Self-Portratiture

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Abstract and Keywords

It is not clear that art ever offers anything like knowledge. But if it does, then one should perhaps look to the self-portrait. The self-portrait is an image of an individual created by that individual, in modern times with the aid of a mirror or a camera. Self-scrutiny in a mirror, and the effort to fix the mirror image in paint or chalk, may bring understanding about the self and its social entanglement in poses and expressions. Even study of a self-portrait produced with little effort, for example, with a camera held at arm’s length, may yield insights into aspects of character and personality masked by social performance. The possibilities and the limits of self-knowledge through self-portraiture are discussed with reference to an etched self-portrait by Rembrandt and to its democratic descendant, the “selfie.”

Keywords: self-knowledge, self-portraiture, self-scrutiny, Rembrandt, selfie, mirror
Can self-portraiture yield self-knowledge? There would seem to be two possible ways for it to do so. The self-portraitist may come to know something about herself in the process of creating the self-portrait; or the finished self-portrait, contemplated in tranquility, may deliver special knowledge about the self. To be interesting, such knowledge would need to exceed what the person might come to know about herself through introspection alone.

Before assessing these possibilities, however, we must define self-portraiture. A portrait is an image of a human being that refers to a real person. That reference is achieved by linking a name to the image, or by creating a degree of resemblance sufficient to permit (at least some) beholders to recognize the image as a depiction of an individual. The referents of many portraits are lost, but when such depictions comply with conventions of portraiture, they may achieve an effect of reference.

Sometimes an individual who wishes to have a portrait of himself lacks the skills to make one. So he delegates the task to a painter or photographer. The sitter can continue to contribute to the project, however, by adopting a pose and so countering the will of the artist to control the meeting.

When the individual who commissions the portrait and the individual who fabricates the portrait are the same person, we speak of a self-portrait. This individual possesses a mirror and knows how to paint, or knows how to operate the timer on a camera, and so does not need to bring in a second party. The two agents behind the portrait become one. The contest of wills involved in portraiture collapses, in self-portraiture, into a feedback loop of posing and seeing through the pose. The difference between the self-portrait and the commissioned portrait is that in the latter agency is shared. The commissioned portrait can thus be understood as a special case of the self-portrait.

Can the self-portraitist come to learn something singular about himself during the process of making the self-portrait? In fixing the perception of a face, stilling it, can the self-portrait add anything to what one can already see in a mirror? Note that the topic here is self-portraiture since the fifteenth century, when effective mirrors first became available in Europe. Self-knowledge in the age of the mirror (and later the
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camera) aims mostly to individuate: to identify those attributes that distinguish one from others. Other traditions of self-knowledge, for example the Christian memento mori that reminds us that we are all mortal, are deindividuating.

The answer to the question “Can self-portraiture deliver individuating knowledge?” is yes. Self-scrutiny in a mirror and the effort to render the image in the mirror in paint or chalk may succeed, in a more disciplined way than introspection, in bringing the self, and the system of poses and expressions that orient the self in society, into focus. The self-portraitist, moreover, may learn to see himself from the point of view of others. Presumably the ability to see oneself in perspective is one of the paths to self-knowledge. Looking at the finished product may also yield self-knowledge because a portrait, any portrait, may deliver insights into aspects of character, personality, state of mind, hopes, fears, delusions, and so forth that are masked by social performance. Therapeutic or edifying self-knowledge may thus be achieved even when there was no sustained private learning process behind the fabrication of the image, for example, when the picture is taken inside a mechanical photo booth.

However, there are also reasons to doubt the capacity of a depiction to contribute to knowledge of a person:

First, a still, silent image reduces the many channels through which one might know a person down to a single channel. Observing a person’s behavior or listening to her talk, for example, are good ways to learn something about that person, including one’s self.

Second, the costume and the pose chosen by the sitter may interfere with real insight into character. That happens in life, too, and not only in portraits. It may even happen in private introspection, where vanity persuades us to pose for ourselves to protect a cherished self-image. Self-portraits nonetheless differ from self-images created in introspection, for they are likely eventually to be seen by others. Posing for a portrait, including for a self-portrait, is more like getting dressed to go out in public than it is like introspection.

Third, the medium, the technique, and the accumulated conventions that the portrait and portraitist are compelled to respect to ensure intelligibility interfere with a view onto the
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whole person. In particular, any pretensions that a portrait harbors to being a work of art are likely to clash with any ambitions it may have to contribute to processes of cognition, for in most—though not all—theories of art, the artwork distinguishes itself from other artifacts, texts, messages, or performances that it might resemble by failing to carry out effectively whatever nonart versions of those things are expected to do. A painting or a photograph becomes a successful work of art by supplementing, distorting, reframing, exaggerating, or otherwise obscuring a clear, rational view onto the object it represents. For Francis Bacon, the artistic, form-creating imagination was to be mistrusted as one of the “idols of the tribe” that clouds knowledge of reality. Finally, to portray an individual is also often a way of giving a person some measure of endurance, perhaps even immortality, and a portrait that is reckoned a work of art would seem to do that especially well. But self-memorialization clashes with the project of self-demystification that is central to some classic disciplines of self-knowledge.

The Dutch painter Rembrandt (1606–1669) made many self-portraits in three media, painting, drawing, and etching. An example is his depiction of himself wearing a startled expression, an etching dated 1630 and measuring 51 × 46 mm (figure 3).

He is mugging for the mirror, and this seems to drop a veil between us and any deeper knowledge about Rembrandt van Rijn. One may well wonder whether Rembrandt intended to see anything, or reveal anything, interesting about himself. Perhaps he was only using himself as a model in order to develop a convincing physiognomy for a startled figure in one of his paintings. But this is not a private study, for his own use only, for he chose the medium of etching, which publishes an image in multiple copies. He made enough etchings and paintings of himself that eventually he could count on a population of beholders who would recognize both his face and his style, and therefore recognize this image as a self-portrait. That style—the rapid lines scratched into the wax surface, mimicking the tangle of hair that is also an aspect of his stylized self; the application of expressive shadows; the focus on the face to the neglect of the body and the surroundings—is itself a dimension of the self-portrait. The artist reveals himself also through his means of depiction. Rembrandt often struck
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stage poses in his self-portraits. He loved costumes. Perhaps in adopting a pose here he is admitting to himself, and revealing to us, his weakness for performance. The little image can be thought as a staging ground for self-knowledge. Yet there is no way of knowing what it meant for the artist. The feedback loop of posing and unposing is too tightly coiled.

This etching has also been prized as a work of art, and coveted by collectors and museums, for almost four centuries. A work of art is a construct of the imagination that exceeds any practical function it might also serve, including knowledge. And yet it would be incorrect to say that the art quality of this etching cancels out the cognitive value; it may add to it. Lucid appraisal of one’s own finitude of the sort praised by Socrates may not be the only kind of self-knowledge. The artwork may elicit nonedifying intuitions about the self.

Can we not say the same about the so-called selfie, the self-portrait made with the cell phone camera and published on the Internet? The selfie appears at first to be nothing more than a radical democratization of self-portraiture, extending the demystification of technique initiated by the small handheld cameras of the early twentieth century, by making the procedure as simple as possible. The impulse to pose for the selfie is irresistible. The possibilities of artistic achievement in the medium are limited. And yet, remembering Rembrandt’s primordial selfie, one would not wish to exclude too quickly the hypothesis that the imaginative self-styling that goes into every selfie can after all contribute to self-knowledge.