

## Self-Portrait Poem

Compiled by the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

**Target Grade Level:** 4–12 English language and visual arts classes

### Objectives:

After completing this lesson, students will be better able to:

- Identify and analyze key components of a portrait and relate visual elements to relevant context and significance
- Identify and communicate through poetry their individual characteristics and personal identity

### Portraits

*Self-Portrait* by Childe Hassam, 1933

*Brick* by Robert Arneson, 1975

Please visit the online exhibition for “Reflections/ Refractions: Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century” at <http://www.npg.si.edu/exhibit/reflect2/index.html>

### Materials

Self-Portrait Poem Warm-Up Activity worksheet

Bio Poem worksheet

Abstractions worksheet

Artist bios

### Background Information for Teachers

“All self-portraits have the advantage of having an available model when and where you want him,” Ivan Albright humorously noted. “Conversation can be held to a minimum.” Despite the convenience, self-portrayal is rarely as simple as we might think. In most portraiture, we “meet” the subject indirectly through an intermediary—the artist. In self-portraiture, it is just the two of us. We discount the mirror that may have been there. The face appears to confront us—the viewers—directly, and we expect some privileged revelation.

Furthermore, self-portraiture in the twentieth century was transformed when advancements in sociology, psychology, genetics, philosophy, and other fields changed understanding about the individual. One’s “character,” which once seemed fixed and controllable, was now subject to a variety of influences. Such notions affected self-portrayal. Artists investigated issues related to gender, race, age, health, or the body and struggled to integrate their multiple identities. The interest in self-portrayal continued to grow throughout the century, resulting in works of remarkable diversity and complexity. As if refracted through a prism, self-portraiture was bent in new directions.

The promise of intimacy the viewer expects is, of course, only an illusion. Self-portraiture can be a teasing masquerade, concealing more than revealing. In the end, we may not gain any personal insights. For all our attempts to grasp the specific, it may be something more universal that moves us: the mysteries of human expression, connection, and understanding.

### Portrait Activity

This lesson shows how two artists describe themselves through self-portraiture. Students will write a poem about themselves using traditional and nontraditional styles of self-portraiture. For the poem activity, choose between the poem format options included in the lesson plan or select your own format.

**Teacher Prep:** Familiarize yourself with the two self-portraits listed above from the exhibition “Reflections/Refractions: Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century.”

**Warm-up:** Define “self-portrait” and “characteristics” with students.

### Portrait Reading Formula for Students:

1. Look at the two self-portraits by Childe Hassam and Robert Arneson. Analyze each portrait using the *Reading Portraiture Guide for Educators*.
2. Gather biographical facts from the portrait’s symbols, and construct the context of the sitter’s life.
3. Use web resources and available books to research the sitter’s life and historical contributions.
4. Share and compare the facts gathered from the portrait with the researched facts.

*\*Each of these steps can be done as a class, in small groups, or individually.\**

Have students analyze the two self-portraits using the *Reading Portraiture Guide for Educators*. In addition to the questions suggested in the guide, have students consider and discuss their answers to the following questions:

- A self-portrait describes the characteristics of the artist. What are some characteristics of Childe Hassam, as described in his self-portrait? What characteristics does *Brick* describe about Robert Arneson?
- Do you think both artworks should be considered self-portraits? Why do they qualify as self-portraits? Why not?
- How would *Brick* be different as a self-portrait if Arneson had not stamped his name on it?

### Poem Activity

- Have students write a poem that describes their characteristics. Student may choose to describe their appearance, their personality, or a combination of both. They may also include autobiographical anecdotes that describe events that had significant impact on them. Students could begin by brainstorming to form a list of adjectives that describe themselves or by answering the questions on the Self-Portrait Poem Warm-Up Activity worksheet. The teacher may choose to have the students write a poem using:
  - the Bio Poem worksheet
  - the Abstractions worksheet. Students write a poem describing themselves as an inanimate object, in a manner similar to Robert Arneson’s *Brick*
  - a format of the teacher’s choosing.
- Allow students the opportunity to share their poems with the class. Which do you think can more effectively communicate someone’s personality: a poem or a portrait? Or can they be equally effective? Explain your answer.

**Extension:** Have students write their poems without including their names. Then, have students exchange poems and try to guess the author of their classmates’ poems. Ask students what they learned about their

classmates from their self-portrait poems. What else might they have included if they were writing a portrait poem about their classmate?

### **Options for Younger Audiences**

After studying and comparing the portraits:

- Have students write an acrostic poem using their name. Each letter of their name will begin a word or phrase describing one of their characteristics.
- Give each student a piece of construction paper. Have them write their name on the paper, then decorate it with words or images that describe them, such as their favorite food, favorite toy, people who are important in their lives, etc.

### **Web Resources**

“Acrostic Poems.” *Read Write Think*

<http://www.readwritethink.org/MATERIALS/ACROSTIC/>

Other Self-Portrait Poem Lessons with examples

[http://www.regionvavid.org/user\\_docs/Resource/Self-Portrait%20&%20Biopoem.doc](http://www.regionvavid.org/user_docs/Resource/Self-Portrait%20&%20Biopoem.doc)

### **National Standards of Learning**

Language Arts Standards

NL-ENG.K-12.4 Communication Skills

NL-ENG.K-12.12 Applying Language Skills

Visual Arts Standard

NA-VA.5-8.6 Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines

### **Key Terms**

**Acrostic Poem:** A poem that uses each letter in a topic word to begin each line. All lines of the poem should relate to or describe the topic word

**Ceramics:** The art or technology of making objects of clay that is treated by firing

**Characteristic:** A feature that helps to identify, tell apart, or describe recognizably; a distinguishing mark or trait

**Self-portrait:** A likeness of a person, especially one showing the face, which is created by that person. Can also be a verbal picture or description of oneself

# Self-Portrait Poem

## Warm-Up Activity

Answer these questions to brainstorm about ideas for your self-portrait poem.

What do you like?

What do you hate?

What do you fear?

What makes you happy?

What makes you sad?

What do you need in life? (people, places, objects, feelings, etc.)

Who is important to you? Why?

What do you love to do?

What do you want to do when you graduate from high school? Why?

Source: [http://www.regionavid.org/user\\_docs/Resource/Self-Portrait%20&%20Biopoem.doc](http://www.regionavid.org/user_docs/Resource/Self-Portrait%20&%20Biopoem.doc)



## ***ABSTRACTIONS***

Identify the characteristics (distinctive elements) held in common between an animate object (you) and inanimate objects (listed).

If I was a piece of furniture, I would be \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_.

If I was a type of weather, I would be \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_.

If I was a type of flower, I would be \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_.

If I was an instrument, I would be \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_.

If I was a piece of music, I would be \_\_\_\_\_ by \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_.

If I was a scent, I would be \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_.

If I was a piece of fabric, I would be \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_.

If I was a music note, I would be \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_.

If I was a shade of blue, I would be \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_.

If I was a primary color, I would be \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_.

If I was a tree, I would be \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_.

If I was a vegetable, I would be \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_.

If I was a fruit, I would be \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_.

If I was a dance step, I would be \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_.

If I was a beverage, I would be \_\_\_\_\_

because \_\_\_\_\_.

## **Childe Hassam 1859–1935**

Frederick Childe Hassam grew up in Boston, Massachusetts. After two years of college, he left to join the accounting department of the publishers Little, Brown, and Company. He was advised to quit after only a few weeks, however; his supervisor witnessed his drawing ability and recognized its superiority to Hassam's aptitude for accounting. Hassam instead worked as an illustrator for magazines and newspapers while studying art.

Hassam's paintings depict the cityscapes and landscapes of his travels. In 1883 he made his first visit to Europe, where he viewed J.M.W. Turner's paintings in London. Turner's Romantic landscapes composed of kinetic brushstrokes are considered the forerunners of impressionism. Hassam moved to Paris in 1886 to study art at the Académie Julian. He was more interested in the local art scene than in the traditional realistic painting style being taught at the Académie, however. He and his wife returned to the United States in 1889 and settled in New York City. Throughout his life he often traveled to Europe and spent many summers at the New England seaside.

Hassam created this self-portrait in 1933, toward the end of his life. It is a small watercolor and graphite artwork, approximately 9 by 3 inches. He depicts himself on the beach in East Hampton, New York, where he spent much of his time after buying a home there in 1920. Hassam is holding paper and pencil, possibly sketching his own self-portrait.

**Source:**

Marcia B. Deneen, "Childe Hassam," *American National Biography Online*, <http://www.anb.org>.

**Robert Arneson**  
**1930–1992**

Robert Arneson is considered the father of pop-art ceramics. Employing clay as his primary medium, he used everyday objects as subject matter in his artworks. Born to a working-class family in Benicia, California, Arneson demonstrated a talent for drawing at an early age, and his family encouraged him to develop his abilities. In high school, Arneson drew cartoons for the local newspaper. His aspiration at the time was to be a professional cartoonist. Self-taught, he took his first art classes while attending Marin College. At California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC), where he spent his latter years of college, he took classes in many different mediums such as metalwork, watercolors (at which he excelled), and one class in ceramics. He nearly failed his college ceramics class, earning a D, primarily for his poor attendance.

After college he took a job as a high school art teacher at Menlo-Atherton High School. The school needed a ceramics teacher, so he spent his spare time learning the craft to be able to teach with authority. In the process, he discovered a love for the medium. After a few years of teaching high school and taking summer ceramics classes at CCAC, he applied to Mills College, where he attended graduate school. The ceramics students were treated differently from the other art school students. There was a divide between the “fine arts” and “arts and crafts”: clay was considered an industrial material for decorative pots, unlike paint, which was a material used to create artistic expression. Arneson continued to teach throughout his life, steadily gaining renown for his pop art ceramics.

Much of Arneson’s art is about the history of ceramics and its separateness from the history of fine arts. His art is also heavily influenced by the objects, places, and situations that surrounded him.

Bricks are present in many of Arneson’s artworks. He cast *Brick* himself in 1975. To Arneson, the brick is the “basic element of all structure, production and art. The artist who creates with clay is inescapably tied to history and culture.”

**Sources:**

Robert Arneson and Helen Williams Drutt, *Robert Arneson, Self-Portraits: March 23–April 28, 1979*, Moore College of Art (Philadelphia: The College, 1979)

Robert Arneson and Leo G. Mazow, *Arneson and the Object* (University Park, Penn.: Palmer Museum of Art, 2004).

Robert Arneson interviews, August 14– 15, 1981, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.