Five Portraits of a Woman By A Woman

Here I present five self-portraits of female painters who made history by not only overcoming the challenges of being a female painter but also excelling in their craft so much so that they could not be ignored.

Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting



Figure 2: Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting by Artemisia Gentileschi 1638-39



Figure 1: Detail of Pittura by Cesare Ripa

In Artemisia Gentileschi's famous self-portrait, she paints herself in the act of painting, following the baroque style by emphasizing her movement and bringing the viewer into the painting on a physical and emotional level. The painting is however not just a self-portrait but also an allegory inspired by the iconography of Cesare Ripa. In the book iconologia, the art of painting is represented as a woman with black hair, thinking imaginatively, with her mouth covered with a cloth and a gold chain around her neck. On the chain hangs a mask that has 'Imitation' written on it, and she holds in her hands a brush and palette. Artemisia's self-portrait almost perfectly matches this description, except for the cloth around her mouth which would normally stand for dumbness or mute.

Artemisia lived in a time when female artists were not treated equally to their male counterparts and early on in her career, she was sexually exploited by a man that was meant to be her tutor. Therefore, artemisia's choice to represent herself as the personification of painting was bold and stood as a challenge to her male counterparts. Moreover, only a female artist could present herself in this way because Ripa's allegorical figure was represented as a woman. Looking at her masterful body of work and the fame she achieved as a painter during her lifetime artemisia's allegorical self-portrait is fitting.

Self Portrait in A Straw Hat





Figure 3: The Straw Hat by Peter Paul Rubens 1622–1625

Figure 4: Self-portrait in a Straw Hat by Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun 1782

Vigée Le Brun's ‘Self Portrait in a Straw Hat’ is her take on ‘The Straw Hat’ by Peter Paul Rubens. In Rubens painting, a girl, wearing a felt hat, stands with her hands close to her chest, timidly averting her gaze. In Vigée’s self-portrait, she stands with a confident posture, holding her brushes and palette in one hand. Her gaze directly meets the gaze of the viewer, and her mouth is slightly opened as if she is about to speak. She also corrects the error made in Rubens’s painting, by actually wearing a straw hat in hers. This painting, therefore, stands as a challenge that she can paint just as well and even better than her male counterparts.

Her painting establishes her as an attractive, confident female artist without being intimidating. Self-image was important to Vigée’s career; her beauty was part of her selling power, as customers would know that even the sitting for the painting would be improved by the presence of such a beautiful artist. This self-portrait therefore not

only stood as a showing of her painting abilities but also as a promotion of herself as a capable and confident artist.

Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird 1940

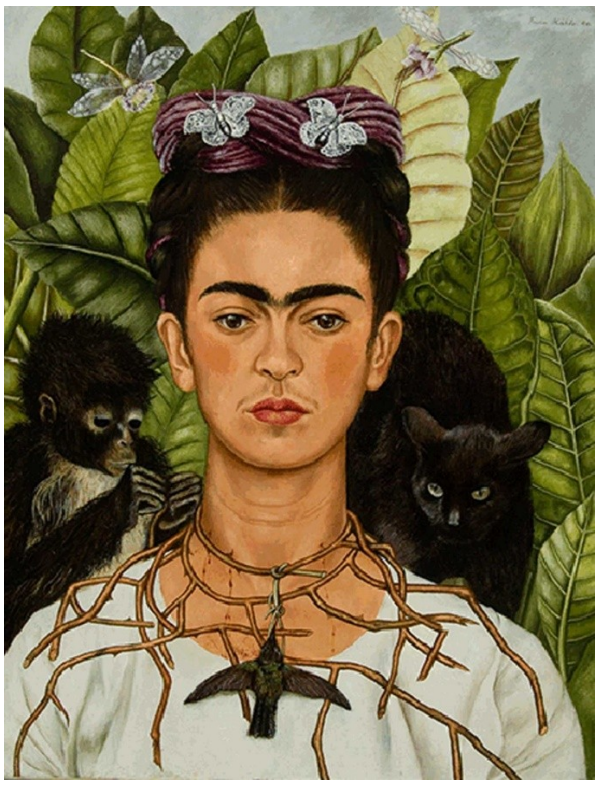

Figure 5: Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird by Frida Kahlo 1940

Frida is known as a surrealist painter as her paintings have hidden meanings behind them and she was very skilled at translating her thoughts into art. In this painting, Frida paints herself looking straight at the viewer with a calm gaze. She has a unibrow and facial hair that goes against the world view of what female beauty is, but instead depicts the beauty of reality as it is. The portrait flows from the monkey on the left, across Frida's face, over to the cat on the right, and finally to the hummingbird at her chest. Frida's skill in painting is illustrated in the details of the painting. The shape of the hummingbird's wings is mirrored in the shape of Frida's eyebrows, and flowers fly above her head while butterflies, that usually fly, sit still on her head. Frida excels in showing expression and making the cat and monkey look realistic. From the fur of the cat and monkey to the way the cat looks agitated, and the monkey looks distracted and preoccupied.

Frida utilised self-portraiture differently from the other women in this list. She started painting after being bedbound due to an accident and she was able to express her feelings through painting. She however represented herself as a confident, capable woman, always looking directly at the viewer as she shared her story around her.

Self-portrait by Judith Leyster



Figure 6: Self-portrait by Judith Leyster 1630

In this self-portrait, Judith paints herself turned towards the viewer with lips parted as if she were momentarily posing to talk to the viewer, before returning to her painting. This portrait is painted in the baroque style as it directly engages with the viewer. This may have been intentionally done because this painting is believed to have been submitted for appraisal, for her entry into a painter's guild in which she was the only woman. Therefore, this painting may have been intended for people she knew and in it she is directly addressing them with a pleasant expression. By painting herself in the process of painting she advertises her profession and skill.

Infrared photography has revealed that the painting on the easel was originally a painting of a face. It is believed that this would have been Judith's face, a self-portrait within a self-portrait however by using the fiddler instead, she was able to highlight different painting skills within a single painting.

Self-Portrait by Sofonisba Anguissola



Figure 7: Self-Portrait by Sofonisba Anguissola 1556

Like most female painters Sofonisba Anguissola used self-portraits to promote and define herself. In her self-portrait pictured in figure 7, Sofonisba paints herself at work with the tools of her trade, advertising herself as an artist. She wears a simple black dress that denotes modesty and virtue, and she shows herself gazing out at the viewer as if she has either been interrupted or the viewer is the subject of her painting, and she is studying them to continue with her painting. Her pose proposes that she will continue to paint making her look like a hard-working artist. In this self-portrait, Sofonisba was able to display her painting abilities, work ethic and morals.

Conclusion

In art there are many representations of women, however, most of them are by male artists. In this list, we see how five women chose to represent themselves. The common theme is as confident, skilled individuals that are proud of and good at what they do. In Frida's portrait, we see how she defines her own beauty and in Vigée's take of Ruben's portrait we see that a woman can paint just as well as a man. Overall, these women were pioneers that could not be held back by the injustices of their time or struggles in their lives, and were able to produce master pieces that are lasting the test of time.