

Unit 5: Women

Larry Rivers

Portrait of Vera List



Larry Rivers (American, 1923–2002)

Portrait of Vera List, c. 1965

Paint, charcoal, wood, tape, Plexiglass, and aluminum window frame, 32 × 27 × 4 in. (81.3 × 68.6 × 10.2 cm)

Gift of Vera G. List, 1984–21

Getting Started

- Identify the different materials and objects you can see in this portrait. (*Window, metal, Plexiglass, graph paper, paint, charcoal, screws, tape, wood, etc.*)
 - Describe the techniques and other procedures the artist might have used to create this work. (*Drawing, painting, screwing, taping, ripping, collaging, scavenging materials, layering, overlapping, assembling, etc.*)
 - Describe the sitter's facial expression and pose. What impression does it give you of this person?
 - Describe the artist's treatment of background space. In what space do you think Vera List is shown? How does the artist incorporate the space of the wall/the gallery?
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Looking Closely

Part painting, drawing, sculpture, collage, and found object, *Portrait of Vera List* defies traditional categorization. This work showcases the artist's interest in and experimentation with multiple media. Rather than use a canvas, Larry Rivers used a storm window as the support for this portrait. He added elements both on top of and behind the industrially fabricated Plexiglas, creating a multi-layered, three-dimensional **assemblage**. His materials include graph paper, charcoal, paint, tape, wood, and screws, as well as the Plexiglas and aluminum of the window and its frame.

Vera List's face is shown somewhere between a completely frontal and three-quarter view. Her right eye is entirely obscured (perhaps painted over with daubs of orange and flesh-colored paint, perhaps never depicted in the first place). Her nose, brow, and forehead are painted on a shaped panel of wood, creating a low relief. The details of her face mingle with tape, graph paper, paint, screws, and applied wooden elements. In the background, her face reappears in profile. The orange contours delineating her collar bone, torso, and upper arms are actually painted pieces of wood, overlaid on a drawing of her torso in charcoal on graph paper. Her right arm, created from a solid panel of wood, is the frontmost layer of the entire composition and projects into the viewer's space.

About the Work

Vera G. List (1908–2002) and her husband, businessman Albert A. List, were prominent collectors and philanthropists who focused on the arts, education, and social justice. In this portrait, Larry Rivers immortalizes his patron without idealizing her. Using unusual materials and innovative techniques, he transforms the traditional format of the painted portrait into a three-dimensional assemblage. He depicts List's face and body with charcoal and paint, applied with the rough gestural brushwork characteristic of his style. The collage elements—which include pieces of painted wood, Plexiglas, and torn sheets of graph paper—were applied on top of and behind the panes of a storm window. Rivers exploits the window's sliding panes, which can be moved to reveal different images. On the one hand, he literalizes the notion that a painting is like a window, offering a view into an imagined pictorial world; at the same time, he does not adhere to the conventions of illusionistic painting. The work's composite views and the fragmentation of the body and facial features prevent a coherent reading of the person depicted. This use of collage and fragmentation suggests the artist's affinity with earlier avant-garde movements, such as **Dada** and **Cubism**. Rivers's innovative use of mixed media, including found objects, and his conflation of high and low culture is typical of the **Pop Art** movement of the mid-1950s and early 1960s.

About the Artist

Larry Rivers (b. Yitzroch Loiza Grossberg) was a painter, sculptor, printmaker, poet, and musician who created works that synthesized elements from the visual, literary, and performing arts. A professional saxophonist, he began painting with the encouragement of two artist friends. His roots in improvisational jazz, with its anti-establishment ideology and inventive thematic variations, informed his paintings and mixed-media assemblages. He studied with the Abstract Expressionist Hans Hofmann in 1947–48 in New York and Provincetown, Massachusetts. After seeing an exhibition dedicated to the French painter Pierre Bonnard at the Museum of Modern Art in 1948, Rivers abandoned **abstract** painting and applied his exceptional drawing skills to figurative subjects inspired by his personal life and everyday surroundings. At a time when painters were rejecting representational imagery, Rivers returned to the human figure and actively positioned himself among the Old Masters.

Sources

Berger, Maurice, et al. *Masterworks of the Jewish Museum*. Exh. cat. New York: The Jewish Museum, 2004, pp. 224–25.

Harrison, Helen A. "Rivers, Larry." Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online. Oxford University Press. Accessed March 2, 2016.

Smith, Roberta. "Vera G. List, 94, Is Dead; Philanthropist and Collector." *New York Times* (October 13, 2002).

Further Discussion

- Why do you think Rivers mixed things we associate with everyday life (*graph paper, wood, Plexiglas, and a window frame*) with materials associated with fine art (painting and charcoal)?
- Imagine opening this window. How would this transform the portrait?
- Vera List was Rivers's patron. How do you think this relationship might have affected Rivers's approach to making the portrait, if at all?
- How much does a portrait have to resemble the person depicted in order to be considered a portrait? Can a portrait be symbolic or abstract?
- If you were to commission a portrait, how would you want it to look? What medium would you prefer? Would you want a realistic, abstract, or symbolic portrait – or some combination of all three?

Alex Katz

Anne



Alex Katz (American, b. 1927)

Anne, 1990

Screenprint on aluminum, 68 × 21 × 1/8 in. (172.7 × 53.3 × .4 cm)

Jula Isenburger Bequest Fund, Funds from an Anonymous Donor, William Rand Fund, and the Fine Arts Acquisitions Committee Fund, 2003-6

The painter, sculptor, and printmaker Alex Katz is best known for his portraits. In 1955, Katz experimented with small collages, gluing cut-out figures onto solid-colored backgrounds. By 1959, he was isolating the figures from backgrounds altogether, making cut-out paintings and multiple editions of cut-out prints. These cut-out figures are also related to the hand-painted billboards with cut-out plywood extensions that were a popular form of advertising in the 1950s. Some of Katz's prints are mounted on wooden supports, others on metal ones. Some of the cut-out figures are freestanding; others, like *Anne*, are meant to be hung on the wall. Some portray a single subject, others multiple figures. Some are full-length portraits, others only busts. Many are life-size. Anne, with her fashionable fur-trimmed coat and hat, is shown larger than life.

Sources

Strand, Mark. *Art of the Real: Nine American Figure Painters*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1983, pp. 124, 129.

Discussion Ideas and Questions

- Describe Katz's use of color and **value**. How does it compare with that of Rivers. Do you think their respective approaches affect how we perceive each of the subjects?
- Compare the facial expressions of Vera List and Anne. Do they have anything in common?
- Katz's works have been variously described as "passive, moody, ambiguous, awkward, slick, stylish, unrealistic likenesses, glossy, bright, optimistic, direct, aggressive." Which of these words do you think apply to *Anne*? How? Do you think these descriptions apply to Anne as a character or to the work of art as an object or to both? Generate a new list of five to ten adjectives or descriptive phrases to describe who you imagine Anne to be.
- Discuss the following statement by Alex Katz: "Style and appearance are the things I'm more concerned about than what something means. I'd like to have style take the place of content, or the style be the content . . . I prefer it to be emptied of meaning, emptied of content."
 - What do you think Katz means by style? In spite of his stated concerns and preferences, do you think there is still meaning and content in this work? What do you regard the content to be? What do you regard the meaning to be? Does the work resonate with you in ways that go beyond style and appearance? In what way?
- Describe the ways in which Katz and Rivers experimented with materials, composition, the support (the surface on which the work is created), and the relationship to the viewer and to the gallery space.

Thomas Sully

Sally Etting



Thomas Sully (American, b. England, 1783–1872)

Sally Etting, 1808

Oil on canvas, 30 × 25 in. (76.2 × 63.5 cm)

Gift of William Wollman Foundation, F 4610

One of America's leading portrait painters, Thomas Sully painted numerous portraits of America's tiny Jewish community during the Federal Period. Here, he depicts thirty-two-year-old Sally Etting (1776–1863), born in Pennsylvania to a family that achieved considerable social and political prominence. Sally is shown with her hair in a Roman-inspired style and in a type of high-waisted neoclassical gown that was becoming fashionable in Philadelphia at the time. This, however, is not how she would have dressed on a daily basis. Nothing in this portrait identifies Etting as Jewish. Perhaps she is presented as she wished to be seen—as an upper-class American woman. During this period, portraits held special significance for many wealthy Americans. They established their sitters' identities, asserted their status, and ensured a form of immortality. For those Jews who could afford them, commissioned portraits affirmed their identity as Americans in an open, democratic society.

Source

Berger, Maurice, et al. *Masterworks of the Jewish Museum*. Exh. cat. New York: The Jewish Museum, 2004, pp. 208–9.

Discussion Ideas and Questions

- Describe the sitter. What do you notice about the way she is dressed and her hairstyle? Her facial expression and pose? What do these things suggest about who she is or how she would like to be perceived?
- This portrait was painted in 1808. Why do you think someone would commission a portrait of himself or herself at that time?
- Sally Etting was a member of the small Jewish community in the United States in the early 1800s. Most portraits of American Jews at the time did not identify their subjects as Jewish. What do you think was the reason for that?
- In the portrait, Sally Etting's clothing helps to identify her as a nineteenth-century American woman. What do you think it means to look or act "American" today? Is this concept meaningful in today's world?
- In Sally's time, American Jews were not usually identified as Jewish in their portraits, but they maintained their Jewish identity in other ways. (*For example, by engaging in religious practice, giving children Hebrew names, or being involved in the Jewish community.*) Do you present different aspects of your identity in different situations? Why? Share examples.
- Sully, Katz, and Rivers depict female subjects in these portraits. The history of representing women in art is long and complex—female subjects have been objectified, glorified, vilified, idealized, demeaned, honored, and everything in between. How would you characterize Sully's image of Sally Etting, Katz's image of Anne, and Rivers's image of Vera List? What might have contributed to the way they represent their female subjects? (*For example, the time in which they lived, their attitude toward women, their relationship to the sitter, their level of respect for the sitter, whether it was a commission or not, their artistic interests and goals, etc.*)