



Image-Making: Reading Gesture, Objects, and Environment in Portraiture

Curriculum Unit 12.01.04
by Jennifer Hoffman Lee

Introduction to Unit

We live in a fast-paced world and much of the information that we all absorb comes from visual images. Whether deciding with whom we want to socialize or for whom we want to vote, we can easily be influenced by how people market themselves or are marketed by others. The impact that a visual image makes to portray the qualities of an individual has a historical basis, as well as contemporary importance.

The overriding goals for this unit on image-making and reading portraiture are fourfold: (1) to ask students to take time and thought to carefully observe, (2) to help students make connections between historical and contemporary times, (3) to encourage an awareness of the power of visual images to influence, and (4) to add to the understanding of students, who will follow the study of image-making to create their own portraits in the art studio.

I plan to utilize this unit with two groups of students, with the Advanced Placement Studio Art class and with the Fashion class. The primary group targeted will be the AP Studio Art class, with their increased understanding in portraiture culminating in each student's creation of a self-portrait to establish her (or his) own image. The Fashion class will be targeted more informally. The course provides the opportunity for student to learn hands on technique for the creation of garments. It also includes fashion illustration. Within the fashion design and illustration portion, students discuss what clothing communicates about a person. Fashion students will have the opportunity to observe the selected portraits, and then discuss what the garments and accessories communicate.

Two powerful hooks to foster student interest in reading portraits lie in: (1) their own interest in dress and accessories, as the means to fit into the high school scene and (2) the importance of how students present themselves in order to impact how a student is "read" by peers. Three years ago, I introduced a Fashion class at the high school. Teaching it, reinforced my own awareness of the importance that each student places on establishing image, by adding a tattoo or wearing a particular hat or by dyeing hair to just the right color or having strategically placed tears in jeans. Most of the Fashion students, as well as the majority of the AP Studio Art students, have been female. Thus, for the purpose of a manageable unit of studies for the targeted high school classes, the unit will focus on portraits of women.

General information about portraiture and image-making will narrow to direct attention on four individual portraits of women from succeeding centuries, starting with one from the 18th century, one from the 19th century, one from the 20th century, and one from the 21st. This exploration of image making can then lead to further informed observation of portraiture in the 21st century. The students will be able to look at historical portraiture with the knowledge that the people depicted were as interested as they are in establishing image. The connections to the image making of today's portrait artists, photographers, and commercial artists will provide the hook to interest the students in the study of historical images.

The primary content of the unit will address the following four portraits of women, each depicting a single figure: portrait of Mrs. Abington by Sir Joshua Reynolds, one of Grace Rose by Frederick Sandys, an anonymous "Chorus Captain" by Walt Kuhn and another anonymous woman by Kerry James Marshall. This exploration of work can then inform the further observation of portraiture in the 21st century.

Any number of more contemporary figures might be observed in the classroom setting. One starting point might be the pictorial coverage of, then first lady Hillary Clinton, in the December 1998 issue of Vogue magazine. The article featured a series of photographs by famed photographer, Annie Leibovitz.

After making connections between historical and contemporary examples of image making, students will then be able to reflect on themselves and the ways in which the information gained from reading portraits might be applied to the creation of their own self-portraits.

Background

As a Visual Arts teacher at Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School, I work with diverse groups of high school students from ninth through twelfth grades. Students select a general arts area upon which to focus, during their high school years, from the following choices: Creative Writing, Dance, Music, Theater, or Visual Arts. By senior year many students specialize within their arts discipline; in Visual Arts electives include those in graphic design, video, photography, sculpture and ceramics, mixed media, and fashion. All Visual Arts students read and write within the discipline and all build skills in observation and critique. By developing this unit in Image-Making, I anticipate the strengthening of my own skill to nurture the students' abilities to observe, make connections, and create significant artwork.

As reported on the school's website, Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School (CO-OP) draws its student population from the greater New Haven area, including thirty neighboring towns. Admission is by lottery, resulting in a wide range of backgrounds, interest levels, and abilities. Approximately 65% of the student body hales from New Haven, with the remaining 35% from outside of New Haven. CO-OP's school day starts at 7:15 and ends at 2:15, with the majority of the student body participating in an extensive after school program. During this extended day students are able to sample arts areas other than their own selected areas of focus.

Images, Observations, and Connections

According to John Berger in his text, *Ways of Seeing*, a woman in portraiture is the "surveyor and the surveyed" (46).¹ I take some issue with this point of view, in that a man depicted also establishes a role as "the surveyor and the surveyed." The gender roles that each society and each generation assigns certainly play a part in the way the viewer interprets the male versus the female portrait. Since the focus of this unit targets the interpretation of four portraits of women, I will avoid the comparison of male and female portraits and concentrate on the characteristics of portraiture and image making, as evident in the four selected works.

This unit targets four general aspects evident in portraiture: the sitter's gesture, the clothing worn by the sitter, the environment, and any objects that might suggest qualities or attributes of the person portrayed. Each of these aspects can be both of a given time period and, at the same moment, hold a timelessness that can bridge the generations. A viewer might make cross-cultural connections, as well as reach across the centuries. It is with the goals of strengthening observation and making connections that I have started an exploration of the following images.



Joshua Reynolds

Mrs. Abington as "Miss Prue"

1771 Yale Center for British Art

When I first observed the Reynolds painting of *Mrs. Abington* at the Yale Center for British Art, I described her in my mind. Mrs. Abington was depicted as a well groomed female figure, dressed in pink and white and seated in a chair, observing the viewer over the back of that chair. Mrs. Abington's right arm rested on the chair back and her left elbow was bent to allow for her hand to move up toward her mouth; there she held her thumb to her lips. A white dog on her lap looked out through the opening in the chair back.

Knowing that Joshua Reynolds painted the portrait, I knew that Frances Abington's gaze was toward Sir Joshua and that I was only there in his stead. She gazed at him with some seductiveness, indicated by the thumb to

her lips, but with the back of the chair between artist and sitter, the young woman appeared somewhat tentative and vulnerable. At the time, I moved on to other paintings and have now returned to Mrs. Abington with biographical information to inform new observations.

As written by the author of *The Life of Mrs. Abington* , Mrs. Abington and David Garrick were major names in theater during the latter half of the 1700's, Mrs. Abington becoming one of the most influential stage personalities of her day. Mr. Garrick, an actor-director who was professionally connected with Mrs. Abington, wrote the lines below for Mrs. Abington to recite on stage.

*"In parliament, whene'er a question comes
Which makes the chief look grave, and bit his thumbs,
A knowing one is sent, sly as a mouse,
To peep into the humour of the house:
I am that mouse: peeping at friends and foes,
To find which carry it...the ayes or noes."²*

Although Mrs. Abington may have been playing a role, the words hinted at the actress' off stage personality as well. Spoken a few years after the portrait, Mrs. Abington had proven herself to be quite "sly" and definitely a "knowing one" in her negotiations in the evolution of her career, from street peddler to theatrical leading lady and to a fashion trend-setter.

Mrs. Abington, born Frances Barton, not only took advantage of opportunities, but also created them. She was born into poor circumstances and yet rose to wealth and fame. Frances Barton worked her way from street peddler to milliner's servant to become a woman of education and means, who spoke both French and Italian. With earnings, Miss Barton enlisted the services of a music instructor and then married the music master, a move that she later regretted.³

Once on stage, Miss Barton (later Mrs. Abington) quickly established a reputation for her skill as a comic actress, as well as for her sense of fashion. "As Mrs. Abington grew popular, her husband showed signs of jealousy"...."by common consent they parted."⁴ As a force to be reckoned with, Mrs. Abington bought her husband off, paying him a pension to remain out of her life. With the strength of her personality and stage presence, Mrs. Abington rescued a failing Dublin theater company and established a style copied by ladies of fashion... "it became quite the rage to wear articles bearing her name."⁵

Frances Abington returned to the London stage and, at the height of her career held the power to have work both written and re-written for her. Mr. David Garrick wrote in one of his many communications, "Dear Madam-I altered the epilogue merely for your ease and credit" and "I leave it wholly to your own feelings to decide what to speak or what to reject."⁶

With the above biographical information in mind, I returned to the portrait to re-assess some of my first impressions. By 1771, Mrs. Abington's mode of operation had proven to be one of a person in control of the events in her life therefore the tentative quality of the pose disappeared in my new interpretation. The seductive quality of her hand to mouth position remained, but her forward leaning body took command over the chair back blockade that protected the more vulnerable Mrs. Abington of my earlier interpretation. The faithful lap dog took on an irony, since Mrs. Abington had discontinued her marital relationship, banishing her husband from her society.

In researching Mrs. Abington's life, I found it of some interest that a portrait of her theatrical peer, David Garrick, by Angelica Kauffmann (1764) preceded the Reynolds painting of Mrs. Abington (1771). In each case, the painter was of the opposite sex and in each case a chair was utilized as a significant property in the composition. Aspects of each sitter's gesture echo each other. The two works provide the perfect duo for a warm up session to compare and contrast their impact*.



Frederick Sandys, 1829-1904, British

Grace Rose

1866 Yale Center for British Art

Aptly named *Grace Rose*, the subject of the 1866 portrait is surrounded by roses and is in the act of arranging them, be it rather distractedly. Sandys incorporates the Victorian language of flowers and jewelry in the *Grace Rose* portrait. The text from *Jewellery in the Age of Queen Victoria* includes the following information to help bridge the gap between the common knowledge of symbolism then and our contemporary understanding: "The 'keeper' ring above her wedding ring on the fourth finger of her left hand is set with an unusually fine and large turquoise for true love."⁷ The roses signify the qualities of 'love' and 'beauty' "with the combined white and red roses meaning 'unity'."⁸ The white of the dress lends a purity and innocence to the subject, adding to the multiple symbols surrounding *Grace Rose*, depicting her as a model Victorian lady.

The description of the work by the Yale Center for British Art highlights that Sandys included "the armorial shield and crest in the top right of the picture" with the "Rose family motto: Constant and true." This motto holds a touch of irony due to the connection between jewelry and bonds; with a bracelet considered 'a token

of slavery'. ⁹ Grace Rose, who wears a golden bracelet that resembles a shackle on her right wrist, seems to have had little choice but to remain "constant and true".

"During the 1860s, as an awareness of the arts filtered into the lives of the new collectors and patrons, they increasingly socialized with artists on an informal footing." ¹⁰ Frederick Sandys numbered among the younger artists, in Dante Rossetti's circle. Rossetti was a leader in the Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic Movements. Grace Rose was the sister-in-law of James Anderson Rose, Rossetti's lawyer and an art collector ¹¹, helping to establish a close circle of artists, friends, business associates, and patrons.

Stephen Calloway, author and Victoria & Albert Museum curator, introduced the emergence of Aesthetic Movement in the museum's video on the topic. Mr. Calloway reflected upon the Great Exhibition of 1851, stating that "a lot of people at that time felt that what was on show there was somehow ugly" ... "that beauty had got lost." ¹² The Aesthetic Movement emphasized the importance of art in everyday life and "this notion that beauty should inform everything we do, all the ways in which we live, is absolutely crucial." ¹³ Grace Rose embodies the concept.

It seems important to note, at this point, that these first two portraits represent British artists and the latter two American artists. Although the two cultures share language and other characteristics, differences remain, differences noted two decades following in the Grace Rose portrait in *Manners and Social Usages* by Mary E.W. Sherwood. Mrs. Sherwood wrote that in America the language of flowers, evident in the Sandys' portrait, had become "rather an echo of the stock market than a poetical fancy". ¹⁴ The desire to show off wealth by the purchase of flowers, especially out-of-season ones, replaced the beauty of Aesthetic Movement and the roses of *Grace Rose*. This prompted Mrs. Sherwood to write, "The economy which is a part of every Englishman's religion could well be copied in America." ¹⁵



Walt Kuhn, American, 1877 - 1949

Chorus Captain

1935 Yale University Art Gallery

Unlike the theatrical personality of Mrs. Abington and without the intense visual beauty of Grace Rose, the subject of the *Chorus Captain* views her own inward world rather than sets her gaze outward toward us, or toward Walt Kuhn, her portrait artist. The chorus captain sits in darkened surroundings, in a slouch, exposed to below the navel, "her scanty costume – particularly the strip of cloth at the bottom that looks as if it could be pulled away – reveals her vulnerability." ¹⁶ Like Grace Rose her eyes avert our eyes, but unlike Grace Rose, the chorus captain seems to look inward rather than outward and appears haggard and tired, with only the superficial trappings of beauty...jewelry and feathers, with artificial rosy cheeks. Walt Kuhn depicts an "odd

sense of melancholy, even exhaustion, on the face of the dancer in *Chorus Captain*".¹⁷ Unlike either of the previous portraits in this unit, the subject of this work comes to the viewer without a name to carry her away from anonymity.

The prettiness of the pink and white costuming of Mrs. Abington, taking charge in her theatrical role has become a sad juxtaposition of costume and mood in the portrait of this performer. "The tension between the sitter's private mood and her public role lends the portrait its evocative quality."¹⁸ The sitter brings the viewer into the portrait, not by her gaze, but in sympathy.

Walt Kuhn experienced success as a professional artist, during his lifetime, with a one-man show at a Madison gallery in New York. In addition, Mr. Kuhn participated in organizing the influential Armory Show of 1913. The artist's professional success continued through his first retrospective in 1939. By 1940, "eccentric behavior" added to the poor health that had started in 1925 and, in 1948, Kuhn was institutionalized." "Kuhn's last years are marked with tragedy and remain a mystery."¹⁹ The portraits created during the latter years of his career reflect the sadness, for "Behind the faces of Kuhn's performers, lies a haunting reminder of life's inescapable hardships."²⁰



Kerry James Marshall, American, b. 1955

Untitled

2009 Yale University Art Gallery

For final image, Kerry James Marshall, painted the anonymous subject with her gaze set upon us, as viewers. The subject has taken charge of the painting process and relegates Mr. Marshall to the role of one of the viewers. Although as anonymous as the chorus captain, the subject in Mr. Marshall's portrait is a powerful figure. The artist confronts the troubled history of African Americans in this country in his portrayal of the ebony figure that dominates the canvas. As Kerry James Marshall stated in the PBSArt21 first season segment on "Identity", Marshall uses his portraits to "reclaim the image of blackness as an emblem of power" and to do this he features "emphatically black figures" that establish a presence that is "amazingly beautiful and powerful".²¹

As stated in the exhibition catalog for the 2010 *Embodyed* show at the Yale University Art Gallery, the subject of this work turns to face the viewer, "disturbed during an act of self-portrayal".²² We are met in shallow space. This anonymous artist confronts us literally at her outskirts, within reach of her flowing and full-length skirt. The shape of her oversized palette, "which suggests the continent of Africa", reinforces the subject's powerful presence and the "in-your-face quality"²³ of the portrait.

In reflecting on the progression of the four portraits, I find it striking that this last image depicts the most

commanding figure, a figure without the barrier of chair or flower arrangement, as in the first two portraits, or with the world-weariness of the Chorus Captain by Kuhn. Instead, Mr. Marshall's subject looks at us, as she uses her Africa-shaped palette to create her own portrait and take charge of her own image-making. Although Marshall's subject lacks full control of her destiny, since the self portrait follows a paint-by-number approach, still the figure remains a strong confrontational figure with her eyes fixed in our direction.

Activities

General Information: During the introduction to the unit, at the Yale galleries, and during critiques the above historical information and background of the above four portraits will be featured. The lead-in to the studio work will include visits to each of the Yale galleries.

I. Initial visits to the Yale Center for British Art and the Yale University Art Gallery will introduce the students to the four, featured portraits. In addition, students will discuss portraiture, as a genre.

II. To place this unit on portraiture in context, some brief preliminary material will look at some similarities and differences in the way different cultures read gestures, acknowledging the importance of that awareness. Students will view a video from the University of California Extension Center for Media and Independent Learning, *A World of Gestures* , and take part in a follow up discussion.

III. As an additional warm-up activity, students will observe and discuss the photographs of then first lady Hillary Clinton, in the December 1998 issue of Vogue magazine. The article featured a series of photographs by famed photographer, Annie Leibovitz, who photographed her subject with an eye to establishing the public image of a multi-faceted Hillary.

Any number of other examples of image making may be selected for follow-up discussion. These examples may be selected from magazine articles and/or from advertisements. This discussion may be concerning student-selected images, with discussion driven by each student selecting the given image.

The discussion will follow the four levels of critique:

1. Description - What do you see? How would you report facts, avoiding editorial comments?
2. Analysis - How did the artist make use of the design principles to take advantage of the design principles?
3. Interpretation - What is the meaning of the work? What is communicated by means of gesture? Are there any objects that might represent the sitter's attributes? Does the environment suggest characteristics of subject? What is the perspective of the viewer? How does the point-of-view depicted effect your interpretation?
4. Judgment - What aspects of the work do you consider the visual and/or conceptual strength of the work?

For this purpose, discussion of the above images will emphasize *description* and *interpretation* .

IV. To continue the reflection of the historical images, students will compare and contrast Reynolds' portrait of Mrs. Abington and Kauffman's portrait of David Garrick, as introduced in the unit write up.

V. The first warm-up studio activity will involve rotational figure drawing. This session will work something like musical chairs. Students will establish stations around a model and each student will select different color of conte crayon. The drawing stations will remain stationary, only the students will move to new locations, taking with them their individual conte crayons. The initial drawing session will last for twenty minutes then the students will rotate to new positions. The subsequent sessions will last approximately 5-10 minutes each. Students will be encouraged to draw on top of existing lines to modify the drawing to reflect their viewpoints. The wrap up critique will focus on the impact of the changes that took place, during the activity.

VI. The second studio activity will allow the students to remain at their own stations for the duration of the drawing session. First, the students will add to earlier discussions about attributes and objects that could be added to suggest the given attributes. The set-up for drawing will be the same, as activity IV, with the students in a circle around the model. The students will collaborate on giving the model a basic pose. Each student will draw the model, adding objects as attributes and any environmental features to reinforce the image desired. Students will ask each other about their image-making work, how viewers might read their work, and whether or not the work resulted in desired effect.

VII. The culminating studio activity for this unit will be self-portraits, with each student establishing his/her individually, desired image. The students will create either real or fictitious settings, utilizing any number of references. Each student/artist will include one or more objects to suggest personal attributes. The basic medium will be graphite pencil, but may include one or more of the following: colored pencils, watercolor, watercolor pencils, gouache, collage, and/or transferred images.

VIII. The students will complete the unit by presenting their own work and by participating in class discussion, based on the levels of critique.

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Franks, Pamela and Steele, Robert E., *Embodying: Black Identities in American Art from the Yale University Art Gallery* . Yale University Art Gallery, 2010.

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Additional Resources

<http://www.common-place.org/vol-07/no-01/ingram/>

http://pabook.libraries.psu.edu/palitmap/bios/Godey_Louis_Antoine.html

http://sullivangoss.com/walt_Kuhn/

http://artgallery.yale.edu/pages/collection/popups/pc_amerps/details21.html

<http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/kerry-james-marshall>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/30/nyregion/art-review-show-biz-art-so-vivid-you-can-smell-the-grease-paint.html>

<http://collections.britishart.yale.edu/vufind/Record/1669236>

<http://collections.britishart.yale.edu/vufind/Record/1666194>

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/videos/c/cult-of-beauty-the-aesthetic-movement-1860-1900/>

http://www.vangoghgallery.com/artistbios/Dante_Gabriel_Rossetti.html

"The Extraordinary Hillary Clinton". *Vogue*. Annie Leibovitz, photographer, December 1998.

University of California Extension Center for Media and Independent Learning. "A World of Gestures" Film/VHS #1072.

Kauffman, Angelica, *David Garrick* , 1764. Painting, Oil on canvas, Burghley House Collection, Lincolnshire, UK.

Notes

1. Berger, John, *Ways of Seeing* . 46
2. *Life of Mrs. Abington* by the Editor of the Life of Quin, 63
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid. 14
5. Ibid. 21
6. Ibid. 65
7. Gere, Charlotte & Rudoe, Judy, *Jewellery in the Age of Queen Victoria* .
8. Ibid. 185
9. Ibid. 182
10. Calloway, Stephen, *The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement 1860-1900* .
11. Ibid. 160
12. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/videos/c/cult-of-beauty-the-aesthetic-movement-1860-1900/>
13. Ibid.
14. Sherwood, Mary Elizabeth Wilson, *Manners and Social Usages* , 352
15. Ibid. 461
16. http://artgallery.yale.edu/pages/collection/popups/pc_amerps/details21.html
17. <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/30/nyregion/art-review-show-biz-art-so-vivid-you-can-smell-the-grease-paint.html>
18. http://artgallery.yale.edu/pages/collection/popups/pc_amerps/details21.html
19. http://sullivangoss.com/walt_Kuhn/
20. Ibid.
21. <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/kerry-james-marshall>
22. Franks, Pamela & Steele, Robert E., Embodied: *Embodied: Black Identities in American Art from the Yale University Art Gallery*, 24
23. Ibid. 26

Appendix - Connection to National Standards

During the course of the unit, activities will address the three Power Standards that the New Haven School District condensed from the National Standards from Art Education.

Visual Arts Power Standards:

I. Communicate in Art Media, techniques, and processes (Create Artwork)

Students will apply a range of media and techniques in the creation of portraits.

II. Reflect upon, describe, analyze, interpret, and evaluate one's artwork and that of others. (Reflect and Respond to Art)

Students will critique both historical and contemporary works of art, utilizing all four levels of critique: description, analysis, interpretation, and judgment or evaluation

III. Make connections between the visual arts, other disciplines and daily life. (Make Connections)

Students will make connections between the image making of the past, based on historical portraits, and the image making of today, based on contemporary images including their own self portraits.