FREE TEACHING RESOURCE / 6–8 / 06

Portrait Through Objects: Many Stories

TEACHER GUIDE • lesson design & facilitation

Grade band: 6–8 | 5–7 studio sessions of 45–60 min

Media: Still-life drawing, photography, collage, assemblage or mixed media

The artistic problem

Create a portrait of yourself or a consenting subject using a carefully composed collection of objects, colors, patterns, or spaces that communicates a nuanced story.

Essential question: How can a portrait communicate identity without assuming a face tells the whole story?

Place-based cultural lens: New Orleans has layered African American, Indigenous, Caribbean, Vietnamese, Latin American and many other histories. Rather than assigning identities by category, students explore actual objects and stories with consent.

Learning targets

- Select at least five specific, evidence-based visual clues.
- Compose objects with a clear focal point and intentional symbolism.
- Identify and revise one potentially misleading interpretation.

Student-visible success criteria

- At least five carefully chosen visual clues.
- Intentional arrangement and visible focal point.
- Three alternative layouts or arrangements.
- Peer interpretation tested against the maker's intent.
- One revision reducing ambiguity or stereotype.

Standards & studio habits

Louisiana 5–8 cluster: VA-CE-M3, VA-CE-M5, VA-HP-M3, VA-AP-M2

Studio Habits of Mind: Express, Observe, Reflect, Understand Art Worlds. These habits are developed interactively, not in a fixed rank or sequence.

Instructional alignment: Louisiana benchmark codes are official broad grade-cluster benchmarks; specific expectations are developed locally. The ten instructional stages come from the supplied Artistic Investigations framework.

Preparation & materials

- Personally available objects or images used with permission
- Still-life lighting and drawing materials

- Photo devices (optional)
- Collage and assemblage materials
- Consent protocol and anonymized display option

10-stage teaching sequence

01 / Engage Show objects belonging to an invented character; compare evidence-based observations with assumptions.

02 / Investigate Examine how portraits can use symbols, objects and place; discuss community and privacy boundaries.

03 / Skill Studio Model still-life overlap, cropping, texture, contrast, scale and focal organization.

04 / Generate List ten possible objects, narrow to five meaningful clues, and sketch three compositions.

05 / Plan Select one layout; annotate why each clue belongs and what can be misunderstood.

06 / Produce Produce the portrait with observational accuracy and an intentional visual hierarchy.

07 / Critique Peer responds: "I infer __ because I see __." Artist notes accurate and inaccurate interpretations.

08 / Revise Rearrange, remove, clarify or replace at least one clue in response.

09 / Present Share with an optional anonymous title or consented artist statement.

10 / Reflect Use visual evidence to distinguish deliberate symbolism from untested assumptions.

Studio sessions & evidence checkpoints

Session	Teaching move	Capture evidence
Day 1	**Seeing beyond a face** Object inference exercise; discuss evidence and stereotype.	Evidence vs. assumption response.
Day 2	**Research + generation** Inventory objects; plan three arrangements.	Teacher validates five clues and consent.
Day 3–5	**Production** Create still life or collage with focal point.	Studio observation and process photos.
Day 6	**Critique and revision** Peer interprets without reading description; revise.	Interpretation audit and before/after.
Day 7	**Present + reflect** Artist statement and audience choice.	Rubric and growth goal.

Key technique to model

Still-life observation, symbolic composition, hierarchy, color relationship, critique.

Access without lowering the artistic goal

Identity map templates, anonymous/fictional subject choice, nonverbal reflection, object photography, adaptive supports for detailed observation.

Teacher coaching questions

- What is the visual problem you are solving?
- Which decision communicates your intended meaning most clearly?

- What does your reference prove, and what are you still imagining?
- What could a viewer misunderstand?
- What visible revision will strengthen your next version?

Cultural care

Respect privacy, consent and agency. Never assign students a cultural identity to depict; require accurate attribution when depicting another person.

Stretch & explore

Create two portraits of one person in different settings; compare the social assumptions each invites.

Design provenance: Direct localization of source investigation 5, Portrait Through Objects; retains a five-clue requirement and the evidence-versus-stereotype critique.