

Activity: Observe and Interpret

1987 marked the bicentennial of the Constitution of the United States. To commemorate the event, artist Mike Wilkins was searching for “...something that was all-inclusive but that kept states separate but also knitted them together.” A plan clicked into place when Wilkins put the idea of the nation’s foundational governing document together with a mundane mode of expression: the vanity plate. Personalized license plates such as these criss-cross the country on state and Federal highways, blending national, state, and individual rights and responsibilities.

How did Wilkins put license plates together to spell out the Preamble? How does this artwork tell a deeper story about our country?



Observation: What do you see?

No matter where you start looking at this artwork, you’ll notice rectangular license plates in their standard, 6”x12” size. Some quick addition would tell you that there are 51 of them; perhaps raising a question about that number.

As you continue to move your eye across the artwork, you might begin comparing these license plates. Colors pop out in contrast to the dark background: white, blue, yellow, green, and red. Some plates are quite plain with block text on a single-colored ground. Others, however, sport state mottos (“First in Flight,” for example). Still others feature vignettes including cowboys, lobsters, or landscapes.



All of the license plates display their state's name but in a variety of fonts. Closer inspection would tell you that the plates are arranged in alphabetical order, Alabama to Wyoming. Look closer and you'll see that all of the license plates are connected to the larger artwork with four bolts in the same location relative to the plate. Some, however, have tags dated to the 1980s. Their edges seem to dig a bit into the padded, vinyl background.

Zooming out, you'll notice that the license plates are arranged in rows of fives and sixes. That 51st plate is due to the inclusion of Washington, D.C. Taking the whole thing in all at once, you might notice the letters and numbers embossed or imprinted on each plate. Reading the individual plates aloud, few make much sense by themselves. Although Hawaii and South Dakota do have recognizable words ("none" and "this," respectively).

Starting at the top left, however, you'll be able to sound out "We the people of the. . . ." to discover that the artwork phonetically spells out all 52 words in the Preamble of the Constitution.



Interpretation: What does it mean?

Looking closely at the license plates in *Preamble*, the names, colors, mottos, and images depicted upon them highlight the individuality of each state. Their differences lend a unique flavor created by history and environment. The similarities among the license plates – the standardized size, shape, and bolt pattern – hint at two, intertwined concepts. First, and most practically, the license plates are mass-produced, mirroring the mass production of cars (more on that below). Second, and more abstractly, these standardizations link to the Federal system that keeps our states working together. State laws differ but they function within the larger framework of the Constitution.

Consider, also, that Wilkins might have ordered the plates by the date of each state's joining the Union or some other strategy. Instead, by presenting them in alphabetical order, he has offered a more egalitarian approach: a roll call by name.

Finally, consider the artist's choice padded vinyl cut into a square with rounded corners. For many viewers this choice of padded vinyl makes them think of drive-ins, diners, or car seats. The United States is a huge country with resources and population spread far and wide. In 1956, President Eisenhower approved the *Federal-Aid Highway Act* and provided a way for



goods and people to zip back and forth across state lines. The Interstate Highway System has helped turn Americans into a car culture ready to heed the call of the open road.