

Portraits

Theme 9: Portraits

Introduction

Throughout history and across cultures, people have shown a fascination with faces, and in turn, with portrait representation. The depiction of an individual likeness is about identification, but more than that, it is a record of an interaction between an artist and a sitter, both of whom contribute to the portrait's form and content. Far from being mirror reflections, portraits are complex constructions of identity that serve a range of functions from expressing power and declaring status to making larger statements about society at a given point in history.

Session

Review:

1. Share your responses to the comparison questions for Writing.
2. Share any other questions or ideas prompted by the previous assignment.

Watch the Portraits video (30 minutes).

Consider/discuss the following:

1. Of the portraits featured in the program, which show concern for naturalism and which are concerned with other ideas?
2. How did the nineteenth-century invention of photography, and subsequent technological developments such as moving images in film and video, or digitized images, affect the way artists created portraits?
3. How do artists use iconic symbols to convey images of power and/or status in their portraits? Which symbols are universal, and which are specific to a particular culture?
4. What do portraits of Gertrude Stein, JFK, and Ronald Fischer, Beekeeper featured in the program reveal about the relationship between the subject and the artist?
5. In Kehinde Wiley's portraits, contemporary males are depicted in poses from paintings created in an earlier era. What is he trying to convey?

Between Sessions:

Go to the Web site at www.learner.org/courses/globalart and:

1. Explore featured artworks from this program, including the descriptive text and the expert perspective commentary.
2. Read the chapter about Portraits in the downloadable text.
3. On the Web, compare selected artworks by considering the questions posed. Prepare to share your responses by taking notes. Bring your notes to the next session.