Images of Political Leaders and Political Power

Political leaders throughout history have used artistic images (paintings, photographs, sculptures) to convey themselves and their power to people. In the following activities, you will explore and design imagery of political leaders and political power by curating a collection of images of political figures and designing an artistic representation of a current political leader.

Look at the portraits of John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court (1794), and Sandra Day O'Connor, the first Woman Supreme Court Justice (1983).

Portrait of John Jay | Public Domain

Portrait of [Sandra Day O'Connor](#) | Public Domain

What do the images make you think about who the person is and what role they play in law, government, and politics?

What assumptions might you make about the individual?

What conclusions were you able to draw about their historical significance and political power based on the images?

Throughout history, political leaders have gained importance and power through imagery, including paintings, portraits, and sculptures. U.S. citizens often instantly recognize figures in U.S. history from artistic renderings, such as George Washington on the dollar bill, Abraham Lincoln seated at the Lincoln Memorial, and the [iconic 2008 Hope poster](#) for Barack Obama's first campaign for President. The staging and framing of these works of art convey lasting messages about each person as a historically significant agent of change.

Even art about celebrities attract great interest. In May 2021, Andy Warhol's portrait of Marilyn Monroe, "[Shot Sage Blue Marilyn](#)," sold for $195 million at auction -- the most money ever paid for a piece of 20th century artwork.

A similar pattern happens in global history where political figures from Alexander the Great to Queen Victoria, Winston Churchill, Che Guevara, and Nelson Mandela are recognized as important and powerful leaders from the paintings, photos, coins, and other images made about them or commissioned by them. Louis XIV of France used art by [Charles le Brun](#) to glorify himself as the strong and robust "Sun King" with a divine right to rule, even though he had lifelong health problems. Marie Antionette had [Elisabeth Louise Vigee Le Brun](#) paint "Marie-Antoinette and Her Children" (1787) in an unsuccessful political attempt to portray her as a faithful and strong mother to the nation.

[Marie-Antoinette de Lorraine-Habsbourg, Queen of France, and her children](#) | Public Domain

[Queen Elizabeth I](#) (1558-1603) had portraits painted depicting her power and that of England as a world power. [Napoleon's 1812 portrait](#) is famous for his pose in a uniform designed to stress his leadership as a military general in war.

Photographs too were image-building tools for political leaders. Think of the 1913 photo of [Tsar Nicholas II, his wife and family](#); not long after, in 1918, they would all be executed during the Bolshevik Revolution.

How do artistic images convey information about individuals and power and why do they last over time? In *[Twelve Caesars: Images of Power from the Ancient World to the Modern](#)*, Mary Beard explores the artistic depictions of the first Roman Emperors and considers why "generations of now anonymous weavers, cabinetmakers, silversmiths, printers, and ceramicists" made and remade these "ancient faces of power" (2021, p. X, para. 2). For Beard, rich and powerful political leaders, both famous and infamous, retain their fame in part because of how paintings and portraits continue to commemorate their importance through time.

In today's world, political figures, not only dictators, kings, and queens, but also democratically-elected leaders, actively seek to shape how they are portrayed in the media ([Political Portraits in the Media Age](#), *BBC Culture*, October, 2013). They craft their own portraits of power from banners and posters hung in public spaces to social media posts about their activities and achievements.

Activity 1: Curate a Digital Collection of Images of Political Figures

- Choose one well-known political figure in U.S. or world history.
- Choose one not-as-well-known political figure in U.S. or world history.
- Select a digital tool or app to assemble a digital collection of images (e.g., Wakelet, Padlet, Jamboard, Google Slides, Sutori).
- Curate a digital collection of images that showcase how the two political figures you selected have been portrayed in different forms of art and media.
  - For example, Life Portraits of George Washington presents a series of depictions of the nation's most recognized political figure. Similarly, Susan B. Anthony Suffrage Icons offers views of her as a strong and effective campaigner for women's rights.
  - The National Portrait Gallery at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. is one source of images of individuals from throughout U.S. history.
- Using the Teacher and Student Guide to Critically Analyzing Images, annotate the images (e.g., add text directly on or next to the images) to illuminate how the artist used different design techniques to craft a specific representation of the individual.

Designing for Learning: Student-Created Activity Example

Curate a Digital Collection of Images of Political figures by Jason Maysonet

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Activity 2: Design an Artistic Representation of a Current Political Leader

- Choose a woman, Native American, Black American, or other traditionally marginalized individual who serves as a political figure in the U.S. or the world today.
- Design an artistic representation showcasing what role that individual plays in law, government, and/or politics. Consider what images of power and politics you would like to include in your artistic depiction.
  - You can use any format you choose, including painting, poster, sculpture, digital 3D model, or even a digitally manipulated photograph. For example, watch here as Barack Obama becomes the first President to have a 3D printed portrait.

Designing for Learning: Student-Created Activity Example

Design an artistic representation of a Political Leader by Jason Maysonet

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Additional Resources

- Images matter: the power of the visual in political communication, The Conversation
- Political portraits in the media age, BBC

Connecting to the Building Democracy for All eBook

[Building Democracy for All: Leadership and the Qualities of Political Leaders](#)