

# PORTRAITURE

## SELF

Readily available access to technology means that we now create more self-portraits than during any other period in history. Evidence of the explosion of self-portraiture in our lives can be found in statistics collated by Google, which in 2019 reported that 93 million selfies were taken a day on their mobile devices alone. The self-portrait snapped on our phone now even has its own dedicated day; in 2014 the 21st of June was established as 'National Selfie Day'.

Self-portraits have, however, been a long-established form of portraiture and are particularly interesting as the artist and the subject are combined in the same person. The artist must therefore play two roles: thinking about artistic choices and techniques, whilst also considering who they are and how, as sitter, they would like to be perceived.

Self-portraits were created for a variety of purposes. They gave the artist an opportunity for self-examination and provide us with an insight into the personality of the artist, acting as a visual diary of how they would like to be seen. Outside of self-expression, self-portraits were sometimes used as signatures as a part of larger paintings, and were also opportunities for self-promotion and artistic experimentation. Artists who could not afford models could use themselves as subjects and had the freedom to explore new ideas, techniques and poses, unconstrained by commissioning patrons' expectations. Self-portraits were often used to market the artist who might send a copy to courts when looking for potential patrons. Artists also used the self-portrait to control their own status and position in the social hierarchy, using the image to express their own aspirations and shape their public image.

The Wallace Collection does not hold a large number of self-portraits, so this section focuses on a single key work.

### KEY WORK



Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait in a Black Cap*, 1637

# SELF-PORTRAIT IN A BLACK CAP



**TITLE** Self-Portrait in a Black Cap  
**DATE** 1637  
**SIZE** 63 x 50.7 cm  
**MATERIALS** Oil on oak panel

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**ARTIST** Rembrandt  
**DATES** 1606-1669  
**PLACE** The Netherlands

# SELF-PORTRAIT IN A BLACK CAP



## IN DETAIL



## THE PORTRAIT

In this self-portrait, Rembrandt's expression seems serious and perhaps slightly perplexed, as the artist looks into the mirror to make the study of himself and, in turn, looks back out of the canvas at us. He is wearing a dark beret with a gold trim, a large brown fur coat and two gold chains. He holds a gloved hand to his chest as he stares out at us. The lighting is dramatic and falls from the left side of the painting, catching his shoulder and the side of his face, highlighting the lines around his eyes, his furrowed brow and his facial hair, while also shining on the gold chain on his hat. The picture has a plain background and the shadow of the man falls on the wall behind him. The tone and mood matches the sombre colours of his clothes.

Rembrandt would have been thirty-one years of age when he painted this self-portrait. He has dressed up in a historical costume from a collection that he kept in his studio. He often depicted himself dressed in fanciful clothing and historical dress in his self-portraits, presenting himself pulling various facial expressions which we can assume were to allow him to practice painting techniques and experiment with lighting methods.

This self-portrait is believed to have been made to be sold as a 'tronie'. Tronies were popular character studies of a model showing an exaggerated facial expression or emotion, or dressed in costume. Rembrandt often used himself as the subject for these studies, which were also used for training pupils and as the basis for characters in his larger works. There are similarities in both dress and pose to the portrait he painted of his son Titus, which hangs opposite this picture of Rembrandt in the Wallace Collection.

The attribution of the painting has changed several times over recent decades. After a period of doubt about Rembrandt's authorship, it is now once again accepted as by Rembrandt himself (and therefore a self-portrait).

## WHO IS THE SITTER AND ARTIST?

Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) was one of the most important and influential painters of the 17th century. In addition to many biblical paintings, history paintings, commissioned portraits, and some landscapes, he produced an incredible number of self-portraits - about eighty were made.

Although self-portraiture became common during the 17th century, with most artists doing some self-portraits, no 17th-century artist made as many self-portraits as Rembrandt. The high number of self-portraits painted by Rembrandt allow us to see him age and also show the development of changing artistic techniques.

## WHY DID REMBRANDT PAINT HIMSELF SO OFTEN?

It is believed that Rembrandt painted himself, as in this portrait, so that he could practice various painting techniques and facial expressions. Some of his other self-portraits were to promote his status as an artist – he sometimes adopted a pose and wore clothing to make himself look like a Renaissance artist, positioning himself as successor to the greatest artists of the past.

It is also known that a few of his self-portraits were painted for wealthy clients who owned self-portraits by famous artists. King Charles I had a self-portrait by Rembrandt in his collection.

## DISCUSS

**What advantages might there have been for Rembrandt when using himself as a sitter?**

**What are the challenges for an artist depicting themselves as the subject in a portrait?**

**Can an artist ever truly represent themselves as something other than a creative maker?**

**Does being depicted as a fictional character, another gender, or as an abstract concept, make it easier to explore your sense of self?**

## COMPARE



Compare the Wallace Collection self-portrait with other self-portraits by Rembrandt at different stages in his career and life.



[LINK>](#)

Rembrandt, *Self Portrait at the Age of 34*, 1640

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[LINK>](#)

Rembrandt, *Self Portrait at the Age of 63*, 1669

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## EXPLORE FURTHER



Investigate the work of contemporary artists who focus on making repeated self-portraits. How have they explored their sense of self? What role do the concepts of time, gender, and community play in the identities portrayed in these self-portraits?

- Frank Auerbach, *Frank Auerbach*, 1994-2001
- Cindy Sherman, *Biography and Works*
- Sarah Lucas, *Biography and Works*
- Grayson Perry, *Map of Days*, 2013
- Grayson Perry, *Aspects of Myself*, 2001

## ACTIVITIES



- Create a self-portrait mask by using tin foil to make a mask of your face.
- Sketch yourself a number of times, each time with a different approach: with your eyes closed, using your non-dominant hand, depicting the inverse of what you see in the mirror, with one continuous line; or draw a rapid portrait in under five seconds. What aspects of your personality do each of these sketched images capture?
- Draw yourself looking in a mirror with a pencil on paper. Once you have finished, immediately erase the image. Then look and draw again over the top of your original image. Repeat this exercise a number of times until you have a series of ghost images on top of the other, each capturing a unique instance that makes up a fuller image.
- Create an identity box. Collect a series of photos, or portraits you have made of yourself. Include also photos of people and items that have meaning in your life. You could photocopy each image onto an individual sheet of acetate, then layer and fix the acetate sheets inside a cardboard box frame so that the viewer can see through the multiple layers of the image.