

Art, a Capitol Idea

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES: Lee Udall Bennion

Self-Portraits

Objectives: Students will learn about self-portraits, will explore reasons for creating self-portraits, will compare various self-portraits, will create their own self-portraits, and will critique their self-portraits. Extensions for advanced students are provided.

Materials

- Reproductions of self-portraits by several artists
- Background information on self- portraits and on individual artists<provided here
- A copy of the worksheet for each student or for each group
- good quality drawing paper
- drawing pencils, charcoal, felt-tip pens, or neutral-colored pastels

Perceiving: Show the class a variety of reproductions of self-portraits such as those by Rembrandt and van Gogh, *Self with Red Scarf* and *Self in Studio* by Lee Bennion, *Crowded, Or I Myself* by Sam Wilson, *Self-Portrait as Fire Chief* by George Ottinger, *A Compromise of Freedom and Control* by Connie Borup.

Show the class the reproductions and ask them the following questions: What are some reasons artists might paint self-portraits? (Possible Answers: artists are always available for themselves; no model fee; can practice on themselves; can explore their personality, growth, feelings; can try new techniques; can experiment, etc.)

Background information:

During the Medieval period of art, art in Europe was created for the church and the individual artists were not recognized or known. Art was created for the glory of God and most of it decorated churches. During the Renaissance, this focus changed and art became for the people: humanism was the focus. Much art was created for wealthy patrons, so many portraits were painted. Self-portraits also began to appear. Then, with the advent of Modern Art, the number of self-portraits declined severely although self-portraits have remained a tradition among those who create realist, super-realist, and expressivist artworks.

Rembrandt's self-portraits seem to be searching and often merciless self-examinations as well as exercises in portraiture. Van Gogh wanted to be accepted as a portrait painter and so he painted many self-portraits—the cheapest solution for the penniless artist. However, because his work is expressive, his self-portraits are also very expressive and personal.

Lee Bennion, on the other hand, says "Although I primarily paint the figure [including herself], portraiture is not my main concern. My painting deals with form, color, and feelings foremost." She has also explained that she paints herself and her family because they are always available and are known to her.

Connie Borup's self-portrait is a visual representation of ideas that intrigue her: "I am interested in a person's appearance based on his/her outside image. There is a conflict between what people choose to see from the outside and the collection of complicated emotions and thoughts that really exist inside a person."

George Ottinger was one of the artists who immigrated to Utah during the mid-1800s. He held many different jobs, one of which, like his father, was as Salt Lake City's Fire Chief. His self-portrait chronicles an important part of his life. The painting is not only good portrait work, but it also documents important historical detail.

Sam Wilson has a studio full of odds and ends that he uses in his artwork. Some of them appear in his self-portrait as does his quirky sense of humor, which perhaps, is asking us to question what self-portraits are.

Sources:

The artworks by Bennion, Wilson, Ottinger, and Borup can be found on the web at www.sma.shs.nebo.edu/museum.html

Bennion's work *Self with Red Scarf* can be found in the exhibition catalog

The best way to find artworks by major artists is to go to www.artcyclopedia.com and search by artist name. The highest quality scans of Rembrandt are at the Rijksmuseum. Go through artcyclopedia directly to the page of Rembrandt artworks: there are five self-portraits. To access the images, simply click on the regular or giant-size highlighted text next to each artwork title. The giant size is huge! If you want information about the specific artworks, follow the directions at the top of the web page.

For van Gogh, you can go to the one self-portrait at the Rijksmuseum highest quality or, go through artcyclopedia to the Van Gogh Museum. You also can go directly to the Van Gogh Museum at www.vangoghmuseum.nl/bis/top-1-2.html. At the Van Gogh Museum site, go to *Collection, alphabetical list*, and down to Self Portrait: there are eight. The scans are decent quality and the information about each artwork is helpful and appropriate for teachers.

For directions for making your own reproductions, see **Creating Postcards or Supplemental Images**, page 21.

Give each student a copy of the self-portrait worksheet and have students complete the worksheet. Students may discuss their reasoning in their groups but not copy answers. The worksheet is on page 23.

Directions: Students should choose a self-portrait by two of the artists. Make quick sketches of the artworks in the frames on the worksheet, fill in the required information, putting similarities and differences between the two portraits where indicated. Allow students to share their ideas with their groups.

Making

Choose one of the following ideas for the production section of this activity:

1. **Contour line drawing:** (see lesson in the Earl Jones activities for directions for a contour line drawing.) The first part of this activity may be best done as homework because of the need for a mirror. Have the students look in a mirror and make a contour drawing of their image. The next class period, students should look at the drawing and consider the overall design. They should choose some lines to emphasize and/or add a few details, trying to look at the drawing as a design, not just as their own face. Turning the drawing upside down can help students visualize the effect of the design so they don't get hung up on the subject matter. Some students may be more successful if they make the drawing upside down. Students should focus on line, balance, and unity.

If having students draw themselves by looking in a mirror is too difficult for your class (such as for very young students) have them make their drawings from memory or have them draw the person across from them.

2. **Contour drawing with watercolor:** make a contour drawing in pencil on thick paper. Then add watercolor washes. Go over the contour lines with black ink.

3. **For advanced students:** After completing a version of the other sections, have students create self-portraits using oil paints or acrylics. Since advanced students often are exploring personal style, rather than specifying stylistic criteria, have students research and find a portrait or self-portrait that has some qualities they want to achieve in their own work. This artwork should be used as inspiration for their self-portrait. Have students design their own rubric for assessing their self-portrait.

4. **Photo extension:** Have students bring a photograph of themselves, preferably a head shot, such as a school picture. Xerox the photo on a large piece of paper. Students should extend the photo by completing the shapes of the photo. Students can also add objects or texture that are logical extensions of the original photograph.

5. **Photo collage:** Have students bring 3-5 photographs of themselves to class. Make photocopies of the pictures. Using diluted white glue or YES! Paste, students should glue the photocopies to a sheet of heavy paper. Students can draw on the collages when they

are dry or glue additional materials to the collages. Because collage brings together disparate elements, the design focus of this assignment needs to be on unifying those elements. Students can be asked to work on a specific quality such as expressiveness as well, or they may be allowed to choose the quality they want to emphasize. (See specific directions for collage on next page)

6. **Expressive color:** Have students make a pencil sketch of their own head or head and shoulders. Then students should color the sketch using colors that correspond to how they feel rather than how they look.

Whichever self-portrait approach you choose, display the artworks within the classroom or school.

Have students self-assess their work by having them write provide help for very young students a simple critique. Both the critique and the self-portrait should go in the students' portfolio once the exhibit is taken down.

For teacher assessment, create a simple rubric using appropriate criteria for your class' assignment and grade level, rating students as *Excellent*, *Satisfactory*, or *Needs Improvement* in each area.

(See the example of a rubric on page 29)

COLLAGE DIRECTIONS

- Collage materials
- White glue, YES! Paste, or acrylic painting medium (can be purchased from craft or art supply stores)
- Inexpensive brushes for applying glue or medium
- Sturdy paper for the backing of the collage
- Scissors
- Cheap paper for planning collage

If you have not made collages yourself, make one or two so you are familiar with the techniques. Making a couple samples will help you understand the complexity of design possible and the unique characteristics of collage as well as giving you examples to show the class.

Give the students cheap paper and let them choose several items from the variety of media available. Students should plan out their collage by placing the individual pieces on the cheap paper, arranging and rearranging them until they have a composition they like. The items can be trimmed to whatever size or shape suits the design. Remind the students to use enough variety to create interest and enough repetition to provide unity. If you are having the students focus on other principles as well, put a list on the board and have students run through the list before attaching any pieces to the good paper. (Even if some activities have a specific focus, students should try to use everything they know about the elements and principles of design that apply to any given activity.)

When students have checked their designs, they can begin gluing. They should start with the undermost layers, and brush an even coating of medium across the backing, place the chosen item on the backing, smooth it carefully, and then brush a coating of medium over the item. If using paste or glue, brush a light coat over the back surface only. (Students can make notes, and they can take the items off the planning paper one by one and place them face down on their desks, so they will be in reverse order.) After the items have been glued to the backing and allowed to dry partway, place plastic wrap and heavy items over the collages and allow them to dry overnight. Weighting the collages prevents severe buckling.

Language Arts

Objectives: Students will demonstrate an understanding of autobiography and self portraiture by writing a short and concise autobiography using appropriate literacy nuance and structural soundness and then illustrating the work with a personal self portrait (refer to previous art objective)

Autobiography and autobiographical sketches are common in world literature. Expose students to several successful autobiographies such as James Joyce, Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man, C.S. Lewis, Surprised by Joy, and Diary of Anne Frank. For younger students use simple books appropriate for their age.

Students will need to work slowly and carefully, making a rough draft and refining it for a final presentation. With the students' permission, stories and illustrations should be exhibited together.

Science

Objectives: Students will demonstrate an understanding of human physiology and anatomy by drawing and labeling the basic bones and muscles.

Have students learn the names of the 24 basic bones (similar abbreviated lists and illustrations of muscles are available). Students should first draw the basic skeleton, labeling major bones. Next, students can use tracing paper to make an overlay of the major muscle groups. Use a real skeleton, if possible.

If a teacher wishes to keep this project theoretical and focused on anatomy, the use of art prints of figure painting can still be used to enliven the lesson.

Variation: For younger students, use the above activity but have the students draw simplified skeletons, using a real skeleton, if available, for reference. Assign the students to learn the names and label the most important large bones.

Line Quality

Objective: Students will compare, discuss, and experiment with line quality. They will

make a drawing using a particular line quality.

Show students the reproductions and slides of Bennion's paintings. Ask them to describe the quality of the lines in her paintings. Show them other artworks such as Trevor Southey's *New Bloom* from the SMA Elementary Poster Set and Harry Taylor's woodcut *Killer Bee*. Have students compare the three artists' use of line.

Students may have an easier time identifying the lines in the black and white version of *Self in Studio* on page 24.

Give students paper and supply a variety of media such as the following:

- fine felt-tipped markers
- brush markers
- broad markers
- calligraphy markers
- hard and soft pencils
- charcoal pencils or sticks
- hard pastels
- crayons, including broken pieces
- gel pens

Have students explore the media. (You can do this in groups, so students can easily pass one of each kind of media around the group.) They should try making broad, sweeping lines, lines that change from thin to thick, delicate lines, smudged lines, lines made from dots or dashes, lines made with the side of crayon or pastels pieces, and so on.

After students have tried the different media, have them choose one kind of line and make a drawing using that kind of line. Students should choose a medium that will allow them to achieve the line quality they desire.

For portraits, have students make a **light** pencil drawing of the person sitting across from them. Then students can use their chosen medium to complete the drawing.

If you prefer, have students draw a single object such as a shoe, bookbag, musical instrument, fruit, vegetable, etc.

Display the finished artworks and allow students to comment on the different qualities the lines convey.