

## ART ACTIVITY

*From Slavery to Fashion Entrepreneur***Background**

Elizabeth Keckley was a self-emancipated woman, abolitionist, and accomplished dressmaker. When she moved from St. Louis to Washington, D.C. in 1860, she established her own business and cultivated a clientele of the wives of the political elite. Elizabeth was recommended to Mary Todd Lincoln, the new First Lady of the United States. The dresses Elizabeth made for the First Lady were praised for their modern look and exquisite detail, and incorporated the social expectations of women, rules of mourning, and Mary Todd's role as a mother figure to the nation.

**Task**

Elizabeth Keckley gained both her freedom and her renown through her talents as a dressmaker. Elizabeth's dresses made important statements, both about herself as the dressmaker and about the person who wore her designs. After reading Elizabeth Keckley's life story, students will imagine that they are fashion designers designing clothing for a modern social or political figure. They will create a fashion illustration that captures the beliefs of the woman whom they are "dressing." They should keep in mind materials and styles that speak to the person's identity and role as well as the mood of the nation. Students will draw their designs on a croqui and add color using watercolor pencils.

**Materials**

- Pencils
- Scrap/sketch paper
- Watercolor paper

- Watercolor pencils
- Paintbrushes (sable, camel, or synthetic)
- Containers for water
- Paper towels
- Croqui printouts (optional)

### Art Vocabulary

- **croqui:** A template used to sketch the human body, often used in fashion illustration.
- **illustration:** A drawing, painting or printed work of art which explains, clarifies, or visually represents.
- **fashion illustration:** The art of communicating fashion ideas in a visual form that originates in illustration.
- **proportion:** The relative size and scale of various elements in a design.

### Steps

Invite students to discuss how clothing defines an individual.

- What do your clothes say about you? Your likes and dislikes? Your personal values?
- What do your clothes say about the time and place in which you live?
- What kinds of statements can your clothing make?
- From whom or on what do we model our clothing choices?
- What are some current fashion trends that we see today? Do you choose to wear them? Why or why not?
- First, lead an inquiry with Mary Lincoln's purple velvet dress made by dressmaker Elizabeth Keckley, 1861–1862 using the line of questioning below.

- What do you notice about this garment?
  - When do you think this garment was made?
  - Who might have worn it? Who might have made it? How do you know?
  - What would you think of someone who wore a dress like this? What statement is it making?
  - Elizabeth Keckley made this dress for Mary Todd Lincoln in the early years of the Civil War. What message do you think this dress sent to the American public in the midst of this historic event? Why might it have led to criticism?
- People throughout history have used fashion to express their beliefs and elements of their personal identity. Fashion often reflects and responds to the time period in which it was created. It can also say just as much about the designer as it does about the wearer. Next, have students read the life story of Elizabeth Keckley. You can also have students read more specific information about her fashion designs [here](#). Discuss the following questions as a class or in small groups.
- What were some of the major events in Elizabeth Keckley's life?
  - How did her skills as a dressmaker impact her life and her experiences?
  - When Elizabeth opened her own dress shop in Washington, D.C. she used her success to create jobs for other people to help with this work. She also started a charity to help other Black Americans recently freed from slavery start new lives. Why is this so important to note?
  - Why was it significant that she designed and made dresses for wives of political figures during the Civil War?
- Students now have the opportunity to imagine themselves as fashion designers for prominent women of the 21st century. First, have students choose a contemporary figure and conduct research on them. After compiling their research, they will brainstorm ways in which this person's beliefs, political views, etc. can be visually represented through fashion, taking into consideration both material and stylistic influences.

- To begin, invite students to practice drawing the human figure by creating a croqui. This will support students in creating their final fashion illustration. In a standard croqui the human body's proportions are exaggerated, with elongated legs, arms, and neck. The full body of the croqui should be ten heads tall (see images below for reference). If time does not permit, students can be given a copy of a croqui to work on rather than drawing their own. You can download and print free croqui templates online [here](#). Note that you'll need to print the croqui templates on watercolor paper.
- Once students have a finished croqui, they can create their final fashion illustration using watercolor pencils.
  - When students are designing their garment, they should consider all of the different elements that make up the woman's full outfit, and also make sure that they are designing something that relates to the style trends of the time (students can research this beforehand or the teacher can provide examples). Is she wearing something casual or formal? What kind of occasion is she dressed for and why? Is she accessorizing with other elements like jewelry or a hat? What are your material choices saying about this woman's identity or influences? Are you including patterns, images, symbols, or words on your design? How can you convey this woman's beliefs, politics, and personality with the colors that you choose for each piece of her outfit?
  - When using watercolor pencils to create their fashion illustration, students should be sure to render their textiles to show texture, weight and movement. Remember that the fabric is draped on a human body. Shading to create lights and darks in the garment can help with this effect (see Watercolor Tips below). They can also incorporate patterns in their illustration to tell a story with their garment.
- When students have finished their artwork, have them write an explanatory statement that addresses the questions below. You can also have them do a

gallery walk and discuss their fashion illustrations and inspirations with one another as they circulate around the room.

- Who is the modern figure you chose to depict, and what elements did you include in your fashion illustration to convey her politics and beliefs?
- Which elements of your design speak to the current moment, or events that are taking place?
- What impact does this woman have in modern society?
- What do you think this outfit says about the person wearing it? What does it say about you, the designer?
- How have politics and expression in the form of clothing changed from Elizabeth Keckley's time to today?

### **Watercolor Tips:**

Watercolor pencils are a wonderful option in the classroom as they combine the translucent qualities of watercolor paint with the hard lines and surface covering of colored pencils.

**Application and Technique:** To achieve thin translucent washes, students should apply light pressure to the pencil while coloring an area before applying water. For thick solid color, students should apply heavier pressure to the pencil before applying water. The amount of water used with the pencils will determine the application technique. Similar to watercolor paint, students should use water sparingly to avoid oversaturating their paper.

If students are new to this medium, allow them time to explore its properties before drawing their final illustration. Making a color chart can be helpful, as the color of the pencils can look different once water is added!

