Unit 4: Historical Figures
Andy Warhol
Sigmund Freud

Andy Warhol (American, 1928–1987)
Sigmund Freud, from ***Ten Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century***, 1980
Screenprint on paper, 40 × 32 in. (101.6 × 81.3 cm)
Gift of Lorraine and Martin Beitler, 2006-64.7

Getting Started

• What is the first thing you notice about this portrait?

• Describe the artist's use of shape, color, and line. How do his choices affect your perception of the subject? (*Consider how the background and the sitter's face seem to overlap and blend together, how the artist uses just a few shades of blue and bright orange—colors not normally associated with the human face—and how little detail the artist provides.*)

• Do you think this work is a portrait?

• Does the subject's facial expression reveal anything about him?

• How would you feel about this artist creating your portrait?

Looking Closely

Warhol has created a multi-layered **abstract** image of Sigmund Freud's face, shown in three-quarter view. The first layer comprises geometric blocks of cool colors (blues, purples, grays) arranged across the surface of the print. An image of Freud from an archival photograph is layered on top of the color-blocked surface. The photographic source has been reproduced fuzzily and without much detail. In what reads as the topmost layer, Warhol printed a loose, sketchy line drawing in gray and orange, which roughly echoes the contours of Freud's head and facial features. Freud's head tilts slightly downward, but his gaze meets that of the viewer.

About the Work

Ten Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century, commissioned by art dealer Ronald Feldman, was Warhol's first portrait series of historical figures. The individuals included, all deceased at the time, were Sarah Bernhardt (actress), Gertrude Stein (poet), Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, the Marx Brothers (comedians), Franz Kafka (writer), George Gershwin (composer), Sigmund Freud (neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis), Albert Einstein (scientist), Martin Buber (philosopher), and Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis. Individual biographies, written by an independent scholar, accompany the portfolio.

Warhol used existing photographs, instantly recognizable but "jazzed up": the works are poster-size, big enough to be clearly visible across a gallery. Blocks of blue, turquoise, red, pink, orange, yellow, and green are layered over and beneath the subject's features; brushstrokes dart around eyebrows, lips, and hair. Warhol began by arranging Color-Aid paper to work out the geometric color-blocking, then used an overhead projector to layer the photographic image over the paper, and finally traced the basic contours of each subject's face with graphite. These collage-drawings were then used to generate the silk

screens to make an edition of 250 sets of prints on paper and 5 sets of paintings printed on canvas.

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) was an Austrian neurologist and the father of psychoanalysis, a clinical approach to treating patients through conversations with an analyst. The photograph that Warhol **appropriated** for his portrait of Freud was taken by Max Halberstadt about 1900, when Freud's highly influential book *Interpretation of Dreams* was published.

About the Artist

Andy Warhol (b. Andrew Warhola) was one of four children of Czechoslovakian immigrants who settled in a working-class neighborhood of Pittsburgh. Educated at Carnegie Tech in the 1940s, he would go on to become a commercial illustrator and draftsman, painter, printmaker, and filmmaker. He arrived in New York in 1949 at the age of twenty-one and was employed as a commercial artist but was determined to be recognized as a painter. In the early 1960s, he began experimenting with subjects culled from popular culture: advertisements, product images (including Campbell Soup cans), celebrity photographs, and news images. Warhol became the leading artist of the **Pop Art** movement.

Warhol's novel technique for portraiture combined photo silk-screen printing and painting. For his first portrait of this type, he purchased a black-and-white publicity photograph of Marilyn Monroe, cropped it, outlined the shape of her head and shoulders on a large canvas, painted the eyelids, lips, and face in garish colors, and then applied the silk-screened photograph slightly off-register. *Marilyn Monroe* (1962) was a great success. In later portraits, Warhol added large cubes of color and outlined some features with sketchy brushstrokes. A certain ambiguity remained, however: is the purpose commemoration, advertisement, or something else? Warhol claimed utter indifference, yet he perceived the numbing effect of our overexposure to car crashes, race riots, and electric-chair executions, as well as the media's power to deify celebrities and commodify them. Reflected in his portraits is the tension between the so-called high culture of the art world and the concept of originality in contrast to the pervasiveness and duplication of images in the mass media.

Sources

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Berger, Maurice, et al. *Masterworks of the Jewish Museum*.
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Warhol." *New York Times* (March 28, 2008).

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Further Discussion

- This is a portrait of Sigmund Freud, one of the most
  influential thinkers of the twentieth century. What does
  the portrait reveal about Freud's identity? What aspects
  of his identity does it fail to communicate? Why do you
  think Warhol chose to reveal so little information about
  his subject's identity?

- In a review of this series of portraits for the *New York Times*,
  Ken Johnson wrote: "If the series seems superficial, a sympathetic
  interpreter might say that that is the point. It is an extension
  of Warhol's preoccupation with celebrity. . . the distinctively
  modern experience of knowing many famous people but
  rarely knowing in any depth what they are famous for."

  – Discuss what it means to be superficial. In what ways
  does Warhol's portrait of Freud seem superficial?

  – In small groups, discuss how the concepts of celebrity
  and superficiality might relate. How might a superficial
  portrait be an apt metaphor for celebrity? How does this
  relate to what you know of contemporary celebrities and
  your understanding of their identities?

- The idea for the series *Ten Portraits of Jews of the
  Twentieth Century* came from Warhol's art dealer.
  Imagine that Warhol wanted to do a follow-up to this
  series, with a set of ten portraits of famous individuals
  from another community. This time, he is soliciting
  ideas from you. On what community would you want
  him to focus? Why that community? Which individuals
  from that community would you propose he include?

Ben Shahn
Maimonides

Ben Shahn (American, b. Lithuania, 1898–1969)
Maimonides, 1954
Tempera on paper mounted on panel, 35 ½ × 26 ½ in. (90.2 × 67.3 cm)
Bequest of Jacob and Bronka Weintraub, 2002-29

Born in Lithuania, Ben Shahn immigrated to the United States in 1906 and settled in a working-class neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. As a teenager, he worked as a lithographer's apprentice, which clearly had an enduring influence on him as he often incorporated text into his work. Shahn's artistic practice grew to include painting, illustration, printmaking, and photography. Social and political themes feature prominently in his work, and, as an activist, Shahn explicitly chose his subjects to raise awareness about injustice. In addition to his highly political work of the 1950s, he frequently portrayed Jewish figures who were models of ethical conduct. In this context, Maimonides is a fitting subject for Shahn's painting. Also known as the Rambam, Maimonides lived in the twelfth century and is known for his writing on Talmudic Law and his philosophical ethical treatise *Guide to the Perplexed*. He was also the physician to the Sultan of Egypt.

Sources

Chevlowe, Susan. *Common Man, Mythic Vision: The Paintings of Ben Shahn*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, pl. 23.

Kendall, M. Sue. "Shahn, Ben." Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online. Oxford University Press. Accessed March 2, 2016.

Klein, Mason. *Collective Perspectives: New Acquisitions Celebrate the Centennial*. Exh. cat. New York: The Jewish Museum, 2004.

Discussion Ideas and Questions

- Describe Shahn's use of line, pattern, and color in his portrait of Maimonides.

- Where and how does Shahn play with proportion and exaggeration in this portrait? To what effect?

- The text included in Shahn's painting is from Maimonides's writings: "Teach thy tongue to say I do not know and thou shalt progress." What does this quotation add to the portrait? What does it add to your understanding of Maimonides's identity?

- Warhol relies directly on a photograph to create his portrait of Freud. Shahn could not base his portrait of Maimonides on a photographic source (Maimonides died in 1204, centuries before the 1839 invention of photography). What sources might Shahn have relied upon to paint Maimonides's likeness?

- Ask students to further consider the different references an artist might use to create a portrait. (*Mirror for self-portraits, photograph, live model/sitter, verbal description, imagination, someone else's portrait of the same sitter, etc.*)

   - What are advantages and disadvantages of using each of these sources?

   - If you have ever created a portrait/self-portrait in the past, which of these sources have you used?

   - With which one do you, or would you prerfer, to work? Why?

- Both Warhol's *Sigmund Freud* and Shahn's *Maimonides* are **abstracted**.

   - Ask your students to compare Warhol's and Shahn's approaches to abstraction. (*Both simplify the details of their subjects' faces; both focus more attention on line/contour than on volume; Shahn's portrait, which plays with proportion, almost has the quality of a caricature; both use non-naturalistic color; rather than focusing on pure description, Shahn emphasizes the patterns and decorative qualities of his line; Warhol emphasizes the expressive and decorative qualities of his color choices, lines, and shapes.*)

- Warhol and Shahn each created a portrait of a famous Jewish thinker. What visual clues, if any, does each portrait give that the subject is such an eminent intellectual? In what other, perhaps indirect, ways does each portrait offer insight into these men? (*Warhol's* Ten Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century *series was exhibited with brief biographies about each of its subjects; both portraits might inspire a viewer to research the figure represented; Shahn's portrait might inspire a viewer to look up the text from which the quotation was excerpted.*)