Who's Who: The Problem With Great Portraits

Van Eyck And Leonardo

By Simon Abrahams

July 2008

Dissatisfied with conventional explanations of art? Puzzled by art's meaning? You are not alone. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American poet, was so mystified by what he had seen in the Louvre that he wrote home:

> "Leonardo da Vinci has more pictures here than in any other gallery & I like them well despite the identity of the features which peep out of men & women. I have seen the same face in his pictures I think six or seven times."[1]

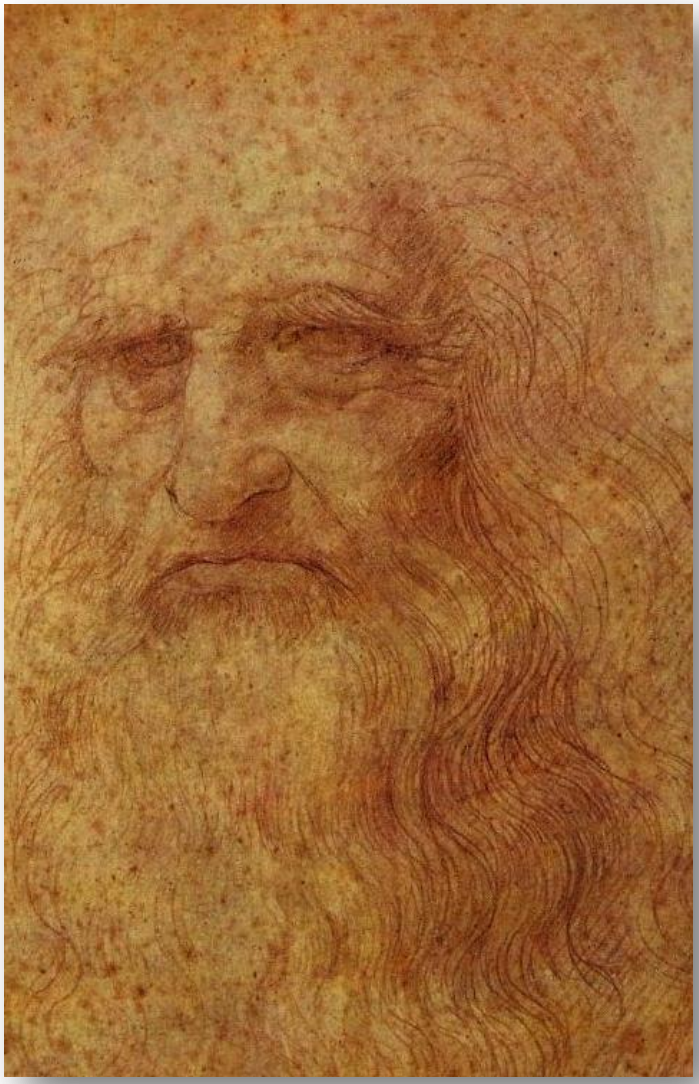
Yet no-one seems to have noted the most striking example of what Emerson probably saw that day. The heads of St. John the Baptist and St. Anne, in separate paintings, are identical. [2] When one is inverted and rotated, the similarity becomes obvious (figs. 1-2). Why did Leonardo paint the same face? And why on bodies of opposing gender? And why do art scholars not note the exact similarities, whatever their explanation?

1. Leonardo, St. Anne from *Virgin and Child with St. Anne*

2. Leonardo, St. John from *St. John the Baptist*

Thirteen years ago a computer scientist named Lillian Schwartz made a somewhat similar observation: that the facial proportions of the *Mona Lisa* were the same as Leonardo's (figs. 3-4).[3] Demonstrating that the distance between the various parts of the face are all identical when measured by computer, she made no claim about Leonardo's meaning. Her article, though, was greeted with derision by experts and prompted headlines about Leonardo being a transvestite. One eminent scholar announced: "Art history will survive this crap." [4]

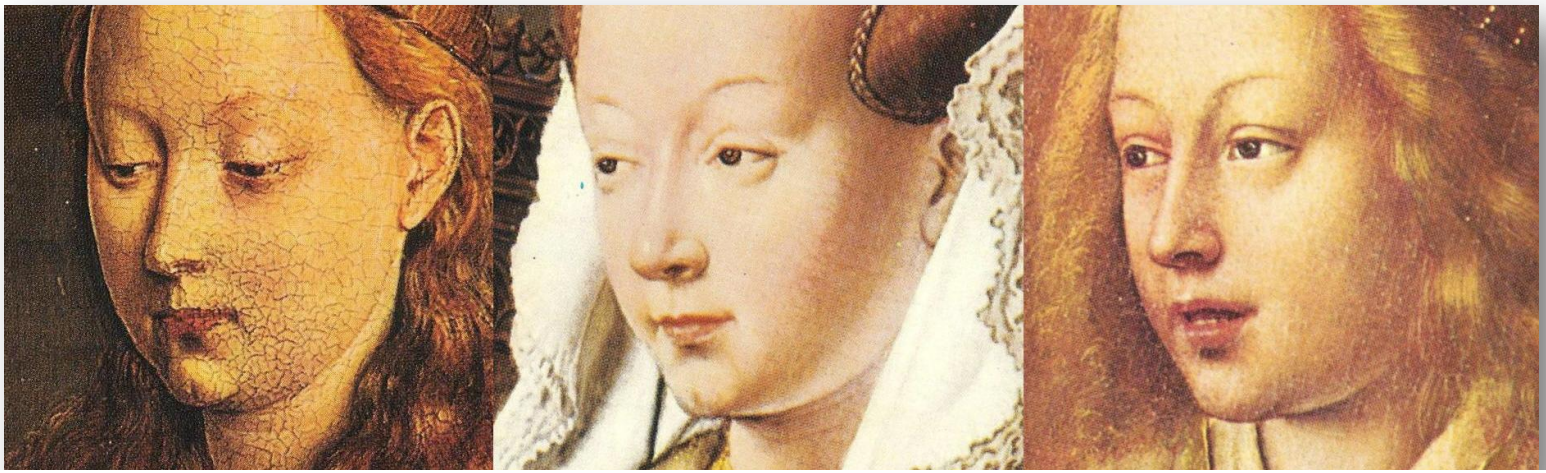
3. Leonardo, *Mona Lisa* (detail)



4. Leonardo, *Self-portrait* (detail)

5. Van Eyck, *Man in a Red Turban* (presumed self-portrait)

6. Van Eyck, *Margaret Van Eyck* (detail)



The Virgin **Arnolfini?** **Angel Gabriel**

All by Jan van Eyck. 7 (left): The Virgin from *Chancellor Rolin and the Virgin*; 8 (center): The Bride from *The Arnolfini Portrait* 9 (right): Angel of the Annunciation from the *Ghent Altarpiece*

No-one noted in the furor surrounding her article that Jan van Eyck, an earlier pioneer of portraiture, did likewise. Although known for exacting realism, Van Eyck painted his wife with features so like his own in a presumed self-portrait that the resemblance is uncanny (figs. 5-6) Even if the man is not Van Eyck, something strange is happening. So too with the bride's face in Van Eyck's most famous portrait, the *Arnolfini Wedding* in London (fig. 8) Her face is almost identical to those of Van Eyck's female Virgin and male Angel Gabriel in other paintings (figs. 7, 9). As with the *Mona Lisa*, their features are in exactly the same proportion. Eyes lower, a mouth opens but all else remains the same, even to a large extent the lighting and pose. Can this really be the new Mrs. Arnolfini? [5]

10. Petrus Christus, *A Carthusian Monk* , 1446

11. Petrus Christus, *Edward Grimston*, 1446

Nor are Van Eyck and Leonardo alone. Portraits by Petrus Christus, another pioneer, paint a similar picture. His well-known images of a monk and an Englishman, though each convincingly real, are too alike to be true (figs. 10-11).[6] One can only conclude that the two portraits, painted the same year, are not what we think.

Portraits have long puzzled viewers for other reasons as well. Art theorists used to wonder where the poetry was in the simple record of a person's face and, not finding much, dismissed portraiture as a minor art form. Their judgment, though, had little effect on artists who continued to make portraits and self-portraits, with Michelangelo being a rare exception. Yet the puzzle persists, as evidenced by that common question "What's so important about the *Mona Lisa*?'

This and articles on the same subject to follow are timely because exhibitions on portraits in 2008 are seemingly everywhere, all concerned with the surface, the ostensible subject. The papers published here each month will offer an alternative understanding based on the visual evidence that portraits of others often look like the artist's own self-portrait. The evidence will challenge the long-held theory, first attributed to P. F. Alberti, that painted

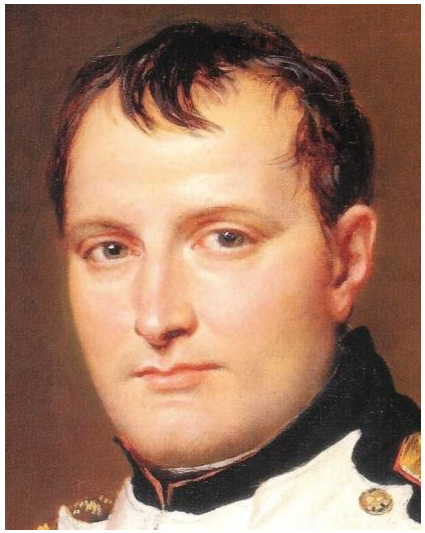
art is like a view seen through a window, a replication of sight like a photograph. If that were true, then figures by the same artist would look different when, as Emerson noted of Leonardo and the evidence here shows, they look similar. If, in answer to this visual problem, one imagines a great painting not as “a window” but as “a mirror reflecting the artist’s own mind”, one can perhaps discover the poetry in portraits that art theorists desired but could not find. It helps explain, moreover, why artists pursued portraiture despite such judgment.

Caveat. No apologies are made for the rotation and inversion of pictorial details. These are simple manipulations that an artist’s mind can naturally imagine in any age.

NEXT MONTH:

Gros, *Napoleon at Arcole*

Gros, *Self-portrait*



David, *Napoleon in His Study*

David, *Self-portrait*

August's paper will focus on portraits of Napoleon. To give a glimpse of what's to come, two comparisons are shown above. In one, at left, the young Napoleon is the spitting image of his artist, Baron Gros; in the other at right by David, the faces have few similarities but Napoleon sports two locks of hair so like the artist's own that they must have meaning, especially since David used the two locks on other figures elsewhere, including the dead Marat. Portraits by great artists, we will see, are not what we think.

Notes

[1] Cited in a *New York Times* review on *Americans in Paris: A Literary Anthology*, ed. Adam Gopnik (The Library of America) 2004.

[2] Kenneth Clark identified the genesis of the St. John painting in a drawing of an angel from 1505 (Popham 202) but the face is different. Nevertheless, in those years Leonardo painted an *Angel of the Annunciation* very similar in pose to the *St. John*. It is now known only through copies, some of which have faces similar to St. Anne's. This suggests that Leonardo used the same face in two different contemporaneous paintings, one now lost, and then used the face again when painting *St. John the Baptist* around 1515. See Clark *Leonardo da Vinci* [1933], rev. ed. (London and New York: Penguin Books) 1989, pp. 246-50

[3] Lillian Schwartz,"The Art Historian's Computer", *Scientific American* 272, April 1995, pp. 106-11. Even if Leonardo's drawing is not a self-portrait but an "idealized type", as Kemp claimed in 1992, the similarity of their proportions is still of major significance, both images probably linked to a real self-portrait, now lost. (For Kemp's observation, see Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press) 1998, p. 256, note 2).

[4] S. J. Freedberg, cited in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, May-June 1987, p. 11

[5] Although the verisimilitude of Van Eyck's portraits have always been praised, Lorne Campbell noted that the heads are much enlarged. Observing distortions in the depictions of rooms as well, he concluded that "Jan did not paint exactly what he saw but manipulated and edited reality with endless invention." As for the Arnolfini portrait he noted significant changes between the underdrawing of the couple's heads, possibly sketched from life, and the finished portraits. He thus believed that the underdrawings "may have been too obviously distorted to have been accepted as credible images by the couple themselves" who "must have authorized the changes". His overall explanation for the distortions are that they "enhance likeness by stressing the most characteristic shapes of the features and...idealize or flatter the subject without, of course, losing the likeness." How can Van Eyck being enhancing "likeness", by which Campbell means their individuality, by making all his faces resemble one another? The assumption, based on the belief that artists attempt to portray the exterior world realistically and without meaning, does not make sense. Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits: European Portrait-Painting in the 14th, 15th and 16th Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press) 1990 pp. 105-12

[6] X-rays reveal that the underdrawings are even identical. See *From Van Eyck to Breughel* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art) 1998, p. 148