



National Portrait Gallery Washington, D.C.

Introduction and Instructions

While the Smithsonian Institution is commonly associated with its more famous history and natural science museums, they also administer the National Portrait Gallery. It is the only museum in the United States dedicated entirely to portraiture and contains portraits of many famous and notable figures from American history, including official portraits of U.S. presidents. In addition to any prior knowledge you may have, use your research skills and the resources provided here to answer the questions below.



Learn about the history of the Portrait Gallery and the building where it is located.
EXPLORE: <https://siarchives.si.edu/history/national-portrait-gallery>

1. What year did Congress officially establish the National Portrait Gallery?

Answer: 1962

2. What were the two main objectives for the gallery based on its congressional mandate?

Answer: To acquire and display portraits and statues of those who have made significant contributions to the history, development, and culture of the United States; and to establishment of the gallery as a research center for American biography, iconography, and history.

3. What are the guidelines for accepting portraits?

Answer: The works must be the best likeness possible; original portraits from life, if possible; and that all exhibitions of permanent collection portraits should be of presidents and First Ladies, and subjects who have been dead for at least ten years.

4. How did Congress increase the Portrait Gallery's ability to add to its collections in 1976?

Answer: It passed an act allowing it to collect portraits in all media, most notably photography.

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5. The gallery moved from the Arts and Industries Building in 1967 to its present location in the historic Patent Office Building. Summarize the building's history and describe its architecture.

Answers will vary: Possible answers may include: It was built on what L'Enfant designated as a site for a national nondenominational church. Construction began in 1836 and was completed in 1867. The Patent Office moved into the building in 1842. Many different bureaus were housed there. During the Civil War, it was used as a military hospital and barracks. It was the site of Lincoln's second inaugural ball. A fire in 1877 damaged upper floors. In 1932 the building was occupied by the Civil Service Commission.

The building was designed by Robert Mills and has porticoes modeled after the Parthenon in Athens. It is constructed from freestone and sandstone from Virginia and marble and granite from Maine, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Maryland. It is a quadrangle built around a courtyard. It has porticoes, colonnades, vaulted galleries, and curving double staircase. New features include a 346-seat underground auditorium; a conservation lab and art-storage area; and a café.



What connection do the Washington Wizards basketball team have to the National Portrait Gallery?

READ: <https://wamu.org/story/17/08/23/washington-wizards-saved-national-portrait-gallery/>

6. What was happening in April of 1968 that made the opening of the National Portrait Gallery challenging?

Answer: Rioting and looting was happening in the city after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The streets were like a "war-zone". It kept many potential visitors away.

7. Why do you think the article is titled, "How the Washington Wizards Saved the Portrait Gallery"?

Answer: In 1997 The Washington Wizards beat the Seattle Supersonics in the new arena in downtown D.C. – at that time called the MCI Center. With the arena came changes to the streets and more people and business to the area. It also brought more visitors to the gallery. In a short period of time, attendance doubled.

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WHAT DO YOU THINK? *This is your chance to share your opinions, make connections, and apply what you've learned!*



Watch this student orientation video about the National Portrait Gallery.
WATCH: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkAfjRoINCI>

1. What are some of the important rules to keep in mind when you are visiting the museum?

Answers will vary – Either keep your backpacks on the bus, or lock them in lockers at the gallery. Stay at least an arm's length away from walls, labels, pedestals, columns, etc. and don't touch. It is not appropriate to yell, run, or wander away from the group.



Explore the current and permanent exhibitions at the gallery.
EXPLORE: <https://npg.si.edu/whats-on/current-exhibitions>

2. Choose three exhibits that you are interested in seeing and explain why they interest you.

Answers will vary.



CONSIDER: "To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths," *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* by Carol Duncan.

3. After exploring the exhibitions, what American values and truths do you think visitors to the National Portrait Gallery discover from visiting the museum? Justify your response.

Answers will vary.

4. On the second floor of the gallery, there is an exhibit that showcases a period in our history called "The Struggle for Justice" that highlights men and women who struggled to achieve civil rights. If you could add an exhibit showcasing another event, group, struggle, or triumph in our nation's history, what would it be? Whose portraits would be on display? Explain your choices.

Answers will vary.