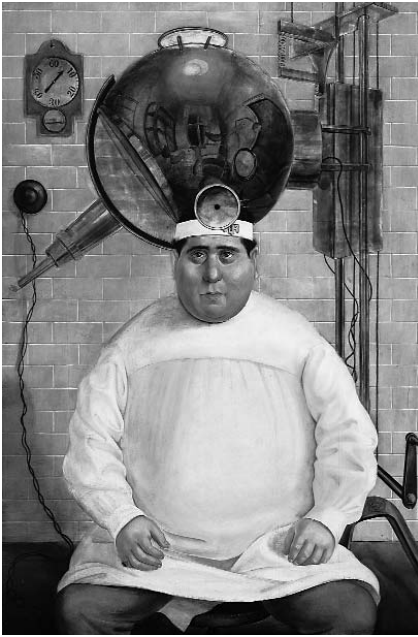# LESSONS

LESSON ONE: Identity

IMAGE ONE: Otto Dix. German, 1891–1969. *Dr. Mayer-Hermann.* 1926. Oil and tempera on wood, 58 ¾ x 39" (149.2 x 99.1 cm). Gift of Philip Johnson. © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

IMAGE TWO: Pablo Picasso. Spanish, 1881–1973. *Girl before a Mirror.* 1932. Oil on canvas, 64 x 51 ¼" (162.3 x 130.2 cm). Gift of Mrs. Simon Guggenheim. © 2007 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
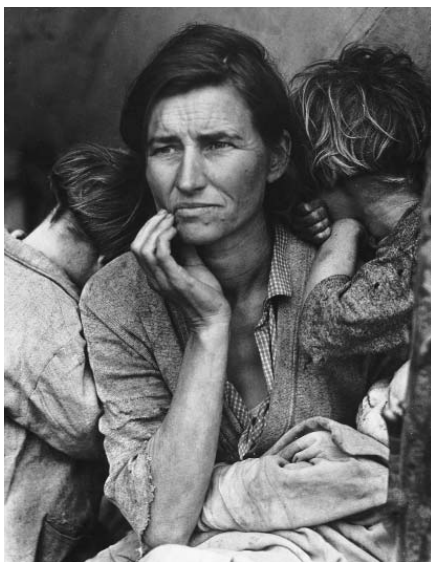
IMAGE THREE: Dorothea Lange. American, 1895–1965. *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California.* 1936. Gelatin silver print, 11 ⅛ x 8 ⁹⁄₁₆" (28.3 x 21.8 cm). Purchase

IMAGE FOUR: Alberto Giacometti. Swiss, 1901–1966. *Man Pointing.* 1947. Bronze, 70 ½ x 40 ¾ x 16 ⅜" (179 x 103.4 x 41.5 cm). Gift of Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller. © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

INTRODUCTION

During the interwar period, the idea of **identity**, both individual and social, came under scrutiny for intellectual and political reasons. In Germany, Italy, Poland, Russia, and other European nations, governments enacted laws that penalized individuals based on their political and religious beliefs and identities. In France and Britain, intellectual developments in the fields of philosophy and psychoanalysis revolutionized the concept of identity.

In this lesson, students will discuss what identity means to them and will consider how their own identities are affected by the social and political realities of their time. They will then discuss how four artists—Otto Dix, Pablo Picasso, Dorothea Lange, and Alberto Giacometti—represent individual and universal identities in **portraiture**.

LESSON OBJECTIVES
- **Students will consider the concept of identity in relation to their own experience.**

- **Students will consider and discuss portraiture.**

- **Students will discuss the costume, pose, gesture, expression, and mood in these portraits, and the artist's stylistic choices.**

- **Students will consider how artists represent individual and collective identity in portraits.**

- **Students will consider artistic choices in relation to historical context.**

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION
- **Ask your students to give some definitions of what the term "identity" means to them. How would they define their own identity? Ask students what political and social realities they face that have an impact on their identity. What other aspects of their lives impact their identity?**

- **Ask your students to explain the term "portrait." On the board, create a class definition for this term using their comments. Once this definition is complete, have your students write it in their journals. As you move through the lesson, encourage your students to add to or change this definition. Ask your students to consider the choices people make when they know their portrait is being created or their picture is being taken, paying particular attention to costume, pose, and expression. Ask your students to collect old photographs of themselves or create new ones that capture them in different ways, and have each student create an individual identity collage.**

- **Inform your students that in this lesson they will be exploring the ways in which four different artists reflected on an individual's identity by creating a portrait that in some way captured the sitter's likeness.**

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION
- **Show your students the image of *Dr. Mayer-Hermann*, by Otto Dix (Image One). Ask your students to describe what they see in this portrait, paying particular attention to costume, pose, gesture, expression, and mood.**

- **Ask your students to identify other elements in the painting that provide the viewer with clues about the subject of this portrait and his identity.**

Tell your students that Dix was a German artist who worked in an **Expressionist** style prior to his participation in World War I. In the years immediately following World War I, Dix and a number of his contemporaries in Berlin began to paint in a realistic style that came to be known as **Neue Sachlichkeit** (**New Objectivity**). In this realistic style they created social satires of postwar Germany. Dix said of these works, "I wanted to depict things as they really were."[1] Later, in the 1920s, during the period in which he painted this portrait, Dix began to move away from political satire to focus on portraits of individuals in a highly realistic style of painting.

- **Ask your students if they consider this portrait to be a realistic painting. Make sure they support their answers with visual evidence.**

- **What reaction do they think the sitter, Dr. Mayer-Hermann, had when he first saw this image? Why do your students think he may have reacted this way?**

Dr. Wilhelm Mayer-Hermann was a prominent ear, nose, and throat doctor who **commission**ed Dix to paint his portrait, although he was aware of the objectively realistic, satirical-seeming style that Dix painted in at that time. Dix painted Mayer-Hermann in the doctor's office with his professional accessories, such as the large circular X-ray apparatus above him and the circular light on his head that he most likely wore when examining patients. The blue ring on the doctor's little finger is the only personal attribute depicted. It was presented to Mayer-Hermann upon his completion of medical school, by his father.

    As a prominent Jewish figure in Berlin society, Mayer-Hermann was forced to leave Germany in 1934, fleeing Nazi rule. With his wife and daughters he moved to New York City, where he lived until his death, in 1945. At the time the doctor moved to New York, The Museum of Modern Art had already acquired his portrait and was displaying it to the public. The doctor greatly enjoyed visiting the Museum to view his portrait and to overhear comments that people made when looking at it. He said of these visits, "If anyone recognized me from the picture, they would never come to me as a patient!"[2]

- **Ask your students why the doctor may have felt this way about his portrait.**

- **Have your students take a moment to look closely at the image of Pablo Picasso's *Girl before a Mirror* (Image Two). Ask your students to compare this painting to the portrait of Dr. Mayer-Hermann, in terms of the pose and expression of the **figure** and the overall mood of the painting.**

- **What do the clues of costume, pose, gesture, expression, and mood tell your students about the subject of this portrait?**

Inform your students that the portrait *Girl before a Mirror* depicts Picasso's young girlfriend, Marie-Thérèse Walter. Picasso created many portraits of Walter. He painted this particular portrait in 1932 in his summer home in the South of France. It is thought that Walter may have been pregnant with the artist's child when this portrait was painted.

- **This painting has been described as an image of dualities, meaning a representation of two sides or two ideas. Ask your students if they agree with this idea. Ask them to discuss any dual elements in this painting.**

1. Otto Dix, quoted in Jodi Hauptman, "Philip Johnson: MoMA's Form Giver," *MoMA: Magazine of The Museum of Modern Art* 22 (1996): 20.
2. Wilhelm Mayer-Hermann, quoted in Sabine Rewald, "How Can I Hurt You?" *Art in America* (April 2004): 111.

- **Ask your students why Picasso may have chosen to create a portrait of Walter that incorporated these oppositional elements. How do these choices affect their interpretation of her image?**

- **Have your students describe the background of the image.**

It has been suggested that the diamond-shaped **pattern** of the **background** refers to the costume of a **harlequin**, a **motif** that Picasso often used to represent or refer to himself. This idea of a hidden reference to Picasso is further supported in this portrait by the colors that the artist used for the diamond pattern. Yellow and red are the colors of the flag of Spain, Picasso's country of birth.

- **Why may the artist have chosen to include this pattern in the portrait? What effect does the background pattern have on the overall image? Ensure that your students support their thoughts and ideas with evidence from the painting.**

- **We explored how Dix used a realistic style in his portrait of Dr. Mayer-Hermann. Ask your students how they would describe the style Picasso used to create this image. Ask them to support their responses with visual examples.**

We just examined how Dix and Picasso depicted the identities of their sitters through portraiture. Now we will discuss how the artists Dorothea Lange and Alberto Giacometti used portraiture, in the **medium**s of photography and sculpture, to approach larger questions of identity—the identity of a social group and of people impacted by their historical contexts.

- **Give your students a few minutes to take in the image of *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*, by Dorothea Lange (Image Three). Have your students describe the main figure depicted in this image.**

- **Give each student a sheet of paper. Have your students write down what they think the woman would say if she could speak.**

- **Have the students share their ideas and explain them in relation to their observations of the image.**

Inform your students that the artist Dorothea Lange created *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California* in 1936, after she had begun photographing the harsh social realities of the Great Depression (1929–39) in America. At the time she took this photograph, she had been traveling in rural California photographing the difficult lives of migrant agricultural workers for the United States government's Resettlement Administration (RA) and the Farm Security Administration (FSA). The Information Division of the RA, later folded into the FSA, hired photographers to document the lives of agricultural workers who had been forced to leave their farms due to several factors, including the introduction of new industrial machinery, the Depression, and drought. In her RA and FSA photographs Lange created portraits of individuals that then become **symbol**s for the larger community identity and its social concerns.

- **Ask your students to discuss some of the concerns that they identified the migrant mother having in the above exercise. Do these seem like individual concerns or could they have also been the concerns of this woman's community? How could this image be reflective of a larger community identity? Ask them to explain their responses in relation to the image.**

Share the following quote by Lange, explaining her working process at the time she created this work:

> My own approach is based upon three considerations. First—hands off! Whatever I photograph, I do not . . . tamper with or arrange. Second—a sense of place. Whatever I photograph, I try to picture as a part of its surroundings, as having roots. Third—a sense of time. Whatever I photograph, I try to show as having its position in the past or in the present.[3]

- **Ask your students to discuss this work in terms of the pose and expression of the sitter, the setting and mood of the image, and the time period in which the image was taken—aspects that Lange stated, in the above quote, were central to her creative vision for her portraits.**

Lange later recounted her conversation with the subject of this portrait:

> [The mother] was thirty-two and . . . she and her children had been living on frozen vegetables from the field and wild birds the children caught. The pea crop had frozen; there was no work. Yet they could not move on, for she had just sold the tires from the car to buy food.[4]

- **Ask your students to identify how Lange's story about the subject of *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California* relates to their discussion of the image.**

- **Ask your students to define the term "sculpture." Ask them to describe some differences between looking at a painting and looking at a sculpture. As a class, brainstorm some materials and techniques that sculptors use to create their artworks. Tell your students that the next image they will see will be of a sculpture created in 1947 by the artist Alberto Giacometti. Tell them that just as Lange created portraits of individuals that reflected larger social concerns, Giacometti was interested in creating sculptures that had meaning for all people.**

- **Show your students the image of the sculpture *Man Pointing*, by Giacometti (Image Four). Have them describe the figure depicted in the sculpture, paying attention to pose, gesture, expression, and mood.**

- **Based on their visual analysis of *Man Pointing,* ask your students if they can tell how Giacometti created this figure or identify the materials he used.**

- **Inform your students that the material is bronze, and that the artist first created a plaster mold to pour the bronze into and allow it to set. How does this description of the artist's material and process match their own hypotheses?**

Giacometti created this sculpture in 1947, following the end of World War II, when he was living in Paris. At this time Giacometti was friendly with writers, artists, and philosophers who ascribed to Existential philosophy, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Samuel Beckett. **Existentialism** is a philosophy that developed out of a "crisis of the individual" during the interwar years and World War II. Existentialists were concerned with their relationships to themselves and to the external world, and with the increased sense of isolation in the modern environment. While Giacometti never officially declared himself an Existentialist, he did associate with many who did, and his sculptures are often interpreted as reflecting Existential philosophy.

Sartre, one of the leaders of the Existentialist movement, wrote about Giacometti's sculpture:

> Before him men thought they were sculpturing being, and this absolute dissolved into an infinite number of appearances. . . . Each of [Giacometti's sculptures] reveals to us man as he is seen, as he is for other men, as he emerges into interhuman surroundings.[5]

- **Give the above description of Existentialism to your students and ask them if there are any connections they can make between Existentialism and this sculpture.**

- **The tall figure in *Man Pointing*, like many in Giacometti's sculptures of the 1940s, is isolated, without any setting. Give each student either a piece of paper with a photocopy of the sculpture in the center or, alternatively, a blank piece of paper. Have students make a sketch or write a description of an imagined background that would be a suitable setting for this figure.**

- **As a group, have students discuss why they chose a particular setting to place this figure into, relating their ideas back to *Man Pointing*.**

- **Giacometti worked with live models to create studies for his sculptures and drawings. He also spoke of representing the underlying realism of all humankind, rather than one specific individual. Ask your students if *Man Pointing* fits their idea of a portrait. Ask them to explain their reasons.**

- **What qualities does the sculpture have that relate to an individual? What qualities seem more universal?**

- **As discussed, Lange and Giacometti were both interested in creating images of individuals that captured the essence of larger concepts of identity. Ask your students to compare and contrast the different ways in which Lange and Giacometti achieved this goal.**

ACTIVITIES

1. Research a Portrait

Using Web resources, ask your students to research the subject of Lange's *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California,* now known to have been Florence Owens Thompson. Ask your students to describe the ways in which their analysis of the image compares with their findings about Thompson's life.

2. Biographies and Portraits

Have each student choose one of the portraits in this lesson and write a one-page biography of the sitter based on their observations and discussions of the artwork.

Ask students who chose to write on the same artwork to organize themselves into groups of three. Have students discuss how their biographies are similar and different and back up their ideas with examples from the artwork.

Many other photographers have documented the lives and concerns of people in the United States and throughout the world. Have your students research the work of an artist such as Auguste Sander, Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, or Lee Friedlander, who documented the social and political realities of their times.

5. Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Search for the Absolute," in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory: 1900–2000; An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 613.

3. Create a Portrait

Have your students each choose a friend or family member to create a portrait of. As a class, brainstorm the different mediums that students can use to create a portrait, including painting, drawing, collage, sculpture, and photography.

As a class, discuss the various stylistic choices students will need to make about how the portrait will appear—possibilities include realistic, abstract, caricature-like, and surreal—in order to represent the sitter the way they wish. Tell your students that all of the artists in this lesson based their artworks on sketches and studies of real people as well as their creative imaginations. Encourage students to make quick sketches of their sitters. Then have them create their portraits, either in class or as a take-home assignment.

Have students write short paragraphs to accompany their completed portraits, explaining their artistic choices and outlining how their portraits reflect their sitters' identities. Create an exhibition of these portraits in your classroom or another location in the school.