When creating a self-portrait an artist is looking to answer—and ask—the question, “Who am I?” In the upcoming National Portrait Gallery exhibition “Reflections/Refractions: Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century,” the self-portraits of 66 renowned artists from the National Portrait Gallery’s collection will be on view April 10 through Aug. 16.

The works on paper include pieces by artists such as Alexander Calder, Chuck Close, David Hockney, Edward Hopper, Jacob Lawrence, Louise Nevelson, Faith Ringgold, Larry Rivers, Charles Sheeler and Andy Warhol, among others. While works by such artists reveal traditional themes—including impersonation, reinvention, self-consciousness, vanity and the complex game of seeing a mirrored image—the exhibition also explores how issues of identity and self-portrayal were taken in new directions in the 20th century, as if refracted through a prism.


In previous eras, the idea of identity was considered singular, controllable and externally evident. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, along with advancements in sociology, psychology, genetics and philosophy, perception of individual character became more complex. This exhibition explores the ways that artists incorporated such ideas. Self-portraiture provides the opportunity to integrate changing or multiple identities and to disguise or reinvent the self.
“Reflections/Refractions: Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century,” is accompanied by a 190-page fully illustrated catalog published by Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press. The publication is authored by the curator of the exhibition, Wendy Wick Reaves, curator of prints and drawings at the National Portrait Gallery, with essays by Reaves and Anne Collins Goodyear, assistant curator of prints and drawings; it will be available in the museum store for $49.95.

The majority of the works in this exhibition are from the collection of Ruth Bowman and the late Harry Kahn. The couple assembled their collection of American 20th-century self-portraits over the course of 15 years; Bowman made a donative sale to the museum.

This exhibition was made possible by the Marc Pachter Exhibition Fund.

The National Portrait Gallery

The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery tells the history of America through the individuals who have shaped its culture. Through the visual arts, performing arts and new media, the Portrait Gallery portrays poets and presidents, visionaries and villains, actors and activists whose lives tell the American story.


Note to editors: Images for publicity may be downloaded from a password-protected FTP site. Call (202) 633-8295 for information to access the site.