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Artists' Self-Portraits



Synopsis

In his fascinating survey, art historian Omar Calabrese reveals that self-portraits through the ages are both a reflection of the artist and of the period in which the artist lived. Organized thematically, the author first presents a basic definition of the genre of the self-portrait, interpreting the picture to be a manifestation of self identity, and including examples from an Egyptian tomb painting and pictures on stained glass during the Middle Ages and continuing to modern times. The next chapter focuses on the turning point for the establishment of the genre during the Renaissance when the status of the painter or sculptor was raised from artisan to artist and, as a result, portraits of the artist were considered worthwhile pictures. At first a self-portrait was hidden in a narrative painting: an artist would paint his image as part of a crowd scene, for example, or as a mythological figure. On the other extreme, once the genre was accepted, it was practiced by some artists—Rembrandt, van Gogh, Munch, and Dali, for instance—as almost an obsession. In contemporary art the self-portrait can become a deconstructed genre with the artist hiding or satirizing himself until he nearly disappears on the canvas. Among the 300 pictures featured here are examples by such artists as Albrecht Dürer, Velázquez, Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, Ingres, Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, Gainsborough, Matisse, James Ensor, Egon Schiele, Frida Kahlo, Man Ray, Henry Moore, Robert Rauschenberg, Norman Rockwell, and Roy Lichtenstein. This intriguing book is a fresh way to appreciate the history of art and to understand that a self-portrait is far more complex and meaningful than merely a portrait of the artist.

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Customer Reviews

Artists' Self-Portraits, a monumental yet lively study, encompasses the long and illustrious history of this piquant subset of the portrait form, which Italian art professor Calabrese traces back to antiquity, then forward into the modern era. Calabrese establishes three main categories of artists' self-portraits: the straightforwardly iconographic, embodiments of a specific historic moment, and works that reflect the inner realm, with Rembrandt and Van Gogh's self-portraits serving as key examples. But from these three main streams branch many tributaries, and Calabrese engagingly discusses self-portraits by women artists, self-portraits as visual autobiography, such recurring motifs as mirror images and the proud display of the tools of the trade, and self-portraits that subvert self-portraiture. His expert interpretations are illuminating, but it's the opportunity to revel in 345 gorgeous color reproductions and gaze into the eyes of such superlative artists as Albrecht Dürer, Elisabeth Vigée-Labrun, Goya, Manet, Munch, James Ensor, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Frida Kahlo that makes the book such a transporting experience. Donna Seaman

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"Calabrese's history of the form highlights its versatility." #151;The New York Times "Artists' Self-Portraits, a monumental yet lively study, encompasses the long and illustrious history of this piquant subset of the portrait form, which Italian art professor Calabrese traces back to antiquity, then forward into the modern era...His expert interpretations are illuminating, but it's the opportunity to revel in 345 gorgeous color reproductions and gaze into the eyes of such superlative artists as Albrecht Durer, Elisabeth Vigée-Labrun, Goya, Manet, Munch, James Ensor, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Frida Kahlo that makes the book such a transporting experience." #151;Booklist

"Magnificently illustrated." #151;The New Criterion

I saw this book in the information room of the DC National Gallery of Art. It is giant, and superb. I just regret the horrible inflation in book prices in recent years. Undoubtedly this book is "worth it," but will be far beyond what I want to pay. Sorry--but for you in the upper 1% (or professional artists with big tax deductions), you couldn't find a better book on the subject. It is especially outstanding for the great number of very large reproductions allowing examination of small details in the portraits by so many masters.

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