

CONVERSATION PIECES

Femininity & Identity



ABOVE: Sam Taylor-Johnson, *Cry Laughing*, 1997, 8 C-type prints on aluminum, each print: 16 x 12in., The Phillips Collection, Gift of the Heather and Tony Podesta Collection, Washington, DC, 2011

LEFT: Theresa Bernstein, *Girlhood*, 1921, Oil on canvas, 29 x 35 in., The Phillips Collection, Acquired 1924

CLOSE LOOKING

Empathize

- Describe each artwork in one word, based on your first impression.
- Mimic the facial expressions in both works. Try to move your face and body so that they mirror the gestures of the figures in the artworks.
- Reflect: How did you feel making those facial expressions? Did you get a sense for what the figure is feeling and why?

Describe

- Based on your experience with mimicking the facial expressions, describe each artwork in one word.
- Think about why you chose this descriptive word.

Reflect

- Compare your one-word descriptions in a small group. How were your words similar and different, both before and after you mimicked the expressions?
- Why, if at all, did your one-word descriptions change through this exercise?
- How did mimicking the expressions make you think differently about what you saw in the artworks?

MAKE CONNECTIONS

Compare

- How are the artworks similar? How are they different?
 - Consider the materials, composition, how the people are framed, and the subject matter.
- What themes does each artwork address?
 - Consider identity, femininity, stages of life, and humanity/mortality.

Compare

- *Girlhood* is an image of Theresa Bernstein’s husband William Meyerowitz’s younger sister Minna (i.e. her sister-in-law). Minna, along with her four siblings and mother, was financially dependent on William and Theresa in 1921. While visiting William and Theresa, Minna posed in a studio near their home, her hands placed near three peaches. The fruit, wrote Bernstein, signified “the three stages of life—youth, development, and maturity. The green peach, the partly blooming peach, and the fully ripened peach represented the full cycle of the fruit’s ripening.”
- *Cry Laughing* was made in 1997, the year Sam Taylor-Johnson was diagnosed with colon cancer. Her photographs respond directly to the artist’s personal experience with facing her mortality.

ART + SCIENCE

Connect the artworks to the human life cycle:

- How do you see the human life cycle depicted in these works? What do you see in the artworks that makes you say that?
- What are some life cycles of other animals? Select one animal’s life cycle and compare its stages with that of a human’s.

EXTENDED ACTIVITY: STAGES OF LIFE

Identify: Write a list with multiple stages of your life that you have experienced. Try to be creative; the stages can expand beyond scientific classifications.

Create: Take a series of selfies to depict at least three stages of your life on your list.

- Try to show your emotions like Taylor-Johnson’s photographs.
- Experiment with incorporating props like Bernstein’s portrait of her sister-in-law

Reflect: Share your photos with a partner.

- Have your partner write down one word to describe each one of your selfies.
- How do your partner’s interpretations compare with the life stages you had written for your original list?



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Sam Taylor-Wood

- Sam Taylor-Wood is an English filmmaker, photographer, and visual artist.
- In her highly choreographed photographic and filmic scenes, Taylor-Wood examines inner states of being, such as emotional isolation, vulnerability, self-absorption, anguish, but also social confrontation.
- She has been diagnosed with both colon and breast cancers and has responded to her personal experiences with mortality through her works.

Theresa Bernstein

- Throughout her career, Theresa Bernstein sought to paint the humanity she saw in the world.
- As a champion of women and a strong supporter of the suffrage movement, her work closely examined the very real, raw, and varying emotional aspects of womanhood.
- Bernstein portrays women with dignity and individuality, demonstrating their goals and accomplishments.
- Bernstein characterized her sister-in-law with tenderness, which is evident not only in Minna’s facial expression, but in the soft light and feathery brushwork she uses. Lost in thought, Minna appears to be at a crossroads in life; leaning on the table and touching the green peach, she seems curiously reticent, as if afraid to make the next move.