Cixi seized power in many ways and both challenged perceptions of herself and owned her personal power through skills, image, dress, and cunning. She was the mastermind behind her own persona, accoutrements (accessories, items of dress, or equipment), and the performances of making and presenting works of art to assert the ruling power she exercised. This strong matriarch purposefully designed and constructed her own space only to transform it into a stage for her performance.

While Cixi’s class and ethnicity put her in a position to acquire positional power, we can also view power through the lens of personal power. Personal power is about the “power within” rather than an attempt to exert control over others. Personal power is about self-mastery: competence, vision, positive human qualities, and service.

In this project we challenge you to investigate your own persona, accoutrements, and performance in order to harness your own personal power.

• Investigate your own power. Use any of this personal power brainstorming worksheet inspired by psychology and business practices to home in on what your personal power is and how you want to use it.
• Explore the Denver Art Museum collection and beyond to discover how status is shown through dress and cultural symbols across time and place.
• Reflect on the many ways power has been expressed throughout time and brainstorm your modern-day spin. Make a list of possible accoutrements that reflect your personal power and goals in a unique way.
• Design an avatar that represents your most empowered state! Draw by hand, use a digital drawing program or avatar-building website, create a paper doll with interchangeable outfits and tools, or sew a stuffed version of your creation.
• Share your avatar and describe all the ways in which you are challenging perceptions – or your “power moves” like Empress Dowager Cixi – and transforming our world!
Reflection Questions:

- How did it feel to be the mastermind behind your own avatar?
- Cixi shared her image far and wide to promote herself as the leader of China. What might your PR (public relations) campaign look like for your avatar self? Would you use social media?
- In the investigation of art or history, what role does gender play?
- Did this activity identify any stereotypes that you feel stifle your sense of personal power? In what ways might you question and combat these going forward?
- Did this activity make you question how stereotypes play into your perception of others? In what ways might you question and combat these going forward?
Unknown artist, Breastplate with Frontal Figure, Parita style (Parita region, Azuero Peninsula, Central Panama) about A.D. 1150–1400. Gold alloy; 5.25 inches. Denver Art Museum: Department acquisition funds, 1965.196.

Young-Sánchez, Margaret. Pre-Columbian Art in the Denver Art Museum. Frederick and Jan Mayer Center for Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial Art at the Denver Art Museum. 2003. | 76 - 77

Thomas Hudson English, 1701–1779  The Radcliffe Family, about 1742 Oil paint on canvas Gift of the Berger Collection Educational Trust, 2019.7.


Travel Cape (Kappa), Japan, mid to late 1800s. Cotton ikat, persimmon paper treated with tung oil interlining, cotton ikat lining. Neusteter Textile Collection: Department acquisition funds by exchange, 2012.290.
