they made, or about different images of portraits (perhaps images of presidents or other famous portraits), to keep them thinking about how messages about a person can be conveyed with both words or images. A cinquain is a five-line poem or stanza that follows a specific pattern and describes a person, place, or thing. An example of a cinquain about John Wilson’s My Brother (page 6) would be:

   My Brother

   Frederick
   Strong, dedicated
   Telling, concentrating, symbolizing
   What will your future bring
   Hopeful

2. Print out the graphic organizers on the following page for students to write on. Display the cinquains alongside the visual portrait collages.
A **cinquain** (pronounced “sink-wain”) is a five-line poem that describes a person, place or thing. Use this organizer to write your own cinquain inspired by the portrait you made in class.

**A NOUN**
One word that tells what your poem is about (its subject).

**2 ADJECTIVES**
Two words that describe your subject.

**3 VERBS**
Three action (-ing) words that describe something your subject does.

A **phrase** that describes something else about your subject.

**NOUNS**
One or two words that rename the subject of your poem.

This exercise is adapted from the Cinquain Graphic Organizer provided by ReadWriteThink, a MarcoPolo website developed by the International Reading Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, and in partnership with the MCI Foundation. © 2003 NCTE/IRA. All rights reserved.
For Further Reference

WEBSITES:

My Learning- Learning with Museums, Libraries and Archives: Click on “interactives” and scroll down to the activity where you can make your own online portrait using features from portraits in the collection of the Museums Sheffield in the U.K.
WWW.MYLEARNING.ORG

Explore Face It!, an interactive website from the National Portrait Gallery in London and Show Me.
WWW.SHOW.ME.UK/HOSTED/FACEIT/INDEX.HTML

“Portrait Detectives” lesson plans from the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas.
WWW.FM.COE.UH.EDU/RESOURCES/PORTRAIT_DETECTIVES/PD_LESSON1.HTML

“Who Am I?: Self Portraits in Art and Writing” lesson plans from the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.
WWW.NGA.GOV/EDUCATION/CLASSROOM/SELF_PORTraits

The National Portrait Gallery in D.C.’s Exhibition Programs & Resources page has online exhibitions and lesson plans.
WWW.NPG.SI.EDU/EDUCATION/EXHIBITRESOURCE.HTML
OTHER RESOURCES AVAILABLE to TEACHERS

@ the Art Museum

Cunningham Center for Prints, Drawings, and Photographs
This part of SCMA houses over 16,000 works on paper including prints, drawings, photographs, watercolors, and illustrated books. The center is open for class and individual visits by appointment only Tuesdays-Fridays. To schedule a visit or to obtain more information, call (413) 585-2764 or email ccenter@smith.edu.

SCMA Records Room
Explore curatorial files and access slides and disc images on the fascinating spectrum of works within the Smith College Museum of Art collections. Visits by appointment only during business hours. Contact the General Administrative Offices to inquire, (413) 585-2761.

Museum Website
Use our website to get the scoop on upcoming exhibitions, as well as accurate event and contact information. Become a free registered Educator user to download teacher packs and high res images. www.smith.edu/artmuseum/education (follow links for K-12 educators)

Museums 10
To learn about other museums and cultural resources around the Five Colleges area, please visit the Museums10 website at: www.museums10.org

Database
Search this developing database by title, artist, or artist's culture to dive into the art collections of the Five College Museums and Historic Deerfield- http://museums.fivecolleges.edu

Museum Members
Consider membership at the Educator or Individual level to receive discounts to teacher workshops and invitations to special programs. You can purchase a membership online at www.smith.edu/artmuseum (click on “Join”), or call (413) 585-2777.

@ the Art Library (adjacent to the Art Museum)

Hillyer Art Library
Research any art topic or keep up with the latest exhibition news through Hillyer’s extensive collection of books and periodical holdings. Regular hours during the semester are usually:

Monday – Thursday 9:00 A.M. – 11:00 P.M., Friday 9:00 A.M. – 9:00 P.M.
Saturday 10:00 A.M. – 9:00 P.M., Sunday 12:00 P.M. – 12:00 A.M.
(413) 585-2940 www.smith.edu/libraries/libs/hillyer