Since its invention in the mid-19th century, photography has developed into a dominant mode of visual representation, into a viable means of communication and a vehicle for the global transmission of culture. Portrait photography came into its own during the 20th century, establishing itself on the artistic, commercial, and even political fronts, and, thanks to technological breakthroughs that democratized its use, developing into the dynamic and diverse medium that it is today. With the advent of the snapshot, photography was adapted for personal use, and, as a result, portraiture became more intimate and less formal.

This selection of 20th-century portrait photographs from the Academy's collection focuses on the exchange between subject, artist, and viewer. Presented in an intimate and visually dense setting, the portraits are a saturated microcosm of today's media-rich society. Modern media has redefined what is personal and what is private as a spectacle for mass consumption; this, in conjunction with increased psychological awareness and the chaotic nature of modernity, has led to an increased sophistication of both the viewer and the artist, bringing to question the authenticity and limitations of a medium that may no longer be considered strictly at face value.

Portraiture—through a performance that happens, deliberately or not, via the camera lens—is a genre that reflects and reveals the inherent qualities of its subject as well as the influence of culture on his or her outward representation. Moreover, and most importantly, portraiture is an exchange between artist and subject through which the viewer may explore the larger social-cultural issues of representation and identity that artists have considered since the advent of photography.