What can we learn from images about the power of dominant culture on societal values?

How does the production and presentation of portraits participate in the shaping of racial, class, sexual, and gender identity?

In 1849, Frederick Douglas argued that until African Americans began to represent themselves, they would not find artists to portray them with the sensitivity that the serious representation of individuals required. In order to broaden an exploration of these relationships across race, class, sexual orientation, and gender, this Portfolio Guide of illustrations, paintings, and photographs features a sampling of works from the Addison’s collection offering varied perspectives and discussion points on visual culture. 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.

Selected Thematic Approaches

Documenting History — How do societal values impact the ways in which history is documented?

Contemporary Perspectives — How and why do the interpretations of historical images change over time?

Portraiture and Hierarchy — How can images speak to hierarchies across racial and socioeconomic groups?

Photography and Othering — How does portraiture relate to the marginalization of individuals or groups?

Countering Type and Stereotype — How can images call attention to and counteract beliefs about race, class, sexuality, and gender?

Identity Construction — How can individual voices and perspectives be heard through portraiture?

Documenting History

How do society’s values and beliefs about race and equality impact the ways in which history is documented?

How can images disrupt society’s perceived notions about race relations?

Winslow Homer’s Civil War-era print, Our Jolly Cook, utilizes period stereotypes, emblematic of the beliefs of the audience to whom he hoped to market this portfolio of prints. Using photography as his medium, Charles Paxson depicts three emancipated slave children shrouded by the American flag in his Civil War-era carte-de-visite, selected possibly for their fair-skin in order to better elicit sympathy from a white audience. Composing his images to satiate the curiosity of his majority audience in the 1870s, field photographer for the U.S. Geological Survey William Henry Jackson documented both the land and peoples of the American west, focusing on Native Americans as ethnographic subjects.

In his photographic series The Americans, Robert Frank revealed a nation not living the assumed American dream of the 1950s. Similarly, Stanley Forman’s documentation of a riot exploding during a protest against desegregation by busing in Boston in 1976 confronted the public with the contrast between perceived notions and realities about race relations in the North.
**Contemporary Perspectives**

*How and why do the interpretations of historical images change over time?*

*How does revisiting historical narratives impact contemporary perceptions and understandings?*

In his 1993 series *Runaways*, Glenn Ligon appropriates the style and format of 19th century broadsheets that advertised for the return of escaped slaves and inserts himself into the descriptions and into history to explore a connection between past and present. Just as contemporary viewing of Charles Paxson’s carte-de-visite (on facing page) asks viewers to question the implications of being selected, qualified, and defined by another, Ligon’s series of ten prints invites exploration of ownership and identity.

Nearly 150 years after the Civil War, Kara Walker’s portfolio of fifteen prints entitled *Harper’s Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)* confront and disrupt existing perceptions of race as Walker’s stylized silhouetted figures move through reproductions of illustrations that appeared in *Harper’s Weekly* during the war. Similarly, Walker’s 2009 film takes its title and narrative from documents in the archive of the Freedman’s Bureau and uses her trademark silhouettes as shadow puppets, exploring contemporary perspectives on historical oppression and the powerlessness of the oppressed.
Portraiture and Hierarchy

How can images reinforce or challenge hierarchies across racial and socioeconomic groups?

What can we learn from images about the power of dominant culture on societal values?

While a c. 1828 portrait of Abraham Hanson, a popular barber patroned by white clientele, by painter Jeremiah Pearson Hardy counters period caricatured portrayals of African Americans by white artists, the image speaks to the ways in which documentation of peoples has been controlled by racial majorities. In an 1850s daguerreotype documenting two young girls, one white and one African American, only the name of the African American child has been lost to time, leaving her to be identified as an “unnamed companion.” This relationship is reflected 100 years later in a publicity still from the television show Our Gang in which toddlers roleplay and uphold a racial hierarchy.

A 1928 publicity still of Al Jolson from the film The Jazz Singer addresses the history of minstrelsy as a tool for the white mainstream to appropriate and tame representations of African Americans. This power of dominant culture can be seen in Bill Owens’s 1970s series Suburbia, where the image Because we live in the suburbs we don’t eat too much Chinese food. It’s not available in the supermarkets so on Saturday we eat hot dogs reveals the conformity to dominant social norms in the newly-minted middle class.
Photography and Othering

*How does portraiture impact the marginalization of individuals or groups?*

*How do photographers reinforce foreignness or emphasize equality in documenting their subjects?*

From 1890 to 1891, American painter John La Farge traveled the islands of the South Pacific, documenting the cultures he encountered through a pointedly Euro-American lens. Similarly, Aaron Siskind utilized photography to create his portfolio of fifty-two photographs of Harlem and its residents in the 1930s, and while the series began as part of a larger project designed to examine ethnic, working-class, urban neighborhoods, the images call attention to the uneasiness of the cross-class and interracial looking inherent in their creation.

Photography’s long history of othering, documenting the unusual as opposed to the everyday and mainstream, is evident in the work of photographers including Leon Levinstein, known for photographing those on the margins of society. In her iconic 1962 photograph of a boy in Central Park, Diane Arbus captures the singular moment that reveals an awkward tension between social class, childhood, and primal violence.
Countering Type and Stereotype

How can images reinforce or challenge evolving perceptions of type and stereotype?

How can images call attention to and counteract beliefs about race, class, sexuality, and gender?

The emphasis on strength of expression in portraits made in 1898 by Frank Albert Rinehart, documenting participants in the Indian Congress held in conjunction with the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, stand in contrast to William Henry Jackson’s detached, ethnographic records twenty years earlier (see page 2). Similarly, Edward Steichen’s 1933 portrait of Paul Robeson as Emperor Jones portrays the strength of this talented actor in the first Broadway play to feature an African American actor in its leading role with a racially integrated cast, countering a past of minstrelsy (see Al Jolson, page 4).

In the 1980s Sage Sohier spent two years photographing gay and lesbian couples across the United States, and through her sensitive portraits an awareness emerges of social and sexual issues of the time period. Through her portraiture, Nan Goldin explores the struggle of gender codes and definitions as well as the liberation of crossing these gender boundaries. Lalla Essaydi revisits her own past through portraiture, employing calligraphy to empower her subjects as well as liberate them from traditional restrictions.
Identity Construction

How can individual voices, perspectives, and languages be heard through portraiture?

How does the production and presentation of portraits participate in the shaping of racial, class, sexual and gender identity?

Countering the outsider perspective of photographers including Aaron Siskind (see page 5), Roy DeCarava’s poetic images of his native Harlem gave direct voice to a community and his photographs were later married with text by Langston Hughes in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. Similarly unwilling to let familiar stereotypes stand, contemporary photographer and Harlem native Dawoud Bey photographed “types” of Harlem’s residents — the barber, the church ladies, the hip youth — in his series *Harlem, U.S.A.*, creating a sensitively composed portrait of this community without courting stereotypes.

The projects of artist-educator Wendy Ewald address individual, community, cultural, gender, religious, and racial identity, including her collaboration with women in Saudi Arabia which resulted in portraits in which the subjects’ own marks and words express individuality. Performance and visual artist Hunter Reynolds utilizes himself as canvas, model, and medium, as can be seen in his 1990 photograph *Shhh...* as his publicly assumed persona Patina du Prey, a character of questionable and questioning gender.
Curriculum Connections and Resources

**SUGGESTED CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS**

**History/Social Studies**
- The Civil War
- The Civil Rights Movement
- propaganda
- colonial America
- slavery and abolitionism
- the immigrant experience
- race relations
- Native American history
- history of gender equality
- history of LGBTQ issues
- AIDS epidemic

**English**
- the immigrant experience
- gender identity
- LGBTQ identity
- books by Junot Diaz
- books by Julia Alvarez
- *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*
- *Sula*
- *Oxhereding Tale*
- *Invisible Man*
- *Native Son*
- *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- *Quicksand*

**Art**
- portraiture
- identity
- cultural identity
- portraits and types
- social documentation

**Science**
- biology and race
- gender and sexuality
- social conditioning

**CONNECTIONS TO ADDITIONAL THEMATIC PORTFOLIOS**

American Identity
African American Identity
Gender
The Immigrant Experience
Portraits/Self-portraits
Identity Construction
Images and the Media
The American Civil War
The Civil Rights Movement

**TEACHER AND STUDENT RESOURCES**


