

Audio Tour: *How do paintings tell stories about people and places?*

The Jewish Museum

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600. Abshalom Jac Lahav, *Anne Frank*, 2007

JAC LAHAV: I was looking at Jewish identity: How do we represent Jewish people? How do we think of ourselves as Jewish people? and all I could think of was this Adam Sandler song which talked about celebrity Jews in entertainment. I was looking at a slightly deeper, intellectual Jewish history. So I started out with Anne Frank.

I'm Jac Lahav. I'm an artist in Lyme, Connecticut. The work is a portrait of Anne Frank taken from a very iconic image of her as a young girl.

NARRATOR: This painting began as part of a larger series called *48 Jews*—a reference to German painter Gerhard Richter's *48 Portraits*.

To reproduce this famous photograph, Lahav used a technique from the Renaissance: sketching in burnt umber, and then erasing some of the brown with cloth, resulting in this blurred image you see before you. What aspects of Anne Frank's life, the artist asks, have been blurred, or erased?

JAC LAHAV: If we talk about Anne Frank, we have to talk about her diary. There are three versions of it. There was her original diary, and then she edited her own version. And then her father took it and published it, and that was also edited, taken out some of the wording that was talking about her sexuality.

So I am making an artwork that's a representation of Anne Frank, who is represented also by her own work, who was then edited. And so we have these questions of who is this person, what is identity, and what is a work of art?

601. Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, *Self-Portrait*, 1814–16

HOLLIE ECKER: You see the artist presenting himself, showing what he could offer you. He could paint a landscape of your property or your estate. He could show you in a classical way, like the Greeks or the Romans. He could even put in elements from the Renaissance or the Baroque period, showing angels or putti. He shows himself confident and ready to go to work.

My name is Hollie Ecker and I'm an educator here at the Jewish Museum. I often think of self-portraits as a way for artists to kind of show: "Look, I've made it." But I also love to think of self-portraits—any self-portrait—as a business card for the services that I can do.

We are looking at the artist. His name was Moritz Daniel Oppenheim. He was German and he was Jewish. He grew up in the ghetto in Germany. When he was 17 years old, he was the first German-Jewish person to enter into the School of Fine Arts.

Something that I love is the way that Oppenheim places himself in a spatial conversation with the other figures in the painting. Oppenheim is shown in this contrapposto, or counterpose, with hips sticking out on one side, shoulders to the other, almost making an S curve. It's echoed in the figure behind him, the plaster figure of this naked woman. Their arms are in conversation with each other, the way their fingers curl, the way their hands gesture, hers to the body and his to his objects: his palette, his measuring stick. He has shown himself as a work of art.

The Jewish Museum has 63 works of Oppenheim's. He worked for one of the most wealthy families in all of Germany, the Rothschild family, as a portrait painter. But what's interesting about Oppenheim is that non-Jewish patrons also solicited his services. I think perhaps this is a work about the ever-changing definition of who gets to be an artist.

602. Alex Bradley Cohen, *Parents #4*, 2022

ALEX BRADLEY COHEN: I'm Alex Bradley Cohen, a painter from Chicago. The painting illustrates a moment during the pandemic. My dad is reading the news on his phone, my mom is talking to him, and through the gazebo it's me playing basketball. None of us are looking or directly engaging with each other, and I think we were all finding different ways to cope with this shared experience. I was cooped up in my apartment, and just being able to shoot some hoops by myself was a way for me to relieve tension. My dad was really much obsessed with the news. And then my mom, she's talking and no one's listening to her.

NARRATOR: Stuck at home, the disconnected members of Cohen's family appear to be almost floating in the composition, much like the figures in a Marc Chagall painting—one of the artists who inspires Cohen.

ALEX BRADLEY COHEN: My mother's father was a painter from Vitebsk, which is the same place as Marc Chagall. So there's that relationship that I have with Chagall, depicting figures that are uprooted. My grandfather being put in a oven to hide him from the Nazis, and then immigrating to America and coming to Chicago, it's very similar to my grandmother and my grandfather on my dad's side during the Great Migration, coming from Memphis and Mississippi to Chicago.

NARRATOR: Jacob Lawrence's 60-panel *Migration Series* is another reference point for Cohen; so too are the social realist paintings of Ben Shahn.

ALEX BRADLEY COHEN: I paint scenes of labor and camaraderie, relationships between workers, people who share labor together. It's like Ben Shahn and Jacob Lawrence. When it's Jewish, it's also Black.

603. Raphael Soyer, *Dancing Lesson*, 1926

HOLLIE ECKER: My name is Hollie Ecker and I'm an educator here at the Jewish Museum. The title of this work is the *Dancing Lesson*. It was painted in 1926 by the artist Raphael Soyer. He was a Russian immigrant who moved to New York.

We're looking at twins, Rebecca and Moses, who are the dancers. Israel, their younger brother, he's playing a harmonica. He's accompanying this dance lesson and giving them the beat to follow.

It's their mother to the left. It's like she has two dots for her eyes, like Charlie Brown. She couldn't seem less interested, her head resting in her hand. She's holding a newspaper, and it's actually written in Yiddish. Their father sits, arms crossed, almost angry or in dismay. And then the [chuckles] woman to his other side with red hair and a green shirt—is she sleeping? Is she falling off the couch?

That frame, with two people in black-and-white, it situates us further in history. We're looking at the grandparents, who are dressed in a very traditional way. We see the black-and-white repeated in the newspaper, which links them visually. The mother and father, it's almost as if their resistance to watching their children do this American-style dance is a direct link to them holding onto their traditions.

The dance becomes a symbol of assimilation, of learning a new culture, of the future generations. And in a really interesting way, this painting is in itself a timeline, a trajectory of family history from the grandparents to the parents to the children. I love that it goes from black-and-white to color. It's such a great visual symbol of moving from the past to the present.

604. R. B. Kitaj, *Rousseau*, 1990

JANE ROYAL: My name is Jane Royal and I'm an educator here at the Jewish Museum.

It seems kind of like a puzzle. There's so many things going on that you're not exactly sure what you're supposed to look at.

The colors don't make sense. Look at the trees. They are red. There are also all of these bright blue pieces floating around. The place in which the figure sits, it looks like a bunch of boards. But if we think about the idea that this is such a flat space— the trees look flat, everything looks flat— if you took a seat and you flattened it out, it would look just like this.

NARRATOR: The man on the bench is curious as well.

JANE ROYAL: He seems as much a puzzle as everything else. He doesn't really look like he got dressed carefully when he went out of his house this morning. And what's he doing? The work is called *Rousseau*, and it's thought that this work is about the 18th century philosopher named Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He believed that nature was a healing place where people could go to meditate and think. So perhaps Rousseau is out here and he is gesturing at something we can't see. Maybe he's talking to the birds.

NARRATOR: At the far right you'll see the logo of Penguin Books, perhaps in reference to one of Rousseau's books. R. B. Kitaj would actually borrow the title of Rousseau's autobiography,

The Confessions, for his own, the posthumously published *Confessions of an Old Jewish Painter*. Kitaj's decision to depict a writer and philosopher may reflect his own practice of contemplating and writing about his identity as an artist and as a Jewish person.

JANE ROYAL: Kitaj was born into a very secular family. And as Kitaj grew older, it became important for him to explore his Jewish heritage. And this is a work from late in his life. Kitaj actually wrote two treatises, two manifestos, where he talked about the diaspora and what it meant to be a part of that. Not necessarily right in the heart of Judaism, but at the edges.

605. Lee Krasner, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1930

MARK EPSTEIN: It almost seems like we've stumbled upon Lee Krasner in a private moment where she doesn't want to be disturbed.

NARRATOR: Jewish Museum educator Mark Joshua Epstein.

MARK EPSTEIN: Lee Krasner made this painting as a way of gaining entrance to a class at the National Academy School of Design. She was around 22 years old. She must have had a mirror set up so that she could see herself. She is looking directly at the viewer. She is not smiling. She looks almost stern. She seems really determined.

When I look at this painting, I think about all of the decisions that Krasner is having to make in very quick succession. She's painting both wet into wet and also wet into dry and probably dry into dry. But especially with wet into wet, she's having to really make choices as her arm moves across the canvas, very quick choices about putting in highlights that will kind of meld with the color below them, putting in shadows. But she's capturing this moment of stillness.

Lee Krasner was the daughter of immigrants from what is now present-day Ukraine. I don't necessarily think immigrant parents are cheering their daughter on becoming a painter in the backyard. When we see her face, when we see the boldness, maybe we can attribute it somewhat to that, that she is forging her own path. This is a particularly feminist act to make this painting, to cast yourself in the role of an artist, a role that in 1930 in the U.S. was largely occupied by men. We're seeing her out from anybody's shadow when she's only 22 years old.

606. Edouard Vuillard, *Lucy Hessel Reading*, 1913

MARK EPSTEIN: This is one of my favorite paintings in the Jewish Museum collection. We don't even see the face of the subject. We're almost seeing more a portrait of an interior, and a portrait of a vibe.

My name is Mark Joshua Epstein. I'm a painter and an educator at the Jewish Museum.

Lucy Hessel was a dear friend of Vuillard's and the wife of the artist's primary dealer. The Hessels were Jewish. Lucy Hessel was the subject of about 100 Vuillard paintings. This portrait is more intimate than most even though we don't see the subject's face. She's not looking at us. She's not looking at Vuillard. She's just doing what she's doing. And he's capturing her in an almost private moment that she lets him reveal to us, the viewer. She's dressed really comfortably. That in itself is a flex. She's saying to us that this is not that big a deal that she's being painted by this very important painter. It feels like she's in a world of her own, and we are just a fly on the wall, witnessing this moment.

The painting features Lucy Hessel reading in this beautiful very Vuillard space that is so animated with brushwork that things like the bed, the walls, the door, the furniture, feel like they are vibrating with energy. We can picture the painter moving around the canvas and he doesn't settle for even a moment. He's like a dragonfly on the water. Little bits of paint everywhere coalesce to this extremely caring, beautiful but also vibrational painting.

607. Eleanor Hepburn Small Fisk, *View of Central Park from Warburg House*, pre-1937

NARRATOR: Artist Eleanor Hepburn Small Fisk was commissioned by the Warburg family to paint a series of interiors of the rooms in their mansion, today the Jewish Museum. Frieda Schiff Warburg donated her family home at 1109 Fifth Avenue to house the museum in 1944, and it opened to the public in 1947. This painting depicts the view from a window on the west side of the building. Educator Jane Royal.

JANE ROYAL: We have a bit of a bird's-eye view. And that's a very interesting perspective.

We are looking out at Central Park. In the far distance you can see buildings. Look at the cars on the street. Those are not the yellow taxis that you'll see out the window now. And you see that there are a lot less people in the park.

The season is very clear. There are no leaves on the trees. We notice that little figure group down there at the bottom, a nanny pushing a carriage with the little kid running around. They seem to have on coats. There are birds flying all over the place. It's just at the time when the leaves have fallen off the trees and it hasn't quite turned to winter yet.

NARRATOR: You can also tell the time of day. Take a look at the green car on Fifth Avenue, which has just exited the park and is driving east.

JANE ROYAL: The shadow is on the back of it. Because the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, it must be in the morning.

NARRATOR: Before you leave this floor, take a moment to look out the window in the room nearby, just past the Hanukkah lamps and Touch Exploration Wall.

JANE ROYAL: You can think about how things have changed, what you would paint. What would you put into your work, and what would you want to make sure people understood about what you saw out the window?