

## Ideas to Inspire and Invigorate the Art Classroom

### Painting Realistic Skin Tones



Kick start your students' creativity with new ideas, approaches, and materials designed to challenge participants and take their work to a new level. Each art activity provides detailed instructions and connections to works of art at the MFAH as well as a list of accessible, affordable supplies and where you can purchase them.

This idea is geared toward high-school instructors wanting to explore and analyze the rainbow of human skin tones through painting self-portraits. This activity includes suggested discussion questions.



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#### Discussion Questions to Start Conversations

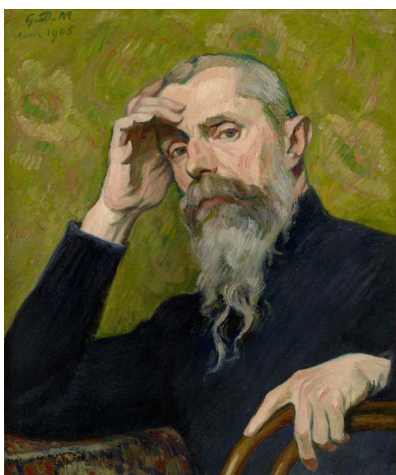
1. What do you notice about these paintings? Look closely at and describe the various objects and people. Think about color, texture, and form.
2. In these four portraits, each individual is from a different racial ethnicity. How difficult do you think it is to mix the paints needed to create these skin tones?
3. In each of these examples of paintings of people, the light source creates shadows and highlights on their skin. How do you mix different colors of paint to create the right blend for the shadows and highlights for each skin tone?



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#### Introduction of Project

In this lesson, students will learn to create different shades of skin tone by mixing paint. It is a good lesson for color theory and has a practical component, as students will then be able to create any color of skin tone for painting. Once students have mastered the art of mixing skin tones, they will be challenged to create their own exact skin tone and paint a self-portrait.



Kermit Oliver, *Roughnecks*, 1974, acrylic on masonite, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by Anne Finkelstein, 2003.52.  
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Janet Fish, *Kara*, 1983, oil on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by the Museum Collectors, 84.199.  
© Janet Fish / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

Henry Taylor, *Cora's*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by Barbara Hines, Barbara and Michael Gamson, Gary Mercer, Cecily E. Horton, and the Director's Accessions Endowment, 2017.437. © 2016 Henry Taylor

Georges Daniel de Monfreid, *Self-Portrait*, 1905, oil on paper, laid down on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, John A. and Audrey Jones Beck Collection, museum purchase funded by the Audrey Jones Beck Accessions Endowment Fund, 2014.193.

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## Gather These Art Materials

- Assorted paintbrushes
- Canvas, 12 x 16 inches
- Acrylic or oil paints in the following colors
  - burnt umber
  - raw umber
  - burnt sienna
  - raw sienna
  - cadmium yellow
  - cadmium red
  - dioxazine purple
  - titanium white
- Sheet of heavy paper, 12 x 18 inches
- Handheld mirror
- Palette knives
- Palette (can be a paper plate)
- Pencil
- Water cup
- For older students: a reference photo of themselves

## Instructions for Project Setup

### Part 1: Create a rainbow of skin tones on a practice sheet of paper

1. On your palette, squeeze out a quarter-size amount of white, red, and yellow.
2. Using a palette knife, scoop out equal parts of these three colors and mix them together until you have a nice beige. This will be your base color. See the photo example on the right.
3. Using the beige you created, you will now create a spectrum of skin tones from light to dark by adding different colors.
4. To create a dark skin tone for an individual of Black African or East Indian descent, try adding burnt umber and dioxazine purple. This will give a rich, dark skin tone.
5. To create medium to dark skin tones, add small amounts of burnt sienna and burnt umber.
6. To create lighter skin tones, experiment with different amounts of yellow, red, and burnt sienna.
7. As you create different skin tones, label them and place them on a graph on a large piece of paper. See photo example on the right.

### Part 2: Paint a self-portrait

1. Using the color-mixing techniques above, try to create your exact skin tone. You can even paint a tiny bit onto the back of your hand to check.
2. Once you have created your skin tone, you will need to create some skin-tone paint that is a bit darker than yourself and another that is a bit lighter. You will use these for the shadows and highlights.
3. Use a photo of yourself or a mirror as a reference to sketch yourself on canvas, lightly in pencil. Younger students can use a template of a portrait.
4. Paint your sketch using the skin tones you have mixed from scratch.
5. Pay attention to the light source and analyze where your skin tone changes color depending on the direction from which the light comes. For example, the areas under the chin and nose usually have a dark shadow.



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## Post-activity Reflection and Discussion Inspired by Past Teacher Workshops at the MFAH

From Melissa Aytenfisu, MFAH educator and artist:

In our increasingly racially diverse classrooms, this project lends itself to discussions on race, skin tone, racial mixing, heritage, and ethnicity. In the spring of 2020 a group of Houston educators participated in a master class during which we discussed Norman Rockwell's famous painting *The Problem We All Live With*. It led to a meaningful conversation in which educators shared the tough conversations they've had to have in their classrooms regarding derogatory names for people of color. This was a springboard for further dialogue on how to handle racially diverse classrooms and what steps educators are taking to create inclusive, safe art spaces for their students.

In a room with Black, white, Latinx, biracial, and Asian educators, we took the time to share our own personal histories of how race has impacted our lives and how that affects us as teachers. The result was a consensus that art classrooms are an excellent place to have respectful conversations about race that can encourage appreciation of diverse backgrounds. Here is a list of questions that can be used to create dialogue about race in your classroom in an open, respectful, and positive way.

1. What is melanin?
2. Is it possible for two human beings to have identical skin color?
3. In your family, is everyone's skin the exact same color or are there different shades?
4. Some people try to lighten their skin and some people try to darken their skin. What does this tell us about ideal skin colors?
5. Do different countries have different standards of beauty in regard to skin color?
6. When someone is biracial, which race do they identify with and why?
7. How do you define ethnicity?
8. How do you define racism?
9. What are some of the ways you think racism can be eliminated?
10. How can art help to heal racism/racial inequalities?

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## Points to Consider to Keep Discussions Positive and Respectful

- Don't force students to answer a question; let answers be purely voluntary.
- As the discussion leader, consider your own potential racial bias.
- Be inclusive and celebrate your students' diversity, but don't tokenize it.
- Acknowledge and respect commonalities and differences.
- Consider small group discussions in teams of two to five students instead of a full classroom discussion.
- Remember to make space for students' emotional responses.

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## Additional Information and Resources

To view hi-res images of the works, visit:

[MFAH Collection online database/roughnecks](#)

[MFAH Collection online database/kara](#)

[MFAH Collection online database/coras](#)

[MFAH Collection online database/self-portrait](#)

For additional information on themes such as Anti-Racism, Cultural Diversity in American Life, Talking about Race, and Thematic Lesson Plans Engaging Social Justice Topics, click here to download the [Teacher Resources for Social Justice](#).

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