**BEAUTIFUL SHADES OF BROWN: The Art of Laura Wheeler Waring**

By Nancy Churnin

Illustrated by Felicia Marshall

**Summary:**

Growing up in the late 19th century, Laura Wheeler Waring didn’t see any artist who looked like her. She didn’t see any paintings of people who looked like her, either. As a young woman studying art in Paris, she found inspiration in the works of Matisse and Gaugin to paint the people she knew best. Back in Philadelphia, the Harmon Foundation commissioned her to paint portraits of accomplished African Americans. Her paintings still hang in Washington, D.C.’s National Portrait Gallery, where children of all races can admire the beautiful shades of brown she captured.

**Themes:** African American Artist, Biography, Portraits, Renaissance

**Lexile Reading Level Range**: 810-1000

**Interest level:** ages 7-12

**Common Core:** CCSS.ELA-Literacy. L.4.3, 4, 4a, 4b,5, 5a, 5b, 6; RF. 4.3,3a,4,4a,4c; RI.4.1,2.3.4.5.6.8.9.10; SL.4.1,1c, 1d, 2.3.4.6; W.4.1,2,3,4,6,7,8,9,9b,10

**Before you read:**

Discuss what is was like to live in 1897 Connecticut as a person of color.

**Discussion Questions:**

Laura describes each color of brown using metaphors. Her mother’s chocolate colored hair. Her father’s caramel coat. See how many shades of brown you can find. Give each one a name and tell why you chose that name.

Laura’s favorite color is brown. Why?

What is your favorite color and why?

Find or make many shades of your favorite color and name them. Did you name them after favorite things of the same shade? How did you choose your names?

What language has 50 words for snow? Look at the list of snow words. Are they all necessary? Can you come up with 50 words for brown? For your favorite color?

Laura found it hard to get each shade right. She had to add some red and yellow. Why was it important to get the exact shade of skin color correct? What does this say about Laura?

Why is brown not part of the rainbow? Laura says brown is its own rainbow made from adding the colors of the rainbow to it. What does this mean?

Laura spent hours mixing and blending. What is the difference between mixing and blending?

Laura described her father’s crinkles by his eyes as russet and her mother’s creased hands as coffee colored. Why do you thing Laura’s shades are all compared to foods?

Laura lived in a segregated world. What does this mean? Would paintings of African Americans be put on museum walls in segregated America? Why or why not?

Laura was only 10 when she dreamed this big dream about her paintings being in a museum. She was determined. You also are close to Laura’s age. What big dream do you have for yourself and are you determined to make it come true? If you have determination can you make your dream a reality? What does it take?

Why is it important for Laura to turn her room into a gallery?

The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts was nearly all white. Is this important? Do you think other artists will care about Laura’s color more than they care about her talent? Explain.

Was it unusual for an African American to go to college during this time?

Why is Paris known for the place to go to study art? What’s special about Paris? Can you be a real artist and not study there?

Laura’s sketch book is filled with brown tones. Are white people really white or are we also shades of brown? Are there many shades of white? Explain.

Laura copied the green skin of Lautrec’s singers, the blue faces of Matisse’s women, and the caramel bodies of Gaugin’s Tahitians. Which do you think she preferred? Why do you think she copied them when she preferred true skin color? Why do you think these three artists chose to not use realistic colors? Would you?

Laura ended up being true to herself preferring to paint portraits of beautiful shades of brown. Did she need to go to Paris to learn this?

Marian Anderson was a teenager but when she walked out on stage she held her head as high as a queen. What does this mean?

When Marian sang she didn’t sound young at all. What does Laura mean by this?

Laura says Marian’s notes rose and danced about her in beautiful shades of brown. Would Laura have said this if Marian wasn’t African American? What is she really saying? Laura said she was hearing what she had been trying to paint. Can we compare singing to painting? What is Laura really meaning? Does it have anything to do with capturing the soul in art?

Paris had made Laura’s painting more bold and confident. How does one look at a painting and recognize boldness and confidence? What is the difference?

Laura’s subjects breathed on canvas. What is it about a portrait that makes a person look alive?

The Harmon Foundation wanted to build a collection of portraits of important African Americans. Why would this be unusual in 1944?

The Harmon Foundation was started by a white real estate developer. Was it unusual for a white philanthropist to be interested in African Americans? What is a philanthropist?

Laura painted Alice Dunbar Nelson showing her as proud? How would one show pride in a painting?

Laura painted James Weldon Johnson with a sensitive face. How would one show sensitivity in a painting?

The difference in a good painter and a great painter is the great painter makes the portrait come alive with emotions. The observer should feel something when they look at a portrait. Can looking at a great portrait tell you what kind of person they are? Explain your answer.

Marian Anderson was the first African American to sing at the White House. Marian’s music was breaking down walls? Could a portrait by Laura break down walls, too? What kind of walls was Laura thinking of?

Laura describes Marian’s singing as soulful. What makes a song soulful and can any song be soulful? Does it depend on who is doing the singing?

Laura felt the melody travel down her fingers as she dipped her brush into the paints of her palette and found the exact luminous shade of Marian’s beautiful brown skin, her gown, the room. Is an artist a better painter, musician, sculpture if they feel the soul of the work they are doing? Explain your answer.

Laura held her breath as Marian studied the painting hoping the great singer would see her spirit mirrored there. Why did Laura feel the need for Marian to see her spirit in her portrait? If she didn’t do you think Laura would have started over? Why or why not?

Laura’s portraits now hang in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. where children like her nieces and nephews could see faces like theirs and how beautiful they are. Why is it important to see faces like ours?

If Laura was alive today who do you think she would choose to paint and why?

If you were a painter who would you choose to paint from your own race?We study the Arts to uplift ourselves and our communities. We know the Arts are important for fostering: abstract thinking, visual literacy, and a sense of community and tradition. How does Laura’s work accomplish this?

Many of the people Laura chose to include in her portraits for The Harmon Foundation were activists. What is an activist? Who today is an activist and why do you believe they are?

**Activities:**

Put brown tempera paint on paper. Add a little white. What happens. Add a little more white to the brown mix. How does the color change the more white you add? Do this again with brown adding a dab of black. How does the brown change. What happens the more black you add?

Brown is made by mixing complementary colors. Make brown from purple and yellow, red and green, and blue and orange. Of the three ways to make brown which brown do you like best?

Laura needed to add red and yellow. What happens to the brown as more red is added? What about yellow?

Experiment with different colors from the rainbow. Which colors are the most helpful? Which aren’t. What have you learned from mixing the colors?

Listen to recordings of different people singing and try to guess their ages.

Pick a relative or friend who is important to you. Think about that person and why he is important to you. What characteristic would you want a portrait of that person to portray? Honesty, humility, charity, etc. How could you show that trait in a portrait?

In order to find a characteristic of a person to paint one must first study their gestures. People watch to observe gestures. What does that gesture tell about the person. Try to paint the gesture.

Try your hand at painting a portrait of yourself. Try to get your skin color just right. What colors did you mix to get it?

Learn to Draw Portraits with Bill Richards: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrhmE2LAHBE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrhmE2LAHBE)

Listen to Marian Anderson sing Messiah, HWV 56 Part 1. No. 20, He Shall Feed His Flock (recorded 1941) (4:31): <https://youtu.be/oECBAaHj6qs>

Some of Laura Waring’s portraits: [www.pinterest.com/isodime/laura-wheeler-waring](http://www.pinterest.com/isodime/laura-wheeler-waring)

**For Further Research:**

Look up the following artists and see their paintings.

Claude Monet (scroll down the page for the paintings): [www.claudemonetgallery.org](http://www.claudemonetgallery.org)

Edouard Manet (click the tabs for his paintings): [www.manet.org](http://www.manet.org)

Paul Cezanne (click the tabs for his paintings): [www.paulcezanne.org](http://www.paulcezanne.org)

Henri de Toulouse Lautrec: [www.biography.com/artist/henri-de-toulouse-lautrec](http://www.biography.com/artist/henri-de-toulouse-lautrec)

Paintings of Lautrec: [www.wikiart.org/en/henri-de-toulouse-lautrec](http://www.wikiart.org/en/henri-de-toulouse-lautrec)

Henri Matisse (click tabs for pictures of the paintings): [www.henrimatisse.org](http://www.henrimatisse.org)

Gaugin: [www.gaugingallery.com](http://www.gaugingallery.com)

Look up the Jeu de Paume museum. [www.britannica.com/topic/Jeu-de-Paume](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Jeu-de-Paume)

Research the Harmon Foundation using the following two links.

African American art and the Harmon Foundation: [www.blog.library.si.edu/blog/2013/02/22/african-american-art-and-the-harmon-foundation/#.SYj1wyhKiUk](http://www.blog.library.si.edu/blog/2013/02/22/african-american-art-and-the-harmon-foundation/#.SYj1wyhKiUk)

Drop ME Off in Harlem: [www.artsedge:kennedy-center.org/interactives/harlem/faces/harmon\_foundation.html](http://www.artsedge:kennedy-center.org/interactives/harlem/faces/harmon_foundation.html)

Research these African Americans whose portraits Laura painted.

Singer Marian Anderson: [www.biography.com/musician/marian-anderson](http://www.biography.com/musician/marian-anderson)

Journalist and activist Alice Dunbar Nelson: [www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/alice-dunbar-nelson](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/alice-dunbar-nelson)

Broadway lyricist and poet James Weldon Johnson: [www.biography;com/writer/james-seldon-johnson](http://www.biography;com/writer/james-seldon-johnson)

Educator and writer W. E. B. DuBois (William Edward Burghardt): [www.biography.com/activist/web-du-bois](http://www.biography.com/activist/web-du-bois)

Editor, poet, essayist, novelist and educator Jessie Fauset: [www.biography.com/writer/jessie-fauset](http://www.biography.com/writer/jessie-fauset)

Composer, arranger, and singer Harry Burleigh: [www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200035730](http://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200035730)

Burleigh sings Go Down Moses: [www.youtube.com/watch?list=RDa7kpcps7Jx0&v=a7kpcps7Jx0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?list=RDa7kpcps7Jx0&v=a7kpcps7Jx0)

Choose from the list below to research even more prominent African Americans Laura Wheeler Waring painted.

George Washington Carver

Judge Jane Bolin

Raul Robeson

William Campbell

Charles Drew

Richmond Barthe

Ralph Bunch

Aaron Douglas

Mary Church Terrell

Thurgood Marshall

Walter White

Captain Hugh Mulzac

Paul Williams

Asa P. Randolph

**About the Author:**

Nany Churnin is the author of several picture book biographies, including South Asia Book Award winner *Manijhi Moves a Mountain* and Sydney Taylor Notable *Irving Berlin the Immigrant Boy Who Made America Sing,* both Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People. The former theater critic for the *Dallas Morning News* and *Los Angeles Times San Diego Edition,* she’s now a full-time writer and peace negotiator between her dog and cats. She lives in North Texas, but you can find her at [www.nancychurnin.com](http://www.nancychurnin.com)

**About the Illustrator:**

Felicia Marshall has illustrated numerous children’s books. She received her bachelor’s degree from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. A native Texan, she lives in Houston with her husband, three children, and their cat, Kitty. See more about Felicia at [www.feliciamarshallartist.com](http://www.feliciamarshallartist.com)

**Readers Theater**

**Beautiful Shade of Brown: The Art of Laura Wheeler Waring**

**By Nancy Churnin**

Narrator 1 Narrator 2 Narrator 3 Narrator 4 Narrator 5 Narrator 6

(The year is 1897. Laura is in her home in Connecticut)

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**Narrator 1:** Laura loved the color brown.

**Narrator 2:** She loved her mother’s chocolate-colored hair,

**Narrator 3:** her father’s caramel coat,

**Narrator 4:** and all the different browns in the cheeks of her younger sister and brothers.

**Narrator 5:** Some languages have fifty words for snow, she thought, swirling her brush in a puddle of chestnut paint. There should be fifty words for brown!

**Narrator 6:** It was hard to get each shade right. Laura dabbed a spot of paint on her skin. It didn’t match at all! Not until she added some red and yellow.

**Narrator 1:** Maybe you didn’t see brown in a rainbow, she thought. But brown WAS a rainbow, with orange and blue, red and green tucked inside, playing hide and seek.

**Narrator 2:** Laura spent hours

**Narrator 3:** mixing and blending,

**Narrator 4:** trying for the precise shade of the russet crinkles by her father’s eyes

**Narrator 5:** and the coffee-colored creases in her mother’s hands.

**Narrator 6:** She bribed her sister and brothers with peppermints to sit while she tried to capture all their colors.

**Narrator 1:** One day, she dreamed, her paintings would hang I museums, and everyone would see how much color brown could hold.

**Narrator 2:** That was a crazy idea for a 10-year-old in Connecticut in 1897. African Americans had separate neighborhoods,

**Narrator 3:** churches

**Narrator 4:** and schools –

**Narrator 5:** nobody was going to put paintings of African Americans on museum walls!

**Narrator 6:** Laura was young, but she was determined.

**Narrator 1:** Maybe there weren’t portraits of African Americans in museums yet, but she could turn her room into a gallery. At least there, her sister and brothers could see pictures of people with all different shades of brown smiling back at them.

**Narrator 2:** All through high school, Laura wanted only one thing –

**Narrator 3:** to go to a real art school,

**Narrator 4:** a place where she could learn to get the images she saw in her head out onto canvas.

**Narrator 5:** She applied to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

**Narrator 6:** It was far from home.

**Narrator 1:** Expensive.

**Narrator 2:** And nearly all white.

**Narrator 3:** But when she got the acceptance letter, there was no question - Laura would get a job if she had to, but she would go!

**Narrator 4:** The Academy was a good start, but Laura was hungry to learn more,

**Narrator 5:** to be around real artists.

**Narrator 6:** Everyone knew there was only one place to study art –

**Narrator 1:** Paris.

**Narrator 2:** Will Laura make it to Paris?

**Narrator 3:** Will she get to study with real artists?

**Narrator 4:** Will her dreams come true?

**Narrator 5:** Will her portraits hang from real museum walls one day for all to see?

**Narrator 6:** To find out read, *Beautiful Shades of Brown* by Nancy Churnin.