

# Free critical thinking on the self portrait

[Art & Culture](#), [Artists](#)



The self-portrait is probably the most important painting in the repertoire of the artist since it defines the character and vitality of the subject matter. A self-portrait is an important statement about oneself apart from also being intrinsically linked to an artistic development. I approached the self-portrait issue with some trepidation, since this has been the remit of several great artists over the years, and several have been studied in detail, apart from offering important guidelines about that particular artist's work (Smith, Kelly, 1997).

The practice of portraiture probably began with the Ancient Egyptians when it was linked with the idea that preserving the likeness of a person in a sculpture would ensure immortality. The art of portraiture as we know it, as the painting of faithful likenesses, dates back from no sooner than the fourteenth century, and the Sienese artist Simone Martini was probably its earliest pioneer in the middle of that century. Probably the first real self-portrait known to us, however, is the sculpture, is the sculpture of Peter Parler the Younger, found in Prague Cathedral, also in the middle of the fourteenth century.

In the 15th century, we come across the figure of Jan Van Eyck, whose technical excellence emerged mainly in his portrait painting, of which his painting of the Italian merchant Giovanni Arnolfini and his bride Jeanne de Chennay 1434 has remained the most famous. The double-portrait records what was undoubtedly for both an important event in the couple's life, namely their betrothal, and records is the operative word. Not only does Van Eyck capture every detail of the event, of the protagonists and their physical surroundings in an attempt to represent the occasion, as it really

was, he emphasises the point to the extent of writing on the picture that he was present for it - this was realism, authentic representation. With it Van Eyck raised the question of the artist's presence in the work of art, in any work of art that represents an event, and also in the portrait.

Perhaps the self-portrait that is a model for all artists is that by Rembrandt. Constituting a visual record of the physical changes to the artist's aspects over the years, his aging and degenerating face and features, Rembrandt's portraits, taken together, constitute an honest and pitiless self-commentary, a stunning autobiography that captures the vicissitudes of his life, his moods, his fortunes, his state of mind at different periods, and so on. Also, Rembrandt used the self-portrait to study the complexities of the human face and the fruits of his study are evident in the several great portraits that he created with a virtuosity that is virtually unparalleled by any other master, before or since. Rembrandt, like all Dutch masters, was essentially inspired by Caravaggio's message that truth and sincerity are to be valued above beauty and harmony, that were the values of the Renaissance, that there must be no compromise with the truth of the subject in the portrait, old, ugly, corrupt, or even malformed, as it may be (Smith, Kelly, 1997).

What degree of resemblance makes for a credible self-portrait? The answer is an elastic one; in the case of many modern artists who have acknowledged resemblance as a necessary ingredient of portraiture, the answer has been 'minimal'. But neither the traditional portraitist, nor the 'man in the street' in general, who is, more often than not, the portrait artist's customer, will concur that the degree of resemblance is not of the essence. For them, the degree of likeness must be the greatest possible. But

even this criterion of achieving the closest likeness possible, that seems very practical and straightforward, remains practically uncertain, that is uncertain from a practical point of view. Self-portraits regarded as good by the artist himself have often been rejected by his client because the likeness is not exact.

I have never been one for a self-portrait. Although I have painted a few of these over the years, this medium has never been to me what it has been to artists such as Albrecht Durer and Rembrandt, or perhaps more recently, Van Gogh and Egon Schiele (Smith, Kelly, 1997). The self-portrait that I am currently painting focuses on the eyes as 'the window of the soul' and the viewer is invited to ignore the other details of the face and focus on them. They are youthful eyes, but already tired and troubled. The background is nearly monochrome and dull, with the light coming from the side, and that even the other features of the face are in shadow, continues to appreciate their importance (Koerner, 1993).

The interpretation of any portrait is always difficult to make; self-portraits present a veritable minefield in this respect. The expression of the face cannot be described as tired, or even sad, it is much more than that. These are the grim features of someone who has recently experienced the traumatic; again the eyes say a great deal, a mixture of sadness and, possibly anger. Those are the emotions conveyed by this self-portrait.

## **References:**

Lucie-Smith E with Kelly Sean (1987), *The Self Portrait: A Modern View*.  
van de Wetering E et al.(1999); *Rembrandt by himself*, , National Gallery,  
London /Mauritius, The Hague, ISBN 1-85709-270-8

<https://assignbuster.com/free-critical-thinking-on-the-self-portrait/>

Koerner Joseph Leo, (1993) *The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art*, Chicago/London,

.