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Portraiture

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Self-portraiture

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The history of self-portraiture is one of the most fascinating and complex of the whole genre. Because self-portraits merge the artist and the sitter into one, they have the allure of a private diary, in that they seem to give us an artist's insight into his or her own personality. However, interpreting self-portraiture as a transparent account of artistic personality is to ignore the many other factors that have an impact on both its creation and reception. While the representational qualities of self-portraits allow them to be used as a means of self-examination, they have also functioned, for example, as signatures, as advertisements for an artist's skill, and as experiments in technique or expression.

The self-portrait as signature, experiment, and publicity

There are few self-portraits before the sixteenth century, and many of these exist only as manuscript marginalia. This early absence could be attributed to a piety that prevented artists from glorifying themselves. In addition, most artists before the Renaissance were considered to be craftspeople or mechanics whose primary occupation was to be responsive to the needs of their workshop and patrons. When artists began producing portraits of themselves in the fifteenth century, it was initially as a footnote or signature to another commission. In Flanders, Jan Van Eyck famously included his self-portrait in the convex mirror of *The Arnolfini Marriage* [see **28**], and his reflection can just be detected in the helmet of St George in his altarpiece representing the Madonna with the donor Canon van der Paele (1436). Van Eyck's Italian contemporary, the sculptor Ghiberti, produced two self-portraits as part of his commission for the doors of the Baptistery in Florence. The first of these was possibly as early as 1401, but the more famous self-portrait appears as a roundel on the so-called 'Gates of Paradise' (1425–52) amidst the heads of prophets. Ghiberti's inclusion of his self-portrait on this highly prestigious commission thus acted as a form of signature that associated him with his masterpiece. Although Ghiberti's is one of the earliest Italian examples of this practice, according to the sixteenth-century biographer Giorgio Vasari a number of Renaissance artists represented themselves as witnesses or spectators in religious commissions. It is

significant that the appearance of free-standing self-portrait painting appeared shortly after the advent of free-standing portraiture in the late years of the fifteenth century, with notable examples by Albrecht Dürer (see below) and Raphael.

There are a number of technical and social reasons why autonomous self-portraiture appeared in Europe when it did. First of all, mimetic self-portraiture relied on the existence of flat mirrors, which were not readily available outside Venice (where they were invented) until the fifteenth century.[1] Secondly, in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe, there was an increasing self-consciousness about identity, and a corresponding growth in the production of autobiography and other forms of self-narrative. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for portraiture, there were significant changes in the status of the artist in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, inspired by the advent of academies and art theory that emphasized the intellectual qualities of artistic production over the mechanical ones. At a time when conceptions of the artist's role were changing, the self-portrait proved one means for an artist to reinforce and enhance this new idea of his or her worth.

The assertion of status was only one of the reasons artists produced self-portraits. Self-portraits often originated as opportunities for technical or thematic experimentation. Artists who could not afford models were able to use themselves as subjects, and they were not constrained by issues of contract, decorum, or sitter expectation. This freedom enabled Rembrandt, for example, to use self-portraits to explore the effects of chiaroscuro (light and dark) on his work—a method he transferred to his various history paintings. Likewise, Van Gogh and Käthe Kollwitz used self-portraits to experiment with different techniques: in Kollwitz's case, etching and lithography; in Van Gogh's, the brushwork of Impressionism and neo-Impressionism. Experimentation also took the form of using different dress, poses, gestures, and contexts. This can be seen most notably in the self-portraits by Egon Schiele (who represented his body as amputated and contorted) or Frida Kahlo (who showed herself both as disabled and in Mexican national costume). Experimental self-portraits can also document the artist's age and appearance at a particular period in their life. From the fifteenth century onwards, artists have produced series of self-portraits over short or long periods of time. Dürer, Rembrandt, Sofonisba Anguissola, Van Gogh, Kollwitz, and Schiele are only a few examples of artists who returned to themselves as subjects again and again. In these cases the portraits could serve many functions: as a mapping of ageing, an exploration of psychological change, or an expression of varying moods.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, self-portraits also served as a useful publicity tool for artists, who would send them to courts in order to advertise their artistic skill to potential patrons.[2] Self-portraits became important records of artists who were associated with Euro-

pean academies, as institutions such as the English Royal Academy and the French Académie Royale traditionally required members to deposit their self-portraits in their collections. The famous collection of self-portraits in the Uffizi in Florence similarly served as a record of notable artists who lived in or visited Italy, or were honoured by one of the Italian academies. The idea that a self-portrait was a tool that enabled artists to explore their own psychological states was very much a twentieth-century phenomenon, although even then, self-portraits continued to be strongly implicated in the artist's notion of their own social identity.

Like all portraiture, self-portraiture has served variant purposes and has appeared in many different manifestations. But underlying all self-portraiture is the mystery of how an individual sees himself or herself as other. A self-portrait involves an artist objectifying their own body and creating a 'double' of themselves. Artists could use the self-portrait as a means of drawing attention to the medium and the process of production of the work, to show off their skill, or to experiment with technique or style. The viewer of a self-portrait also occupies a strange position of looking at a metaphorical mirror that reflects back not themselves but the artist who produced the portrait. Viewing a self-portrait can therefore involve the sense of stepping into the artist's shoes.[3] These qualities make self-portraits both compelling and elusive.

Self-portraiture, gender, and artistic identity

Self-portraiture by its very nature engages in some way with artistic identity, but how that identity is represented and perceived is heavily influenced by the status and gender of the artist at different periods in history. Because a self-portrait can be a reminder of the artist's profession, artists have used them as visual manifestos, demonstrating their artistic role or sense of place in their society. To give a flavour of the range of these concerns a starting point will be a comparison of self-portraits produced by a male and female artist at different historical periods.

The Italian artist Parmigianino's sixteenth-century painting of himself looking into a convex mirror [102] and the German sculptor Renée Sintenis's 1917 drawing of herself in the nude [103] convey a range of different impressions about the artist and the self-portrait. Both works appear, at first glance, to be technical studies. Parmigianino has represented himself in the act of painting, but by distorting his own form and that of the room behind him he has skilfully drawn attention to the convex mirror in which he is looking. Parmigianino is thus referring to the tradition of artist as craftsman as well as engaging in a kind of visual game which forces the viewer to look in a mirror and see the artist looking back. The reason for this display of virtuosic technical ability becomes clear when we understand that Parmigianino produced this self-portrait in order to gain the patronage of Pope Clement VII.

Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror, 1524

This is one of three paintings that Parmigianino presented to Pope Clement VII when he met him in Rome in 1524. Parmigianino came to Rome shortly after the Pope was elected in 1523, and this self-portrait was clearly intended to impress the Pope with its clever illusionism. The efficacy of the image helped persuade Clement to offer Parmigianino a number of commissions for religious schemes.

Inspired by the late work of Michelangelo, Italian mannerist artists such as Parmigianino favoured attenuated or exaggerated form and complex, sometimes deliberately arcane, subject matter. In contrast to this mannerist complexity, Sintenis's work seems to serve the more prosaic purpose of a life drawing—a kind of technical study essential to the artist's practice. However, the fact that the nude model she uses is herself gives the work an additional resonance.

These two self-portraits reveal a great deal about gender and status categories in the periods in which they were produced. In the early sixteenth century European artists were battling against the tradition that labelled them as mere mechanics and were striving to obtain a higher status than their fellow craftspeople. Parmigianino's emphasis on his own hand and the technical qualities of the work alludes to this tradition of manual labour, but the dominance of his head also stresses the new significance of artistic learnedness. The technical skill with which Parmigianino represented his image splayed unevenly on the face of the convex mirror is complemented by the inventiveness that underlay this unusual choice of composition.

The self-conscious examination of the technologies and philosophies of artistic creativity that can be seen in Parmigianino's self-portrait was embedded in male self-portraiture from its inception. Some of Dürer's earliest painted self-portraits of the sixteenth century
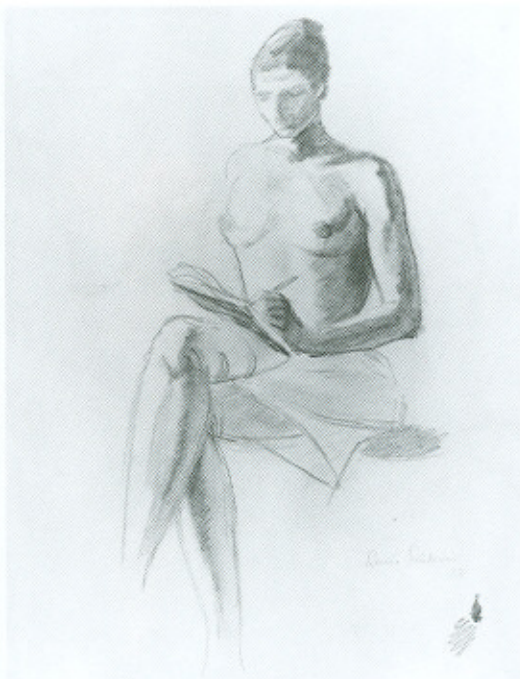
already had begun to play with ideas of artistic and social identity. Dürer returned to his own self-image in a number of different contexts: he produced self-portrait drawings as technical studies or as documents of his state of health; he included self-portraits in religious commissions, just as fifteenth-century Italian artists had done; and he painted free-standing self-portraits. In the latter category are three notable portraits from the turn of the fifteenth century. In the first (1493) Dürer painted a self-portrait that was intended as a betrothal gift to his fiancée, Agnes, showing himself holding a sprig of holly, representative of happiness in love. The second (1498) was painted after his return from a trip to northern Italy, and here he dressed himself as a Venetian nobleman, deliberately elevating his status and eschewing any references to his artistic practice.

The most controversial of his self-portraits is the last one (1500) [104]. In this painting Dürer's frontal pose seems to make a direct reference to images of Christ, or the holy face, as seen on Veronica's head-cloth in contemporary religious paintings.[4] Whether or not Dürer intended this deliberate Christ-like reference to be seen as a sign of his status as an artist/creator and whether such an allusion could be read as blasphemous have been the subject of much art-historical controversy and remain unresolved. However, it is difficult to deny that Dürer was representing himself in a way that had clear echoes of contemporary images of Christ, and that his self-portrait avoids any reference to the act of painting itself. The fine detail seen in the curling strands of hair and in the fur of his sleeve, which he seems to caress with

his fingers, demonstrates the skill and attention he devoted to the production of this panel. However, the processes of labour are concealed rather than declared. Dürer is not showing himself as an artist: this was significant in a period in which the status of the artist was subject to scrutiny and change. Dürer himself was dedicated to raising the artist's status in Germany, and his enterprise was acknowledged by his later biographers such as Karel van Mander, whose *Het Schilderboek* of 1604 stressed the deference paid to Dürer by noble patrons. In the early years of self-portraiture artists often used this mode of representation to provide themselves with the more elevated roles normally associated with sitters of a higher social status.

This conception of the male artist as a superior being has remained prominent in the visual rhetoric of self-portraiture, but different kinds

of roles have been assumed to demonstrate it. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, artists cultivated a notion of themselves as free spirits, whose liberation was manifested in sexual promiscuity, cultivation of lower- or working-class attributes, and asocial behaviour. This was a new way of elevating the male artist by placing him outside the norms and morals of bourgeois society. The number of self-portraits of artists with nude models, who were also their lovers, multiplied in the early twentieth century as the conception of sexual prowess and artistic creativity became conjoined.[5] The German artist Lovis Corinth painted several self-portraits in this sexually dominant mode. In one he represented himself indulging in drink and sexual foreplay with his nude model, Charlotte Berend, who later became his wife. In Corinth's work his artistic identity is inextricably linked to his sexual prowess. By avoiding any indicators of the act of painting his work implicitly linked painting and sexuality. It is this image of the sexually active male Bohemian artist and the coupling of sexuality and creativity that was held to be fundamental to the male modernist artist.[6]

By the late twentieth century, male artists played variously on the tropes of the artist as gentleman, Christ, Bohemian, or technician, while others returned to the technical playfulness of an artist like Parmigianino. Photography has made this latter aspect of self-portraiture even more varied, as can be seen in the work of the photographer Alfredo Dino Pedriali [**105**]. Pedriali portrays *himself in the nude, just as* Sintenis had done; like her, he shows himself engaged in his craft by snapping his photograph in a mirror. Here his artistic apparatus serves

105 Alfredo Dino Pedriali
Self-portrait with Camera,
1979

This is one of a number of self-portrait photographs by Pedriali, who specialized in black and white images of the male nude. Pedriali was based in Rome, and his works recall the classical and baroque traditions of Roman art. This can be seen in his use of chiaroscuro (light and dark), which was practised by Caravaggio and his followers in the seventeenth century, as well as in his allusion to fragments of classical sculpture in photographs in which the nude body can only partially be seen.
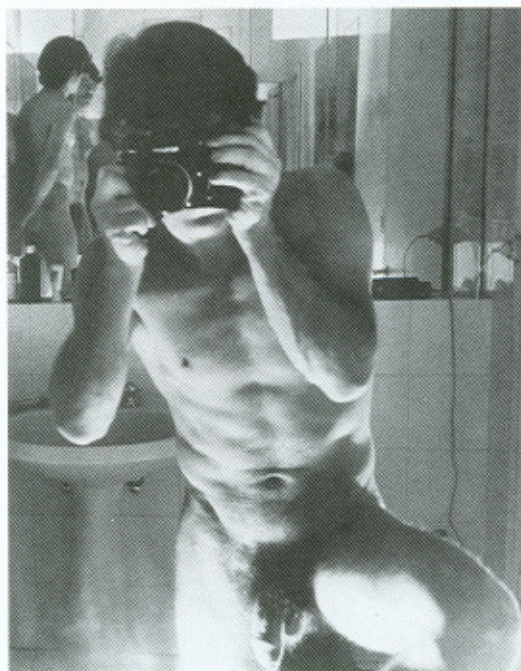
to obliterate his face—a primary indicator of his identity—and focus attention on a naked body seen in the context of a bathroom, which he shares with a nude male friend. Like many male twentieth-century artists, Pedriali collapses his sexual identity into his artistic identity, but his self-portraiture also involves playful reference to his technical skills as an artist.

The self-conceptions of the male artists discussed here are thus tied

up with their technical ability, social identity, and their gender. These are also issues at stake in self-portraits of women artists. Returning to the portrait drawing of Sintenis, here we see a woman artist following in a male academic tradition of using the nude female model as a subject of study. Her study of herself serves to problematize the idea of the woman as artist, as she presented herself as both nude model and working woman.[7] In German art schools of her time, nude models were generally used in life drawing classes as part of artistic training; self-portraiture was alien to this practice. Furthermore, women were employed as nude models in academies and art schools for centuries before they were officially allowed—towards the end of the nineteenth century—to draw 'from the life'. By placing herself as the subject of such a technical study, Sintenis undermined the convention of the objectified female life model. Sintenis's focus on her identity as both an artist and a woman is highlighted by comparing her self-portrait to another painted only four years before by the English artist Laura Knight [106]. Knight portrayed herself in a way that referred more explicitly to the conventions of academic life drawing—the clothed artist painting the nude female model. But Knight's relationship with her model is visually harmonious rather than sexually charged. She shows both herself and her model with their backs turned; there is thus a rhyming pattern to the positioning of their bodies, but Knight's choice of pose also provides a clear view of the painting she is making. Like Parmigianino's work, this painting involves a clever play with ideas of mirrors and doubling. It would have been logistically difficult for Knight to view herself from that particular angle, but the work creates the illusion of reality. Unlike some of the role-playing portraits by male artists discussed earlier, Knight foregrounds her artistic identity. The fact that she chose to present this work to the Royal Academy in London upon her election to that institution makes the choice of subject even more significant. As women had been excluded from Academy membership for most of the nineteenth century, Knight's painting stands as a manifesto of her skill and a declaration of her achievement as a woman artist, but it also adheres to the principles of an academic training based on study of the life model.

The earliest self-portraits by women artists also emphasized their professional role. The sixteenth-century Flemish artist Katharina van Hemessen depicted herself with brushes, palette, and canvas [107]; this painting became a prototype for other self-portraits by women who employed a similar three-quarter-length format with a partial profile angle.[8] At a time when male artists such as Dürer were attempting to raise their status and disassociate themselves from the mechanical aspects of their trade, women were only just beginning to gain recognition as artists. Representing themselves in their professional role may have seemed necessary as a statement of purpose or a document of

106 Laura Knight
Self-portrait, 1913
Knight presented this work to the English Royal Academy upon her election as Royal Academician in 1913. The bold colourism of this portrait is commensurate with the colour experimentation of her avant-garde contemporaries, but the subject matter of an artist painting a model aligns Knight to the conventional academic training method of painting from the nude life model.

achievement. It is important to note that self-portraits by women were not exclusively of this nature. It was also common for women artists to show themselves playing music or with their families, as exemplified by the works of the Italian sixteenth-century painter Sofonisba Anguissola, for example.[9]

The self-portraits discussed in this section reveal some of the complexities of gender and status underlying artistic identity in self-portraiture. If a self-portrait was mimetic, it needed to show the artist in the act of producing the portrait, but this also drew attention to the mechanical processes of painting. Those mechanical processes were not always valued; indeed, artists in some periods avoided associations of their work with what they saw as mere craft. On the other hand, if a self-portrait avoided the trappings of the artist's studio, it could present other aspects of the artist's identity, such as the links between sexuality and creativity often associated with the modern Bohemian male artist. In many instances the gender of the artist had an impact on the way in

which he or she chose to portray themselves, with some roles being more commonly assigned to women than to men, and vice versa. Because the self-portrait is both an object of artistic creation and a self-exploration, ideas of gender and status are never far beneath the surface.

Self-fashioning and self-presentation

In self-portraits artists did not simply present their status and gender identities in an unthinking or un-selfconscious way. From an early stage in the history of self-portraiture artists realized they could project particular ideas about themselves. This deliberate 'self-fashioning'[10] has been rarely absent. Artists have used self-portraiture as a means to perpetuate a view of themselves as wealthy, poor, sad, insane, or as a genius, iconoclast, exemplar, outsider. Such roles were frequently contrived and served to elevate the self-portrait to a statement about the artist's private life or his or her place in society. The idea that different public roles could be crafted, assumed, and represented was articulated in conduct books from the Renaissance onwards. Castiglione's *The Courtier* (1528) was one of the first substantial texts that suggested that a particular kind of character, physical appearance, and behaviour could—and indeed should—be cultivated by the higher classes of society. This perpetuated an assumption that public behaviour could be learned and that certain character traits could be fostered, so that the individual became like an actor performing before an audience, rather than behaving spontaneously.[11] Such ideas are significant for our understanding of self-portraiture. Because artists were conscious about their own status and where this placed them in the social hierarchy, they could use the tool of self-portraiture to enact roles that declared their aspirations, as Dürer had done.

The social functions of 'self-fashioning' have been complemented in portraiture by a kind of self-presentation and role-playing that has a less obvious public purpose. Rather than focusing on a single declaratory image of themselves, or using the self-portrait as a kind of manifesto of their social position, a number of artists represented themselves in a variety of roles and guises over a period of time. Such self-presentation could be probing, revealing, theatrical, experimental, or arbitrary. These works could be intended only for the artist and his or her immediate circle, and they could be less determinate or instrumental than the roles artists assumed to perpetuate a particular kind of public image.

Perhaps the first artist to use self-portraits systematically in this way was Rembrandt in the seventeenth century. Rembrandt produced over 50 self-portraits in many different media: painting, drawing, and etching [**108** and **109**]. The purpose of these fascinating and enigmatic works has been the subject of heated art-historical debate and controversy that, in the absence of full documentary evidence, has by no

means been resolved.[12] In his earliest self-portraits, many of which were etchings, Rembrandt employed the self-portrait to conduct experiments in artistic technique, using himself as the cheapest and most accessible model available. These self-portraits appeared to be exercises in facial expression and chiaroscuro, and they may consequently have functioned as studies for history paintings. If they were experimental, this could explain why he returned to this mode of representation again and again throughout his life. From the 1640s onwards, when Rembrandt practised in Amsterdam, he produced painted self-portraits which showed him in a variety of elaborate costumes and with carefully rendered facial expressions. These works appear to be more than technical experiments or studies for history paintings. Some art historians have interpreted these portraits as Rembrandt's map of his moods and changed status at significant high and low points of his life. This has led to a tendency to retell Rembrandt's life through his art. Thus his final self-portrait (c.1669) [109] represents a doddery old man verging on senility, who has recognized the vanity of his earlier optimism. The labelling of this self-portrait relates him both to Democritus, the so-called 'laughing philosopher', and to the ancient Greek artist Zeuxis, who was said to have died laughing at a picture of an ugly old woman. This is a powerful work in which Rembrandt's heightened expression contrasts with absence of visible emotions that characterize much portraiture. By including such an expression he seems to provoke the viewer to see his life reflected through the painting. However, in this work, as in earlier paintings in which he shows himself dressed in elaborate robes or scowling experimentally through a heavy haze of chiaroscuro, we get a sense of an artist playing roles.

The afterlife of Rembrandt's self-portraiture has perpetuated the