

Functions of Portraiture

Lesson Overview:

Students will be introduced to the three functions of portraiture as outlined in *Portraiture* by Shearer West. They will discuss these functions, citing examples of each, and then create their own portrait using the defined functions.

Grades: Four–twelve

Length of Lesson: Two class periods

Objectives:

After completing this lesson, students will be better able to:

- ✓ Distinguish among the various functions of portraiture
- ✓ Create their own portraits

Key Words:

Social: Of or relating to human society and its modes of organization.

Political: Of, relating to, or dealing with the structure or affairs of government, politics, or the state.

Aesthetic: Pertaining to the beautiful, as opposed to the useful, scientific, or emotional. An aesthetic response is an appreciation of beauty.

Symbol: An image or sign that represents something else, because of convention, association, or resemblance.

Supplies:

- 8½ x 11-inch paper
- Scissors
- Markers, colored pencils, or oil pastels
- 11 x 14-inch paper

Teacher Background Information:

The author of *Portraiture*, Shearer West, writes that portraits “serve a multiplicity of aesthetic, political, and social functions.”

Excerpt from *Portraiture*, p. 43

Because of the many different forms they take, portraits have been and can be used for a variety of dynastic, commemorative, judicial, personal, and propagandist purposes. They can be considered aesthetic objects, but they can equally be seen to act as a substitute for the individual they represent, or as conveying an aura of power, beauty, youth, or other abstract qualities. Many portraits were produced for public places such as city squares, civic or religious institutions, or for mass dissemination in the form of coins or in prints, for example. However, even portraits that had ostensibly private function, such as miniatures or family snapshots, are usually intended to be viewed and responded to by a group of individuals rather than a single person. Portraits therefore are normally created with the understanding that they will be in the public domain (however that may be

defined) and that they will serve a special purpose. More than any other genres of art, portraits draw attention to themselves as objects that can be employed or exploited in a variety of ways.

Instructional Plan:

Warm-Up:

Learning to Look: “Thirty-Second Look” Discussion

Choose portraits in the Gallery’s collection or in the Portrait Competition section of the website based on your curriculum study.

- Instructions to students: *Look at the portrait for thirty seconds. Turn around, with your back facing the image. Name everything you saw. Turn back around. Were you right?*
- Note: Be sure to embark on discussions by asking probing and open-ended questions (questions that cannot be answered yes or no).

Learning to Look: “Thirty-Second Look” Grid

Choose portraits in the Gallery’s collection or in the Portrait Competition section of the website based on your curriculum study.

- Show a portrait to the class for thirty seconds, and then remove it.
- Instructions to students: *List or draw what you saw in the portrait on a piece of paper divided into a grid of nine sections. Fill each grid with a term or sketched object.*
- Re-show image and check the accuracy of student-generated grids.
- Facilitate a discussion about the symbolic meaning of the objects.

Activity Discussion:

- Have students define the three functions of portraiture.
- Encourage a debate about what make a portrait aesthetic, social, or political.

Activity Instructions:

- Have students pair up and create a portrait of each other. They should keep the portrait’s function in mind: is it social, political, or aesthetic?
- Place each portrait in front of the class and have them decide what function each portrait serves.

Extension: Create a collaborative portrait

- Have students create self-portraits, or take a photographic portrait of each student. Be sure to include symbols in the portraits.
- Using extracted facial elements and symbols from each portrait, have the class create a new class member.
- Have students decide whether the function of the new class member’s portrait is social, political, or aesthetic.

Wrap-up:

Students will discuss what they have learned from this lesson.

Assessment:

Work should be assessed on the following criteria:

- Participation in class discussions
- Creation of a self-portrait
- Creation of a portrait whose function is clear

Source:

Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).