

LESSON THREE: Portraiture



IMAGE NINE: Vincent van Gogh. *Portrait of Joseph Roulin*. 1889. Oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 21 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (64.6 x 55.2 cm). Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William A. M. Burden, Mr. and Mrs. Paul Rosenberg, Nelson A. Rockefeller, Mr. and Mrs. Armand P. Bartos, The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection, Mr. and Mrs. Werner E. Josten, and Loula D. Lasker Bequest (all by exchange)



IMAGE TEN: Paul Signac. *Opus 217. Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones, and Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in 1890*. 1890. Oil on canvas, 29 x 36 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (73.5 x 92.5 cm). Fractional gift of Mr. and Mrs. David Rockefeller. © 2005 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris



IMAGE ELEVEN: Édouard Vuillard. *Mother and Sister of the Artist*. c. 1893. Oil on canvas, 18 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 22 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (46.3 x 56.5 cm). Gift of Mrs. Saidie A. May. © 2005 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

INTRODUCTION

Portraits can represent individuals in many different ways. They can be literal representations of a person or they can represent a person symbolically. Around the time that these three paintings were created, a shift in the way artists represented people was starting to take hold. Rather than just seeking to capture the sitter's physical appearance, artists sought to represent his or her character, disposition, and even inner psyche. In order to represent such

subjective and symbolic aspects of their subjects, artists often paid less attention to capturing precise facial features than to developing new compositional devices, employing nonnaturalistic color and making very specific choices about the background and what it might reveal about the subject.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will be introduced to some of the conventions of portraiture such as **costume, gesture, expression, pose, and background.**
- Students will consider how the above elements can communicate information about a person.
- Students will consider how symbols can be used in a portrait to add meaning.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Begin the conversation by asking your students to define portraiture. Ask them if they have ever sat for their portrait. Perhaps they have had their picture taken at school. Ask them if they do anything special in preparation for having their picture taken. Ask them why or why not.
- Ask your students to describe what someone looking at their portrait could learn about them from what they are wearing (their costume or outfit) or the expression on their face.
- Consider Édouard Vuillard's painting (Image 11), which represents his mother and sister at home, where they both lived and worked as seamstresses. Unlike traditional portraiture, Vuillard was not so interested in recording his subjects' precise likenesses as in capturing the nature of their relationship and environment. Ask your students to look carefully at this work and tell you what the painting seems to be suggesting about Vuillard's mother and sister. Make sure that they support their comments with visual evidence from the painting. Ask them to note specifically how Vuillard communicates these ideas to the viewer. Introduce the terms "pose" (the way a figure is positioned), "gesture" (the placement of the figure's hands), and "expression" (the appearance of the figure's face). Ask them to consider the background against which the figures are posed.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to take a moment to look at *Portrait of Joseph Roulin*. Make sure that they understand the terms "costume," "expression," "pose," and "background," and ask them to keep these ideas in mind while describing the portrait to you.
- Ask your students what they think can be learned about Joseph Roulin by looking at this picture.

Joseph Roulin worked for a post office in the French town of Arles. He was not a letter carrier but rather held a higher position as an official sorting mail at the train station. Van Gogh and Roulin lived on the same street and became close friends. Van Gogh painted many portraits of Roulin. This picture, which van Gogh boasted of having completed quickly, in a single session, was painted after Roulin got a better-paying job and left Arles. Some scholars think that this portrait was not painted from life but rather from memory or from previous portraits.

- Show your students *Opus 217. Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones, and Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in 1890*. Ask them to take a moment to look at this portrait.
- Ask them what they think can be learned about Félix Fénéon by looking at this portrait, keeping in mind costume, expression, pose, and background.
- Ask your students to think about the title. Make sure they understand that the term “opus” refers to a musical movement, and that the rest of the title refers to the background of the painting as “rhythmic with beats and angles, tones, and tints.” Write this part of the title on the chalkboard, and ask your students to consider the words while describing the painting’s background.

Félix Fénéon was an art and literary critic who acted as a spokesperson and advocate for Paul Signac and contemporaries such as Georges Seurat and Camille Pissarro. He coined the term “Neo-Impressionist” to distinguish their work from the Impressionists, and explicated the artists’ interest in optics and color theory, which informed their use of many small brushstrokes or dots (a style known as “pointillism”) to compose their pictures. Like many of his friends, Fénéon enjoyed dressing eccentrically in silk top hats and capes. His pointed beard contributed to his resemblance to Uncle Sam.

- Ask your students to look at these two paintings again. Ask them to describe how they are similar and how they are different.
- Ask what aspects of their subjects the artists have chosen to highlight.

ACTIVITIES/PROJECTS

Ask your students to plan a portrait of someone they know. Ask why they selected this person. Have them write a few words to describe his or her personality and consider what they would like to communicate about the person to the viewer. Then ask them to think about the costume, expression, pose, and background they intend to include in their portrait to best communicate this information. Have them make a drawing, painting, or collage of the person.

Ask your students to create a **self-portrait** in the same manner.

As mentioned above, Félix Fénéon was an art critic who influenced the way in which people understood and thought about the work of artists he chose to write about. There were other people who wrote about art at this time who also had an impact on the way in which the public viewed art. Research some of these critics and their ideas.

There are art critics today who write reviews of museum exhibitions and artists’ shows in newspapers and magazines. Find a local exhibition and ask your students to visit it either on their own or as a class. Before the visit, students should brainstorm about questions to consider while they are at the exhibition. They should take notes about what they see, thinking carefully about the themes and ideas in the exhibition and the ways in which the works are installed. Ask them to use these notes to each write a review of the show. Then have the students read a published review on the exhibition. How does the review add to their ideas or help further their understanding of the exhibition? Do they agree or disagree with the reviewer?