

The Portrait Project

Creating conversations among famous faces of the past

Developed by: Linda Marie Coakley

Suggested Grade Levels: 10-12

Subject areas: History, Language Arts, Drama, Art

Rationale:

In this response to art project, students are invited to investigate as many portraits from our past as they can. Hopefully they will discover a person of interest to research, write about, and re-create to present in a theatre situation. Creating conversations between unlikely characters of history is an intriguing idea. The notion of time travel is appealing to students and connecting people from disparate times and places is exciting to contemplate. The project utilizes many skills in researching, (particularly in narrowing website searches) interviewing, writing, teamwork building and performing. The opportunity to polish many talents, perhaps yet unknown, is available here.

Materials/Suggested Resources:

Encourage students to scour the websites of the world to find faces that inspire, disturb or excite them. The Smithsonian Institution, Web Museum Paris and AGNS Collection are good places to consider. Library books are a good resource as well.

Procedure:

- Bring in some famous portrait reproductions such as those of any Prime Minister or Royalty, famous men and women, artists like Henri Matisse, Norman Rockwell and Pablo Picasso did many portraits.
- Display these portrait images on a large expanse of wall space in a classroom or hallway, with plenty of white space in between so they can be viewed fairly.
- Ask the students to identify as many as they can and imagine what might ensue if say, Queen Elizabeth met Norman Rockwell.
- Begin individual searches to find a portrait of a person you would like to “become” for a 2 person conversation.
- Emphasize that there should be substantive research for valuable information about the persons’ lives so the exchange would inform as well as entertain the audience.

- Demonstrate, for example, what Albert Einstein might have to say to Henri Matisse about the importance of this quote: "Imagination is more important than knowledge, for knowledge is finite."

- Make clear that part of the excitement is to have them come from different periods of history.

-Really look deeply into the character's portraits – discuss with others what they see there as well. Shakespeare said "eyes mirror the soul." For example, how has the artist use light and shadow to convey a feeling to the viewer?

- Costume your characters significantly. Add a prop that enhances the character. A fan, for example, for a coy, Royal figure. Think about how lines and textures in clothing suggest a particular period, or a station in life. And how colour plays a role in creating an emotional response.

-Consider what a piece of instrumental music might do to enhance the portrait portrayal. Music could be played as an introduction to the piece or a send-off. Or even quietly played "underneath" the presentation. Talk about how it lifts or tones down a mood almost effortlessly.

- Rehearse and present these for an audience of your choice.

Extension of ideas:

Prepare a handout explaining the process followed. Ask questions tailored to each group you are presenting to – everyone loves to learn new things.

Video the performances to get maximum benefit from them – "one picture IS worth a thousand words..."

Suggestions for Assessment:

Students can interview each other, and audience members, and get their feedback.

Students may also provide their audience with a checklist, which asks for various evaluations like enjoyment level, accuracy of information received, performance qualities noted, etc.

Students can rate themselves on their efforts and outcomes and the project's success as a whole.