

SELF-PORTRAITS INSPIRED BY SAINT HELENA WITH TRUE CROSS

ART AND SOCIAL STUDIES

GRADE LEVEL: 6–12

BASED ON

Lucas Cranch the Elder, *Saint Helena with True Cross*, 1525, Bequest of Mary M. Emery, 1927.387

OBJECTIVE

Students will create their own self-portrait revealing personal information employing two types of aesthetics: imitation and expression.

Students will use the scratch board to render either realistically or expressively the likeness of themselves or a selected person.

Students will embellish the surface around the portrait with found materials to communicate this person's reputation, ideals, virtues, and importance to society.

MATERIALS

12 x 18 in. 100# (or heavier) paper
rulers
magazines
scratch board
found objects (fabric scraps, wallpaper samples, buttons, feathers, ribbons, yarn, etc.)
scissors
newspapers
pencils
mirrors
glue

CONCEPT

Artists have always been interested in capturing likenesses of themselves and other people. A self-portrait is a portrait an artist makes using him or herself as its subject. It implies looking at yourself in your own particular way, showing what you look like as well as revealing something about your own personality. Some artists also believe that for a self-portrait to be a work of art, it must have atmosphere.

Inspired by the portrait *St. Helena with the True Cross*, the students will create their own self-portrait revealing personal information employing two types of aesthetics: imitation and expression.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What about themselves and others do artists choose to reveal?
How much do they want to reveal?
What have artists done with their materials to suggest personality?

BACKGROUND

Saint Helena with True Cross, created by Lucas Cranch the Elder, represents his perception of ideal female beauty rather than a concrete individual., with her oval face, sharp chin, almond eyes, and small rosebud mouth. The red, orange, and gold tones found in her jewelry, curls of hair, costumes, and elegant crown along with whimsical, winding lines demonstrate the artists' realistic tendencies and marvelous gift for color.

The Nazi leaders of Germany would have appreciated this artwork. Created by one the foremost German artists of the Northern Renaissance and by a member of the court of Saxony, this was the type of artwork they sought to legitimize their power historically by pointing to German accomplishments of the past. They coined the term The Third Reich, counting the Holy Roman Empire as the first and the 1871 Empire as the second, to signify their place in the succession of world power.

The painting's subject matter, St. Helena, led the pilgrimage to unearth the True Cross. This would have appealed to the Nazi party's pride in their cultural achievements. Here, St. Helena is depicted gallantly supporting the True Cross, sumptuously dressed in a traditional medieval German costume, with a doll-like face; adolescent, youthful body; and glacial whiteness—all virtues stressed by the Nazis. Elements of this artwork, such as the crown and jewels, are also thought to warn against lust, greed, and gluttony, all vices the Nazis taught their youth to resist.

CLASS EXPERIENCE

PROCEDURE

Each student creates a mixed-media portrait using the following steps:

1. Make a list of words that describe you. Include your favorite color and favorite animal, characteristics of your family, where you are from, what you like to do, your interests, your friends, what music you like, etc. Describe images, textures, colors, etc. that would represent these words next to them. You are creating symbols with which to describe yourself.
2. Using a mirror, draw your self-portrait (head and shoulders) or find a picture of a selected person. Here are some hints on facial proportions:
 - o Begin with the eyes.
 - o There is one eye width between the eyes.
 - o The bottom of the nose is approximately one eye width from the bottom of the eye.
 - o The bottom of your bottom lip is approximately two eye widths from the bottom of the eye.
 - o The bottom of your chin is approximately one eye width from the bottom of your mouth.
 - o To measure for the top of your head: It is the same distance from the bottom of your eyes to the bottom of your chin as it is from the bottom of your eyes to the top of your head.
 - o Notice that the corners of your mouth line up with the iris of your eyes, and the corners of your nose line up with the tear ducts of your eyes.
 - o Your neck lines up with the outer corners of your eyes.
 - o Your shoulders extend almost a full head width from the side of the head.
3. Make an envelope for storing found objects, fabric scraps, and magazine clippings. Pick out found objects, magazine images, and colors that you feel represent your personality and interests, based on your lists.
4. Arrange the objects and textures to form your self-portrait, using your drawing as a guide. To create a unified composition, spread the textures, colors, and objects around, repeating three of each three times. Use objects of a variety of sizes. Rearrange, add, and subtract objects until you are satisfied with the composition.
5. Glue the objects down to the paper.

CONCLUSION

Each student will now write an artist's statement about the finished work that explains why the particular images, objects, and colors were chosen and what they represent. Then hold a class critique of the finished portraits, focusing on how effectively the students were able to use the elements of art and principles of design in their artworks.

RESOURCES

- Burns, Paul C. and Joe Singer. *The Portrait Painter's Book*. Watson-Guption Publications, New York. 1979.
- Leveille, Paul. *Painting Expressive Portraits*. North Light Books, Cincinnati. 1998.
- Ragans, Rosalind. *ArtTalk*. Glencoe/McGraw-Hill, New York. 1994.

NATIONAL STANDARDS

ART

- Students will demonstrate an understanding of portraits as a subject matter.
- Students will demonstrate an understanding of personal expression as a purpose for creating art.
- Students will create a portrait with symbols using elements of art and principles of design.
- Students will create a portrait using a variety of media to communicate ideas, feelings, or experiences.

SOCIAL STUDIES

- Standard 39: Understands the causes and global consequences of World War I
- Standard 42: Understands major global trends from 1900 to the end of World War II