Young Portrait Explorers: Henrietta Lacks

Learning Objective: Discover the life of Henrietta Lacks through Kadir Nelson’s vibrant portrait and learn about her legacy (or her important place in history).

Portrait Discussion:
Spend 30 seconds letting your eyes wander from the top of the painting to the bottom.

Clothing: Look closely at Henrietta Lacks’s clothing. What is she wearing in this painting? What colors and shapes do you see? Her deep red dress is covered in a flower pattern. The flowers on her dress represent cells (or the tiny structures that make up a person’s body). Henrietta Lacks is best known for the unusual cells that scientists and doctors found in her body as she was being treated for cancer. These cells were so unique that they were named HeLa cells after Henrietta Lacks. To this day, scientists use these cells for important scientific research, but Henrietta Lacks and her family never knew about her special cells. Did you notice that one button is missing? The missing buttons on her dress symbolize the cells that were taken from her body and used without her permission or knowledge.

What else is Henrietta Lacks wearing in this portrait? Did you notice her hat? What shape is it? The circles of her hat make up a halo (a circle of light surrounding the head of someone who is extraordinary). Artist Kadir Nelson painted a halo around Henrietta Lacks because he wanted everyone to know that she was special. What qualities make you special?

Background: What patterns (or shapes/designs that repeat) and colors can you find in the background? Can you spot the intricate (or detailed) blue shapes? Use your finger to trace the outline of one of these blue shapes. Did the shape that you traced resemble a flower? There are many flowers in this portrait, both on Lacks’s dress and in the background. Did you know that all living things (plants and flowers, animals, and humans) are made up of cells? Henrietta Lacks’s body was made up of cells, just like yours and mine. But her cells (or HeLa cells) were special. HeLa cells are able to continually make copies of themselves, similar to the way in which Kadir Nelson has repeated one shape to make a pattern.

Historical Context: Henrietta Lacks’s HeLa cells have allowed scientists to discover many new things about medicine and the human body. They have contributed to research regarding, polio, AIDS, Parkinson’s disease, and other conditions. But Lacks herself was never able to see her cells help other people. Scientists experimented with the HeLa cells for many years but never asked permission or gave credit to Lacks and her family. In fact, it was a long time before her family even knew about the HeLa cells. If you were the main part of a scientific discovery, would you want to know about it? Henrietta Lacks was almost left out of scientific history, but fortunately we know her story. Thanks to artists like Kadir Nelson who painted her likeness and the many writers who wrote about Lacks, her legacy lives on.

Related Children’s Books:
Little Doctors Cell Biology for Babies by Dr. Haitham Ahmed

Activity: Making Patterns
Materials:
Paper + Drawing utensil or a stamp and ink pad or paint
Instructions: Artist Kadir Nelson used flower patterns to represent HeLa cells. The flower pattern in the background is large and blue, while the flower pattern on Henrietta Lacks’s dress is smaller. Now it’s your turn to create a pattern. What shapes will you use to make your pattern? Circles or triangles? Will your pattern be small or large?
Feel free to draw a pattern or use stamps to create one!

Find the portrait on our website, here: https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.2018.9