



MIKE WILKINS
Preamble, 1987

MIKE WILKINS (born 1959)

Preamble, 1987

painted metal on vinyl and wood, 96 × 96 in.
Smithsonian American Art Museum,
Gift of Nissan Motor Corporation in U.S.A.

Background Information for Teachers

Preamble is an artful arrangement of personalized “vanity” license plates from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The plates are organized alphabetically by state, beginning with Alabama and ending with Wyoming, and all contain shorthand text phrases. Read collectively, starting at the top left corner, a pattern emerges: artist Mike Wilkins has utilized 51 license plates to phonetically render the 52 words of the preamble to the U.S. Constitution. The words of the preamble are some of the most important in our nation’s founding documents, helping us to understand the purpose of our federal government and our relationship to it.

Looking closely at the license plates in *Preamble*, the names, colors, mottos, and even vignettes depicted upon them highlight the individuality of each state. Their differences lend a unique flavor created by history and environment. The similarities among them—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. 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.

Wilkins created this artwork to commemorate the bicentennial of the United States Constitution in 1987, interpreting the relationship between the individual and the collective population embodied in the text of the preamble. The spirit of our nation’s motto, *E pluribus unum* (Out of many, one), is honored, the license plates reflecting the individuality of their state yet contributing to a cohesive whole United States. Speaking of the inspiration for *Preamble*, Wilkins explained: “I was trying to think of some way to salute the 200th anniversary of the Constitution. It needed to be something that was all-inclusive but that kept the states separate and also knitted them together.”

Guided Looking Questions for Students

- Compare the license plates. How are they different? What are their similarities?
- The artist contacted the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) in all 50 states and Washington, D.C., to create a vanity plate for his artwork. How would this artwork be changed if one DMV had declined to participate?
- Consider the artist’s choice of medium as well as the message. How does this artwork represent the spirit of our national motto, *E pluribus unum* (Out of many, one)?

Primary Source Connection

The preamble to the U.S. Constitution as we know it was not its first iteration. On August 6, 1787, the Constitutional Convention Committee delegates submitted a rough draft for consideration. The draft began with a list of the 13 states, ordered from north to south. Yet one month later, the text had undergone a drastic change. The list of state names had been omitted, in part because the delegates did not know which states would ratify the Constitution, and they did not want to exclude any future states that were expected to join. In their place was the phrase “We the People of the United States.” This change significantly strengthened the idea of popular sovereignty—that the new government’s power came from the people rather than from the states. Following is the first draft of the preamble, along with the final version:

August 6, 1787

We the people of the States of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode-Island and Providence Plantations, Connecticut, New-York, New-Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North-Carolina, South-Carolina, and Georgia, do ordain, declare, and establish the following Constitution for the Government of Ourselves and our Posterity.

September 17, 1787

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

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Suggested Questions

- Compare the draft preamble with the final version. How do they differ? What is significant about these differences?
- How might the interpretation of Mike Wilkins's artwork be different if the draft preamble had become the final version?

Literary Connection

To date, only five U.S. presidential inauguration ceremonies have included a reading by a poet. For his second inauguration, in 1997, just ten years after the 200th anniversary of the Constitution, President Bill Clinton selected poet Miller Williams to read his poem "Of History and Hope." The stanzas, excerpted below, were meant to encourage optimism, inspiration, and the promise of new beginnings. The text touches upon some of the same principles laid out in the preamble of the Constitution, namely how we must strive to secure and ensure a better future for the next generation of Americans, to "form a more perfect Union."

*We have memorized America,
how it was born and who we have been and where.
In ceremonies and silence we say the words,
telling the stories, singing the old songs.
We like the places they take us. Mostly we do.
The great and all the anonymous dead are there.
We know the sound of all the sounds we brought.
The rich taste of it is on our tongues.
But where are we going to be, and why, and who?
The disenfranchised dead want to know.
We mean to be the people we meant to be,
to keep on going where we meant to go.*

.....

*All this in the hands of children, eyes already set
on a land we never can visit—it isn't there yet—
but looking through their eyes, we can see
what our long gift to them may come to be.
If we can truly remember, they will not forget.*

Suggested Questions

- Compare the final wording of the preamble with the wording of the poem. Have American goals and ideals shifted over time? Cite evidence from the texts to support your answer.
- The Constitution's preamble (1787), Mike Wilkins's artwork (1987), and Miller Williams's poem (1997) were created in different times and for different audiences, yet all three works express similar perspectives and share many of the same principles. What do these cross-generational values tell us about our legacy as Americans?
- Mike Wilkins's *Preamble* was made to celebrate the bicentennial of the Constitution in 1987. Compare this fact with the last line of Miller Williams's poem, "If we can truly remember, they will not forget." Why is it important for us as Americans to remember our past?

To read the full text of extended quotes, visit:

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