



(?) met geplande baert...



Rembrandt's meester zittend, met...



Zelfportret in mantel met platte...



Zelfportret met lange, verwarde...



Zelfportret met de onderen leunend...



Zelfportret in mantel met platte...



Zelfportret met bushy baard



Zelfportret met open mond, alst...



In mantel met platte...



Zelfportret leidend aan een...



Zelfportret met bushy baard van...



Zelfportret met hoofd met slappe...



Zelfportret met bushy baard



Zelfportret met naar voren...



Studeerblad met zelfportret...



Zelfportret met rug haer



met haard met slappe...



Zelfportret naar voren leunend...



Zelfportret met bushy baard



Zelfportret met open mond, alst...



Studeerblad zelfportret, een pen...



Zelfportret met naar voren...



Zelfportret, bushy baard, buste



Zelfportret, staans kijkt



leidend aan een...



Zelfportret met baard en hoed...



Zelfportret met dikke bushy baard...



Zelfportret met krullend haer en...



Zelfportret met de onderen leunend...



Zelfportret met lange, verwarde...



Zelfportret met hoofd met slappe...



leidend zelfportret met muts



met muts en doek...



Zelfportret met naar voren...



Zelfportret met bushy baard



Zelfportret met naar voren...



Zelfportret met geheven zwaard



Zelfportret met hoofd met slappe...



Zelfportret met geplande flouwen...



Zelfportret met open mond, alst...



met haard met slappe...



Zelfportret met brade neus



Zelfportret met baard en hoed...



Zelfportret met geplande flouwen...



Zelfportret in mantel met platte...



Zelfportret leidend aan een...



Zelfportret met pet



Zelfportret leidend aan een...



(?) met geplande baert...



Zelfportret met geheven zwaard



Zelfportret met krullend haer en...



Zelfportret met pet



Zelfportret, leidend, naar voren...



Zelfportret met gekruld voorhoofd...



Zelfportret met bushy baard



Zelfportret met geplande flouwen...



Zelfportret met lange, verwarde...



Zelfportret met hoofd met slappe...



leidend zelfportret met muts



Studeerblad zelfportret, een pen...

Rembrandt 1659

Staring into chaos

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An unexamined life is not worth living.

—Socrates in *Plato's Apology*

Self-portraiture first achieved autobiography status with Rembrandt Van Rijn, who left nearly 90 self-representations. Still, it was only later in life that Rembrandt's self-portraits turned introspective, with the most haunting being the 1659 canvas now hanging in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC.

This self-portrait is also the only major oil painting where Rembrandt chose to show his left cheek. This is odd, since from the Renaissance onward artists typically captured their sitters' more emotional side, which is usually the one controlled by the right brain and thus the left hemiface (the right in self-portraits, given the mirror constraint). That's what Rembrandt typically did, but in 1659 he showed the opposite cheek—in one of the darkest moments of his life.

For with much wisdom comes much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.

—Ecclesiastes 1:18

Self-portraiture can be traced back as far as Old Kingdom Egypt, yet it was only during the Renaissance that it evolved into an independent art form. This was a result of cheap mirrors, and an increased focus on the individual.

Renaissance Man Leon Battista Alberti proclaimed it the origin of art itself, "Narcissus, who saw his reflection in the water, and trembled at the beauty of his own face, was the real inventor of painting."¹ Alberti was right, 90 percent of emotional communication is non-verbal and mostly conveyed through the face,² thus making it the road to the human soul.

Raphael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo all dabbled in the genre, yet the idea of portraying yourself for its own sake was born in Northern Europe, first with Albrecht Dürer, and then on a larger scale with Rembrandt (1606-1669).

Scholars still argue about the number of self-portraits Rembrandt produced over his 40 years as an artist. A recent exhibit at the National Gallery of London displayed 51 oils, 31 etchings, and a handful of drawings,³ which is close to 20 percent of his entire artistic output.⁴

It can be argued that if Montaigne pioneered the idea of an autobiography in words, Rembrandt left one in paint.

The term self-portrait didn't exist in Rembrandt's time. Instead, the convoluted, "*contrefeitsel van Rembrandt door hem sellfs gedaen*" (Rembrandt's likeness done by himself), or "*het portrait van Rembrandt door hem zelf geschildert*" (the portrait of Rembrandt painted by himself)³ was used to describe this art form. It was only in the 19th century, and with the rise of a different form of self-awareness, that the term self-portrait came into use.

Rembrandt's many portraits displayed in the Rijksmuseum's browser

Rembrandt

Today, we have the selfie, the latest permutation in our self-centeredness, so widespread a phenomenon to the point of being selected by Oxford Dictionaries as the Word of 2013.⁵

Rembrandt's selfies span his artistic life, but can be divided into three periods. The first is mainly devoted to tentative self-examination, 1625 – 1643. As the cheapest and most readily available of all models, Rembrandt tries on himself a variety of clothes, postures and expressions. These representations do not exhibit interior drama, and only turn introspective with the 1640 self-portrait hanging in the National Gallery of London, and one from 1643 that followed the death of his wife.

The mid-period of Rembrandt's artistic career, 1643 – 1651, had few self-portraits. He had become busy, and his artwork was highly sought-after, expensive, and often copied. He was a successful artist. He had also become a spendthrift, wasting fortunes on exotic collections and a palatial home.

In the third and final period of his life, with all unraveling around him, Rembrandt returned to portraying himself. He painted a canvas a year. His eyes had turned painfully introspective, at times almost cruel. His portraits ceased to be experiments in technique, or mere boasts of wealth and status. They became brutally honest self-studies, expanding in size, possibly because of his 1652 purchase of a huge mirror.³

The large paintings, now in Vienna (1652) and New York (1658) are examples of this evolution toward inner dialogue—bold, painfully human, groping for answers. A personal and disillusioned way of looking at the world's vanities.

Right versus left

In most of his self-renditions Rembrandt shows the left side of his face (the right on the canvas, given the mirror image). In his book *Faces: The Changing Look of Humankind*, Milton Brener reviews the evolution of facial representation, from its total absence in pre-Hellenistic art to the gradual appearance in pre-Hellenistic times.² He notes that early faces are typically inexpressive and schematic, looking straight ahead or to the viewer's right side, thus showing the sitter's right cheek.

Intriguingly, this is also the kind of facial representation made by dyslexics, prosopagnosics, and other subjects with right hemispheric dysfunction.⁶

It was with the rise of Greek civilization and its emphasis on the individual that facial orientation gradually shifted, and paintings, drawings, coins, gems, cameos, and

vase portraits started displaying the sitter's left cheek.² However, this tendency was lost during the Dark Ages, but re-emerged with the Renaissance. In a review of 1,474 portraits produced in Western Europe from the 16th to 20th centuries, McManus and Humphrey, of the Medical School at the University of Birmingham, found a 60 percent left cheek bias ($P < 0.0001$), which is even greater when the sitter is a woman rather than a man (68% versus 56%, $P = 0.001$).⁷

Today, 80 percent of right-handers drawing a human profile direct it toward the left of the viewer, portraying the sitter's left cheek.⁸

A review of the direction of gaze in 50,000 facial representations found that the profile shift may reflect a change in cerebral hemispheres' dominance for higher visual perception.⁸ This would have started around 600 BC, and eventually led to the visual primacy of the right hemisphere. The right hemisphere processes faces, captures emotional content, and builds empathy,^{9,10} which may explain the artist's interest in portraying the sitter's more emotional left hemiface, the one being controlled by the subject's right hemisphere, the most charged with emotional content. Since it's also the artist's right hemisphere doing the viewing, this would reinforce the emotional connection with the sitter, and lead to a more expressive representation.

Rembrandt's left cheek

Forty-eight Rembrandt's (a miscellanea of paintings, etchings and drawings) show a right cheek bias.¹¹ Only one major oil painting has a left-cheek bias—his most haunting. In that self-portrait Rembrandt gazes intently at his right hemiface, and, given the mirror image, shows his left cheek.

When Rembrandt completed this painting he was 53 years old, but he looks much older, and tired. The year 1659 had been his latest *annus horribilis*, both professionally and personally. After losing his wife and three of his children, he was forced by the courts to pay a healthy settlement to a former mistress; he was under attack for living with a young woman; a war with England had dried his commissions; he was starting to be considered passé; and his collecting habits had stretched him so thin he was bankrupt. By 1659, everything Rembrandt owned had been sold. He was destitute, but not broken. This canvas hauntingly conveys the stoic endurance of the human spirit.



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait at the Age of 34*, 1640, oil on canvas. The National Gallery, London



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait with Beret and Two Gold Coins*, c 1642-1643, oil on canvas. Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid



Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Large Self-Portrait*, 1652, oil on canvas. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait*, 1658, oil on canvas. The Frick Collection, New York



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait*, 1659, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew. W. Mellon Collection



Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione, 1514-1515, by Raphael.

Photo by Art Media/Print Collector/Getty Images

The darkness of Rembrandt's clothing draws the viewer immediately to the lit face, which has such a profound empathy and vulnerability that by gazing at the man we seem to stare at our own naked humanity. He's almost ruthless in showing the ravages of time—the wrinkles, blotches, thick features, pockmarks of rosacea, rhinophymatous nose, sagging jowls, and deep set eyes of premature aging. Only the pursed lips and tightly clenched knuckles betray the inner tension. His sad face remains full of dignity, eyes firmly locked into place—so unsettling that viewers are almost forced to avert their gaze. In those eyes, Rembrandt's personal drama transcends into the viewers the drama of the human condition. The experience leaves a disturbing insight—the dignified defiance of our tragic solitude.

But why the odd pose? Why is he showing the other

cheek? Why does he give an expression of his left brain? Why is this portrait so different from all others?

The conventional explanation is that Rembrandt was copying Raphael's portrait of Baldassarre Castiglione which he had seen in Amsterdam 20 years prior, and made a drawing of it. There are similarities in composition, but there might be a deeper and more psychological explanation for why this painting is one of the few, if not the only, where the artist gazes at his right hemiface. The reason may very well be depression.

Depression is consistent with evidence indicating that certain neuropsychological functions, especially those relying on the right temporo-parietal region, are significantly reduced in depressed patients, while the right frontal region's activity may actually intensify.¹² This imbalance often coincides with less vivid imagery.¹³ Left visual field

deficits from decreased right hemispheric function are common in patients with bipolar depression.¹⁴ This would apply to Rembrandt, whose spending sprees suggest phases of mania.

This hypothesis is further supported by the study of infant-holding preferences in depressed versus normal mothers. Independent of handedness, mothers tend to cradle their babies on the left side.¹⁵ One possible explanation is the closeness of the child to the maternal heartbeat, which is supposed to be soothing to the baby, possibly reminiscent of what he/she heard in the womb. However, the more intriguing theory is that while cradling infants on the left, mothers get to see their babies' left hemiface with their own right hemisphere, thus establishing a more emotional connection.^{16,17} This pattern typically reverses when the mother gets depressed, with cradling shifting to the right.¹⁸ This has been interpreted as a left visual field deficit due to depression-induced right hemispheric dysfunction.¹⁰ Breastfeeding might protect against this.¹⁹

Thus, there may have been unique neuropsychological reasons why this most compelling of all Rembrandt's self-representations shows the artist's right face. A morphing of his self-portraits further underscores the rarity of this pose.²⁰ The neurological explanation doesn't alter the emotional impact of the artwork, but allows us to see it through different eyes, much like a physicist looking at the stars of a nocturnal sky does not just see tiny points of light, but billions of massive gas collections glowing into darkness. Still, we are deeply touched. In fact, probably even more.

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