Black, White, and Pastel Portraits

This activity will guide you in creating a black, white, and pastel portrait of someone you admire, inspired by Amy Sherald’s portrait of Michelle Obama.

Investigate the Work of Art!

1. In this painting, Michelle Obama, the first Black First Lady, is wearing an abundant gown designed by one of her favorite fashion designers, Michelle Smith. How is she posed? How would the dress look different if she were standing?

2. The artist, Amy Sherald, said that the shapes reminded her of the paintings of Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), and the diligent quilt-making of the Black women artisans of Gee’s Bend, Alabama. Let your eyes follow the outline of her dress. What colors and shapes do you see in her dress? What outfit would you wear if an artist were making a portrait of you?

3. Painted using Sherald’s signature grayscale for Michelle Obama’s skin tone, how does this color palette help establish a connection to past artistic traditions like photography?

Let’s Make Some Art!

Gather These Art Materials

- HB, 4B, 6B pencils
- Eraser
- Glue
- Piece of fabric
- Blending stomp
- White 8 1/2 x 11–inch paper
- Pastel colored 8 1/2 x 11–inch paper
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Step-by-Step Artist Instructions

1. Find a black-and-white photo of someone you would like to draw.

2. Place a white paper over the photo, hold it up against a window, and trace it. This will help you get the correct proportions. If you feel confident drawing without tracing, then please go ahead and draw the outline of the person on the white paper.

3. Fill in the face of the sketch in black and white by using the darker pencils to add shadows and the lighter pencils to add shading.

4. Use the blending stump to soften the features of your drawing of the face.

5. Now, think about what this person will be wearing. Will it be a fancy dress, like the one Michelle Obama wears in her portrait, or will it be a more casual outfit? Use the fabric swatches provided to design your fashion, then glue the fabric in place on the portrait.

6. After the glue has dried from the attached fabric, use the sketching pencils and blending stump to add a grayscale skin tone.

7. Finally, cut out your sketch and glue it onto the pastel paper provided, or find another paper you think is better suited for your portrait.