

LESSON THREE: Politics and Portraiture

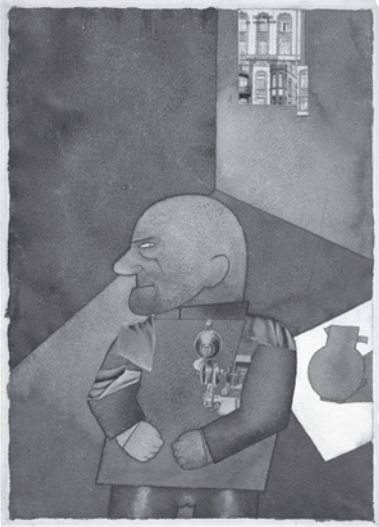


IMAGE THIRTEEN: George Grosz. American (born and died in Germany), 1893–1959. “*The Convict*”: *Monteur John Heartfield after Franz Jung’s Attempt to Get Him Up on His Feet*. 1920. Watercolor, pencil, cut-and-pasted postcards, and halftone relief on paper, 16½ x 12" (41.9 x 30.5 cm). Gift of A. Conger Goodyear, 1952. © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn



IMAGE FOURTEEN: Hannah Höch. German, 1889–1978. *Indian Dancer: From an Ethnographic Museum*. 1930. Cut-and-pasted printed paper and metallic foil on paper, 10⅞ x 8⅞" (25.7 x 22.4 cm). Frances Keech Fund, 1964. © 2008 Hannah Höch/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Germany



IMAGE FIFTEEN: Ben Shahn. American, 1898–1969. *Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco*. 1931–32. Gouache on paper mounted on board, 10⅞ x 14⅞" (27.6 x 37.1 cm). Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, 1935. © 2008 Estate of Ben Shahn/Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.

INTRODUCTION

Because drawing is versatile and easy to experiment with, artists often use the medium to challenge established artistic conventions. Discussing art practice in the twentieth century, Gary Garrels, former Chief Curator in the Department of Drawings at The Museum of Modern Art, writes, “Drawing by its very nature provided a means for accepted understandings to be pried open, values to be reappraised, knowledge and even truth itself to be reconsidered.”¹¹ Because of this, drawing can be thought of as an inherently political medium. This lesson examines the work of artists who use portrait drawing to make a political statement.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will consider portraiture as a means of political expression.
- Students will discuss the elements of a **portrait** that contribute to its meaning, such as expression, **pose**, **costume**, and **background**.
- Students will consider the effectiveness of drawing as a form of political expression.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to define the word **portrait**. Have they ever had their portrait taken at school or somewhere else? What decisions did they make about how they wanted to look in their portraits? Emphasize that their **expression**, **pose**, and **clothes** (or **costume**) communicate information about them to anyone who sees their portrait. Ask your students to consider how the **background** of a portrait (the setting the person is placed in) might also communicate something about the person.
- How can creating a portrait be a form of political expression? Ask your students to define the word **caricature**. A caricature is a representation of a person that intentionally exaggerates something—how the subject looks or the ideas he or she espouses. Where do you usually see caricatures? Why do artists make them? Look for contemporary examples of caricature or other representations of current political figures. What choices have the artists made in representing these political figures? How could these choices impact viewers’ opinions of these figures?
- Tell your students that the images in this lesson all represent people and all have a political purpose.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Show your students *“The Convict”*: *Monteur John Heartfield after Franz Jung’s Attempt to Get Him Up on His Feet* (Image Thirteen), by George Grosz. What is going on in this image? Ask them to describe what they see, using the elements of a portrait. How would they characterize the expression of the person in the drawing? His pose? His costume? How does the background contribute to their understanding of the person represented?
- Tell your students the title of the work and let them know that while the title states that this is John Heartfield, an artist who was friends with Grosz, the face is actually that of Grosz himself. Franz Jung, also referred to in the title, was a writer.

Heartfield and Grosz both spent time in a sanatorium—Heartfield during his military service in 1915 and Grosz in 1917, one month after he was called up to serve in World War I. Grosz had volunteered to serve in the war in 1914, but his experiences during his service changed his thinking about war and German militarism. Both artists made work that was

11. Garrels, *Drawing from the Modern*, 14.

considered politically defiant, influenced by their experiences in the war. This work is sometimes described as a portrait of both Heartfield and Grosz. The background, made of watercolor and cut-and-pasted postcards, creates an unrealistic space that is incongruous with the figure pictured within it.

- Ask your students if they would consider this work to be a caricature. Why, or why not? What elements, if any, appear to be exaggerated in this image? Do the choices Grosz made about the expression, pose, and costume of the person represented and the background behind him communicate effectively about that person? What do they communicate? Based on your students' observations and their knowledge of Grosz and Heartfield, what political statement do they think Grosz wished to make in this work?
- Now show your students *Indian Dancer: From an Ethnographic Museum* (Image Fourteen), by Hannah Höch. Divide your students into pairs, and ask them to create a list of characteristics that this work and "*The Convict*" have in common. Have your students share their lists, and record the similarities on the board.

This image is from a series Höch made between 1925 and 1930 called *From an Ethnographic Museum*. It represents the film actor Maria Falconetti, famous for her portrayal of Joan of Arc in the 1928 film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, directed by Carl Theodor Dreyer. Part of Falconetti's face is obscured by a wooden dance mask from Cameroon, a country in Central Africa, and her headdress is made from foil with the shapes of utensils cut out of it.

Höch was part of the Dada movement, and she is attributed with creating the technique of **photomontage** along with Raoul Hausmann in 1918. Both Dada and photomontage were artists' responses to World War I. Höch was interested in critically examining the way women were represented in Germany at that time.

- Ask your students to consider the title of the work. Höch does not identify this work as a portrait of Falconetti, but many viewers would have recognized her at the time. What is the impact of taking a recognizable figure and combining her features with an object, the mask, that might be found in a museum? Ask your students to consider the way her head is situated against the background. What has Höch done to make the head look even more like a museum object? How could this image, which combines a female film star portraying a female warrior (Joan of Arc) with ethnographic objects, be a comment on the representation of women? It may be helpful for your students to consider what things are thought of as objects to be looked at (for example, films, "exotic" objects from outside the dominant culture, and women).
- How could this work be considered a political statement? How is Höch's statement in her work different from Grosz's in content and format? Ask your students which they consider to be the more powerful statement.
- Tell your students that, unlike the first two images in this lesson, the last image depicts two political figures who were very famous at the time the work was created. Ask them to hypothesize about how this work might differ from the other two, given its different subject matter. What are some choices the artist might have had to consider?
- Show your students *Bartolomeo Vanzetti and Nicola Sacco* (Image Fifteen), by Ben Shahn. How is this work different than the ones your students have just seen? Ask your students to look closely at the work and consider how Shahn chose to render the figures. What words would they use to describe the two figures? List these words on the board. If your students do not know Sacco and Vanzetti's story, ask them what they can infer just by looking at the image.

Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were Italian immigrants to the United States who were brought to trial for the robbery and murder of two men in Braintree, Massachusetts, in 1920. Although not originally suspected of the crime, they were caught in a police trap. Vanzetti had been given a harsh sentence for a previous conviction, and Sacco and Vanzetti and their supporters came to believe that they would not receive a fair trial. In an earlier trial, many witnesses on Vanzetti's behalf had spoken only broken English, and Vanzetti himself had been afraid to take the stand for fear of implicating himself for his radical activities on behalf of the Italian anarchist movement. Instead of trying to hide the radical activities of his clients, in the subsequent trial Sacco and Vanzetti's lawyer made them a focal point, suggesting that his clients were being unfairly persecuted because of them. Despite this, eventually Sacco and Vanzetti were convicted of robbery and murder, and they were both executed in 1927. Their case rallied political radicals, labor unions, and immigrants all over the country. Many writers and artists responded to their story, including Shahn, who made more than twenty images of the two men in 1931 and 1932.

- **Tell your students that this image, like nearly all the images in Shahn's Sacco and Vanzetti series, was based on photographs the artist had collected about the case, primarily from newspapers. The use of photographs was important to Shahn, who was interested in how class and character might be expressed in the "difference in the way a twelve-dollar coat wrinkles from the way a seventy-five dollar coat wrinkles."¹²**

Unlike the other artists in this lesson, Shahn did not try to abstract or create caricatures of the figures. He did, however, alter the compositions of the original photographs in order to emphasize certain elements he felt to be important and to communicate class and character. For this image, Shahn increased the size of the figures and pushed them forward in the picture plane. He was working from a black-and-white photograph, so he also decided what colors he wanted to use in the work. Finally, he increased the size of the figures' eyes and noses and made their shoulders appear more slight and slanted downward than they did in the photograph. This made the men appear more frail and exhausted.¹³

- **Shahn used gouache on paper to create a straightforward representation of the two men. What impact does this choice have on the viewer? Can your students imagine this work having a different impact if it had been created in photomontage or collage? Ask your students to consider what kind of political statement Shahn wished to make by portraying two convicted criminals in this manner so soon after their execution.**
- **The artists in this lesson made different choices in their communication of political messages. Have your students identify the primary political messages or ideas conveyed in each of the three works. Ask your students to debate which methods are most effective. Which are best at creating disjuncture in the work, at conveying instability, or at disrupting the viewer's passive experience of viewing? Why? What impact might the subject matter have had on the artists' choices of materials?**

ACTIVITIES

Learn More

There are many Web sites about the trial and execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti and its implications for bias against immigrants on the part of the jury. Have your students choose a specific aspect of the case to examine closely and share with the rest of the class. You can also ask students to look at the newspaper images published during the case. Which were used by supporters of Sacco and Vanzetti in their own publications? Which were used by their detractors? Ask your students to consider which images they might consider replicating in another medium, like Ben Shahn did. Why would they choose one image over another?

12. Ben Shahn, quoted in "'Mechanical Vision': Photography and Mass Media Appropriation in Ben Shahn's Sacco and Vanzetti Series," by Laura Katzman, in *Ben Shahn and The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*, ed. Alejandro Anreus (Jersey City, N.J.: Jersey City Museum, 2001), 55.

13. *Ibid.*, 58.