

***Golden Years? 1905-1950: a non-digital world.  
Self-expression, self-promotion, self-preservation***

*For one thing, it has never occurred to me before how many different faces there are. There are quantities of people, but there are even more faces, for each person has several.*

Rainer Maria Rilke<sup>1</sup>

There is no instantly noticeable change in the style of the art of self-portraiture at the turn of the century, and the enthusiasm with which artists continue to embrace the genre persisted. Perhaps the adage *Ars longa vita brevis* is the reason, for it is this ability to make a mark reflecting one's identity/identities that is not only innate but assures an immediate record and document of who you are. To make public what is personal and adapting and developing styles of painting whilst retaining individuality, indeed one's own history.

Traditionally artists' self-portraits show the painter at work at the easel with brushes, palette, with perhaps a mirror and studio contents. The self-portrait is a sophisticated method of reflecting a moment in time, and the early twentieth century was a particularly momentous time for humanity in a world striving to be 'modern'. Nikos Stangos in his introduction to *Concepts of Modern Art* states: "The roots of modernism lie in about the middle of the nineteenth century, in Baudelaire's art criticism, in Gustave Courbet and Realism, in depictions of modernity [...] and in inventing the notion of the avant-garde."<sup>2</sup>

One thing that failed to be politically modern was almost universally the treatment of women, their voting rights, their lack of self-representation. Paula Modersohn-Becker – not an explicitly political feminist, rather a loner - nevertheless exhibited an indomitable spirit and her passion for making art led her to the artists' colony at Worpswede, near Bremen. Here she married, partly to escape the financial support of her parents but also for love. There she met artists including Rainer Maria Rilke and his wife Clara Rilke-Westhoff. Modersohn-Becker left this enclave four times to visit Paris, writing, "I must learn to express the gentle vibration of things: the intrinsically rough texture [...] I must also find this expression in

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<sup>1</sup> R.M.Rilke. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Hogarth Press. Trans. John Linton. 1930.London. p.6.

<sup>2</sup> Nikos Stangos, *Concepts of Modern Art: From Fauvism to Postmodernism*, Thames & Hudson, 1981, p.8.

drawings in the way in which I draw my nudes here in Paris, more original and at the same time sensitively observed, [...] Great simplicity of form, that is something wonderful.”<sup>3</sup> Her intriguing portrait, *Wedding Day* (1906, Cat.p.?) shows her apparently pregnant. She fixes us with an immobile, candid stare, the dancing, speckled wallpaper surrounding her, an amber necklace hanging curved between her breasts with her belly reciprocally rounded.<sup>4</sup> She died after childbirth, fulfilling her own prophecy: “I know I shall not live very long [...] and if I’ve painted three good pictures, then I shall leave gladly with flowers in my hand and my hair.”<sup>5</sup> Art education for women was changing, and they were allowed to paint the nude at the Académie Cola Rossi and Académie Julian. British artist Gwen John, a lover of Rodin’s (to whom Rilke was secretary in 1905-6) draws herself naked in her room at 87, Rue du Cherche-Midi.<sup>6</sup>



Fig.1. Gwen John, 1876-1979, Self-portrait, Nude.1908/9. National Museum of Wales.

We do not know if these two uniquely avant-garde artists met when in Paris, but they were both uniquely independent of any specific movement, and individually innovative in their approach to self-portraiture.

So too was Frida Kahlo, born in Mexico City in 1907 (the year that Modersohn-Becker died) whose father was German, a photographer from Baden-Baden. Kahlo’s idiosyncratic self-portraits suggest the unconscious world of Freud who argued that the public self was a

<sup>3</sup> Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Her Life and Work*, Gill Perry, The Women’s Press, 1979. P.53

<sup>4</sup> Cézanne in his 1880 self-portrait, NG4135, London, also relies on a visual dialogue with the patterned wallpaper pictured behind him.

<sup>5</sup> Op.cit., Perry pp.136-8

<sup>6</sup> *Gwen John, An Interior Life*, Cecily Langdale and David Fraser Jenkins, Phaidon Press and Barbican Art Gallery, 1985. Cat.66.

conditioned construct of the inner psychological self. In 1938, André Breton declared her pictorial world Surrealist: “The art of Frida Kahlo is a ribbon around a bomb.”<sup>7</sup> But she denied this - her ‘brand’ was altogether more Mexican in flavour. Her identity as such was underpinned by her traumatic accident when aged sixteen and the traditional costume she wore, encouraged by her husband, the fiery mural artist Diego Rivera. Both communists, the couple formed an unlikely marriage in 1929, divorced in 1939 and remarried a year later. In 1943, he wrote, “Frida’s art is individual-collective [...] she paints at the same time the exterior and interior of herself and the world.”<sup>8</sup> She sometimes included him in her self-portraits, describing him thus: “His bulging dark, highly intelligent and large eyes are held in place with difficulty – almost coming out of their orbits – by eyelids that are swollen and protuberant, like those of a frog.”<sup>9</sup>

The Surrealist who also knew Breton and worked in relative isolation during the German occupation of Jersey, was Claude Cahun, her groundbreaking photographic self-portraits encompassing androgyny, performance and disguise.

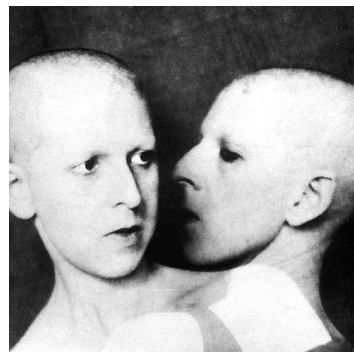


Fig.2. De Chirico, 1888-1978, Self-portrait with his mother, 1921

Fig.3. Claude Cahun, 1894-1954. *Que me veux tu? What do you want from me?* 1928

They constitute a bridge between the traditional and the innovatory, resonating strongly with paintings by De Chirico, who portrays himself over the years in multiple guises; here, beside his mother, in the studio flanked by a Roman bust, and in armour. These works hint at Freudian scenarios and reference art history, both Rembrandt’s self-portrait with gorget (1629, Mauritshuis, The Hague) and that of

<sup>7</sup> André Breton *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1982. P.36

<sup>8</sup> Diego Rivera, *Frida Kahlo y el Arte Mexicano*, *Bolitin del Seminario de Cultura Mexicana*, Mexico City, 2 (October 1943), p.101, quoted in, p.122. Hayden Herrera, *Significant Others, Creativity & Intimate Partnership*, Ed. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron, Thames & Hudson, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Herrera, *Significant Others*. p.126.

his pupil Fabritius (1654, National Gallery, London) wearing a breast plate.

Another serial self-portraitist, Munch painted himself aged eighty, standing poised between a bed and a clock, time/life ticking away. After his sojourn in a Copenhagen clinic in 1909, he withdrew to work in isolation near Oslo cementing his own mode of 'expressionism'. Munch had travelled widely in Europe, was in Berlin in the 1890s, and painted *The Scream* in 1893. This work evokes a sense of universal horror, prefiguring the Holocaust and Hiroshima. He describes his vision of the painting: "I was walking with two friends and the sun set and the heavens suddenly turned to blood and my friends continued walking. I stopped by the fence, deathly tired. Over the cold blue fjord and the city was a flaming reddish yellow, and I felt a huge scream course through nature."<sup>10</sup> This statement is an insight into his febrile mind and glimpses his pitch of emotions. He writes:

"The fountain  
Notes of a madman  
A BIRD OF PREY IS CLINGING  
TO MY INNER BEING. ITS CLAWS  
HAVE RIPPED INTO MY  
HEART. ITS BEAK HAS  
DRIVEN ITSELF INTO MY CHEST  
AND THE BEATING OF ITS WINGS  
HAS DARKENED MY  
SANITY"<sup>11</sup>

The mental fragilities wrought by depression register clearly in his melancholic, confrontational self-portrait works.

Though we may sense the remaining tendrils of *Jugendstil* and *Art Nouveau* in Munch's work, he was an Expressionist at heart and this movement was the defining vision of the new century.



Fig.4. Edvard Munch,1863-1944, Self-portrait, 1908/9 Sanitorium.

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<sup>10</sup> *Munch In His Own Words*, Poul Erik Tøjner, Prestel, 2003. p.96

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid* p.115

Art historical movements do not flow in a seamless chronological progression, and at this time, they erupt simultaneously in different European locations, challenging assumptions and established hierarchies. Matisse (a *Fauve* between 1904-7) exhibited *Luxe, Calme et Volupté* at the Salon des Indépendents, Paris in 1905, the title of the work deriving from a line in Baudelaire. The 1906 manifesto of the *Die Brücke* group, that included artists such as Heckel, Pechstein and Nolde (briefly) stated: "With faith in evolution, in a new generation of creators and connoisseurs, we call together all youth. And as youth, who carry the future, we want to create for ourselves freedom to move and to live opposite the well-established older forces."<sup>12</sup> These young artists were striving for a new identity, and like a spawning collective unconscious this chimed with desires of others, creating the inter-connecting Expressionist outpouring of energetic art. In Austria, we find Kubin, Kokoschka, Schiele and later Gerstl, Schoenberg and Oppenheimer; in Berlin, Meidner, Grosz, Kirchner, Beckmann and Dix. All who felt that by reproducing the external form, one also captured the troubled, excited, contradictory inner gestalt. Kandinsky, Malevitch and Mondrian (whose self-portrait in the exhibition shows him with one of his early abstract paintings as backdrop, Cat.p.?) were simultaneously wrestling with the problem of non-figurative painting. The art world was in tumult and so too was the political world, with searching questions of identity, representation and power.



Fig.5. Malevitch 1879-1935, Self-portrait, 1915

The two world wars made a profound impact on notions of national and individual identity. Most obviously in terms of passports and papers but more widely as people en masse were committed to

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<sup>12</sup> *Expressionism, Art and Idea*, Donald E.Gordon, Yale University Press, New Haven and London,1987. p.129

loyalties, to recognize or question national identities, as men and women went to war. Some even saw it as a 'cleansing'. Even the bohemian artist, was now obliged (or chose) to fight for their country or be purged from it. Otto Dix's malevolent *Self-portrait as a Soldier* (1914, Galerie der Stadt, Stuttgart) depicts his cannonball head swathed in fiery vermilion, and the reverse reveals his *Self-portrait with a Gunner's Helmet*. He wrote: "I had to experience the worst aspects of life myself – that's why I went into the war, and also why I volunteered."<sup>13</sup> The artists loosely described as Expressionists were branded as 'Degenerate' in the *Entartete Kunst* touring Nazi exhibition of 1937-39. The list included Barlach, Beckmann, Chagall, Corinth, Ernst, Feininger, Jawlensky, Klee, El Lissitzky, Marc, Moholy-Nagy, Mondrian, Schlemmer, Schmidt-Rotluff, Schwitters, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Käthe Kollwitz and more. Beckmann rejected the term Expressionism and during the 1920s became associated with the New Objectivity or *Neue Sachlichkeit*. In 1937 more than five hundred of his works were confiscated from museums in Germany. Four hundred of Kokoschka's works were also impounded and his response was to paint *Portrait of a Degenerate* and write an essay entitled *Degenerate Art*, saying: "Europe trembles in fear before that hypnotist who – overnight it seems – has transplanted the sorcery of the ancient oriental priest-kings... right into the present-day world of spectacular technological progress and blatant materialisms."<sup>14</sup>



Fig.8. Oskar Kokoschka, 1886-1980, *Self-portrait of a 'Degenerate Artist'*, 1937, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art

Fig.9. Otto Dix, 1891-1969. *Self-portrait with a Gunner's Helmet*,1914, Municipal Gallery Stuttgart.

Fascism and the Second World War both stifled and encouraged art. Felix Nussbaum, a Rome scholar at the Villa Massimo in 1932-3, who had been taught by Meidner, produced a number of riveting self-

<sup>13</sup> Cited in *Expressionism*, Norbert Wolf, Taschen, 2006. P.36

<sup>14</sup> Oskar Kokoschka 1886-1980, Tate Gallery Publications, 1986. P. 352

portraits including this depiction of his plight 'in the camp' (1940, Cat.p.?). It is a miserable documentation of his desperate circumstances; he was denounced whilst in hiding in Brussels and later died in Auschwitz. Those refugees who found new homes worldwide, such as Lucian Freud, Mondrian, Marie-Louise von Motesiczky, Moholy-Nagy and Schwitters were obliged to create new identities or at least to transform themselves within the context of their country of adoption. Self-portraiture becomes a means of reassurance, of becoming grounded, of exploring and subsuming ones 'foreign' cultural influence - re-creating a self in a changed world where the skin of the past might be shed and there is a possibility of renewed personal blossoming.

In the Crimea in 1855, Fenton became the first war photographer. Sixty years later wars were filmed in all their active, gory and disastrous detail. The images were reproduced worldwide, challenging the power of painting, with the exception, perhaps, of Picasso's *Guernica*, shown at the Paris World Exhibition in 1937. A year earlier, Walter Benjamin discussed the impact of film and photography: "Compare if you will, the screen on which the film unrolls to the canvas that carries the painting. The latter invites the viewer to contemplate; he is able, in front of it, to give himself up to his chain of associations. Watching a film, he cannot do this. Scarcely has he set eyes on it before it is already different. It cannot be pinned down."<sup>15</sup>

The relationship between photography, painting and portraiture combined with the style of execution, the identity of the subject, and the inevitability of subjectivity within the art of self-portraiture, remains a complex subject. Francis Bacon famously used Deakin's photographs to help him create portraits. His paintings are a lasting and visceral testimony to this collaboration, revealing how artistic disciplines can inform each other. In 1929, Bacon saw Picasso's drawings in Paris and was inspired to draw and paint. His *Crucifixion* (1933, Tate) together with Picasso's *Bather* of 1929, was illustrated in Herbert Read's *Art Now: An introduction to the Theory of Modern Painting and Sculpture* (1933). Read places Bacon's work on a par with that of Picasso, Matisse and other established avant-garde 'European' artists. The availability of such reproduced images has become a standard method of manipulating, influencing and

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<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art In The Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Translated by J.A. Underwood, Penguin Books, England. 2008. p.32.

communicating stylistic fashions in art.

Bacon's portraits laid bare the physiognomy and offered up a rawness that invokes the smashed visages of war victims whose faces (and lives) were improved by pioneering plastic surgeons such as Sir Harold Gillies (1882-1960). The relationship between the self-portrait and the fate of the individual during war is pertinent, as the concept of *memento mori* stalks both. The skull is the armature for the fragile skin of the face, the bone often remaining solid beneath the skin that melted for instance, during the nuclear attacks on Japan, in August 1945.

The self-portrait retains a performative element. The work is a mediated fiction, yet whilst the record is implicitly about death, the artwork anticipates a life beyond the grave and comments on the vanity and brevity of human existence. In painting a self-portrait the artist both captures his life and arrests it.

Mirrors have remained a key (often invisible) tool in the artist's studio, a physical necessity for the reflected journey of self-analysis, and when Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* was published in 1900, the internal path of discovery was opened up with the psycho-analytical investigation of the unconscious. Questions of identity and representation dominated European cultural thought. In 1916, Jung gave a lecture in Paris entitled, *The Structure of the Unconscious*, and it was he who coined the phrase 'the collective unconscious' also embracing the importance of spirituality, the arts and literature within his practice. Published in 1919, Hope Mirrlees' poem, *Paris*, evokes the newly discovered landscape of the psyche: "Freud has dredged the river and, grinning horribly,/ waves his garbage in a glare of electricity"<sup>16</sup>. In 1914, self-proclaimed *Vorticist*, Wyndham Lewis had produced his stridently modern magazine *BLAST*, and in 1922 the literary landmarks of Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *The Waste Land*, were published.

Staring at your reflection in a mirror is a way of trying to understand who you are, it is a meditation, an attempt to penetrate the psychology of the self. How can the artist convey complexities of personality and talent, whilst hinting at the swathes of emotional and personal history that underpin their (un)conscious being? Bonnard's use of the bathroom mirror, as seen in his self-portrait is somber and intimate (c.1940.Cat.no.?). The distance between him

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<sup>16</sup>Hope Mirrlees, *Paris*, lines 414–15, in *Collected Poems*, ed. Sandeep Parmar. Manchester: Carcanet. 2011.



and the reflective surface is suggested by the bottles on the shelf in front of him, the framing of his outline by the edge of the mirror and cupboard doors behind; he exists stranded in a claustrophobic sliver of space. Painted during the German occupation of France, he wrote to his nephew; "I am working a lot, immersed more and more deeply in this outdated passion for painting. Perhaps with a few others, I am one of its last survivors." <sup>17</sup>

Picasso is the giant of figurative painting for most of the twentieth century and it is worth considering what he achieved for the genre of self-portraiture when he segued effortlessly from the conservative, lyrical hues of his blue period, to the archly defined, blatantly African inspired conceptual visage that echoes his revolutionary *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, (1907, MOMA, NY): this leap through time and form is magnificent in facility and communication. His huge artistic ego was obsessively dedicated to the tackling of the painting dilemma, he was not afraid to experiment, nor concerned with crystallizing one particular style. Bacon's screaming popes seem almost pedestrian in comparison to the brutal honesty of Dix, Grosz and Picasso's fearless and endless reworking of the human form. Picasso and Matisse battled head-to-head for supremacy with their sequential artistic innovations, exposed so admirably at Tate Modern in 2002.<sup>18</sup> Bacon and Freud similarly jostled for position as figurative painters who continued to make a stand against the rising tide of abstraction.

And Post War? Women returned to the home and confronted a new dull urbanism. In America the threat of the Cold war did little to deflect artists from their mission, indeed expressionism had crossed the Atlantic and many of those who spearheaded that 'softer' movement *Abstract Expressionism* were immigrants. In the 1950s came the end of rationing in the UK, new scientific discoveries and inventions (DNA, atomic power, computers). Culturally it heralded the Swinging Sixties, jet travel, the Nouvelle Vague, performance art and Situationism. A brave new world with all 'mod cons' – TVs, cars and washing machines...enter consumerism and the

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<sup>17</sup> Bonnard letter to his nephew, Charles Terrasse, 1933, quoted in Antoine Terrasse, 2000, pp.96-7, quoted by Ursula Prunster in [www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/work/6.1972/](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/work/6.1972/)

<sup>18</sup> *Matisse/Picasso*, Tate Modern London 11/05/-18/08 2002. Curated by Elizabeth Cowling and John Golding

mass/supermarket, Andy Warhol and the factory. Warhol presents us with his self-portrait. Working with new media but ever the traditionalist, he is in memento mori mode – picturing himself as doppelgänger with a skull above each head.

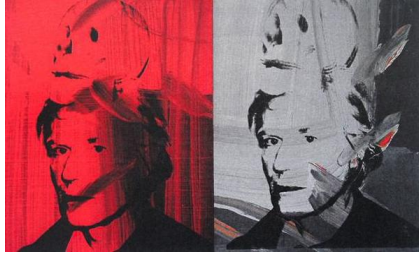


Fig.10. Andy Warhol. 1928-1987, Self-portrait with Skull, 1978. Cat.142