

At the Scottish National Portrait Gallery – Facing the World :Self Portraits from Rembrandt to AI Weiwei



Opening on Saturday 16 July 2016 at the Portrait Gallery is a fascinating collection of self-portraits collected from across three collections in Europe.

From Rembrandt's famously unflinching treatment of his ageing reflection to Ai Weiwei's politically charged use of social media, artists have chosen a multitude of strategies to portray themselves, for reasons ranging from self-promotion to the questioning of the self.

We were given a preview of what is in the exhibition earlier this week and it is a diverse and fascinating array of techniques spanning six centuries from the earliest work by the Renaissance artist Palma Vecchio (1480-1528) where the artist turns to look at himself in a mirror, a typical procedure for self-portraits employed by Rembrandt among others. Rembrandt is the supreme self-portraitist having painted, etched and drawn 80 versions of himself.

Facing the World will draw on the strengths of three outstanding European collections, and is a collaboration between the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh, Lyon's Musée des Beaux-Arts in France and Karlsruhe's Staatliche Kunsthalle in Germany.

The exhibition brings together many stunning images, some of which will be unfamiliar to British audiences, and includes

works by a wide range of European artists like, Jan Lievens, Antoine Watteau, Allan Ramsay, Henry Raeburn, Franz Winterhalter, Gustave Courbet, Éva Gonzalès, James Ensor, Edvard Munch, Henri Matisse, Paul Klee, Gino Severini, Oskar Kokoschka, Joseph Beuys, John Bellany, Douglas Gordon and Sarah Lucas. Though the genre of self-portraiture is centuries old, in the age of the hugely popular selfie it continues to be one of the most powerful forms of self-expression.

The Edinburgh Reporter spoke to Gallery Director Christopher Baker who explained that this has taken five years to collate: "This is a wonderful main summer show and it runs from the 17th century right up to today. In a marvellous way it combines three great European collections and there are huge discoveries to be made in this exhibition.

"This has been a project which has been developing for some years; it has been planned for four or five years. My colleagues the other directors and curators here knew that there were very rich works in both of the other collections. The collections were a similar scale to those in Edinburgh, but they were not well-known in Britain so we were looking for a key theme which would allow us to transfer the collections from Germany and France to Edinburgh and this is the happy result of that."

Key themes emerge throughout the history of self-portraiture, including artists choosing to show themselves at work and their exploration of their rising status in society. The French painter Joseph Vivien (1657-1735), a celebrated portraitist dubbed the 'Van Dyck of pastel', conveys his status in his *Self-Portrait with Palette* (1715) which is dominated by the shimmering fabric of his garb and majestic pose, and highlights his drawing portfolio and paint brushes. Sir David Wilkie's (1785-1841) remarkable *Self-Portrait*, of 1804-5, made when the artist was only 20 and on the cusp of securing recognition in the London art world, depicts him with fashionable tousled hair, elegantly clothed, and holding a

portfolio and pencil.

Other artists have chosen to explore more disguised and less obvious forms of self-representation. In his *Vanitas Still Life* (1637), the German artist Jacob Marrell (1613-1681) hid his portrait in a reflection on a glass vase this painting is primarily a *vanitas* image which encourages contemplation of the transience of life. Hans Thoma (1839-1924), one of the most successful painters in late 19th-century Germany, explored similar themes in his *Self-Portrait with Love and Death* (1875), but included a skull far more prominently in the skeletal figure of Death who is trying to hiss something into the painter's ear.

Michael Clarke Director of the Scottish National Gallery at the National Galleries of Scotland explained however that even though there are themes the way the art is displayed is not in any chronological order : "By combining these exhibits we have managed to get a really interesting display of six centuries of artist self-portraiture right up to the selfie of the present day.

"To try and give some structure to the show we have chosen about five themes and then we've mixed up the artists chronologically within each theme, so you could see something from the Renaissance juxtaposed with something from the 19th century. I hope this will make you wonder and think a little bit more about the subject."

Provocatively and playfully the American artists Andy Warhol (1928-1987) and Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) used their series of self-portraits to alter their identities and take on various roles, making use of costumes, wigs and makeup to alter their image. Mapplethorpe's 1980 *Self-Portrait* and Warhol's *Self-Portrait with Platinum Bouffant Wig* (1981) were taken in the last decades of both artists' lives and are striking examples of how role-playing became a central aspect of their creativity.

In more recent years, the high profile Chinese artist Ai Weiwei (b.1957) pioneered the use of selfies among artists. In 2009 he was arrested by the Chinese government and injured in the process, and by posting selfies on Instagram during his arrest immediately informed a global audience about his fate. A month later he posted another set of images from a hospital bed, where he underwent an operation to treat the cerebral haemorrhage he had suffered as a result of his arrest – the photos show him with a dressing on his head and a blood bag lying on his chest. He is a big Instagrammer too, often posting several photos at a time when visiting one site or location.



The Edinburgh Reporter spoke with Ken Currie whose work is based on himself in the nude (although he confirmed he did not paint it in the nude!) Mr Currie explained to us that he did not paint from a mirror but from imagination. " I did not want to get involved in any kind of observational realism. I wanted this to be a projection of an idea that I had in my mind, so I didn't use a mirror and I didn't strip naked! I tried it out to see how it felt but I didn't work from life. I would have felt a bit silly doing that!

"It's oil on canvas and it has quite a ghostly look to it which is partly to do with the technique using very soft glazes, very thin layers of paint built up over quite a long period of time rather than very thick paint. I have used this technique many times but this is not the primary technique I use. It depends on the idea and in this particular idea I wanted to produce a very ghostly image."

Currie is in awe of some of the art on display in this exhibition. He said: "It is a fantastic show. It's got brilliant work in it. It has work by a whole number of German artists who have had a huge influence on me throughout my student years in Scotland alongside a knock out Rembrandt that

has been in Edinburgh for years.”

Be careful when you walk around the corner next to Ken Currie’s work as you will suddenly come face to face with yourself! The show features two interactive installations: FLICK_EU and FLICK_EU MIRROR.

As part of FLICK_EU, visitors will be encouraged to make portraits of themselves inside a photo booth which is outside the exhibition itself, but the resulting images will be broadcast in the exhibition and online at www.i-am-here.eu.

In FLICK_EU MIRROR visitors are filmed and their faces emerge on a large projection made up of the combined images generated of other visitors who have also participated in FLICK_EU.



Another Scottish artist whose portrait is on display here is Alison Watt OBE. The Glaswegian has come a long way with many exhibitions under her belt since painting the self-portraits display here. She told us about the painting: “I painted this in 1986 when I was still a student at Glasgow School of Art.”

The Edinburgh Reporter asked if her technique has moved on considerably since this painting to which she answered: “I think your painting is like yourself because you evolve as a person, your work evolves. My work tends to come from inside as in an emotional place. You change and you grow and that affects your work. It would be very strange if you were making paintings that were similar to the ones you were making 30 years ago. It is a natural evolution that you are watching change.”

“When I made the painting I had been looking at two other self-portraits which influenced me hugely. I had been looking at a wonderful self-portrait by Stanley Spencer from 1914 and also an exquisite self-portrait which is probably one of my favourites by Samuel Palmer from the 1820s. Both of those

paintings are really striking because there is no awareness beyond the self. They are completely direct which is very unusual. They also have a very limited palette and a very shallow depth of field so those elements are something I took on in my own painting.

“I have painted dozens of self-portraits over the years, but this was the first painting that I had ever completed.”

The exhibition is accompanied by a lavishly illustrated catalogue *Facing the World: Self-portraits from Rembrandt to Ai Weiwei*, compiled by curators from the three participating institutions (288 pages, 180 colour illustrations, price £29.95).

Facing the World is part of the Edinburgh Art Festival.

FACING THE WORLD: SELF-PORTRAITS FROM REMBRANDT TO AI WEIWEI

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SCOTTISH NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

1 Queen Street, Edinburgh EH2 1JD

Admission £9/£7 | 0131 624 6200

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