

LESSON 4

Museum Connection: Art and Intellect

Lesson Title: The Portraits of Joshua Johnston

Purpose: In this lesson students will become acquainted with the artwork and painting style of Joshua Johnston, a portrait painter from Baltimore, Maryland. Students will examine the time period and culture in which this African American artist painted, and they will create a family portrait modeled after Johnston's style.

Note to the teacher: Please be sensitive to the fact that not all students come from home situations where they are willing or able to create a family portrait. In such situations, consider having students create a portrait of people who are important to them. Explain that "family" can mean with whomever the student lives.

Note to the teacher: Joshua Johnston is also sometimes called Joshua Johnson.

Grade Level and Content Area: Elementary, Art

Time Frame: 3-5 class periods

Visual Arts Essential Learner Outcomes:

II.B.2 Inspired by the art of people from different times and cultures, create a work of art that reflects aspects of his or her daily life.

Visual Arts State Curriculum:

2.3.b (Grade 4) Categorize attributes of theme, style, and form that convey meaning in artworks.

2.3.b (Grade 5) Use selected attributes of theme, style, and form to convey meaning in visual compositions.

Correlation to State Reading and English Language Arts Maryland College and Career Ready Standards:

1.E.3 (Grades 4 and 5) Use strategies to make meaning from text (during reading).

1.E.3.h Visualize what was read for deeper understanding.

1.E.3.i Use a graphic organizer or another note taking technique to record important ideas or information.

1.E.3.j Explain personal connections to the ideas or information in the text.

Objective:

- Students will demonstrate their knowledge of Joshua Johnston's artistic style by creating a family portrait using his techniques and by comparing what they create to one of Johnston's portraits.

Vocabulary and Concepts:

Abolition – Abolition is the act of putting an end to a condition or cause, as in the abolition of slavery.

Commission – A fee paid to an agent or employee for transacting a piece of business or performing a service is called a commission.

Freedmen – People who had been freed from enslavement were known as freedmen.

Limner – A painter or drawer of portraits is sometimes called a limner.

Manumission – The formal release of a slave from slavery was called manumission and could be performed by an individual or by state law.

Portrait – A portrait is a drawing, painting, or sculpture of a person.

Pose – A pose is an assumed posture or attitude, usually for artistic purposes.

Props – Anything used to create or enhance a desired effect is called a prop.

Materials**For the teacher:**

Teacher Resource Sheet 1 – *Mrs. Thomas Everette and Her Children*

For the student:

Student Resource Sheet 1 – Joshua Johnston

Student Resource Sheet 1b—Joshua Johnston: Biography Questions

Student Resource Sheet 2 – Build a Portrait Web

Student Resource Sheet 3 – Sketch Your Family

Student Resource Sheet 4 – Painting Label

Resources**Books:**

Rugoff, Milton, ed. et al. *The Britannica Encyclopedia of American Art*. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Educational Corporation, 1976.

Weekley, Carolyn J., et al. *Joshua Johnston: Freeman and Early American Portrait Painter*. Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1987.

Artwork:

Print of *Mrs. Everette and Her Children* (Maryland Historical Society brochure cover)

Two advertisements by Joshua Johnston (Maryland Historical Society)

Web sites:

AskART.com
www.askart.com

Joshua Johnston: Freeman and Early American Portrait Painter
Maryland Historical Society

<http://www.mdhs.org/digitalimage/joshua-johnson-manumission-record-july-15-1792>

(The Maryland Historical Society has Joshua's Johnston's original manumission papers.)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
www.metmuseum.org

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
www.nga.gov

Teacher Background

Baltimore:

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Baltimore, Maryland, was a growing and industrious city. Ships carrying wheat sailed from the city's harbor to all parts of the globe, and many shipbuilders, sailors, laborers, warehousemen, and merchants made their homes in the city. In 1800, one-fifth of the city's population was African American, and census takers reported that half of them were free. Although there were many legally free African Americans living in Baltimore, the kidnapping and sale of African Americans was common. This made it necessary for the freedmen in Baltimore to carry freedom papers at all times.

Enslaved African Americans in Baltimore were used as house servants, unskilled laborers, and skilled laborers in trades such as shipbuilding. Most of those who were free were unskilled laborers. According to C. J. Weekley, "women worked as domestics, laundresses, and cooks, and men were carters, draymen, laborers, stevedores, sawyers, water men, and waiters. Only a small percentage worked in skilled occupations—barbers, blacksmiths, boot and shoe makers, gardeners, tanners, coopers, as well as the already mentioned caulkers, ship carpenters, riggers, and brickmakers." (Weekley, 26)

In 1789, 90 citizens from all across the city of Baltimore formed the Abolition Society. Comprised primarily of wealthy merchants and professional men, the Abolition Society used its collective wealth and power to fight against the institution of slavery and to protect the status of free African Americans. These sympathetic men and their families were the neighbors and clients of portrait-artist Joshua Johnston.

Joshua Johnston

Joshua Johnston was born a slave in Baltimore, Maryland, around 1763. His father's name was George Johnston, and his mother was an unknown African American slave.

Johnston's father purchased his son's freedom in 1764. He would not be free, however, until he completed an apprenticeship with a blacksmith or until he turned 21, whichever came first. Johnston was freed in 1782, and that same year he began his career as a portrait painter, also known as a limner.

The camera had not been invented yet, and business was good for Johnston. Baltimore was growing rapidly at this time, and he was able to make his living painting the portraits of his wealthy white neighbors, as well as their friends, and families. In fact, during his lifetime, Johnston painted more than 80 portraits of local merchants, traders, and sea captains. Of all the limners in Maryland, he was the one who produced the most portraits of children and their parents.

Johnston spent his entire life in Baltimore, where many people supported the abolition of slavery. Some of the same people also supported Johnston's work as a painter. One of his first paintings was commissioned by Mr. John Moale, a white man who recognized the legitimacy of Johnston's status as a freedman. Like John Moale, Johnston's neighbors also stood up for his rights as a free black man. His name and word of his talent were spread around Baltimore, and many local wealthy families commissioned portraits from him. As a result, Johnston had a very successful career.

At one time during his life, Joshua lived only one block away from the first museum of art in the United States: the Peale Museum in Baltimore. The museum was founded by the Peales, who were a family of painters, and some people think that they may have influenced Johnston's work because the style of his paintings was similar to theirs. Even if this is true, Johnston had no formal training as a painter, and he always described himself as "a self-taught genius."

Joshua Johnston overcame many obstacles to become the first professional African American portrait artist. Johnston was also the first portrait artist in Baltimore who worked continually from around 1795 until 1825. With confidence and perseverance he made his dream come true.

Lesson Development:

1. **Motivation:** Ask students to think about their families. Have them brainstorm a list of things that are unique to the members of their families. Individual students can share their ideas with the class.
2. Tell students they will be learning about Joshua Johnston, a black portrait artist who was from Baltimore and who worked there until his death in 1825.
3. Distribute Student Resource Sheet 1a, Joshua Johnston, and Student Resource Sheet 1b, Joshua Johnston: Biography Questions. Have students read the selection and answer the accompanying questions. Discuss their responses.
4. Tell students that they will be examining the artistic style of Joshua Johnston in order to create a family portrait using his techniques.

5. Display Teacher Resource Sheet 1, *Mrs. Thomas Everett and Her Children*. Have students observe this portrait for several minutes, then participate in a class discussion using these questions:

- What do you see? *(Mrs. Everett is seated and holding a baby girl with her older daughter standing to her right. The older daughter is placing her arm on her mother's arm. There are also three boys: two are standing and one is seated. The boy in the center of the painting appears to be a toddler wearing a festive red jumpsuit.)*
- What is happening? *(They look like they are dressed formally and waiting to go somewhere special.)*
- What did you see first? *(The faces of the people are what I saw first.)*
- Describe the people and their clothing. *(The people are dressed in good clothes, their faces are fresh, and their hair is combed neatly. Mrs. Everett is wearing a fancy white hat that matches her white lacy ruffled collar. With the exception of the baby and the toddler, everyone is wearing a dark outfit with a white collar. The two daughters are wearing long dresses; the baby's dress is a sheer white.)*
- Describe the furniture. *(There is a very dark, long black couch on little wheels with brass tacks outlining the seat. The look is very formal.)*
- What else do you see? *(All the people have a pleasant or mild expression on their faces. There are no large smiles with teeth showing, and there are no frowns. Their lips look tightly closed, their eyes have heavy lids, and all are facing with a three-quarter view.)*
- Are there any props? *(There are books, a pen, strawberries, and roses in the hands of the children.)*
- What is the relationship of the people? *(It appears to be a loving, close family with the bodies in close proximity and with everyone dressed in coordinated outfits.)*
- Is anyone missing? *(Perhaps the father is missing.)*
- What does it tell us about their relationship? *(The mother is holding the wealthy family together and wants a memory created of her well-behaved, loving, successful, and educated family. She is proud of her position and family and wants others to see her accomplishments and children.)*
- Has the artist used contrast to make the people and objects stand out? *(Yes! The foreground, mid-ground, and background are all dark. Most of the clothing is dark, which emphasizes the pale faces of the people.)*
- What kind of music would be playing in this work of art? *(Classical music would be playing.)*
- What type of mood does this picture portray? *(Somber)*
- Is there a relationship between this work of art and your experiences?
- How is this like or different from your own world?
- How could you change this work of art to be more like your world?
- What would the artwork look like?
- What does the artist want you to think about in this work of art?

- Is the painting successful because it is realistic?
6. Display Student Resource Sheet 2, Build a Portrait Web. Tell students that they will be completing it using their family members. Work through the following questions with them:
 - My family includes: (fill in all your family members)
 - Will you include pets?
 - What type of clothing best describes your family?
 - How will they be posed?
 - What props can you use?
 - Will their whole bodies show?
 - Is there furniture?
 - What kind of values will be used in the background?
 - What is the mood?
 7. Next, display Student Resource Sheet 4, Sketch Your Family. Begin by sketching the furniture first, very lightly. Explain each step as you go. For example: "I'm sketching the furniture very lightly because the bodies will be in front of the furniture." Next add the family members in seated or standing positions. Remember to have the arms drawn so they can hold props or pets. Sketch the clothing and other details of each person. Add props or pets. Next color in the background and foreground, then the furniture. Color the people and their clothing.
 8. Ask students to sketch a different family grouping and explain why their pose may be different from that of their own families, e.g., a family that loves camping and hiking. Help students decide on ideas for establishing the family members, pets, clothing, pose, props, furniture, background, and mood.
 9. Let students take turns coming up to the overhead projector to draw examples of furniture (very lightly), family members in various positions, clothing, props, pets, etc. As each student draws, he or she should explain why he or she is adding the elements.
 10. Have students complete Student Resource Sheet 2, Build a Portrait Web, and then draw their family portrait on Student Resource Sheet 3, Sketch Your Family.
 11. **Assessment:** Have students complete Student Resource Sheet 4, Painting Label. They should use this as an organizer with which to write a paragraph that explains how their portrait used the techniques of Joshua Johnston. They will compare the similarities and differences in their portrait to one of Johnston's portraits.
 12. **Closure:** Ask: What is unusual about Joshua Johnston choosing to be a portrait painter in the late 1700s? What made it possible for him to follow his dream? Who supported him throughout his career? Why was he able to paint for 30 years in the

Baltimore area? Name five characteristics of a Joshua Johnston painting.

Thoughtful Application:

How could you become a better portrait artist? Are there careers in portrait painting today? How could you advertise yourself as an artist? What is another way you could capture someone's portrait? Are there any other careers associated with old paintings? Is there a way you can offer support to friends who are trying something new?

Lesson Extensions:

- Visit the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture.
- Plan a visit to the Maryland Historical Society to see some of Joshua Johnston's paintings, including *Mrs. Everette and Her Children*. Also on display are Johnston's original manumission papers, as well as the newspaper ads that he placed in local newspapers.
- Visit the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., which has five of Joshua Johnston's paintings. *The Westwood Children* includes the Westwood's pet dog in the portrait. See if you can find something missing in this portrait. (Hint: Look at their heads.)
- Visit the Baltimore Museum of Art, which also owns some paintings by Joshua Johnston and is the home of a group called the "Joshua Johnston Council."
- Compare Joshua Johnston's portrait paintings to contemporary works by Charles Wilson Peale, Charles Peale Polk, Rembrandt Peale, and Raphaelle Peale. Can you find similarities between their paintings and those of Johnston? Differences?
- Use the "Sketch Your Family" worksheet as a plan for a real portrait painting. Try to use the technique of dark background and illuminated faces in your portrait. Tape your label to the back of the painting so art historians will be able to identify it as your portrait.
- Use online museum and web resources for virtual field trips.
- Create student narratives of family portraits.
- Investigate the earliest known fine artwork by African American Scipio Moorehead, which was a copper engraving of Phillis (*sic*) Wheatley and later nineteenth century African American landscape painters Robert Duncanson, Edward Bannister, and portrait painter Henry Ossawa Tanner. Discuss the developing contributions of African Americans in the fine arts.

Mrs. Thomas Everette and Her Children



Mrs. Thomas Everette (Rebecca Myring)^[1]_[2] and Her Children, 1818, by Joshua Johnson, Oil on Canvas.

The Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, Maryland.

Joshua Johnston

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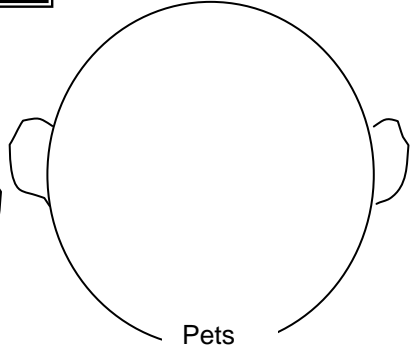
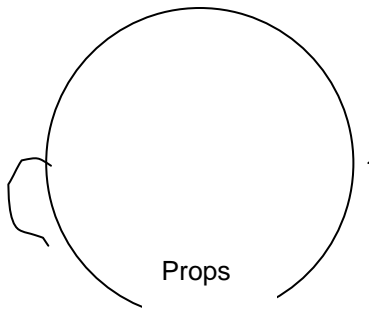
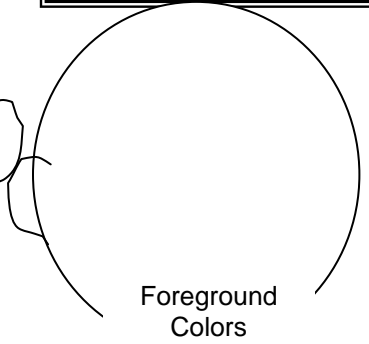
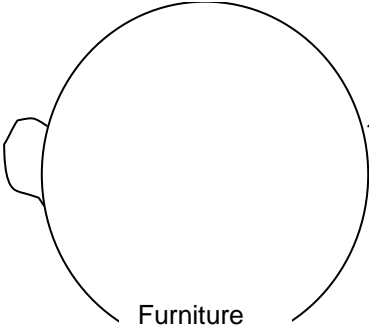
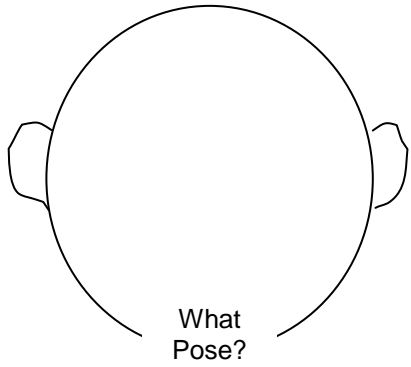
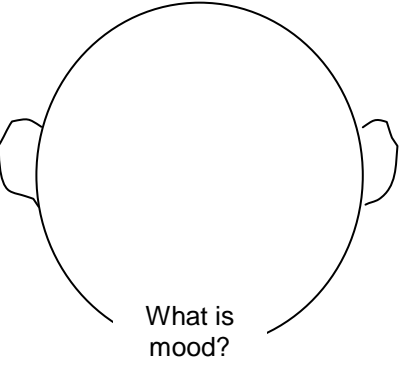
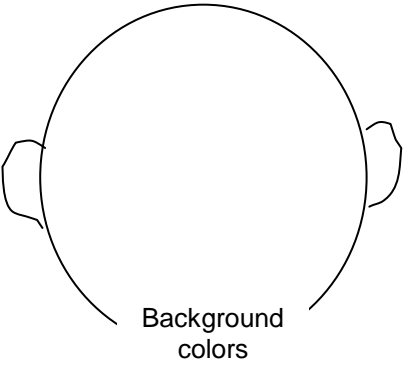
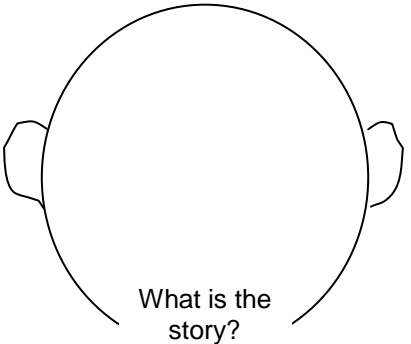
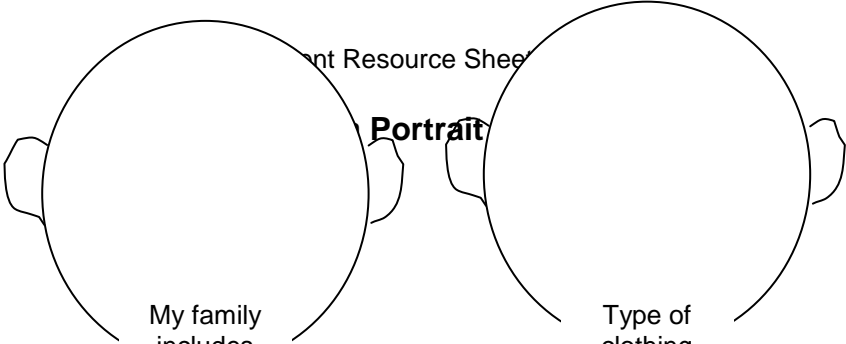
Joshua Johnston: Biography Questions

1. List at least 3 of Joshua Johnston's struggles and 3 of his accomplishments.

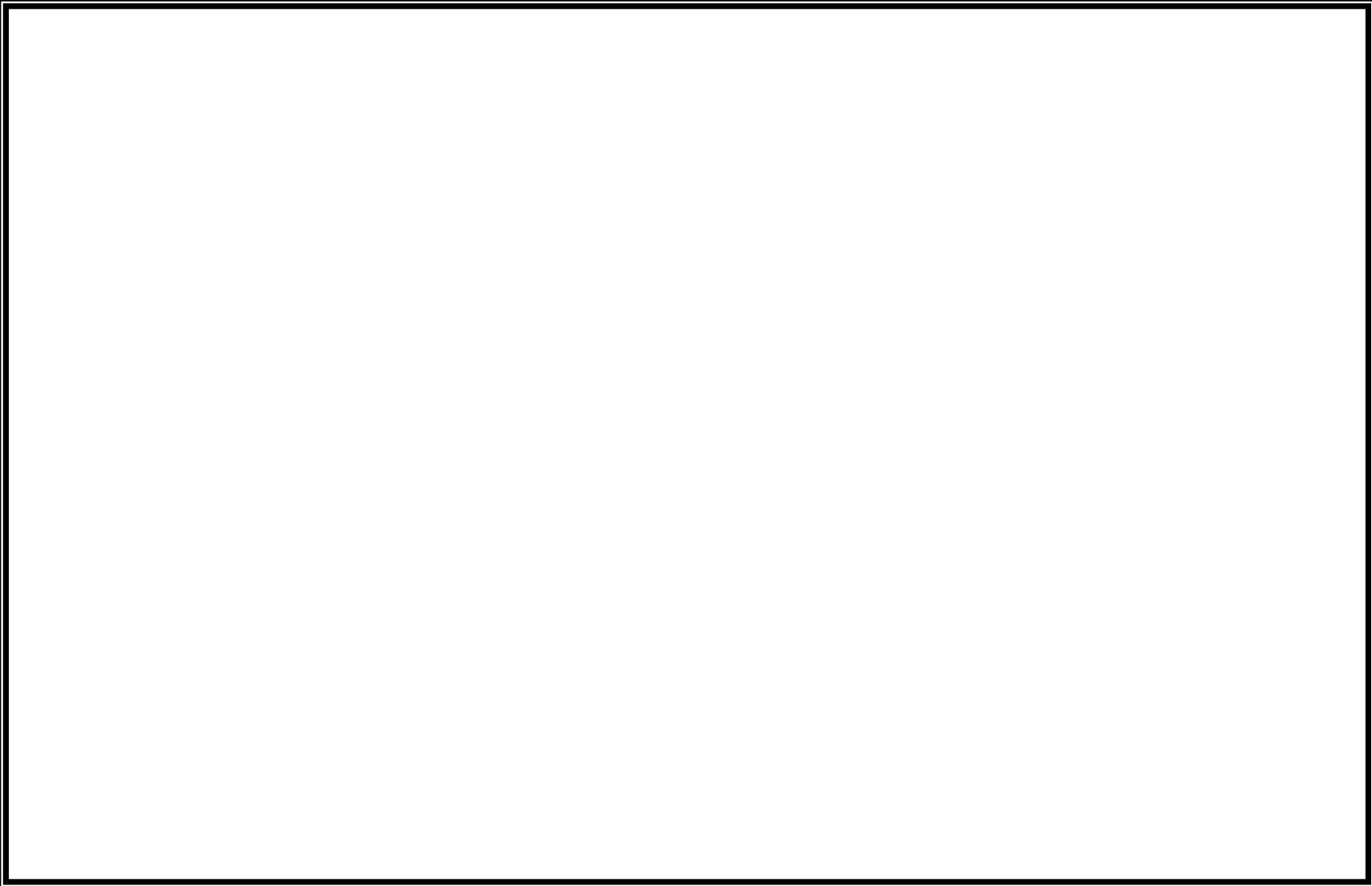
Struggles	Accomplishments

2. Why is Joshua Johnston's work important?

Portrait



Sketch Your Family



Painting Label

Title:

By:

Date:

Medium:

Names of people in your portrait:

What is the relationship of the people?

What is happening in your portrait?

What props did you use?

What is the mood of your portrait?

What do the props tell us about your people?

How is this portrait like a Joshua Johnston portrait?

How is this portrait different from a Joshua Johnston portrait?