PORTRAITS IN CONVERSATION

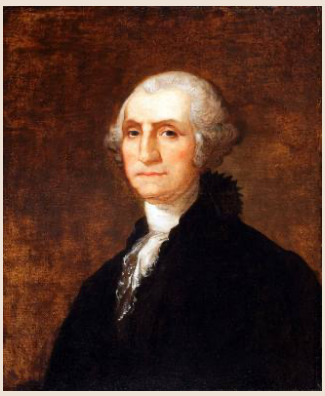
THE INQUIRY PATH

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

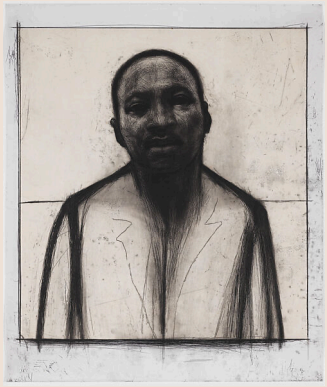
ON LEADERSHIP

George Washington and Martin Luther King, Jr.

What is leadership and how do artists shape the way we remember leaders?



Rembrandt Peale
George Washington, 1850



John Woodrow Wilson
Martin Luther King, Jr., 2002

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

PORTRAITS AS HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

These artworks are primary sources that illustrate how George Washington and Martin Luther King, Jr. were remembered and represented at the time the works were created. The artists' choices—what to emphasize, simplify, or leave out—shape what viewers see. The works do not tell the whole story of either leader. Pair visual evidence with the leaders' words and other historical evidence. Invite a conversation about the role leaders play in fostering democratic ideals and the way artists create memory.

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HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Leadership in worlds shaped by war, conflict, and democratic change

GEORGE WASHINGTON

Washington's early military career brought successes and setbacks. In 1775, the Continental Congress appointed him commander of the Continental Army. In 1787, delegates unanimously selected him to preside over the Constitutional Convention. As the first president, Washington set important precedents for the new federal government that shaped the nation and the presidency.

The nation's claims of liberty, however, existed beside profound exclusions. Washington himself participated in institutions of slavery and westward expansion that were resisted by some people during his lifetime and remain central to evaluating his legacy.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

King emerged as a national leader in the struggle against segregation and Black disenfranchisement. Drawing on Christian theology and nonviolent resistance, he used preaching, organizing, protest, persuasion, and coalition-building to press government and citizens toward change.

Along with those in the Civil Rights Movement, including grassroots organizers, students, and other organizations, he helped organize the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and built public pressure for federal civil rights legislation, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964. King later linked racial justice to economic justice, peace, and opposition to the Vietnam War. His assassination in 1968 did not end the movement he helped lead.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR THE PAIRING

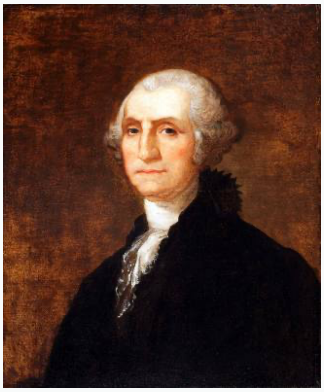
Washington challenged British political authority during the Revolution. He worked within the new government and became a symbol of the nation's founding.
King respected constitutional principles and democratic institutions, but often challenged government and the public to live up to democratic promises.

Use the historical context to ask what each portrait emphasizes or leaves out, and how later generations remember each leader.

PRIMARY SOURCES TO INTEGRATE

- Washington's "Farewell Address"
- "George Washington on the abolition of slavery, 1786"
- King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail"
- King's "I Have a Dream" speech

ARTISTS & ART

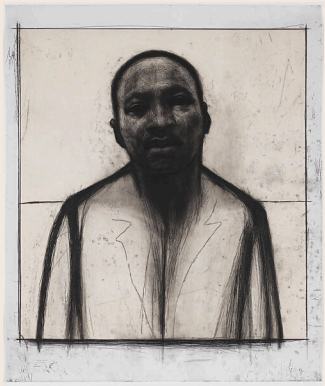


REMBRANDT PEALE, 1778–1860
***George Washington*, 1850**

Peale first painted Washington from life in 1795, when he was seventeen. He returned to Washington's image throughout his career, developing this idealized portrait in 1850 that answered a growing national desire for an enduring image of the first president. By 1850 he had produced dozens of Washington portraits.

LOOK FOR Oil portrait • direct gaze • dark cloak • composed expression • memorial image

How do Peale's choices make Washington appear—authoritative? symbolic? Other?



JOHN WOODROW WILSON, 1922–2015
***Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 2002**

Wilson was a Black sculptor, painter, printmaker, illustrator, and teacher in Boston whose work was deeply concerned with Black dignity, racial justice, family life, and inequality. Wilson's 2002 etching and aquatint, made with master printer James Stroud, is closely related to a 1985 pastel study of King. Wilson had also created the bronze bust of King installed in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda in 1986.

LOOK FOR Etching & aquatint with chine collé • close view • active lines • lowered eyes • little official symbolism

How do the close view, line, and expression make King appear?

PAIRING LENS

One portrait presents the first president through the conventions of formal oil portraiture; the other presents a civil rights leader who never held public office through a black-and-white print. Both portraits were created after their subjects' deaths. Peale's 1850 portrait drew on his earlier sitting of Washington from life in 1795. Both of these later works help us study how leaders were remembered. Together, they help students see how artistic choices shape ideas about leadership and historical memory.

Consider asking students why Americans in 1850 and 2002 might have wanted images of Washington and King.

LEARN MORE / SOURCES

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Colin G. Calloway, The Indian World of George Washington (Oxford University Press, 2018).
Caroline Cox, A Proper Sense of Honor (University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
Fritz Hirschfeld, George Washington and Slavery (University of Missouri Press, 1997).
Stanford: The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute.
Stephen B. Oates, Let the Trumpet Sound (Canongate Books, 1998).

ARTISTS AND ARTWORKS

Rembrandt Peale

National Gallery of Art, "Rembrandt Peale."

George Washington

Art Experts, "Portrait Identification: George Washington."
Edward Countryman, "Getting to Know George Washington," Southwest Review 94, no. 2 (2009): 132–146.
Glenn A. Phelps, "George Washington and the Founding of the Presidency," Presidential Studies Quarterly 17, no. 2 (1987): 345–363.
Gordon S. Wood, "The Greatness of George Washington," Virginia Quarterly Review 68, no. 2 (1992): 189–207.

John Woodrow Wilson

Mary Ryan Gallery, "John Wilson."
"John Wilson: The Art of Black Dignity."
"John Wilson: The Rhetoric of Dignity."
Smithsonian: John Wilson papers.

Artwork, *Martin Luther King, Jr. 2002*

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, "Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr."
Hood Museum of Art, "Creative Maladjustment: Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Arts," 2021.
The MET: Martin Luther King, Jr.

TEACHER TOOLKIT

Plan the inquiry, select evidence, and assess student thinking

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Analyze portraits as primary sources for representation and remembrance.
- Use specific visual details to support interpretations.
- Compare how artists represent leadership and how Washington and King sought to shape the nation.
- Explain how historical context affects our understanding of leaders and their legacies.

STANDARDS FOCUS

NCSS: Power, Authority and Governance
Forms of authority are established, represented, exercised, and challenged.

NCSS: Civic Ideals and Practices
Leaders and citizens interpret, uphold, challenge, and extend democratic ideals.

Supporting: Time, Continuity and Change
Ideas about leadership change—and persist—across periods.

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.	Handout 1: Visual inquiry and comparison of Peale's and Wilson's artistic choices.
D2.His.10.6–8: Detect possible limitations in the historical record based on evidence collected from different kinds of historical sources.	Handouts 2–3: Historical comparison and discussion of what the portraits reveal and leave out about Washington and King.
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–Reasoning response using visual and historical evidence.

VOCABULARY

Authority	Legitimate power
Historical memory	How societies remember the past
Leadership	The ability to guide or influence others
Legacy	The lasting impact of ideas and actions
Moral authority	Influence grounded in values and actions
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)
Symbolism	Images, objects, colors, or other visual elements that represent ideas

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 roles, methods, challenges, and significance.

DISCUSSION
Handout 3
Connect portraits to authority, ideals, and memory.

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

REFLECTION
Handout 5
Reconsider leadership using evidence from the lesson.

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

INTERDISCIPLINARY ASSESSMENT OPTION

Students create a symbolic portrait of a leader, explain the artistic choices, and establish the leader's historical significance. (Art and Social Studies teachers co-plan the rubric.)

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 Peale and Wilson Artworks
1	**OBSERVE** Let students look before giving background. Begin with 30 seconds of quiet observation. **Consider Handout 1**	Before observing, ask students to quick-write their initial definition of leadership. Then ask about each work: What is going on in these works? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can we find? Notice gaze, expression, clothing, light, line, color, and background.
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.	The portraits were made about 150 years apart. • What does Peale's portrait communicate about Washington as a leader? • What does Wilson's portrait communicate about King as a leader? • How do the portraits fit with what you already know about these leaders? • Do the portraits seem inspirational? Why or why not?
3	**ADD CONTEXT** Introduce the artists, the dates, and concise historical context. Add primary sources so portraits are not treated as complete biographies. **Ask: What changes when we know more?**	In discussing Washington, acknowledge enslavement as profoundly wrong. Use evidence from the portraits and historical sources to examine the tension between Washington's leadership, his enslavement of people, and the Declaration of Independence's claims of liberty.
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**	Compare artistic choices and forms of leadership without ranking the two men. Notice how artistic choices shape ideas about leadership. • Ask where the eye goes first in each work; how does the artist direct it? How does each artist use line? What is the effect of color or lack of color? • How does each artist create a sense of leadership? • What becomes clearer when the portraits are viewed together?
5	**CONNECT** Connect students' visual evidence and interpretations to history, civics, geography, economics, culture, or contemporary life. Encourage students to test their ideas against additional sources. **Consider Handouts 3 or 4.**	Move from portraits to civic questions. • Can leadership exist without public office? What did working within government allow Washington to do? • What did challenging government allow King to do? • What were the limits of each man's leadership? • How did Washington and King influence the nation differently? • How did each man try to shape the future of the United States?
6	**REFLECT** Ask students to reconsider their thinking and communicate their insights. **Consider Handout 5**	Return to the opening definition of leadership. Ask which portrait detail or historical source most changed or complicated students' thinking. What remains unresolved?

HANDOUT 1

OBSERVE + INTERPRET

Look Closely and Interpret

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

Directions: Record visible details first. Then explain what those details suggest about leadership. Consider expression, gaze, pose, clothing, line, shape, texture, light, color, and background.

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

VISUAL ELEMENT	PEALE / WASHINGTON	WILSON / KING
Facial expression		
Clothing		
Pose		
Eye contact / gaze		
Color / value		
Background / space		

EVIDENCE CHECK

Choose one detail from each portrait. What might each detail suggest about leadership?

HANDOUT 2

COMPARE

Two Paths to Leadership

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

Directions: Use historical evidence and details from the portraits. Compare the leaders without ranking them.

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

WHAT TO COMPARE	WASHINGTON	KING
Historical role		
Leadership methods / style		
Challenges and limits		
Historical significance / legacy		

COMPARE FINDINGS

What do you think about Washington's and King's leadership? What do the portraits alone not tell you?

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 Can leadership exist without public office? Why or why not?

2 How do portraits shape historical memory?

3 How should leaders be remembered when their legacies are complex?

4 How do democratic ideals change—or persist—over time?

HANDOUT 4

CER WRITING

Add a Third Portrait

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

Directions: What other historical figure would you add to the Washington and King pairing? Why? Develop your answer using claim, evidence, and reasoning.

CLAIM

Name the figure you would add and explain the connection to this pairing.

EVIDENCE

Give specific historical or visual evidence. Identify the source you used.

REASONING

Explain how the evidence supports your choice and deepens the discussion of leadership. Identify one limitation of your evidence.

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.

WHAT MAKES SOMEONE A LEADER?

Answer with one detail from a portrait and one historical fact from the lesson.

LOOK AGAIN

How has your thinking about either portrait changed or become more complex? Identify the detail or source that influenced you.

REVISIT YOUR DEFINITION

Has your definition of leadership changed? Explain why or why not.

KEEP ASKING

One question I still have is…