

LESSON

Art and Social Justice: What is a Portrait?

This lesson helps children start thinking about what a portrait can show about race and racial stereotypes, and how portraitists might reinforce or fight against stereotypes through their art.

Grade Level

K-23-5

Topic

Race & Ethnicity

Subject

Arts

Social Justice Domain

Identity

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- become familiar with the genre of photographic portraiture.
- analyze ways that portrait photographers portray their subjects.
- consider features that can make a portrait into an activist statement.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What can or should a portrait show about an individual?
- What can or should a portrait show about a group of people?
- What can we learn about artists and subjects from analyzing portraits?

This lesson is part of the series [Art and Activism](#).

Overview

Most students are familiar with at least some portraits—pictures or paintings of people—but perhaps they have not had a chance to think about the way a portrait shows a person. In fact, portraitists make a lot of choices when they execute their work. These choices include how the artists see the subject, and how the artists want the subject to be seen by others. It is important for young children to develop a critical eye when looking at portraits, just as they are developing critical thinking skills in other areas. In particular, this lesson helps children start thinking about what a portrait can show

about race and racial stereotypes, and how portraitists might reinforce or fight against stereotypes through their art.

Activities

1. Ask students if they know the meaning of the word “portrait.” Explain that a portrait is a picture of a person, and a portraitist is an artist who creates portraits. Write these terms on the board. Then ask students to brainstorm with a partner about the question, “What can a portrait show about an individual or a group of people?” Encourage students to go beyond physical appearance in these conversations. Can a portrait show the subject’s personality, work, values and skills? Offer these questions as prompts if needed, and allow students to discuss. *(Note: You can help get students started by asking them to think of photographs they have seen of themselves or their family members. Do these photos show only what the person looks like? Or do they show more about the person? There is no right answer to these questions, but they can be useful to think about.)*
2. Explain or remind students that a **stereotype** is an idea that a whole group of people is a certain way. For example, many or most people of a particular race or gender share a certain characteristic. A **racial** stereotype is a stereotype based on a person’s race. Ask students how they imagine portraits might have the power to reinforce or fight against racial stereotypes.
3. Break students into groups and give each group one of the following photographic portraits (K-2, 3-5) from the Smithsonian’s 2008 exhibit, “Let Your Motto Be Resistance: African American Portraits.” Give them the caption and biography that go along with each portrait. Allow students time to discuss the portraits and what they notice. *(Note: Though students are using these portraits to discuss stereotypes more broadly, you may also need to remind them that one individual does not represent a whole group. Still, artists have power to make important and sometimes very broad and moving statements through the way they show individuals.)*

Extension Activity

Individually or in small groups, have students complete these worksheets with regard to one or more of the pictures they looked at. (K-2, 3-5)