Joseph Ducreux’s Self-Portraiture – Capturing Emotions in the Wake of Enlightenment and Revolution

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The French painter Joseph Ducreux (1735–1802) was one of the foremost portraitists active at the court of Louis XVI, and the quality of his work earned him the coveted position of premier peintre de la reine ("Principal Painter to the Queen"). From early on his portraiture was characterised by a strong and overriding sense of naturalism, reflected in particular in his ability to capture a specific mien, emotional state or mindset. His talent for the “physiognomic” aspects of portraiture grew and was refined throughout his career, culminating in a series of innovative and justly famous self-portraits, primarily created in the 1790s.

Maurice Quentin de La Tour and the “Smile of Reason”
Ducreux was born in Nancy and at first probably trained with his father. In 1760 he went to Paris where he in all probability became a student of Maurice Quentin de La Tour (1704–1788). Just like his master, he became especially prominent as a pastellist, and the influence of La Tour is evidenced in several aspects of Ducreux’s work. Apart from the obvious technical and stylistic similarities, there are also several when it comes to content. La Tour was part of a cultural context in the mid-18th century which undoubtedly also laid the groundwork for Ducreux’s innovations some 30 years later. The former artist’s sensitive portraits of, for example, Rousseau and Voltaire seem to capture

Fig. 1 Maurice Quentin de La Tour (1704–1788), Portrait of Voltaire. Pastel on paper, 26.5 x 18 cm. Purchase 1968. Nationalmuseum, NMB 1946.
Acquisitions/Joseph Ducreux’s Self-Portraiture

not only the personalities of these giants of letters, but also the central themes of the Enlightenment, the movement of which they were leading lights (Fig. 1). Both Rousseau and Voltaire are smiling – “the smile of reason”, to borrow Kenneth Clark’s apt phrase – which humanises them, but also, together with the bright gleam in their eyes, embodies brilliance, insight and independent intellect. Here the smile was depicted as both a universal facial expression and a physiognomic trait integral to complex personalities. The embrace of a simple expression such as this as a natural part of portraiture relaxed the inherent formality of the discipline, humanising it and, thereby, reflecting the Enlightenment’s central concerns. 3

La Tour, Ducreux and Portraiture: Gracefully Unfinished and Perfectly Imperfect

“ The smile of reason” and other humanising expressions quickly became an integral part of French portraiture, which was dominated by artists as well as a clientele who were both progressive and genteel. Few other artists, however, could master the new type of portraiture the way La Tour did. Perhaps his predilection for working with pastels played a part here. It is as if La Tour intentionally explored the inherent frailty of the technique and fused it with the subject matter of his portraiture – both the characteristics of the individual man and the strengths and weaknesses of humanity – in the process capturing its imperfection in a close to perfect way. 4

This was an approach to portraiture which Ducreux developed and also perfected. Notable figures whom Ducreux portrayed in pastels included the writer Pierre Choderlos de Laclos (1741–1803) and the connoisseurs Pierre-Jean Mariette, the Comte de Caylus (1692–1765) and Ange-Laurent de la Live de July (1725–1799), whose portraits are all close to La Tour’s images of figures of the Enlightenment. 5

Just like La Tour, Ducreux took advantage of the somewhat transient nature of the pastel technique and made it an integral part of the portrait, resulting in an intentional, graceful and vibrant state of finished unfinish. Thus, from an early stage the portraiture of La Tour laid the foundations for certain traits that have become synonymous with that of Ducreux, although the former never took the same experimental and exploratory stance towards physiognomy as the latter would later do.

Revolution and Revolutionising?

Ducreux’s wish to capture in himself both universal and commonplace expressions. 6 They were done in oil, yet retained all the immediacy of his pastel portraits.

In our own media-saturated times, it is perhaps hard for us to realise what effect these self-portraits must have had on the contemporary viewer. Although one is tempted to regard them as such, these were by no means caricatures, but nor of course did they exhibit the traditional composure expected of both portraits and self-portraits. Strong emotions were commonplace in caricature, but they were by nature often exaggerated and ridiculed, and here Ducreux instead seems to be trying in earnest to depict the actual natural feelings of surprise and surprised fear. To some extent there are similarities here to the established academic tradition of producing what were termed têtes d’expression, studies of heads with the purpose of achieving the ideal depiction of various emotions. 7 However, transferring this particular artistic aim to self-portraiture is both rare and unexpected, and as viewers we are struck even today by the powerful result. The inherent immediacy of frontal self-portraiture becomes even stronger when the artist fuses this with alarming feelings that we instantly recognise and instinctively react to.

To properly understand these works and set them in context, we must also look a little beyond the influence of Maurice Quentin de La Tour and the Enlightenment. On 28 March 1671 Charles Le Brun (1619–1690) had addressed the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture concerning what he would later call a Méthode pour apprendre à dessiner les passions (1698). 8 In his address, which he illustrated with drawings, he described the myriad expressions that he detected in men and which he correlated to different types of animals, “making note of the signs that mark their natural inclination”, which, of course, was the basis for the notion of and belief in physiognomy. 9 Ducreux must...
ACQUISITIONS/JOSEPH DUCREUX’S SELF-PORTRAITURE

commonplace feelings and expressions in his own self-portraits from actual character – conditioned or – defined physiognomies, the latter of which were otherwise common in his regular portraits. An artist who produced works comparable to these paintings by Ducreux was the Austrian sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt (1736–1783). As Michael Yonan has pointed out, there is a possibility that Ducreux and Messerschmidt met while the former was on a mission to Vienna to paint the portrait of the future French queen Marie Antoinette. But if this supposed meeting and the works of Messerschmidt had any influence on Ducreux, it did not really show, at least not in full, until he painted his self-portraits in the 1790s. There are also some marked differences between the two. As Messerschmidt’s works are three-dimensional, the almost scientific aspects of how he captured different facial expressions become much more pronounced. The sense that the feelings are acted out, even exaggerated, is also stronger in his work. Comparable works by Ducreux are frontal self-portraits executed in a two-dimensional medium.

Fig. 3 Joseph Ducreux (1735–1802), Self-Portrait, Called Le Silence (the Silence), 1790s. Oil on canvas, 66.5 x 52.5 cm. Purchase: Sophia Giesecke Fund Nationalmuseum, NM 7495.

Fig. 4 Joseph Ducreux (1735–1802), Self-Portrait, Called La Surprise (the Surprise), 1790s. Oil on canvas, 66.5 x 52.5 cm. Purchase: Sophia Giesecke Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7496.
ACQUISITIONS/JOSEPH DUCREUX’S SELF-PORTRAITURE

which, in this case, and to all intents and purposes, creates an almost unavoidable interaction between the portrait and the viewer. What do we subconsciously imagine has caused this surprise or fear; is it we ourselves as the viewer? We wonder at the expression as a mirror on ourselves: is this what we ourselves look like when we feel those feelings?

Universal Expressions, Personal Experience and Potential New Paths for Portraiture

Ducr?eux’s desire to capture these universal expressions in self-portraits was certainly and primarily a result of an artistic training and inquisitiveness conditioned by the Enlightenment, but perhaps the reason it arose exactly when it did was also a reflection of his own direct experiences of the turbulent times both leading up to and following in the wake of the Revolution. Even if his exile in London was a short one, it is perhaps no coincidence that it was during this time that he emphatically took his work further in this direction.

Ducr?eux produced five basic types of these self-portraits: Le Rieur (laughing), Le Bâilleur (yawning), Le Moqueur (mocking), Silence, ou Le Discret (silence, or discretion) and La Surprise/La Surprise en Terreur. Although two or three of these involve expressions that could be termed quite calm, all of the portraits are characterised by a pronounced, almost in-your-face, forcefulness. This is perhaps most evident in the accusatory pose of Le Moqueur, which has both been compared to later military draft posters and seen as a depiction of Ducr?eux contra mundum (Fig. 2). In all likelihood these must have been stressful times for Ducr?eux, and although these works are meant to represent universal expressions, they are still very much self-portraits and as such also reflective of both the artist’s personality and his particular state of mind at the time; perhaps a tad irritable and nervous as well as playful.

Ducr?eux was back in Paris to exhibit at the Salon in the autumn of 1791. He again showed self-portraits of this kind, which received both positive and negative criticism. They seem to have excited interest and become popular, however, prompting the artist in some cases to create different versions of the basic types. The two paintings recently acquired by the National-museum are quite clearly later variants of the Surprise Mixte with Terror exhibited in London in 1791 and the Silence exhibited at the Paris Salon later that year. In the first of the two portraits, the principal features defining the expression are the wide-open eyes, the gaping mouth and a dramatically outstretched right hand (Fig. 4). In the second, the artist’s torso is in profile, but his head is turned towards the viewer. His right index finger is raised to his mouth to indicate silence (Fig. 3). In both portraits, the artist is wearing a powdered wig, a top hat and a brown coat. As was its wont, some of the powder has ended up on the shoulders and collar of the coat.

When Ducr?eux, in these works, captured universal human emotions through his own particular physiognomy, he potentially opened up new paths for portraiture, broadening the view of what could be accomplished by it. It is perhaps not surprising that one of these self-portraits today has become a popular meme on the internet, evidence of course of the artist’s both timeless and playful curiosity, well suited to an artistic mind born out of the Enlightenment.

Notes:
5. Ange-Laurent de la Live de July, 1762, Comte de Caylus, 1763, Choderlos de Laclos; see Lyon 1958, pp. 161–162, 181, pl. VII.
6. Ibid., pp. 77–78.
8. Ibid.
9. For the Concours de têtes d’expression, also called the Prix de M. le Comte de Caylus after its founder, see Procès-verbaux of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture 1648–1793.