



Road to the White House

A collaborative project presented by Presidential and First Lady sites in Ohio & Indiana

What Is A Portrait?

A portrait is an artwork portraying a person. Portraits are made in many media, from paintings and sculptures to photographs and prints. Portraits aim to reflect the sitter's appearance, but they may also provide insight into the person's character or personality. Learn about our nation's first ladies as you explore portraits and personal items in the exhibition *Defining Her Role: The First Lady's First 100 Days*. The exhibit can be seen at First Ladies National Historic Site in the Education and Research Center. During this activity, questors can create a self-portrait that focuses on their best traits or share the love by immortalizing a friend or family member. This activity is offered both on-site and online.



National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; Gift of friends of President & Mrs. Bush

Reading Pictures: Portraits Tell A Story



Helen Herron Taft, 1910, portrait by Karl B.A. Kronstad.
White House Collection, White House Historical Association

Do you know you can read a portrait?

When reading a portrait, you observe the visual elements in the picture just like you read the words in a book. The facial expression, pose, clothing, and hairstyle help describe the person. The setting, or background of the portrait, and the objects in the portrait also give important information about the sitter. Art elements like color, scale or size, medium, style, or art supplies used also help tell the story.

Check out this portrait of Ohio born first lady Helen Taft. Take a close and careful look at the painting. What can you tell about her by the observations you make? She's not in jeans and a t-shirt, right? Her clothing looks really fancy. She sits cross-legged in a long white dress with a wrap flowing around her, framing her. She's holding a fan and looking out at the viewer. The White House peeks out from the background.

So, what do these clues tell us about Taft? We see the White House from beyond the clearing. Taft visited the White House as a teenager and fell in love with it. She made it her priority to get there, encouraging her husband, William Howard Taft to run for office. She also holds a fan, possibly referencing her time in the Philippines and her travels to China and Japan. In fact, she's responsible for the famous Japanese cherry blossoms that line the Tidal Basin in Washington D.C. See how the elements of a portrait can unlock a person's story?

Connect With Your Sitter

Now that we've talked about the elements of a portrait, let's see how you tell a person's story through portraiture! Before you make your artistic mark, you will need more information about your sitter. Choose a family member or friend and interview them. Ask your sitter the questions below or devise your own questions.

What three words best describe them?

What is their favorite kind of music?

What is their favorite item of clothing?

Describe three things you might find in their favorite room.

Describe some things they like to do on the weekends.

Strike A Pose: Create A Portrait

Use the information you have to create a portrait in the frame below. What elements can you include to convey your sitter's personality?



Glamorous Upcycled Gown

So, can dresses act as portraits? They can definitely tell us a lot about the women who wore them! Take a look at this blue chiffon dress that belonged to Rosalynn Carter. The dress is complemented by a long elegant, sleeveless jacket covered in a gold-embroidered swirling pattern. Pretty fancy right? So why was the fashion industry aghast over the dress? That's because Rosalynn Carter wore this dress once before! She wore it to a ball celebrating her husband's inauguration as governor of Georgia in 1971. She even bought the dress off the rack at a store. Fashion designers felt that Carter should celebrate and support them by commissioning a new dress for her husband's presidential inauguration. While some people felt that the first lady should exude glamour, Carter's move definitely established her as a first lady for everyday people.



President Jimmy Carter and First Lady Rosalynn Carter inaugural ball, 1977



Rosalynn Carter inaugural gown, 1977
Designed by Mary Matise for Jimmae
Photo courtesy of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History

Dressed to Impress

Take a look at Michelle Obama's portrait at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery. Her dress conveys a lot about her personality, right? What colors, shapes, and lines do you notice in her dress? What do the art elements in her dress tell us about her?



Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama
by Amy Sherald, oil on linen, 2018
National Portrait Gallery,
Smithsonian Institution History

Let's Button This Up: Campaign Buttons

You may not be able to commission an expensive portrait like the White House or National Portrait Gallery, but you've probably shelled out a dollar or two for a button. Campaign buttons often include a portrait of the candidate and sometimes those little circles even make room for the entire family, from spouses to kids and even pets. Check out the campaign buttons on view at the National First Ladies' Historic Site. How are first ladies portrayed on the buttons? Here's your chance to design your own button. Let's make this one a self-portrait, which means you'll need to create a picture of yourself as the candidate or candidates family member. How do you want to look? Strong, serious, personable? Use this template to create your portrait. Don't forget your campaign slogan.



"Pat for First Lady"
Pat Nixon Campaign Button for Richard Nixon
Presidential Campaign
1960

