Who's Who: The Problem With Great Portraits

2. Napoleon and Friends

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July 2008


Van Eyck and his wife, a facial comparison from the prior issue

The first paper in this series recently revealed that faces in Renaissance portraits, from both North and South, are either similar to the artist's own face or share the same proportions. This helps explain why great artists of the pre-Modern era painted so many portraits even though contemporary theorists disparaged the practice as mere copying, far removed from poetry. [1] This month, in focusing on the French and their rulers, the comparisons between portraits will help demonstrate how artists, in not copying exterior reality, painted the interiors of their own mind, an illusion that until now, broadly speaking, only artists could see.

Gros, *Napoleon at Arcole* (detail), 1796

Gros, *Self-portrait* (detail), c. 1790-95

*For the facial similarities in each comparison, see p. 20

Ingres, *Napoleon I on His Imperial Throne (detail),* 1806

Ingres, *Self-portrait* (detail), 1835

Needless to say, these portraits of Napoleon are so remarkably like the artist's own self-portrait that one or the other is unlikely to have been intended as an honest likeness. They are not, as commonly thought, historical records in a poetic vein but, the reverse, poetry posing as history. They represent not the sitter, whom they resemble to varying degrees, but the majesty and power of the poet's mind, as imagined by the poet.

Even if, as in Ingres' case and others here too, the self-portrait shown is from many years later, the resemblance is such that the original either had the same thought in mind or the later self-portrait does. Besides, there may have been a similar but earlier self-portrait, now lost. Either way, as mirrors into the artist's mind, these celebrated portraits challenge the long-held Albertian idea that art is a view through a window.

David, *Napoleon I in His Imperial Robes* (detail), 1805

David, *Coronation of Napoleon and Josephine*, (self-portrait detail), begun 1805

Ordinary viewers are so mesmerized by the illusion of reality in art that they mistake it for truth, assuming that their own interest in images was the artist's too. Yet no-one reads Shakespeare's *Henry IV* or *Richard III* as history. We read these portraits of *Napoleon* differently in part because the patrons themselves did and in part because the practice of art history developed through the lens of photography, both appearing contemporaneously in the mid-nineteenth century. Only with the development of Symbolism, then Cubism and, finally, full abstraction did art historians recognize a visual art that was *not* "photographic." They were able to do so because artists themselves wanted to differentiate the "look" of their art from photography. Yet art, as artists knew, was never photographic. This fundamental misunderstanding is why the comparisons here and the many hundreds still to be revealed have never been seen by outsiders – or by the patrons themselves.

J-B Isabey, *Empress Josephine* (detail), c. 1808

J-B. Isabey, *Self-portrait* (detail), 1841

Right at the beginning, when portraits first appeared in the Renaissance, royal patrons were already complaining about how few artists could copy a face accurately. Mantegna was no good at all, they said. Great masters, though, and many lesser artists too have always been able to make a perfect likeness. That is why a story recounted by Joanna Woods-Marsden is so revealing. “When..Pisanello and Jacopo Bellini made competitive portraits of Leonello dEste in 1441 [both paintings now lost], the Marchese found it incomprehensible that he could not persuade the two artists to reconcile their different rendering of his features.” Only now we know why.

Ten years after this and in the same vein Fouquet made a portrait of the French king so like his own self-portrait, probably from a year earlier, that it cannot be a good likeness either. Later artists, more interested in what their predecessors painted than in what art theorists expected, continued the tradition as the following comparisons demonstrate.

Fouquet, *Portrait of King Charles VII* (detail) 1451

Fouquet, *Self-portrait* (detail), c. 1450

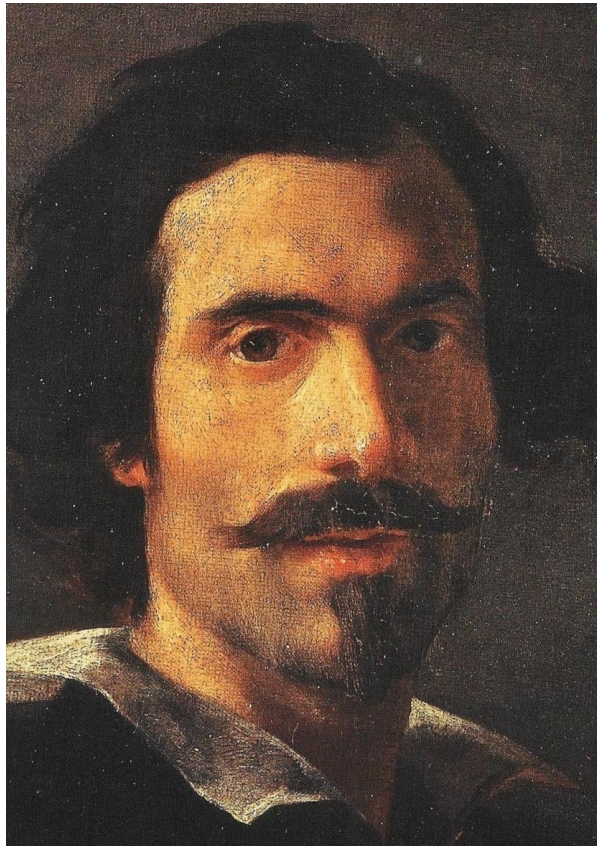
Rigaud, *Portrait of Louis XIV in His Coronation Robes* (detail), 1701

Rigaud, *Self-portrait* (detail), 1716

Rigaud, *Self-portrait in a Turban* (detail), 1700

The distinctive hairstyle of Louis XIV, the Sun King, and his artist, Hyacinthe Rigaud, is the most obvious similarity between the two portraits opposite. However, they also share facial resemblance (see p. 20). Those common features can also be seen in Rigaud's much earlier self-portrait (at left) from 1700. Thus, in painting the king one year later, Rigaud placed some of those features on the king's face, features which were wisely imperceptible as his own. Fifteen years later, however, in painting his self-portrait for the Uffizi and feeling bolder, Rigaud adopted the king's hairstyle as a royal reference. By then, of course, the king was dead. This is a good example of how the process can work both ways. Self-references are included in portraits of royalty and royal references are sometimes included in self-portraits.

Bernini, *Cardinal Richelieu* (detail), 1640-1



Bernini, *Self-portrait* (detail), c.1635

Although Bernini's bust of Cardinal Richelieu is thought to be based on Philippe de Champaigne's triple portrait, the man who helped commission it remarked: "It doesn't look like him [the Cardinal]….it will not be as admired here as it would have been if it resembled him."[2]

Duplessis, *Portrait of Louis XVI* (detail), 1775

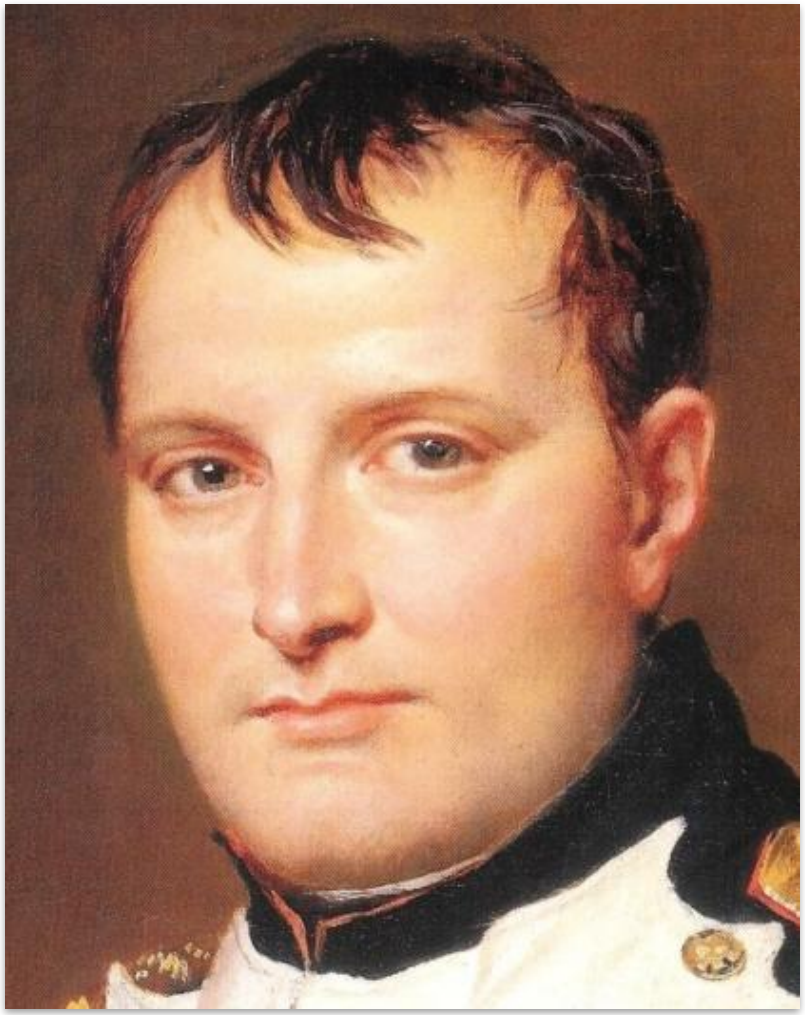
Duplessis, *Self-portrait* (detail), 1780

Duplessis, *Marie-Antoinette as Dauphine* (detail), 1773

Duplessis, *Self-portrait* (detail), 1780

Many viewers, considering these comparisons, understandably question them. They search for the differences in order to deny the similarities. Yet an artist might use just one feature, like David's two locks of hair on Napoleon's forehead (next page), to make the self-identification clear to those with similar perception. Resemblance itself is not necessary. However, while the use of an *alter ego* is common in literature, it is rarely seen in art and even more rarely in portraits. This is not surprising because great masters do not paint for you or me, not even for the patron beyond what is apparent on the surface. They paint, as T.S. Eliot said of poets and poetry, for future great masters. They are the ones who will understand and who will carry on the tradition.

The artist's use of an *alter ego* or, more accurately, their use of another person to represent an aspect of their own mind, is so important a concept that even if an artist and their sitter share the *same* physical trait, the artist can paint the sitter's face truthfully and still impart the same meaning. Truth is of little importance; it is what later artists *see* that matters because seeing, as science has confirmed, is understanding.



David, *Napoleon in His Study* (detail), 1812

David, *Self-portrait* (detail) 1794

Next month we cross the Channel as we turn from the Kings of France to the Kings and Queens of England.

Page **Similarities between each pair of portraits**

3. **Napoleon/Gros**: Hairstyle, facial shape, nose, the straight line of the eyebrows, eyelids, lips.

4. **Napoleon/Ingres**: Hairstyle, facial shape, eyebrows, shape of eye openings, mouth, chin, jowls.

6. **Napoleon/David**: Turn of head, hairstyle, facial shape, nose, mouth, shape of high collar with tied fabric.

8. **Josephine/Isabey**: Turn of head, curly hair, direction of gaze, line of eyebrows, facial proportions, nose, chin.

10. **Charles VII/Fouquet**: Turn of head, facial shape, contour of headwear, eye openings with tired look, mouth, chin.

11. **Louis XIV/Rigaud**: Hairstyle, eyebrow on left, eyes (king's eye on right partially closed disguises similarity of shape), prominent philtrum, creases by side of mouth, thin upper lip, protruding lower lip, cleft chin.

13. **Richelieu/Bernini**: Swept-back, untamed hair, facial shape, line of eyebrows, bony nose, hollow cheeks, moustache and beard, protrusion in center of upper lip.

14. **Louis XVI/Duplessis**: Protruding lower eye-lids, deep shadow by nose, bulbous lower lip with slight smile and indents on either side.

15. **Marie Antoinette/Duplessis**: Eyebrows, eye-openings, deep shadow by nose, protruding lower lip with slight smile.

16. **Napoleon/David**: Two locks of hair on forehead.

Notes

[1] Woods-Marsden has expressed surprise that self-portraiture appeared simultaneously with portraiture itself, a type of painting mostly restricted for its first century to images of the ruling classes. Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press) 1998, p. 9

[2] *Bernini and the Birth of Baroque Portrait Sculpture* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum) 2008, p. 251