Portraiture Study

Definition

What is Portraiture? "Portraiture is the recording of an individual's appearance and personality, whether in a photograph, painting, sculpture, or any other medium. What makes it so magical is its ability to depict not only the physical but also psychological characteristics of a figure" (What Is Portraiture in the Context of Contemporary Art? | Widewalls) and "A portrait is a representation of a particular person. A self-portrait is a portrait of the artist by the artist. Portraiture is a very old art form going back at least to ancient Egypt, where it flourished from about 5,000 years ago. Before the invention of photography, a painted, sculpted, or drawn portrait was the only way to record the appearance of someone. But portraits have always been more than just a record. They have been used to show the power, importance, virtue, beauty, wealth, taste, learning or other qualities of the sitter" (Portrait – Art Term | Tate).

Analyzing portraits or portraitures allows you to develop or further develop visual literacy through the visual analysis or assessment of artworks or pieces of art similarly to how you would read and analyze an article, book or any other document (Zinkham, 2007 - Reading and Researching Photographs (loc.gov); Bell, 2016 - Reading Portraits: Analyzing Art as a Primary Source | Teaching with the Library of Congress (loc.gov)). "Basic visual literacy, the ability to 'read' pictorial images, is a fundamental skill necessary for working with photographs...visual literacy [is] 'the ability to decipher cultural and technological systems that express meaning using graphic images, icons, or symbols.' In more general terms, visual literacy is 'the ability to understand (read) and use (write) images and to think and learn in terms of images'." (Zinkham, 2007). "The strategy of reading portraiture encourages the visual analysis of a piece of art, similar to closely reading a document. The visual clues found in portraiture may be decoded to learn about the individual featured in the artwork. To get

started, select visually complex images that include objects and a compelling setting" (Bell, 2016).

4 Strategies for Portraiture Study

Use the photos below to practice doing a portraiture study.

1. In *Jumping In*, students envision themselves jumping into the portrait. First, ask students where they landed when they jumped in the portrait. Next, have them use their five senses to describe what they hear, see, taste, touch, and smell (as applicable) from that vantage point in the portrait. Finally, have students brainstorm and generate questions about experiences that might help to contextualize the life of the individual in the portrait. Using the See, Think, Wonder process students can share their observations and questions about the portrait, the artist, etc. Click here to learn more about the strategy and get more resources for students to practice the activity. This process can easily be applied to the arts to further engage students in close analysis of texts across mediums.

2. In the *Strike a Pose* strategy, students recreate the portrait by posing like the person in the portrait. Ask them to consider what it feels like to be in that pose, to imagine themselves wearing those clothes, and to be in the setting of the portrait. This can be a brainstorming or reflection activity that launches students into journal writing. They can also generate a list of questions about what they want to learn more about, whether it's the individual in the portrait, the artist and their process/methods, or the time period.

3. The *What Would You Ask* strategy encourages questioning. Students focus their questions on what they would ask the sitter or artist. Crafting questions between the sitter and artist in an imagined conversation encourages students to immerse themselves in the moment the portrait was created. Students can use this as a way to develop different kinds of questions that they can use for an "interview." They can either write a dramatic skit where they can

role-play the artist and sitter interaction or write an interview for a journalistic feature news article.

4. *Observe, Infer, Question*. Using this [Primary Source Analysis Tool](#) students can share what they Observe, Reflect and Wonder about the person's life and the era in which that person lived. Here are some tips for analyzing [primary sources](#) and [photographs](#).
   - *Observe*: Study the photograph for 2 minutes. Form an overall impression of the photograph and then examine its features more closely. List what you see in the photograph. Think about who made the photograph and why. What purpose does the photograph serve? Consider how the photograph expresses information. What visual elements or techniques does it use?
   - *Infer*: Based on what you have observed above, list three things you might infer from this photograph.
   - *Question*: What questions does this photograph raise in your mind? Where could you find answers to them?

Adapted from: [Reading Portraits: Analyzing Art as a Primary Source | Teaching with the Library of Congress (loc.gov)](#); [Reading and Researching Photographs (loc.gov)](#)).

Citation: "Reading and Researching Photographs" by Helena Zinkham. In Archival Outlook (Jan./Feb. 2007): 6-7, 28. https://www.loc.gov/rr/print/resource/Reading_Researching_Photographs.pdf

Art as Activism Portraits for Study

3-D Portraiture Study Activity

Visualization technology is allowing art viewers to actively/interactively engage and immerse in art for rich experiences. This technology allows viewers to become part of the story and storytelling experience by bringing the creative's or artist's narrative to life. "Three-dimensional (3D) visualization is the process of creating the three-dimensional object using a special computer program. Today computer graphics technologies such as 3D visualization technology are becoming more and more in demand. The technology has earned popularity among designers because it allows creating three-dimensional objects of any shape. It is widely used throughout the world to create the interiors of houses, offices, hotels, [art], etc." (Sadiku, Alam, & Musa, 2018) - [(PDF) 3D VISUALIZATION TECHNOLOGY | INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGIES AND MANAGEMENT RESEARCH I J E T M R JOURNAL - Academia.edu](#)

Examples:

1) Internationally- teamLab ([EXHIBITIONS | teamLab](#)):
   [https://youtu.be/CzqIYjNRRjU?list=TLGGxXXYgey_0sgxNjAxMjAyMg](#) (Every Wall is a Door),
   [https://youtu.be/2nMGdXHZ6jM?list=TLGGQWnooMBQswExNjAxMjAyMg](#) (Planets),
   [https://youtu.be/b0BboQnqT_4?list=TLGGF9iDN0nOdTwxNjAxMjAyMg](#) (The Infinite Crystal Universe)

2) Internationally & Nationally: [https://youtu.be/PHorMVnX1Do](#), [Immersive Van Gogh](#), [https://youtu.be/kq4lf2rswEw](#)

Instructions: Use these guiding prompts on the handout to analyze the work of an author or artist in three ways. Select a piece of artwork from an artist of your choice. Zoom in and look at the artist's work in a three-dimensional way.

1. *Analyze Language*: Select 1 technique used by the author/ artist and explain what messages are being communicated to the audience with that strategy.

2. *Examine Actions:* Examine the author's/ artist's voice and agency through their work and provide an example of the author's/ artist's decisions.

3. *Contextualize Themes*: Describe 1 specific way the author's/ artist's work was impacted by their environment and/or how they impacted their society.

Art as Activism Portraits for Study
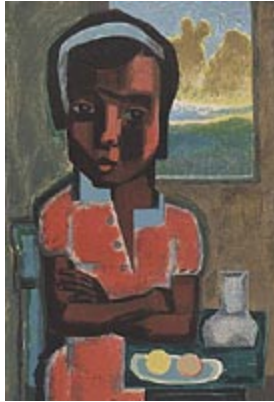
Robert Blackburn, *Girl in Red*, 1950. Lithograph, Still Life, Landscape, Portraiture. "Girl in red" (loc.gov),

Delita Martin, *Portrait #4*, 2015. Woodcut, Portrait Print. Portrait #4 / Delita Martin. | Library of Congress (loc.gov)

Samuel Joseph Brown, *Self Portrait*, 1985. Lithograph, Self-portrait. Self-portrait | Library of Congress (loc.gov)

Shikō Munakata, *Self Portrait*, 1957. Woodcut, self-portrait. [Self portrait] | Library of Congress (loc.gov)

Thomas E. Askew (photographer) & W.E.B. Du Bois (William Edward Burghardt) (collector), *Four African American women seated on steps of building at Atlanta University, Georgia*, 1899/1900, Gelatin Silver Prints, Group Portraits, Portrait Photographs. [Four African American women seated on steps of building at Atlanta University, Georgia] - digital file from original photograph | Library of Congress (loc.gov).

Thomas E. Askew (photographer) & W.E.B. Du Bois (William Edward Burghardt) (collector), *Nursing student wearing a starched white uniform, seated in a rocking chair, reading*, 1899/1900, Gelatin Silver Prints, Portrait Photographs. [Nursing student wearing a starched white uniform, seated in a rocking chair, reading] - digital file from b&w film copy neg. | Library of Congress (loc.gov)

Thomas E. Askew (photographer) & W.E.B. Du Bois (William Edward Burghardt) (collector), *Mamie Westmorland, school teacher; half-length portrait, with left hand to cheek, facing front*, 1899/1900, Gelatin Silver Prints, Portrait Photographs. [Mamie Westmorland, school teacher; half-length

portrait, with left hand to cheek, facing front] - digital file from b&w film copy neg. | Library of Congress (loc.gov)

Thomas E. Askew (photographer) & W.E.B. Du Bois (William Edward Burghardt) (collector), *Nursing student wearing a fur collar and lace dress, head-and-shoulders portrait, facing left*, 1899/1900, Gelatin Silver Prints, Portrait Photographs.[Nursing student wearing a fur collar and lace dress, head-and-shoulders portrait, facing left] - digital file from b&w film copy neg. | Library of Congress (loc.gov)

Thomas E. Askew (photographer) & W.E.B. Du Bois (William Edward Burghardt) (collector), *Thomas E. Askew, self-portrait*, 1899/1900, Gelatin Silver Prints, Self-portrait, Portrait Photographs. [Thomas E. Askew, self-portrait] - digital file from b&w film copy neg. | Library of Congress (loc.gov)

Thomas E. Askew (photographer) & W.E.B. Du Bois (William Edward Burghardt) (collector), *Three African American boys, full-length portrait, facing front*, 1899/1900, Gelatin Silver Prints, Group Portrait, Portrait

Photographs. [Three African American boys, full-length portrait, facing front] - b&w film copy neg. | Library of Congress (loc.gov)

Russell Lee, *Negro clients, Southeast Missouri Farms. Meeting at project*, 1938. Safety Film Negatives, Group Portraits. Negro clients, Southeast Missouri Farms. Meeting at project | Library of Congress (loc.gov)

William A. Gladstone, *Three-quarter length portrait of an African American woman posed with book*, 1880 and 1900. Photographic Print, Portrait.
[Three-quarter length portrait of an African American woman posed with book] (loc.gov), Gladstone Collection of African American Photographs - About this Collection - Prints & Photographs Online Catalog (Library of Congress) (loc.gov)

Edward S. Curtis, *White Shield--Arikara*, 1908. Portrait. White Shield--Arikara (loc.gov)

Edward S. Curtis, *Nunivak Island, Alaska: Jukuk*, 1929. Photographic Print, Portrait. [Nunivak Island, Alaska: Jukuk (loc.gov)](loc.gov)
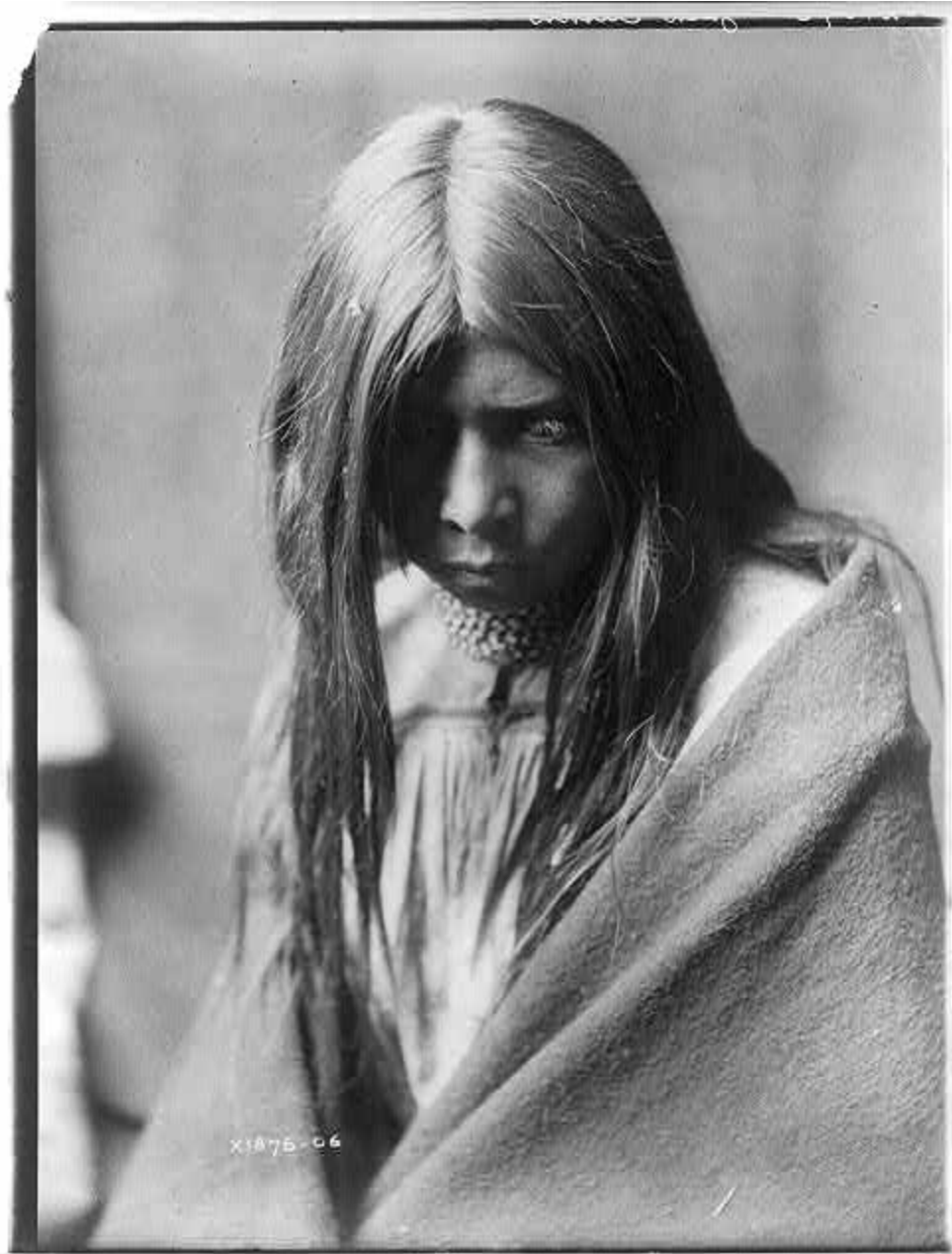
Edward S. Curtis, *Zosh Clishn--Apache*, 1906. Photographic Print, Portrait.
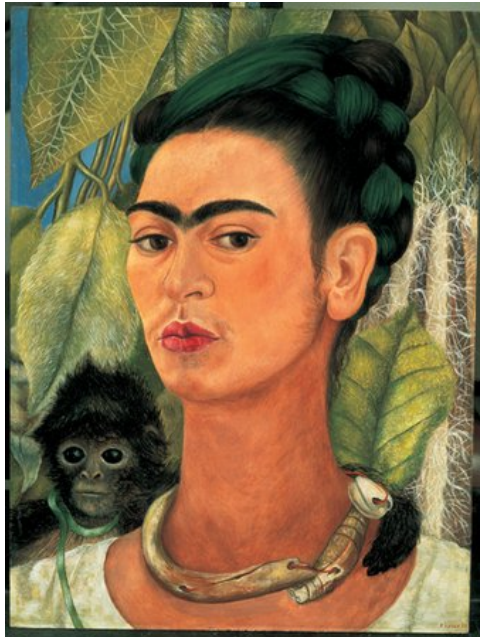Zosh Clishn--Apache (loc.gov)

Edward S. Curtis, *A son of the desert*, 1904. Photographic Print, Portrait. [A son of the desert (loc.gov)](loc.gov)

Portraits of Native Americans:
https://www.loc.gov/pictures/search/?st=grid&co=ecur
https://www.loc.gov/collections/edward-s-curtis/

More Portraits: https://www.loc.gov/photos/?q=portraits

Frida Kahlo Self-Portrait with Monkey 1938
Source: Frida Kahlo – Exhibition at Tate Modern | Tate

Thomas A. Dillon and Margaret Dillon family, photographed by William Bullard, about 1903.
Courtesy of Frank Morrill, Clark University and the Worcester Art Museum
Source: How Black Americans used portraits and family photographs to defy stereotypes | New Pittsburgh Courier

Additional Portraits can be found from these current visual artists:

Kesha Bruce, *TOTEM FOR A DANCING GIRL.* Kesha Bruce | ART.

Allie Wilkinson, *Interior II*, ink on dura-lar 90' x 40', 2021. (Work - Allie Wilkinson (alidawilkinson.com)).

Jeremy Dennis, *Nicole Dennis Banks*, Shinnecock Portrait Project. Photos and Interview Audio: Nicky Dennis-Banks - Shinnecock Portrait Project (shinnecockportraits.com)

Wendy Red Star, *Apsáalooke Feminist #1*, 2016. Pigment Print, Portrait. Apsáalooke Feminist — Wendy Red Star, Wendy Red Star

Guiding Questions for Analysis

1. How does the author attempt to describe, define, or challenge contemporary ideas and practices?
2. How does the author use their work and medium to challenge the status quo and mainstream norms?
3. How does nonconformity look across different generations and time?

1. Who's the primary audience?
2. Why do you think the author is targeting that audience?
3. Do you think there are other audiences that would benefit from this author's work?
4. Who are they and how do you think it will help them?
5. How does the author use their platform to address social issues by navigating different spaces?
6. How does codeswitching allow the author to move in different spaces?
7. What techniques are used by the author to convey meaning?
8. Are there words, images, symbols, etc. being used?
9. How are they used?

Examine Actions

Analyze Language

Contextualize Themes

1. How does the artist compare to peers?
2. How are they similar and different?
3. What factors do you think influenced the author's work?