

ART ACTIVITY

Zitkala-Sa and Portrait Photography

Background

Gertrude Käsebier is considered one of the most influential female photographers of the early 20th century who, along with contemporaries such as Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen, helped establish photography as a fine art. Skilled in portrait photography, Käsebier often photographed underrepresented groups, including women and Native Americans. Her portraits of Sioux and Lakota performers in Buffalo Bill Cody's traveling show are some of her most notable works.

Käsebier had the fortunate opportunity to photograph **Zitkala-Sa**. The portraits taken in Käsebier's New York studio uniquely illustrate the two worlds in which Zitkala-Sa lived. One portrait depicts Zitkala-Sa in profile against a shadowed backdrop. An homage to her Sioux ancestry and culture, she wears tribal dress and stoically looks into the distance. Another portrait depicts her in western dress, seated with her violin in front of a floral Victorian wall – a representation of Zitkala-Sa's "Americanized" life. Both portraits are personal and honorific, but express two different aspects of her identity.

Task

Inspired by Gertrude Käsebier's portraits of Zitkala-Sa and her life story, students will compose and photograph a series of portraits of a classmate using clothing, objects, and backgrounds that represent different aspects of his or her partner's identity. By embodying the role of both sitter and photographer, students will recognize the benefits and challenges of sharing one's story through portraiture and the similarities and differences between 19th century photography and the modern selfie. By creating a two-to-three portrait series, students will appreciate themselves and historical figures as complex individuals who play multiple roles within the communities in which they live.

Materials

- Cameras (digital or phone)
- Computer and printer

- *Optional:* desk lamps for spotlighting
- *Optional:* Fabric or paper for make-shift backgrounds

Art Vocabulary

- **photography:** The art and practice of taking and processing photographs.
- **portrait:** An artistic representation of a person in which the face and its expression are predominant.
- **selfie:** A photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media.
- **sepia toning:** A special treatment to black and white photographs to give them a warmer tone, often a reddish-brown color.
- **sitter:** The individual who is posing for his or her portrait to be created.
- **symbol:** Something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship.

Steps

- Before the lesson, ask students to identify aspects of their lives that define them. This can include cultural heritage, personal interests, extracurricular activities, or family history. Instruct students to bring in a collection of personal objects and articles of clothing that represent or symbolize these identities. These items will be used in their final work of art.
- Display the two portraits of Zitkala-Sa by photographer Gertrude Käsebier and inform students that these images are depicting the same woman. Instruct students to examine each portrait. Then discuss what they notice about each.
 - How are these photos similar? Different?
 - What do these portraits tell us about the woman? How do we know?
 - Why might Käsebier have chosen to portray her in these ways?
 - What do these portraits tell us about the experiences of Native American women in the early 20th century?
- Invite students to read **Zitkala-Sa's life story** and discuss how the two portraits connect to the text. Gertrude Käsebier composed the portrait using specific clothing, objects, and backgrounds to represent different aspects of Zitkala-Sa's identity.

- Students now have the opportunity to compose and photograph portraits to celebrate their own personal identities. This should be done in pairs, in which students compose and take the portrait photos for a partner.
- Students should use the objects and clothing they brought in as props within the composition. If possible, allow students to utilize different spaces within the school for a variety of backgrounds or provide backdrops to use within the classroom. Photographers should think about how best to portray their sitter and the story they hope to tell through their photographs.
- After students have been photographed, print each portrait and provide students with an opportunity to share.
- Conclude the project with a written reflection using the following questions:

Many individuals share portraits of themselves on social media by taking selfies. How are our portraits similar to and/or different from selfies? What are the benefits and challenges of having your portrait composed and taken by someone other than yourself? Both Zitkala-Sa's portrait series taken by Gertrude Käsebier and your own portrait series taken by a partner show multiple identities – which identities of Zitkala-Sa are being shared? Which identities of you are being shared? When learning about a new person, whether it be a historical figure or a friend on social media, why is it important to analyze a collection of portraits rather than just one?

Artmaking Tips

Today, special computer software and phone apps can be used to manipulate and edit photographs. 19th century portrait photographers found their own tips and tricks to transform their images. Allow students to experiment with various materials to create self-made filters, vignettes, or unique lighting. For example, students can place colored cellophane over their lens to tint their image.

For more authentic 19th century style photographs, print only in black and white or sepia tone.

Portraits can be composed and taken in a variety of ways. Invite students to try different poses or angles, or different shots including close ups, medium close-ups (chest and head), and full body.