These are the 5 essential aspects of this work of art:

1. Alice Neel was one of the great American painters of the twentieth century. She was a pioneer among women artists. A painter of people, landscape and still life, Neel was never fashionable or in step with avant-garde movements. She painted at the same time as the great abstract expressionists but she painted in a style that was distinctly her own.

2. She was born in Philadelphia in 1900 and trained at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women. She married a Cuban, Carlos Enriquez, and lived for a time in Havana. She returned to the US after the birth of a daughter, Santillana, and was soon joined by Carlos in New York. Santillana died at a young age of diphtheria. Alice had a second daughter, Iabetta, but when Carlos left her and took the child to live with his family in Cuba, she suffered a nervous breakdown and attempted suicide. Throughout, she painted.

3. Neel became a painter with strong social convictions and strong left-wing beliefs. In the 30s she lived in Greenwich Village and enrolled as a member of the Works Progress Administration for which she painted urban scenes. Her portraits in the 30s included left-wing writers, artists and trade unionists. Neel moved to Spanish Harlem in 1938. There, she painted the Puerto Rican community, neighbors and family.

4. She had two boys, Richard and Hartley. She used the large light living room of their apartment as a studio. The apartment was filled with her paintings. She struggled to make ends meet and was helped by benefactor and friend John Rothschild. He helped with her painting supplies and an occasional good meal.

5. In the sixties she moved to the Upper West Side and made a determined effort to reintegrate with the art world. This led to a series of dynamic portraits of artists, gallery dealers and curators, among them Frank O’Hara, Andy Warhol and the young Robert Smithson. She also painted activists in the women’s and civil rights movements. She was embraced by the women’s movement.

6. In the 70s she painted portraits of her extended family. After Alice put her boys through school Richard became a doctor and Hartley a lawyer. They both took their mother’s last name. She exhibited widely in the seventies and in 1974 a major retrospective of her work was shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

7. She was selected as a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and received a number of national awards, including the International Women’s Year Award in 1976 and the National Women’s Caucus of Art Award for outstanding achievement in the visual arts in 1979. She died in 1984.

These are the questions I would ask when viewing this object with visitors:

1. What is going on in this picture?
2. How would you describe the expressions on their faces?
3. How has the artist used color here?

**Tour to use this object:**
Learning to Look
People, Portraits & Places

**Artist quotes:**

“You should keep on painting no matter how difficult it is, because this is all part of experience, and the more experience you have the better it is . . . unless it kills you, and then you know you have gone too far.”

At the age of seventy, Alice eel said that the closest she ever came to a self-portrait was the image of an empty chair by an apartment window. Five years later she began this shocking, endearing, and unconventional portrait, a project that took another five years to complete. A striking challenge to the centuries-old convention of idealized femininity, Neel’s only painted self-portrait is wonderfully suggestive of the artist’s bohemian, bawdy character.