

Research Point: Investigate Self-Portraits

Why might an artist choose to paint (or sculpt) a self-portrait? RIDEAL (2005 p13) states “Vanity, self-interest and self-promotion are all key reasons why artists choose to paint or record their own image”. While these are important reasons there are probably others, e.g.:

- No costs for a model
- Opportunity to showcase technical skills
- Control over what vision of the artist is left to posterity
- Perhaps were commissioned to do it
- To make a political or artistic point

SOME EXAMPLES OF SELF-PORTRAITS OF ARTISTS AS ARTISTS:

Dame Laura Knight 1913

<http://www.npg.org.uk/whatson/laura-knight-portraits/exhibition/dame-laura-knights-life.php>

RIDEAL (2005 p19) states “This iconic work reasserts the importance of the model and promotes Knight’s identity as a woman artist The complex composition showcases her skills”

Rembrandt

CUMMING (2009 p82) describes Rembrandt as “the soul of self-portraiture, its leading light”. Rembrandt drew or painted more than 80 self-portraits and here he is shown as the old master, looking out at the viewer but with the tools of his trade held in front of him, demonstrating his mastery of the genre.

<http://www.bridgemaneducation.com/ImageView.aspx?result=38&balid=61824>

Norman Rockwell 1960

http://www.nrm.org/2011/07/norman-rockwell-museum-in-print-magazine/tripleself_web/

This is a really interesting portrait – not just for the comment it makes on self-portraiture, or the humour or the symbolism of the 4 famous self-portraitists pinned to the main work. This self-portrait really says something about the artist.

CUMMING (2009 p146) describes it as “an expert narrative, transparent, inclusive, gently humorous was the essence of his art at its best”.

ARTISTS PORTRAYING THEMSELVES IN OTHER ROLES

David Hockney 1973

<http://www.artfund.org/what-we-do/art-weve-helped-buy/artwork/2555/the-student-homage-to-picasso-david-hockney>

The title of this work is “The Student – Homage to Picasso” Related to the first part of this exercise (artists portraying themselves as artists) Hockney here portrays himself as an art student and acknowledges the significant influence that Picasso had on him.

Sam Taylor-Wood 2011

<http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/photographs/sam-taylor-wood-self-portrait-in-a-single-breasted-5413474-details.aspx>

This work is called “Self-portrait in single breasted suit with hare”. RIDEAL (2005 p37) describes how this “image was created following her treatment for breast cancer”. There is deep symbolism in her clothing and props with the hare being a reference to the loss of hair during chemotherapy and regaining it after completing treatment.

Felix Nussbaum 1943

'Self-portrait with Jewish identity card' is a deeply moving self-portrait with a strong political point. Painted while in hiding in Belgium during the 2nd world war, it is described by CUMMING (2009 p75) as "an urgent message smuggled out of hiding to the people of the future".

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/2/28/Self_Portrait_with_Jewish_Identity_Card_-_Felix_Nussbaum_-_1943.jpg

What have artist said about their self-portraits

CUMMING (2009 p86) states "Rembrandt left no documents about his self-portraits and there is no record of him saying anything about them. Although this puts him in the company of practically every self-portraitist who has ever lived for some scholars it is proof positive that they cannot have meant much to their maker".

One artist who wrote something of his motivation was van Gogh. Quoted in CUMMING (2009 p235) he states "what impassions me most, much, much more than all the rest of my work is the portrait, the modern portrait". As Cumming points out, at the time van Gogh was unable to pay for models and resorted to his own face to paint. In his last months he wrote to his brother "It is difficult to know yourself, but it isn't easy to paint yourself either".

References

Cumming, L. (2010) *A Face to the World: On Self-Portraits*. London: Harper Press

Rideal, L. (2005) *Self-Portraits: National Portrait Gallery Insights*. London: National Portrait Gallery Publications