

PICTURING AMERICA LESSON

Exploring Identity

A portrait can communicate volumes about the sitter's identity beyond physical appearance. Through the careful organization of elements such as costuming, props, setting, and pose, artists reveal the depth and complexities of their subjects' personalities. This lesson develops an awareness of how individuals express their identity through their outward appearances, and guides students through the critical thinking skills of deductive reasoning and forming conclusions.



Portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Mifflin (Sarah Morris), 1773

John Singleton Copley, American

Oil on tacking

61 5/8 x 48 inches (156.5 x 121.9 cm)

125th Anniversary Acquisition. Bequest of Mrs. Esther F. Wistar to The Historical Society of Pennsylvania in 1900, and acquired by the Philadelphia Museum of Art by mutual agreement with the Society through the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. Fitz Eugene Dixon, Jr., and significant contributions from Stephanie S. Eglin, and other donors to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, as well as the George W. Elkins Fund and the W. P. Wilstach Fund, and through the generosity of Maxine and Howard H. Lewis to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1999
EW1999-45-1

Grade Level

For grades 6–12

Common Core Academic Standards

SOCIAL STUDIES, LANGUAGE ARTS

- Reading Informational Text: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media #7
- Listening and Speaking: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats #2
- English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content #2

Art Images Required

Click on the Museum object title below to view high-resolution photographs on the Philadelphia Museum of Art website. Click on the Picturing America object title to view that resource on the National Endowment for the Humanities website. Images that are also available in the ARTstor Digital Library are indicated by an ID number or search phrase. Entering that number or phrase into the ARTstor search bar will direct you to the corresponding image in that database.

RELATED PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART OBJECT:

- [Portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Mifflin \(Sarah Morris\), 1773](#), by John Singleton Copley
ARTstor search: EW1999-45-1

For more information, please contact Division of Education and Public Programs: School and Teacher Programs by phone at 215-684-7580, by fax at 215-236-4063, or by e-mail at educate@philamuseum.org.

PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

RELATED PICTURING AMERICA OBJECT:

- [Paul Revere](#), 1768, by John Singleton Copley
ARTstor search: 30.781

Lesson Process

1. Take some time, either as a class or in small groups, to look closely at each work, reading the background information provided online. (Be sure to review the "Teacher Resources" on the Museum website.) Discuss what you have discovered, including any questions you may still have about the paintings.
2. Examine Copley's *Portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Mifflin (Sarah Morris)* (1773). Where did your eyes go first in the painting? What about that area caught your attention? Why might the artist have wanted you to look there? Where did your eyes go to next? What made you look there? Discuss how an artist attempts to control the movement of your eyes, and what purpose that can serve.
3. Individually or in small groups, describe Mr. and Mrs. Mifflin. What are they doing? How would you describe their clothes? Can you tell anything about their personalities through their expressions or poses?
4. Next examine Copley's painting *Paul Revere* (1768). While there are fewer details to examine in this portrait, look again for insights into the character of Revere. Where do your eyes go first, and what catches your attention? Why might the artist have directed you in this manner? What props are included? How would you describe the setting? How would you describe the clothing of Revere?
5. Compare the props (book and loom, teapot and tools) that Copley has included in each portrait. What added information to these objects suggest about these individuals?
6. Refer back to the information provided about the Mifflins from the Museum website, and revise/expand your description.
7. Research the controversial British policies toward the colonies prior to the creation of the Mifflins' portrait in 1773 (Sugar Act, Currency Acts, Quartering Act, Stamp Act, and Townshend Acts). How might this painting be a statement against those British policies? What is the significance of the loom, of the pamphlet? How does this added insight change your perception of the painting?

Assessment

1. Take a few minutes to answer the following questions about yourself: What are some of your interests? How would you describe your personality? If your friends were asked to describe you, what would they say? What would you want them to say?
 - Use this information to begin planning your own self-portrait.
 - Select accessories, props, and an outfit or costume.
 - Set up a camera (on a tripod, if possible) and have someone photograph your portrait.
These can be arranged in a class gallery.
2. Write a narrative that you would use if you were offering tourists a close-up view of one of these portraits. Select and include interesting details rather than including everything you know (which might be too much for a first-time viewer). Organize your narrative in a logical and focused manner.

PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

Enrichment

1. Have students bring in four or five objects from home that they feel best describe who they are. Then, in small groups, have students share their objects and explain why they chose them.
2. Search the Philadelphia Museum of Art website for other portraits. Discuss or write about conclusions you can draw from the details you see in the portrait you have chosen.