

Background

Lois Curtis was one of the plaintiffs in the *L.C. v. Olmstead* Supreme Court case. The landmark Supreme Court decision paved the way for Lois Curtis and others with disabilities to live in the community rather than in institutions.¹ While Lois Curtis's contribution to disability and civil rights history is immeasurable, her life extends far beyond that seminal court case.² She is a self-taught visual artist, known for her portraits.

Portraiture has been a popular form of art for centuries because its primary focus is the human subject. A portrait can tell us both about the subject and the artist. Artists create portraiture to capture a person's intense emotions. Lois Curtis does this with simple lines and bold colors. Her portraits are bold expressions of how deeply she values personal relationships. Lois does not limit herself to one medium; rather, her works consist of ballpoint pen, chalk pastels, and acrylic artworks.

Task

Students will analyze portraits created by Lois Curtis. They will discuss the importance of having the freedom to be in community and to express themselves through art. Students will explore illustrating emotion through colors, lines, and shapes by practicing different ways of creating a portrait.

Art Vocabulary

Medium: in art, medium refers to the materials used to make a work of art (such as clay, wood, paint, fabric, charcoal, etc.) and also refer to creation techniques such as sculpture, printmaking, watercolor, or pottery

Portrait: a painting, drawing, photograph, or engraving of a person, especially one depicting only the face or head and shoulders

Oeuvre: the works of a painter, composer, or author regarded collectively

¹<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/06/22/olmstead-champion-meets-president>

²<https://the-art-of-autism.com/disability-history-month-lois-curtis-artist-and-disability-advocate-paved-the-way/>

Profile: an outline of something, especially a person's face, as seen from one side

Blind Contour Drawing: a drawing exercise in which an artist draws the contour of a subject without looking at the paper

Steps

Read the [Life Story of Lois Curtis](#).

Analyze the works by Lois Curtis [here](#).

- How might you describe Lois from the photo of her holding her artwork?
- What does she depict in her works?
- How do you think her artworks are made?

For more information on Lois's drawings, invite students to watch this [video](#).

After learning about Lois's life and looking at her work, inform students that you will practice creating portraits in different styles and mediums.

Have students partner up and challenge each student to create a blind contour drawing of their classmate.

Using a pen or marker, have students first make a blind contour drawing without picking their pen or pencil up off of the paper while looking at the subject. Blind contour drawings are created when the eye is not watching the hand as it draws on the paper. A blind contour drawing is an excellent way to train the artist to draw what they see and not what they think they see. **Optional: set a time limit for each drawing **

The second blind contour drawing will be made by not looking at the paper but students will now be allowed to lift their pencil/pen off the paper.

Have students share both drawings and lead an inquiry through the process.

-How was this exercise for them? Did they enjoy the process? Was it difficult or fun? Are they happy with their drawings?

Remind students this project is about how we can express our emotions freely using art. The goal is not to walk away with a detailed drawing but to work through the art process and consider one's own feelings in the process.

For the final art exercise, students will make one more portrait. This will not be a blind contour drawing; they are free to look at their partner and/or the paper as they please. In this portrait, allow students to add color and use various line weights to express emotions.

If students want to show happy emotions, they may want to use bright colors; a sad emotion may be expressed with darker or bolder colors. Their line weight may also change to show an expression; for example, a lighter line using less pressure may be used to show a calm expression while a thick bold line may be used to express an excited feeling.

Have students think about the emotion they want to express and how it might feel as it is running through their drawing arm: What would that arm be doing if it was excited, scared, happy etc.? This will help them understand how their lines may be drawn.

Remind students there is no wrong way to illustrate an emotion and their final portrait should depict feelings through lines and colors rather than be a realistic final portrait.

When the class has finished all the portraits, have students share their work and lead one final inquiry on this exercise.

-How was the process of making a portrait? Did you enjoy it? What did you find challenging? Did the emotion you wanted to show change as you were drawing?

To conclude, remind students of the Lois Curtis life story and the importance of having the freedom to be part of your community and the opportunity this freedom allows one to have. In Lois's case, this freedom allowed her to be an advocate and artist.