

Making Art of Ourselves: Self-Portraits, Self-Expression, & Identity

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Hello, and welcome to “Making Art of Ourselves: Self-Portraits, Self-Expression, & Identity,” a lesson developed for the Gluck Fellows Program of the Arts in an effort to bring art, and art history, to the students of the Riverside County area. My name is Jesse Rocha, and I am an Art History Masters student at the University of California, Riverside. As an art historian, I often am studying the ways that artists use self-expression to take pride in their identity, and make their place in the art world. In this module, we will learn about self-expression and identity, and together we will look at how different artists have approached both of these ideas. I encourage you to pause to take a look at these artworks and come up with some thoughts before reading what I have to say. That process is something called “formal analysis,” and it is a key aspect of art history. Then, you will engage with worksheets created for this module which will assist you with thinking about what makes up your own identity. Finally, we will bring all of this together by making our own self-portraits, reflecting how we see ourselves and our own identities.

“Classroom” Rules

- Be Respectful Towards Others, and Yourself!
- Keep An Open Mind
- Be Patient During the Exercise
- If You Try, You Can’t Fail!



Before we begin, I would like to take a quick moment to layout some ground rules for our “classroom.” Whether you are doing this alone at home, together with family members, or with your friends on Zoom or FaceTime, these are important to keep in mind while we learn, and create, and express ourselves, together!

- Be respectful towards others. In this lesson today we will be learning about how people can express themselves artistically in their own way, and there is no wrong way to do that! So long as what you are doing is respectful, appropriate, and doesn’t harm anyone else, it is not up to us to tell others that the way they approach self-expression is wrong. You may see an artist express themselves in a way you think isn’t very nice-looking, but that artist has made a choice to use that specific style, or color, or image. How they see themselves is a personal matter, and we need to encourage people to express, and value, their own self-image! At the same time, it is important that you respect yourself in this lesson. Do not look at others’ work and try to copy it, or feel like they are doing better than you. The great thing about art is that as long as you consider yourself an artist, then what you create will be a piece of art. Art may be different, and you might prefer one style to another, but neither one is “better” than the other.
- Keep an open mind! We all have things about ourselves we may want to change, but with an open mind we can look at these things in a new way.
- Remember to be patient during the activity today. Making your own piece of art, especially when it is about self-expression, can be frustrating. You want it to be perfect - it’s about you after all! But art take many forms, and even the great Masters had to take their time and try again.

- In this lesson, the only thing I ask of you is that you make an honest effort. What you are learning today is not how to become an expert portraitist, or even how to draw a straight line. We are learning about the importance of self-expression, and how doing that artistically is beneficial for yourself, your identity, and the art history field as a whole!

How do we express ourselves?

What is self-expression?

- Oxford Dictionary: “the expression of your thoughts or feelings, especially through activities such as writing, painting, dancing, etc.”
- My definition: “the act of conveying one’s own identities, emotions, thoughts, and values in a creative manner.”



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To begin a conversation about self-expression, we first need to understand what it is, and how we perform it in our lives. According to the Oxford Dictionary, self expression can be defined as “the expression of your thoughts or feelings, especially through activities such as writing, painting, dancing, etc.” That’s a great starting point - putting your emotions and thoughts into something that you make yourself, be that a drawing, a poem, or dancing it out. However, for our purposes, I would like to expand upon this definition a bit more. In my words, self-expression can be defined as “the act of conveying one’s own identities, emotions, thoughts, and values in a creative manner.” While similar to the Oxford definition, this re-wording allows us to think about self-expression in a much more open way. It is not just about showing you are sad when painting, or putting into words how you feel about the summertime. It can also be about showing the world who you are. The idea of identity is something that applies to all of us in a different way, and we will explore that next.

Self-expression takes on a number of diverse creative forms.

- Fine Arts (painting, sculpting, music, photography)
- Crafts (sewing, pottery, woodworking, paperwork)
- Writing (poetry, stories, novels, letters)
- Fashion
- Performance (singing, dancing, acting)
- Cultural ceremonies, events, holidays

Why do we express ourselves?

Self-expression allows us to:

- Understand Ourselves
- Understand Others
- Process Emotions
- Exercise Creativity
- Use Our Voices



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Now that we understand what self-expression is, we need to understand why it is important. What are the motivations for artists to perform self-expression?

- First, self-expression allows us to think about ourselves, our thoughts, and our identities. It can be helpful for anyone to express their thoughts and feelings to better understand themselves.
- Just as self-expression helps us understand ourselves, it can also help us understand those around us. If self-expression allows us to put our inner thoughts and feelings into artwork, then others might be able to look at our artwork and learn something about us. In the same way, we might be able to look at someone else's artwork and learn about them. This allows us to open ourselves to different perspectives.
- Creative expression has long been seen as a healthy, productive way to process emotions, from grief, to confusion, to joy.
- Self-expression is also important to exercise your creativity. Especially in these difficult times, it is important to find healthy, fun outlets that allow us to get our creative energies out in the open.
- Finally, self-expression lets us use our voices in a creative way, and allows us to put out messages to our audiences. Artists have long used the arts to put out their own ideas, as we will see later in this presentation.

Identities

Identity is personal and should be determined by ourselves.

- Identity is a personal experience.
- Our choices contribute to our identities.
- It changes throughout our lifetimes.



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Before we discuss what an identity is, I would like to begin by stating that an identity is personal, and is something we should determine for ourselves, and only ourselves. Every person should have the right to say what makes up their own identity. The first reason for this is that identity is a personal experience that we each live everyday, and no one else can experience your life as you can. For example, I come from a Mexican family, but you would not know it by looking at me. People often say that I cannot be Mexican because I do not look like it, but my experience with my family, culture, and traditions is something that other people cannot decide for me.

Another reason why identity is personal is that we make decisions everyday that contribute to our identities. From the clothes that we wear to the hobbies we choose, we are constantly deciding who we want to be. You might choose to be a musician or an athlete - both of these can be a part of your identity.

Just as our lives change day to day, year to year, our identities will also change. You might find that someone you know is very different than they used to be. This is because we are always growing. The person that you are today might be very different from the person you were five years ago, and likely will be very different from the person you turn out to be in five years. This is because our lives and our choices will influence our identities. Because of this, no one can tell you how you should identify.

Let's Define Identity



Identity is made up of two parts: Subjective & Objective¹

Subjective Identity: When we identify ourselves with a specific characteristic or group.

Objective Identity: When a physical characteristic allows others to identify us with a specific characteristic or group.



1. Bilgrami, Akeel. "IDENTITY." In *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*, edited by BERNSTEIN J. M., OPHIR ADI, and STOLER ANN LAURA, 159-66. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018. Accessed October 6, 2020. doi:10.2307/j.ctt1xhr6ms.12.

When we talk about identity, I would like to use an explanation used by Akeel Bilgrami, a Philosophy professor at Columbia University who specializes in philosophy and the mind, politics, and language. He stated in an article titled "Identity," that identity is a concept made up of two parts - the subjective and objective. Subjective is defined as "affected by personal views, experiences, or backgrounds," or something based on opinion that cannot be a proven fact. Subjective things can be different between any two people. Objective, on the other hand, is something factual that can be proven.

Bilgrami says that our subjective identity is something that we determine ourselves based on a characteristic. It is always something that we decide for ourselves and does not have to be visible to others. For example, if we live in the United States, we may identify as American. We determine this based on where we live, and you cannot necessarily see it on ourselves. Someone may also identify as an ethnicity, based on where they or their parents come from. Personally, I identify as Mexican-American, even though I may not look like it. This is my subjective identity.

Our objective identity is something others can determine themselves based on looking at us. This can be based on our skin color, hair color, visible qualities like wearing glasses, and so on. You can look at me and see brown hair, and it can be proven to someone else by looking at me. However, Bilgrami mentions that it is important to know that sometimes people disagree with their objective identity, and it is not our right to tell them otherwise.

Formal Analysis

*“...[A] formal analysis – the result of looking closely – is an analysis of the form that the artist produces; that is, an analysis of the work of art, which is made up of such things as line, shape, color, texture, mass, composition. These things give the stone or canvas its form, its expression, its content, its meaning.” – Sylvan Barnet, *A Short Guide to Writing About Art**

For an in-depth tutorial, see this video from Khan Academy:

<https://youtu.be/sM2MOyonDsY>

If you recall, at the beginning of this presentation, I mentioned something called “formal analysis.” Formal analysis is one of the most important tools in an art historian’s toolkit, and it is one I want to encourage you all at home to do for yourselves. Please take a moment to read the quote from art historian Sylvan Barnet on the slide.

Formal analysis is the act of looking closely at a piece of art and analyzing, or thinking about its components. What makes this piece of art what it is? What subjects do we see in it, and what medium does the artist use? By that, we are asking if the artist is using photography, or painting, or even sculpture? How does the artwork look to you? Is there a lot of contrast between light areas and dark? Is it clear or blurry? Does it look realistic, or does it seem a little unnaturalistic? What colors are being used? We must assume that everything an artist does is purposeful, so try to look at everything in the image.

Formal Analysis (Cont'd)

Things to look for in a formal analysis:

- **Medium** - What medium did this artist choose? Why might they have done that?
- **Content/Subject** - What is the artist presenting to us in the artwork?
- **Composition** - How did the artist arrange the piece?
- **Color** - What colors did the artist use? This might be influenced by the medium
- **Line** - Straight, curvilinear, thick, thin
- **Shape & Form** - The shapes and forms of the objects in the work of art
- **Texture** - Can you see brushstrokes? Is the sculpture smooth, or rough?

NOTE: Not all of these apply to every art piece, and we will not use all of them today.

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Here are some of the things that we must consider in a formal analysis, including medium, content, composition, color, line, shape and form, and texture. This list does not include everything that we can consider, nor do all of these apply to every work of art. Take a moment to read all of these.

Identity in Art History: Taking The Reins

Sherman, Cindy. *Film Still #21*,
1978. Gelatin Silver Print, 7.5 in by
9.5 in. New York, Museum of
Modern Art



This is the first artwork we will look at today, *Film Still #21* by American artist Cindy Sherman. Take a moment to pause and jot down your thoughts, and then we can resume. Remember this isn't about noticing what I do, but practicing your formal analysis.

To begin, I will analyze the artwork's visual parts. By looking at the formal components of her work, here are a few things we can note:

- **Medium:** The artist is using photography to make this artwork. Photography is often associated with reality, since it is showing us the real world rather than painted objects. It is important to remember that photographs can show us fantasies and stories too, if the artist wants to.
- **Subject/Content:** The main content of the photo is a woman. This woman is Sherman herself; since she is also the artist, that makes this a self-portrait in the form of a photograph. She is among several high-rise buildings, and she is located towards the front of the photo.
- **Composition:** The piece is composed so that it feels like we are looking upwards towards the sky.
- **Color:** In terms of color, it is in black and white. It feels cinematic, as if we are watching a movie about a woman in the big city. This is purposeful. Sherman could have used color photo to make this piece if she had wanted.
- **Form:** Sherman's body is the most clear object in the photo, and is one of the only images not cast in shadow. This, with the fact that she is in the front, draws our eyes to her. She is the focal point, or focus, of the piece.

This piece was a part of a series of photographs done by Sherman, where she was

commenting on the role of women in classic Hollywood movies. She was frustrated that women had limited options in roles, and that the directors and writers were always men. Her visual choices remind us of old movies - they are in black and white, they are photos rather than paintings. By taking the photo herself, Sherman is taking the reins of what roles women can play. She is deciding what role a woman can play, and she gets to be the actress herself. Although she is not depicting herself, and so it is not technically a self-portrait, she is taking control of how her identity as a woman is treated in the art world. She is a woman expressing the identity of a woman.

Identity in Art History: Taking The Reins (Cont'd)

Weems, Carrie Mae. *Untitled (Woman Standing Alone)*, 1990. Part of *The Kitchen Table* series. Gelatin Silver Print, 28.25 in x 28.25 in.

“feminist understanding of black womanness” – bell hooks, *Art on My Mind*³

3. Hooks, Bell. *Art on my mind: Visual politics*. New York: New Press, 1995, 76



Our second piece of art is another photograph by black American artist, Carrie Mae Weems. The title of this piece is *Untitled (Woman Standing Alone)*, 1990, and was part of Weems' *Kitchen Table Series*, so-called because each photograph is centered around a kitchen table. Take a moment to look at how the artist has composed the photograph on your own, then come back and read my interpretation.

Some key points for a formal analysis of this artwork would be:

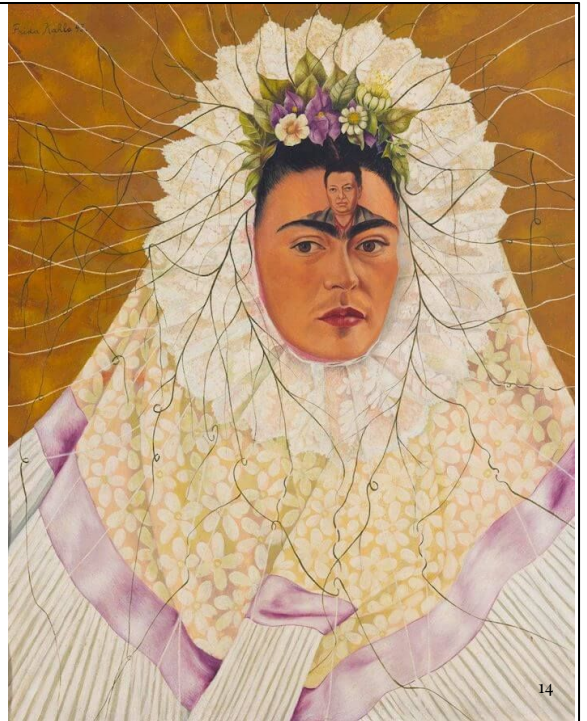
- **Medium:** The piece is a photograph, the same medium that Cindy Sherman used.
- **Subject/Content:** The subject of this piece is one person: a black woman. This woman is the artist herself, Carrie Mae Weems. Weems is also the artist of the piece, so this piece can be understood as a self-portrait.
- **Composition:** She stands with her hands placed on her kitchen table, and a bright light shines above her head. Unlike in Sherman's photo, where she is placed at the very forefront, Weems places herself at the very back of the piece, but she stands at what we would call the head of the table.
- **Color:** Weems used black-and-white photographs, although she could have easily used color photos instead. Therefore, the color choice is very intentional.
- **Line:** The table, Weems' arms, and the lamp are composed of diagonal lines.
- **Shape:** Weems' body, with the table and the lamp above her head, make a sort of triangular shape.

This piece is about Weems' identity as a black woman, or what author bell hooks calls her “feminist understanding of black womanness”³, and more specifically, it is her

response to what she felt was a lack of serious representation of female black identity in art and scholarship. Weems takes the reins of self-expression to express her own experience and identity as a black woman. She portrays herself as the head of the table, which we can associate with being the head or center of the family. She is looking straight at the viewer (us), so we can read her as independent and confident. What Weems is doing is very similar to what we saw Cindy Sherman do - using photography to take control of how women, white or black, are depicted in art, giving both a place in art history.

Identity in Art History: Conveying Ourselves

Kahlo, Frida. *Diego on My Mind (Self-Portrait as a Tehuana)*, 1943. Oil on Masonite, 29.9 in by 24 in.



The last piece of art which we will look at is a painting by the Mexican Modern artist, Frida Kahlo. Titled *Diego on My Mind (Self-Portrait as a Tehuana)*, this painting heavily reflects her personal and cultural identity. Once again, I will ask you to take a moment to perform a visual analysis, and jot down some thoughts about the art piece.

In terms of formal analysis, here are a few things which we can take note of:

- **Medium:** This piece is done in oil painting, which is very different from the two photographs which we looked at earlier. Painting allows Frida Kahlo to play with reality a bit, and add in more fantastical things than she might have been able to do with a camera.
- **Subject/Content:** The piece is a portrait of a woman, specifically Frida Kahlo herself. We know this by second portion of the title: (*Self-Portrait as a Tehuana*). A Tehuana is a word used to identify women from Tehuantepec, a city in Mexico. By painting herself in a Tehuana outfit, she is identifying herself with the culture of that area. We also see a smaller portrait of Diego Rivera, her husband. He is literally *on her mind*, as the title says.
- **Composition & Line:** Kahlo's self-portrait takes up almost the entire composition. Thin, curvilinear lines stretch from her head towards the edges of the canvas, almost like a spider web. We could say that the thought of her husband, Diego, is tangled up in the web of her mind, and she cannot get him out of the web, or off her mind.
- **Color:** Kahlo uses very soft, pastel colors such as yellow, pink, and green, while her face and hair are a darker tan and black. This draws the eye to the contrasting dark colors, and makes her face the focal point.

This work of art is especially interesting because of how Kahlo presents different layers of her identity. On the one hand, she is representing herself as a Mexican woman, more specifically identifying herself with Tehuana culture. Kahlo was very proud of her Latina identity, and this is something she depicts throughout many of her artworks. She is also representing herself as a woman and wife, including her husband Diego Rivera in the piece. Kahlo also embraces several aspects of her physical qualities which people might not always be comfortable with. Almost everyone recognizes Frida Kahlo for her thick unibrow; had she chosen, she could have had it plucked, or not painted it in her portraits, yet she always did. She embraced the things that made her different, and that is proof of the power of a self-portrait.

Thank you!

Next Steps:

- Complete Formal Analysis & Identity Worksheets
- Watch and Follow Along to the Self-Portrait Tutorial Video

Thank you for your time, and for choosing this lesson on identity and self-portraiture. Next you will use the worksheets and drawing tutorial video in this module to put to use all that you have learned in this presentation. This lesson was intended to help students feel comfortable looking at, talking about, and creating their own artwork. This lesson is made possible by the generous funding of the UC Riverside Gluck Fellows Program of the Arts, which works to help educate local communities on the arts. I hope you all continue to learn about, explore, and participate in the arts!