

Beyond the face: Art therapy and self-portraiture

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Abstract

Self-portraiture can be a means of self-reflection and accepting the self. Art therapists can be informed of the benefits and drawbacks of recreating the self by examining the art of artists who experienced melancholy and depression. Vignettes of artists whose self-portraits were healing, as well as of artists who became stuck in feelings of despair, are described. Self-portraiture is an introspective tool that can be beneficial with many client populations. Examples from the literature in art therapy regarding the use of self-portraits in therapy augment the importance of this genre and describe some of the clinical applications of self-portraiture. © 2007 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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Throughout time, artists have created self-portraits as a vehicle to understand themselves. In self-portraiture the artist does not have to be concerned about pleasing anyone but him or herself. Self-portraits can allow the artist to be open and receptive to the self, which is an important component of therapeutic growth. Some artists create self-portraits to depict a spiritual part of the self or use the self-portrait to depict the emotional, spiritual, or physical self to significant people in their lives (Alter-Müri, 2003). Self-portraits can be a tool to assist the artist to step back from an experience and to reflect on that experience. However, self-portraiture is not often used as a tool by art therapists. The author is interested in increasing awareness of the therapeutic potential of self-portraits, using interviews with artists and a review of the literature of some of the many artists who focused on self-portraiture during their careers. When therapists use self-portraits as a therapeutic intervention, they enrich their understanding of the ways that artists have been able to overcome and transform their life experiences. Many client populations can benefit from self-portraiture. However, in some instances self-portraiture may not be healing and may increase the potential for some individuals to sink deeper in negative thinking, repetitive patterns, and feelings of despair. Self-portraits can contribute to an artist being more vulnerable to obsessive thoughts about the self. Several artists who have concentrated on creating self-portraits have become unable to critically examine themselves. This suggests that it is important for art therapists to serve as guides in the process of self-reflection. The result of a compulsion to create self-portraiture by artists who did not have the advantage of an art therapist as a guide is described as a measurement of the indications and contraindications for self-portraiture in therapy.

Indications and contraindications for self-portraits and depression

The self-portraits created by Vincent Van Gogh may have accentuated his downward spiral into the depressive phase of what Jamison (1995) described as his manic-depressive illness. Bonafoux (1989) made relevant observations about

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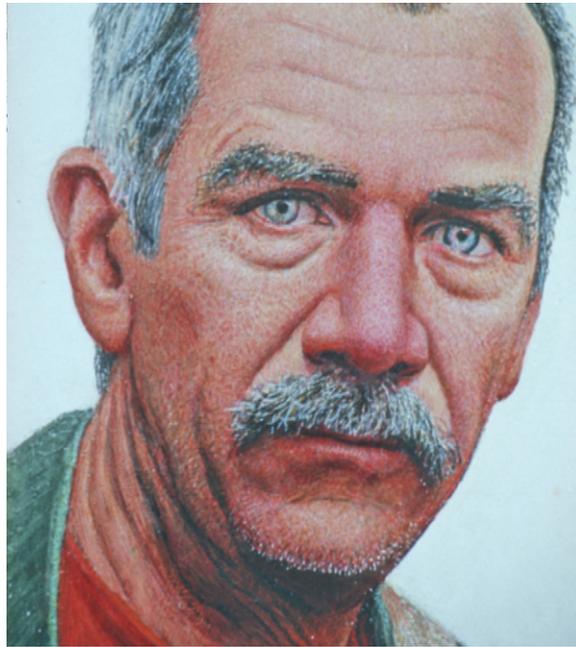


Fig. 1. Self-portrait.

Van Gogh's self-portraits. This author referred to self-portraiture as the genre of painting about which Van Gogh perhaps felt the most self-confident. According to Bonafoux, Van Gogh's self-portraiture often depicted the artist's desire to subdue his inner impulses and to feel grounded in the aftermath of a crisis. For example, the self-portrait that Van Gogh created in the asylum at St. Remey reasserted his identity as an artist to himself, his family, and his doctors. Van Gogh sent many of his self-portraits to his brother and some to his sister as evidence that his illness was improving and that he was feeling better. Bonafoux describes Van Gogh's self-portraits as the foundation of his solitude—and his salvation.

Gregory Gillespie also found self-portraiture a vehicle to experience internal contemplation. The studio where he created his self-portraits was also a haven and a place of solitude and internal contemplation for the painter. Born in New Jersey, Gillespie lived from 1936 to 2000. He was a recognized artist throughout the United States in the 1970s. His first retrospective was at the Hirshhorn Museum in 1977, where he exhibited over 70 of his self-portraits. He was awarded two Fulbright grants to study and paint in Italy, where he lived for 8 years. Some of his self-portraits were created with the use of a magnifying glass. Although he is well known as a realist, his paintings contained elements of surrealism. Several of his self-portraits, as seen in Fig. 1, depict the artist at work in his studio (Alter-Müri, 2003).

In 1978, Gillespie wrote that his role as an artist was to observe himself and to take notes on himself, saying "The more I paint, the less I deviate from what I see." Although Gillespie employed self-portraiture as an existential exercise, he felt that self-portraiture was a dialogue with the self (G. Gillespie, personal communication, March 2000). Stebbins and Stebbins (2003) described Gregory Gillespie as the only American painter who created an intense psychological record through self-portraits. Gillespie's self-portraits are often described as depicting a sense of melancholy. In April 2000, Gregory Gillespie committed suicide. Two weeks before he died, I interviewed the painter in his studio on the topic of self-portraiture. Throughout our meeting, Gillespie was self-reflective and discussed problems in his relationship with the "art world." He appeared relaxed and seemed happy to talk. He was working on revising a self-portrait. Although I have interviewed several artists whose career included a majority of self-portraits, I have been most touched by Gillespie's work. Was this because of my friendship or because of Gillespie's interest in the underlying meaning of his art? or was it due to his painterly and representational abilities? In an interview with Nina Nielsen (1998), Gillespie discussed two important influences in his past: his mother's commitment to an asylum and the influence of strict Catholicism. The strictness of his upbringing with the intensity of his mother's illness perhaps can be seen in his compulsive attention to details combined with his interest in adding imagery from the unconscious in the picture plane. In his paintings, Gillespie included images of Buddha and Hindu goddesses and deities and combined them with images that were phallic or sexual in nature. The tiny images on the canvases were painted for more than allegorical

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