Selfies: Now and Then

Margareta Gynning
Curator
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Rembrantd Harmensz. van Rijn (1606–1669), Self-Portrait, 1630. Oil on copper, 15.5 x 12 cm. Nationalmuseum, NM 5324.

Images of the actress Ann Petrén from her slide show on stereotypes and body language.

Gustave Courbet (1819–1877), Jo, the Beautiful Irish Girl, 1866. Oil on canvas, 54 x 65 cm. Nationalmuseum, NM 2543.
Museums are an important meeting place for discussions about our entire visual culture, and not just about what is defined as Fine Art. As part of the Highlights: Famous and Forgotten Art Treasures from the Nationalmuseum exhibition, the Museum therefore wished to contribute to the current debate about identity and what are called “selfies” – self-portraits taken at arm’s length using the camera of a mobile phone. Drawing on the Museum’s collection of portraits, we wanted to identify parallels between Now and Then and discuss how people have wanted to be seen down the centuries. We asked if a selfie is simply an egocentric facet of contemporary life, or if it first and foremost is an expression of our need for mutual recognition and an instrument of social communication.

According to relational psychologists, the most basic human drive is for contact – we actively engage and create ourselves by connecting with others. Certainly, we live in a neo-liberal, consumerist culture that is centred on the individual and fosters narcissism, but the longing for recognition is also a way of connecting with the collective. From infancy, we understand how crucial it is to establish contact with those closest to us, to interpret our parents’ facial expressions, and vice versa. Portraits therefore have an unusual ability to touch deep layers of our subconscious, and the encounter with another face can thus give a sense of affirmation that is interlinked with the origins of self. Being seen with an affirming gaze is an important part of forming our own identity. That is the basis shared by the older tradition of portraiture and the images posted on today’s social media.

Artists paint their own portrait by looking themselves in a mirror. This is a process marked by slowness, depth and introspection, whereas the modern-day selfie, with its cropped, from-above perspective, seeks to give the impression of being the work of a moment, improvised and laid-back. And yet, both as a pictorial construction and in relation to body language, fashion and social conventions, it recalls the practised pose we adopt when we view ourselves in a bathroom mirror.

Selfies: Now and Then therefore focused on stereotyped visual structures and portrait conventions. As part of the exhibition, a slide-show on body language by the actor Ann Petrén was shown, interacting with our portraits and with our visitors, who could post their own selfies on Instagram and which were then incorporated into the exhibition.

We got a great deal of attention from the press and feedback from our visitors when we explored what these kind of images actually represent in relation to gender, ethnicity, class and age, and the meanings of different codes and norms in the past and present.

Exhibition curators: Margareta Gynning
Exhibition design: Joakim E. Werning
Lighting design: Jan Gouiedo
Exhibition technology and installation: The Technical Department at Nationalmuseum, under the supervision of Lennart Karlsson
Chief conservators: Britta Nilsson, Maria Franzon and Nils Ahlner
Exhibition manager: Anneli Carlsson
Exhibition coordinator: Lena Granath
Education officer: Helén Hallgren Archer

Exhibition catalogue
Highlights: Kända och okända konstskatter från Nationalmuseum (Swedish edition);
Highlights: Famous and Forgotten Art Treasures from the Nationalmuseum (English edition)
Nationalmusei utställningskatalog nr 671
(Nationalmuseum exhibition catalogue no. 671)