The Jewish Museum is located on Fifth Avenue and East 92nd Street in New York City. Our exhibitions and programs explore the intersection of art and Jewish culture for people of all backgrounds. The Museum’s collection spans 4,000 years and includes nearly 30,000 works of art, ceremonial objects, media, and antiquities from around the world.

Use this lesson to support a discussion of identity and portraiture. Explore related works of art in the Museum’s collection listed at the end of this lesson. For a more extensive look at portraits, visit our online collection and Portraiture and Identity Educator Resource.
Larry Rivers, *Portrait of Vera List*, c. 1965

Find the work on the museum website [here](#)

Paint, charcoal, wood, tape, Plexiglas, and aluminum window frame  
32 × 27 × 4 in. (81.3 × 68.6 × 10.2 cm), Gift of Vera G. List, 1984-21

About the Artwork

Larry Rivers often combines painting, sculpture, printmaking, poetry, and music in his work. In this portrait of Vera List, an art collector, Rivers creates an assemblage using painting, drawing, sculpture, collage, and found objects. Rivers was interested in the idea that paintings are windows to the world. Rather than using a canvas, he constructed this portrait of Vera List on actual window panes, inviting the viewer into an imaginary world. Sliding the window panes up and down reveals different images. Because the figure is abstract, with a fragmented body and partially obscured facial features, Rivers does not reveal his subject completely. A sense of mystery remains.

Discussion Questions

1. Identify the different materials you see in this portrait. How do you think the artist created this work? Have you used a similar technique to make art?

2. What is the focal point of this portrait? Where is your eye drawn to when you look at this image?

3. Describe the sitter’s facial expression and pose. How do you think she feels? What might she be thinking?
4. Describe the background. Where do you think the sitter is? Is she inside, looking out the window, or outside looking in? How does Vera List both blend into and stand apart from the background? How does the background help you to understand who she is?

5. How much does a portrait have to resemble the person depicted in order to be considered a portrait? Can a portrait be symbolic or abstract? Would you like an artist to create your portrait in an abstract way like this? Why or why not?

Activities

1. Create your own found object portrait! Choose a person whose portrait you wish to create. It can be someone you know or an imaginary figure. Find a piece of paper or cardboard to use as a base and sketch their face using pencil, crayons, colored pencils, or markers. Gather some found objects around your home—like cardboard, cotton balls, string, buttons, bottle caps, or paper clips. Glue the found objects on to the base to make the person’s body and you will have your own portrait inspired by Portrait of Vera List. For an extra challenge, try making your portrait 3D!

2. What do you see outside of your window? Grab some paper, colored pencils, crayons, or markers, and make a drawing that reflects your own window to the world, imaginary or realistic.
Vocabulary

• **ABSTRACT**: Art that does not attempt to represent external reality, but seeks to achieve its effect using shapes, forms, colors, and textures

• **ASSEMBLAGE**: Sculpture consisting of different objects and materials arranged in a unified 3-D composition

• **FOUND OBJECTS**: Common or unusual objects that may be used to create a work of art; specifically refers to scrap, discarded materials that have been “found” and used in artworks

• **MIXED MEDIA**: Any artwork that uses more than one medium

• **PORTRAIT**: Painting, drawing, or photograph of a person or people

Selected definitions are adapted from [www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk)

Related Works of Art in the Jewish Museum’s Collection

• Alex Katz: *Anne*, 1990

• Lee Krasner: *Self-Portrait*, 1930

• Louise Nevelson: *Self-Portrait*, 1935

• Andy Warhol: *Portrait of Edna Weissman*, 1981

• Ross Bleckner: *Double Portrait (Gay Flag)*, 1993