



Seeing Ourselves: Women's Self-Portraits

By Frances Borzello

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The first chronicle of the whole story of female self portraiture through the centuries? a key work in the study of women's art

For centuries, women's self-portraiture was a highly overlooked genre. Beginning with the self-portraits of nuns in medieval illuminated manuscripts, Seeing Ourselves finally gives this richly diverse range of artists and portraits, spanning centuries, the critical analysis they deserve. In sixteenth-century Italy, Sofonisba Anguissola paints one of the longest series of self-portraits, from adolescence to old age. In seventeenth-century Holland, Judith Leyster shows herself at the easel as a relaxed, self-assured professional. In the eighteenth century, from Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun to Angelica Kauffman, artists express both passion for their craft and the idea of femininity; and the nineteenth century sees the art schools open their doors to women and a new and resonant self-confidence for a host of talented female artists, such as Berthe Morisot. The modern period demolishes taboos: Alice Neel painting herself nude at eighty years old, Frida Kahlo rendering physical pain on the canvas, Cindy Sherman exploring identity, and Marlene Dumas dispensing with all boundaries.

Frances Borzello's spirited text, now fully revised, and the intensity of the accompanying self-portraits are set off to full advantage in this new edition, now in reading-book format. 180 illustrations, 130 in color

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In her fifth book, social art historian Borzello has "tried to make sense of what I was seeing by treating the self-portraits as painted versions of autobiography." Borzello has chosen vivid self-portraits of women from middle ages to the present that reveal cultural characteristics of an era as well as ideographic inclusions of the artist's perception of herself. As in every autobiographical sketch, imagery is selective. Thus many portraits of earlier centuries are modeled on those of male painters, palette on one arm, brush poised in the other, both indicating serious intent. But despite this earlier evidence of fine self portraiture, it was not until the late 19th century that art began to be recognized as a legitimate and significant field for women.

Borzello's text, accompanied by the 240 well-chosen illustrations (100 in color) is a history of the marked separation of male/female domains in daily life, as well as women's ability to skirt prevailing male traditions and portray an inner life that transcended domesticity. The transition from subtle details?the setting the portraitist chose for herself, the style of dress and hair, the placement of her hands?to the startling freedom of 20th-century imagery that revealed women artists as "independent and unshackled by conventional notions of feminine behavior" is arresting. The visual manifestation of how women see and represent themselves may seem elusive, but Borzello does a fine job of illuminating the subject, without overly simplifying it.

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From Library Journal

Books of this high caliber are few and far between in feminist art history. Borzello, a specialist in the social history of art, aimed to "present women artists' self-portraits as a genre in its own right." She succeeds admirably, creating a work that is exciting yet factual, inspiring without indulging in hyperbole, and that stands as one of the finest single volumes on women artists appearing in at least a decade. Written in elegant prose that will draw in even casual readers, it bears a wealth of new material on both well-known and practically unknown artists, with 240 illustrations?100 of them in large format and excellent color. After the preface and introduction, there are separate chapters covering the 16th through 20th centuries, with headings that range from "the presentation of self" to "breaking taboos," and comments called "drawing breath." For example, of the late 1960s Borzello writes, "These were the glory days of feminist art, when indignation fueled the artists and everything seemed possible." To demonstrate, she discusses Louise Bourgeois's "Torso/Self Portrait," c.1963-64, and Sylvia Sleigh's "Philip Golub Reclining," 1971. A landmark work; essential for all academic and large public libraries.?Mary Hamel-Schwulst, Towson Univ., MD

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From Kirkus Reviews

Women artists have been painting self-portraits since the 12th century but, notes Borzello, a specialist in the social history of art, the genre has received surprisingly little attention. Her thorough, lucid study goes a long way toward providing a remedy for that oversight. Women artists have painted themselves for the same reasons as male artists--to call attention to their skills, to emulate the self-portraits of past masters, to express elements not appropriate to other kinds of subject matter, such as wit or a sharp sense of social criticism, and to boldly announce particular beliefs about art. But they have also done so for some unique reasons: to claim a place among serious artists, to explore the often peculiar status of women in Western societies, and to examine the issue of feminine beauty. Borzello traces women's self-portraits across eight centuries, deftly weaving together art and social history, the biographies of many women artists, and a wide selection of paintings, prints, and photographs by women. While some of the pieces are primarily of historical interest, there are some stunning works here, including period works by such accomplished painters as Artemisia Gentileschi and Rosalba Carriera and modern works by such little known but talented painters as Zinaida

Serebryakova and Lotte Laserstein, and paintings by such familiar figures as Frida Kahol and Paula Modersohn-Racker. A fascinating monograph, and a particularly useful contribution to both women's studies and art history. -- *Copyright ©1998, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

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