



Scott Russell

Micrography Self-Portraits

4th–5th (can be adapted to older students)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Micrography>

<http://gawno.com/2009/05/micrography-text-art-and-typography/>

<http://eatock.com/project/holley-portraits/> (great alternative self portrait idea for older students)

I use this as my culminating lesson for 5th grade, and then I hang them all the last weeks of school and for the graduation/awards assembly. I have seen many parents pause for a photo of their child and their last artwork as an elementary student. And this one (even though they complain about how hard it is sometimes) – they always take home.

We begin with a review of portraits, but because we have done them many times by 5th grade I don't normally do a step-by-step lesson. I do provide a facial proportions worksheet to help them. Using mirrors students choose a facial view, full face, $\frac{3}{4}$ etc. and create a sketch of their face. I encourage them to draw large and have been known to provide a template for the head if they want one to help them. This initial drawing is a contour line sketch, so erasures are fine.

Once the (6x9 inch) sketch is completed to their and my liking they take a thick sharpie and outline the lines they want to keep. So if they made mistakes, they just don't trace them.

Once the sketch is traced they get a final white copy (7x10 inch) Using a light box or window, or sometimes a lightly colored table top, student place sketch behind white paper and trace (with pencil) the outline of their portrait onto the white paper.

Now is the time to talk about the art of micrography/microcalligraphy. Wikipedia gives a good overview of the origins and if you search images in Google you will find some amazing examples. I personally use a poster of the Wizard of Oz and the Declaration of Independence – both from: <http://www.lapopart.com/> a great, inexpensive site for examples. We discuss the way text is used in advertising and how text imagery is being used in technology.

Once traced, the hard part (for some) comes. They must talk about themselves! Or in the case of micrography, write! I have a brainstorming worksheet to help get the juices flowing. Some choose to begin writing on the portrait right away, some plan. There is no wrong way.

The students will be writing along the pencil lines. We talk about consistency of letter size – this is important to create the illusion of an implied line – and seem to be the most difficult part for most students. Every line should get words – it doesn't matter where they start. I am lenient around the eyes – they can fill in the pupil and eyelashes – but some put their initials in the pupils instead! For the student who just can't figure out what to write, I let them describe the parts of the face they trace, for example – around the hair write “brown hair, soft, wavy, brown hair, long and brown” etc. I have let English language learners or other students write in native languages – anything that helps them be expressive.

I let the student decide if they want to start writing with pencil or with a fine sharpie. We discuss those mistakes with sharpie stay. Ultimately all words will be traced so that when the whole face is text, the pencil gets erased.

I've left them black and white, but more recently I've had the students select 1 accent color. They can color any 1 thing and use 1 color – iris, lips, hair, background, skin – whatever. I had a boy with a shock of electric blue hair color only that part of his portrait.

One year I put out alphabet stamps and let them stamp their first name in the negative space around their portrait too.

When complete mount on a 9x12 inch background. Sometimes I have them choose the complementary color to whatever accent color they used, sometimes I don't.