

1 Art and Biography

Few artists better exemplify the connection between art and biography, or autobiography, than the Dutch artist, Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669). Born in Leiden, where he maintained a studio after leaving the University of Leiden to study painting, Rembrandt belongs to the Baroque period of Dutch art. This era emerged around 1600 as a reaction against the formulaic Mannerist style that dominated the Late Renaissance. Rembrandt was influenced by the paintings of Italian artist Michelangelo Caravaggio (c. 1571–1610), particularly in the dramatic use of light and shadow. Other artists of the Baroque period include Italian sculptor Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598–1680), Spanish painter Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), and Rembrandt's fellow Dutch painter Jan Vermeer (1632–1675).

Rembrandt is best known for his paintings and etchings in two genres: portraits and scenes of historical events. He became the leading portrait painter of his day in Holland and, in 1631, moved to Amsterdam, where he spent the rest of his life. In the centuries before the invention of photography, many artists made their livelihood by making portraits, usually of wealthy individuals who could afford to pay for such work. Rembrandt extended his fame and fortune by also selling lower-priced etchings, which persons of more modest means could afford. Often the subjects of the etchings were images taken from his paintings. In his time, such etchings were the counterpart of today's posters and postcards that bear the images of famous artworks.

Although Rembrandt painted many individuals' portraits, he was undoubtedly his own favorite model. He often used his own face to study his art. Consequently his many self-portraits form a kind of autobiography.

6 ● Visual Knowing

For example, his 1634 **Self Portrait as a Young Man** shows the artist full of self-confidence at the height of his fame, only three years after his move to Amsterdam. By contrast, the 1660 **Portrait of the Artist at His Easel** shows a careworn Rembrandt nine years before his death, at a time when he was living beyond his means and burdened by massive debt.

Artistic portraits have always served many purposes, from catering to the vanity of their subjects to more lofty aims, such as recording the image of a famous person for posterity. Portraits can range from intimate (some tiny, such as miniatures) to public and even massive, such as **Mount Rushmore**, by sculptor Gutzon Borglum (1867–1941), with its huge heads of presidents Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt. The most successful portrait artists delve beneath the surface, however. They attempt to portray the essential, not merely the superficial, characteristics of the model. The portraitist tells a story. Thus, portraiture is at its best when it provides a visual biography or at least hints at what lies within the individual.

This is true not only in painting but in other media as well. Examples abound in sculpture, for instance, from the regal 1340 B.C. portrait **Bust of Queen Nefertiti**, wife of the controversial pharaoh Akhenaten, to the standing bronze portrait of French novelist Honoré de **Balzac** (completed 1893–1897) by French sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840–1917). Even now—long after the advent of photography—drawn, painted, carved, and cast portraits still provide complex images that convey more than everyday photographs can. It should be noted, however, that the best photo portraitists also make penetrating photographic biographies. The outstanding portrait images created by photographer Richard Avedon (1923–2004) provide a body of work to rival the best in portrait painting and are readily accessible in magazines, such as *The New Yorker*.

Many modern artists have found that less realistic styles of portrayal, such as abstract painting, can be more revealing than painting with camera-like realism. A famous abstract portrait example is the weighty image of the writer and art patron as captured in the 1906 **Portrait of Gertrude Stein** by the quintessential Modernist painter, Pablo Picasso (1881–1973). Many artists in the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century produced abstract portraits, including Rodin (mentioned previously), abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning (1904–1997), and surrealist Salvador Dali (1904–1989).

A popular form of biographical portraiture in schools is created when students draw or make a collage portrait of themselves or their classmates. Mirror, paper, and pencil are all that a student needs for drawing. But many teachers opt for a freer form of expression, one less dependent on drawing skill. That is *collage*. Collage is a form of artwork that combines various materials to compose a unified image. The materials can be almost anything flat, such as scraps of wallpaper, dried flowers, photographs,

clippings from newspapers and magazines, bits of fabric or leather, and feathers. These materials are glued to a flat surface to compose the image. Often, students choose images from magazines or personal photo collections—images to which they particularly relate or that convey something about their thoughts and interests. In this way, the collage becomes truly autobiographical.

Collage did not originate as school art. It was invented by the Cubists in 1906, Cubism itself being the creation of Picasso and Georges Braque (1882–1963). From then to the present day, collage has been used in many art styles. There is even an International Museum of Collage, Assemblage, and Construction in Cuernavaca, Mexico (collagemuseum.com). A worthwhile online gallery site for modern collagists is Collagetown at www.collagetown.com.

A collage portrait example is **Tatlin at Home** (1920) by artist Raoul Hausmann (1886–1970). The collage is constructed of pasted papers and gouache, a kind of opaque watercolor. Hausmann's subject is the Russian artist Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953), the originator of the sculpture movement called *Constructivism*.

Related to collage is *photomontage*, the combining of photographic images in collage fashion. Hausmann, indeed, claimed to have invented photomontage. But the technique has its roots in the mid-nineteenth century with the invention of photography. In fact, making composite photographs was a popular Victorian era amusement. But it was not until the 1920s that photomontage developed as a truly new art form. The center of this development was Berlin, where a group of artists calling themselves *Dada* (a founding member being Hausmann) found a new means of expression that rebelled against the prevailing current of abstraction but did not revert to traditional figurative work.

Finally, there is the humorously biographical portrait technique called *caricature*. Caricaturists exaggerate the features of the model to point out particular characteristics. Often, it is the characteristics that make the model stand out. One of the leading caricaturists was Al Hirschfeld (1903–2003), who worked for the *New York Times* for 70 years and produced some of the most memorable caricatures of famous people over nearly the whole span of the twentieth century. An example is his 1955 **Cleveland Amory Scratching His Head at Typewriter**.

VISUAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. Artists and writers who have known (or sometimes only known of) one another often have created biographies in different ways. Gertrude Stein wrote a biography of Pablo Picasso, and Picasso painted Stein's

8 ● Visual Knowing

portrait. Rodin sculpted Balzac. What other pairings of artists and writers can be found? What are the characteristics of the resulting visual and literal biographies? What are the commonalities, the differences?

2. Choose a biographical portrait—for example, Hausmann's *Tatlin at Home*—and consider it closely. What characteristics of the model can be identified from the portrait? Can these characteristics be confirmed by reading about the subject of the work?

3. Rembrandt's autobiographical self-portraits trace his life. Choose several of the dated self-portraits and match them to what was happening in Rembrandt's life at each point. Are there other figures whose portraits or self-portraits can be used in this manner? (Consider the portraits of public figures, such as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Mark Twain.)

SUGGESTED READING

- Poggi, Christine. (1993). *In defiance of painting: Cubism, futurism, and the invention of collage*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Schama, Simon. (1999). *Rembrandt's eyes*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Zinsser, William. (1998). *Inventing truth: The art and craft of memoir*. Boston: Mariner Books.

ONLINE IMAGES

Balzac (Rodin)

www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/fnart/rodin/balzac1.jpg

Bust of Queen Nefertiti (Egypt, 1340 B.C.)

pavlov.psyc.queensu.ca/~psyc382/nefertitide.html

Cleveland Amory Scratching His Head at Typewriter (Hirschfeld)

www.alhirschfeld.com (search by title)

Mount Rushmore (Borglum)

www.travelsd.com/parks/rushmore/photos.asp

Portrait of Gertrude Stein (Picasso)

www.usc.edu/schools/annenberg/asc/projects/comm544/library/images/257bg.jpg

Portrait of the Artist at His Easel (Rembrandt)

www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/rembrandt/self/self-1660.jpg

Self Portrait as a Young Man (Rembrandt)

www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/rembrandt/self/self-1634.jpg

Tatlin at Home (Hausmann)

faculty.dwc.edu/wellman/Hausmann.htm