

109 Rembrandt
Harmenszoon van Rijn

*Self-portrait as the Laughing
Philosopher, c. 1669*

In this late self-portrait, Rembrandt represented himself laughing, just as he had done in etchings early in his career. However, here the laughter of an old man seems less of an experiment in facial expression and more of an embodiment of Rembrandt's own view of himself.



idea that it was desirable or beneficial for artists to represent themselves in such exploratory or experimental ways. Whether the artist used role playing as a means of technical experimentation, exploring the deeper inner workings of his or her psyche, or simply playing dressing-up games is something which is not easily resolvable. In the case of Rembrandt, whatever the artist's intention was, the viewer's idea of Rembrandt as an artist has been affected by his role-playing self-portraits.

Rembrandt may or may not have been adopting different guises as a way of expressing his own view of himself at key moments of his life, but series of self-portraits were often used to display personal symbolism or as a means of psychological experimentation, especially by the end of the nineteenth century. A number of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century self-portraits appear to exhibit the artist's imaginary projection of himself or herself into different kinds of roles. One of

110 Max Beckmann

Self-portrait in Tuxedo, 1927

Beckmann's rather bleak view of the pointlessness of life was fed by his enthusiasm for the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer. Beckmann adopted this theme in his self-portraits, most of which show him playing a role or wearing a disguise. In some self-portraits, Beckmann chose symbolic disguises such as that of a clown; in others, such as this one, he overplayed the part of a bored modern bourgeois man. Although Beckmann rejected the label 'Expressionist', his emphasis on the inner life was commensurate with the interests of his Expressionist contemporaries in Germany.



these roles was the virile Bohemian already mentioned, but modernist artists played on other motifs, such as clowns, dandies, or classical gods. Picasso and Georges Rouault chose the persona of a clown to evoke the tragicomic aspects of human existence; Otto Dix glorified himself as Mars, the God of War; and Max Beckmann expressed his pessimism about the artificiality and inescapable tedium of modern life by dressing up in modish fashions and affecting a series of bored or cynical expressions [110].

111 Ernst Ludwig Kirchner

Self-portrait as a Soldier, 1915

The German artist Kirchner was drafted into military service in 1915, and he began training for the mounted artillery. His brief experience of fighting in the First World War led to a nervous collapse, and he spent the next few years in sanatoriums and clinics. During this period he attempted to come to terms with his attitude towards the war through his art. Some of his paintings represent his fellow soldiers, but this self-portrait sees the war experience as emasculating to the artist.

Although they could be imaginary, the guises assumed by early twentieth-century artists in their portraits could also be plausible and relevant. For example, the unprecedented number of artists who were conscripted during the First World War forced them into the unfamiliar role of soldier—an occupation that many neither expected nor desired. One artist who served only briefly during wartime was the German Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, whose nervous breakdown quickly led to his removal from active service and exile into a Swiss sanatorium. Despite his very limited experience of action, Kirchner represented himself in his military role in *Self-portrait as a Soldier* (1915) [111] in order to convey his sense of despair and identity crisis at the time. Although he suffered no major war wounds, Kirchner depicted himself with an amputated hand, which is significantly his right—painting—hand. Kirchner shows himself with a disability that metaphorically emasculates him and prevents him from practising his art. This image

of emasculation is enhanced if this self-portrait is compared to another one Kirchner produced before the war (1910), showing himself wearing a garish bathrobe sporting a phallic paintbrush and pipe and exuding an air of bold self-confidence. The presence of a semi-clad female model completes the effect of masculine sexual and artistic creativity. This work was produced at a time when Kirchner shared a studio with the Brücke (Bridge) group of artists, who cultivated a free love ethos, and maintained a Nietzschean belief in the links between virility and creative energy. In his self-portrait as a soldier, though, Kirchner's



amputation becomes a symbolic castration, emphasized by the presence of a nude female model whom he is now unable to paint. Kirchner's self-portraits explore his psychological state as well as his position as an artist, but there is also an aspect of 'self-fashioning' in the cultivation of a role that was not just a personal statement of anxiety but an image that would have communicated to a wider audience.

Self-portraiture and autobiography

Self-portraits can be playful, experimental, theatrical, and many other things, but there is a question about the extent to which they bear any relationship with the narrative and revelatory qualities of autobiography. When looking at a self-portrait viewers can be tempted to test the artist's view of himself or herself against what is known about their life, and to see the artist's self-representation as somehow indicative of their feelings or appearance at the time the work was produced. However, as with biography's connection with portraiture, comparisons of *self*-portraiture with autobiography offer both analogies and important differences.

In his essay 'Autobiography as De-facement' Paul de Man pointed out the inherent limitations of autobiography as a record of an individual's life:

We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture.¹³

De Man was referring specifically to autobiographical literature and to the way the genre had its own conventions and techniques, which artfully constructed the subject of its narrative. Although a human being is a fragmented array of emotions, experiences, behaviour, and knowledge, the autobiographical narrative seems to erase these discontinuities and create a unified self that can be conveyed through a genre. What de Man calls 'the technical demands of self-portraiture' can be seen as the limitations and possibilities of the medium in which the life story is conveyed. Rembrandt's self-portraits, for example, may seem to give us a snapshot of himself wearing particular clothes and expressing particular emotions at an identifiable moment in time, but the conventions of portraiture convert this apparent life moment into an art form. Furthermore, while a written autobiography will be constrained by those parts of the life selected by the author, a work of art is even more shackled by technical limitations, as—apart from time-based media like video—art works can present only a series of frozen moments.

Although a self-portrait can convey little but traces or vestiges of an actual life, filtered through a medium with its own conventions and limitations, it is significant that the flourishing of self-portraiture in

Europe coincided with the advent of autobiography as a genre.¹⁴ As early as the fifteenth century artists began telling the story of their lives. The sculptor Ghiberti published a *comentarii*, which was a form of autobiography. By the late sixteenth century, when the genre of autobiography was well established, the Tuscan goldsmith Benvenuto Cellini wrote a lively story of his own life, which was enriched by many details of his fellow artists and patrons (written 1558–62, first published 1728). In the same centuries both Catholic and Protestant theology emphasized the importance of self-examination and self-awareness. Although early autobiographies existed, the use of the term to characterize the genre of narrating your own life did not become common until the end of the eighteenth century. Autobiographies could take the form of memoirs or diaries and were frequently published after the author's death. These generic developments were complemented by a public interest in the lives of artists that flourished especially in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. By the twentieth century, a prurient fascination with the private lives of famous artists increased the tendency of artists to write their own memoirs and to express their view of themselves in self-portraits. Some artists, like the Viennese Oskar Kokoschka, did both.

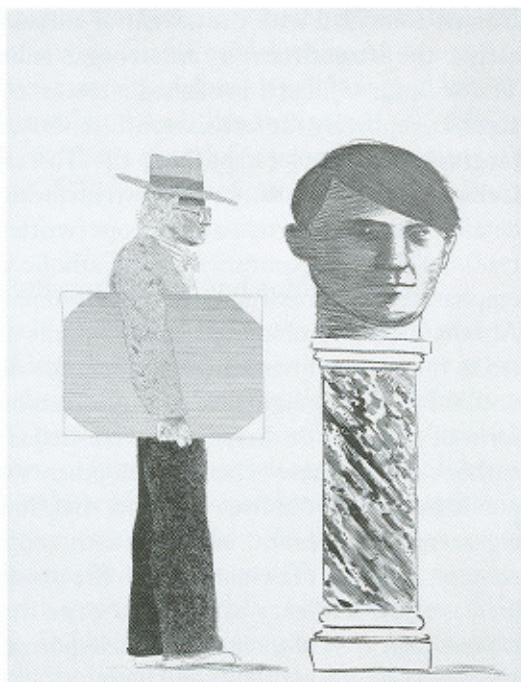
David Hockney is one example of a late twentieth-century artist whose work has an autobiographical flavour. In his early career he frequently made visual reference to the vicissitudes of his life as an art student and as a young man struggling to come to terms with his sexual identity. Hockney's self-portraits signal specific moments of his life, which may have been private or meaningful only to him. However, the fame he achieved at a relatively young age means that the audience for his private view of himself is vast, and it is an audience that knows enough about Hockney's life to be able to relate his work to his private circumstances. In a self-portrait such as *The Student: Homage to Picasso* [112] Hockney shows himself dressed as a trendy art student observing an oversized bust of Picasso as if he is viewing an object in an art gallery or the effigy of a god in a temple. The self-portrait is a fantasy of Hockney's first definitive encounter with Picasso's work at a retrospective exhibition held at the Tate Gallery, London, in 1960. The homage here is both public and private, and the autobiographical reference to a moment in his formative years is thus overwhelmed by an image that carries greater symbolic, as well as personal, resonance. This is one of Hockney's less intimate views of his own life. He produced other works which refer to his initially secret homosexuality, but interestingly many of these were not conceived as self-portraits.

Hockney's work offers a view of a definitive moment in his life, but the way he imagines that moment, as well as the iconic nature of self-portraiture, eludes easy conversion into self-narrative. So, unlike written autobiography, which can appear to convey a life story through

112 David Hockney

The Student: Homage to Picasso, 1973

Hockney produced portraits throughout his career. In a number of cases these works were reflections on his own identity as an artist and as a gay man. This self-portrait is more concerned with Hockney's conception of his artistic debt to Picasso. Hockney modelled his experimental approach to style and technique on Picasso's lifelong creative breadth. This self-portrait by Hockney pays homage to Picasso using the etching technique, which was one of many methods of printmaking with which Hockney experimented.



time, self-portraiture relies on the presentation of frozen moments, which, as de Man says, 'produce . . . the life' of the subject, rather than offer reflections of it.

113 Vincent Van Gogh

Self-portrait Dedicated to Paul Gauguin, 1888

Although Van Gogh devoted his most sustained attention to landscape, portraiture played an important role in his work, especially from 1888. At that time he moved to Arles in France, hoping to found a community of artists. His correspondence with Émile Bernard and Paul Gauguin, who were invited to join him there, was accompanied by an exchange of self-portraits among the three men, as declarations of friendship and common purpose. The decline of Van Gogh's mental health can also be traced to this period, and the series of self-portraits he produced have been interpreted as knowing self-examinations of his psychological state.

Self-exploration and psychoanalysis

Rightly or wrongly, self-portraits can convey to the twenty-first-century viewer the idea that an artist is investigating their inner life rather than playing out social or artistic roles, or referring to specific events or moments. Self-portraits seem to suggest a form of self-exploration. Although the idea that an artist would choose deliberately to explore their states of mind through self-portraiture is a modern one, such an interpretation is often read back on to self-portraits in the past.

This view of self-portraiture is epitomized by responses to and interpretations of Van Gogh's self-portraits. Van Gogh struggled throughout his life with his intense desire to be recognized as an artist and the concomitant frustration of being unacknowledged while he was living. His manic approach to his art—which led to bouts of prolific production—and his well-documented lapses into insanity have coloured subsequent interpretations of his work. Our knowledge of these obstacles and frustrations is enhanced by the evidence of his many letters to his brother, Theo, which were published posthumously, and by the sequence of self-portraits he produced throughout his working life. Van Gogh's work is an example of how subsequent generations could use self-portraiture as a means of exploring the life of an artist.

However, the difference between retrospective interpretations of Van Gogh and those of Rembrandt is that Rembrandt's self-portraits are seen as rather more self-conscious presentations of his successes and failures, while Van Gogh's self-portraits are more often read as catalogues of his unstable state of mind. His self-portraits show artistic innovation and skill, but they also seem to reveal an artist who is intent on a documentary observation of his own psychological vicissitudes.



Many of these portraits appear to represent the artist as melancholy, brooding, intense, or threatening [113]. Although artistic intention is always a problematic concept, it is possible to speculate that Van Gogh's own motivations in producing these self-portraits could conceivably have been no different than Rembrandt's. It is notable that Van Gogh had perpetual money worries, and models were an expense he could ill afford, which made self-portraiture a practical choice for the artist. However, shortly after Van Gogh's death, and with the posthumous publication of his letters in 1914, art historians and critics developed an idea of the artist as an insane genius. The retrospective interpretations of his self-portraits were based largely on this view of his life.

The historical point of focus here is the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which witnessed changes in the scientific understanding of psychology. Notable investigations during this period included Jean-Martin Charcot's studies of hysteria in France and Sigmund Freud's focus on sexuality and the unconscious in Vienna, which eventually resulted in his development of psychoanalysis. Explorations such as these led to unique perspectives on the relationships between human behaviour and such issues as insanity and sexual development. The popularization and dissemination of this psychological knowledge affected both how artists approached self-portraiture and the ways it was interpreted by contemporary viewers. Using Freud's terminology, Erika Billeter has pointed out that 'Every self-portrait is a dialogue with the ego'.¹⁵ Here she refers to Freud's idea that the human psyche is based on a constant negotiation between the id (instinctual drives), the superego (the conscience), and the ego (the sense of self). In the early twentieth century artists played self-consciously on the idea of a self-portrait as a dialogue with the ego. The notion of the artist as an outsider, whose mental instability was a sign of his creativity, inspired artists to use self-portraiture as a means of exploring the tensions between their drives and their ego-states. Such self-exploration became embedded in art movements that privileged the inner life above formal experimentation, such as Expressionism and Surrealism, both of which drew self-consciously on Freud's theories of the functioning of the unconscious and the role of sexual drives in human behaviour.

An examination of self-portraits by artists who were associated with these two tendencies in twentieth-century art reveals the ways exploration of psychological states could become the focus of the work. In Austrian Expressionism the inner life was a major concern of portraitists such as Oskar Kokoschka and Egon Schiele. Late in his life, Kokoschka expressed what he thought was the primary function of his portraits:

When I paint a portrait, I am not concerned with the externals of a person—the signs of his clerical or secular eminence, or his social origins. It is the business of history to transmit documents on such matters to posterity. What used to shock people in my portraits was that I tried to intuit from the face,

from its play of expressions, and from gestures, the truth about a particular person, and to recreate in my own pictorial language the distillation of a living being that would survive in memory.¹⁶

Kokoschka's older contemporary, Schiele, produced around a hundred self-portrait paintings, drawings, and watercolours [114] in order to explore the relation between inner and outer life in a similarly probing way. Schiele's self-representations are inevitably disturbing. He showed himself naked, with distorted or amputated limbs, and an emaciated or

114 Egon Schiele

Self-portrait Nude Facing Front, 1910

Schiele was an Austrian artist best known for his numerous self-portraits that show him in an uncompromising way, with an emaciated, distorted, or disabled face and body. His brutal treatment of his own body and physiognomy explored the animalistic extremes of the human condition, but he also engaged directly with sexuality in a way that was shocking in early twentieth-century Vienna. Some of Schiele's self-portrait drawings and watercolours were based on photographs of himself making faces and posing awkwardly in front of a mirror.



flayed body. He subjected his face to the same sort of brutal treatment, and many of these works represent him scowling or grimacing. Some of Schiele's more extreme works were not intended to be purchased or exhibited; to a certain extent they represent the kinds of experiments with expression characteristic of Rembrandt's early self-portrait etchings. However, Schiele was working in Vienna at a time when Freud's ideas were becoming widely discussed. The overtly sexual subtexts of Schiele's self-portraits appear to tie in with Freud's theories of sexual deviation—ideas that were also explored in the work of other Viennese psychologists, such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) and Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character* (1903).¹⁷ Thus Schiele used these portraits as a means of self-analysis, drawing upon contemporary psychoanalytic ideas. This is a historically plausible way of understanding Schiele's still disturbing project.

115 Frida Kahlo

Broken Column, 1944

The vast majority of Kahlo's work is self-portraiture, and she used a Surrealist idiom to explore the physical and mental pain that dogged her throughout her life. In the years after a bus accident in 1925 she had more than 32 operations, which left her in constant physical agony. Works such as this one graphically express her suffering. In other works Kahlo also used self-portraiture more positively as a means of exploring her Mexican identity.



Psychoanalysis was used rather differently by the Surrealists, who latched upon Freud's ideas of sexual repression rather than concentrating on his study of sexual deviance. As part of their wholesale attack on bourgeois society, the Surrealists emphasized the by-products of sexual repression, as revealed through the imagery of dreams, wishes, and fantasies. European Surrealism was largely a male movement, but there were also a number of women artists associated with Surrealist tendencies in other countries, including the German/Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. Kahlo produced a number of extraordinarily original self-portraits that drew upon Surrealist ideas of displacement and repression but minimized their emphasis on sexuality [115]. Kahlo's self-portraits had elements of both autobiography and psychoanalytic self-exploration. She frequently alluded to her adoptive Mexican heritage, and she also referred explicitly to a series of back operations that left her in constant pain, and to the miscarriages that prevented her from bearing a child she wanted. Her deeply personal self-portraits turn these real life events into metaphorical and fantastical realizations of her own physical and psychological pain.

Artists like Schiele and Kahlo saw self-portraiture as a way of exploring their own psychological states imaginatively as well as therapeutically. However, it could be said that all self-portraiture involves the kind of othering of the self that Schiele and Kahlo played with so overtly. One of Freud's more notable successors, Jacques Lacan, discussed the phases of life in terms of the development of the human ego.¹⁸ The earliest stages of childhood, in which the baby sees itself as one with the mother ends at the point when the child recognizes its own image in a mirror and realizes that it is a separate being. The implicit or explicit presence of a mirror in self-portraiture recalls Lacan's theory of the development of the self, but it was only in the twentieth century that artists began to adopt this approach self-consciously.