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Lesson Plan: Black and White Mixed-Media Portrait Collage

Grades

All

Subject Areas

Visual Arts

Social Studies

Media Type

2-D Collage

Estimated Time

Varies according to grade levels; two to three class sessions

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Student Learning Objectives

Students will explore the idea of portraiture and create a mixed-media self-portrait collage, paying particular attention to formal aspects. This lesson begins by discussing photographs by twentieth-century documentary photographer Dorothea Lange and continues to the creation of a work of art. Suggestions for alternative, social-studies-connected assignment and pre-lesson activity included.

Context

In the 1930s, the twin cataclysms of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl inspired a group of socially conscious photographers to capture the mass exodus of Americans from their homes and farms. Photographer Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) began her career as a portrait photographer but in the midst of the Great Depression, she turned her camera to the streets, documenting the experiences of her fellow Americans. In 1935 she began working for the Farm Security Administration (a program of the New Deal). In this work, she and other photographers traveled around the country taking photographs for the government to help show what was happening in the United States. This extensive documentary project helped motivate Congress to provide relief those greatly affected by the Depression and Dust Bowl. The photographs are stored at the Library of Congress and are in the public domain.

Essential Questions

- What is a portrait?
- Why do artists create portraits?
- How can I use materials other than drawing tools to create a **representational** image?
- How does a change in **value** help create a sense of **form**?

National Visual Arts Performance Standards

Anchor Standard 1.1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 1.2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 1.3: Refine and complete artistic work.

Anchor Standard 3.1: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard 3.2: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Anchor Standard 4.1: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

Anchor Standard 4.2: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

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NC Social Studies Essential Standards

2.H.1 Understand how various sources provide information about the past.

3.H.2 Use historical thinking skills to understand the context of events, people and places.

3.C&G.2 Understand how citizens participate in their communities.

Potential other connections, depending on how you structure the conversation looking at photographs:

4.H.1 Analyze the chronology of key historical events in North Carolina history.

4.E.1 Understand how a market economy impacts life in North Carolina.

5.H.1 Analyze the chronology of key events in the United States.

5.E.1 Understand how a market economy impacts life in the United States.

8.H.3 Understand the factors that contribute to change and continuity in North Carolina and the United States.

Resources

The Great Depression Resource Page for Teachers at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC [loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/themes/great-depression](https://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/themes/great-depression)

Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives in the Library of Congress, Washington, DC [loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa](https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa)

Webcast “About the FSA Collection” with speaker Carl Fleischhauer.

2011/09/13. Running time: 11 minutes. [loc.gov/item/WEBCAST5541](https://www.loc.gov/item/WEBCAST5541)

Photogrammar—a website that geographically organizes the 170,000 photographs created by the United States Farm Security Administration and Office of War Information (FSA-OWI) from 1935 to 1945. For example, you can find images Dorothea Lange took in North Carolina. photogrammar.yale.edu

“Dorothea Lange Biography with Photo Gallery,” *American Masters*, PBS [pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/dorothea-lange-biography-with-photo-gallery/3097](https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/dorothea-lange-biography-with-photo-gallery/3097)

"Reading Portraiture" Guide for Educators from the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC

[npg.si.edu/learn/classroom-resource/reading-portraiture-guide-educators](https://www.npg.si.edu/learn/classroom-resource/reading-portraiture-guide-educators)

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Vocabulary

Portrait: A likeness or image of a person that is created by an artist.

Sitter: The person or people who are in a portrait.

Attribute: An object associated with or held by a sitter, that serves as a *symbol* about that person

Symbol: Something representing something else by association; objects, characters, or other concrete representations of an abstract idea, concept, or event.

Art History Connection

Before the lesson, take time to look at two or three portraits by photographer Dorothea Lange. You might select *Migrant Mother, Nipomo California*, 1936 (Library of Congress Control Number 2017762891, [loc.gov/pictures/resource/fsa.8b29516](https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/fsa.8b29516)). Alternatively, use Yale's

Photogrammar website in the resources above to locate images Lange took in North Carolina. Some suggestions:

Dorothea Lange. *Member of the congregation of Wheeley's church who is called "Queen." She is wearing the old fashioned type of sunbonnet. Her dress and apron were made at home. Near Gordonton, North Carolina, 1939.* Library of Congress call number: LC-USF34- 019917-C [P&P] LOT 1496, reproduction number: LC-DIG-fsa-8b33928 ([loc.gov/pictures/item/2017772311](https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017772311))

Dorothea Lange. *Father of sharecropper family. He is sixty-nine years old, has six acres of tobacco, has a large family. Heard in conversation on his porch, "Land is like folks. It gets tired and needs a rest." Person County, North Carolina, 1939.* Library of Congress call number: LC-USF34- 019946-E [P&P] LOT 1497, reproduction number: LC-DIG-fsa-8b33956 ([loc.gov/pictures/item/2017772340](https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017772340))

Dorothea Lange. *Young North Carolinian in old Ford. He does not farm. "Works for wages." At Tuck's filling station. Person County, North Carolina, 1939.* Library of Congress call number: LC-USF34- 020253-E [P&P] LOT 1497, reproduction number: LC-DIG-fsa-8b34251 ([loc.gov/pictures/item/2017772645](https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017772645))

Dorothea Lange. *Young sharecropper and his first child. Hillside Farm. Person County, North Carolina, 1939.* Library of Congress call number: LC-USF34- 020258-E [P&P] LOT 1497, reproduction number: LC-USF34-020258-E ([loc.gov/pictures/item/2017772650](https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017772650))

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Instructions

- Project a selected portrait for all to see.
- Invite students to observe what they notice.
- Depending on the age, introduce the idea of **portraiture** or ask students to categorize the image.
- Ask open-ended questions that explore ideas of portraiture as well as the role of the artist in creating a portrait. See the resource from the National Portrait Gallery above for additional suggestions. Suggested questions:
 - What can you discover about a person just by looking at his/her portrait?
 - What kind of life do you think the sitter leads? Does he or she work? If so, doing what? Are there any props that give clues about the sitter's profession or lifestyle?
 - Are you looking directly at the sitter, or slightly upwards or even down on him or her? How does that make you feel?
 - How does the artist use light and dark in this portrait?
 - What does the setting tell us about the subject?
 - When was this portrait made? How does it relate to the time period during which it was made?
 - What do you think the person in this portrait wanted the artist to communicate about himself/herself?
 - How do you think the artist wanted viewers to feel about the subject(s)? What artistic techniques did she use to make you feel a certain way about the sitter? (e.g. like or dislike, admire or fear, pity or envy)
 - What do you think was the artist's attitude towards the sitter?
 - How might the relationship between artist and sitter influence the outcome of the portrait?
 - Why do you think the artist created this portrait?
 - What do you think the artist and sitter might have talked about? What conversation can you imagine?
- Explore some formal aspects of the photograph, like **visual texture** and areas of **light and shadow** and how that might focus attention to certain areas. Consider the **focal point** and how it is created. Are there **actual** or **implied lines**? What is the sense of **space** or **depth**? Think about how the photographer cropped the image (what did she include? what did she leave out?)

Adaptations

- If technology in the classroom is a challenge, print out photographs and invite students to look and converse in small groups.
- For more technology and research work, the students could use the Photogrammar site (photogrammar.yale.edu) to find a portrait from North

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Carolina that interests them and write a paragraph about what they *observe* and *infer* from the image.

- For younger students focus on what you can observe about the sitter and make personal connections to having their portrait made. Consider what emotion(s) the sitter might be feeling.



Self-Portrait Collage

Students will create a self-portrait by drawing a basic outline and collaging various materials to create the completed image.

Materials

- All-media paper
- Black, white and grey papers including: newspapers; used books; magazine text and black and white images; prepared papers (see suggestion at end for pre-lesson activity); construction paper; patterned papers (like scrapbook paper); silver foil paper (optional); crimped or otherly textured construction paper (made with a crimper)
- Pencils and erasers
- Black marker and/or india ink
- Mirrors
- Scissors
- Glue sticks
- Optional: other items like cotton balls, yarn, ribbon etc. in the black/white/grey/silver range

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Instructions

1. *Optional:* Review basic proportions of the human face.
2. Have students look at their image in a mirror and draw a basic contour of their features onto a piece of all media paper. *Optional:* Make some lines thick and some thin by using a black marker or India ink and a calligraphy brush.
3. Invite students to select various media for collage. Students should cut or tear papers and glue them to their paper to complete (or partially complete) the form of the face. Encourage them to think about the lights and darks and how to use texture from the papers (either in their pattern or in how they overlap) to contribute to creating the facial features.
4. Lay out the pieces before gluing to plan the composition.

Adaptations

1. For young students or students with some difficulty with fine motor skills, place liquid glue on a sponge so they may press the back of their collage pieces onto it and then glue the items to their paper.
2. For more advanced students, use Yes!™ Paste or matte medium as the adhesive.
3. Instead of using mirrors, students could use their phones to take a self-portrait (or pair with a partner to take portraits) and use the image to guide their composition.

Historical Figure Portrait Collage

Using the same materials, and with the same visual arts intentions, students will create a portrait of a historical figure instead of a self-portrait.

Instructions

1. Students select a historical figure to research.
2. After writing a brief report about the figure, students should consider what materials or textures would most fit the figure they selected. Then, they should use these materials to create a mixed-media collage of their selected individual.
3. Invite them to consider what **attributes** they could also include in the image to help communicate more about their selected historical figure.

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Adaptations

1. Tie in to the English Language Arts curriculum and instead of a historical figure, choose a literary character to develop and create through collage. Use text that describes the character as part of the collage material.

Suggested Pre-Lesson Activity: Create Prepared Papers

Thinking about texture, pattern and value, while exploring different media, students can prepare their own papers for collage.

Suggested Prepared Papers

1. With white tissue paper, India ink and water, let students explore the textures and patterns they can create with various greys. Try splattering or making repeated marks with a brush. Do the same on white all-media paper and try adding salt or alcohol (or drops of water) while the ink is still wet to get interesting effects. Try painting the paper with water first, then dropping ink on top.
2. With a small scrap of mat board, cardboard, or foam core, make patterns on black construction paper by scraping white acrylic paint across it. Try black paint on white paper.
3. Mix different shades of grey paint and sponge paint them onto white or black paper. Alternatively, paint with crumpled paper towels to create texture.
4. For a computer project, have students create patterns with typographic symbols and print a page for collage. Try different type sizes and see how that changes the visual texture. (E.g. create one row of ##^##^ as a repeating pattern and alternate it with rows of ^^#^^#)
5. Use textured plates or found textures to make textured rubbings (frottage).

