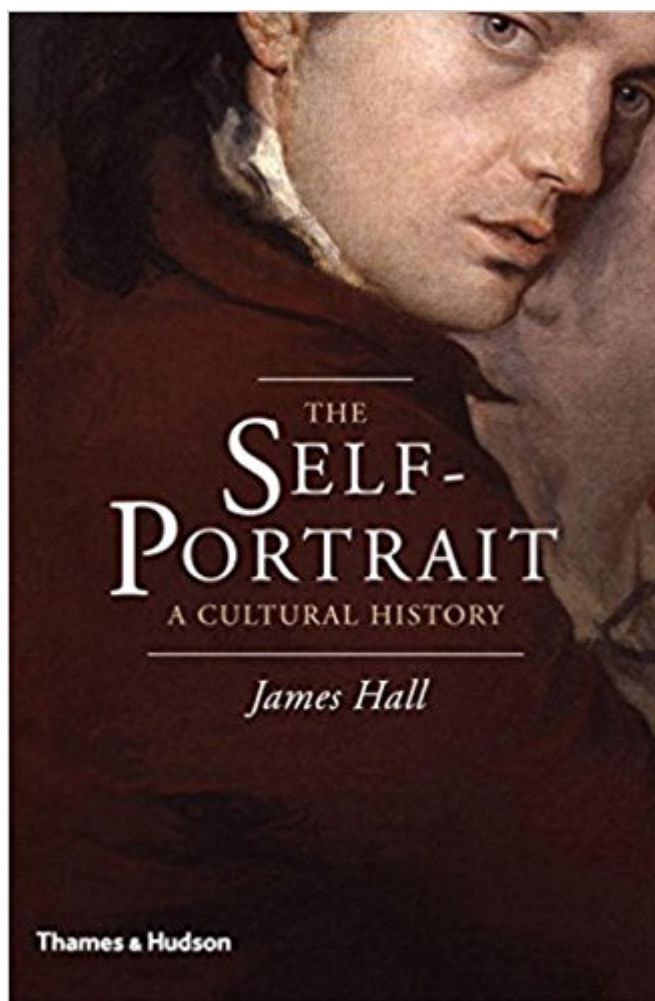


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# The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History



## Synopsis

Sheds new light on the long history of self-portraiture with fresh interpretations of famous examples and new works, ideas, and anecdotes This broad cultural history of self-portraiture brilliantly maps the history of the genre, from the earliest myths of Narcissus and the Christian tradition of [bearing witness](#) to the prolific self-image-making of today's contemporary artists. Focusing on a perennially popular subject, the book tells the vivid history of works that offer insights into artists' personal, psychological, and creative worlds. Topics include the importance of the medieval mirror craze in early self-portraiture; the confessional self-portraits of Titian and Michelangelo; the mystique of the artist's studio, from Vermeer to Velázquez; the role of biography and geography for serial self-portraitists such as Courbet and Van Gogh; the multiple selves of modern and contemporary artists such as Cahun and Sherman; and recent developments in the era of globalization. Comprehensive and beautifully illustrated, the book features the work of a wide range of artists including Beckmann, Caravaggio, Dürer, Gentileschi, Ghiberti, Giotto, Goya, Kahlo, Kauffman, Magritte, Mantegna, Picasso, Poussin, Raphael, Rembrandt and Van Eyck. The full range of the subject is explored, including comic and caricature self-portraits, "invented" or imaginary self-portraits, and important collections of self-portraiture such as that of the Medici. 120 illustrations in color and black and white

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## Customer Reviews

"Think selfies are a new phenomenon? Think again. In Hall's cultural history of self-portraiture, you'll find everyone from Michelangelo to Titian to Cindy Sherman."

- Entertainment Weekly " [A] splendidly written and valuable study of one of the most psychologically revealing genres in art history. - Gallery & Studio "Knowing why artists like Rembrandt and Courbet [created self-portraits] is at the heart of art historian James Hall's book. . . . Hall's writing is not only accessible for a general audience, but filled with notable insights, including spicy, pertinent ones. - The Daily Beast "James Hall's brilliant book . . . traces the evolution and aesthetic development of the form, from Flemish painter Jan van Eyck to Diego Velázquez's Las Meninas. - Al Jazeera America "The variety of expression on display here is amazing. . . . Hall carefully unpacks the portraits . . . with anecdotes and histories that bring a new understanding to a vital part of artistic endeavor. - The Commercial Dispatch "Hall shows that the creation of self-portraits is a deep-rooted aspect of the creative impulse. - Art Eyewitness "Art historian James Hall examines the genre of self-portraiture from the Middle Ages to the present, contextualizing the tradition in relation to the cultural climate of its time. This clear, well-researched book is an exceptional choice for everyone from the general reader to the expert in art history. - Library Journal "A lovely object in itself. . . . The text is informative and accessible. - Portland Book Review "Features major artists, mostly European, exhibiting themselves in a variety of modes, mostly pictorial, all complemented by effective, descriptive passages in well-wrought prose. . . . Recommended. - Choice "James Hall provides a lively cultural interpretation of the genre from the Middle Ages to today. But rather than provide a series of greatest hits, he is more concerned with the reasons why artists create self-portraits. - The Weekly Standard "While numerous texts have been written about many of the individual artists (and their self-portraits) the scope of the text is unique. . . . [The] inclusion of lesser known artists and media is one of the strengths of Hall's research, and the historic context provided demonstrates his extensive knowledge. - ARLIS/NA Reviews "This broad cultural survey...shows us how art inspired by the artist's own image has been part of our tradition for centuries....Beautifully illustrated. - Professional Artist "Hall intelligently and succinctly analyzes centuries of cultural history, and if the book doesn't much suggest where we're going, it does an exceptional job of pointing out where we've been. - Santa Barbara Independent

James Hall is an art historian, lecturer, and broadcaster, and is a visiting research fellow at the University of Southampton in England. He is the author of four critically acclaimed books.

Wonderful book about art. Brand new and no damages. Has wonderful artworks.

helpful

Everyone knows now what a selfie is; no one knew before around 2002, the first citation found by the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary. Before we had easy electronic photography, people might point their Brownies or box cameras toward a mirror for the same effect. And before photography, artists had for millennia looked at themselves and recorded what they saw. There are no webcam or smartphone selfies covered in *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History* (Thames and Hudson) by art historian and critic James Hall, but this is a splendidly comprehensive view of all the selfies that have gone before. The variety of expression on display here is amazing; of course there is a range of artistic styles over the centuries, but the themes of these self-portraits are just as varied, as the artist depicts the self with heroic overtones, or sentiment, or self-mockery, or pride. It is no wonder that we think that how the artist displays the form of the self to the world has some special meaning, and Hall carefully unpacks the portraits here, with anecdotes and histories that bring a new understanding to a vital part of artistic endeavor. Right at the beginning, in his introduction, Hall wants us to know it is not all about mirrors. There is the “mirror myth” that self-portraiture took off in the Renaissance due to the invention of the glass mirror. There were, however, mirrors of polished metal or even of pools of liquid, so if an artist wanted to depict the self, there was no lack of available images. The Renaissance boom in self-portraits was probably just part of the many booms of the period, and the mirror may have made self-portraits easier, but there had been plenty before. The first one mentioned here, indeed, is a sculpture from Bak, a chief sculptor to Pharaoh Akhenaten, a charming double portrait of the artist and his wife. There was no tradition of self-portraiture in ancient Greece or Rome (perhaps we think this simply because few such works survive), but despite the “mirror myth” there were plenty in the Middle Ages. They were in manuscript illuminations, the arena within which scribes could express themselves and paint themselves. Albrecht Dürer, among his other famous self-portraits, did one in silverpoint at age thirteen, showing himself pointing offstage. The pose echoes paintings of the twelve-year-old Christ debating with the doctors of the church: “Even at the age of twelve the artist seems to measure himself against Christ - and does not find himself wanting.” There was a sub-genre of the self-portrait in the sixteenth century that went to an opposite extreme. In 1595, Caravaggio painted *Self-Portrait as Sick Bacchus*, showing the wine god with a wan smile, yellow skin, and

dirty fingernails. "This smallish, hunched up sybarite is quite clearly our social and even physical inferior. Of course the artists most famous for their self-portraits are here. Self-portraits account for nearly twenty percent of the productions of Rembrandt, drawings, paintings, and etchings. Hall reminds us that for all that the portraits remind us of the painter's humanity, they functioned also as advertisements, informing potential patrons that he was still around and still skillful. They were not a diary or a project in autobiography; all were sold before he was declared bankrupt in 1656. Van Gogh may have painted himself for many reasons, but one of the big ones is that he didn't have to pay himself any modeling fee. Also he scared off other models, so he was stuck with himself. Hall is the perfect guide for this wide-ranging tour. His selection of self-portraits is extensive, and while most of the ones he mentions are illustrated here, some are not, so it is handy to be able to look up images on the internet. There seem to be hundreds of reasons an artist might make a self-portrait, and Hall's interpretations are sensible and expressed with clarity and wit. The pictures provide him with a rich field to survey for themes about artists and their societies, and it is a surprise that this is a territory that has been little explored before. Hall might have been lucky with his timing, with selfies continuing to be of interest to everybody, but this is a happy and serious book for anyone interested in art or art history. The selfies we have now from smartphones are simple pictures of the phone owners; but the point here is that the painted or sculpted self-portrait is never just a depiction of the artist.

Moore: Selfies are quite the craze these days. Is this kind of activity new, or are we simply availing ourselves of new technology? Hall: It's too early to say how new it's going to be, in the sense of it creating a new genre. But what's clearly different is the ease, spontaneity and quantity. The systematic self-portrait series is surprisingly old. The first artist to make a self-portrait series is the British portrait painter Jonathan Richardson (1667 - 1745). In 1728, shortly before retiring from full-time portrait painting, Richardson began to draw daily self-portraits in tandem with daily poems meditating on topics like time, ageing and personal morality. It coincides with the beginnings of the epistolary novel. The poems were written first thing in the morning (in summer he often rose at 4am) and it is possible the self-portrait drawings were also made at the dawn of the day. He made hundreds, of which around fifty have been traced. The systematic quality of these self-portraits, often precisely dated, is unprecedented, and would only be repeated in the twentieth century. Hand held cameras have been around since the 1890s - Edvard Munch made shaky, off

focus on selfies while recovering in a sanatorium; Claude Cahun made staged selfies; and Warhol used photo-booths and Polaroids. To an extent, the novelty of selfies lies in their high levels of narcissism. But then we have to decide what we think about Narcissus, the beautiful boy who, as punishment for rejecting the nymph Echo, was transfixed by his reflection in a pool, then turned into the eponymous sterile flower. Narcissus was redeemed in Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955), which became a bible for the 1960s counter culture. For Marcuse, the pool gazing Narcissus symbolized the liberation of self: he had overcome the opposition between man and nature, and repudiated the capitalist culture of toil and production. Seen in this light, the selfie epidemic should be considered a protest, or a cry for help from a young generation that feels marginalized and exploited, socially, spiritually and in terms of employment.

Moore: Among other things, your book covers the unfolding use of mirrors. When do we start to see something that mimics the function of today's mirrors?

Hall: In the twelfth century there is something I call the medieval mirror craze. Everyone became obsessed by the science and symbolism of mirrors. Dante refers to mirrors thirty times in his writings, with half of these references occurring in the Paradise section of the Divine Comedy. Beatrice tells him to do a scientific experiment involving three mirrors and a light to prove that God is ever present with the same intensity. On the other hand, when Beatrice criticizes his dissolute lifestyle, he sees his face, flushed with shame, reflected in a stream. Mirrors tell the truth, empirically, morally and spiritually.

Moore: You mention that St. Augustine is the first to use the idea of a "mirror of Scripture."

Hall: Why would someone writing during the ancient period use the mirror to describe the Bible?

Hall: It is because if you read the Bible, it gives you a clear mirror image of virtue and vice, and of the meaning of life and the divine plan.

Moore: Albrecht Dürer believed great artists had "a creating power like God's."

Hall: Unpack that provocative comment. It does sound a bit heretical. What he means is that the artist is imitating God - and God's instrument, Nature - when he makes figures. But unlike God, he is not making them from scratch. In Dürer's famous self-portrait in Munich, he adopts the pose of Christ the redeemer, again in imitation of Christ. Meditation manuals encouraged this kind of sympathetic identification and emulation.

Moore: When most people think of self-portraits the first name that comes to mind is Rembrandt. How influential is he with that particular genre?

Hall: Initially, neo-classical critics found Rembrandt's self-portraits rather baffling and in bad taste - they were alarmed and embarrassed by their burlesque qualities, bizarre hairstyles, weird costumes and general grossness

(big nose etc.). In a period where people liked portraits and self-portraits to be definitive, consistent and to have gravitas, Rembrandt was suspect. This changes with romanticism, when psychological roller-coasters become fashionable. The quixotic version of Rembrandt is beautifully encapsulated in a New Yorker cartoon from 1987. It shows Rembrandt in his studio turning away from his easel. The caption reads: "Hendricke, I feel another self-portrait coming on. Bring in the funny hats." The late self-portraits have become iconic images of unflinching self-scrutiny on the threshold of death, part of a modern *Ars Moratoria*. Moore: You write, "Self-portraiture in the twentieth century has been many things, but its most distinctive quality is its tendency to conceal or suppress the face and head." What are the reasons which make this occur in the twentieth century? Hall: The traditional portrait and self-portrait focusses on the face, with the eyes supposedly being the windows of the soul. But in the twentieth century there has been a reaction against the idea of the self-portrait - centered on the face and eyes - as intimate autobiography and transparent soul-music. The self-respecting modern gallery artist now needed to protect themselves from type-casting and misinterpretation by an incomprehending yet insatiable public, even as that same public paid the bills. The philosopher Nietzsche, who despised mass society and the vulgarization of culture, made the point forcefully in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886): every profound spirit needs a mask | even more, around every profound spirit a mask is growing continually, owing to the constantly false, namely shallow, interpretation of every word, every step, every sign of life he gives. In 1888 the Belgian symbolist James Ensor went back over his earlier work adding masks and skeletons, and in *Self-Portrait with a Flowered Hat (My Portrait Disguised)* (1888) - itself a revision of a self-portrait painted in 1883 - and a further adaptation, *Self-Portrait with Masks* (1899), made a template for the eternally elusive and independent artist, whose mask keeps on growing. The best known modern masker is Cindy Sherman, but artists also adopt a mask of anonymity. Think of the "salaried man" suits worn by Magritte and Gilbert & George. Another popular strategy for concealing or marginalizing the face is by focusing on the body, which is more anonymous, and on bodily functions and desires. Naked self-portraiture emerges around 1900 in the work of Edvard Munch and Egon Schiele. Moore: What are a few takeaways you would like your readers to get from reading *The Self-Portrait: a Cultural History*? Hall: I would like readers to realize that self-portraiture is a genre that starts properly in the Christian Middle Ages, rather than earlier in antiquity, or later in the Renaissance. It is an art form connected to personal salvation and reckoning, involving penitence as well as self-advertisement. And it still is. I want people to understand the emergence of what I call "tracker" -

self-portraiture, multiple self-portraits that mark the development of an artist's life and art. This is a fascinating and crucial development. I hope they will realize that the history of self-portraiture is much more than a history of narcissism, and that conceptions of narcissism have changed down the ages. He can be a contemplative hermit as well as deluded loser.

The artist's place in, and meaning to, society has changed throughout history and the same is true of self-portraits. James Hall surveys the changes from the Middle Ages to the present day. His structure is to examine ten themes that fall fairly well into a chronological order. This works nicely and helps make sense of the give and take between the artist and his time (and patrons). Each chapter illustrates the theme with works of several artists, some well known and others not. Although not every work Hall describes is illustrated in the book he gets you to really look at those that are. In addition to the illustrations there are many quotes from the artists and their contemporaries that help see things in the light of their own time and place. Hall is scholarly without being dry or condescending. The book is well documented and includes a Select Bibliography of newer sources that are probably possible to find. Thames & Hudson are to be commended for producing a well made book on nice hefty paper to be pulled off the shelf over a period of years. I received this book compliments of Thames & Hudson through Goodreads.

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