One of the traditions of being president is having a portrait made. The National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., has at least one portrait of every American president. These likenesses are in different mediums, such as paintings, sculpture, drawings, prints, and photographs. This exhibition provides a visual record of the men who have held the highest political office in the country. Some presidential portraits were created before the sitters were elected president. Others were painted during their presidency. And still others were created after they left office. Sometimes the artist had only a short time with the president: Peter Hurd spent only fifty minutes with Lyndon Johnson during two sittings. On the other hand, Greta Kempton painted five portraits of Harry Truman and had five sessions with him just for the first portrait.

For many years, a presidential portrait was the only way in which people could know what their presidents looked like. Their expressions in these portraits may be serious, warm, somber, or happy. Important information can be gathered just from looking at portraits. Beyond what the sitters looked like and what they wore at the time the portrait was created, portraits provide clues to the person through the objects in the background. You can see the differences and similarities when there are multiple portraits of one president in the exhibition. Combining what you see with research and study will give you a deeper understanding of those people who have been president.

Now you can explore and learn! Take a virtual tour of the Hall of Presidents in The National Portrait Gallery. Click on the “List of Presidents” to see a list of all the artwork displayed in the hall. Click on each president’s name to see their portrait. Click on each room name in the list to take a virtual tour of that room, using your arrow keys to move around. Learn more at Smithsonian: http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/hall/index-hall2.htm.

ePals Activity: Choose two portraits from the Hall of Presidents. Look closely. Compare and contrast the two. What is similar and what is different about the portraits? Use a Venn diagram to help organize your ideas. Post your thoughts to the Smithsonian Chat Student Forum on ePals.

Share portraits, paintings or other pieces of artwork that you have created with students from around the world. Upload them to the ePals Student Media Gallery.