

## THE MAGIC OF HER MIRROR: Expanding Identities in Self-Portraits by Women

By Jan Raitzel

The earliest mention of self-portraits by women comes to us from classical historian Pliny the Elder in the 1st century AD (AD 23/4-79). He mentions a woman who painted her image with the aid of a mirror and who was also famous for her virtue. For centuries artists depicted Vanity as a woman looking into a mirror; therefore, self-portraiture by women came to be taken as evidence of this 'female' vice. The linking of vanity to self-representation led to the assumption that women, who were considered to be more vain than men, painted more self-portraits than their male counterparts. However, since evidence indicates that the frequency of self-portraiture by artists of both genders is approximately equal, the hypocrisy of this assumption is evident. And yet for generations of women artists the pejorative linking of their self-representations with vanity was virtually inescapable. Nevertheless, my examples will show that many early women artists painted self-portraits that were laced with subtle and not so subtle responses to how society framed, defined, and limited their lives.

From the earliest beginnings of self-portraiture by women, the role of the mirror has gone well beyond its reference to vanity. Mirrors mimic reality and thus are associated with the idea of naturalism as well as with the important social construction of what it is to *know* something. When we look into a mirror we feel as though we experience a kind of 'objective truth'. The physical truth-telling qualities of mirrors link with their metaphorical potential. For example, mirrors 'frame' images in a way that constructs what is seen by focusing on certain elements of 'reality' and by excluding others. Sometimes it is as though we, the viewers of self-portraits, are privileged to enter the frame of the subject's personal mirror and thus are able to glimpse certain disarmed realities of the subject. On the other hand, our role as spectators may involve what feels like a more direct observation of the subject in the painting, just as we might encounter a person in our everyday lives. Either the artist represents herself as though she is looking into a private mirror or into a mirror in order to check what others will see when they look at her. In the latter case, aware of being observed, she represents herself according to how she wants to be seen. In 1972 John Berger pointed out that beginning in early childhood, women learn to watch themselves in a way that men do not. According to him, "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (Berger 46-7). Accordingly, we could say that women are skilled self-observers. More than twenty years earlier, in The Second Sex (1949), Simone de Beauvoir had commented on this idea: "But all her life the woman is to find the magic of her mirror a tremendous help in her effort to project herself (642-3). De Beauvoir sees the mirror as an important instrument for a woman engaged in creating her identity

Today we will take a brief look at the evolution of women's self-portraiture from the 16th to the 20th century. Just as you might expect, such works offer insights into the ways women constructed their identities according to the expectations of their historical placement and according to their vision and desire. Today's selection of works offers an opportunity to contemplate the multiple ways in which women artists have seen themselves and ways they have wanted to be seen. We will discover that by the 20th century, the genre of self-portraiture began to take on a broader and more radical definition as women questioned issues of gender, race and identity in their works.

From the Renaissance to the present, artists have painted self-portraits for a variety of reasons: 1) to demonstrate skills to prospective clients; 2) to boast of their status; 3) to honor past masters; 4) to publicize their artistic beliefs; 5) even to simply practice figure painting. Despite considerable common ground with men, self-portraits by women artists have certain distinctive characteristics. In part, the differences stem from women's struggle to be accepted at all in a field that was defined as a male activity. Talented women artists were considered 'exceptional' or thought to possess male attributes that enabled them to produce art. In fact, often in history we hear of a male artist or critic saying "she paints like a man". Through the 19th century women's works tended to be less boastful than those by men, and also placed more emphasis on the artist's proper behavior and proper accomplishments. Whereas some male artists depicted themselves proudly displaying drawings of nude male models to indicate their mastery over the human form, women were not allowed access to the study of nudes, and thus, any kind of nudity portrayed by women tended to bring their morality into question. A woman artist could not advertise her technical skill representing the human body without risking or even ruining her reputation because to do so would imply her indiscretion. Thus looking at and drawing from nude models could destroy a woman artist's career.

Early self-portraits by women display varying degrees of originality within the socially imposed boundaries of propriety for their lives. Functioning outside the mainstream of the art-producing world, women artists were judged according to their comportment and morality rather than for the aesthetic qualities of their work. It would have been impossible for their art to be superior and their behavior questionable, since the two were inextricably linked. Women had to consider carefully how they presented themselves, reconciling the conflict between what society expected of them and what it expected of artists in general, who were assumed to be male.

Their answer to this dilemma "was creative defensiveness." Women sought to anticipate the responses of critics and yet "dared not risk looking



Caterina van Hemessen.  
Self-Portrait. 1548.

boastful" (Borzello 32). Excluding the small self-images inserted in manuscript illuminations such as the image on the screen from the 12th century, the first known self-portrait by a woman is by Catarina van Hemessen (c.1528-87). The modest painting of 1548 shows her in plain clothing with a solemn expression. It is not painted like portraits of a young woman seeking a husband, since she is not smiling and is in simple, unadorned attire. Most significantly though, the self-portrait emphasizes her agency as the painter. The inscription in Latin reads "I Catharina de Hemessen painted myself aged 20 years." Prior to this work, even male artists rarely portrayed themselves with their tools. Depicting herself with easel, brushes and mahlstick *in the act of painting*, this is the first example of the tools-of-the-trade type of self-portrait by any artist, man or woman. Why such a bold departure from the tradition of simple self-representation without tools, we might ask? Possibly she wanted to differentiate herself from male artists and to emphasize her expertise in a direct fashion, especially since women were frequently accused of not doing their own work. The inscription indicates that the painting may have been done as a gift for a patron which might have been an important stepping stone to the artist's further employment. We know that eight years later van Hemessen became court painter for Mary of Hungary, Hapsburg ruler of the Netherlands.

The second woman known to paint self-portraits and who was prolific in that genre in the mid-16th century was Cremonese artist Sofonisba Anguissola (c.1535-1625). Her father, Amilcare was a widower and



Sofonisba Anguissola. Self-Portrait. 1561.

a nobleman who believed in giving all of his seven children a sound Renaissance education so that they might bring honor to their city (a principal goal of an educated person in that era). He actively promoted his daughter's career until 1559, when she became the painting tutor to a princess at the Spanish court. For this, according to custom, her father received the pension, a practice that implied the father's ownership of his unmarried daughter's production. Anguissola was the first European woman artist to establish an international reputation and the first for whom a significant number of works still

exists. To be a woman artist in the 16th century was a rarity and a curiosity; thus, their self-images were in demand by collectors, academics and artists. Roman scholar Annibale Caro deemed one of Anguissola's self-portraits a marvel, noting both the quality of the work and the proper appearance of the artist. In his eyes her virtue and beauty were prerequisites for her talent.

In Anguissola's 1554 self-portrait with a book, we see the artist neatly coifed with a high lace collar and no jewelry, the image of a proper noblewoman according to the Renaissance ideal of the artist which de-emphasized artisanship in favor of intellect. The book's inscription in Latin translates "Sofonisba

Anguissola Virgin made this herself 1554." In it she appears modest, cultured, and refined, all essential attributes for a respectable Renaissance woman. Anguissola also presented herself in another self-portrait playing a clavicord. Introducing musical accomplishment in their self-images, women may have sought to imply that painting like music was a ladylike activity. Moreover, representing herself with an older female companion suggests the appropriate social behavior of a gentlewoman (Perry 42).

Anguissola's wonderfully complex self-portrait, *Bernardino Campi Painting Sofonisba Anguissola*, (late 1550s), offers a remarkable challenge to the art establishment of her time and expands the boundaries of self-portraiture. In this portrait/self-portrait, she paints herself being painted by her teacher. It is intriguing to consider how the 'gaze' or how the 'looking' occurs here. Anguissola looks at Campi to paint him as he looks at her to translate her image to his canvas. There is a kind of sandwiching of viewership which places Anguissola's image at least one step removed from how a self-portrait normally functions. The viewer is not looking at a painting of herself by Anguissola, but at a painting of a painting of herself, *by her teacher*, Bernardino Campi. In doing this, she removes the mirror from the self-portrait process. Not only is this a captivating idea for its clever innovation, but Anguissola also lays claim to the mastery of her teacher's style by painting his painting, thus implying that she can paint as well as he can. Also, it is significant to note that in this painting, her image is larger than Campi's, or larger than life, another daring idea for a 16th century woman painter.



Sofonisba Anguissola. Bernardino Campi Painting Sofonisba Anguissola. Late 1550s.

In Bologna, a city that was known for its early and sustained emphasis on educating women, Lavinia Fontana (1552-1614) drew inspiration from Sofonisba Anguissola. Her miniature self-portrait on copper of 1579, a mere fifteen centimeters in diameter, shows her with antique plaster models of a man and



Lavinia Fontana. Self-Portrait with Small Statues. 1579.

a woman along with several casts of body parts. Here we see a line drawing from the painted work in order to more clearly examine the elements it contains. This is the only woman's self-portrait of the 16th century to depict the artist working from a miniature nude and studying antique figurative works. Fontana had access to excellent artistic education since her father was a recognized painter and a member of the academy, and she displays her skills both symbolically and directly in this intriguing work. Arcs and circular elements within the painting echo its format. Indeed the circle was considered a perfect geometric figure because of its association with the orbits of the planets and with the

cosmos. Here Fontana balances multiple images within the small circular work. The shelving to the left of her head demonstrates her knowledge of linear perspective, a Renaissance discovery enabling artists to create the illusion of depth using a mathematically precise system. It is well worth noting that the small male statuette looks down and back into the space of the painting thus preserving the decorum in the male/female relationship within the work. The artist's gaze is strong and direct, giving her a self-possessed and autonomous air; Fontana is thoroughly in control of her art and of herself. Nevertheless, despite her efforts to lay claim to the male academic domain, Fontana can really "only claim a feminine version of academic knowledge" according to Gill Perry (54). This is because in the academies men studied anatomy from cadavers and live models as well as from statues. Furthermore they worked together in academic classes, as we can see in the 1578 engraving, *An Ideal Roman Academy* by Cornelius Cort (after Jan van der Straet). Here though, Fontana's pursuit of art training is isolated and limited. She is proud and proper while affirming the depth of her artistic studies, and she is alone.

Several prominent women artists of the 17th century continued to expand ideas of self-representation. Italian Baroque painter Artemesia Gentileschi (1593-1652) represented herself as the allegorical figure of Painting, La Pittura, in her 1630 self-portrait. Although men could depict themselves as St. Luc, the patron saint of painters, this would not have been as powerful a self-presentation as it was to claim the identity of Painting herself. The classical idea of La Pittura was a young, pretty and



Artemisia Gentileschi. Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting. 1638-39.

often bare-breasted woman, but generally a figure who was not actively painting. Gentileschi's work displays double innovation, because she was the first woman to lay claim to the allegorical figure, and she extends the iconography of La Pittura by representing her in action, inspired and working. She tackles the depiction boldly, even pushing the boundaries of female propriety by making her self-image passionate, disheveled and intense. Gentileschi's or La Pittura's gaze relentlessly attaches to her work beyond the far left side of the canvas, leaving the viewer of the self-portrait to contemplate her inspiration, but in no way to penetrate into it. The wonder is her creative focus, not her physical beauty or charm. Drawing upon the verve and grandeur of the Baroque style to lay claim to a giant prize, the prize of Painting itself, Gentileschi is not a woman to be possessed by the masculine gaze, but a forcefully engaged woman in full possession of herself.

In contrast to Gentileschi's allegorical self-portrait, Dutch Baroque painter Judith Leyster (1609-1660) presents herself in a worldly manner in a work also of about 1630 that may have been her presentation piece for admission into the Haarlem Painter's Guild. In this expressive painting, her open pose

and gesture appear casual and informal, with her lips slightly open as if she is about to speak. Leyster's gaze is remarkably direct and candid, meeting the gaze of the viewer with considerable personal power, along with an engaging friendliness. There is a feeling of split-second immediacy as she momentarily pauses during her work. No longer prim and self-conscious, the artist grasps a large handful of paintbrushes and seems proud of her skill and comfortable with her role in the world. The lace collar orbiting her face and the smiling *commedia dell'arte* figure on her canvas further animate this painting. Scholars have suggested that her choice of the theatrical figure may have been to point out the equality of painting and poetry. In classical times poetry had been considered superior to painting, but Renaissance humanists argued that painting should be considered equal, as a silent form of poetry. By including the theatrical figure, Leyster points out her engagement in a philosophical debate of her age (Borzello 53). Beyond the human and intellectual qualities it displays, the work exhibits sophisticated paint handling, both in the transparencies of her coif and in the bravura technique in the portrayal of the lace around her collar and cuffs.



Judith Leyster. Self-Portrait.  
1635.

Shifting away from the exuberance and drama of Leyster's and Gentileschi's Baroque self-portraits, we encounter the gentle and non-threatening gaze of Rosalba Carriera (1675-1757) in her early 18th century pastel self-portrait. She is working on a lace collar in a portrait of her sister with a chalk pastel in a holder (not a brush as we may first assume). Carriera was the foremost pastel artist of the Rococo era and popularized the medium of pastel and pastel techniques in European art circles. To avoid the potential stigma of employing a male assistant, she trained her sister in this capacity and so established a deep bond with her. This was not uncommon, as family support of one kind or another was essential in the careers of most early women artists. A prominent, acclaimed and sought-after portrait artist, her self-depictions are more introspective and psychologically penetrating than the rest of her portraits, which tend to follow the dictates of the Rococo style in their emphasis on the superficial and idealized qualities of the sitters.

Later in the 18th century, like Rosalba Carriera, Polish painter Anna Dorothea Therbusch (1721-1782) eschews the 'tyranny of beauty' in her *Self-Portrait* of 1762. This full figure, unapologetic work reveals both her age and her need for visual correction. She spent years in Paris where she was accepted into the French Academy. Despite this success, Diderot, the influential French encyclopedist and critic found her lacking in desirable womanly traits such as youth, beauty, modesty and even flirtatiousness, all lacks which could impede her professional success, but ironically he did *not* find her lacking in talent (Borzello 72-4).

One of the two women among the founding members of the Royal Academy of Arts in England in 1768, Angelica Kauffman (1741-1807) was among the best and most influential European artists painting in the Neoclassical style in the 18th century. In her *Self-Portrait Hesitating Between the Arts of Music and Painting*, 1791, she depicts herself at a very youthful 50, torn between two allegorical figures representing Music and Painting. The viewer witnesses the narrative scene which is a reprisal of a story from her youth when she had sought advice from a priest about whether to pursue the profession of art or of music. This innovative painting emphasizes female creative action as well as female inspiration. Both 'muses' are female, as is the artist responding to their calls. Thus in this self-portrait Kauffman upsets the traditional idea of the muse as female, and the artist (who actively expresses the inspiration) as male.



Angelica Kauffman. *Self-Portrait Hesitating Between the Arts of Music and Painting*. 1791.

Even more than Angelica Kauffman, French artist Marie-Louise-Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755-1842) tended to emphasize her physical beauty and charm, painting herself in a youthful manner throughout her long career. She used her many self-portraits to attract commissions by displaying them each time she arrived in a new city. Court artist of Marie Antoinette, Vigée-Lebrun was well known throughout Europe for the idealized likenesses of wealthy patrons that she created. Her *Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat*, c.1782, is based on a much earlier portrait: *Le Chapeau de Paille* (1625) by the great Flemish painter, Peter Paul Rubens. Although attractive and conscious of her own visual appeal, Vigée-Lebrun presents herself as a proper yet slightly eccentric professional woman in contrast to the woman in the Rubens painting who seems to lack a certain degree of propriety. Vigée-Lebrun claimed in her memoirs to have influenced women's hair and dress styles toward the more casual and natural look she had adopted for herself. Always industrious and professional, Vigée-Lebrun invariably presented herself as refined, innocent and unthreatening.

Like a Raphael Madonna and Child, Vigée-Lebrun's beauty and innocence as a young mother emerge in *Self-Portrait with her Daughter*, 1786. According to the influential 18th century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, women had an innate need for domesticity and were not well suited for intellectual pursuits. Here Vigée-Lebrun suggests that she is successful in two arenas: motherhood and painting. Also, the work demonstrates her support of the virtues of motherhood in an era that was strongly influenced by Rousseau's philosophy. It is interesting to note the contrast between the almost ethereal or perhaps self-conscious and worldly gaze of the artist and the wide-eyed, innocently open expression of her young

daughter. Despite her stature in the art world, Vigée-Lebrun preferred to think of her talent as a female artist as 'exceptional' and did not like teaching because it forced her to take valuable time away from her own work. After all, taking students was an enterprise that was not likely to lead to much success, since she believed most women to be lacking artistic talent.

On the other hand, Adélaïde Labille-Guiard (1749-1803), painted herself with two young women students in 1785 in a work that both recognizes the artist's achievements and expresses her desire to have other women follow in her path (Perry 127). This life-size triple portrait demonstrates the artist's virtuoso abilities in a number of ways. As would be required of a history painter, the most elevated category in the



Adelaide Labille-Guiard. Self-Portrait with Two Pupils. 1785.

academies, she paints multiple figures in believable space. (Women were largely excluded from history painting due to the prohibition against their studying from the nude model.) Moreover, Labille-Guiard exhibits great technical skill in depicting numerous textures as well as luminous flesh tones and volumetrically descriptive shadows, right down to the pucker along the seam in her gown. (Incidentally, her father was a successful haberdasher, but we can probably assume she did not paint in this attire every day.) In the dim background of the scene, the bust of her father is the

only masculine presence in the painting. The artist's gaze conveys integrity and propriety. This is a public display of her professional self and of her convictions regarding women's rights to access training through the academy.

Besides being denied formal training, women artists often held marginal status, because they were categorized as amateurs. This is the case of Maria Cosway (1759-1838), who loved to paint, but whose husband refused to allow her to sell her work. In the engraving from her *Self-Portrait with Arms Folded* of 1787, there is a sense of sad resignation (and, I think, a bit of rebellion) as we see the artist in an almost straight-jacketed pose. In fairness to him, her husband's apparent lack of support of her artistic work may have been because he feared the damaging gossip that often arose around women painters whose public lives risked accusations of impropriety (Borzello 97).

Although self-portraiture by women continued in the 19th century, most women did not benefit from serious academic training until the 1870s. Even then it was a diluted academic curriculum. A devoted member of the Impressionists, Berthe Morisot (1841-1895) trained with private teachers in the 1850s and 1860s. She exhibited in every Impressionist showing beginning with the first in 1864, except for the year of her daughter's birth. Although Impressionist painters were interested in depicting domestic scenes, self-

portraiture was rare. Two 1885 self-portraits by Morisot depend on the rapidity of the Impressionist style for their immediacy and psychological impact. The artist portrays herself with a stark, staring expression in the pastel work. Despite the sketchy character of the image, the haunting emphasis on the eyes compels the viewer to contemplate the very act of looking, the act of seeing. Her unfinished oil painting, *Self-Portrait with Julie* of the same year, shows Morisot with her daughter, yet she seems preoccupied with interior thoughts, almost unconscious of Julie's presence. The apparent maternal ambivalence of this work may derive from the fact that Morisot's artistic production had dropped significantly after her marriage. In fact, historic records provide numerous examples of women setting aside their artistic lives temporarily or permanently when they married.

German artist Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907) resisted marriage for a time, because she wanted to stay intensely focused on her artwork. In *Self-Portrait on My Sixth Wedding Day, 1906*, she depicts herself as though she were pregnant, even though she was not, in order "to link her female body with monumental concepts of creativity" (Meskimmon 141). A member of Worpswede art colony in Germany, Modersohn-Becker sought to link nature and primitivism to creation, as did other artists working there. However, she was drawn to the stimulating art world of the first years of the 20th century in Paris and felt suffocated by the small town provincialism of the colony. Her style combines a Post-Impressionist force with attention to the primitive creative potential of Nature. Again in *Self-Portrait with Amber Necklace, 1906*, her female form conveys a sense of monumentality and primitive, earth-based womanhood with its simplified forms, thick impasto paint, and the direct gaze of the figure.



Paula Modersohn-Becker. *Self-Portrait with Amber Necklace, 1906.*

Moving beyond woman's identification with Nature, women photographers began to explore expanded ideas about gender in self-portraits before women painters did. Frances Borzello offers two explanations for this: 1) the speed and immediacy of the photographic process and 2) its potential for privacy (115). An early example of such gender inquiry can be seen in Frances Benjamin Johnston's famous *Self-Portrait, c. 1896*. Posing in a masculine manner beside a fireplace, with photographs of men aligned along the mantelpiece, she burlesques the New Woman of the soon-to-be-dawning century with her skirt raised, a cigarette in one hand and a beer stein in the other. There is no effort to convey feminine graces or propriety in this self-portrait, which openly challenges the notion



Frances Benjamin Johnson. *Self-Portrait, c. 1896.*

that women's place is at home by the hearth. Here, the photographically captured men are forced witnesses of this radical New Woman.

The androgynous style of the New Woman, with short cropped hair and tailored clothing that de-emphasized female curves became popular in the early decades of the 20th century. Tamara de Lempicka's self-portrait in a green Bugatti of 1925 demonstrates the glamorous, androgynous myth of the 20s. The Polish artist's masculine attire links her here with the masculine action and power of the exotic automobile. Despite gains in women's rights, in this and other works, the new (female) androgyny was more about glamour than real power (Meskimmon 128). Although it was a popular idea in the mass media, the concept of the New Woman was also debated as a potential threat to women's femininity and to the family, and by extension, to the very fabric of society.

In another example of women artists' discomfort with the idea of fixed notions of identity, Suzanne Valadon (1865-1938) brought a challenge to the idea that above all a woman artist must be irreproachable in her personal life and appearance. Before becoming an artist's model to Toulouse-Lautrec, Renoir and others, she was a circus performer. Active in early 20th century bohemian life in Paris, she did not fit the mold of the refined woman artist and produced gritty, rather than idealized, images of nude women bathing and other powerful works that prompted some critics to refer to her as 'virile'. It was unthinkable for her to be a woman and produce such works, and thus, she was placed outside her own gender by such critical remarks. In Valadon's *Family Portrait, 1912*, the artist gazes directly out from the canvas unlike the other three figures: her mother, her troubled son in the lower right and her much younger male companion. In this tell-it-like-it-is work, Valadon places herself at the hub of her motley family and puts particular emphasis on her right hand which may gesture toward her heart or nurturing breasts, or may be the capable hand that holds all of their lives together. By including the everyday character of their life experiences in their work, Valadon and others have opened the door to a broader definition of women.

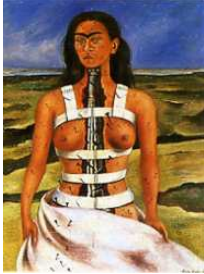
Associated with German Expressionism, and yet marginalized from it because her work has been considered too conservative in style and too much allied with what was considered by some the 'low' art of popular graphics, Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) was committed to socially relevant and universal themes such as opposition to war, poverty, and human suffering. Eschewing the notion of women as carriers of 'beauty,' her soberly real self-portraits reveal the depth of her concern with human tragedy and suffering, and drop superficial mirroring in favor of profound introspection that delves into spiritual and psychological



Käthe Kollwitz. Self-Portrait. 1934.

insights that resonate far beyond herself and her era. Her numerous self-portraits represent not just Kollwitz but all women, indeed all of humanity.

Working on a more personal level, the works of Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) are predominantly self-portraits, many of which deal with the physical pain that resulted from a terrible trolley-car accident when she



Frida Kahlo. *The Broken Column*. 1944.

was a teenager as in *The Broken Column*, c. 1944. Another major theme she explored in her work was her dual ethnic heritage as we see in *The Two Fridas*, 1939. Her father was German and her mother Mexican. On the left we see her in a lacey white Victorian dress symbolic of her European heritage, and on the right, in the Tehuana skirt of her indigenous Mexican roots. Here the heart of the Mexican Frida supports the European Frida. However, it is simplistic to interpret this doubled self-image only in terms of her dual heritage. It is also indicative of her ties with the Mexican movement of artists

who, for political and nationalist reasons, sought to renew interest in Pre-Columbian art and folk traditions (Meskimmon 82). The split image suggests that she engages in an intense and complex dialogue with herself. Throughout her works, her face retains a mask-like quality, thus deflecting the potentially possessive grasp of the spectator and retaining the importance and intensity of her inner dialogue. Because of the personal and symbolic content of her work, Surrealist spokesman, André Breton, claimed Kahlo to be a Surrealist. However, she denied this connection because her works contain direct and symbolic references to her experiences and are not based in dreams and the unconscious.

On the other hand, the Surrealists embraced ideas of incoherence, fragmentation and disjunction, and derived their imagery from dreams, irrational fantasies and chance. Surrealism perpetuated the idea of women as muses (possessors of intuition) rather than as producers of art. Nevertheless, women once again attempted to move beyond the boundaries imposed upon them. Dorothea Tanning's self-portrait, *Birthday*, 1942, painted when she was 30, emphasizes her maturing beauty rather than the pubescent child-like women both male and female Surrealists often painted. In an irrational world where doors open toward an infinite depth, Tanning wears the blank stare of many Surrealist figures as though she is sleep walking. Other 20th century images of the body owe a great deal to Surrealism's collapse of interior and exterior reality and its formulation of the body as "unfamiliar, uncaring, grotesque, [and] unbounded" (Chadwick 15)

Beginning in 1925, French artist Claude Cahun (1894-1954) used mirrors and photomontage to create eerie doublings and distortions of her image and to achieve an almost gender neutral presence. She

was interested in the idea of a third gender, not male, not female. In this tentative restructuring of gender, Cahun posits a self and a reality that are ultimately unknowable (Kline 73). Also interested in androgyny, Surrealist Meret Oppenheim (1913-1985) strove to achieve what one writer called the "dismantling of gender difference" (Spector 36). Her *X-Ray of M.O.'s Skull*, 1964, eludes superficial social constructions of gender to a point, but then humorously includes the overtly female accoutrements of earrings, rings and necklace, which darkly punctuate the skeletal armature of the body.



Claude Cahun. Self-Portrait. c. 1928.

In another subversion of traditional self-portraiture, American Joan Semmel (b.1932) represents herself headless. The viewer of *Me Without Mirrors*, 1974, enters the eyes of the artist directly, without the



Joan Semmel. *Me Without Mirrors*. 1974.

intervention of the mirror, and thus establishes a much more powerful link to her in this startling work (even today, more than thirty years after it was created). This painting deconstructs the centuries old practice of representing the female nude to "connote beauty, wholeness and, in many ways, 'art' itself," (Meskimmon 2). Jean Auguste Dominique Ingre's *Grande Odalisque* of 1814 is a work that provides an example of the traditional

female nude. This however is not the stereotypical objectified female nude of the western practice of fine art. Semmel's self-representation instead depicts an intimate yet mundane moment of visually experiencing her own body while bathing. Her work also subverts the iconography of Vanity by rejecting its implicit enticement of the viewer to join in pleasurable looking. By depicting herself bathing, Semmel links this work with a long tradition of female bathers but rejects the voyeurism associated with that tradition.

Since the late 1960s, there has been an exponentially increasing pluralism of styles and approaches to making art. Feminist theory has played a significant role in this continuing evolution, with its consistent focus on the female body and on female experience. Given the impetus of feminist art and its stand that *the personal is the political*, it is not surprising that late 20th century women artists have utilized self-portraiture to advance various agendas that undermine and subvert attitudes toward women that are prevalent in the mass media and in popular culture. Freed of many of the restrictions faced by their predecessors in earlier centuries, these self-interpretations tend to repel the control of the male gaze and instead recognize the body as an active vehicle of expression.

For example, Yolanda Lopez becomes a modern day icon in *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe*, 1978. In contemporary dress she reinvents the traditionally passive depictions of Mary. Here

she strides forward like an active and capable leader. Patron saint of Mexico, the Virgin of Guadalupe is a symbol of the unification of the indigenous people and is associated with the Mexican Revolution. The serpent is both a symbol of Mexico and of the Great Goddess. Lopez places herself in the center of this political and religious symbology and thus advances a claim for female power and action in the public realm.



Yolanda M. Lopez. Portrait of the Artist as Virgin of Guadalupe. 1978.

One of the important results of this type of agenda-driven self-representation has been the blurring of the boundaries of the category of self-portraiture itself (Borzello 167). In fact it is sometimes irrelevant whose body is represented in a given work. This may be the case again in *Kikeomasu Ka, [Can You Hear Me?]*, 1990, where Japanese-American Linda Nishio is futilely trying to tell her story against a pane of glass which functions as a barrier. With the tired stare of someone caught in an endless struggle, she confronts problems of cultural assimilation and art education in this work.

In another culture-based work, African-American Howardena Pindell's *Autobiography: Water/Ancestors, Middle Passage/ Family Ghosts*, 1988, also stretches the envelope of the self-portrait. This vibrant work offers multiple ideas and images to the viewer. The shape of the artist's body is sewn into the center of the work, where she appears in 'white face' floating on her back, along with the fragmentary text of a slave trade law and the white silhouetted hull of a slave ship. Pindell (b.1943) organizes all of the elements according to traditional African methods of decoration and costume in this remarkable variation of a self-portrait where she is almost droning in a sea of associations. These extended self-portraits, that delve into issues reaching well beyond the individual life of the artist, are fascinating and important works and may signal the breakdown or radical shift in the definition of self-portraiture. It seems likely however that a more traditional approach to self-representation will continue to exist alongside such innovative interpretations of the genre.



Alice Neel. Self-Portrait. 1980.

In 1980, at the age of 80, Alice Neel (1900-84) made one of the most penetratingly honest self-images of the 20th century. The only self-portrait Neel ever painted, *Nude Self-Portrait*, shocks with its utter naturalness. In *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger distinguishes between 'naked' and 'nude'. According to him, to be 'naked' is to "be oneself", and to be 'nude' is to "be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself" (54). Clearly, Neel is in full

possession of herself in this image; she is naked, not nude. Known as a portrait artist who relentlessly probed the human depths of her subjects, here she applies her formidable gaze to her own mirror and gives us an unprecedented self-portrait that reveals the intense dignity of her humanity with all of its sags, wrinkles and awkwardness. These are the trophies of her life, the visual record of its accrued wisdom. Neel was not a passive little old lady; in 1975 she said "all insults, all attacks, all downgrading and exploitation of women should be fought by all women."

The urge toward self-examination is probably universal and perhaps increasingly so due to the presence of world-shrinking media, components of which constantly seek to help us reinvent ourselves yet one more time. As we have seen, women have long been accustomed to looking at themselves, first in order to see and thus attempt to control what others (especially men) saw and second as a soul-searching exploration of self and culture. There is not a single *correct* way to see or interpret a self-portrait or any other work of art for that matter, no single objective truth. Keeping this in mind, it is essential for us to identify and acknowledge the positions from which we see. Thus, while attempting to remain cognizant of our personal and societal reference points, we can enter into a dialogue with the works and allow the outcome of the interchange between them and ourselves to be open-ended. Constructions of identity in self-portraits manifest complex social and psychological elements, sometimes reflecting a precarious balance between the two, a balance that we as individual women and men may recognize in the identities we continually formulate within our own lives with the aid of our own mirrors.

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