



Tufts University Art Galleries Collection Guide *Portraits and Identity*

Introduction

Portraits have existed in many cultures for many reasons, such as solidifying reigns or commemorating the dead. The Tufts University Permanent Art Collection, like many other collections, is full of portraits of many kinds: self-portraits, official college portraits of presidents past, artistic explorations of identity and the portrait genre. What do these images tell us about the people they show and about how identity is viewed and constructed?

Using Art Across Disciplines

This collection guide draws from selections from Tufts University Art Galleries' Permanent Collection. The content presented here is meant to suggest curricular connections, prompt further discussion, and promote interdisciplinary learning. Click on each image to open its record in TUAG's collection database.

Art and visual images can supplement any curriculum across academic disciplines. Engaging with art can help to fine-tune cross-disciplinary skills that complement a variety of research practices and critical-thinking methods. The images and questions offered in this collection guide can prompt educators and learners to:

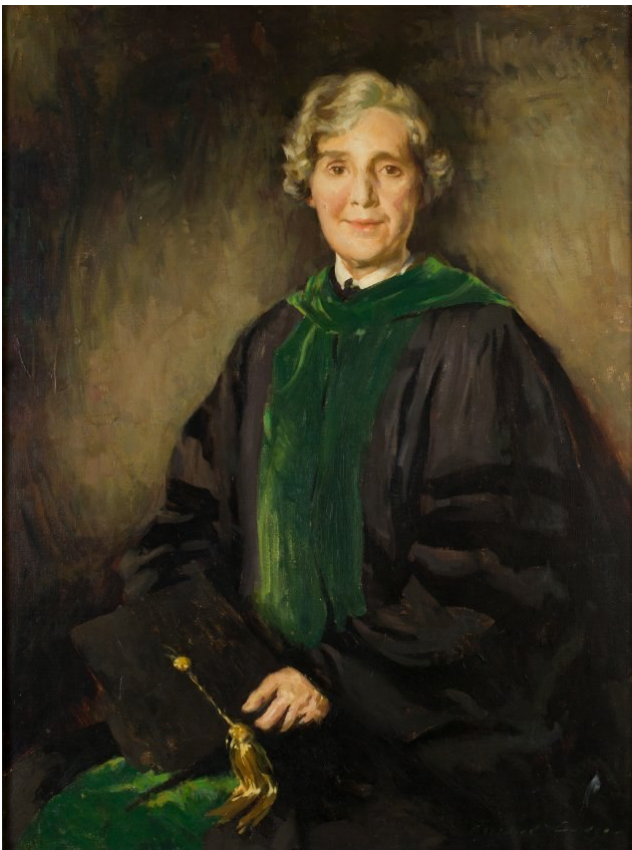
- Consider how artists visually represent data, tell a more complete story about presented data, or connect emotionally with an audience by presenting data pictorially.
- Consider the aesthetics of color, shape, line, texture, etc. by looking formally at art. Apply those sensibilities to images in your own work or field:
 - What do I notice first?
 - Where does my eye travel? In what directions?
 - Am I looking at individual parts of an image or at the whole?
 - What do particular colors connote?
 - What has been omitted?
 - What story or message is most prominent?
- Examine an artwork or group of works as primary source material. How does it relate to or challenge other texts, objects, or archival sources you are reading?
- Practice perspective-taking or compare ideas cross-culturally. Use an image or work of art to consider others' values and ways of looking.
- Use art to practice asking and honing questions. Consider all of the questions you might have about a given work of art. Think about which types of questions yield more substantive discussions or additional lines of thinking.
- Look at art as a way to get out of a rut or think creatively about your own work. Consider:
 - How would an artist have presented content related to your field?
 - What information was known about a topic in your discipline at the time this artist was working? How has it evolved?
 - What could be different in this work of art? This situation?
 - Sketch or draw as a way of coming to understand or know the material differently.



Kimiko Powers, Andy Warhol, 1972, painting, 40x40 in. Tufts University Permanent Collection, Gift of David B. Slater, A56, A84P, A85P, A91P and Barbara W. Slater, A84P, A85P, A91P, 1980.05.



Leonard Carmicheal, President 1938-152, Jacob Binder, 1954, oil on canvas, 36.13x30.25 in. Tufts University Permanent Collection, gift of the class of 1921, AI 70270.



Dr. Florence Meredith, Professor of Physical and Mental Hygiene and Public Health, Mary Rosamund Coolidge, ca. 1940, oil on canvas, 40.38x30.38 in. Tufts University Permanent Collection, gift of the artist, AI 70013.

What is a Portrait?

Likely, when most people think of a portrait, they might think of official portraits of Heads of State, old European kings, or even formal school photos. These portraits were typically a full or three-quarter length depiction of a sitter with minimal background. The sitters would have been those wealthy enough to pay for an artist to paint their likeness or influential enough to merit the creation of one. Over time though, the genre of portraits, and who get depicted in them, has been called into question.

Over the years Tufts has amassed a collection of **institutional portraits**, mainly of presidents, often depicted in their academic regalia, and trustees. These images are displayed around campus, usually in academic buildings such as Ballou Hall. Typically, a portrait would only be on view while the sitter was still alive; they were often taken down a year or two after the sitter's death. This trend prompts the question about what the portrait was for: to commemorate or to flatter?

Additionally, these portraits almost exclusively depict white men, save for a few portraits of female donors or professors. These portraits of female sitters are not given the same value as their male counterparts and are not often put on display. This was the case for Dr. Florence Merideth, a professor of Physical and Mental Hygiene and Public Health. She is lucky in that her portrait has kept its identity, which has not always been the case for portraits of younger women who are seen more as pretty objects than sitters of import.

Key Questions

What is a portrait? What is its purpose?

Who gets represented in portraits and why?

What can portraits tell us about racial and gender identity?

In what ways can portraits be truthful or deceptive?



Arthur Rothstein

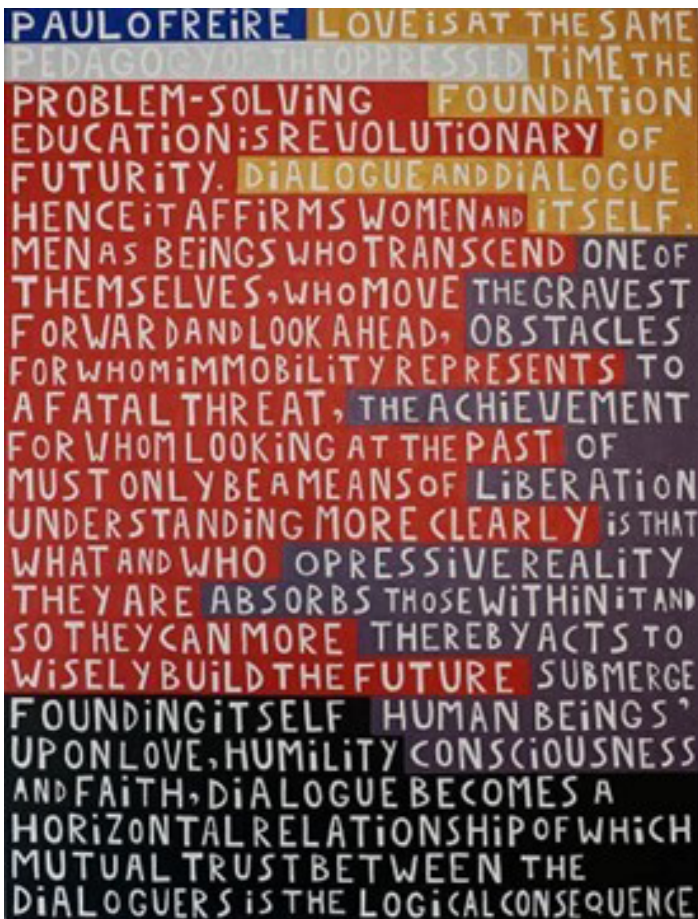
With the invention and spread of photography, portraits became accessible to a wider audience. Sitters could have their picture taken for a cheaper price than a painting, and photographers also had more flexibility in whose images they could capture. The rise of documentary and street photography led to the creation of images of everyday people, often portraying those of the working-class with the respect and dignity seen in more traditional forms of portraiture. This can be seen in Arthur Rothstein's portrait of John Dudeck, one of several that Rothstein took of Dudeck at his farm in Dalton, NY during the Great Depression. What do you think Rothstein was trying to show about his sitter? What might Dudeck have been trying to show about himself?

Top left: John Dudeck, Dalton, New York, Arthur Rothstein, 1937, gelatin silver print, 14x11 in. Tufts University Permanent Collection, gift of Dr. Daniel C. Schuman, M.D., M66, F99P and Dr. Joan Sigel Schuman, AG63, F99P in honor of Alfred Sigel A26, 1985.4.9.

Top right: Bete Toni, Margaret Vendryes, 2020, oil with cold wax on canvas, wood mask, 36x20 in. Tufts University Permanent Collection, 2023.01.



In her series *African Diva*, Margaret Vendryes creates portraits of non-male African American figures that challenge traditional notions of portraiture and gender across cultures. In this case she depicts esteemed author Toni Morrison, but obscures Morrison's face with a traditional African mask, creating a complex dialogue of gender, power, and representation. In the majority of African cultures, masks such as the one in this artwork are only worn by men. By placing the mask on non-male sitters, Vendryes inserts her subjects into traditionally masculine-coded presentations of power, traditional western portraiture and African masks, where they are not usually represented.



Does a portrait always need to show the sitter's face? For Julia Csekó, it is the words and writing of a person, such as radical educator and philosopher [Paolo Freire](#), that come together to create a portrait of the author. Her approach moves portraiture beyond the faces, poses, and other characteristics of wealth and power to include a broad array of thinkers, expanding definitions of who and what is portrait-worthy. If a person's likeness has not been preserved, their words are a powerful way to help represent who they were. It also brings up questions about what this approach to portraiture tell us about the "sitter" and what it might leave out?

Paulo Freire, Julia Csekó, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 48x36 in. Tufts University Permanent Collection, purchase with funds provided by the Tufts Acquisitions Committee, 2022.04.

Further Reading

Local institutions such as [Harvard University](#) and [Brigham and Women's](#) are working to show a more diverse range of portraits to better reflect their histories and the contemporary moment. Harvard commissions new portraits showing the diversity of the university from the nineteenth century to now, whereas other institutions or museums might seek to add already existing works to their collection. How do these strategies compare, what are the pros and cons of each?

Facial perception is an incredibly specialized process within human psychology and neurology. This [resource](#) provides a literature review on the science of face perception, delving into the processes and the specific areas of the brain involved. Do you think this cognitive process impacts how we view artworks, and portraits in particular?

Certain artists, such as [Titus Kaphar](#) and [Ken Gonzales-Day](#), have explored how to disrupt the art historical narratives around portraiture, manipulating images to highlight subjects and conversations that are often overlooked. The two were recently paired in an [exhibit](#) at the National Portrait Gallery aimed at interrogating the portrait genre and its reception. What do you make of their efforts? How do they compare to the artists in this guide?



(Self) Representation

Aside from their long history as symbols of wealth and status, portraits have also been used to assert and explore identity. This has either occurred from the sitter's own agency in how their image is created or through artists themselves creating self-portraits and exploring how to represent their own identities.

Ayla 9, Beirut, Lebanon, Rania Matar, 2011, chromogenic print, 19.5x16 in. Tufts University Permanent Collection, gallery purchase, 2015.11.12.

Rania Matar is well known for capturing images of girlhood. In her series *L'enfant Femme* she photographs young girls from both the Boston area and Beirut, two places she has lived. Matar is interested in the transitory moment of girlhood when her subjects are trying to negotiate and figure out their own identities and sense of selves. At Matar's direction, none of the girls are smiling, rejecting associations of bubbly femininity and youthful selfie culture, rather they strike poses of confidence, portraying an air of self-assuredness, as if trying to appear older.

Molly 12, Brookline, Massachusetts, Rania Matar, 2011, chromogenic print, 19.5x16 in. Tufts University Permanent Collection, gallery purchase, 2015.11.07.



This painting was done by influential psychologist Morton Prince, copying a portrait of himself painted by famed portraitist John Singer Sargent. As a psychologist, Prince specialized in personality and dissociative disorders, so the idea of attempting to



copy a likeness of himself was likely an interesting exercise in identity and self-reflection. With the rise of art-based therapy psychologists and therapists have considered self-portraits, and their therapeutic benefits in a variety of contexts.

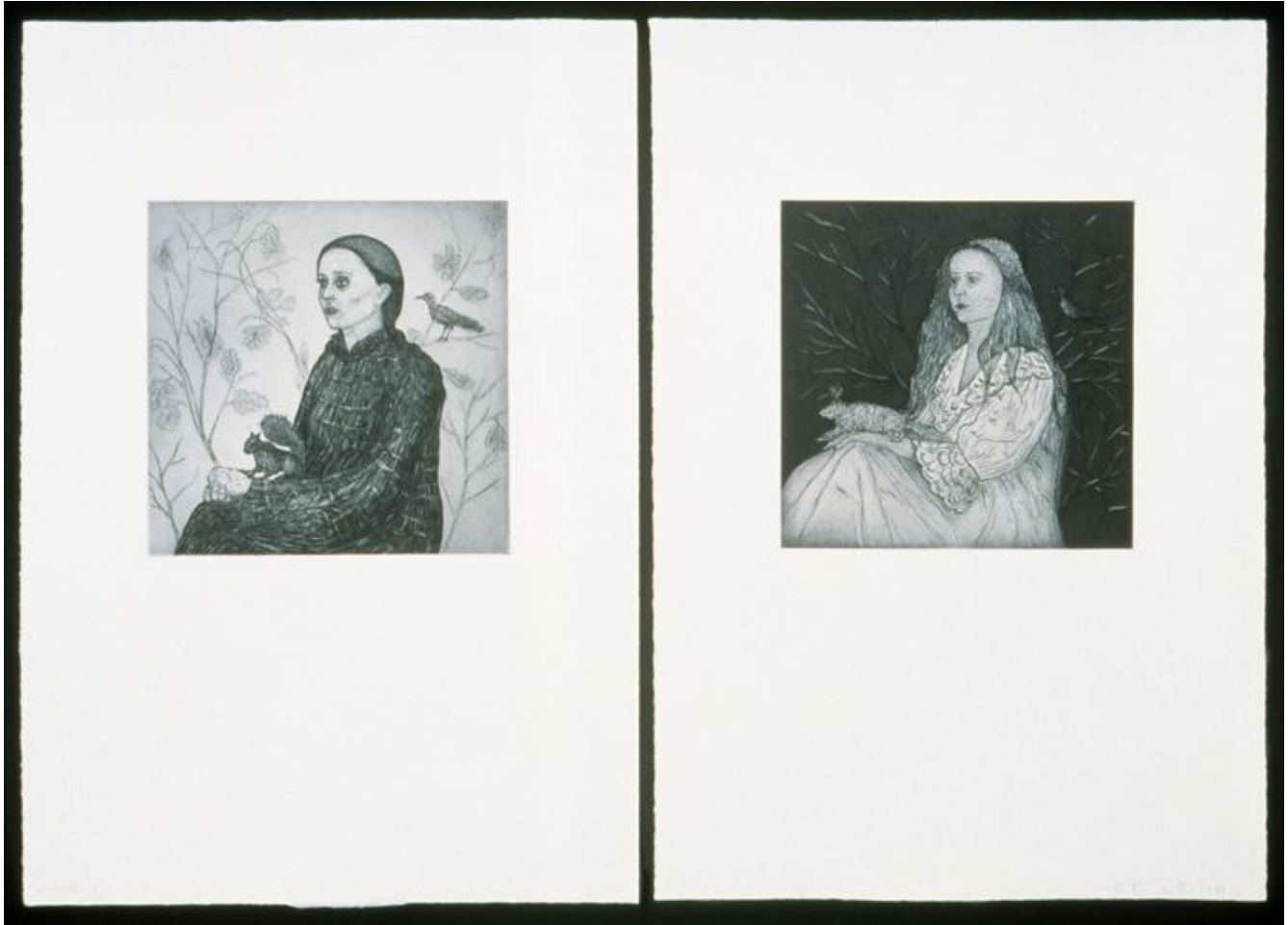
Left: Self-Portrait, Morton Prince (after John Singer Sargent), ca. 1900, oil on canvas, 18x14 in. Tufts University Permanent Collection, gift of the Estate of Clara Morton Prince Hanks, AI 41510.

Inset: Dr. Morton Henry Prince, Chairman of the Departments of Psychology and Neurology, 1902-1912, John Singer Sargent, ca. 1895, oil on canvas, 27.38x22.38 in. Tufts University Permanent Collection, gift of the Estate of Clara Morton Prince Hanks, AI 41500.



While official portraits such as those of Tufts presidents were status symbols painted by trained artists, self-taught artists throughout the centuries have also tried their hand at portraiture. One such example is a self-portrait by William L. Hawkins, a self-taught artist who gained prominence in his eighties through his fantastical paintings of animals, taking advantage of the art market's desire for "outsider" art to build a successful market for his work. Here he draws himself in the same fashion, taking care to include his prominent signature at the bottom. The improvisational style that can be seen in this self-portrait has been linked to other forms of African-American art such as jazz, perhaps indicating that Hawkins was exploring what it meant to be African-American artist in the twentieth century.

Self Portrait, William L. Hawkins, 20th century, graphite and color pencil on paper, 12x9 in. Tufts University Permanent Collection, gift of Andrew Safran A76, F77 and Linda Safran, 2017.018.



Here the artist Kiki Smith creates two self-portraits that, like much of her work, examine people's relationship to animals and the natural world. Basing her prints on a 1527 [portrait](#) by Hans Holbein the Younger from the National Gallery in London, Smith casts herself as the personification of Fall and Winter, using her appearance and the animals she interacts with to show the delicateness and decay of those seasons. By intermingling her own likeness with those of the animals and the narratives of the natural world, Smith envisions the interconnections between the self and wider environment.

Further Discussion

What is the relationship between the sitter's identity and the artwork that is created? Which is more important – the "value" of the sitter or the artistic "value" of the work?

What is the role of self-representation, agency, and (in)visibility in portraiture?

Seeing and Believing

In the age of personas, social media, photoshop, and filters, an image, especially of a face, has become somewhat distrusted by society. This is a topic artists have explored in a variety of ways, both through image manipulation and engaging the ways in which our world has become oversaturated with certain faces.

This is one of ten portraits done based on a longer video work that Fast created about the actors of Colonial Williamsburg. The video, as well as the text accompanying the portraits, melds the actors speaking about their historic characters and speaking about modern concerns, blending together past and present, fact and fiction. These portraits provide an extreme example of a central question in portraiture: who is being portrayed – the individual, a projected persona, or are the two indistinguishable?



Untitled (Frances), from the portfolio: Godville Portraits, Ten Illustrated Short Stories, Omer Fast, 2006, archival pigment print on paper, 11.75x16.5 in. Tufts University Permanent Collection, gift of the artist, 2019.04.05.



In his series titled *Hidden Image*, Czech artist Jiri David photographs notable figures and, taking the idea of image editing to the extreme, manipulates the negatives so that the final print is either composed of either the right or left side of the face that has been flipped to create an uncannily symmetrical image, highlighting the uniqueness of a face as an un-symmetrical image, and contrasting the imagined ideal of the perfectly symmetrical face. When the two photographs are placed side by side it becomes difficult for the viewer to figure out what the original person looked like, building distrust in the image as a way to portray a likeness.

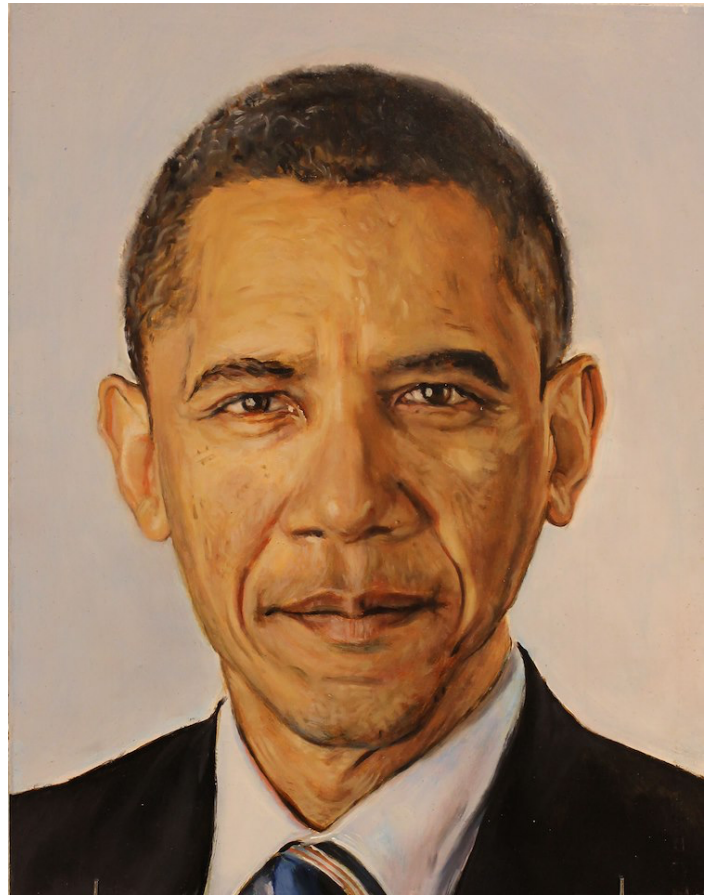


Martha Wilson is known for her work with transformation and impersonation, often examining the societal, and in some cases self-imposed, roles that women are forced to embody. These photos are pulled from earlier [video work](#) where she plays with make up and camera angles to highlight or mitigate her own insecurities about her face. Neither image is a true depiction of what she looks like – they show extremes of self-perception and self-representation and make transparent the ways that these can be manipulated.

Top left: Marcia Tucker- Left Side Face (left diptych), Bottom left: Marcia Tucker- Right Side Face (right diptych), from the series *Hidden Image*, Jiri David, 1994, gelatin silver print, 15.75x11.88 in. Tufts University Permanent Collection, gallery purchase, 2016.23.A and B.

Right: *I Make up the Image of My Perfection/I Make up the Image of My Deformity*, Martha Wilson, 2007, archival digital print on paper, 12x12 in. Tufts University Permanent Collection, gallery purchase, 2016.06.

In a series exploring the prevalence of images on the internet, and in the cultural sphere at large, Peter Wilde takes well known figures' Facebook profile pictures, in this case Barak Obama, and repaints them 42 times with varying degrees of clarity or abstraction. According to Wilde, like a word that loses its meaning the more you say it, the faces of these public figures become meaningless through their mass circulation. There is also power in ubiquity though, creating a representation that is unescapable and undeniable.



Obama (42 Variable Portraits), Peter Wilde, 2013, oil on board, 12x10 in.
Tufts University Permanent Collection, gallery purchase, 2014.02.01-42.

Further Discussion

What constitutes identity, and how can it be portrayed?

How do we as viewers respond to faces, especially in a society overrun with images on social media and the internet at large?

Additional Relevant Collection Works

- [Still Life, Landscape, Self-Portrait](#)
- [Kimiko Powers](#)
- [David Bowie](#)
- [Variety of Fruit of Paradise](#)

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