

## Philosophy @ The Virtual Art Museum: Portraits

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**John Singer Sargent, *Portrait of Madame X*, 1884,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art**

1. What strikes you most prominently about this portrait?
2. What attitude towards Madame X does the painting convey?
3. Do you think this is a beautiful painting? What accounts for its beauty?
4. If you discovered that this painting caused a scandal, how would that change your understanding of it?



**Henri Matisse, *Woman with Hat*, 1905,  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art**

1. What features of this portrait stand out?
2. What attitude towards the woman in the portrait does the painting convey?
3. If you discovered that the woman was Matisse's wife, how would that affect your understanding of the painting?
4. Is this painting beautiful? Is Mme. Matisse beautiful? Does that matter?

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**Kehinde Wiley, *Michael Borges Study*, 2008,  
Mount Holyoke College Art Museum**

1. What strikes you about this portrait?
2. What do you make of the flowers painted in a cartoon-like style that surround the man in the picture?
3. What attitude does the sitter have in this portrait?
4. Does the painting express a specific attitude about the man in the portrait?
5. Is your attitude toward the painting changed when you know that it is one of a series of watercolors that the artist painted of men of African descent and that this painting is of a man in Brazil?



**Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self Portrait*, 1660,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art**

1. What features of this self-portrait stand out for you?
2. What expression does Rembrandt have in the portrait?
3. Is this portrait beautiful?

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## Philosophy Questions:

1. Which of the portraits/self-portraits you looked at is your favorite? What makes it your favorite? Why do you like it better than the other ones?
2. Do you think that painting is beautiful? Which features of the painting contribute most to its beauty? For example, the colors, the detailed representation of the person, its accuracy? Would you say that all works that have that or those features are beautiful?
3. Can a painting be beautiful even if its subject is not? That is, if the person who is featured in the portrait is not beautiful or handsome, can the painting still be? What is the relationship between the person portrayed and the portrait itself?
4. Is beauty the only term you would use to praise your favorite portrait? Try to think of other terms that evaluate that painting but that go beyond merely calling it beautiful? For example, might you praise your favorite portrait for being accurate, expressive, intimate, etc.? Are these other terms important to your understanding of the painting?
5. Some philosophers maintain that our knowledge of our own minds is different than our knowledge of the minds of others. Do you think this is true? That is, do you know your own state of mind in a different way than you know the state of mind of others? Is your knowledge of yourself more certain than your knowledge of others? In what ways if any? Are there features of a self-portrait that distinguish it from a portrait of someone else? Are these related to the difference between self-knowledge and knowledge of other people's minds?
6. Jean-Paul Sartre, the famous Existentialist philosopher, thought that the "look of the other" was always objectifying. Based on the paintings you have looked at, do you think that painters necessarily objectify their subjects? Do we always objectify others? Is that necessarily a bad thing? Does this claim apply any differently to a self-portrait? Justify your answers.
7. *Portrait of Madame X* upset many viewers because it violated their standard of decency. Do you think that this makes this a bad work? Should works of art have to be consistent with a community's standards of taste? Should obscene works be censored?

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