

EDUCATOR GUIDE

Portraits and Presence

African American Artists in the Collection of the
Chrysler Museum of Art



Beverly Buchanan (American, 1940–2015), *Three Families (A Memorial Piece with Scars)*, 1989, Wood with paint, charcoal, and metal, Gift of David Henry Jacobs, Jr. ©Beverly Buchanan, 99.29.1



ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Portraits and Presence is a multidisciplinary companion for college-level educators interested in engaging their students in exploring African American artists in the collection of the Chrysler Museum of Art. This guide offers a range of learning objectives and content to stimulate critical thinking, encourage dialogue, and foster understanding of the art presented. Educators should glean from this guide what is most relevant and useful to their students. Vocabulary words that appear in **bold** are defined at the end of the guide.

ABOUT THE CHRYSLER

The Chrysler Museum has fifty galleries, a growing collection of more than 30,000 objects, an interactive space for families, and the only glass studio of its kind in the Mid-Atlantic region. Best of all, admission is free.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS

African American and African Studies, American Studies, Art, Art Education, Art History, Communications, Creative Writing, Education, History, Psychology, Sociology

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Students will consider the role of portraiture in giving the subject agency.
2. Students will discuss identity politics and the power relationship between the artist and the subject.
3. Students will analyze compositional choices made by the artists to convey their message.

BACKGROUND

Why do artists create portraits? Who do portraits commemorate? What do they tell us about the time when they were created? Use the examples below from the Chrysler Museum's collection to consider these questions and more. Each work is accompanied by brief background information and discussion questions.



Beauford Delaney (American, 1901–1979)

Portrait of James Baldwin, 1965

Oil on canvas

Museum purchase ©Estate of Beauford Delaney, by permission of Derek L. Spratley, Esquire, Court Appointed Administrator, 2015.28

Intense yellow brings a sacred and redemptive light to Beauford Delaney's portraits of people he admired, as seen here framing the writer and Civil Rights activist James Baldwin (1924–1987). Though Delaney often exhibited with **Harlem Renaissance** artists, he preferred the company of intellectual circles in New York's Greenwich Village. His abstract, colorful, and highly textured paintings found many admirers, including Alfred Stieglitz, Stuart Davis, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Baldwin, who was only a teenager when they first met in 1940. Delaney became a spiritual mentor to the budding writer based on their mutual struggles against poverty, racism, and homophobia. This portrait, created twenty-five years after they met, celebrates their lifelong creative friendship.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What can you tell about James Baldwin from this portrait? How would you describe him?
2. Why do you think Delaney chose bright yellow for this portrait? How would the portrait be different if the artist had used green, red, or blue? What role does color play in your emotional response to the painting?
3. Can you tell that the artist and the subject were lifelong friends? How might this portrait have been different if Delaney and Baldwin did not know each other?



Barkley L. Hendricks (American, 1945–2017)

Slick, 1977

Oil, acrylic, and Magna (acrylic resin paint) on canvas

Gift of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, New York ©Barkley L. Hendricks, 78.62

*You think you're slick. Just wait. One day,
a woman is going to straighten you out.*

This wry comment by Hendricks's sister inspired the title of this self-portrait. The essence of cool, the artist is stylishly dressed in a white linen suit and stands against a neutral backdrop. The white-on-white environment becomes a witty metaphor for the racial politics of the era. Drawing attention to his face and colorful African cap, Hendricks invites us to contemplate his identity—a vision that is literally reflected in his glasses as they catch the light from his studio's arched windows.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Hendricks convey himself? His personality? His profession? His identity? What does he want viewers of this painting to know about him? What **attributes** does he include?
2. Why have artists throughout history created self-portraits? How does this work compare to self-portraits by other artists? (Examples: Rembrandt, Warhol, Kahlo, etc.)
3. This work was created in 1977. How does it reflect the time when it was painted?



Joshua Johnson (American, active ca. 1796–1824)

Mrs. Abraham White, Jr., and Daughter Rose, ca. 1808–09

Oil on canvas

Gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch, 74.6.12

As the wife and daughter of a Baltimore grocer, Martha Bussey White and baby Rose are a typical middle-class family, posing in their finest dresses and lace in this formal portrait. Its creator was the esteemed local painter Joshua Johnson, the son of a white man and an enslaved black woman. Freed at age 19 and probably self-taught as a painter, Johnson became one of the nation's earliest professional African American artists. He admired and competed with highly trained portraitists like Charles Peale Polk, Charles Bird King, and other artists in the collection.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Johnson depict his subjects? What can we guess about the subjects from how they are represented? Compare this to Delaney's portrait of James Baldwin.
2. Joshua Johnson placed an advertisement in the *Baltimore Intelligencer* on December 19, 1798 that read, "As a self-taught genius, deriving from nature and industry his knowledge of the Art; and having experienced many insuperable obstacles in the pursuit of his studies, it is highly gratifying to him to make assurances of his ability to execute all commands with an effect, and in a style, which must give satisfaction." How do you interpret this text? Would you hire Johnson to paint your portrait from this advertisement?
3. Discuss the contrast between the knowledge and representation we have of the sitters of this portrait with the relatively little-known information about the artist. How did the artist leave his mark? What does the contrast tell us about life for African Americans in the early nineteenth century?



Hale Aspacio Woodruff (American, 1900–1980)

***The Death of Crispus Attucks*, ca. 1942**

Tempera on board

Gift of Mr. A. Ailon ©Estate of Hale Woodruff Licensed by VAGA, New York, 82.95

This is one of four panels by Hale Woodruff submitted for a new municipal building in Washington, D.C. The panels are built around powerful, stylized figures enacting violent yet stirred events; the tightly compressed narratives are enriched with detail drawn from historical accounts, engravings, and earlier paintings. Each panel illustrates the heroism of African Americans in battle. This represents the martyrdom of Crispus Attucks at the 1770 Boston Massacre, a prelude to the Revolutionary War. Woodruff was an art teacher at historically black Atlanta University and studied mural painting under the Mexican modernist Diego Rivera.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This work is a small study submitted as a competition entry. How do you think the impact of the work would change if it had been turned into a full-size mural?
2. How is the figure of Crispus Attucks represented?
3. How do we create portraits of figures from the past? How do we know about them? How important is it for representations to look like the actual figures?



Robert Colescott (American, 1925–2009)

Listening to Amos and Andy, 1982

Acrylic on canvas

Gift of the family of Joel B. Cooper, in memory of Mary and Dudley Cooper ©Estate of Robert Colescott, 2002.26.4

By layering satirical imagery, Robert Colescott uses humor to expose viewers' racial and sexual **stereotypes**. In this painting, the artist takes on blackface **minstrelsy** in the form of Amos and Andy—the long-running radio serial in which two white actors portrayed black characters. In this scene, one actor's shadow shows the exaggerated features of racist **caricatures**. The other actor's white hand takes on black skin as it extends through the radio and into the living room below. The gesture suggests the far reach of derogatory stereotypes as the two listeners smile, cheerfully entertained by the offensive portrayal.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Robert Colescott said, "A painting is like a catalyst. It can't tell a very complicated story. The complication comes in what you are doing in your mind." How can you apply this quote to *Listening to Amos and Andy*?
2. How does the artist use contrast to tell the story? Think about differences in how the listeners and radio personalities are portrayed.
3. Consider the differences between a visual medium (such as painting) and an auditory medium (such as radio). How do you convey a sense of presence, personality, and identity through each one? Which is stronger?



Kehinde Wiley (American, b. 1977)

***St. Andrew*, 2006**

Oil and enamel on canvas in antiquated frame with gilded ornaments

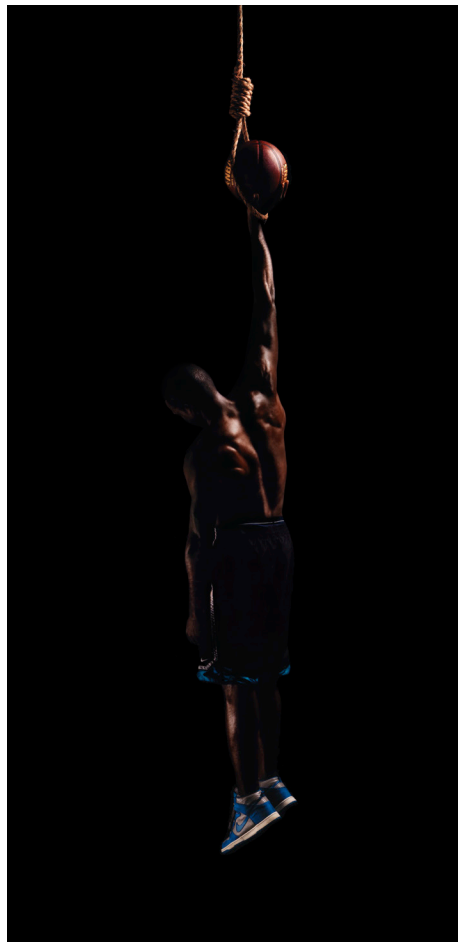
Museum purchase with funds provided by Susan and David Goode; Meredith and Brother Rutter; Ashby Vail; Joseph T. Waldo and Patrick Waldo; Leah and Richard Waitzer; Fannie, Milton and Leslie Friedman Family Foundation; Martha Goode and Blair Mielnik; Oriana McKinnon; Penny and Peter Meredith; Mabel Burroughs Tyler Fund of the Hampton Roads Community Foundation; Rebecca and Tom Robinson; Dr. Henry A. Garrity; Mrs. Joseph C. Addington; Lynn Cobband Warren Richard; Susan and Alan Donn; Karen and Matt Fine; Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Lane Stokes, Jr.; Tim Griffith; Angelica and Henry Light; and Dr. Edward L. and Linda H. Lilly

© Kehinde Wiley, 2014.15

A young black man in contemporary streetwear provocatively straddles the X-shaped cross on which he will die. This unusual cross is associated with St. Andrew, a disciple of Christ who was executed for refusing to renounce his faith. Kehinde Wiley upends the history of art and style by posing his contemporary St. Andrew against rich brocade that comes to life as it winds over the figure. The subject, painted in a powerful and dramatic Baroque style, contrasts with the flat background pattern. Wiley remixes historical styles to reimagine the role of African American culture in today's society.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Kehinde Wiley sources his subjects from his community. This is a portrait of a real, contemporary figure, but we only know him here as St. Andrew. Why do you think Wiley uses real models? Why do you think he uses art historical references for the titles of his works?
2. Where does this figure exist in space and time? Why do you think Wiley makes these decisions?
3. This work is displayed in a gallery of Baroque art of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries at the Chrysler Museum. Why do you think this painting is paired with Baroque works? Where would you exhibit this artwork?



Hank Willis Thomas (American, born 1976)

Strange Fruit, 2011

Digital c-print

Gift of Meredith and Brother Rutter ©Hank Willis Thomas, 2018.26

What happens when the visual legacy of American lynching collides with the visual legacy of a slam dunk?

This is the question posed by contemporary artist Hank Willis Thomas in ***Strange Fruit***. Like many of Thomas's photographs, the work provocatively explores the black male body as a site of violence, spectacle, and commercial profit. Thomas says, "I take pleasure in talking about things that people say we don't need to talk about anymore."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This photograph does not represent a single figure but rather refers to a long history of the treatment of African Americans. It juxtaposes a poignant **dichotomy** of experience— the racially motivated violence of lynching and the celebration of athletic excellence. What relationship do you see between the two?
2. How does the artist use contrast to emphasize the message of this photograph?
3. Like Kehinde Wiley, Hank Willis Thomas photographed a contemporary model who remains anonymous. Compare the figures in *St. Andrew* and *Strange Fruit*. What can we tell about each subject? Is it important to know who they are?



Beverly Buchanan (American, 1940–2015)

***Three Families (A Memorial Piece with Scars)*, 1989**

Wood with paint, charcoal, and metal, Gift of David Henry Jacobs, Jr. ©Beverly Buchanan, 99.29.1

Beverly Buchanan builds on her own memories when creating these sculptures, which make very powerful statements about destitution, inequality, and personal triumph. Often, Buchanan's shacks symbolize an angry defiance as they address and challenge sociological problems of our time—including racism, social injustice, and economic inequality—which have torn this country apart for centuries. *Three Families (A Memorial Piece with Scars)* is constructed from scraps of wood, set on fire, and then extinguished.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Can this work be considered a portrait? Of whom is the portrait? Does a portrait need to be figural or can it be abstract (aesthetically or conceptually)?
2. How can you link this sculpture to the idea of presence? Who is present? Who is absent? Where? What is missing?
3. Often, portraits contain positive **attributes** of the sitter; however, the subtitle of this work indicates scars. Where do you see evidence of scars? Are scars the same as attributes? Should people be identified by their scars?



SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES (RESPONSES)

1. Think about other media (TV, movies, music, poetry, literature) where an artist (or group of creatives) creates a representation of another figure. What forms can this take? What makes a successful portrait or tribute?
2. Create a portrait of someone (personal acquaintance, historical figure, etc.) or describe how you would create a portrait of that person. What attributes would be important to include? How would the representation compare to the ones discussed in this activity?
3. Use chrysler.emuseum.com/collections to find another portrait in the Museum's collection. Compare and contrast the portrait with one of the artworks from this guide. What similarities can you find? What are some of the differences? To find an artwork, visit chrysler.org/art/collection and use the keyword "portrait" to find pieces in the Chrysler collection.

VOCABULARY

Attributes: a quality or feature regarded as a characteristic or inherent part of someone or something

Caricature: a picture, description, or imitation of a person in which certain striking characteristics are exaggerated in order to create a comic or grotesque effect

Dichotomy: a division or contrast between two things that are or are represented as being opposed or entirely different

Harlem Renaissance: the development in the Harlem neighborhood in New York City as a black cultural mecca in the early twentieth century and the subsequent social and artistic explosion that resulted. Lasting roughly from the 1910s through the mid-1930s, the period is considered a golden age in African American culture, manifesting in literature, music, stage performance, and art¹

Minstrelsy: the practice of performing as a minstrel (a member of a band of entertainers with blackened faces who performed songs and music ostensibly of black American origin)

Stereotype: a widely held but fixed and oversimplified idea of a particular type of person or thing

Strange Fruit: a reference to the victims of lynchings across the American south; the title of a song originally sung by Billie Holiday in 1939 protesting racism

¹<https://www.history.com/topics/roaring-twenties/harlem-renaissance>



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS IN THE JEAN OUTLAND CHRYSLER LIBRARY

[Barkley L. Hendricks: Birth of the Cool](#)

[Rising Up: Hale Woodruff's Murals at Talladega College](#)

[Hank Willis Thomas: All Things Being Equal](#)

[Art and Race Matters: The Career of Robert Colescott](#)

[Beauford Delaney: The Color Yellow](#)

[Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic](#)

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

[Hank Willis Thomas](#)

[Kehinde Wiley](#)

[Barkley L. Hendricks](#)

[Robert Colescott](#)

[Beverly Buchanan](#)

PORTRAITS

[Portrait definition \(Tate\)](#)

[Portraits of African Americans \(National Portrait Gallery\)](#)

FILM AND MUSIC

[Through a Lens Darkly: Black Photographers and the Emergence of a People](#)

[Strange Fruit](#) sung by Billie Holiday

OTHER

Poetry written [James Baldwin](#)

[Reflections on Black Image in Amos 'n' Andy](#)



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