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## **To See or Not to See? A Visual Approach to Identity in Shakespeare**

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### **Introduction**

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When I was a child, my mother spent a tremendous amount of time finding educational and fun activities for my brother and me to perform in our free time. One of these activities that made a huge impression was going to the Williamsburg Shakespeare Festival every summer. In addition to seeing the performances, we would attend the "open backstage" events geared for children. I was immediately drawn to the costuming. The clothes were so rich, elegant and sumptuous. The visual splendor had an enormous impact on me. From these events, I was first drawn to Shakespeare, an initial step in coming to adore Shakespeare.

I also have a passion for English history, especially Tudor history, which has been reinforced by several trips to London. I believe that this enthusiasm also stems from my exposure to those Shakespearian performances early in my life. While I did not become an English teacher, I have always loved reading and seeing performances of Shakespeare and I go out of my way to see quality productions. My early experiences have had a life-long influence.

### **Objectives**

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I want to facilitate students applying their reading strategies, which they will be concurrently using in English class, to an art project. I will be asking them to use their visual skills in combination with making inferences about characters to create a visual portrait image. The focus of the unit will be on identity and how identity is communicated visually. We will examine how identity is communicated in Tudor portraits and then have the students use the same techniques as Tudor artists to create their own "portrait" of a Shakespearean character.

By teaching this unit, I also hope to inspire in my students an openness to Shakespeare: the beauty of the language, the wonderfully complex stories and characters, the historical context, and the pageantry of the period. And, as they will be encountering Shakespeare again on the high school level, I hope to build a platform for them so when they are academically paired again with Shakespeare, they embrace the

opportunity with enthusiasm.

I teach in an inner-city middle school, which also has an International Baccalaureate program. The IB program functions as a school within a school and serves the gifted students for the school system. I teach half time in the regular school program and half time in the IB program. In 8th grade, the IB students can pick either a music class or art class. The 8th grade art class is a year long honors class, which counts as high school credit. In the IB program, there is a focus on interdisciplinary teaching. The 8th grade English teacher does a unit on *Romeo and Juliet*. I have always wanted to do a unit that would integrate my art class with the English teacher's unit. Since she does her Shakespeare unit in the beginning of the year, at a time when I am doing a unit on self-portraits, this unit will integrate the two concepts.

The two overarching themes for this class are drawing from observation and looking at art in terms of the context in which it was created. This unit is designed to integrate both of these themes/goals. The studio production will be a drawing from observation. We will also be exploring the history of portraiture, Tudor portraits in particular, and the unique type of art known as Shakespearean art (art inspired by Shakespeare), all through the lens of the time period in which they were created. Ultimately, the students will be able to go from the "vocabulary" of the written play to the "vocabulary" of image, by applying the same skills of closely analyzing the character in a play and closely analyzing Tudor portraits and then applying the information acquired from both of these to their own image.

I want them to learn how identity is conveyed, both by writers and artists. They will be exposed to the complex characters of Shakespeare and how he developed those characters so the reader could understand the character's actions and reactions. They will also be exposed to the development of portraiture, and how artists contemporary to Shakespeare were also creating "documents" showing identity. This in turn will enable them to begin to be able to read portraits for their complex, deeper meanings. They will then be able to create a portrait designed to convey characteristics of the subject.

The state standards that will be covered are:

AI.7 The student will use a variety of subject matter and symbols to express ideas in works of art.

AI.6 The student will produce works of art that demonstrate an understanding of two-dimensional art media.

AI.15 The student will identify features of a work of art, including media, subject matter, and formal choices, that influence meaning.

AI.18 The student will identify and examine symbols in works of art and discuss possible reasons for their use.

In addition to the required objectives, I also want the students to be able to use facial proportions and the use of tints and shades to create a sense of 3D.

## Strategies

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The students will ultimately create portraits of a particular Shakespearean character. First, they will do research on several characters from Shakespeare in order to be able to begin to draw conclusions about the character's identity. In the second part of the lesson, we will look at the history of portraiture, focusing in on portraits from the Tudor periods. The third part of the lesson will enable the students to have the opportunity to apply the knowledge that they have learned: they will "stage" a self-portrait by dressing and posing as their selected character from Shakespeare. By "staging" a portrait, I want the students to be able to apply their ideas about their character's identity, using the information that they have learned about the character, Tudor portraits, and symbolism in art.

From this staging of their chosen character, the students will create an oil pastel drawing. Their final portrait should have the iconography that enables others to "read" their character. After the students have made the artistic decisions about their own portrait and have finished it, I will use, as closure to the unit, an aesthetic and art criticism activity that will focus on how other artists, since the time of Shakespeare, have created art that uses Shakespeare as the subject matter. We will look at these examples of Shakespearean art—in addition to their art historical context—in terms of how successfully the students feel that the artist has captured the character or the scene depicted. We will look at how mood, technique, composition, pose, setting, expression and costume either contribute to or detract from what the students perceive to be the essence of the character or the play. I feel this unit will be appealing to all of the students as they will have an open-ended problem to solve and will need to think creatively to solve it.

## The Shakespeare characters

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Running concurrently with my unit, the English teacher will be doing a unit *on Romeo and Juliet*. In her class the students will be introduced to the language of Shakespeare, and will view two film versions of the play, as well as reading the play in its entirety. As I want to model for the students the thought processes I will be expecting them to use, and as the students will become very familiar with *Romeo and Juliet* and the characters in it, I will be using characters from this play as my models.

I will introduce the students to three other plays by Shakespeare: *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*. After going over the narratives of each play, the students will select one character from one of the plays that appeals to them and that they would like to explore further. The characters from which they will be able to choose are:

\*Macbeth

Macbeth is the main character who begins as a loyal supporter of King Duncan and ends up killing Duncan so that he, Macbeth, will become king. To maintain being king and to cover up the murder, he ends up killing more before he gets his comeuppance.

\*Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth is an ambitious, powerful woman who encourages her husband to murder Duncan and eventually cracks under the pressure and kills herself.

\*Macduff

From the beginning he suspected Macbeth of the murder. He is honorable and loyal, but he flees to England to avoid Macbeth, leaving his wife and son to be murdered by Macbeth's men.

\*Othello

This black Moor is a well-respected military officer. He desperately loves his wife, Desdemona, whom he kills in jealousy, having been influenced by Iago's web of lies.

\*Desdemona

Othello's wife is beautiful, kind, intelligent and loyal. Despite Othello's untrue allegations, she continues to love and defend him.

\*Iago

Here is a truly malevolent character who manipulates and lies to everyone to achieve his goal, the destruction of Othello. He is very cunning and able to pretend to be Othello's friend while he is plotting and conniving behind this façade.

\*Katherina

Better known as Kate, she is a smart, fiercely independent, hot-tempered young lady who does exactly what she wants. She meets her match in Petruchio, whom she eventually marries but with whom there are tremendous clashes.

\*Petruchio

Headstrong and eccentric, Petruchio is enticed by Kate's looks, spirit and above all, inheritance. He determines to wed and "tame" her.

\*Bianca

Bianca is Kate's younger sister who appears to be a submissive, docile young lady who manages to get her way, but in a less obvious way than Kate.

Once the students have selected the character that they wish to explore, I will provide them with several graphic organizers to be used in conjunction with their reading of their selected play. While reading the play, they will be finding any physical description or any implied physical traits and selecting adjectives that they feel describe their character. They will also be focusing on extracting from the text what the character says and does and what other characters say about him or her. After practicing these close reading skills, we will use the same skills, close observation and analysis, to view portraiture.

We will begin by looking at the history of portraiture, exploring the context in which changes in portraiture occurred. Next, we will focus on Tudor portraits, which, besides being the visual art of Shakespeare's time, are a wonderful type of portrait to use for this unit because they are highly iconographical and are deliberate,

conscious depictions of identity in terms of class status.

## History of Portraits

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As the students will learn, from the beginning of time people have created images of people. Often these images represented a god or a goddess or a generic human, rather than a specific individual. In ancient Egypt, the images depicted were of rulers and nobility. Instead of trying to capture a likeness, the purpose of the image here was to show the person's power and greatness. In ancient Greece, portraits of individual people were completely idealized, with sculpture that was concerned with showing idealized beauty and not the individual countenance. Roman art was an unusual exception to this trend. In this culture, the portraits were very realistic, showing all aspects of a person's image, even if ugly. Many of the portraits were created from death masks, so they were very authentic. During the Middle Ages there were almost no portraits done. The artists of this period were concerned with showing religious subjects and the people they portrayed were religious figures, not individual people. In the Renaissance, portraiture was revived and thrived. Man, meaning humans, became the center of art. Portraiture even enters religious art during this time period with the donor portraits found in altarpieces and other devotional and religious images. The image of the donor of a specific work was incorporated into the painting, though on a smaller scale than the religious figures which dominated the painting.

During the Renaissance portraits that were intended to capture an individual's likeness began to gradually gain prominence, as man himself became more important in the universe. Prior to this, portraits were used mainly to illustrate one's status and social position, while making an individual likeness was secondary. Most of the portraits being done were commissioned by the nobility or the Church, focused on displaying status and power, and thereby were actually a form of visual propaganda. But capturing the likeness of the person became more important as did the concept of telling the inner character of the person on the basis of their image. This is not to say that status was not a very important message to be communicated to the viewer, because it continued to be. Depicting status, or the external "character" of the person, was still being done in the same ways, through clothing, symbolic objects, and posture. But in the later part of the Renaissance, portraits began to be commissioned by private individuals, and this encouraged significant changes. I feel it is very important for the students to have a context of how portraits evolved up to the Tudor period and to understand the function of portraits in Tudor England.

## Tudor Portraits

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It will be important for the students to understand that Tudor portraits are unique in that they are really a blend of the two reasons for creating a portrait, to communicate a likeness and to communicate status. Great Britain, partly because of its location as an island, was somewhat disconnected from the art that was being produced on the European continent. Britain's art was always a little behind what was occurring elsewhere and the British tended to have a suspicion of and a slight prejudice against what the other countries were doing. Part of this, of course, had to do with the relationships these countries had, i.e. one of competition and

often aggression. At various times, both France and Spain were enemies of Britain. During the reign of Henry VIII, Italy, if only for their ties to the Roman Catholic Church, also was not on good terms with Britain. For these reasons, the Tudor portraits are not as sophisticated as the portraiture in continental European countries, where there was a more open exchange of ideas and opportunities for artists to travel and study outside their own countries. I found Tarnya Cooper's *A Guide to Tudor and Jacobean Portraits* the best source for information. While I looked at other resources, and will have several available for the students to look at, this one was very clear and concise.

Tudor portraits do show a reasonable likeness of the sitter, but most importantly they were about status and how the sitter wanted to be remembered. The Tudor artist was meticulous about showing detail, and this is especially evident in the depiction of the elaborate costumes worn in the time period. Individual sitters wanted their portraits to enhance their status. Because of this they would wear their best clothes, in the latest fashion and often had symbols that would show their allegiance to the Queen. They would pose and have symbols and attributes depicted that would show them in the best possible light. 1

The type of life- sized portraits and half-sized portraits that we associate with the Tudor image arrived in Britain somewhat late. By the late 1400s, portraiture was very common on the Continent, but there were very few portraits painted before 1500 in Britain. It really was Henry VIII who caused the popularity of life -sized portraiture to grow in Britain. He wanted to use his image to show not only his status but also the status of his court as a means of propaganda. He was very conscious of his image and only wanted to be depicted as a powerful monarch. Because of Henry's use of portraiture, the popularity of portraits grew and the nobles and other members of the court began to want their portraits done. In the later part of the 1500s, portraits became popular for men and women who were outside the court. These included merchants and other wealthy members of society. By 1600, lawyers, writers, and other professionals began commissioning portraits. 2

As the popularity of portraits grew during this time, other art forms that had been a mainstay of English culture, specifically religious imagery, were in decline, being removed, whitewashed over, destroyed or hidden because of the separation of Henry VIII from the Catholic Church. Thus the Tudor portrait makes up the largest surviving category of painting from this time. There were, of course, other types of art that have not survived as well, including tapestries, painted clothes that served as wall hangings, and heraldic images or crests. Also, woodcut and metal plate engravings were becoming popular for images in books.3

For the students, I will be focusing specifically on how Tudor portraits communicate identity. Tudor portraits have two major functions: to communicate a likeness and to communicate the status or identity of the sitter. One would want one's portrait to show what one looked like for family members, including descendents, social contemporaries who would view the image and, of course, posterity. 4 It is a common human desire to leave a mark on the world, a way to say, "I was here". In a time period where portraits were not common (unlike today with the proliferation of the camera), one would inevitably perceive the image as a way of immortalizing oneself and one would want the image to show how one actually looked, within reason. You would want to look your best. After all, who would not like having a likeness that was "airbrushed", as it were?

The other major function of Tudor portraiture was to put on one's best "external" face. This function was, while appealing to one's ego, primarily intended to impress the viewers of the image. So, how does one show, in a visual image, one's status in the best light? How, in a picture, does one show one's status, wealth and power? The Tudors had a visual system, a language or vocabulary if you will, for depicting these things. Through dress, jewelry, mottos, coats of arms, emblems of an office or even symbols integrating into the image, there

was an advanced vocabulary that communicated many messages about the sitter.

The Tudor sitter would consciously wear his or her best, and latest, fashion. By the 1550s, a unique phenomenon had occurred in England. Throughout Europe, England was known as a place where someone's clothes literally made the man. It was a society where what one wore counted at least as much, if not more, than birth, and one's clothes really defined one's status as a gentleman. The men of the period dressed as extravagantly as the women. It was possible to move up society's social ladder by wearing expensive clothes. Thus clothes, which were seen as a true reflection of your status in life, were very costly and often were the most precious and prized items owned by Tudor gentry and nobility. It goes without saying that middle school students will be able to closely identify with this aspect of Tudor culture. Fashion during this time changed rapidly and when people had their portrait painted, they would of course choose to be shown wearing only the latest fashion. The clothing worn by Anne of Cleves was a part of why she was not easily accepted by Henry VIII's court. All this is now a tremendous benefit to the art historian in that the portraits can be accurately dated to within five to 10 years of their execution. 5

In addition to wearing one's best clothes, the sitter would often have inscriptions and/or coats of arms included in the image, often in the upper left hand corner. These are common features in Tudor portraiture and served to further define the identity of the sitter. The inscriptions, written either in Latin or in English, would often have the sitter's age and the date when the painting was created. This tradition has caused some confusion, because later generations would add an inscription idealizing who they thought the sitter was and when they thought it was painted. Often the added information was incorrect. Coats of arms, also frequently put in the upper left hand corner, were, above all else, designed to very clearly inform the viewer of the status, in this case the "family lineage or recently acquired honors", of the sitter. 6

In addition to using clothes, inscriptions and coats of arms to depict one's identity, the use of symbols customarily appeared in a variety of ways. Elizabethan courtiers commonly incorporated into their portraits items that would be intended to be read as symbols for their loyalty to Queen Elizabeth. They would consciously incorporate her personal colors- white, gold, black and red- into the image. They would also wear items of clothing, such as a cloak with a sun motif, the sun being a symbol of Elizabeth, or jewelry, such as pearls, symbolizing the Virgin Queen, or miniatures or cameos depicting her that would convey their loyalty to her. 7

Tudor jewelry was often produced in heraldic forms, as emblems, as symbolic animals or even letters. A famous example of this is the necklace worn by Anne Boleyn in many portraits. The necklace is a gold "B" with three pearls hanging from the bottom. It is currently experiencing a certain amount of fame as the necklace that the character Betty wears in the television show " Ugly Betty". I know that the students will be happy to connect the unit to a piece of popular culture.

Finally, many Tudor portraits depicted the sitter holding something in one or both hands. These items were carefully chosen for their symbolic meanings. While these items add another level of meaning to the message the sitter wanted to convey, it can be challenging to decipher these messages today. Many of the symbols, such as the pomegranate, have different and often contradictory meanings associated with them. I have included in the appendix a list of common images used in Renaissance art and some of the basic, most common connotations. This is the list that the students will be using when trying to decipher Tudor portraits and in creating their own portrait. Before and during the actual production of the students' portraits, I will only show them portraits painted up to this time period, i.e. Tudor England, focusing of course on the portraiture being done during this period.



## Shakespearean Art

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When the students have finished their portraits of their selected Shakespearean character, we will explore a unique type of art, art inspired by Shakespeare. There is an entire genre of art that uses Shakespeare's plays and sonnets as subject matter. I have decided not to show these images prior to the completion of the studio project because I do not want the students to be influenced by images of Shakespearean characters created by other artists. While I can't say there are many examples of great art found in this category of art, if indeed any, it does provide a very interesting, unique chapter to art history and specifically the art history of Great Britain, and to the importance of William Shakespeare. I think it is important (and is one of the state objectives) that students understand the historical context of art and how history not only reflects in art but also helps determine the development of art.

These Shakespearean artworks tend to be by British artists, and while there are some by American artists and others, they all have commonalities. As the students will learn, there are two approaches that an artist (and for that matter the general audience) can use to approach Shakespeare's plays. There is the experience of reading his plays in private and the experience of seeing his plays performed in public. Artists can either imagine what a character or a scene would look like by themselves or use specific productions or actors for the subject. Much of Shakespearean art can be divided into two broad categories that connect to these two approaches to Shakespeare. First, there is Shakespearean art that is intended to be illustration for a book format or function similar to illustration, though not intended to be published but to stand on its own. Second, there is art that is theatrical, in that it depicts either scenes from specific productions or portraits of actors in their role.<sup>8</sup> Literary illustrations can be further divided into various categories, namely history painting and genre painting. History paintings show heroic action in a very idealized style, while genre paintings, often much smaller in scale, depict everyday scenes and commonplace activities.<sup>9</sup>

There are three quotes that I will display in the classroom during this unit. I feel that both will give the students a different basis upon which to consider the relationships between Shakespeare's written work and the visual Shakespearean art. The first and second quotes, "Like stage productions, works of art are vital components in the continuing saga of Shakespeare interpretations for, as W. Moelwyn Merchant has written, 'every painting or engraving based on a poem or play is a critical gesture toward its source, a critical gesture the more potent in that it does not cease to be an original creative act.'" <sup>10</sup> and "As an act of translation from word into picture, Shakespearean art often tells the modern viewer as much about the manners and customs of the periods in which it was produced as it sheds light on Shakespeare's meaning."<sup>11</sup> are by Ross Anderson. And the last quote, "In the final analysis, the artists offer their own interpretation of Shakespeare. The best of their work is an act of criticism on par with that of the literary critic and the actor."<sup>12</sup> is by William Pressly.

### History of Shakespearean Art

As my students will learn, to understand this very unique category of art, one has to put it in context with what was happening in Britain and in Europe at the same time. In France, in 1648, Charles Le Brun, an artist, and Louis XIV founded the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture.

(<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/349071/Louis-XIV-style#ref=ref208229>) This academy was rather imperious and dictated not only style but also subject matter. From the practices of this Academy grew the idea of a hierarchy of the painting of subject matter. At the top of the hierarchy was history painting, a style of painting that produced canvases quite large in size with many figures shown in action. The subject was drawn from "history," namely classical mythology and religious subjects, derived from the Old and New



Testament. These history paintings were thought to be the highest form of painting because of the emphasis on the human figure in action, considered the most challenging subject matter to paint, as well as a form that often depicted man at his best, as hero, etc. An interesting side note is that the term "masterpiece" was derived from the French Academy. The final project that artists had to complete, a history painting, was called their Master piece, implying that it would demonstrate their mastery of what was learned in the Academy. Because of England's relationship with the Continent, there was a perceived need for developing a new category of history painting for English artists. The British could not claim Classical mythology as their own, as it naturally was considered Italian and artists did not want, in this Protestant country, to draw on Catholic religious imagery.

In 1768, George III founded the Royal Academy of Arts, in London.

(<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/511208/Royal-Academy-of-Arts>) As a side note, one can see how England is lagging a little behind other European countries. Joshua Reynolds, a famous and influential British painter, became the first president of the Royal Academy. During his tenure, from 1769 to 1790, he repeatedly called on artists to advance English painting by creating paintings with important subjects. Those would include subjects from history, mythology and literature. He also wished them to use the techniques and compositional styles of the great masters of art. The painting of this time that was based on Shakespeare fulfilled Reynolds's guidelines. 13 It would also give history painting a subject matter that would be exclusively British.

I found that Ross Anderson's and William Pressly's books on Shakespearean art were the two resources that had the most information on the subject. While there are other books that have wonderful images, these two had the best content and also wonderful resources.

From 1769 until 1900, almost 1,400 artworks depicting Shakespearean subjects were displayed at the Royal Academy of Art in London. Before 1770, most of the images created based on Shakespeare were functional in that they were not intended to hang alone on a wall as a work of art but to be used as front pieces in publications or as portraits of the actors playing one of Shakespeare's roles. In the 1760's, the interest in Shakespeare's plays expanded tremendously. This was due to three things: new editions of the plays and new criticism, the fact that there were Shakespearean paintings at the first public art exhibition, and the popularity of the Shakespearean actor, David Garrick. In addition to being very popular and crucial to the renewed interest in Shakespeare's plays, Garrick was very adroit at self-promotion. He commissioned more than 175 known portraits of himself, many of them in his roles from Shakespeare.14

During the 1770's and 1780s, there came to be a general agreement that Shakespeare was "England's supreme dramatist and poet." The variety that one finds in Shakespeare's plays and poetry provided artists with divergent subject possibilities and thus became a popular choice. During this time frame history paintings were still considered the "noblest category in the hierarchy of art." and Reynolds envisioned a new genre of British paintings inspired by the history paintings of 16th and 17th century Italy. 15 The Continental master artists had a long tradition of creating history paintings inspired by "universal" texts such as the Bible, mythology, and classical history. By treating Shakespeare's work in the same ways as these classical works were, and lifting art that depicted Shakespearean subject matter to the same category as these large scale history paintings, the English artists were "breaking new ground" and asserting their equality to the continental European countries. 16 . A perfect example of this is the Boydell Gallery.

## **Boydell Gallery**

"The greatest single act of patronage for painters in the 18th century England revolved completely around

Shakespeare." 17 John Boydell (1719-1804) was one of the most successful print publishers in London. He formed the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery, which displayed art images depicting scenes and characters from Shakespeare's work. Boydell's idea for the gallery was motivated by pride in England and a desire to honor Shakespeare. He wanted to have the greatest artists in Britain paint scenes from work by the greatest British author. 18 This idea was first put forth at a dinner where there were a number of artists, including Joshua Reynolds, and John Boydell. By lauding Shakespeare, the British artists were also asserting their own worth and indicating that they could compete with any nationality in terms of creativity. Boydell's ultimate plan was to have 100 large-scale paintings and 100 small paintings on permanent view in the gallery. While he charged admission to the gallery, most of the money was gained from subscription sales of the prints that were created from the paintings. Unfortunately the project collapsed before all 200 Shakespearean paintings were commissioned. 19

By choosing the great English Dramatist as the pinnacle subject for the British paintings, Boydell hoped that there would be mass appeal for the prints that he would make of the paintings and then sell. The Shakespeare Gallery was opened in 1789 with 34 paintings and by 1802 it had 167 paintings by 33 different artists. 20 It was so successful that in 1792 James Wood Mason opened one in Dublin. 21

There developed two basic categories of Shakespearean art: history painters that preferred subject from Shakespeare's tragedies and darker moments, and genre painters (painters that developed in the tradition of 17th century Dutch genre painting), who preferred the histories, the comedies and the romances. 22

## **Victorian**

The generation of artists coming after Boydell still looked to Shakespeare for subject matter but were forced, without Boydell's patronage, to configure their art to a broader, mass appeal. By the 1830's the artists were focusing on narrative domestic scenes. 23

Queen Victoria reigned from 1837-1901. During her reign subjects from literature were very popular. The burgeoning middle class preferred literary subjects to the more upper class subjects of "dynastic portraits or sporting scenes". This middle class supported the artists who were working at this time, and this patronage helped shape the development of using subjects from literature. 24 During the Victorian era, fairy paintings were exceptionally popular and Shakespeare's two plays that contain fairies (*The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) were fashionable choices. From the very first Royal Academy of Art exhibition in 1769 to that of 1830, there had been approximately five to ten paintings that had Shakespearean subject matter in each of the annual exhibitions. However, in 1830 the number increased to fifteen and in the 1840s and 1850s, to around twenty. This marked the height of the popularity of Shakespearean subjects. 25

While Boydell had been concerned with encouraging a British school of history painting, publishers of the mid-eighteen hundreds were more concerned with appealing to a wide market. The Victorian artists had a proclivity for sentimentalizing Shakespearean subjects. This is seen in the publications by Charles Heath of Shakespeare's heroines. The heroines are saccharine, pretty young girls and were enormously popular. 26 These images were held up as examples of what women should be. "The canonization of Shakespearean female characters required certain distortions in the interpretations of the plays." 27

## **Pre-Raphaelites**

The pre-Raphaelites, a group of young artists who first came together in 1848, considered Shakespeare near the top of their list of "Immortals" and even called for making Shakespeare's birthday a national holiday.

Needless to say, Shakespearean subjects abound in their artwork. The Pre-Raphaelites were extremely concerned with accuracy of all minute details. Because of this they developed "a striking new realism imbued with freshness and clarity". Perhaps the most famous pre-Raphaelite Shakespearean artwork is Sir John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1851-1852). The image depicts Ophelia floating on the water just before she drowns. Millais worked for six months (over 1000 hours) just painting the natural background. The model for Ophelia spent many days floating in a bathtub so that he could precisely represent a floating body. 28 Luckily for her, he didn't expect her to actually drown.

From the 1860s to the 1880s, the quantity of Shakespearean art shown at the Royal Academy dropped from about twenty a year to about fifteen. One of the important Shakespearean subject painters for the late Victorian period was the American Edwin Austin Abbey. He began painting in oils in the 1890s when he was thirty-eight. Another important painter of Shakespearean subjects was Frederick Leighton. "One significant development in late 19th century artists' approaches to Shakespeare is epitomized in the evolution of the art of Frederick Leighton." Leighton began to stop using the painstaking, detailed research of costumes, nature and settings that are typical of the Pre-Raphaelites. He also stopped painting "elaborate, theatrical narratives that had characterized English representations from Shakespeare and other subjects from the time of the Boydell Shakespeare Gallery." Now Shakespearean subjects tended to be portraits of pretty young women that were viewed as studies in "form, color and mood." 29 By the beginning of World War I, the new art styles from France (Impressionism and Post-Impressionism) were gaining in popularity in England and Shakespearean themes lost their status as the most popular subject matter for art. 30

## Classroom Activities

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### Lesson One- Introduction to Shakespearean Characters

I plan on having the students "stage" themselves as a character in one of Shakespeare's plays. I will introduce my unit by introducing the three plays at which we will be looking: *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*. The students will be, concurrently, exploring *Romeo and Juliet* in depth in their English class. I do not expect the students to be familiar with these plays or the characters. To introduce the plays, I will put several copies of "60 Second Shakespeare Newspapers" on each table. These "newspapers" are one page long and formatted in a tabloid style. Each gives a short, engaging summary of the plot and major characters of each play. ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/shakespeare/60secondshakespeare/themes\\_index.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/shakespeare/60secondshakespeare/themes_index.shtml))

From this information, I will ask the students to select a play or character that interests them. When they commit to their character, I will give them the *No Fear Shakespeare* version of their selected play. This version has the original text on the left side of the page and a modern language version on the right side. I have selected these versions because I want to enable students who are interested and motivated to be able to delve into the original language but I also want to make the plays accessible to all of the students, even those who would struggle with the language. My assumption is that most of them will have little or no experience with the language of Shakespeare and while the English teacher will be teaching, in depth, the language, that will probably be occurring a little later in the time frame of this unit, and therefore will not be of help to my students at this time.

I will provide three graphic organizers that the students will complete as they read their chosen play. The

graphic organizers will include one page of descriptive adjectives, another page where the students will look for physical description, inferred physical description, background information on the character, the personality of the character and their personal response to the character, and a final graphic organizer that will have the students "read closely". They will need to cite lines from the play that show evidence of what the character does and says, and what others say about the character. Since they will be concurrently reading *Romeo and Juliet*, I will use Juliet as my example of how to complete the organizers. As a group we will complete (as much as the time in class allows) the last worksheet. I will then allow the students to work on this assignment over the following week (approximately two to three class periods—we are on block scheduling, where we see each class for 90 minutes every other day). At the end of each class period during this time, I will use the last 30 minutes for the students to break into small groups, determined by the play on which they are working. During this time they may work independently, cooperatively, with their classmates, or they can ask my assistance.

## **Lesson Two - Portraiture**

Running concurrently to the class period where the students will be working on their character analysis, I will be using the first 60 minutes of the class to focus on the history of portraiture and Tudor portraits. Using a PowerPoint of images, I will outline the history of portraiture up to the Renaissance. In their sketchbooks, I will have them create a time line of the basic art historical periods that I will discuss: ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, Roman, Middle Ages and the Renaissance. They will need to provide dates for each period and draw a portrait that will signify the type of portrait that would have been done during that particular period. They will also include the pertinent information.

On the next day, I will present a PowerPoint that focuses on Tudor portraits. I will show this to them twice. The first time I will have them look for similarities among the portraits, hoping that they will be able to identify the characteristics of a Tudor portrait. We will then have a discussion where I elicit from them what they discerned from seeing many of the images. I will write these commonalities on the board, making sure that individual likeness, elaborate costumes and jewelry, items in the hand(s), flat backgrounds, inscriptions, and coats of arms are noted. We will then discuss what these items would mean in Tudor England and what we can infer about both the Tudor culture and the individual sitters for the portraits. If time allows this day, I will show the PowerPoint a second time (if not, this will be done during the following class period). During this viewing of the PowerPoint, we will focus on symbolism. When the students were in 6th grade, they did a unit on symbolism; so while I will remind them of what symbolism and symbols are, I expect them to have a clear understanding of the concept. For each image, I will point out the symbol (or the item that could have symbolic meaning) and ask them to infer—based on their new knowledge of Tudor England—or even guess what it might mean. We will proceed through the images this way, adding to their visual vocabulary. At the end of the class, I will give them the handout of symbols, which they will glue into their sketchbook for future reference. Their homework will be to look at the list and decide on five symbols that could relate to some aspect of their Shakespearean character. They will name the five symbols, and with a few sentences on each, explain the connect, as they perceive it, to the character. This will be their first step in contemplating their character visually.

In the following class period, we will divide into pairs and go to my computer lab (part of the art room). I have twelve computers and never more than twenty-five students in a class. The students will go to the website page of Showtime's *The Tudors* (<http://www.sho.com/site/tudors/characters.do>) that has the link to "the Restoration Project". This interactive website has ten of the major characters from the show as "painted" portraits. The viewer needs to select from five possible objects to place into the portrait (thus "resorting" the portrait). Two will be considered "correct" and three "incorrect". When the website says it is correct, it gives

an explanation of why that object is an appropriate symbol for that particular character. I will allow the students to do each of the portraits while taking notes on the explanations of the symbols. These notes will be taken in their sketchbook. I will also ask that they do a sketch of each symbol next to their explanation. I anticipate this taking most of the class period.

At the end of the class, I will present the challenge of the studio project: the student will need to "stage" a portrait of their Shakespearean character. They will need to think how the character will be dressed, what jewelry they will have, their pose, their facial expression and any objects that they will be holding in their hands. I will explain that they should portray their character like actors. I will show them some of the props that I have gathered and that have been donated by the parents (as per a letter sent out at the beginning of the year). I tell them that they are welcome to bring anything from home that they might want to use, (given parents' approval) and that they could even create their own costume. They will have two or three days to work on this while I begin teaching the technical studio skills that will be required to complete the portrait.

### **Lesson Three - Staging of the Self-Portrait**

After the background information is given and their research is completed, I will have the students design a costume and stage a portrait of their chosen character. I will spend some time talking about how one stages a production, and how you need to select authentic costumes, props, hairstyles etc., to reflect the characters. These concepts should reinforce the previous day's instruction. I hope to have a costume designer, a set designer or even a director from the Theater Department at one of the local universities (University of Richmond or Virginia Commonwealth University) come in and talk about how one designs costumes or sets, or stages a production. I will request that the speaker address how these decisions reflect the personality and identity of the characters in the performance. We might even be able to take a field trip to the University of Richmond to see their Theater Department

I envision having the students dress themselves as the character, as this would be most engaging for them. I will have clothing items that they can use, e.g. cloaks, hats, etc., as well as jewelry and crowns. I will also have fabric that they can drape or pin to create a costume. I would imagine that some of the students would find items at home and some might even do some work on their costumes at home.

In addition to dressing themselves as the character, they will also need to decide on the objects that might be in the portrait. The students will need to think about what pose, expression and hand position would exemplify the character. I will also talk about symbols that can be used in portraits and let the students select objects to be used as symbols to further communicate the character. They will have their notes and handouts to help their thought processes. Armed with all of this information (information about their character, Tudor portraits, symbolism and staging of theatrical productions), they will be ready to figure out how they will "stage" their portrait.

### **Lesson Three - Studio**

I will spend one to two classes teaching or reviewing the specific art skill that they will need to actually create their drawing of their portrait. I will review tints and shades and demonstrate the use of oil pastels and how to create tints and shades using oil pastels. I will also discuss composition, contour line and proportion.

During the next class period, the day that they were told would be our staging day, the students will bring all of their props to class. I will have set up in the corner a chair with a large light and a black drapery background. The students, having dressed themselves and selected their items, will then take turns arranging

themselves as the focus of their envisioned portraits. I will take a photo of each one of them posed as the character. While waiting their turn, the other students will begin a rough draft of their justification of why they have made their visual decisions and how these decisions reflect directly back to the identity of their chosen Shakespearean character.

The next day (or perhaps two days, depending on how quickly all get photographed) I will give them their photograph. Using this image, they will create a large, 18"x24" oil pastel self-portrait drawing. During the drawing phase, I will focus on facial proportion rules, tints and shades, and creating a three dimensional illusion on a two dimensional surface, as well as composition. As the students finish, I will have them continue to work on their justification of the choices they have made regarding their self-portrait. I also plan on having them present their drawings to the other 8th grade students who are in the IB program but who do not take art. I think it would be interesting for the students to be able to explain their portraits to their peers and maybe, just maybe, spark an interest in their peers.

#### **Lesson Four - Shakespearean Art**

After the oil pastel portraits and the justification papers are finished, as a closure to the unit, we will look at Shakespearean art. I have developed PowerPoint presentations for each of the plays that they have been studying: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*. I also have one that gives an overview of the history of Shakespearean art. After we have viewed the history PowerPoint, I will show each of the play's PowerPoints. Each one has several examples of Shakespearean art that depict scenes and characters from the play. During the PowerPoint, we will talk about how each image is or is not an accurate depiction of the play and/or character. At the end, I will give each group of students that did the same character a copy of a painting of that character or of a scene from the play. Using an art criticism worksheet as a guide, they will need to write an essay that deals with the four steps of art criticism: description, analysis, interpretation and judgment. Each statement will need to have evidence from the painting. I will make the connection to the worksheet that they did while reading the play, the one in which they found evidence of their character's identity within the play.

After looking at the Shakespearean art and writing the criticism essay, I will show the students some images by Cindy Sherman, a contemporary photographer who is known for her conceptual self-portraits. She does series, and one of her most famous series, the one we will be looking at, is the History Portraits. She cast herself in roles in famous paintings. We will have a brief discussion comparing and contrasting what she did in this series with what we did. I will then ask them to remember this artist because we will be coming back to her.

This unit fits within my first semester curriculum very well. This will be the first unit we do. After this unit, we do a unit on Dutch still life painting, where we deal with the development of different categories of art (i.e. portraits, history painting, still life, interiors, seascapes, genre painting, etc) and the hierarchy of these. We will emphasize the still life category and the use of symbolism in these vanitas paintings. The students create their own vanitas painting. After this, we return to portraiture, returning to Cindy Sherman and featuring the contemporary artist, Kehinde Wiley. He is an extremely talented artist who takes inner-city youth and has them select artwork from the traditional western European art canon. He then paints the young man, dressed in his street clothes, in the setting of the image from art history. I will have the students do a self-portrait, in charcoal, and have them create an abstracted background design from tapestries from the Renaissance period. I am very excited, not only about the unit itself, but how well it fits within my curriculum. I know my students will develop and strengthen their analytical thinking skills.



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## Notes

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