Art is identity.

For teachers planning a self-guided tour

Recommended Grades:
10th-12th grade

Tour Theme:
The search for self-definition is a common experience to every human being. As both individuals and members of communities we must constantly consider our place in the broader world. In this lesson, students will explore issues of identity and self-definition. By looking at and discussing objects from the Blanton collection, students will consider ways artists have used the visual arts to explore identity.

About This Resource:
• For teachers planning a self-guided tour at the Blanton Museum
• Aligned with TEKS standards
• Features works from different time periods and cultures.

This Tour:
• Stop 1 - Fosters looking and discussion
• Stop 2 - Explores an artwork through an activity
• Stop 3 - Allows students to investigate works of art on their own

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Stop 1 - Guided Looking

**Nicolas de Largillière**  
*Portrait of a Man, 1715*  
Oil on canvas  
Dimensions: 36 5/16 x 29 11/16 inches  
Location: European Galleries

**Introduction:**
Begin by discussing the concept of identity with your students. How do they define identity? What does identity mean to them? Explain to students that many artists explore the issue of identity in their work. Use the following questions as prompts for discussion.

**Questions for Students:**
- What is going on in this portrait?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- Describe this person’s facial expression and pose. What do they say about him?
- Describe this person’s clothing, props and surroundings. What do they say about him?
- Why do you think this person chose to have his portrait painted?
- Would you like to meet him in person? Why or why not?

**Background Information:**
This portrait features a wealthy young man who proudly displays his elevated identity and high-ranking social status. We see the sitter in half-length, placed directly in front of a shadowed landscape. The sumptuousness of his clothing, his elaborate wig, and his confident stance all point to his nobility. At the same time, however, the portrait displays a hint of informality by means of the direct gaze and playful expression of the sitter, the openness of the collar, and the fluidity of brushwork and color. The artist, Nicolas de Largillière, was one of the most successful portrait painters of the Ancien Régime (the political and social system in France before the Revolution of 1789).
Stop 2 - Guided Activity

Carlo Ceresa
*Portrait of a Widow*, 1640
Oil on canvas
Dimensions: 37 11/16 x 30 7/8 inches

**Work Introduction:**
Ask students to compare this work to the work they have just seen. How are these works similar or different?

**Questions for Students:**
- Describe this person’s facial expression and pose. What do they say about her?
- Describe this person’s clothing, props, and surroundings. What do they say about her?
- Who do you think this person is? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Name some adjectives that describe this person.
- Why do you think she chose to have her portrait painted?

**Student Activity:**
- Distribute a pencil and paper to each student and ask them to imagine that they are about to sit for their own yearbook portrait.

- On their paper, have students list three adjectives that they would use to describe themselves.

- Next, ask students to turn their paper over and brainstorm a list of visual attributes (clothing, props, surrounding, expression, pose, etc.) that would communicate their identity in their yearbook portrait. For example, “intellectual” might be illustrated with a pair of glasses, an honors medal, and a stack of textbooks.

- Once finished, have students get into pairs and read their partner’s list of attributes and hypothesize what attributes they are trying to communicate.

- At the end, ask students to look again at the portrait on the gallery wall. Ask students:
  - What do you think their portrait reveals about their identity?
  - Is this a person you would like to meet in person, why or why not?

**Background Information:**
In this work we see a pious seventeenth-century Italian widow. The female sitter of advanced age is shown in three-quarter length, and confronts the viewer with a harsh and severe expression. She is presented in a stark black dress with starched collar and cuffs, minimal jewelry, and prayer book all hint at her desire to project the virtues of simplicity and piety. This theme is reinforced through the austere domestic setting, the only hint of color being the red velvet cloth that covers the bare
Stop 3 - Self-Exploration

Suggested Gallery:
American/Americas Gallery

Student Activity:
- Explain to students that they will have 15 minutes to explore the gallery and find a work of art that they feel best represents their identity.
- Tell the group to feel free to discuss the works of art they see with their fellow students or with you, and to come to you with any questions they may have.
- After students disperse, circulate and engage them in conversation about what they see. Encourage discussion and looking through open-ended questions about the works of art in which they are interested.
- Once students have had 15 minutes to look around, bring the group together and ask students to share their experience.

Questions for Students:
- What work of art did you select and why?
- How does that work reflect your identity?
- What is one thing you discovered or learned by looking at that work of art?
- What would you like to learn more about?