

Rembrandt's self portrait essay

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Formal Analysis of Rembrandt's Self-Portrait, Aged 23
Self-Portrait, Aged 23 was painted by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) in 1629. The oil on wood work is on display in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. It was purchased in 1896 from Lt.

Col. Sawyer through Bernard Berenson and has dimensions of 89.7 x 73.5 centimeters¹.

As the title implies, Rembrandt as a young man is the only figure in the portrait. He is set slightly off-center to the viewer's left and his body is angled so as to present his right shoulder to the viewer. His face is not in three-quarter view but rather is turned almost directly toward the viewer, though still not straight on.

His small, beady eyes look out towards the spectator and his mouth is slightly open as if he has been interrupted in mid-speech. He looks as if he is in casual conversation with the spectator or maybe just turning to face in our direction as if someone had called his name. Either way, it is an expression of interest or concern. His face structure is very soft and thin, but at first glance appears pear shaped due to the lighting.

He appears to be a very genuine person, yet has a sense of naiveté about him, like he is newly out in the world after a wealthy, sheltered upbringing. In contrast to Albrecht Durer, who always included his hand in self-portraits, Rembrandt rarely portrays himself as an artist and this work is not an exception. His elaborate costume, complete with feather-in-cap, makes him seem important, perhaps even noble. His hair sticks out from under the cap, fluffy-like, in what might today be considered an afro, rounding out his face.

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There are few spatial elements in the portrait; in fact, the subject almost blends into the background in places. This is partially due to the color palette of the work, which consists mostly of shades of olive-green. As is typical of many of Rembrandt's self-portraits, earthy colors are predominant. The colors are mostly muted and they make the painting seem rather subdued, especially around the edges, which are mostly dark.

In contrast, the few bits of gold used in the costume stand out and seem to shine, giving a touch of elegance to the painting. His garb seems to be too sophisticated and gaudy for a subject who I think would look more natural in simpler garments. Most of the clothes are in shadow, however, as the artist is clearly playing with the use of light. Half of his face and most of his body are in shadow, as if the sunlight has shifted due to the passing of time since he first arrived.

There is a single source of light which comes from the viewer's left and mostly from behind the subject. It starts right below the middle of the portrait and follows a linear path at a slight positive angle ending on the left side of his face. Perhaps it comes through a window several feet away which would limit the amount of incoming light reaching the subject. The light is gentle rather than sharp due to a filtering source such as glass and a great deal of the illumination is diffused on the background, which puts some of the subject in silhouette.

With neither the subject nor the background entirely well lit, the light serves to blend them in some places, such as the top of the feather, and clearly define them in others, such as the subject's right shoulder. Brush strokes are

clearly visible bordering the subject which helps distinguish him from the background. The gold fringe of the subject's top and the gold on the hat provide a border for his face. Along with the light, they help draw attention to Rembrandt's face in the middle of the portrait. Looking outside of this frame, there are clearly items which help balance the painting.

The feather in his cap provides vertical balance; without it, there would be too much empty space above his head. Providing horizontal balance is the subject's left arm. Upon further study, it looks as if it is too long, but it is clear that the painting would not be pleasing to the eye if it was shorter. Perhaps he has his hand on his hip, drawing his garment up to provide the necessary balance. Another thing that is well balanced is the light on the background. While the light clearly shines on only one side of the figure, it is diffused on the background so that enough light is provided for each side. The Dutch republic, which was based on free commerce, was growing powerful during the Reformation. During this period, the Catholic Church was being protested and so large religious works were not being commissioned.

This Protestant movement split Europe: In Italy, artists like Leonardo da Vinci were concerned with linear perspective, contrapposto, realistic modeling, and classical ideals while Northern European artists were concerned with color and detail. Northern patrons were middle-class and genre and landscape paintings were popular as were works created for personal religious devotion. With the sale of art transitioning to an open market rather than commissioned works, artists were free to create as they wished but they also had to make paintings that appealed to buyers. They began

producing works and types of art for which they were skilled at or had a passion for; in this way, artists created niches for themselves. Most artists of the period became known for specific types of works. Rembrandt was an exception in that he continued to create all types of art, however, he is well known for his self-portraiture. He painted or drew himself almost ninety times, a large number which may be attributed to several motives.

While not in demand as a portrait painter, he had to depend on his friends, family, and himself for sitters. He also may have been attempting to boost his own celebrity both by showing off his varied skills and by creating recognition for his face. His portraiture is different from those of his contemporaries in that it is clear that he wished to study himself over time and in different roles, as is evidenced by the wide variety of self-portraits he created throughout his life².

The study of light, color, and detail can be seen with a brief overview of these works. While he may have had other motives as well, this one is probably the clearest reason for his many varied self portraits. Self-Portrait, Aged 23, like many of Rembrandt's self-portraits, gives fascinating insight to the life and times of this artist.

The work reflects great historical and personal significance as well as displays Rembrandt's artistic talents.