

## Wonderful Women: A Museum Portrait Activity

In #510 tales, Cinderella wonders what her life would be like if she weren't a servant. What if she could wear a beautiful dress and go to the ball? Wouldn't life be wonderful if those dreams came true?

“Wonderful,” or being “full of wonder” has two meanings: a *wonderful* person or thing possesses qualities that are greatly appreciated, For Cinderella (and also, for that matter for her stepsisters as well), it would be truly wonderful, great, fantastic, to be able to attend the ball. But a person who is full of wonder asks or inquires about something that s/he doesn't quite understand. That inquiry can be about something mundane such as, “I *wonder* whether I'll have to sweep the hearth again?” or it can be used to show that someone is thinking hard about an idea that opens up myriad possibilities, as in “I *wonder* whether the prince will find me?” Wonderful thus has two meanings, and both play a role in the transformation of Cinderella in the story.

Much emphasis is also placed on Cinderella's physical transformation from grungy servant girl to beautiful maiden. But does this change Cinderella's essential nature? What can we tell about her, simply by judging the way she looks? How should we wonder about the appearances of other women in the tale such as the stepsisters, or stepmother? How much should we wonder about who Cinderella is from what we see of her wonderful or non-wonderful appearance?

### **Activity**

Women are often judged by their appearance. But what if we used *wonderful* in both its contexts as a criterion to look at portraits of women throughout the ages? What would you wonder about, want to know, perhaps be puzzled by? What might be wonderful, interesting, or fantastic, about these women? Here are some questions you might ask as you consider portraits of women you find throughout the museum:

### **Do you wonder: who was the woman in this portrait?**

- See if you can get to know each woman by comparing what you see with what you might do if this were your portrait.
- If an artist were to make a portrait of you, what would you wear?
- How would you fix your hair?
- What would you choose to have included in the picture with you?
- What would you want a viewer to know about you just by looking at your portrait?

### **I wonder what life was like in her time?**

Imagine for a moment that you are transported to the time and place in which this woman lived.

- Can some of the details you find in the portrait show what life may have been like in this woman's time?
- What information can you glean about the ways this woman might have lived in her time just by looking at her portrait?

### **Why, this is a wonderful woman!**

Portraits such as these hang in a museum because they are examples of artistic excellence. Develop your critical skills:

- What makes each of these portraits a wonderful (excellent) example of an artist's work?
- You may want to consider such factors as: use of color, painting style, background treatment, historical relevance or uniqueness of ideas.

## Age-Specific Guidelines

### ***Getting to Know You – What We Can Learn From Looking***

Elementary students eagerly participate in looking activities that underscore the fact that we can find out a good deal of information about a person by looking closely at their portrait. They can then be encouraged to relate what they see to their own experiences. (What did you wear when you had your portrait taken? How is this woman's dress similar to or different from yours? Do you have chairs like this in your home?)

Students will then be able to speculate about the differences they've discovered. (Why do you think women today rarely wear long dresses? What do we have in our homes that influences the ways in which we arrange our furniture?) Students will come away with an understanding of some of the ways women are both the same and different from those of yesteryear, after having become aware of their own life experiences.

### Middle/High School

Students can further explore through research, the varying roles of women throughout the depicted historical periods. Concepts to be explored could include: traditional/nontraditional roles for women; economic factors that enabled women to be able to have a portrait; ways in which the portraits reflect the cultural context of both the sitter and the artist; ways in which the portrait reflects aesthetic choices indicative of the artistic tastes of the time; and the role of the artist in the society of the time period.