Kehinde Wiley’s Portrait of Barack Obama

Ages 8+ | This is a free lesson created and supported by Art in Action, a nonprofit empowering students through arts education.

This lesson is intended for parents and their children to explore art as a powerful form of learning and play

About the Lesson

Lesson Overview: 45 min - 1 hour
This lesson explores the legacy of presidential portraits with special attention to the newest addition of this long-standing tradition, Kehinde Wiley’s Portrait of Barack Obama. The lesson covers symbolism in art and allows children to learn to portray feeling through portrait-style art.

Included in this Lesson:
- Discussion: Presidential portraits and Kehinde Wiley’s Portrait of Barack Obama
- Activity: Mixed Media Portrait
Discussion: Kehinde Wiley’s Portrait of Barack Obama

About the Piece
Kehinde Wiley was the first African-American artist commissioned to paint an official presidential portrait. He painted the first African-American president of the United States. In fact, there were many firsts about Wiley’s portrait of Barack Obama. To appreciate this, let’s first look at the legacy of presidential portraits that go all the way back to the country’s founding father, President George Washington.

A portrait is a painting, drawing, photograph, or engraving of a person, especially one depicting only the face or head and shoulders.

Every president of the United States has an official presidential portrait. Follow the link to view the White House Historical Association’s collection. Notice the colors used in each of the portraits. Do you notice similar colors across them? Pay attention to the varying poses and positioning of the presidents in each portrait. How do their expressions and positioning make you feel about them? Look at the backgrounds of each portrait, what do you see?

Scroll through the portraits again and let’s take a closer look at the objects in the paintings. We are observing symbolism. What symbols can you find? What might these symbols mean?
Discussion: Kehinde Wiley’s Portrait of Barack Obama

With the end of his term at the close of 2017, President Barack Obama’s presidential portrait was unveiled Monday, February 12, 2018 at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery. Take a look at the portrait below and again think about colors, expressions, and positioning, with special attention to the background of the portrait.

What do you find surprising about this portrait?

Are there elements that are similar to the other presidential portraits we just observed?

What do you notice about the colors that Wiley used?

What about the expression and positioning of the president?

What symbols do you see? What might they mean?

How does the portrait make you feel?

What about it makes you feel that way?

What kind of person does the portrait make the president appear to be?

What about it makes you think this?
About the Artist

Kehinde Wiley was born in Los Angeles in 1977. Wiley's portraits harness the power of color, posturing, and symbolism for expression. Take a look at some of his other portraits below.

Holland Cotter, of The New York Times, called Wiley "a history painter, one of the best we have.... He creates history as much as he tells it." And that is what Wiley did with the portrait of Barack Obama.
Activity: Kehinde Wiley’s Portrait of Barack Obama

About the Activity
Portraits are a form of expression. In this activity, you will express yourself by planning and creating your own portrait. Through the thoughtful use of color, positioning and symbolism, you will be able to represent who you are on paper. You may not be president (yet), but there is a great deal that is important and interesting about you. How do you want the world to see you?

For this activity, we will use a method known as mixed media which will allow us to paint, draw, cut, and glue just about anything.

"The use of mixed media began around 1912 with the cubist collages and constructions of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, and has become widespread as artists developed increasingly open attitudes to the media of art. Essentially art can be made of anything or any combination of things."
- Tate.org -

Preparation + Materials
First gather all of the materials you will need:
- Paper for the portrait’s ‘canvas’
- Pencil (for planning)
- Drawing Tool of Choice: markers, pens, colored pencils, crayons, all the above
- Mixed Media Options: magazines to cut, tissue paper, stickers, photographs, rhinestones, leaves, flowers, pipe cleaners, pom poms, yam, whatever you have laying around, etc.
- Necessary Application Tools for Mixed Media: scissors, glue, tape, etc.

Now, it’s time to plan for your portrait by answering the following questions:
- What colors do I want to represent me?
- What position and facial expression do I want to represent me? What will I be wearing?
  Optional: Model that position and facial expression in real life and take a photo. You can use that photo as a reference or you can print it to cut out and glue onto your portrait.
- What objects/symbols best represent me? These symbols might represent a sport, a pet, a goal, a place, etc.
Activity: Kehinde Wiley’s Portrait of Barack Obama

Step One
Read over the your responses to the questions answered in the 'Preparation + Materials' section. Take a look at your mixed media options and think about what you can use to represent the colors and symbols you chose. Pick/cut them out and arrange them on your paper. Plan out where the objects can go and where the image or drawing of you can go.

Step Two
On your sheet of paper, use your pencil to lightly sketch out your plan for your portrait. Reference this guide on how to draw a face.

Step Three
Now you are ready to unleash the creative genius within. Color, paint, draw, and glue all over your paper 'canvass' until you are happy with your portrait. Having a plan is a great help, but it is okay to change your mind as you go.

Share your portrait on social media and check out other kids' art with the hashtag, #MyArtinAction
Bring Art Into the Lives of Your Students!

Don't let the fun end here!
We hoped you enjoyed the lesson! Art in Action empowers students through arts education by providing schools with thoughtful visual arts curriculum, teacher training, and art supplies. We want as many kids to have access to art as possible. To do this, we partner with parents and other volunteer teachers to make art possible. Keep the fun going by joining the Art in Action community!

Reach out and let's find out how to bring art into your school:
Contact katie@artinaaaction.org or call 650.566.8339 x204

Don't miss out on more free art lessons and join the Art in Action community!