PORTRAITS IN CONVERSATION

THE INQUIRY PATH

Observe → Interpret → Add Context → Compare → Connect → Reflect

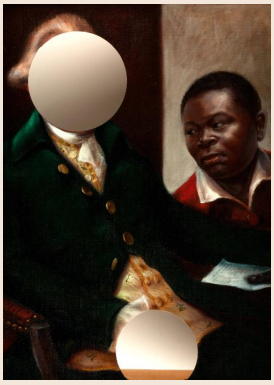
PORTRAIT & POWER

Ralph Earl and Titus Kaphar

Who is remembered, who is forgotten, and how can art help us see both?



Ralph Earl
Gentleman with Attendant, ca. 1785–88



Titus Kaphar
Jaavon & the Unknown Gentleman, 2011

Grade and subject	Time	Theme
Grade 8; adaptable for secondary U.S. History / Social Studies	60–90 minutes One or two lessons	Status, representation, and historical visibility

PORTRAITS AS HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

Portraits reveal how artists represent people and power, but they do not tell everyone's story. Earl's painting is an eighteenth-century primary source that uses eighteenth-century portrait conventions. Kaphar's 2011 response is a primary source for contemporary interpretation of that past. Pair close looking with historical evidence; distinguish what is visible, what is inferred, and what remains unknown.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Overview…1
Historical Context…2
Artists and Art…3
Sources…4
Teacher Toolkit…5–6
Six-Step Lesson…7
Student Handouts…8–12

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Debt, slavery, and unequal freedom in the early republic

RALPH EARL, CREDIT AND SOCIAL STATUS

Credit sustained everyday exchange in colonial and early America. Merchants recorded debts in account books; unpaid obligations could lead to lawsuits, imprisonment, or court-ordered service. Earl was confined for debt in New York from 1786 to 1788 and continued painting portraits there.

New England households participated in Atlantic networks linking local trade to Britain and the West Indies. Those networks were shaped by slavery and the slave trade. Enslavers sometimes sold people to satisfy debts. Free and enslaved people of color also used credit under severe legal and racial constraints.

SLAVERY AND GRADUAL FREEDOM

Slavery remained legal in New York during Earl's imprisonment. New York adopted gradual emancipation in 1799 with different rules and timelines for different groups of enslaved people. It ended slavery statewide in 1827.

Connecticut's 1784 law did not immediately free enslaved adults or children. It applied to children born to enslaved women after March 1, 1784, and required service to age 25 before freedom was granted. Connecticut finally abolished slavery in 1848 after a long process over decades.

These laws establish the wider context. Neither state's law establishes the identity or legal status of the child in Earl's painting.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR THE PAIRING

The pairing connects an eighteenth-century portrait to a contemporary intervention or visual appropriation. Kaphar makes the absence of a recorded identity central to the viewer's experience and makes clear that missing evidence does not mean that a person's life was unimportant. Historical context helps students recognize the systems surrounding Earl's image while remaining clear about what the painting can and cannot prove. What does the historical context help us understand that the painting alone cannot tell us?

OTHER PRIMARY EVIDENCE

Pair the images with a selected emancipation-law excerpt, an account-book entry, or a local archival record. Ask who created it, when, for what purpose, and whose experience it records. Help students see that a general record is not evidence about these unidentified sitters.

ARTISTS & ART

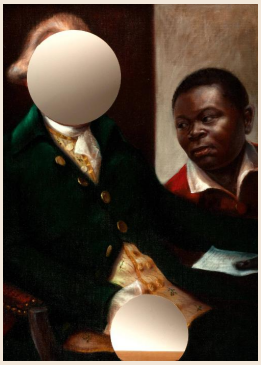


RALPH EARL, 1751–1801
Gentleman with Attendant, ca. 1785–88

Born in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, Earl worked in New Haven in the 1770s. He sketched Lexington and Concord but remained a Loyalist. He left Connecticut in 1777 and arrived in London in April 1778. He studied British portrait traditions and returned to New York in 1785.

Commissions helped secure his release from debtors' prison in 1788. He later worked as an itinerant portraitist in Connecticut and New England. This unsigned painting is attributed to him on stylistic grounds; both sitters remain unidentified.

LOOK FOR Oil portrait • red armchair • embroidered vest • gold buttons • scale, gaze, and gesture



TITUS KAPHAR, b. 1976
Jaavon & the Unknown Gentleman, 2011

Born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, Kaphar earned his Yale M.F.A. in 2006. His New Haven practice revisits art history through cutting, folding, covering, and removal. He received a 2018 MacArthur Fellowship and co-founded NXTHVN.

For this NBMAA commission, Kaphar recreated Earl's composition, portrayed his young neighbor Jaavon, and cut openings at the gentleman's face and hand. Naming Jaavon and showing his distinct features direct attention to him rather than to the unnamed gentleman.

LOOK FOR Oil on canvas • two circular openings • a named child • a changed center of attention

PAIRING LENS

Earl's portrait organizes status through scale, position, costume, and service. Kaphar reworks that visual hierarchy and asks whose individuality art preserves. Jaavon is a contemporary child, not an identification of the historical attendant. Kaphar's intervention changes the representation; it does not recover the attendant's biography.

LEARN MORE / SOURCES

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Bruce H. Mann, Republic of Debtors (Harvard University Press, 2009 edition).

Joanne Pope Melish, Disowning Slavery (Cornell University Press, 1998).

Barbara J. Beeching, Hopes and Expectations (SUNY Press, 2016).

ARTISTS AND ARTWORKS

NBMAA eMuseum – Ralph Earl, Gentleman with Attendant

Oil on canvas, ca. 1785–88. Harriet Russell Stanley Fund, 1948.6.

NBMAA eMuseum – Titus Kaphar, Jaavon & the Unknown Gentleman

Oil on canvas, 2011. Director's Discretionary Purchase Fund, 2011.60.

NBMAA – "Using Holes to Reveal History's Blindspots" (July 5, 2011)

Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser et al., Ralph Earl: The Face of the Young Republic (Yale University Press, 1991).

Elizabeth L. O'Leary, At Beck and Call (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996).

MacArthur Foundation – Titus Kaphar (2018 Fellow)

Titus Kaphar Studio

Titus Kaphar – "Can Art Amend History?" (TED, 12:52)

Optional extension: preview the talk, select an excerpt, and ask how the artist explains amending history. Allow additional lesson time.

TEACHER TOOLKIT

Plan the inquiry, select evidence, and assess student thinking

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Analyze portraits as sources for representation.
- Support interpretations with specific visual details.
- Compare scale, placement, gaze, gesture, and naming.
- Connect each work to its period.
- Explain how new perspectives change interpretations while recognizing uncertainty.

STANDARDS FOCUS

NCSS: Time, Continuity and Change
How can questions about the past change?

NCSS: Power, Authority and Governance
How does portraiture represent status?

Supporting: **Individual Development and Identity**
Who is named and recognized?

C3 PRACTICES

Question, use evidence, compare sources, and communicate conclusions.

C3 Indicators	Evidence
D2.His.6.6-8: Analyze how people's perspectives influenced what information is available in the historical sources they created.	Handouts 1–2: visual emphasis, naming, and representation
D2.His.10.6-8: Detect possible limitations in the historical record based on evidence collected from different kinds of historical sources.	Handout 2's final row Handout 5's "Recognize the Limits"
D4.1.6-8: Construct arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging the strengths and limitations of the arguments.	Handout 4: claim, evidence from both paintings, reasoning, and limitation

VOCABULARY

Historical narrative An account or interpretation of the past

Historical visibility How much surviving evidence lets us learn about a person or group

Hierarchy A ranking of importance or status

Interpretation An explanation based on evidence

Perspective A particular point of view

Portrait A representation of a particular individual, usually intended to capture their likeness or personality (MoMA)

Primary source Original documents and objects that were created at the time under study. They differ from secondary sources, accounts that retell, analyze, or interpret events, usually from a distance in time or place. (Library of Congress)

Visual appropriation Reusing or changing an existing image to create a new message

ASSESSMENT OPTIONS

Select prompts and handouts, if desired, to fit your goals and available time.

VISUAL INQUIRY
Handout 1
Separate observation from inference; cite details.

HISTORICAL COMPARISON
Handout 2
Compare visual emphasis, naming, artistic changes, and source limitations.

DISCUSSION
Handout 3
Consider what the paintings reveal and the artists' perspectives.

CER OPTION
Handout 4
Make a claim; support it with visual/historical evidence.

REFLECTION
Handout 5
Explain how an interpretation changed or deepened; identify what helped to change thinking.

PERFORMANCE OPTIONS
Communicate a clear idea with accurate evidence and context. Examples: museum label, collage, artist statement.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ASSESSMENT OPTION

Students rework a historical image and explain their changes. Label invented elements clearly and assess the historical explanation alongside artistic choices. (Art and Social Studies teachers share the rubric design.)

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

- A claim that answers the inquiry question.
- Accurate evidence from the required sources.
- Reasoning explaining how the evidence supports the claim.
- Recognition of a source limitation.

SIX-STEP PORTRAIT PAIRING PROTOCOL

Across all work, students explain how evidence supports their interpretations.

	Portrait Pairing Protocol	Personalized for the Earl / Kaphar Artworks
1	**OBSERVE** Let students look before giving background. Begin with 30 seconds of quiet observation. **Consider Handout 1**	Ask: What is going on? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can we find? Notice scale, placement, gaze, gesture, clothing, and background. Record visible details before explaining them.
2	**INTERPRET** Help students to move from description to possible meanings. Ask them to connect each interpretation to a visible detail and to distinguish between what they observe and what they infer.	Ask: Who seems most important, and which details suggest this? What might the relationship between the figures be? Reveal the titles. Who is named and who is not? Distinguish observation, interpretation, and questions needing other evidence.
3	**ADD CONTEXT** Introduce the artists, the dates, and concise historical context. Add primary sources as relevant. **Ask: What changes when we know more?**	Explain gradual emancipation and the limits of the record. The attendant's identity and legal status are unknown; Jaavon is Kaphar's neighbor.
4	**COMPARE** Ask students to study the relationship between the works. Consider: • What connects these portraits? • How do the works approach the theme differently? • How does one portrait affect the way you understand the other? Is there a third story as a result? **Consider Handout 2**	Ask: What does Kaphar preserve, change, or remove? How do the cutouts and naming redirect attention? Does the work amend an interpretation of history, recover missing facts, or do something else? Support answers with details from both works.
5	**CONNECT** Connect students' visual evidence and interpretations to history, civics, geography, economics, culture, and/or contemporary life. Encourage students to test their ideas against additional sources. **Consider Handouts 3 or 4.**	Move from portraits to civic questions. Discuss: Who is remembered in our community? Who decides? What source or perspective could make a familiar story more complete? Use the discussion stations or connect a selected historical record to the portraits. Ask what further evidence would test students' ideas.
6	**REFLECT** Ask students to reconsider their thinking and communicate their insights. **Consider Handout 5**	Return to the inquiry question. Ask which detail or source changed or complicated students' thinking. Collect an evidence-based exit response and a remaining question. If using CER writing, allow extension time or continue in the next lesson.

HANDOUT 1

OBSERVE + INTERPRET

Look Closely and Interpret

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

Directions: Record visible details first. Then explain what those details suggest about status and attention. Keep observations separate from inferences.

APPROACH: ☐ Whole Class ☐ Small Group ☐ Pairs ☐ Alone

VISUAL ELEMENT	EARL / GENTLEMAN WITH ATTENDANT	KAPHAR / JAAVON & THE UNKNOWN GENTLEMAN
Scale and placement		
Clothing		
Pose and gesture		
Eye contact / gaze		
Facial expression		
Background / space		

EVIDENCE CHECK

Choose one detail from each portrait. What might each detail suggest about status and attention?

HANDOUT 2

COMPARE

Two Views of Status and Identity

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

Directions: Use details from both artworks and the historical context. Explain how the works direct attention and what remains unknown.

APPROACH: ☐ Whole Class ☐ Small Group ☐ Pairs ☐ Alone

WHAT TO COMPARE	EARL	KAPHAR
What attracts attention? Which details do this?		
Who is named? Who remains unknown?		
What is preserved, changed, or removed in Kaphar's work?		
What can this work tell us? What can it not establish?		

COMPARE FINDINGS

How does seeing the works together change your interpretation of either one?

HANDOUT 3

CONNECT

Discussion Stations

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

Directions: Work in groups of three. At each station, discuss the question and record one response supported by a portrait detail or historical source.

1 What question about the past does Kaphar ask through his painting?

2 Does Kaphar change history, add another point of view, or do something else? Explain.

3 What can these paintings tell us? What can't they tell us?

4 Choose a local monument, museum display, or historical marker. Whose perspective could help you evaluate the story it tells?

HANDOUT 4

CER WRITING

How Kaphar Redirects Attention

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

Directions: How does Kaphar change where you look and how you interpret Earl's portrait? Develop a claim supported by details from both paintings.

CLAIM

State a clear answer to the question.

EVIDENCE

Give at least three specific details: one visual detail from each painting and one detail from a historical source.

REASONING

Explain how the evidence supports your claim. Include one limit on what the painting or historical record can establish.

HANDOUT 5

REFLECT

Reflection / Exit Ticket

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

Directions: Return to your first impressions. Use evidence from the portraits, historical sources, or class discussion.

LOOK AGAIN

What did you first think about the portraits? What do you think now? Name the detail or source that influenced your thinking.

WHO IS REMEMBERED?

How can art help us notice people or stories that have received less attention in history? Use one piece of evidence.

RECOGNIZE THE LIMITS

What remains unknown about the historical attendant? Why is it important to distinguish evidence from inference?

KEEP ASKING

One question I still have is…