How does the production and presentation of portraits participate in the shaping of identity?

What can historic and contemporary representations of people tell us about changing American identity?

American identity exists not in a singular portrait or a composite group, but in the consistency - or rupture - of images over time. This Portfolio Guide featuring paintings, photographs, prints, and sculpture from the Addison's collection offers a sampling of representations of people from varying times, artists, and intentions and of subjects diverse in class, race, context, activity, and social meaning.

Educators are encouraged to use this Guide and the expanded Portfolio Image List as a starting point, a place from which to dig deeper, ask questions, and make new connections for class plans and projects.

For online use, click the images in this guide to access digital images in the Addison's online database.
Portraiture and Social Status

How is status conveyed and/or reinforced through body language, clothing, setting, and composition?

What can we learn about the culture and values of a time period from exploring who did - and did not - have their portrait made before the invention and popularization of photography?

In 17th and 18th century Europe, portraits were the staple of the aristocracy and due to cost and accessibility were not readily available to other classes, a tradition replicated in the United States during the Colonial period. Artistic strategies, such as those employed by the European-trained Benjamin West and John Singleton Copley, followed social conventions which used pose, gaze, clothing, props, setting, and story to project the sitter’s wealth, power, social status, and aspirations.

A rare portrait of socially-established African American Charles Jones utilizes these European American conventions in countering the denigrating caricatured portrayals of blacks made for public consumption during slavery. Thomas Eakins’s post-photographic portrait of Professor Rowland expands the social aspects of portraiture to include the psychological and professional elements of identity in this moody portrait of an important inventor/educator. With its unusual frame, decorated with notes and equations from Rowland’s notebooks, Eakins extends the sitter’s intelligence beyond the picture plane.
The Impact of Early Photography

_How are the social and artistic constructs of early photographic portraits inspired by painted portraits?_

_What impact did photography have on the ways in which people expressed identity through images?_

The popularization of photography in the United States following its invention in 1839 made portraiture more accessible to a broader social spectrum. This less costly form of visual representation significantly diversified the visual record of American culture. Because the early technology required extensive equipment and long exposure times, photographic portraits were often made in the photographer’s studio with neutral backdrops, conventionalized poses and props, and controlled lighting (top row).

Although William Henry Jackson’s portrait of a Papago Indian from the Grand Canyon appears to be housed in a similar studio setting, it was made on a survey trip to document the landscape and people of the American West. Other such endeavors to record and portray the identity of the growing nation through photographic surveys, where bulky cameras and entire darkrooms were transported on horseback through uncharted terrain, also created “portraits” of the rich resources and natural treasures of the United States and its territories, such as in Carleton Watkins’s bound album, _Yo-Semite Valley._
The Politics of Cultural Identity

How can portraits give voice to the identity of a group or community?

How can images in series help to define - or redefine - a cultural group?

In 1898, Frank Albert Rinehart was commissioned to photograph the Indian Congress held in conjunction with the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition. Although Rinehart’s images of Native American leaders retain many European portrait conventions, the allowance of traditional dress and the expression of individual and tribal identity stands in sharp contrast to William Henry Jackson’s assimilated, anonymous Papago Indian (see previous page).

Art critic, writer, and photographer Carl Van Vechten was one of the leading popularizers of African American culture to white America, depicting and promoting the Harlem community from the mid 1920s through the 1960s. His portfolio ‘O, Write My Name: American Portraits: Harlem Heroes, celebrates through image and word the lives and contributions of fifty influential artists, writers, singers, and actors of the Harlem Renaissance. Statements by and about the subjects are printed below each image, inviting the comparison of the personal and public aspects of identity.

ZORA NEALE HURSTON (1903 – 1960)
I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes... At certain times I have no race. I am me... the cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time... I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries.

From the essay “How It Feels To Be Colored Me”
A novelist, folklorist and anthropologist prominent during the Harlem Renaissance, she wrote Mules and Men, Their Eyes Were Watching God and other important works. After writing a number of books that celebrated black folkways, her life of fame, travel and adventure ended in poverty.
Documenting America

What are the intentions and results of documentary, social documentary, and journalistic photography?

How is an artist's relationship to a community reflected in the portraits and documents s/he makes?

For half a century Roy DeCarava focused his camera on the everyday people and activities of Harlem, where he was born and lived throughout his life. His spontaneous yet poetic images gave direct voice to a community which had otherwise been photographed by those from outside, such as Aaron Siskind.

The unfiltered immigrant perspective of young Swiss photographer Robert Frank led to what appeared to some at the time as an all-too-honest documentation of 1950s America. With its eighty-three candid compositions from across the country, The Americans reflected the reality of the American experience during a time that is often glossily portrayed as wholesome and prosperous.

Under the auspices of the United States government, Dorothea Lange was commissioned to photograph the dire situation of migrant workers during the Great Depression to help secure Congressional funds and public sentiment. A skilled photojournalist, she created images that communicated both the extreme needs and the everyday heroism of those hardest hit by the devastating economic conditions.
Creating, Reinforcing, or Negating Stereotypes

How have and are images employed to construct and confirm stereotypes?

How can images be made to counteract limiting or degrading perceptions of individuals and groups?

Racial caricatures in visual art and journalism and on stage and screen have been informing our ideas about the personalities, values, and capacities of African Americans since the advent of minstrelsy in the early 19th century. The powerful—and painful—impact of these ubiquitous and sustained images on African American and non-African American psyches can still be seen in today’s comedy which frequently lampoons stereotyped black character traits to elicit audience laughter.

While this publicity still from the television show Our Gang uses toddlers to visualize and uphold a racial hierarchy, Eduard Steichen’s portrait of Paul Robeson playing the lead stage role in Emperor Jones portrays the strength and social standing of this talented actor. More recently, the photographs of Dawoud Bey challenge the limiting images of both African Americans and teenagers historically seen in museums and the media by presenting probing, complex portraits of students from diverse cultural, class, life, and school backgrounds. Bey’s images in his Class Pictures series are accompanied by poignant personal narratives which add often unexpected layers to the sitter’s identity.
Curating Identity

How can historical conventions of portraiture be transformed to create new identity narratives?

How so student-centered projects reveal and redress identity issues in the classroom?

By layering costumes and props, personal experience, and recognizable portraits by European masters, David McGee raises identity questions about the past and present. Inspired by the paradox of women’s growing prominence in the workplace yet continued reliance on make-up and feminine dress, this painted “collage” also speaks to the irony of art museums and art histories that simultaneously reference yet diminish the impact of African art on western art styles.

The projects of artist-educator Wendy Ewald, such as Black Self/White Self, where a racially mixed class of students in North Carolina pictured themselves as their own and the other race, address individual, community, cultural, gender, religious, and racial identity. Through direct collaboration with school systems, teachers, and students that respond to both local and global issues of expressing and representing identity, Ewald’s and her students’ photographs redress the sometimes superficial, misleading, or invisible representations of their communities.
**Curriculum Connections and Resources**

**SUGGESTED CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS**

**History/Social Studies**
- colonial America
- African American identity
- race relations
- The Harlem Renaissance
- Civil Rights Movement
- Native American history
- Women’s Movement
- femininity and masculinity
- The Great Depression
- social documentary
  photography
  photojournalism

**English**
- the immigrant experience
- coming of age
- books by Junot Diaz
- books by Julia Alvarez
  - The Dew Breaker
- The Odyssey
- The Diary of Anne Frank
- To Kill a Mockingbird
- The House on Mango Street
- The Awakening
- The Color Purple
- The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

**Art**
- portraiture
- self-expression
- representing identity
- symbolism

**Science**
- biological traits
- childhood and adulthood
- gender and sexuality
- social conditioning

**CONNECTIONS TO ADDITIONAL THEMATIC PORTFOLIOS**

**Race and Otherness**

**Gender**

**Stereotypes**

**Identity Construction**

**Identity and Place**

**Home and Community**

**The Great Depression**

**Civil Rights Movement**

**Documentation versus Art**

**Social Documentary Photography**

**TEACHER AND STUDENT RESOURCES**


*Class Pictures: Photographs by Dawoud Bey*. New York: Aperture, 2007. Bey's photographs accompanied by poignant personal statements of sixty students from various economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds from high schools around the country.
