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CHECKLIST

Dorothea Lange, American, 1895–1965
Funeral Cortège, End of an Era in a Small Valley Town,
negative 1936; print 1950, gelatin silver print
*Purchased through the Charles F. Venrick 1936 Fund and the
Hood Museum of Art Acquisition's Fund; 2005.21*

Julia Margaret Cameron, British, 1815–1879
Corinna, Portfolio of Twelve Victorian Photographs,
September 1868, albumen print
Anonymous gift; PH.967.96.12

Y. Z. Kami, Iranian, born 1966
(Untitled), 1996–98, oil on linen
Gift of Hugh J. Freund, Class of 1967; P.2002.56.1

Irving Ramsey Wiles, American, 1861–1948
Emily Henderson Cowperthwaite, 1902, oil on canvas
*Gift of Emily Henderson Grave Jones, Granddaughter of the Sitter;
P.2004.37*

Africa, Egypt
Head of a God, Late Period, 664–332 BCE, black granite
*Gift of the Estate of Mary C. Rockefeller, Class of 1930,
and her son, Rodman C. Rockefeller, Class of 1954; S.999.52*

A Space for Dialogue and this brochure are made possible by a generous gift from the Class of 1948.

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART



THE EYE OF THE BEHELD



You don't look different
But you have changed
I'm looking through you
You're not the same.

—Paul McCartney

Africa, Egypt, *Head of a God*, Late Period, 664–332 BCE, black granite. Gift of the Estate of Mary C. Rockefeller, Class of 1930, and her son, Rodman C. Rockefeller, Class of 1954; S.999.52

Visual art is concerned with looking. Bereft of the flurry of sound or movement that accompanies many arts, such as dance, music, or drama, people realize that they need to look at the visual arts, and through that act alone form a link with them. However, we do not look at the work of art the way we look at another person. The looking that takes place in museums seeks no response from the object of the gaze, and the object, ironically, can be completely overlooked as a result.

We might therefore assume that museum looking is entirely within the command of the viewer, or beholder. The beholder can look, and then walk away. However, if there is power in a gaze, a connection to be made through the act of looking alone, then those works of art that gaze back at the beholder possess some power as well. Those that do not gaze back can still be powerful, but any connection between the art and its viewer will occur in what I will call the “third person.” When a literary work is written in the third person, the narrator takes no part in the action or emotion of the plot. Similarly, when we are looking in third person, we can observe but ultimately take no part in the work of art. The subject of the work remains in its own time and space, and we remain in ours.

Direct eye contact slices through this third-person experience. The term *eye contact* itself connotes communication or a bond between two individuals. One also “breaks” eye contact, evoking a solid, physical connection. By looking out directly at the viewer, the eye of the beheld becomes an essential part of the viewing experience. The viewer is no longer a third-person observer but half of a connection with the subject of the work of art.

Eye contact with the viewer animates that subject by virtue of its ability to engage. The Egyptian *Head of a God* is an excellent example of animation through gaze. The sheer mass and serene features of the statue would seem to withdraw the piece from any involvement with a flesh-and-blood viewer. However, when we move our gaze to the eye level of the statue, it abruptly becomes animated. The statue's shift from imperturbable mass to living stone is so sudden and so astounding that we might jerk our own gaze away, for fear that the statue's archaic smile might turn into a modern grin. In the case of this statue, the animation is overwhelming in part because of the three-dimensionality of the piece. The statue exists in the same space as we do, and therefore the impact of the animation is spatially immediate. When the statue looks back at us, as it stands in our own space like any other person, our gaze can connect to the statue's gaze as if it were human. Suddenly, rather than looking in the third person, we come to expect a response, as we would from another person. Suddenly expecting a human response from a piece of granite is proof of how profound the effect of eye contact can be.

Looking is a living, human action. In spite of the viewer's separation from the time and place of the subject, the gaze between beholder and beheld can overpower the disconnect between artistic medium and living person, reconnecting them as individuals. Eye contact can link individuals as people, even if one of those people is caught in an artistic medium. The very act of looking and connecting makes time and space obsolete, and the connection can be so immediate that the subject of a work of art can seem to be real.

An example of the humanizing gaze occurs with the woman glancing out of the car in Dorothea Lange's photograph *Funeral Cortège, End of an Era in a Small Valley Town*. The composition of the photograph leads the viewer to believe that this photograph captured the instant in which the woman in the window caught the gaze of the camera, and through it the viewer. Her stare is arresting, and the candidness of the camera shot intensifies its effect on us. We see her with her fists to her lips, a familiar gesture, riding in a car: she is an ordinary woman. The viewer and the woman make eye contact as if she were not caught in a two-dimensional medium but alive and accidentally meeting the eyes of the viewer as she passes.

The power of the connection between the woman and the viewer lies in that, unlike accidental eye contact in reality, she does not look away here. The eyes of a stranger can transfix us. Allegorical and historical distances disappear. We may read the title of the piece, make assumptions, or displace our own emotions back onto the woman, but the human connection remains.

Supposedly the eyes are the windows of the soul, and beauty is in the eye of the beholder. The eyes and the gaze are valuable not only to clichés but to visual arts, and to finding connection with those arts. In this installation, each work of art reproduces an individual gaze that connects with the individual viewer. Their humanity crosses many boundaries. An ancient Egyptian god comes alive, while Corinna, the ancient poet, looks through the lens of a camera. Emily Henderson Cowperthwaite, a young bride, solemnly stares out with her eyes gleaming, a woman glances challengingly out of her car as it passes, and an anonymous man gazes point-blank into the viewer's eyes. Eye contact may be silent, or anonymous, or brief, but whatever its form, the power of its connection can overcome barriers of time, space, and medium. The viewer may be tempted to assume this connection is a complicated function of art and its audience, but in truth the connection of humanity is powerful in its simplicity, and art can create that connection not only through the eye of the beholder, but also the eye of the beheld.

Caitlin Roberts '08
Student Programming Intern

Dorothea Lange, *Funeral Cortège, End of an Era in a Small Valley Town*, negative 1936; print 1950, gelatin silver print. Purchased through the Charles F. Venrick 1936 Fund and the Hood Museum of Art Acquisitions Fund; 2005.21

