

# Unit 1: Self-Portraits

## Moritz Daniel Oppenheim

### *Self-Portrait*



**Moritz Daniel Oppenheim** (German, 1800–1882)

***Self-Portrait***, 1814–16

Oil on canvas, 38 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 32 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (98.3 × 83.5 cm)

Anonymous gift in memory of Curtis Hereld; Esther Leah Ritz Bequest;  
Fine Arts Acquisitions Committee Fund; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. George Jaffin,  
by exchange; and Abraham Aaroni and Ruth Taub Bequests, 2008–137

## Getting Started

- Based on this young man’s facial expression, pose, and demeanor, what are some adjectives that describe him?
  - What attributes or objects have been included in this portrait, and what do they tell us about the subject?
  - Take a close look at the sketch hanging on the wall behind the artist’s head. What do you see?
  - What does this young man’s clothing suggest about his class or status? About when this painting was made?
  - Describe the artist’s approach to painting (*Naturalistic/realistic; use of shading to give the illusion of three-dimensional form; small, barely visible brushstrokes.*)
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## Looking Closely

In this self-portrait, Oppenheim positions himself in the center of the canvas, his face the focal point of the **composition** and his body cropped just above the knees. He is young, with fair skin, ruddy cheeks, and a mop of auburn curls. He gazes directly at us, and his slightly pursed, smiling lips and relaxed and informal pose make him look content and self-assured. He is dressed in a white shirt and black coat with coattails, and a patterned, rust-colored kerchief is knotted around his neck. He leans against a pedestal that holds a plaster cast of a classical sculpture. His left elbow rests on the pedestal, and in his left hand, he holds brushes and a **palette** on which are arrayed some of the colors used in this painting. His right hand rests against his hip, and he holds a **mahl stick**. He is shown standing in the corner of a room, most likely his own studio. On the wall behind him hangs a small painting of a cherub and a pencil sketch showing three figures. At left, a window provides a view to the outside world.

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## About the Work

This work is one of the earliest self-portraits painted by an academically trained Jewish artist. Oppenheim presents himself dressed as a dandy in a confident, relaxed pose—a young and fashionable man about town. He holds his palette, brushes, and mahl stick and is surrounded by the hallmarks of his profession: a plaster cast of an ancient sculpture that he probably sketched; an oil sketch of a cherub that resembles a painting by the Italian Renaissance artist Raphael; and a pencil sketch on gray paper. This pencil sketch contains an additional self-portrait. Oppenheim appears in the center as his teacher, Conrad Westermayr, holds out a drawing pen (on the left) and his father hands over a quill pen (on the right)—a representation of the profound influence these two men had on the artist.

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## About the Artist

Moritz Daniel Oppenheim’s career epitomizes the journey of German Jewry from traditional life to modernity. The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century and its Jewish counterpart, the Haskalah, resulted in the emancipation of Jews and their subsequent entry into professional fields previously closed to them. Born in the ghetto of Hanau, Oppenheim received a traditional Jewish education but also attended a Christian school to learn Latin and Greek and studied academic painting, opportunities previously unavailable to Jews. Even during his lifetime, a professional career as an artist was viable only for Jews prepared to convert to Christianity. Oppenheim withstood the pressure to convert and succeeded in becoming a prominent artist. As a portrait painter in Frankfurt, he received commissions from both Jews and non-Jews, including many intellectuals, businessmen, artists, and politicians. He also painted history paintings and scenes of daily life. He became known as the “thinking painter,” an artist who prioritized content over style.

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## Sources

Berger, Maurice, et al. *Masterworks of the Jewish Museum*. Exh. cat. New York: The Jewish Museum, 2004, pp. 42–43.

*Culture and Continuity: The Jewish Journey*. The Jewish Museum, New York, January 2, 2009–February 12, 2017.

Goodman, Susan. *The Emergence of Jewish Artists in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Exh. cat. New York: The Jewish Museum, 2001.

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## Further Discussion

- The sculpture and the small painting in the **background** of this self-portrait refer to the way artists were trained in European art schools in the 1800s. Students copied ancient sculptures from Greece and Rome, as well as paintings by artists of the Italian Renaissance. Greco-Roman sculptures and Renaissance paintings were considered the pinnacle of great art. Why do you think Oppenheim included these objects in his self-portrait?
  - What **attributes** or objects would you include in your self-portrait to convey your interests or achievements?
  - We do not see anything in this self-portrait to indicate Oppenheim’s Jewish background. It is not clear whether he is deliberately omitting his Jewish identity or simply emphasizing the most important aspects of who he is. Think about situations in your own life. How do various aspects of your identity express (or not express) themselves in different situations and with different people?
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# Lee Krasner

## *Self-Portrait*



Lee Krasner (American, 1908–1984)

*Self-Portrait*, c. 1930.

Oil on linen, 30 1/8 × 25 1/8 in. (76.5 × 63.8 cm)

Esther Leah Ritz Bequest; B. Gerald Cantor, Lady Kathleen Epstein, and Louis E. and Rosalyn M. Shecter Gifts, by exchange; Fine Arts Acquisitions Committee Fund; and Miriam Handler Fund, 2008–32

Lee Krasner (b. Lena Krassner) was the daughter of immigrants who fled anti-Semitism in Russia. Krasner studied at the National Academy School of Design in New York, where this self-portrait was the result of an assignment required to advance to the next level of study in a life-drawing class. Krasner painted it in the backyard of her parents' Long Island home, nailing a mirror to a nearby tree in order to work from her own reflection. She depicts herself with the tools of her trade: her canvas, brushes, rag, and artist's smock. The painting captures a determined-looking young woman, just twenty-two years old, embarking on the difficult path of trying to become a professional artist. Krasner was sometimes overshadowed by her husband, the painter Jackson Pollock. At the time of her death, however, in 1984, a critic in the *New York Times* declared her "a major, independent artist of the pioneer Abstract Expressionist generation, whose stirring work ranks high among that produced here in the last half-century."

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## Sources

Kleeblatt, Norman, and Stephen Brown, eds. *From the Margins: Lee Krasner/Norman Lewis, 1945–1952*. Exh. cat. New York: The Jewish Museum, 2014.

*Shifting the Gaze: Painting and Feminism*. Exh. didactics. The Jewish Museum, New York, September 12, 2010–January 30, 2011.

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## Discussion Ideas and Questions

- What details in this self-portrait establish Krasner's identity as an artist?
- Describe Krasner's facial expression and gaze. What do they suggest about her personality? What do they suggest about her self-perception and identity as an artist? (*With her intense gaze fixed on her own reflection, she seems to be examining her features in order to capture her likeness on the canvas.*)
- Describe how Krasner handles the paint. Think about her brushstrokes and the textures she creates. Describe how she treats light and shadow.
- Why do you think Krasner painted this self-portrait outdoors? What are the advantages of an outdoor setting? What are the challenges?

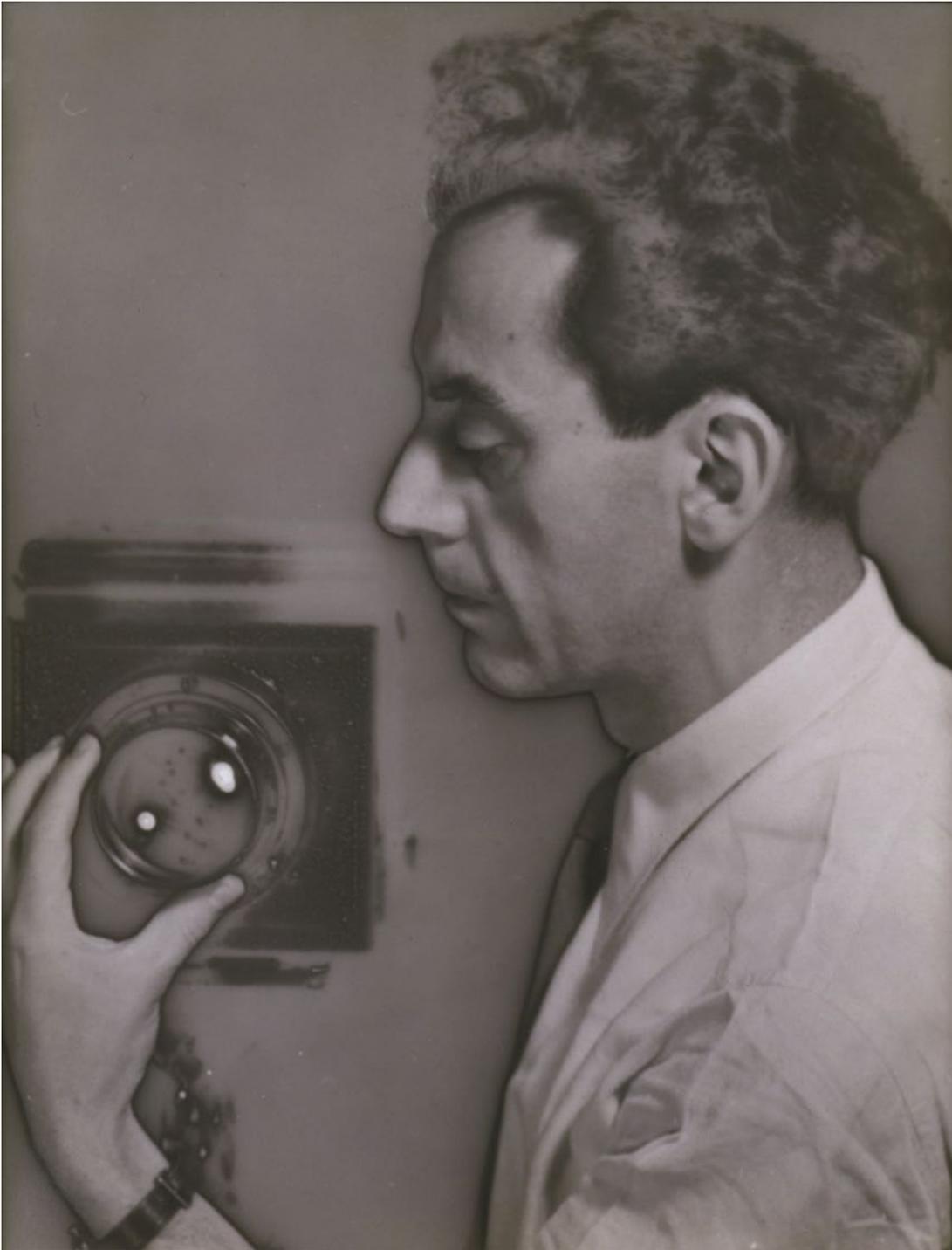
- Krasner said the following about this self-portrait: "I am often asked, 'Who did that portrait of you?' I think it was the first self-portrait I painted. It was done in my early twenties during summer vacation while I was at the National Academy. I hung a mirror on a tree and spent the summer working on the portrait . . . I think I'm still dealing with the same polarities that are in this early portrait."

- What polarities do you think Krasner is referring to? What polarities do you see in yourself? What aspects of your identity might be perceived as opposites?

- Compare Oppenheim's and Krasner's self-portraits. How do they handle paint differently? (*Consider their brushstrokes and use of texture.*) Compare their facial expressions, gazes, and poses. What are some shared choices they made in representing themselves? What are the notable differences? (*Consider the significance of a woman and a Jewish man, each belonging to a group traditionally excluded from western European art, creating self-portraits that assert their status as professional artists. Consider that each portrait is fairly traditional in its approach, i.e., painted in oil on canvas and naturalistic.*)

# Man Ray

## *Untitled (Self-Portrait with Camera)*



**Man Ray**, (American, 1890–1976)

*Untitled (Self-Portrait with Camera)*, 1930, printed c. 1935

Solarized gelatin silver print, 4  $\frac{3}{4}$  × 3  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (12.1 × 8.9 cm).

Photography Acquisitions Committee Fund, Horace W.

Goldsmith Fund, and Judith and Jack Stern Gift, 2004-16

Man Ray (b. Emmanuel Radnitzky) was an innovative American photographer and painter. In this black-and-white photograph, he shows himself at work. We see him in profile, his gaze focused on the camera as he adjusts the lens. In a setting otherwise devoid of details, his face appears to glow. To achieve this effect, he used **solarization**, a technique in which film is exposed to bright light during the development process (normally done in a pitch-black “dark” room). This has the effect of reversing some of the highlights and shadows. The camera in the image is the very one Man Ray used to take the photograph, creating this self-portrait by photographing his reflection in a mirror.

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## Sources

Klein, Mason. *Collective Perspectives: New Acquisitions Celebrate the Centennial*. Exh. cat. New York: The Jewish Museum, 2004.

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## Discussion Ideas and Questions

- What **mood**/tone does solarization lend to his self-portrait? Why do you think Man Ray used solarization instead of a traditional photographic development process?
- Compare the gazes of Oppenheim, Krasner, and Man Ray in their self-portraits. Who or what are they each looking at? (*Oppenheim: the viewer; Krasner: herself and perhaps the viewer; Man Ray: his camera.*) How does the object of each artist’s gaze affect your interpretation of his/her self-portrait and identity as an artist?
- Compare the use of background space in the three self-portraits. How does each artist make use of the background? Does it add to, distract from, or help illuminate your perception of each figure?
- All three artists show themselves with the tools of their trade. What do you infer from this choice? Consider practical and **symbolic** interpretations. Taken together with the artists’ facial expressions, body language, and other details in the paintings, how does this choice convey each artist’s feelings about his/her chosen profession?