In his biography of Albrecht Dürer, published in Het schilder-boeck (The Painter Book, 1604), Karel van Mander describes holding in his hands Dürer’s Self-Portrait of 1500 (fig. 9.1).1 Van Mander, the Dutch painter-biographer who wrote the lives of the Netherlandish and German painters (see chapter 24), was on his way home from Italy in 1577. He had stopped in Nuremberg, where he saw Dürer’s Self-Portrait in the town hall. Van Mander’s account conveys Dürer’s fame, as both the greatest German artist of the Renaissance and a maker of self-portraits. It tells us that self-portraits were collected and displayed, in this case by the city of Nuremberg. Above all, Van Mander’s remarks demonstrate that, by 1600, self-portrait was a concept. Though there was as yet no term for self-portrait (autoritratto dates to the eighteenth century, Selbstbildnis and “self-portrait” to the nineteenth), a portrait of an artist made by that artist was regarded as a distinctive pictorial type. The self-portrait had acquired a mystique, because the artist had come to be regarded as a special person with a special gift. The topos “every painter paints himself” conveyed the idea that a painter invariably put something of him/herself into his/her art. More than any other kind of artistic creation, the self-portrait was regarded as a manifestation of the artist’s ineffable presence in the work.

Today we tend to think of self-portrayal as a private process and of the self-portrait as the product of introspection. But artists make self-portraits for many reasons. Some result from the straightforward studio exercise of looking in a mirror and recording the likeness of an available model. Usually, however, artists make self-portraits not just for themselves but with viewers, whether specific or general, in mind; representing oneself is as much about self-projection as it is about self-reflection. The self-portrait is at once a claim to and a representation of artistic creativity.2 Early modern self-portrayal was already a complex process of
self-presentation that involved both inner-directed self-scrutiny and outer-directed self-construction. Self-portraits could articulate notions of invention and (divine) inspiration; cast the artist as a noble virtuoso on an intellectual and social par with his/her patrons; provide a means of emulating an admired predecessor; or celebrate the artist’s hand and craft. Other self-portraits situate the artist in familiar society, with a friend, family, or spouse, in a tradition that sometimes merges wife and muse. Still others set the artist apart from society by casting him/her as rogue, outcast, or prodigal.

This essay explores how the ways in which painters envisioned themselves shaped early modern ideas of the artist. It first looks back from 1600 to outline briefly the rise of self-portraiture in the Renaissance, with special emphasis on Dürer, the first to devote significant attention to self-portrayal. The essay then explores how self-portraiture developed in the seventeenth century, especially in the Netherlands. Here, the focus is on Rembrandt van Rijn, a self-portraitist of unmatched power. Among the many artists famed for using self-portraits to probe and craft their visions of themselves or to project their social, intellectual, and

Figure 9.1  Albrecht Dürer, Self-Portrait in Fur Cloak, 1500. Alte Pinakothek, Staatsgemaeldesammlung, Munich. BPK, Berlin/Art Resource, NY.
professional status, these two stand out for their deep preoccupation with self-portraiture, their varied self-fashioning, and their inventiveness within the genre. They also make a fascinating contrast that brings out differences not just between two extraordinarily creative individuals but also between ideas of the self and artistic identity ca. 1500, at the height of the Renaissance, and ca. 1650, during the Baroque period.

Artists had portrayed themselves since antiquity, but conditions in Renaissance Europe encouraged the rise of the independent self-portrait. As never before, artists had something to say about themselves, with an audience interested in artists and what they had to say. The heightened individualism and self-awareness of Renaissance humanism promoted self-scrutiny; the ancient Greek aphorism “know thyself,” once Christianized, expressed the belief that self-knowledge leads to virtue and to knowing God. Self-portraiture developed in tandem with early modern autobiography, such as those by the goldsmith and sculptor Benvenuto Cellini and the French essayist Michel de Montaigne, who set out to examine his daily life and his inner self, an unprecedented, self-motivated project. Humanism also promoted the rise of the artist in intellectual and social status. As painting and sculpture evolved from being considered crafts to liberal arts, artists came to be regarded as possessing a type of excellence called *virtù*, which encompassed virtuous living and virtuosity in one’s craft. Fascination with the artist implies a recognition that s/he has a special creative talent that is sometimes seen as a gift from God or as a reflection of God’s powers of creation. That notion underlies ideas of inspiration, divine furor, and genius.

As they gained status, artists came to be regarded as persons worthy of being portrayed, whether pictorially or in print. The Renaissance produced biographies of artists that were also vehicles for theoretical ideas about artists and artistic practice. Vasari’s *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1550) was the most influential (see chapter 25). Van Mander’s *Schilder-boeck* (1604) included lives of the Greek artists from Pliny’s *Natural History* and of the Italian painters from Vasari, along with new biographies of the northern painters and a theoretical introduction. Portraits of artists proliferated. The second edition of Vasari’s *Lives* (1568) added woodcut portraits, at Vasari’s insistence, despite the expense. Soon after, portraits of artists were widely disseminated in print series, an honorific format that had originated in humanist portrait books and would find its ultimate expression in Anthony van Dyck’s *Iconography* of 1632–41. The first of these in the north was Hieronymus Cock’s *Pictorum aliquot celebrum Germaniae Inferioris Effigies* (*Effigies of Some Celebrated Painters of Lower Germany*, Antwerp, 1572), a series of twenty-three engraved portraits of Netherlandish artists, from Jan van Eyck to Cock himself, each accompanied by a laudatory Latin verse by Domenicus Lampsonius. An expanded series of sixty-eight etched portraits, published by Hendrik Hondius in 1610, amounted to a pictorial history of Netherlandish art (http://www.courtauld.org.uk/netherlandishcanon/index.html).
Collecting portraits of artists was a simultaneous development. The earliest collectors, such as Paolo Giovio in the 1520s and 1530s and Cosimo I de’ Medici later in the sixteenth century, included artists among images of “famous men.” Like Vasari, who collected portraits of artists, these collectors did not always distinguish between self-portraits and portraits of artists. Nor did the Accademia del Disegno, which began collecting portraits of its members shortly after its establishment in 1563. In the early seventeenth century, Charles I of England had a small collection of artists’ portraits, most of them self-portraits. Cardinal Leopoldo de’ Medici, however, specifically collected self-portraits. He first commissioned self-portraits in 1664 from Guercino and Pietro da Cortona. With the help of agents, by 1675 he had amassed seventy-nine paintings, which he displayed in his “Stanza dei Pittori” in the Pitti Palace. His nephew Cosimo III, who started traveling to buy self-portraits in 1664, reorganized the collection and installed it in the Uffizi, where it hangs today in the “Vasari Corridor.”

Long before Cardinal Leopoldo, however, it was understood, perhaps above all by artists, that a portrait by the person who knows himself best, working in his own style, was not the same as a depiction of an artist by another painter.

Witness and Participant

Some of the earliest Renaissance self-portraits functioned as pictorial signatures. North and south of the Alps, artists appeared either as themselves or in historical guise in their commissioned works, a practice that ensured that self-portraits would be distinguished from portraits of artists from early on. Including oneself in a larger narrative imitated a practice sanctioned by antiquity. According to Plutarch, the Greek sculptor Phidias portrayed himself in the battle between the Greeks and Amazons on the shield of the *Athena Parthenos*. A participant self-portrait expressed the artist’s pride in his work, spread his fame, and preserved his image for posterity. It could also comment on a painter’s style or artistry, as when Jan van Eyck claimed mastery of *reflexy-const*, oil paint’s reflective surfaces, by inserting himself into the mirror in the *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434; National Gallery, London; http://commons.wikimedia.org) and as a reflection in the armor of St. George in the *Madonna of Canon van der Paele* (1436; Groeninge Museum, Bruges). Michelangelo repeatedly inserted his face into his works – on the flayed skin of St. Bartholomew in the *Last Judgment*, for example – as a way of identifying himself with his inventions.

The participant self-portrait also provided a reminder that the gift of creation accorded the painter a privileged position. It could cast the artist as a witness and mediator – often the painter catches the viewer’s eye – between the beholder and the event portrayed. In an altarpiece or biblical narrative, these self-images served as professions of faith, intensifying the immediacy of the religious experience. Vasari records self-portraits of Masaccio as one of Christ’s Apostles in the *Tribute Money* (1424–25) and Raphael in the *School of Athens* (1505). Van Mander
reports that Jan and Hubert van Eyck appear, next to the Count of Flanders, adoring the Holy Lamb in the *Ghent Altarpiece* (1426) and that Dürer painted himself in such major commissions as the *Adoration of the Trinity* (1511). In the historicized self-portrait, a related type, the artist adopted a specific guise in a single-figure format. Giorgione asserted artistic prowess and *ingegno* by portraying himself as the giant-slayer David, who was also the inspired author of the psalms (ca.1500–10; only Wenzel Hollar’s engraving [1650] shows the entire painting, with Goliath’s head). In turn, Caravaggio represented himself as the giant’s severed head in *David and Goliath* (ca. 1606, Galleria Borghese, Rome; http://commons.wikimedia.org), thereby rivaling Giorgione and claiming the *terribilità* of a modern Michelangelo (whose self-portrait as the head of Holofernes appears on the *Sistine Ceiling*).

A defining persona for the painter was the evangelist Luke, who according to legend represented the Virgin and Child when they appeared to him in a vision and was thus held to be the first Christian painter. Luke became the protector of painters, who organized themselves under the aegis of the St. Luke’s Guild. One of the earliest representations of a painter at work, Rogier van der Weyden’s *St. Luke Drawing the Virgin* (ca. 1435; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; http://www.wga.hu), has long been considered a self-portrait. In the sixteenth century, Luke’s encounter with the Virgin took on new currency, because it justified the art that was threatened by the iconoclastic Protestant Reformation. In 1532, Maerten van Heemskerck presented a *St. Luke Altarpiece* (Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem; http://www.wga.hu) to the painters of Haarlem in which he represented himself, standing behind Luke, as a poet, crowned with ivy, which van Mander interpreted as signifying that painters need a “poetic, inventive spirit.” In the late 1560s, Vasari painted himself as Luke in his *St. Luke Painting the Madonna* for the Painters’ Chapel in Santissima Annunziata, Florence (http://www.wga.hu). Whether the painter appeared in the guise of or in proximity to the evangelist, identifying with St. Luke encapsulated a myth of inspired creativity that bestowed quasi-sacred status on the artist.

During the seventeenth century, the artist’s presence enhanced the immediacy of his works: Caravaggio appears as a participant in the *Arrest of Christ* (ca. 1598; National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin; http://www.wga.hu). In the *Raising and Descent from the Cross* (ca. 1633; Alte Pinakothek, Munich), Rembrandt plays the roles, respectively, of one of Christ’s tormentors and one of his most compassionate supporters. The contemporary etched studies of his own facial expressions, like *Self-Portrait Open-Mouthed, As If Shouting* (1630), derive from the idea that the artist must imagine the “passions of the soul” for the sake of convincing expression, which stems from ancient poetic theory, specifically Horace’s advice to the tragic actor: “If you would have me weep, you must first feel grief yourself.” The Dutch painter Jan Steen, the ultimate player in his own paintings, transformed the participant self-portrait into a comic theatrical device with which to hone the moralizing messages of such genre pictures as *Easy Come, Easy Go* (1661; Museum Boijmans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam; http://commons.wikimedia.org).
Origins of the Autonomous Self-Portrait

The autonomous self-portrait developed simultaneously north and south of the Alps, in humanist court culture and its urban counterpart. The *Man in a Red Turban* of 1433 (National Gallery, London; http://commons.wikimedia.org) by Jan van Eyck, court painter to Philip the Good of Burgundy, is considered a self-portrait, on the basis of its inscription, “Als ich kan,” “as best I can,” both a declaration of dedication and a witty reference to van Eyck’s name. The Italian architect and author of treatises on painting and architecture, Leon Battista Alberti, probably portrayed himself in profile on a bronze plaquette of ca. 1435 (National Gallery, Washington; fig. 10.3), in imitation of classical portrait medals. We know with greater certainty that artists portrayed themselves in independent, freestanding self-portraits by the end of the fifteenth century. Dürer first painted himself in 1493. In Italy, transitioning from the participant self-portrait, Perugino and Pinturicchio included illusionistic framed portraits of themselves within larger fresco cycles (1500, Collegio del Cambio, Perugia; and 1502, Santa Maria Maggiore, Spello; both http://www.wga.hu). Raphael may have been the first Italian to paint a self-portrait on panel shortly after 1500 (Royal Collection, Hampton Court and Uffizi, Florence). His *Self-Portrait with a Friend* (ca. 1519; Louvre, Paris; http://commons.wikimedia.org) initiated the friendship portrait, through which an artist, despite lower social standing, might claim intellectual equality with a nobleman.

Parmigianino’s *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* of ca. 1524 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; http://commons.wikimedia.org) presents a likeness dependent upon looking in a mirror and drawing oneself accurately. Painted on a curved surface, it simulates a convex mirror. (Although mirrors had been around since antiquity – and the myth of Narcissus falling in love with his reflection in the water is one legend of painting’s origins – advances in mirror-making technology provided an impetus to self-portraiture.) Vasari describes how Parmigianino “made the hand engaged in drawing somewhat large, as the mirror showed it … His image on that ball had the appearance of a thing divine…. nothing more could have been hoped for from the human intellect.” Parmigianino made this demonstration of his *ingegno* as a gift for Pope Clement VII.

Titian portrayed himself wearing the gift that demonstrated his sovereign’s recognition of his genius. In his *Self-Portrait* of ca. 1562 (fig. 9.2), Titian fashioned himself wearing the gold chain that he received when he was knighted by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. The chain of honor bestowed by a ruler was a practice derived from antiquity that was central to court culture. Titian may have been the first painter to be so honored; many others who followed suit portrayed themselves with chains of honor. Titian’s *Self-Portrait* also pointedly displays his “hand,” his distinctive painterly style; his chain demonstrates his ability to paint gold with colors, which was regarded as a mark of a painter’s skill. The position of court painter benefited both artist and patron; the self-portrait with chain at once ennobled the artist and paid homage to the sovereign.
The autonomous self-portrait was a momentous step that signaled the self-confidence that came with the artist’s claim to *virtù*; it is perhaps no surprise that it was taken by only a few of the period’s most honored, most self-aware painters. Albrecht Dürer’s unprecedented attention to self-portrayal – he first drew himself at age thirteen (Albertina, Vienna) – suggests a heightened self-consciousness, due in part to his temperament and in part to his circumstances. Dürer was not a court painter (although he worked for Maximilian I); he lived and worked in the free German city of Nuremberg, and he traveled widely. Since much of his income derived from his print production, he was not beholden to patrons to the same extent as many of his contemporaries. Despite Nuremberg’s rich humanist culture, Dürer was acutely aware of the difference between the artist’s status there and in Venice, where he wrote in 1506: “How I shall freeze after this sun! Here I am a gentleman, at home a parasite.”

Two self-portraits that Dürer made during a trip to the upper Rhine comment on his promise as an artist. They show that, from the outset, self-portrayal ranged from private self-reflection to outer-directed self-fashioning. The first, an informal pen and ink sketch (ca. 1491–92; University Library, Erlangen; [http://commons]}.
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(https://commons.wikimedia.org), seems to be an exercise in self-scrutiny. Dürer, at about age twenty, wears a plain working cap and confronts himself in a mirror; to hold his head steady, he rests his head against his hand. His pose, intense gaze, furrowed brow, and darkened face characterize him as melancholic, the temperament considered necessary for artistic creation, which Dürer would later embody in his engraving *Melancholia I* (1514; https://commons.wikimedia.org). The second, his first formal self-portrait, Dürer painted on vellum and dated 1493 (Louvre, Paris; https://commons.wikimedia.org). Its inscription, “My affairs go, as it stands above,” and the sprig of eryngium that Dürer holds may suggest that he painted his likeness in anticipation of his marriage in 1494. Another explanation is that the combination of a plea to God and a plant emblematic of fortune and known as “unrest” or “break-away-thistle,” because it easily breaks from its roots to be cast about by the wind, reflects both Dürer’s current uprootedness and what fate holds in store for an artist of restless mind—a melancholic—in the long run. Although the self-portrait gives no specific indication that he is an artist, Dürer’s unusually colorful attire and tasseled red cap suggest both inventiveness and self-assurance. In his *Self-Portrait* of 1498 (Prado, Madrid; https://commons.wikimedia.org) Dürer, who had by then been to Italy, boldly asserted himself as a virtuoso. His elegant black and white clothing is unlike the sober elite fashion of his time. His gloves mark him as a gentleman, not one who works with his hands. The window with a view of mountains makes him a man of the world. In 1636, the city of Nuremberg gave this image to the English king Charles I, for his collection of self-portraits.

Nothing quite prepares us for the *Self-Portrait* of 1500 that van Mander admired in the Nuremberg town hall. Describing what he found noteworthy in Dürer’s “counterfeytsel” (portrait), van Mander says Dürer painted his “tronie” (face) and his beautiful hair, artfully handled and intertwined with golden strands. Van Mander does not observe, though he must have realized, that Dürer’s symmetrical full-face pose, long hair, and hand evoking a gesture of benediction make him look unmistakably like Christ in images of Christ as Savior and of the holy face on Veronica’s veil. Van Mander may not have known what to make of a self-identification that seems blasphemous. Identifying with Christ seems a remarkably egotistical claim to special creative powers, but it is also an imitation of Christ that casts Dürer’s creativity as a gift from God. Perhaps to mitigate Dürer’s unmentioned presumption, van Mander immediately reports that Dürer represented himself in humble biblical guise: his portrait is also to be seen in one of his prints, on the face of the Prodigal Son—the sinner whose acceptance by his father stands for God’s grace—who looks heavenward as he kneels with the swine, after squandering his patrimony.

Although Dürer inserted himself into important commissions and into religious prints that were widely distributed, he kept most of his autonomous self-portraits, suggesting that they were self-motivated, not for sale, and primarily for the benefit of himself, his family, and his learned friends, including Willibald Pirckheimer and Conrad Celtis. The latter wrote four epigrams about the *Self-Portrait* of 1500, in which Dürer is likened to Apelles and his creativity is a gift from God. Celtis was a nationalist who urged the Germans to rival Italy in
literature and culture. The 1500 self-portrait conveys similar native pride in that the fur that Dürer fingers marks him as a man from a northern climate. ¹⁹ (He made a point of signing his name in a way that referred to his German/northern origins.) One self-portrait, which though lost is described by Vasari and van Mander, Dürer sent as a demonstration of his – a northerner’s – skill to an admired Italian colleague whom he had never met: Raphael of Urbino. ²⁰

**Painters as Painters**

As far as we know, Dürer never represented himself with the tools of his craft. In the second half of the sixteenth century, however, self-portraits of artists at work or in the studio served as vehicles for painters to convey their ideas about their art. This was especially so in northern Europe, where Jan van Eyck’s legendary invention of oil paint promoted the celebration of manual practice. Just as the Renaissance elevated the artist from craftsman to practitioner of a noble, liberal art, so too the studio was a Renaissance invention. Studio, as opposed to workshop, implied a connection to the scholar’s study and, thus, contributed to the intellectualization of art. ²¹ In his *Self-Portrait* of 1558 (Uffizi, Florence; http://commons.wikimedia.org), Anthonis Mor positions himself at his easel, with brushes, palette, and maulstick in hand, before a blank panel that signifies invention. The fashionably attired Netherlander was portrait painter to European rulers; his self-portrait demonstrates the descriptive naturalism from which his mastery of portrayal derived. On the piece of paper, a *trompe l’œil* illusionistically pinned to both the blank panel on Mor’s easel and the self-portrait itself, is a Latin poem by Dominicus Lampsonius claiming that, through his mastery of naturalistic representation, Mor surpasses Apelles, Zeuxis, and all the other ancients and moderns. Further, it declares that Mor “has made this portrait of himself/ He painted it with his own skilled hand./ He studied himself... in front of the mirror: Oh what an excellent artist!” ²² Self-portraits by other Netherlanders, including Isaac Claesz van Swanenburg (1568; Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden; http://commons.wikimedia.org) and Joachim Wtewael (1601; Centraal Museum, Utrecht), showed the artist with tools or at the easel, as did many of the portraits in Hondius’s series of 1610. ²³

Sixteenth-century women appear to have taken the lead in representing themselves at their easels; especially in Italy there was a marked discrepancy between self-portraits by men, who predominantly appear as gentlemen, with little indication of their profession, and by women, who tend to celebrate their craft. Because it was difficult and unusual for women to become painters, and because women painters were regarded as marvels and curiosities, the self-portrait in working guise confirmed their professional legitimacy as well as their virtuosity and their particularly feminine virtue (see chapter 11). ²⁴ Caterina van Hemessen may have been the first to paint a self-portrait at the easel. In her *Self-Portrait* of 1548 (Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel; http://commons.wikimedia.org), she works on the very portrait that we see. In ca. 1556, Sofonisba Anguissola, who became
court portraitist to Philip II of Spain, portrayed herself at her easel, painting an image of the Virgin and Child (Museum-Zamek, Lancut, Poland; http://commons.wikimedia.org), thereby likening herself to St. Luke. Self-portraits by women were in demand. Requesting a self-portrait by Anguissola, Annibale Caro wrote: “There is nothing I desire more than an image of the artist herself, so that in a single work I can exhibit two marvels, one the work, the other the artist.” A self-portrait by a woman was regarded as having the unique capacity to combine the physical beauty of the painter – a quality demanded of female artists but not men – with the beauty of her style. Still, the creativity of women was sometimes attributed to their male teachers. One contemporary called Anguissola the creation of her master, Bernardino Campi: “From the works by the hand of the beautiful [Anguissola], your [Campi’s] creation, which I am here able to view with amazement, I am better able to understand your beautiful intellect.” A few years later, Anguissola painted a self-portrait within a portrait, Portrait of Bernardino Campi Painting the Artist (ca. 1559; fig. 9.3). Anguissola, who was famed for her naturalism, depicted Campi as astoundingly life-like; he, in turn, is shown painting a larger-than-life, idealized portrait of her. Her teacher works, as she takes
center stage. As if to dispute the claim that she was her teacher’s creation, Anguissola animates, imitates, and inventively surpasses him.28

The Seventeenth Century

Two contrasting self-portraits of women at their easels suggest differing ways of picturing artistic creativity open to women in the seventeenth century. The Roman painter Artemisia Gentileschi drew on allegory to represent herself as the embodiment of painting in a way that no man could. In her idealized Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting of 1638–39 (British Royal Collection; http://commons.wikimedia.org), Gentileschi appropriates attributes of Pittura, the invariably female personification of painting: as in Cesare Ripa’s description of Pittura (Iconologia, 1603), the mask on the chain around her neck symbolizes imitation, and her disheveled hair evokes “the divine frenzy of the artistic temperament.”29 Gentileschi’s upward gaze, toward the light, and wide-open arms – a martyr’s pose – and the broad reach of her brush suggest her inspired dedication to and mastery of the most ambitious kind of painting; she was the first woman to make a successful career as a history painter (rather than a portraitist) to illustrious patrons.

Whereas Gentileschi appears as timeless Pittura, the Dutch painter Judith Leyster portrayed herself with bold casualness as an up-to-date modern (ca. 1630; National Gallery of Art, Washington; http://commons.wikimedia.org). Leyster holds an unusual brush; its handle is the quill of an African porcupine. She wears fashionable clothing, not working attire, and presents herself as so engaged with the viewer that she almost seems to speak. Like many Dutch painters, Leyster specialized in genre subjects – one of which, a merry violinist, is on her easel – that were regarded as modern and the recent invention of the Dutch. Her urban elite and upper-middle-class clientele sought such paintings for their homes. Just as modern is Leyster’s loose, free painting technique. Her handful of brushes and visible brushwork, like that of Frans Hals and Rembrandt, registers her signature painting style. With the development of self-portrayal came an analogous self-consciousness about and appreciation of individual artistic style.

In the seventeenth century, men continued to portray themselves in the studio in varied and inventive ways that speak to both representation and status. Annibale Carracci represented himself poignantly as a self-portrait on an easel in a murky studio (ca. 1604; Hermitage, St. Petersburg; http://www.wga.hu). The bust-length self-portrait stands out for the clarity with which it is painted and for the intensity of the artist’s gaze, directed towards the viewer. A palette hanging on the easel registers Annibale’s recent presence. In his absence, the painter has become his work. The studio’s only inhabitants, a herm – a faint ghost of classical art – and a dog and cat, mark it as an isolated place, where the (melancholic) painter works alone. In contrast, Velázquez’s Las Meninas (1656–57; Prado, Madrid; http://www.wga.hu) is a self-portrait cum gallery picture that positions the court painter at his easel within his palace studio. Drawing on the imagery of Alexander the Great in the studio of Apelles, Velázquez is visited by the Infanta Margarita and
her entourage. King Philip IV and Queen Mariana are reflected in the mirror on the back wall. Whether they are present as sitters (and Velázquez is painting their portrait), or as his sovereigns who have come to visit his studio (and to watch him paint), their mirror-image makes them the eternal and primary viewers of the painting; Velázquez, in ultimate homage, paints *Las Meninas*, his most ambitious work and his self-portrait, for them alone.

**From Courtier to Artist**

Seventeenth-century Spain was singularly conservative. Elsewhere in Europe, as the artist’s status rose, and as honor and *virtù* became factors of accomplishment, displacing birth, the role of courtier-artist grew increasingly problematic. Peter Paul Rubens, though he both painted and served as a diplomat for rulers throughout Europe, insisted on independence. He agreed to become principal painter to Albert and Isabella, governors of the Spanish Netherlands in Brussels, provided that he could live in Antwerp, because, as he put it, “I have little desire to become a courtier again.” Rubens painted his few self-portraits almost exclusively on demand and, he claimed, reluctantly. In 1623, at the request of Charles I of England, he painted his *Self-Portrait* (British Royal Collection; http://commons.wikimedia.org); the few, almost hidden links of his gold chain convey Rubens’s subversive modesty. Late in life, Rubens portrayed himself as a gentleman whose sword conveys his nobility (1639; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; http://www.wga.hu). Rubens, who had Tacitus read to him as he painted, epitomized the classically learned *pictor doctus*. His one ungloved hand is a reminder that he is, in his words, “one who works with his hands.” In contrast, Rubens’s pupil Anthony van Dyck embraced his role as court painter in the *Self-Portrait with a Sunflower* (1633; private collection; http://www.wga.hu), in which his chain and floral emblem of eternal devotion announce his loyalty to his sovereign. In his *Self-Portrait with Sir Endymion Porter* (1630s; Prado, Madrid; http://www.wga.hu), van Dyck both subordinates himself to and claims friendship with his patron.

Rubens more freely portrayed himself as spouse and friend. The grand, full-length *Rubens and Isabella Brant in the Honeysuckle Bower* (ca. 1609; Alte Pinakotheek, Munich; http://www.wga.hu) registers the elegant Antwerpers as joined by love. In the intimate, casual *Rubens, His Wife Helena Fourment, and their Son* (ca. 1639; Metropolitan Museum, New York; http://www.wga.hu), Rubens conflated portrait and genre to present himself with his family in a love garden. The marriage self-portrait, whether the couple was portrayed in separate pendants or together in one image, had been an important genre since the Renaissance. For Rubens, whose wife becomes his muse, the theme of love related to the idea of love as the motivating force of art. The domestic sphere spoke to a new ideal of privacy and separated him from the court.

In early modern humanist circles, virtuous friendship opened the way for artist and scholar or collector to meet on equal grounds. In the *Adages*, Erasmus pairs
“Friendship is equality” with “A friend is a second self.” Because the friendship self-portrait addressed a like-minded beholder, it could serve as a vehicle for articulating elevated theoretical ideas about art. Rubens painted himself as friend in two group portraits that unite painting and philosophy: Rubens and his Mantuan Friends (ca. 1600–07; Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne; http://www.wga.hu), painted in Italy; and Justus Lipsius and his Pupils (ca. 1611–12; Palatine Gallery, Florence; http://www.wga.hu), painted in Antwerp, where he had joined a like-minded group of scholars who convey their devotion to the stoic philosopher who had been their teacher.

Like Rubens, Nicolas Poussin, who spent most of his career in Rome, claimed professional autonomy by distancing himself from his courtly patrons in France. For Poussin, who was deeply engaged with Montaigne’s essay on friendship, intellectual friendship provided for (the illusion of) a painter/patron relationship that was free from servitude. He painted his Self-Portrait of 1650 (Louvre, Paris; http://www.wga.hu) at the request of, and as a gift to, his friend and patron Paul Fréart de Chantelou. Poussin appears in academic garb as the painter-philosopher; his folio of drawings evokes his study of classical art; the gold-framed, mostly blank canvases stacked behind him both order the composition and suggest compositions and self-conceptions to come. On one partly hidden canvas are painted the personification of Perspective, or Prospect, with the eye of judgment, embraced by a naked man, the beholder, who together, according to Bellori, signify the love of painting and friendship. This pair conveys Poussin’s idea that a painting initiates a dialogue, based in friendship, Stoic love, between an understanding viewer and the painting.

Salvator Rosa’s Self-Portrait for his friend, the philosopher and poet Giovan Battista Ricciardi (ca. 1647; Metropolitan Museum, New York; http://www.wga.hu), was part of just such a dialogue, in that its recipient responded with a poem. Rosa represents himself as a philosopher, his head garlanded with funerary cypress, contemplating a skull, on which he writes in Greek, “Behold, whither, when.” The painting recalls the time the two friends had spent together; it is also a memento mori that comments on the artist’s power to memorialize, of art to outlast death, which in the context of friendship evokes a painful loss. In taking on the guise of melancholic philosopher, Rosa commented on the affinity between painting and philosophy and made himself into the mirror image of his friend.

**Rembrandt**

Like Dürer, Rembrandt must have been drawn to self-portrayal by both temperament and circumstances that brought into sharp focus the changing role of the artist. And like Dürer, he fashioned an astonishing range of self-images, many probably made for himself. He must have produced others for specific clients or to sell; in contrast to Dürer’s time, there was a demand for self-portraits and images of the artist in the studio. Rembrandt was one of many seventeenth-century Dutch
self-portraitists, including Gerrit Dou and Samuel van Hoogstraten, who were pressed to negotiate their collective professional identity by the discrepancies between outmoded courtly ideals and their new situation in the Dutch Republic. There, social and economic circumstances that gave painters greater autonomy— an open market for paintings and freedom from old systems of church and court patronage— also denied to them the very values on which Renaissance painters had predicated their sense of worth.

One contemporary who shared Rembrandt’s acute self-awareness was Constantijn Huygens, a non-noble humanist, connoisseur, and secretary to the stadholder Frederick Hendrik, who secured court commissions for Rembrandt and lauded him in his autobiography. Presumably it was via Huygens’s mediation that Rembrandt painted one of his first independent self-portraits for Charles I (ca. 1629–30; Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool). His fanciful court-painter guise—in black artist’s beret, with a gold chain—suggests he knew that his self-portrait was headed for a princely collection. Rembrandt, who was never given one, repeatedly granted himself chains and in the process invented an imaginary self-portrait type that demonstrated his inventive gheest (spirit) and identified him as an artist.

Rembrandt opted for artistic autonomy with his move, at age twenty-five, to Amsterdam. As if to celebrate his newfound success, Rembrandt twice portrayed himself just as he might wealthy merchants and doctors. Yet, as contemporary as they may look, the etched Self-Portrait in a Soft Hat and Embroidered Cloak (1631) and painted Self-Portrait of 1632 (Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow; http://collections.glasgowmuseums.com) recall Rubens’s Self-Portrait for Charles I, which Rembrandt knew through an engraving and which he presumably knew was in the same collection as his own.36 During the 1630s, Rembrandt concertedly sought to surpass Rubens on his own, more naturalistic terms. From this point on, many of his self-portraits emulate—imitate with the intent to surpass—illustrious predecessors, a strategy by which Rembrandt at once claimed allegiance to an imagined community of artists and distinguished himself as an innovator.

Through self-portrayal, Rembrandt cast himself in imaginary roles. In the theatrical Self-Portrait with Saskia (ca. 1636; Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden; http://www.wga.hu), Rembrandt appears as the Prodigal Son, or a secular prodigal, carousing in the tavern with his wife, cast as a harlot, sitting on his lap.37 In taking on this guise, Rembrandt wittily rivaled Dürer, who had engraved himself as the Prodigal, by identifying with the aspect of the Prodigal that spoke to the inspirational effects of drink and love, here embodied in the painter’s living muse.38 That other Dutch painters, including Gabriel Metsu in 1661 and probably Vermeer in The Procuress of 1656 (both Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden; http://www.wga.hu), portrayed themselves in similar roles testifies to the success of Rembrandt’s conceit.

The ambitious, historicized Self-Portrait at the Age of 34 (1640; National Gallery, London; http://www.wga.hu) rivaled the Italian virtuoso ideal and transformed it into an imaginary Netherlandish idiom. By alluding to two paintings
that were in Amsterdam in 1639, Raphael’s *Portrait of Count Baldassare Castiglione* (1515–16; fig. 21.2) and Titian’s *Portrait of a Man* (ca. 1510; National Gallery, London; http://www.wga.hu), then thought to represent the poet Ludovico Ariosto, Rembrandt entered into a longstanding art-theoretical debate by claiming he could unite Raphael’s central Italian disegno (drawing) with Titian’s Venetian colore. By also alluding to Dürer’s *Self-Portrait* of 1498, which had passed through Amsterdam in 1635–36, and appropriating costume from the Cock/Hondius portraits of Netherlandish painters, Rembrandt inscribed himself within the family of northern painters. His invention captured the imaginations of his contemporaries: respectful emulation prompted artists in Rembrandt’s circle, including Ferdinand Bol (1646; Dordrechts Museum, Dordrecht), Gerrit Dou (1647; Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden), and Aert de Gelder (ca. 1700; Hermitage, St. Petersburg), to model their self-portraits after his.

Rembrandt’s varied guises comment on his role as artist. The magisterial *Self-Portrait* of 1658 (Frick Collection, New York; http://www.wga.hu) enthrones Rembrandt, in Venetian-inspired gold and red historicized costume, as a prince of painters (perhaps as a specific painter from the past) and as master of a tradition of history painting. The *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul* (1661; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; http://www.wga.hu) represented the culmination of Rembrandt’s lifelong engagement with the thinker who most clearly expressed the concept of grace and salvation that informed Dutch Protestantism. In Paul’s example of an inspired yet humble vehicle for God’s word, Rembrandt found an analogy to his conception of his own engagement with the Bible. In the poignant and ironic *Self-Portrait, Laughing* (1660s; Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne; http://www.wga.hu), Rembrandt assumes the role of the classical painter Zeuxis. Zeuxis, who was famous for painting ideal beauty by selectively combining the most beautiful parts of different beautiful women, is said to have died laughing while painting an ugly, old woman. He was also the master of representing the emotions. Rembrandt’s identification with Zeuxis may express his vindication of his own unidealized, emotionally expressive naturalism, which was increasingly out of step with the taste for classicism.

With the 1648 etched *Self-Portrait at a Window, Drawing on an Etching Plate* (fig. 9.4), an image of the practicing artist in ordinary working attire, Rembrandt replaced the virtuoso ideal with an original image of himself as craftsman. Rembrandt portrayed himself as he saw himself in the mirror, drawing with etcher’s needle on the very plate that printed this self-portrait. Bold, vigorous strokes and spontaneous drypoint lines drive home the presence of the artist’s hand. The less costly print medium provided a vehicle for disseminating Rembrandt’s name and signature loose style. Rembrandt’s working stance demonstrates that his professional role was sufficient basis for a self-portrait: his selfhood gains more from his talent and professional identity as craftsman than from his social status.

Not until the 1660s did Rembrandt translate this artisan guise into paint. In the Louvre’s *Self-Portrait at the Easel of 1660* (http://www.wga.hu) and the *Self-Portrait* of the mid-1660s in Kenwood House (http://www.wga.hu), he presents
himself before his easel, holding his palette, brushes, and maulstick. In both, his plain, white working cap defies self-portraiture’s traditional mandate to elevate the status of the painter. Yet neither self-portrait is entirely contemporary. The *Self-Portrait at the Easel* evokes Rembrandt’s Netherlandish lineage in reviving a formula that had been popular in the Netherlands during the sixteenth century. For the *Self-Portrait* at Kenwood House, Rembrandt wears historicized studio attire. Thick impasto, visible brushwork and quickly incised lines emphasize his rough manner. With his supreme demonstration of his hand, Rembrandt’s actual hands recede: his right hand is barely blocked in, and his left hand becomes one with his brushes and rectangular palette. With his hands and tools rendered so sketchily as to be seemingly unfinished Rembrandt lays bare his practice. Just as his late painterly manner set him apart from the trend toward a refined classicizing style, so his painter’s guise distinguished him from his more academically inclined predecessors and colleagues. He demonstrates that his eminence rests on his artistic mastery and his distinctive hand.

In 1667, Cosimo III de’ Medici came to Rembrandt’s studio seeking a self-portrait for his uncle’s collection. Rembrandt responded with a self-portrait (Uffizi, Florence; http://www.virtualuffizi.com), perhaps his last, in imaginary courtly guise. As in the early picture for Charles I, Rembrandt donned beret and
fanciful chain. Even as an independent painter who valued his freedom in the open market of Amsterdam, he still knew how to play the role of court painter. Rembrandt’s irreverent approach to his clients and free-spending ways had resulted in bankruptcy and loss of control of his business.

**Toward the Modern Autonomous Painter**

Gerrit Dou, Rembrandt’s first pupil and life-long rival in self-portrayal, had also opted for autonomy when he declined the invitation to the court of Charles II. Dou was a savvier exploiter of new market conditions; his arrangements with clients who paid for the right of first refusal both left him free to paint what he wanted – mostly modern genre subjects – and made him Holland’s highest paid painter. In 1665, Dou’s principal collector, Johan de Bye, exhibited twenty-seven paintings, including three self-portraits, by Dou in a rented space in Leiden. The first one-man show in the history of art was advertised in the newspaper as open to the public on Sundays. In the Metropolitan Museum’s *Self-Portrait* (ca. 1665; fig. 9.5), a copious arsenal of emblematic accouterments memorialize Dou as a

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master of illusionistic fine painting, the conceptual opposite of his master’s rough style. Dou stands in his trademark window niche; in the context of a self-portrait, it is as if the ledge from the virtuoso type that Rembrandt invented has expanded into a fancy frame and permanent memorial for Dou. He holds his palette and brushes in one hand and, with the other, fingers the pages of a well-worn book. Dou’s name across the top of one of its pages suggests that this volume is a book of artists’ biographies, a modern Pliny, Vasari or van Mander, that inscribes Dou in history.

Like such biographies, a self-portrait memorializes an artist for posterity. Unlike most biographies, a self-portrait is of the artist’s own making in his/her own medium and style. As this essay has demonstrated, for Renaissance and Baroque painters, self-portrayal served, in varied, complex ways, as a vehicle for displaying one’s craft and for crafting one’s image. Broadly speaking, the rise and development of self-portraiture paralleled and advanced the elevation of painting from craft to liberal art, of the painter from artisan to self-aware artist. Despite the extraordinary claim to god-like creativity embodied in Dürer’s self-image of 1500, most autonomous self-portraits of the Renaissance presented their makers as like their patrons, by emphasizing an artist’s virtú and courtly or social status at the expense of identifying him or her explicitly as a practitioner. However, as painters gained independence and professional self-confidence, they increasingly claimed artistic agency by representing themselves as set apart by their special powers of creation and invention, by their genius. They took to wielding their tools, or showing off their works, in self-portraits that explicitly connect the figure of the painter with his or her distinctive style. Women were among the first to portray themselves at work, arguably because their professional legitimacy was at stake in a way that it was not for men. By the mid-seventeenth century, Gentileschi, Poussin, Velázquez, Leyster, Dou, and Rembrandt had each demonstrated that artistic authority derives from artistic mastery. Through uniquely inventive acts of self-portrayal, each had contributed to a collective invention of the modern artist.

Notes

3 Giusti and Sframeli, *Uffizi*, 21–33.
12 Bond and Woodall, *Self-Portrait*, 84.
Bibliography


