

# Portraiture & Identity



## AN EDUCATOR'S RESOURCE

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This resource was developed to help elementary through high school educators guide students in an exploration of identity based on portraiture in the Jewish Museum's collection.



## **Acknowledgments**

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# Why use this guide?

## Curriculum Connections

This guide uses object-based learning to support your curriculum and deepen students' understanding of topics, ideas, and themes explored in the classroom. More broadly, the guide is intended to encourage and develop students' observations, evidence-based reasoning, and analytical and critical thinking skills. It also encourages students to exercise their imaginations and share perspectives.

The discussions and activities interrelate with the following areas of study.

### English Language Arts

- art-as-text analysis and interpretation (deciphering and understanding images through observation or "close reading" and evidence-based reasoning)
- biography/autobiography
- coming-of-age literature
- creative writing
- memoir
- narrative writing
- personal essays, personal writing, and journal writing
- persuasive writing
- symbolism
- vocabulary development

### Studio Art

- abstraction
- appropriation
- art criticism
- figurative art/representational art
- photography, drawing, collage, new media (i.e., digital and technology-based art forms)
- self-portraiture and portraiture (traditional, experimental, representational, abstract, symbolic)

### Art History

- art criticism
- eighteenth- through twenty-first-century art
- feminist art history
- formal analysis
- revisionist art history
- visual literacy

### History/Social Studies/Social Sciences

- biography
- community studies
- current events
- European history, especially eighteenth through twentieth century
- gender studies, feminism
- Jewish history
- multicultural studies, cultural studies, cultural literacy
- New York City history
- political studies, political science

- primary document analysis (work of art as primary document)
- psychology
- social justice and activism
- U.S. history
- World War II and Holocaust history

### Theater/Drama/Film

- character development, character sketches
- dialogue
- internal monologue
- soliloquy

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## Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS)

This guide supports and aligns with the goals of the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) and is intended to enhance classroom curricula by engaging students with primary sources—in the form of original works of art—through close observation, discussion, interpretation, and activities. Described below are some of the ways the guide can be used to foster skills outlined by the CCLS, skills that are strong indicators of students being career and college ready.

### Demonstrate Independence

This guide suggests inquiry methods that teachers can use to create a forum for students to discuss their interpretations and share their opinions about works of art. Students learn to build directly on each other's ideas, to debate, and to think critically. The writing exercises and studio art projects encourage students to use their imagination, be creative, and hone problem-solving skills.

### Build Strong Content Knowledge

By exploring works of art made during the nineteenth through twenty-first century, students will expand their knowledge of a wide range of subjects. They will share that knowledge through discussion and writing activities. By engaging with new art-related concepts, students will learn a wide range of art-related vocabulary. (The glossary will help you teach students this vocabulary as it arises during discussions and activities.)

### Respond to the Varying Demands of Audience, Task, Purpose, and Discipline

Students will explore how artists use color, line, composition, and symbolic imagery to convey meaning. They will use visual, textual, and empirical evidence to support their interpretations and opinions. They will make artistic choices about modes of expression to create their own works of art.

### Gain an Understanding of Other Perspectives and Cultures

The works of art discussed in this guide reflect a range of experiences and perspectives. In many of the activities, students are asked to relate themes suggested by the works to their personal experiences, to current events, and to contemporary political and social issues. Collectively, these activities and the sharing of students' own art and writing samples create a platform for students to consider their peers' perspectives.

## **Comprehend and Critique**

Students will engage in discussion to gain a better understanding of complex themes and related symbolism. They will be asked to consider and analyze artists' choices—their modes of expression and visual strategies. Students will use discussion, writing, and art-making activities to express their own ideas and to construct meaning. They will also have the opportunity to debate interpretations.

## **Value Evidence**

Inquiry-based discussions will encourage students to make observations and develop hypotheses through examination of primary sources (works of art). Students will be asked to cite visual evidence in support of interpretations.

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## **New York State Learning Standards in the Arts**

Discussions and activities in this guide also address the New York State Learning Standards in the Arts as they apply to the visual arts. (The texts below have been edited to reflect the specific areas of the Standards that this guide targets.)

### **STANDARD 1**

#### **Creating, Performing, and Participating in the Arts**

Students will make works of art that explore a range of subjects, topics, and themes. They will learn about and use sensory elements, organizational principles, and expressive images to communicate their own ideas in works of art. In creating and exhibiting their work, they will use a variety of art materials, processes, mediums, and techniques, as well as relevant technologies.

### **STANDARD 2**

#### **Knowing and Using Art Materials and Resources**

Students will learn about a variety of visual arts materials, techniques, and processes. They will learn about resources and opportunities for participation in the visual arts community (exhibitions and museums) and use appropriate materials (reproductions, print materials, electronic media).

### **STANDARD 3**

#### **Responding to and Analyzing Works of Art**

Students will reflect on, interpret, and evaluate works of art, using the language of art criticism. They will analyze the visual characteristics of the natural and built environments and explain the social, cultural, psychological, and environmental dimensions of the visual arts. Students will consider the ways in which ideas are expressed through the visual arts in relation to the ways they are expressed in other disciplines.

### **STANDARD 4**

#### **Understanding the Cultural Contributions of the Arts**

Students will explore art from various historical periods and cultures to learn about the role it plays in the lives of people at a given time and place and to understand the influence of time and place on the visual characteristics of the work. Students will explore art to understand social, cultural, and environmental aspects of human society.

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## **How to Use This Guide**

This guide highlights eight works from the Jewish Museum's collection. Included are questions that encourage close looking and further discussion, a visual analysis, information about each work and artist, and a list of related resources. Each of the highlighted works is subsequently compared—thematically, visually, and conceptually—to one or two other works in the museum's collection, with additional questions and information provided.

Each lesson in this guide can be used independently or in conjunction with the other lessons. The activities sections explore ideas that relate to works of art throughout the guide. We encourage you to choose those most relevant to your curriculum and teaching goals.

The discussion questions and activities are intended to foster thoughtful observation, visual analysis, student-generated interpretations, critical thinking, and creativity. They may be modified to fit your students' specific grade level. We encourage you to select those works of art that lend themselves to conversations that are developmentally appropriate for your students.

For the most part, the biographical and contextual information and the interpretations offered in this guide are best shared with students after they have explored the works of art on their own. If introduced too soon, this information could inhibit the students' ability to bring their own observations, interpretations, and personal experiences to the work.

Analysis and interpretation should rest on a foundation of careful observation, but students should also be encouraged to bring their own perspectives, personal experiences, and imagination to the work. When discussing interpretations, it is important to emphasize that there is no single way to understand a work of art.

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## **Theme and Key Issues**

This curriculum guide is intended to help your students explore the theme of identity by looking at portraits—historic, contemporary, traditional, representational, symbolic, and abstract—in the Jewish Museum's collection. Through close looking, analysis, and activities, students will gain a richer understanding of identity and representation.

## Identity

Before you explore the artworks in this guide, we encourage you to spend time as a class brainstorming, sharing, and reflecting on the meaning of identity and the factors that contribute to identity formation.

Definitions of identity may take into account the following:

- who you are
- how you define, see, and perceive yourself
- how you present or express yourself
- how others perceive you
- how you challenge expectations or stereotypes

Ask students to consider the various aspects of identity. In other words, what makes you who you are? Conversations may cover the following:

- age
- aspirations and achievements
- culture
- ethnicity
- experiences
- feelings and emotions
- gender
- groups and communities
- heritage
- hobbies, passions, and interests
- language and self-expression
- likes and dislikes
- name
- nationality
- personal style/fashion
- personality
- physical traits
- profession/vocation
- relationships
- religion
- roles
- sexual identity
- social and political views
- socio-economic status
- values, beliefs, and attitudes
- weaknesses and strengths

As a possible extension to this conversation, you might ask students to find connections among the different elements that make up one's identity. *(For example, connections might include aspects of identity that are fixed versus ones that can change; aspects that have to do with nature versus nurture; aspects of identity that you can control versus those you cannot; objective versus subjective aspects.)*

You can extend and deepen conversation by encouraging students to make personal connections in one of the following ways:

1. Ask students to pick ten of the identity factors from your brainstorm and list one or more words to describe themselves in connection with that factor. This can be done in a journal.

For example:

community: proud New Yorker  
hobbies: chess, basketball  
passions: art, travel  
politics: liberal  
profession: student  
relationships: daughter, sister, friend  
strength: good listener  
temperament: self-reflective  
weakness: quick-tempered  
worldview: optimist

Ask for volunteers to share their lists with the class.

2. Have students break into small groups to discuss which identity factors from the class brainstorm are most important to their sense of self and why.

With this initial discussion as a foundation, your class will be ready to further explore ideas about identity by looking at and discussing the portraits in this guide.

## Portraiture

Before looking at the artworks in this guide, ask students to share their definitions of a portrait. Explain that some of the works you will be discussing might expand or challenge their understanding of what a portrait is.

Throughout your conversations, ask students to consider which aspects of identity a portrait reveals or conceals about the sitter. Students will learn to notice, interpret, and analyze the following visual factors that can reveal information about a sitter's identity:

- attributes / accessories / personal effects
- background / setting
- dress / clothing
- facial expression
- gaze
- gesture
- pose and body language
- symbols

# Units of Study

Elementary through high school educators may use this resource to engage students in an exploration of identity inspired by portraiture in the Jewish Museum’s collection. Traditional and contemporary portraits—by artists as diverse as Andy Warhol, Edouard Vuillard, Lee Krasner, Man Ray, and Kehinde Wiley— are organized into eight units. Teachers may use each unit individually or in combination with several others and in any order.

Unit 1: Self-Portraits

Unit 2: Friends and Family

Unit 3: Photography

Unit 4: Historical Figures

Unit 5: Women

Unit 6: Politics

Unit 7: Teens

Unit 8: Cultural Identity