

## Who Am I? Self Portraits in Art and Writing

*Who am I?* is a set of art and writing activities designed to help middle school students begin to answer this important question. Students will look carefully at self-portraits in the National Gallery of Art's collection by **Vincent van Gogh**, **Paul Gauguin**, **Judith Leyster**, **David Alfaro Siqueiros**, and **Andy Warhol**. They will also make a variety of self-portraits and write poetry, a speech, and a letter about themselves—all to be placed in their **self-portrait portfolio**.

**Who am I?** is not a simple question. In fact, it leads to a long list of related questions. Here are a few:

- What are the distinctive things that make me "me"?
- How do I want people to see me?
- How can I express my many different sides?
- How can I reinvent myself for various purposes or times in my life?
- How am I changing from day to day or year to year?
- Who do I want to become?

Middle school students ask themselves these questions every day. They look in the mirror, compare themselves to their peers and to the countless images around them, and begin to form ideas about their identity. They are experiencing enormous changes in physical, social, emotional, and intellectual growth. Exploring their sense of self through diverse forms—here, self-portraiture, speaking, and autobiographical writing—will help them master these changes.

The activities that follow encourage students to examine and compare a range of self-portraits painted in different periods, and for different reasons. Each student activity is supported by a lesson implementation plan and background information for teachers. You'll also find artist biographies, a glossary of terms, and other suggested print and online resources. The activities are designed to be used together as a unit on self-exploration through self-portraiture or separately as lessons that promote language arts, the study of art history, or the study of an individual artist. The activities may be done in any order, although starting with "Van Gogh's Self-Portraits" and ending with "Andy Warhol / Digital Self-Portraits" is recommended.

### Begin and End by Brainstorming:

**Before** students start the student activities, begin with a classroom brainstorming session. Ask students: "Why do artists make self-portraits? Give me every possible reason you can think of." Write all answers on a large piece of chart paper that you can keep posted.

**After** the class has completed the activities, ask students again: "Why do artists make self-portraits? Give me every possible reason you can think of." List their responses on a new chart and compare the "before and after" lists. What new observations did students make? What did they learn?

### Background Information: Why do artists make self-portraits?

Since the Renaissance, artists have used self-portraits to explore a basic question: Who am I? While a mirror or a photograph can tell a person what he or she looks like, that physical image does not reflect the whole self. Self-portraiture insists the artist embark on a journey of self-exploration in order to make decisions about how to represent him/herself authentically. For each self-portrait, the artist must ask: What expression, posture, clothing, background, colors, texture, and style best express the *real* me? Might those answers be different at any given time?

Artists have always had practical reasons for making self-portraits; for instance, they get a model who is always available and works for free; self-portraits are a good way for an artist to practice rendering different expressions and moods; and they can serve to advertise the artist's skill to potential customers. Self-portraits may also represent an artist's quest for immortality, as a way to leave behind an image that will outlive the artist. Additionally, a self-portrait can preserve a memory, serve as a gift, and even help an artist further understand him/herself.

# Picture A Day Project

Project assignment: take three pictures a day of yourself for 14 consecutive days.

**Research work by Cindy Sherman or other artists that have done a series of self portraits.** Note how they **position themselves in a situation**. You do not need to be the main component or subject of the picture.

All, or a part of **your body** must be in **each** picture. Your face does not need to be shown, and you do not need to be looking at the camera.

For best results, the camera should be a minimum of **2 metres** away from your body. It is advisable to direct **someone else** to take your picture. If you shoot closer (ie. at arms length), the picture may not be in focus.

If you are shooting **inside**, it may be best to use the flash, so your picture is not underexposed – but it is also worth taking the same photo using no flash and compare the differences.

Not every picture is going to be amazing, this is fine because not everyday is amazing. Just shoot what you feel.

## **Presenting:**

You will then be given your pictures and asked to edit down the duplicates and present your 14 days of pictures to the class the following week. Presentation options will be discussed in class. *Students may be as creative as they like. I buy a roll of craft paper, bring some tape and markers in and let them mount the pictures.*

## **Purpose for Assignment**

This photo assignment will give you 14 days of memories, recognizing the power of the picture to stimulate memory. Other than memories, what else did you learn from this experience? The goal is to try and have you think creatively about your pictures.

## **Grade:**

Your mark will be based on:

- shooting all 3x14 days of pictures
- preparing a presentation of your pictures for required date (the final chosen image, plus the two outtakes)
- presentation to the class
- ability for the viewer to feel insight into: the motivation, the details and the feelings when it was taken.

Demonstrate your thought process for the pictures you have taken for this assignment.

# Artists' Self Portraits

The subjects of art vary from artist to artist. They can range from a painting of a busy rehearsal in a cramped dance studio to a photograph of a calm desert in the morning light. The choice of subjects depends upon what kind of story the artist wants to tell and show their audience.

No matter what subject an artist chooses, the one subject that they all share is themselves, the self-portrait. Self-portraits are not just a reflection of what they look like but also of how the artist interprets themselves and the world around them. It is perhaps the most personal story that the artist can tell and makes the self-portrait one of art's most important subjects.

## **Your task:**

Pretend that you work for the Art Gallery of Ontario as an art collector. The museum curator has asked you to take charge of the upcoming "Self-Portrait Art Gallery". Your job is to look for the self-portraits of at least 5 artists to hang in the gallery. Keep in mind that the more self-portraits you find the better the gallery will turn out.

## **What you need to find out:**

You need to write down the following things about the self-portraits you find:

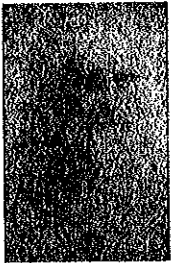
- The name of the artist
- Their nationality
- When was the portrait done or when did the artist lived
- What kind of art does it represent (i.e. Impressionism, Pop Art)
- What medium is it in (i.e. acrylic paint, photograph, pencil)
- Where is the self-portrait located
- Write a short desription of the self-portrait (What does the artist look like? What is the setting of the piece? How big is it? What is the artist doing?)

## **Potential Resources:**

- The National Gallery of Canada
- The Art Gallery Of Canada
- The Leonardo da Vinci Museum
- The Rembrandt Page
- The Andy Warhol Museum
- The Frida Kahlo Page

**Good Luck & Happy Hunting!**

# Self Portraiture



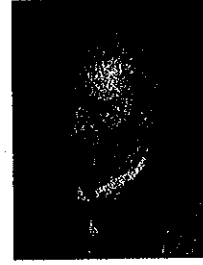
Leonardo da Vinci  
1500s



Rembrandt: 1600s



Paul Cezanne  
1800s



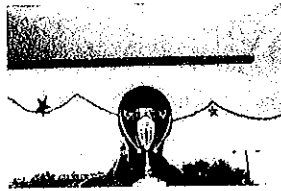
Vincent van Gogh  
1800s



Pablo Picasso  
1900s



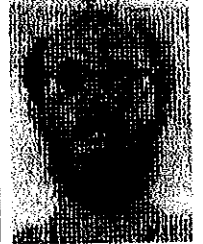
Frida Kahlo  
40s, 50s



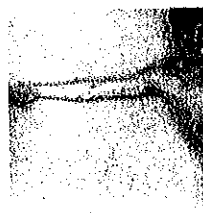
Lee Friedlander: 60s



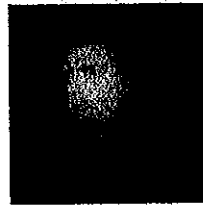
Chuck Close: 60s, 70s



Cindy Sherman: 70s



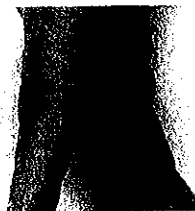
Robert Mapplethorpe: 70s, 80s



Andy Warhol: 60s, 70s, 80s



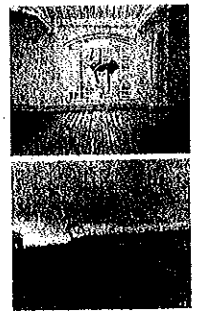
Nan Goldin: 90s



John Coplans: 80s, 90s



Sam Taylor-Wood: 2000s



# Photo Blog & The Self Portrait

List three pros & cons that Facebook/Flicker era have brought to the world of photography

(pros)

(cons)

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Why do artists engage in self portraiture?

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What's the point of a regimented project like taking a photo a day?

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Why take three photos a day?

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List three reasons to shoot with a cell phone:

List three reasons to shoot with an SLR Camera:

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List some corresponding styles / genres of self portraiture (eg. close up vs. far away)

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What makes a successful self portrait?

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What are some considerations when creating a large body of photographs?

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Why is photo editing an important skill?

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