Who's Who: The Problem With Great Portraits

5. The Artist and His Wife

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November 2008

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‘..Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter, it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself’ Oscar Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray*

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Face fusion, an artist's use of their own features in the portrait of someone else, is only one of the many ways through which poetic painters portray external reality for the benefit of some viewers and an inner aspect of their own self for others. The dual concept is so at odds with conventional understanding that its use elsewhere, from altarpieces to still-lifes, is best left until its presence in portraits is more fully understood. Yet the claim, however surprising, is not new. Even in the Renaissance patrons and critics wondered why *good* portrait painters produced poorer likenesses than their less talented colleagues.[1] Isabella d'Este, for example, refused to send a portrait of herself by Mantegna to a friend on the grounds that "the painter has done his work so badly that it does not resemble us in the slightest way."[2] One theorist in 1586 wrote:

> "…most times portraits made by excellent artists are found to be painted with better style and more perfection than those of others, but most often they are less of a likeness."[3]

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A review of the later literature concluded that eighteenth-century art criticism “is riddled with the same paradox”. Yet though some critics like Denis Diderot came to the specious conclusion that good artists and their sophisticated viewers were more concerned with style and artistry than resemblance, the original paradox remained. [4]

Today we still have no alternative explanation though specialists often make observations that suggest the answer offered here: that good artists allow multiple viewpoints, taking liberties with a sitter’s likeness in order to portray an aspect of their own self. For instance, the presence of an artist’s *alter ego* is a fairly common observation about *good* portraits from any century. Svetlana Alpers writes of Rembrandt, for instance, that “the image in which he casts his sitters is his own.”[5] Even more tellingly, some artists are said to have actually resembled their sitters. Titian, for example, was heavily bearded and painted a disproportionate number of heavily bearded sitters. Frank Zöllner, one of the few Renaissance art historians to have studied the issue, wrote of two other artists:

> “[It was said that] Fra Filippo Lippi and Sandro Botticelli often repeated their own physiognomies in

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> almost any face in their paintings because they simply could not avoid painting themselves.......[And]the visual evidence seems to confirm that in fact both Filippo Lippi and Sandro Botticelli painted themselves."[6]

Leonardo's figures have long been thought resemble himself as well which is why the abuse hurled at Lillian Schwartz for noting that the *Mona Lisa*'s facial proportions are similar to his own was bizarre. Her critics surely knew that an actual acquaintance of Leonardo's wrote:

> There is one nowadays who has so fixed
> In his conception the image of himself
> That when he wishes to paint someone else
> He often paints not the subject but himself.[7]

Furthermore, the vast number of Renaissance portraits once thought to be a self-portrait and now rejected as being insufficiently like is yet further evidence of just how many portraits out there *somewhat* resemble the artist.[8] Why, one might well ask, would that be?

This month's issue on the artist and his spouse, normally a wife, reveals how often self-representation crosses gender as well, just as Schwartz suggested of the Mona Lisa.[9] Sometimes with unmarried artists, the painter appears with or paints an unidentified, perhaps even imaginary, woman.

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Israhel van Meckenem, *The Artist and His Wife Ida*, c.1490

We saw in Issue #1 how Margaret van Eyck's portrait is the spitting image of her husband, Jan.[10] Yet such resemblance is also present in the very earliest extant portrait of an artist and his wife, a woodcut by Israhel van Meckenem from around 1490. With their figures at a mirror-angle to one another, everything from their headwraps, eyebrows and narrow eye-openings to their half-smiles, protruding lower lips and highlighted chins reflect one other.

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Raphael by Raphael

La Fornarina by Raphael

Raphael by Raphael

In a more famous example, clearly inspired by the *Mona Lisa*, the facial features of Raphael's *La Fornarina* (hair, eyebrows, nose and mouth) clearly rhyme with his own. Other examples from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries follow.

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The Artist's Wife by Andrea del Sarto

Del Sarto by Del Sarto

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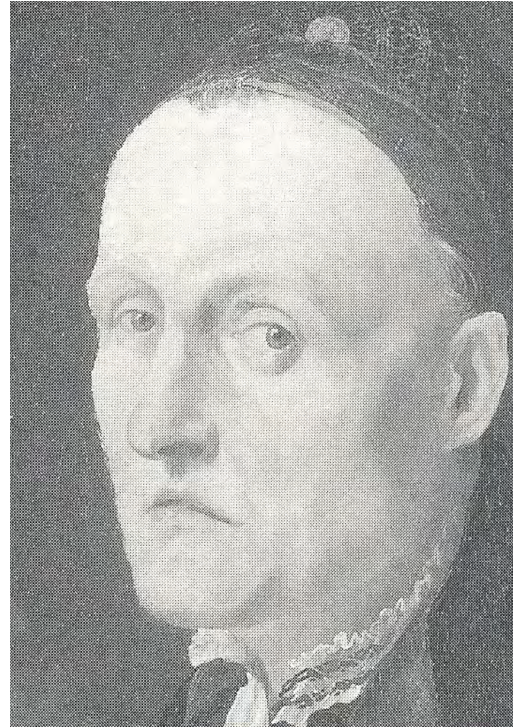
The Artist Hans Burgkmair and his wife
by Lukas Furtenagel



Detail of Hans Burgkmair

Detail of Burgkmair's wife

In this example Lukas Furtenagel has portrayed another couple, the painter Hans Burgkmair with his wife in such a way that once again their facial features echo each other.

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Rembrandt's Wife by Rembrandt

Rembrandt by Rembrandt

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Rubens' wife, Hélène Fourment, by Rubens*

Rubens by Rubens

* Detail from *The Little Fur*, c.1638

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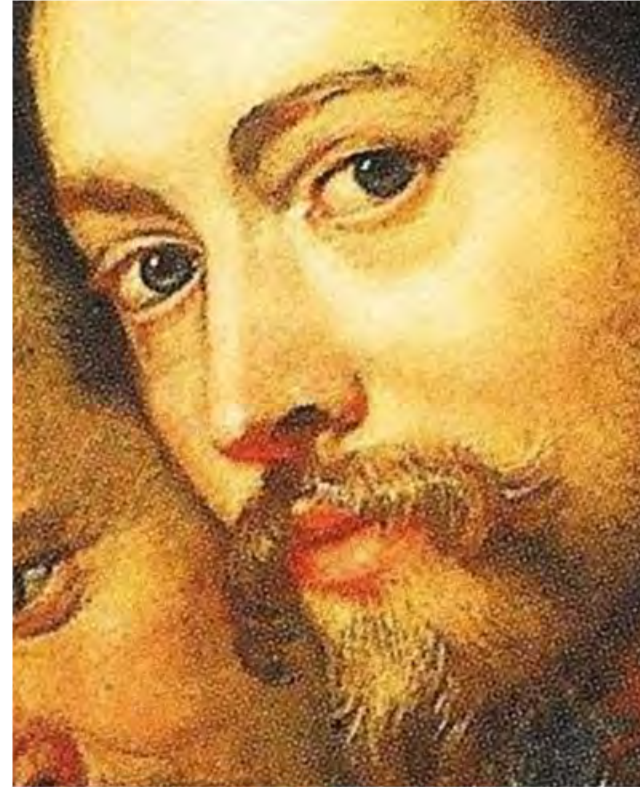

Rubens' wife, Hélène Fourment, by Rubens*

Rubens by Rubens

* Detail from *Helene Fourment and Her Children*, c. 1636

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Mary Beale, *Self-portrait with her husband* (detail from a family portrait)

Even in seventeenth-century England, a cultural backwater, painters such as Mary Beale embedded similar meaning with similar methods. Her husband in this portrait, with his blank stare, is her mirror-resemblance, representing the male half of her androgynous mind. The androgyny of the poetic mind is a well-known feature in the literature of the English Renaissance, a period that ended only a few decades before this picture was painted.[11]

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Ramsay's wife by Ramsay

Ramsay by Ramsay

A 1755 portrait of the Scottish artist Allan Ramsay's wife reveals a similar pattern. Look, for instance, at how the brows of their eyes, the tips of their noses, the prominence of their lower lips and the shape of their chins minus, of course, his cleft all match.

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Gainsborough and his wife by Gainsborough*

* Detail from *Portrait of the Artist with his Wife and Daughter*, 1751-2

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So too in Gainsborough's self-portrait with his wife where their doll-like heads share similar proportions and a similar mouth. These family portraits, long considered little more than photographs, contain far more profound meaning. The similarity might be stylistic but, as theorists note, an individual style or even a composition recognizably an artist's own is by nature self-referential, reminding spectators of its creator even while they examine the sitter.[12]

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Mr and Mrs. William Hallett (detail) by Gaisborough

An Unknown Couple in a Landscape (detail) by Gainsborough

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Mr. Gravenor *

Mrs. Gravenor*

* Details from *The Gravenor Family* by Gainsborough*

A glance at three other husband-and-wife portraits by Gainsborough confirm the pattern. Both the Halletts (opposite top) and the Gravenors (above) look too similar to each other to be accurate likenesses. Compare, for instance, the Hallett's arched eyebrows or the Gravenor's noses. Since all great portraits are in one way or another a self-representation of the artist (with face fusion only one of many methods), these dual portraits must, almost by definition, represent the union of genders in the artist's mind. While poets and artists of the English Renaissance flaunted the androgynous nature of their psyche in word and image, later artists were more circumspect but no less convinced of their mind's androgyny.

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David's wife by David

David by David

Even with the arrival of republican ideals and realism in portraiture, the androgyny of the poetic mind continued. Critics routinely comment that David made no effort to flatter his wife, painting her as the plain woman she was. Yet she shares his button nose, eyebrows at an identical angle and a deformed and uneven chin. He even transferred the curls on the left side of his face to her forehead.

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Ingres' wife by Ingres

Ingres by Ingres

In the nineteenth century Ingres, renowned for the accuracy of his draughtmanship, still gave his wife his own facial proportions and some of his own features too. Here their eyebrows, eyes, nose and mouth are all similar.

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The Lovers by Courbet (with self-portrait)

Courbet's self-portrait with an unidentified woman, *Lovers in the Country*, likewise signals that an invisible mirror lies between them. Thus the woman, even without his features, becomes a reflection of the artist "on the canvas". The lighting further emphasize that her figure is on a different plane than his figure "in the studio". The fusion of studio reality with painted image later became the guiding concept behind at least two of Manet's masterpieces.[13]

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Cézanne's wife by Cézanne*

Cézanne by Cézanne

* Detail from *Mme. Cézanne in a Yellow Armchair*

Cézanne was no different either. While others have been noted how some of his male portraits resemble himself, the same can is also true of some of his female portraits though his bushy beard confines the similarities to the upper half of the face. His wife, for instance, in a well-known portrait does not really resemble him though there is still a striking similarity where it counts, the eyes. Just as most of his self-portraits contain a raised right eyebrow, so does she. Their facial color is different but their eyebrows and eye-openings are the same, each right eye tilting upwards along with the raised eyebrow.

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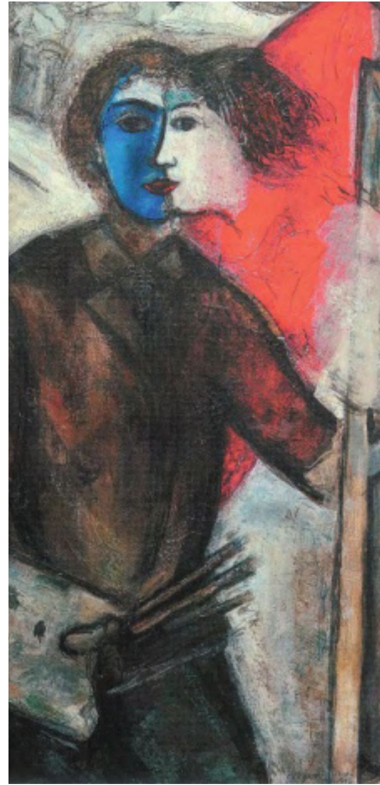

Chagall and his wife by Chagall*

*Detail from *Self-portrait in the Twilight*, 1938-43

The process is even more self-evident in some of Chagall's self-portraits with his wife. Here their two faces are literally fused, Picasso-like, with hers extending from an imaginary canvas while his figure, more clearly than Courbet's, stands firmly in the studio.

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Copley's wife by Copley

Copley by Copley

Lastly, to demonstrate that the knowledge revealed here is widely known among poetic painters everywhere, we end with America. John Singleton Copley's portrait of his wife from around 1770 is like an Identikit copy of his own face.

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Eakin's wife by Eakins

Eakins by Eakins

Eakins, it has been written, "projected..his own difficulties and disappointments" onto this portrait of his wife which is "in great measure, a portrait of the artist himself."[14] The comment refers, of course, to their melancholic aura but, unnoticed, they both share raised eyebrows, eyes underlined with tiredness and broad noses. Their facial proportions are similar too.

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Wood by Wood

Wood, Detail of farmer and wife from *American Gothic*

In the twentieth century Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, though not a portrait of himself or his wife, might well have been. When compared to his own self-portrait, the artist's self-representation in *both* the figures, husband and wife, becomes clear. The farmer wears the artist's own wire-rimmed spectacles while his wife, modeled by Wood's sister, resembles him even more closely than a sibling might. And is posed alike too. This use of a relative to make an unrelated figure resemble the artist is a common tactic in great art, again already described in Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe.*[15]

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This brief tour is but another minor step on the long road to proving that all great art is a form of self-representation. Next month we turn to independent portraits of the opposite gender and of sitters unrelated to the artist.

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NOTES

[1] Woods-Marsden has discussed the issue in "*Ritratto al Naturale*": Questions of Realism and Idealism in Early Renaissance Portraits", Art Journal 46, Fall 1987, pp. 209- 16; See also Sherriff, "Invention, Resemblance and Fragonard's *Portraits de Fantaisie*", *Art Bulletin* 69, Mar. 1987, p. 79-80; Another example, not cited in the above articles, includes Erasmus' reaction to his portrait engraving by Dürer. He called it "not similar." (Cited by Matthias Winner, "The Terminus as a Rebus in Holbein's *Portraits of Erasmus*" in *Hans Holbein the Younger: The Basel Years 1515-1532* (Kunstmuseum Basel) 2006, p. 98).

[2] Cited in Woods-Marsden, ibid., p. 210

[3] Giovanni Battista Armenini, *On the True Precepts of the Art of Painting*, ed. and trans. E.J.Olszewski, New York, 1971, pp. 257-61, cited in Sherriff, ibid., p. 79

[4] Sherriff, ibid., pp. 79-80

[5] Alpers, *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press) 1988, p. 86. For her wider comments on Rembrandt's self-representation in portraits, see pp. 83-6.

[6] Zöllner, " '*Ogni Pittore Dipinge Sé'*: Léonardo da Vinci and 'Automimesis' ", *Künstler über sich in seinem Werk*, ed. M. Winner (Weinheim: VCT Acta Humanoria) 1992, pp. 139

[7] Gasparo Visconti, *I canzonieri per Beatrice d'Este e per Bianca Maria Sforza*, ed. P. Bongrani (Milan) 1979, CLXVIII, pp. 117-8, cited in Zöllner, ibid., pp. 147

[8] For the many suggested self-portraits of Titian, a few accepted, most rejected and some still questioned, see Smetana, *Titian's Mirror: Self-Portrait and Self-Image in the Late Works*, PhD Diss. (Rutgers University) 1997, pp. 44-5. "Such uncertainty", she notes, "is not uncommon for many Renaissance self-portraits that are either attributed, re-attributed, or de-attributed as self-depictions of a particular artist based largely on circumstantial evidence." (ibid. p. 45)

[9] Lillian Schwartz, "The Art Historian's Computer", *Scientific American* 272, April 1995, pp. 106-11

[10] Abrahams, "Who's Who: Van Eyck and Leonardo", 2008, p. 6 available at www.artscholar.org/articles

[11] See, for instance, Katharine Eisaman Maus, "A womb of his own: male Renaissance poets in the female body" in *Sexuality and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. J. G. Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 1993, pp. 266-88

[12] Barolsky, 1994, p. 51; Sherriff, 1987, p. 79

[13] See Abrahams, "Manet's Art Through Manet's Eyes" at www.artscholar.org/articles for an explanation of Manet's masterpieces. Note also the two horizontal locks of hair flying improbably outwards from Courbet's face, a likely reference to David's self-representational motif in his portrait of Napoleon and other sitters. See Abrahams, "Who's Who: Napoleon and French Rulers" at www.artscholar.org/articles.

[14] John Wilmerding, Thomas Eakins (London: National Portrait Gallery) 1993, p. 106

[15] See note 4

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