



A Plentitude of Self-Portrait Paintings

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It's one thing to understand what we see, and another to understand ourselves through what we see.

Vincent van Gogh, *Self-portrait*, 1887

In art museums, self-portrait paintings are sometimes protected behind glass, enabling us to see both the artist depicted in the painting and ourselves reflected in the glass. Even without reflective glass, after gazing long and deeply at an artist's self-portrait, we might begin to see something of ourselves. Self-portraits thus can be mirrors that artists first hold up to themselves while they paint them and posthumously hold up to us when we view them.

Mirror, mirror, on the wall Who's the fairest self-portraitist of all?

AROUND THE WORLD IN EIGHTY SELF-PORTRAITS

Early in the days of my youth, I revered the two titans of self-portrait painting: Rembrandt van Rijn and Vincent van Gogh. The moment I laid eyes on their artworks, it was love at first sight. With opened eyes and open arms, I welcomed their paintings into my life—unless it was they who welcomed me into their worlds. Either way, in 1972 I began a quest to view in the flesh all the Rembrandt and van Gogh self-portrait paintings held in public collections.

As a New Yorker, I was immediately able to add checkmarks to my list for three of them. For the next fifty years, I traveled throughout North America and Europe in pursuit of completing my lofty goal.

Depending upon which art historian is keeping score, mileages will vary. By popular consensus, across the span of four decades, Rembrandt painted himself as many as forty-three times. Van Gogh, a great admirer of Rembrandt, returned the favor during only five years of painting by depicting himself around thirty-six times. Bundled together, the body count of these two prolific and compatriot Dutchmen totals approximately eighty self-portrait paintings in all.

While I did not retrace the circumnavigation fantasized by Jules Verne in his 1872 novel *Around the World in Eighty Days*, exactly a century after its publication, I did initiate my journeys halfway around the world in pursuit of those illustrious eighty self-portraits.

Among them, each memorable painting is so distinct that Rembrandt's or van Gogh's faces rarely look similar twice. This most



Rembrandt, *Self-portrait with Beret*, 1655

intimate genre of art made me feel that we were kindred spirits. During my travels, their evolving yet familiar faces greeted me in their secluded and quiet galleries as if they were awaiting my arrival. Though a solitary visitor to museums of distant cities in foreign countries, I seldom felt like a stranger when in their paintings' presence.

Gazing at self-portraits also stirred my musings about the art of self-portraiture generally. Thanks to pocket-sized cellphones, photo selfies ubiquitously shared on social media have shined a new light on the traditional art of self-portraiture. That artistic genre has become more relevant today than ever before. In our pop culture Age of the Selfie, who can ignore the bright lights and long shadows cast by the legacies of Rembrandt and van Gogh? Certainly not art historians.

A lucky thirteen richly illustrated books, including a 724-page tome, have been published about Rembrandt's self-portraits, and that's just about his paintings and just in the English language. Within the same parameters, five books have lavished praise upon van Gogh's smaller oeuvre. Mysteries still shroud these artworks, yet I'm not the art sleuth likely to unravel any of them.



Until now, this autobiographical essay has documented the role of self-portraiture in my autodidactic life. Allow me to now take myself out of the picture; let's probe beyond the surface of the paint and explore the poetics and metaphysics of self-portraiture.

REFLECTIONS ON THE ART OF SELF-PORTRAITURE

Some art critics suggest that all artistic creation contains elements that are intrinsically semiautobiographical. If so, then all portraiture is subliminally selfless self-portraiture. Making no apologies about being all about oneself, conventional self-portraiture achieves an elevated status as ultra-self-portraiture.

Viewed chronologically, any two self-portraits by the same artist are more than mere art objects. They are testaments. Even if created only weeks apart, any two self-portraits document the artist's stages upon life's way. As mature adults, we may cherish the photos of our youth and midlife, but before the invention of photography, only self-portraitist artists possessed



Vincent van Gogh, *Self-portrait with Straw Hat*, 1887

such mementos with which to view their pasts.

The mirror and the easel are two tools for self-examination that enable self-portrait painters to experience two time periods—the present and the future—and to see two worlds—their world and ours. In the mirror, they see themselves looking at themselves in their present. On the easel, they can envision us later looking at them in what will become their future.

We look at paintings, out windows, and into mirrors. When we glimpse into mirrors, we see only the faces of our present selves. Just as few of us look longer at a painting than does its painter, few people look longer into mirrors than does the painter of mirrors. Self-portraiture is not a means of escape from reality, but a way to face reality.

A single self-portrait stands to life as a still frame stands to a film or video. Collectively, self-portraits can portray both the growth of the artists and the development of their art. Consecutively, a series of self-portraits unfreezes the passage through time that is a lifespan.

We can see in portraits what people have done with their lives. And in a

chronology of self-portraits, we sense what a lifetime has done to the artist. Inscribed on their faces, the artists' themes are not just their own lives but life itself—their worlds condensed into a face.

During the mercurial years of youth, the changes in our faces are more transformative than during old age. In youthful self-portraits, we rarely see the same person twice. Youthful works are like masks. Older works are like maps. Last works are like last wills and testaments.

At class reunions, we can see in the wrinkles on the faces of our former classmates the march of time across decades. In their self-portraits, even if interspersed by only months, artists can view their own procession from birth to youth to maturity to debility to death.

With each successive gaze into their mirrors, artists have aged and have crept closer to their deaths. So each time they look, they see the face of death. Socrates said the purpose of philosophy is to teach us how to die. Socrates thereby taught us how to live. Insofar as self-portraiture teaches both its artists and us to expect and accept death, self-portraiture also teaches us how to live. ❖



VINCENT VAN GOGH (1853–1890)

People say—and I’m quite willing to believe it—that it’s difficult to know oneself—but it’s not easy to paint oneself either.

—Vincent van Gogh

“Vincent felt that portraiture (and presumably self-portraiture) could do what photography had failed to achieve . . . As Vincent told his sister Wil: ‘I myself still find photographs frightful and don’t like to have any, especially not of people whom I know and love.’ On another occasion he told her that ‘it isn’t easy to paint oneself,’ but ‘one seeks a deeper likeness than that of the photographer.’

“On other occasions he made self-portraits to try out various technical explorations, such as color contrasts or brushwork. These less ambitious works were sometimes more in the way of studies. This helps to explain why twenty-seven of the thirty-five self-portraits date from his Paris period, when he was experimenting and developing his technique—moving away from the dark hues of his Dutch years to the Van Gogh we now know and love, with his exuberant coloring.” —[Martin Bailey](#)



REMBRANDT (1606–1669)

“More than any other artist before or since, Rembrandt turned his gaze on himself. The human face, and specifically his own, was his recurring theme... He painted, etched, and sketched almost a hundred self-portraits in his sixty-three years. Taken as a whole, they amount to an intimate autobiography, intended or otherwise, that began in his youth and ended only with his death . . .

“Today we can read his life’s work, not just as autobiography, but as the universal, perennial story of everyman’s journey from innocence to experience, from ignorance to wisdom. For we are human too, and little different from the way people were then. This is why his face can tell us as much about us as it can about him—if, like Rembrandt, we are willing to look ourselves in the eye and to accept whatever we see there.”

—Roger Housden, *How Rembrandt Reveals Your Beautiful, Imperfect Self: Life Lessons from the Master*