

## Portrait Within a Portrait

**Ages:** 10+ (Grades 5–12)

**Duration:** Open-ended

**Materials Needed:** Paper and pencil; markers, crayons, or colored pencils; mirror, smartphone, or tablet with front-facing camera; another person (or people) in your family or class.

**Inspiration:** Palmer Hayden (American, 1893–1973). *The Janitor Who Paints*, ca. 1930. Oil on canvas. Collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1967.57.28. On view in *African American Art in the 20th Century*.



## Introduction

Who can be an artist? Where does an artist make their work? When do they make it? Whom is it for? Palmer Hayden addresses these questions in his work *The Janitor Who Paints*, created around 1930 after his return to New York City from travels to Paris, France. Let's explore this painting in more detail.

## Look

- What's going on in this painting?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can you find?

## Think

- What details in the painting do you identify with the work of an artist?
- What details in the painting do you identify with the work of a janitor?
- What do you think might be the relationship among the three people in this painting?
- Describe how you imagine each of the individuals in this work might have spent their days.
- What happened before the scene we see here? What might happen afterwards?

## Connect

Palmer Hayden described *The Janitor Who Paints* as "a sort of protest painting." His inspiration for the work was his friend Cloyd Boykin, an artist who lived in New York City and worked as a janitor to support himself, just as Palmer had. He said, "I painted it because no one called Boykin the artist. They called him the janitor." Now, look closely at the painting again. How does the title of this painting affect your understanding of it?

## Do

1. First, find another person in your home, your classroom, or from the group you are with today. This person will be your subject.
2. If you have access to a mirror, try to sit together so you are both reflected in it, along with the background of the space you are in and all of the objects in it. If you don't have access to a mirror, you can use a smartphone or tablet with a front-facing camera to reflect yourselves on the screen.

3. Looking directly at your subject, and using paper and pencil, sketch a portrait of your subject on one section of your paper. Your portrait can be of their head and shoulders, or you can sketch their entire body. Try to include as many details you can about their facial expression, their posture, and their clothing. Try to add details about what is in the background. If you have markers, crayons, or colored pencils available, you can also add color to your work.
4. Now, imagine that you are looking at both your subject and yourself from another set of eyes. The mirror and/or front-facing camera on your device can help you visualize this.
5. Try to add yourself, the artist, into the composition with the portrait of your subject. Where are you located relative to that person? What does your facial expression look like? What are your posture and body language like? What about your clothing? What objects and materials are around you that you can add to the overall composition?

## Reflect

What was the most difficult part of this process? How is drawing your subject different from drawing yourself? What details about either you or your subject provide clues about your personalities, your likes, your dislikes, and how you spend your time? How did it feel to draw yourself in the act of drawing? Did this process change your understanding of Palmer Hayden's painting?

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