

# The Viz



david



28,880 likes

The Exploration of the Selfie  
and Contemporary Portraiture

Delaney Feezell

**Abstract** The Selfie is a unique cultural advent of the 21st century and has changed our perceptions of portraiture forever. To understand the selfie as it exists today, we must consider it as a development in the art historical timeline. By looking to portraiture of the past, we may better understand current distinctions in style, purpose, and implications. Considering aspects such as control, proliferation, and narrative, this journal issue aims to understand what separates traditional self portraiture and 21st century selfie-style imagery, as well as explore how the selfie has affected contemporary works.



Art history helps us understand the past by analyzing visual remains from a time before our own. What, then, will art historians look to 1000 years from now to understand our culture? We are alive at an interesting and pivotal moment in history; we have experience the dawn of what we now call “the selfie”. This journal issue will discuss the unique importance of the selfie, focusing on the themes of control, narrative, and proliferation to better understand how it has changed our perceptions of portraiture permanently. Through comparison of self-portraiture from a time before hand-held front-facing digital photography and now, we may even better understand the future implications of the selfie.

Self-portraiture of humans has been present since the dawn of humanity. Prehistoric human representation in the form of paintings spatter caves throughout Spain and France. Whether for the sake of memorial, reverence, or power, it is clear that humans from every corner of the earth have found the need to represent themselves visually. In the realm of art history, self-portraits provide us with valuable information about people from the past.

Unfortunately, power and representation have been closely intertwined in human history; thus, both have been stripped away from those of lower social status. Before the dawn of photography, portraiture was reserved for the wealthy and privileged. Unless one was a trained artist themselves, acquiring a realistic self-portrait was not necessarily feasible. Portraiture became tangible evidence of power. Take, for example, the Presidential portraits of the United States. Each President has been rendered in a traditional oil painting as a symbol of power, prestige, and honor. The Presidential portraits tend to be characterized by their large format, extremely realistic

The Art of Painting,  
Johannes Vermeer,  
1666-1668 (fig. 1)



George Washington,  
painted by Gilbert  
Stuart 1796 (fig. 2)

rendering, dramatic lighting, and purposeful composition (fig. 2). George Washington is portrayed standing tall in a room of ornate furniture and decor, gripping a sword in one hand and gesturing as if to welcome someone with the other. It is evident that President Washington was literate and wealthy by his dress and the quill on the left side of the frame. This portrait leads the viewer to believe that the subject is educated and successful, even if one did not know his identity as the first President of the United States. This was the nature of portraiture; important people using visual representation to further their importance.

The invention of photography in 1827 completely changed the preconceived idea of portraiture. Instead of requiring a commission from an academically trained painter, the new technology allowed one to capture the most realistic human rendering in human history more easily and quickly than had been possible with painting alone. This meant that, though buying a camera or hiring a photographer was still not an option for everyone, photographed portraits were more readily accessible

to the masses than traditional painted ones. The invention of photography began to restore the universality of human depiction which had been stripped away by generations of power politics. Naturally, humans became the most photographed subjects of early photographs, and in 1839, Robert Cornelius achieved the very first selfie (fig. 3).

Photography continued to develop and grow in popularity over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. Then, our next contributor to the modern day selfie and an engineer working for Eastman Kodak Co., Steven Sasson, invented the first digital camera in 1975 (fig. 4). Though his model was not immediately successful, Sasson's invention laid the groundwork for the digital cameras housed in our phones today. Digital photography has allowed the masses to take as many photos as they wish at no extra cost, a major advancement from film photography (and something to consider next time you snap 100+ selfies to capture the perfect one. Thanks Mr. Sasson!) Additionally, digital photos have the ability to be sent electronically, or uploaded to the internet, eventually. In short, the



Self portrait,  
Robert Cornelius,  
1839 (fig. 3)

The first digital  
camera, engineered  
by Steven Sasson  
(fig. 4)



innovation of digital photography created the potential to create an infinite volume of images and the ability to proliferate those images with ease and speed. Photos can now be sent anywhere in the world in a matter of seconds.

It wasn't until the early 2000s when the aspect of narrative through social media allowed the selfie to become a household concept. At this point in time, many people own a digital camera or a cell phone with a camera feature. All they needed was a space and a reason to begin taking selfies. Enter: MySpace. Social Media platforms, such as MySpace, which required a profile picture gained popularity quickly. However, at this point in time, many of the selfies being taken were blown out from the flash in a bathroom mirror or an off-kilter attempt to fit one's face in the frame of their camera phone.

While these make-shift self-portraits do constitute as selfies, it wasn't until 2009, argues Kate Losse of the New Yorker, when Facebook overtook MySpace in online traffic and usage that we see a major shift in the quality of selfies being taken. She



goes on to argue that Facebook, was associated with better taste and superiority to the MySpace culture. A cleaner layout and design pushed for better quality photos and profile awareness, as well as a caption feature.

Only a few months later on June 24th, 2010, Apple released the iPhone 4, the first model of the phone to feature a front-facing camera, to the public. This feature was specifically designed to cater to the growing popularity of taking photos of oneself, as well as the new video calling feature, FaceTime (Losse, 2013). Also in 2010, Instagram, a new platform for photo sharing was launched. Now, with a specialized tool for production and a space to house them, selfies skyrocketed in popularity over the following years.

In 2013, Oxford added “selfie” to the English dictionary and named it ‘Word of the Year’. Their definition is, “A photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media.” (Selfie - Noun, Oxford).

This was the peak of the selfie's popularity; they were nearly already cliché. This is largely due to the fact that the selfie restored to the public what traditional portraiture had suppressed. Taking a selfie became nearly a universal act in the early 2010s because it was accessible, easy to proliferate, and provided a narrative to those who may be otherwise underrepresented and marginalized. Anyone with an up-to-date phone may now become the artist, subject, and curator of their own visual representation and online profile on their own terms. Gone are the days of power politics dictating which groups are featured in art history textbooks. The way the world consumes any given person's visual representation is largely in their own control.

Five years after becoming an official word, in 2018, there were an average of 93 million selfies uploaded to the internet every day (Meyer, 2018). Selfies are an unprecedented and remarkable advancement in self-portraiture, and though they may be inherently casual and trivial, the effects and implications have proven to be anything but



inconsequential. Selfie culture has shown to breed narcissism and comparison, and can lead to issues in confidence and self worth, especially in adolescents (Leung, Zhang, 2017). Whether the pros outweigh the cons or vice versa, selfies are not disappearing anytime soon.

The topic of whether selfies qualify as fine art is hotly debated, yet it is undeniable that the selfie has inspired many artists. Melanie Bonajo, a Dutch digital artist, coined the term and concept of the “Anti-Selfie”. Instead of photographing the highlights of her life with smiling self-portraits and using her sexual appeal for validation online, she instead uses the trend to document her saddest and darkest moments (“Anti-Selfies and Bondage Furniture”). By doing this, she explains, she becomes an observer to her own suffering, and it helps her cope (fig. 5 and 6). She also expresses that she aims to humanize the female experience by sharing what she believes is a more ‘real’ selfie.

Melanie Bonajo, 2014 (fig. 5)



Melanie Bonajo, date unknown (fig. 6)

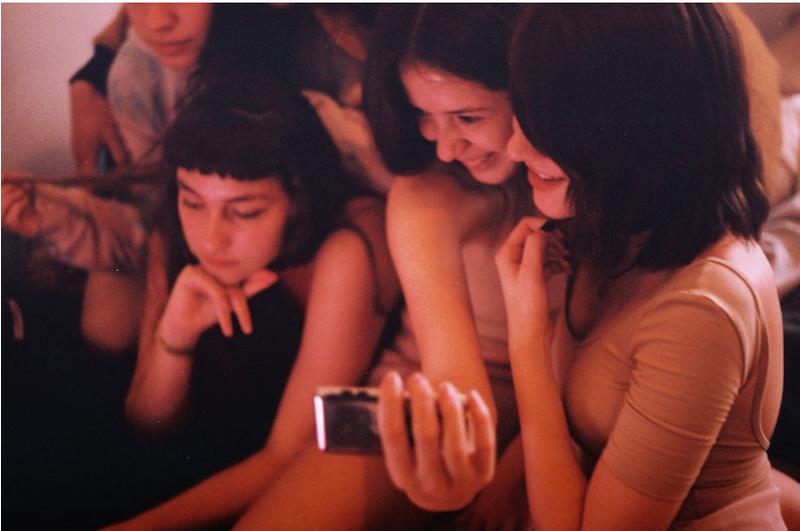


Petra Collins is a New York based photographer who uses self portraiture to capture raw moments of womanhood. The purpose of her work is to produce relatable images for young women and provide them a sense of comfort. Her work celebrates the facts of life rather than editing out imperfections. She hopes to combat the negative cognitive affects which social media has had on young girls. In an interview with Huffington Post in 2015, Collins explains, “If your story is being told by someone who doesn’t really know it, it’s not going to come out accurate” (Frank, 2105). As seen in figures 7 and 8, Collins is highly inspired by selfie culture among adolescent girls. Her photos are grainy, tender, honest, and portray the psychological turmoil of young womanhood.

Petra Collins, *The Teenage Gaze*, (fig. 7)



Petra Collins, *Selfie* (fig. 8)



Art historians will look back to our society and consider the visual remains of our time. With 93 million selfies being produced each day, the selfie as an artistic expression cannot be ignored in our story.

Though oil paintings of presidents and other elite groups still exist, in traditional portraiture of the past, access has been limited. Today, nearly any average person can take out their smart phone and begin curating their own representation online.

In the past, physical portraits did not typically travel for viewing, they were viewed in person. Today, selfies have reached all corners of the globe by way of the internet.

The selfie has provided an unprecedented amount of control over how we represent ourselves and share our narrative with the world as we become the subject, the artist, and the curator.

The selfie has become more highly proliferated than any other form of visual human representation via the internet and social media. For all of these aspects and more, the selfie has made a unique and lasting impression on art and contemporary culture.

## Works Cited

- “Anti-Selfies and Bondage Furniture.” *Anti-Selfies and Bondage Furniture | Mister Motley*, <https://www.mistermotley.nl/en/art-everyday-life/antiselfies-and-bondage-furniture>.
- Frank, Priscilla. “How Artists Are Using The Selfie As A Radical Weapon For Change.” *HuffPost*, HuffPost, 3 Sept. 2015, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/10-artists-who-use-selfies-as-their-radicalweapons\\_n\\_55e7393ae4b0c818f61a303b?guccounter=2](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/10-artists-who-use-selfies-as-their-radicalweapons_n_55e7393ae4b0c818f61a303b?guccounter=2).
- Leung, Louis & Zhang, Renwen. (2017). Narcissism and Social Media Use by Children and Adolescents 10.1891/9780826133731.0003.
- Losse, Kate. “The Return of the Selfie.” *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 19 June 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/the-return-of-the-selfie>.
- Meyer, Paige. “The Selfie Generation.” *HQ Press*, HQ Press, 9 Dec. 2018, <https://www.hqpress.org/blog-2/2018/11/20/the-selfie-generation>.
- “Selfie Noun - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage Notes: Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com.” *Selfie Noun - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage Notes | Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com*, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/selfie>.



Cover art Credit

Adapted from Jörg Bittner Unna; David by Michelangelo Florence Galleria dell'Accademia; 28 July 2016; Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File: %27David%27\\_by\\_Michelangelo\\_Fir\\_JBU00](https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%27David%27_by_Michelangelo_Fir_JBU00)