

SELF-PORTRAITURE

THE SENSATION OF AUTHORSHIP

JD Pirtle | 2007

“We work in the dark, we do what we can, we give what we have, our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task, the rest is the madness of art.”

-HENRY JAMES

Self-portraiture is the artist turning their eye inward. In the absence of a photograph, it is a filtered visual record of the artist. Contrasting self-portraits executed by five different artists, this paper examines this fascinating artistic practice.

The first self-portrait, *Self-Portrait* (1886), by Claude Monet, is a sketchy and airy toned painting that features unfinished edges and finds the artist relatively young.

The second, *The Wounded Man*, by Gustave Courbet, is an epic and romantic visual narrative that places the artist in an unusual posture before a pastoral scene.

The third is the first of only four self-portraits completed by Camille Pissarro, entitled simply *Self-Portrait*, from 1873. The artist, looking dark and crestfallen, is seated in his dim studio.

Self-Portrait with Palette, by Paul Cezanne, is an earthy rendition of the artist at work. The work is closely framed and features the artist with a full palette matching that of the painting.

The last work is *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*, by Vincent Van Gogh. One of over twenty self-portraits completed by Van Gogh, this painting features the artist and his wound in his studio before a Japanese block-print, of which he was so fond.

Self-Portrait (1886, oil on canvas) is one of three painted by Monet, completed three years after he relocated to Giverny; it is the last self-portrait he painted until 1917. At this point, Monet's interest in painting the human figure has waned.¹ Monet's interest shifted to a great extent to meticulous representations of the natural world around, painting in series in a nearly obsessive manner.

Though the rich blues that dominate this canvas seem lighthearted, Monet's manner and expression are serious. Lacking any background, the viewer is confronted with a composition

¹ Steven Z. Levine, *Monet, Narcissus and Self-Reflection: The Modernist Myth of Self*, (London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 279.

that features a simple, triangular arrangement. Fresh from completing a series of portraits of women against the backdrop of milky-blue skies and waters in Giverny, Monet's beret, sweater and coat are of the same family of blues.² Although sketchy and feathery brushstrokes make up a majority of the painting, Monet's darkened brow, nose and eyes show clear definition. This detail is gradually softened in a radial pattern toward the edges of the canvas and his torso is left unfinished.³

Ever the perfectionist, his punctilious treatment of detail is evident in the hairs of his beard; they appear to be light and effervescent, floating above his collar. His perturbation away from realism has increased during this period. Though he has not yet solidified the style and technique that mark later works, such as is found in his series rendition of water lilies and haystacks, one may see the soft accuracy with which he conveyed the rich harmony of moments.

Whereas *Self-Portrait* by Monet contains simply the artist's figure with no background, *The Wounded Man* (1844-1855, oil on canvas) by Gustave Courbet departs from many conventions of self-portraiture by placing the artist in a pastoral scene. He is lying against a tree, blood from a fresh wound soaking his shirt, with a sword leaning against the tree next to him. According to radiography, *The Wounded Man* is the final product of several overpaintings that Courbet began when he was twenty-one. Evidence suggests that he reworked the painting several times in the eleven-year period attributed to its creation.⁴

Courbet appears to be sleeping, or merely fading quietly into death. The proximity of the artist to the viewer is aided by the triangular, top-to-bottom arrangement of the figure, causing the normal boundary between subject and viewer to be crossed.⁵ Courbet clutches his cloak as a hint of blood soaks through his white shirt, which simultaneously encourages both curiosity and sympathy from the viewer. This effect, combined with the pastoral scene in which the artist placed himself, articulately generates an aura of mysterious narrative. Unlike traditional self-portraits in which the artist is shown at work or posing, the viewer is free to create his or her own version of what has occurred previous to Courbet's injurious state. On the horizon, it is either dusk or dawn, supporting the uncertainty of the artist's fate.

Courbet began the painting when he was twenty-one and remarked after completing *The Wounded Man* and another self-portrait, "Until I'd done these two canvases, I doubted myself; but

² Ibid., 277.

³ Ian Chilvers and Rachel Bean, *The Artist Revealed: Artists and Their Self-Portraits*, (California: Thunder Bay Press, 2003), 155.

⁴ Jack Lindsay, *Gustave Courbet: His Life and Art*, (Somerset: Adams and Dart, 1973), 86.

⁵ Ibid. 85.

after that, I said: I am a painter.”⁶ Courbet worked on *The Wounded Man* during a period before he began the innovations in Realism for which he is so well known, which is apparent from its Romantic/Neoclassical style and content.

Self-Portrait (1873, oil on canvas) is the first of only four completed by the Camille Pissarro. Pissarro is a forty-three year old man whose gray, balding hair and haggard expression resemble a man of sixty. Pissarro, with his back to a soft light source emanating from the left, has a darkened, somber face. Troubled by years of financial insolvency and isolated from his fellow Impressionists by his rural existence, Pissarro’s luck is about to change. That very year his dealer, Durand-Ruel, had sold several of his canvases for high prices.⁷

Like Monet’s self-portrait, Pissarro’s is a very painterly work; the brushstrokes are so visible in some areas that they might be considered impasto. The palette of the painting contains mostly warm, contrasting earth tones. Transitioning from a cool gray positioned against a warm ochre wall in the top right corner to Pissarro’s similarly toned complexion, his smock or coat fades into a flat, darkened plane at the bottom right. His sullen visage is made glummer by the lack of any highlights in his pupils. His eyes are those of a man dying a slow death. The background has a quick, sketchy appearance, suggesting that it was completed in haste or left unfinished.

This portrait was completed in the middle of Pissarro’s life, in a period that would mark the end of impoverished existence and a sojourn into new styles and ideas. Though Pissarro experimented with Neo-Impressionism and Pointillism in the two decades following the completion of *Self-Portrait*, he returned to Impressionism in 1893. That same year Durand-Ruel organized a major exhibition of 46 of Pissarro’s works.⁸ Contrary to *Self-Portrait*, 1873, Pissarro’s self-portraits from this era echo the vast change in his financial and professional outlook. For example, *Self-Portrait*, 1903, was done the year he died. Though Pissarro is an old man, his eyes are full of joy; his complexion and the world outside the window behind him teem with life.

Self-Portrait with Palette (1885-1887, oil on canvas), by Paul Cezanne, was painted during the latter half of his life, when the artist was 46. Cezanne is dressed very simply in a dark coat with a loosely buttoned white shirt underneath. He is standing before his canvas and easel, thumb hooked through a palette, as the name implies. The palette contains most of the tones used in the self-portrait, so it is assumed that Cezanne made no efforts to pose or augment his

⁶ Ibid. 309.

⁷ John Rewald, *Camille Pissarro*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1964), 92.

⁸ Ibid., 98.

appearance in the content of the painting.⁹ Cezanne and his surroundings have a yellowish cast with the exception of a small section of red ochre in the bottom left portion of the painting and palette. In contrast to a self-portrait completed in 1875, in which Cezanne's extremely sensual brushstrokes and vivid colors are matched with more ostentatious clothing, *Self-Portrait with Palette* is indicative of work completed during what is known as his Mature Period.¹⁰

In 1886, Cezanne's childhood friend Emile Zola published his novel, *L'Œuvre*, which featured a character that was based largely on Cezanne. This breach of decorum led Cezanne to break off the longtime friendship and may have caused the delay in the completion of this self-portrait.¹¹

Cezanne's simplified geometric shapes, masterly design and unique observation are apparent throughout *Self-Portrait with Palette*.¹²

Van Gogh painted *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* (1889, oil on canvas) during the ten days after his famous self-mutilation. The artist is clad in a heavy coat and fur-lined hat, standing in front of his easel. The painting is closely framed, cropping his torso at the waist. Short, visible brush strokes and shades of green dominate this canvas, blending his eyes and the background with tones found in the Japanese block-print hanging on the background wall. Though Van Gogh severed a portion of his left ear, his right is bandaged. This irregularity has commonly been attributed to the fact that Van Gogh was probably painting his reflection in a mirror.¹³ This self-portrait is very different than the ones previously discussed. For example, Van Gogh's figure dominates the canvas. Whereas Pissarro and Monet left undeveloped portions of their canvases, Van Gogh left no spot unpainted.

Van Gogh captures himself in a truly Post-Impressionist manner; rather than revealing his image through the lens of "first impression" that defines many Impressionists, he transforms his image and background into a new entity of light and dark. Textures are conveyed through alternating tones using short, vertical brushstrokes on objects of high relief, such as his face, hat and coat. Flat forms, such as the wall and easel, are shown through similar, non-alternating brushstrokes, which blend together to form solid planes.¹⁴

⁹ Frank Eligar, *Cezanne*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1963), 109.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹² *Ibid.*, 111.

¹³ Wilfred Niels Arnold, *Vincent Van Gogh: Chemicals, Crises, Creativity* (Boston: Birkhauser, 1992), 245.

¹⁴ Ian Chilvers and Rachel Bean, *The Artist Revealed: Artists and Their Self-Portraits*, (California: Thunder Bay Press, 2003), 183.

Van Gogh was an enthusiastic collector of Japanese block-prints and this is evident in his careful treatment of the print hanging on the wall just over his left shoulder. Rather than a vague rendition of a background item, one can easily make out the activities of the women, their fans and even a mountain in the print.¹⁵

¹⁵ Ibid., 247.

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