

Elementary
(Grades K-5)



The Magic of Portraits: *Mrs. Nesbitt as Circe*

Overview

Students will learn what a portrait is and explore all the ways a portrait can tell us something about its subject. Then students will make their own portraits.

Age Group

Elementary (Grades K-5)

Length of Lesson

One 30-40 minute lesson

Rationale

By examining *Mrs. Nesbitt as Circe* and making their own portraits, students will bring the process of portrait-painting to life. Using special objects in their portraits like Reynolds did for *Mrs. Nesbitt* allows students to draw upon the artwork to make a unique creation.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Name at least three things they see in the painting
- Recognize that the details in the portrait have something to do with the woman
- Compare the portrait with photographs they have of themselves
- Apply the principle of the painting, i.e. that the objects say something about the person in a portrait, to their own hands-on project

Massachusetts Curriculum Framework Connection

Visual Arts:

- **Standard 3: Observation, Abstraction, Invention, and Expression**
3.3: "Create a 2D or 3D artwork from memory or imagination to tell a story or embody an idea or fantasy," e.g. draw family member from memory.

- **Standard 5: Critical Response**

5.1: "In the course of making and viewing art, learn ways of discussing it, such as by making a list of all the images seen in an artwork."

5.3: "Describe similarities and differences in works, and present personal responses to the subject matter, materials, techniques, and use of design elements in artworks."

Materials

- Image of *Mrs. Nesbitt as Circe* and a way to display the image for the class
- Plain paper
- Glue sticks
- Scissors
- Drawing utensils (crayons, markers, colored pencils)
- Different colored yarn and ribbon
- Patterned and colored paper (e.g. scrap wrapping paper)

Lesson

Prior to the lesson, have the children bring in pictures of themselves when they were toddlers. Encourage them to bring in a picture of when they were dressed-up in a costume.

1. *Warm-up:* Can anyone tell me what a portrait is? Help them construct a definition if necessary. Ask the students whether they have ever made a portrait or had a portrait made by someone else. How was it made? Who did you give it to? Have you ever played dress up? What do you like to dress up as?
2. Show children the image of *Mrs. Nesbitt as Circe* and have them describe the picture. Help them identify the objects in the picture: the animals, chalice, forest, etc. Ask them questions like the following: What do you think is going on in this artwork? What do you see that makes you say that? What is the woman doing/holding? What are the animals doing? Notice that the animals are docile, even though they're wild. Help the students identify the woman as a sorceress: she has a wand and cup nearby for her magic potion.
3. Explain that portraits like these often had special objects and details that told you important things about the sitter. Explain who Mrs. Nesbitt was and who Circe was: Mrs. Nesbitt is "dressed-up" as Circe. Ask the students what these objects tell us about Circe and/or Mrs. Nesbitt. Why do they think these animals are there? Why are they so tame? Why is she in a forest? (Because Circe lived in a forest and turned men into animals.) Why did Mrs. Nesbitt dress up as Circe? What was she like in real life?

4. Share the collected photographs that the students brought in and compare them to the painting of Mrs. Nesbitt, focusing on the dress-up (clothing), poses, and overall feel of the pictures.
5. *Hands-on project:* have the students draw a portrait of someone they know, using the different materials you collected. Ask them to include an object that tells something important about that person, like a flower for someone who likes gardening or a book for someone who likes to read.

About the Art

Mrs. Nesbitt as Circe by Sir Joshua Reynolds. 1781. Oil on canvas. Ca. 4 ft. x 3 ft. Gift of Dwight W. Morrow Jr., Anne Morrow Lindbergh, class of 1928, and Constance Morrow Morgan, class of 1935. SC 1958:4. Smith College Museum of Art.

The artist: Sir Joshua Reynolds

Sir Joshua Reynolds was a preeminent portraitist in England and revolutionized portraiture. He often gave his sitters historical, allegorical, or mythological attributes and, by doing so, he imbued the popular genre of portraiture with the elevated quality of history painting, which was more venerated but less lucrative. Reynolds had an extensive workshop of apprentice painters and artists who assisted in the completion of his paintings. He was in such demand that for portraits such as this, he probably only painted the face and hands. The rest was likely done according to his direction by assistants.

The work: *Mrs. Nesbitt as Circe*

Mary Nesbitt was a woman surrounded by mystery and scandal in eighteenth-century England. By the time this portrait was painted in 1781, she was a widow and mistress of Augustus John Harvey, the third earl of Bristol and close advisor to King George III. She was known for her charm, beauty, and intelligence and became involved in foreign policy and 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 viewer's attention with her ambiguous expression and exotic surroundings. The figure is seated in a lush wood with a leopard, monkey, and domestic cat. The monkey was often associated with licentiousness; the leopard may refer to the powerful men whom Mrs. Nesbitt charmed. Her flowing white gown evokes classical drapery and sets off her pale features. Her expression is enigmatic yet direct; 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 enhance the dignity of his sitters. Reynolds chose 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. She also holds a magic wand. Mrs. Nesbitt is surrounded by docile animals, which allude to her enchanting power over men.



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This work of art may not be currently on display at the Museum.