

NORTON SIMON MUSEUM
Student Preparatory Packet
Portraiture: Behind the Gaze

A portrait captures the likeness of an individual, preserving it for generations to come. Once reserved for the wealthy elite, portraiture—now widely accessible through digital media—today serves both documentary and memorializing purposes for an enormous variety of people. Viewers cannot always read a portrait simply at face value: all artists—painters, sculptors, draftsmen, etchers and even photographers—represent sitters through personal lenses. Among the factors at play in an artist’s interpretation is whether he or she observes the sitter from life, in a photograph, or even through a mirror if the sitter is himself.

The following lesson plans are designed to engage students in looking at, thinking about and creating portraits. They were developed to align with California State Content Standards for the Visual Arts and Language Arts.

In addition to the enclosed preparatory packet, you may also find it helpful to visit our website, www.nortonsimon.org. Look for the “Study Guides” in the Education section of the website.

Sincerely,

Michael Ano
Educational Assistant
Norton Simon Museum

Lesson 1: Visioning the Self

Rembrandt van Rijn, Dutch, 1606–1669
Self-Portrait, c. 1636–1638
Oil on panel, 24-7/8 x 19-3/4 in.



Look and Discuss

- What do you first notice about the sitter?
- What does his facial expression tell you about him (i.e., is he thoughtful, happy, angry, confused, etc.)?
- Describe the sitter's clothing. Is he wearing casual dress or more formal attire?

Background

In this self-portrait, one of over seventy Rembrandt created in his lifetime, presumably while studying himself in a mirror in his studio, the artist represented himself in clothing from the previous century. Unlike the simple black clothing with white starched linen ruffs, or collars, found in other 17th-century Dutch portraits, Rembrandt wears an elaborate bejeweled costume. Viewers in Rembrandt's time would have recognized his velvet beret as an accessory associated with artists; they would have also interpreted the gold chain around the master's neck as a token of a wealthy patron's esteem, another long-established tradition in the arts. Taken as a whole, Rembrandt's dress is a way for him to elevate his social status, sending a message to the viewer about how he would like to be seen.

Create

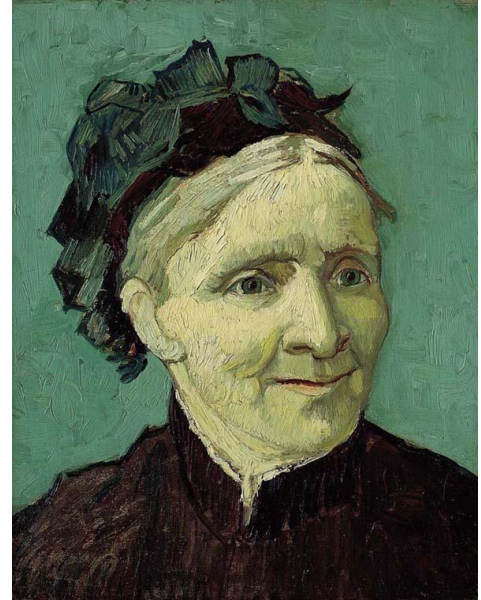
Rembrandt was admired for what his portraits revealed about the sitter's personality and character. Students will create a self-portrait in the style of Rembrandt, considering facial expression, pose, gesture, clothing and accessories. The portraits can be drawn with pencils or painted with tempera or watercolor. Mirrors may be used in the process of self-examination. Encourage students to critique their self-portraits. What image of themselves were they trying to project? Were they successful?

Lesson 2: Rethinking a Beloved Image

Vincent van Gogh, Dutch, 1853–1890
Portrait of the Artist's Mother, October 1888
Oil on canvas, 16 x 12-3/4 in.

Look and Discuss

- What do you first notice about the sitter?
- Where is she looking?
- What does her facial expression communicate? List adjectives that describe the sitter's emotions (such as sad, excited, courageous, stern, etc.).
- If the setting were different (i.e. an environment filled with objects), how might your perception of her change?



Background

Upon receiving a black-and-white photograph of his mother, Vincent van Gogh wrote to his brother Theo, “I am doing a portrait of Mother for myself. I cannot stand the colorless photograph, and I am trying to do one in a harmony of color, as I see her in my memory.” In this painting, van Gogh meticulously copied his mother's expression from the photograph while slightly altering her bonnet and collar and, most importantly, adding the color that he wished the photograph possessed. In the same spirit as Byzantine artists who copied religious icons in the attempt to retain the sacred aura of the original, van Gogh relied more on the precious photograph than on his own memory while painting this picture.

Create

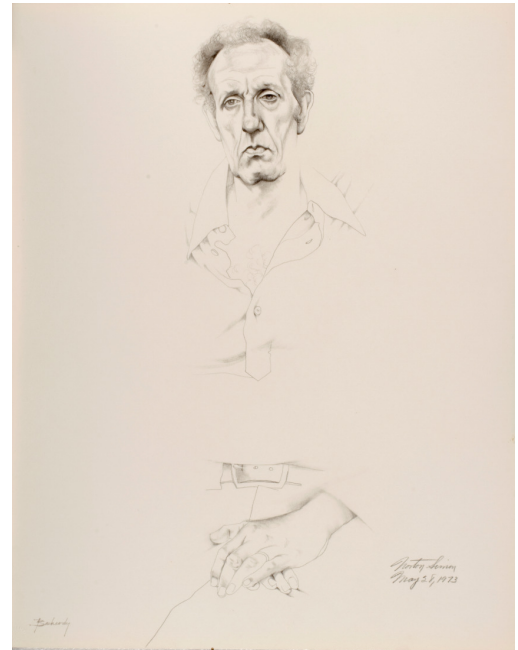
Van Gogh stated that he used vibrant color “as a means of arriving at the expression and the intensification of character.” Students will examine portraits in black and white and the same images in color. Ask students to bring to class a black-and-white photograph of a friend or family member. Have students write about how they feel about the subject inspired by the black-and-white photograph, then discuss how color can add another dimension to portraits—how it can set tone and mood. Ask students to paint a color portrait in tempera or watercolor based on their black-and-white photographs. Have them write about how their perception of their portrait changed when they used color.

Lesson 3: Observing a Sitter from Life

Don Bachardy, American, 1934–
Norton Simon, May 28, 1973
Pencil and ink on paper, 29-1/8 x 23 in.

Look and Discuss

- What do you first notice about the sitter?
- What does his facial expression tell you about him?
- How would you describe his pose?
- If you could ask this person a question, what would it be?
- If the sitter could speak, what might he say?



Background

In a recent interview, artist and Los Angeles native Don Bachardy commented, “I only work from live sitters, and I’ve been doing it now for more than fifty years.” On May 28, 1973, a day short of Norton Simon’s and Jennifer Jones’s second wedding anniversary, Bachardy, a longtime friend of Jones’s who had known Simon since the couple’s marriage, drew two portraits of the industrialist and art collector. On each, the viewer notices two signatures: the artist’s, which is normally expected, and the sitter’s, visual evidence that Bachardy drew Simon from life. In contrast to a photograph, which can capture only one expression in a single exposure, Bachardy has said the following about his goals for his portraits: “Somebody sitting still for hours is naturally going to go through all sorts of different moods and expressions.... If I’m really working well the finished product is a kind of combination of different expressions and moods.”

Create

Bachardy is well known for his ability to capture the “essence” of his sitters, which in his earlier work he accomplished primarily through line. Have students choose a classmate as the subject for their line drawings. Using pencils and paper, students will observe and record not only the physical appearance of their sitters but also what they perceive as the sitters’ inner world. Discuss the challenges of communicating a great deal of information about a sitter through line drawings as opposed to portraits in other media.

Further Exploration

Encourage students to look at a range of portraits on museum websites and during visits to the Norton Simon Museum. Ask students to think about the following:

- How does portraiture go beyond revealing a likeness of a person or persons?
- How does portraiture function as a “portrait” of the time and place in which it was created?
- Which artist or artists would students choose to make a portrait of them? Why?
- What aspects of artists’ portraits do students find particularly compelling?