

Looking at her Good Side: Profile of a Stranger

A Lesson Plan for the Classroom

Hung Liu, "Chinese Profile II"; American, born in China; oil on canvas; 80"x80";

About the Artwork

The source for this painting was the "Chinese-type" documentary profile *portraits* made from 1868-72 by the American John Thomson for his book "Through China with a Camera," a photographic essay that documented "exotic" Chinese people in the 19th century. "Chinese Profile II" offers the viewer a large profile image of a woman with an enormous decorative bun of hair cantilevered from the back of her head. It bestows monumental significance upon an anonymous individual rendering her heroic. The image works as a gesture of cultural critique of both the Western view of Chinese culture and of the Chinese view of women.

As an artist, Liu sees herself as a witness – to history, current events, and social injustice.

About the Artist

Hung Liu's paintings grapple with issues of gender, identity and the challenge of reconciling disparate cultures.

In China, in the late 1960's, as a result of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, all universities and schools were closed: an entire generation of educated young people was sent to the countryside to be re-educated by the new ruling classes of workers, poor and lower middle-class peasants, and soldiers. Hung Liu was sent to a village in the north of Beijing, where she worked in the fields harvesting corn and rice. During her stay in the countryside, Hung Liu used a friend's German camera to teach herself the rudiments of photography by snapping pictures of villagers. Nearly four years would pass before Liu was able to return to Beijing and pursue a career in art. By 1984, well-grounded in the fundamentals of socialist realism and classical painting, Hung Liu arrived in the United States and entered the University of California, San Diego. Now an American citizen, she is a Professor of Studio Art at Mills College in Oakland.

Discussion Questions

Who might this person be? What do you see that makes you say that? What can you say about the colors and the textures in this painting?

What are some reasons Hung Liu would prefer to use 19th-century photographs instead of contemporary ones?

How do you think Hung Liu may feel about Chinese and American culture and about the mixing of two cultures?

Vocabulary

Profile: a human head or face represented or seen in a side view.

Portrait: a painting or sculpture that represents a likeness of people or animals

Lesson Objectives

Grades 1-4

- Identify colors and textures in the painting.
- Discuss different kinds of portraits.

Grades 5-7

- Consider the choice of an old photograph by a contemporary artist.
- Identify those aspects of the artwork that relate to an historical period.

Grades 8-12

- Examine contemporary art that expresses the experience of multiple, sometimes conflicting cultural identities.
- Examine the images and stereotypes of women addressed by Hung Liu's paintings.
- Discuss how stereotypes operate in our society.
- Explore the role of personal and social context in the creation and understanding of the work.

Activities

Art

Have students make a self-portrait or portrait of a family member or friend, emphasizing the relationship between two cultures. If a student feels that he or she has only one culture to draw on, pair the student up with a classmate from a different background to complete the assignment together.

Students can create written portraits, do a photo essay, cut out newspaper and magazine pictures, make drawings, or a combination of all of these in scrapbook or album form. The cultural portraits could be presented to and discussed by the rest of the class.

Art activity satisfies Visual and Performing Arts Standards for the State of California, grades 1-12, in areas such as Artistic Perception, Creative Expression, and Historical and Cultural Content.

Language Arts

Have students pretend to interview the woman in "Chinese Profile II". *Who is she? What is she doing? Where is she going? Why is she dressed the way she is?*

Have a group of students create a journal entry for the woman depicted in "Chinese Profile II," dated from when the original photograph was taken. Have another group of students create a journal entry for the photographer. Compare and contrast the two texts.

Language Arts activity satisfies English Language Art Standards for the State of California, grades 1-12, in areas such as Reading Comprehension, Writing Strategies, and Writing Applications.

Math

Consider the size of the artwork. Have the students measure a canvas, calculate the area, and evaluate the size. The students can also calculate the ratio needed to enlarge a 19th-century photograph to the size of the canvas.

Math activity satisfies Mathematics Content Standards for the State of California in areas such as Measurement and Geometry.

Social Studies

Use Hung Liu's "Chinese Profile II" as a model for a project on ethnic stereotypes in the mass media.

Social Studies activity satisfies History-Social Science standards in areas such as Historical Interpretation.