Selling vs Truth-Telling: An Analysis of Two Self-Portraits

Executed around 1556, Sofonisba Anguissola’s *Self-Portrait* is a varnished watercolor on parchment measuring 3 ¼ x 2 ½ inches (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) [Fig. 1]. The painting shows the artist holding a sizable medallion that bears the inscription “The maiden Sofonisba Anguissola, depicted by her own hand, from a mirror, at Cremona”. Anguissola looks directly forward, casting her wide, doe-like gaze out to onlookers. In a work likely circulated to help her attain a court position, she exudes both innocence and femininity. Executed in 1888, Vincent van Gogh’s *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Paul Gauguin* is an oil on canvas measuring 24 3/16 x 19 13/16 inches (Fogg Museum, Harvard University) [Fig. 2]. In contrast to the demure portrait of Anguissola, van Gogh presents himself as an aged and stoic man. His gnarled features and furrowed brow imply a pensive state, and a patch of skin on his left temple, illuminated by the light source at the painting’s left, suggest that he is in a state of deep contemplation. Both of these self-portraits depict individuals who, in their own ways, aim to explain how they see themselves within society. While Anguissola strives to conceal her struggles from her viewers, van Gogh works to honestly expose how his burdens have impacted him. Anguissola seeks to sell herself, but van Gogh is a vendor of truth.

Embodying the norms of the Italian Renaissance, Sofonisba Anguissola worked within her constraints to display what the public desired. She sought to please her patrons by exhibiting artistic tastes that were thought to be embodied by a Renaissance woman. Joanna Woods-Marsden describes the tactics female artists of the Renaissance had to employ in order
The achieving woman needed to present the self in such a way as to win respect for her attainments without eschewing appropriate female demeanor... (or) transgressing the traditional decorum of chastity, virtue, and modesty needed for a lady of rank in society.¹ The prim nature of the portrait, exhibited through her stiff posture and formal dress, counters the youth of her rosy cheeks, the childlike features of her round face, and the innocence displayed through her countenance. Rather than painting herself with a palette in hand or poised at a canvas, Anguissola indicates her role as an artist through the inscription on the medallion; the toil associated with artists is hidden from onlookers, suggesting that she does not partake in strenuous, grimy labor. Thus, she straddles the line between mature woman and girl in order to strike a balance between professionalism and femininity.

Beyond her outer appearance though, Anguissola carried the same social weights as her male counterparts, bearing the strain of the pressures associated with being both woman and artist. These burdens take shape in the medallion, especially. Anguissola’s body is largely obscured by the object, and her hands cradle the rim with a firm grip to support its hefty size. Rather than leaning unsupported against her chest or causing her strain, the medallion stands upright, implying that Anguissola possesses the strength to support the weight of her title as an artist. This stroke of genius in the portrait inherently ascribes mental acuity and great artistic skill to her by creating a hidden meaning behind a seemingly conventional form. The entwined letters at the center of the medallion reference her father, the man who provided her with the opportunities to thrive as an artist.² Though Anguissola pays her father due diligence, she indicates that the ability to carry out his expectations has been fully cultivated within herself. Her stable, almost presentational hold on the medallion suggests that her talents are being offered

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² Woods-Marsden, 203.
up to the public by the artist, as she has become the vendor of her own skills. The fruits of her labor, grown from seeds planted by her father, are now able to be picked and enjoyed by the Renaissance nobility.

In considering the inscription on the medallion, the reference to the mirror is of particular interest. A mirror conveys the idea that Anguissola’s portrayal of herself is wholly and completely accurate, meant to display her true features rather than dress her up with artistic liberties. Through including this in the inscription, Anguissola employs a common Renaissance tool for portraiture to further identify her virtues. As Woods-Marsden notes, “the mirror, symbolized, among other things, reflection upon, and consideration of one’s identity...Like transparent glass, the unspotted mirror, *speculum sive macula*, was a metaphor for the Virgin’s unspotted purity”.\(^3\) Anguissola’s reference to her virginity negates any suggestion of duplicity in the young artist. Held up by her firm arms, her purity is put up for the world to see and acknowledge, and this admirable candor further strengthens her image in the public as a pure woman and skilled artist. Thus, Anguissola presents the public with what they want: a lucid depiction of what makes her an admirable woman of the Italian Renaissance. Without tainting her image, Anguissola’s presentation of herself subtly reflects her intelligence.

While van Gogh’s *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Paul Gauguin* also presents the artist as a truth seeker of society, his work implies that toil and strain can been seen and shown through physical characteristics. His determination to find a sense of self identity is especially expressed through his use of color and brushstroke. The drab brown of his suit contrasts with the effervescent, seafoam green of the background, drawing the eye to search for tones that complement the green. A paler hue of the background’s green is seen in his neck and head, almost as if the color has seeped into his skin. Much like the woman in Henri Matisse’s later

\(^3\) Woods-Marsden, 203.
Woman in Green painted in 1909 (Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg) [Fig. 3] and van Gogh himself in his Self-Portrait of 1889 (Musée d’Orsay, Paris) [Fig. 4], elements of van Gogh meld with the background. As he becomes one with the upper half of the portrait, his torso incongruously sticks out. His oversized jacket conceals the form of his body, and the eye is drawn upward in a search for a defined form, ultimately settling on his slender neck and angular face. Furthermore, the dichotomy between head and body is enhanced by the short, rapid brushstrokes of his skin and the longer, languid strokes of his clothing. His head and neck look like a bust that could be separated from his shoulders, as their structured forms contrast with the curved, saggy appearance of his torso. The distinction between the two forms implies a disconnect between mind and body, almost as if van Gogh felt himself struggling to align his thoughts with his actions and work. It is not clear who van Gogh is or what role he fits into; the notable absence of objects that signify a trade or interest and the lack of a concrete location place the artist in an ambiguous setting and state of being. As the painting was a gift to Paul Gauguin, to whom van Gogh regularly wrote letters, van Gogh used the work to express his thoughts to his friend; he employed his artistic skills to send a different kind of missive, one that openly communicated his physical and mental state at the time. With his self-portrait, Van Gogh posed a question to his friend and his viewers that he himself could not answer: who is the person behind the artist?

The artist’s struggle to depict his inner truths through portraiture is clear. Jacquelyn Baas discusses the toil behind the work, stating, “In a letter to Gauguin...van Gogh wrote of the spiritual discipline that would be necessary to live up to the ambition of his self-portrait: ‘It has cost me a lot of trouble, yet I shall have to do it all over again if I want to express what I mean’.”

The dark bags beneath the artist’s eyes, furrowed brow, and squinting eyes act as physical

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representations of this strain. One can imagine his head spinning with thought as he mulls over who he is as a person, as an artist, and as a friend. Through the mass of bright colors at his left temple and light source at the left of the painting though, van Gogh suggests that there is some hope in his journey to self-realization. A subtle diagonal line created by differing tones of green divides the illuminated portion from the darkened section; but, the light source may soon shift and pull back the shadowy curtain covering the right half of the portrait. Thus, van Gogh sits patiently as his understanding of self slowly expands. In the same letter from van Gogh to Gauguin, the artist wrote, “I...exaggerate my personality, I have in the first place aimed at the character of a simple bonze worshipping the Eternal Buddha.”

Similar to a monk’s dedication to prayer and self discipline, van Gogh dedicated his time and effort to perfecting his craft, honing his ability to present the world through painting. Van Gogh exposes the complexity of his creative process to the viewer, inviting them to step within his world to understand the jumbled contents of an artist’s mind. He presents his likeness as something more than a picture; it is a window into his soul.

In a self-portrait, it is the job of the artist to decide whether or not they want to hide themselves behind layers of paint or candidly expose their true selves. But, an artist’s honesty about their person can manifest in a number of ways. Paint color, like van Gogh’s seafoam green, and props, like Anguissola’s medallion, provide insight into invisible characteristics; by presenting symbolic information, these artistic choices supplement what an individual gathers from the artist’s outer appearance. Viewers do not always see every truth an artist places into a portrait, though. Nuanced details strike different people in different ways, causing some insights to stick with one person and others with another. As personal experiences shape how individuals view the world and art, a painter learns that each person will uniquely interpret a work and subjectively react to its elements. Thus, a self-portrait acts as an earnest, personal

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introduction, inviting viewers to greet the sitter and become acquainted with them as a person and an artist. Through these two self-portraits, Anguissola invited court society to see a skilled female artist and van Gogh invited Gauguin to see a friend. Their greetings extend into the present, asking modern viewers to look deep within the likenesses to identify the artists’ traits and uncover their truths.
Figure 1, Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait*, about 1556. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.

Figure 2, Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Paul Gauguin*, 1888. Harvard University, Fogg Museum.
Figure 3, Henri Matisse, *Woman in Green*, 1909. Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg.

Figure 4, Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait*, 1889. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.
Bibliography


