

Self-cognition of the Female Artist

Comparison Between Self-Portrait (1790) by Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun and Self-Portrait (1980) by Alice Neel

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ABSTRACT

By comparing a self-portrait (1790) by Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun and a self-portrait (1980) by Alice Neel, the paper tries to analyze how these two portrait artists demonstrate their self-cognition in their own self-portraits. By means of comparison, such as clothing, character's posture and facial expression, and backdrop of the painting, Vigée Le Brun's work emphasizes her identity as a respectable painter by showing her work for the queen, while Alice Neel focuses on the inner emotion as a female artist. Although Alice Neel's painting style is relatively abstract, she dares to show the real image of her subjects, even if it is ugly in the eyes of the public.

Keywords: *Female artist, Self-portrait, Inner values, Vigée Le Brun, Alice Neel.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Self-portrait is a very special and introspective art form.

Artists make self-portraits in order to see themselves, and in order to do so they must push their emotional expressions and capacities in order to cast a new light on their own image. Artists' self-portraits not only reflect their understanding of self-identity and their place in the society, but also reveal the artists' most intimate style and techniques.

When we study female artists' self-portraits, we will be able to understand the ideas and expressions of their work, and their identity. The portraits also offer details about the time and place they live in, providing rich information for those interested in art history.

In this project we leveraged a comparison technique and analyzed two self-portraits of two female artists, both famous for their portrait work for others, in the hope that we would know more about their identity, their style and technique as artists, and their place in the society.

2. THE SELF-COGNITION OF TWO PORTRAIT ARTISTS

When I read through an art history textbook, it is usually hard to find a female artist in the first half of the book. It seems like the influence of female artists begins to grow continuously from modern art. This is influenced by the change in the inner values female artists. I believe that the self-portrait is one of the most direct ways for an artist to reveal his or her self-cognition, since through an artist's self-portrait, we can see that how they wanted to be seen in others' eyes.

Therefore, I choose a self-portrait from Vigée Le Brun, a prominent French portrait painter in the late 18th century [1], and a self-portrait of Alice Neel, an American artist in the twentieth century [2], to compare the inner values of these two female artists who were a century away from each other. In this analysis, we try to figure out how they demonstrated the self-cognition in their paintings.

Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun is a prominent French artist who is known for her portraits for the Queen. After leaving France, she worked in Italy, Austria, and Russia for a few years and continued creating portraits for the high class people there. In her life she has made over 660 portraits, and studying her self-portrait is especially interesting.

Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun was raised in a family with an artistic atmosphere and started painting when she was very young. She has always been a member of the establishment, first working for royal members in France and later working for kings in Italy, Vienna and Russia. The female figures in her painting are often depicted as elegant, delightful, sexy and feministic.

Alice Neel is an American artist famous for her portraits for friends, families, lovers, poets, other artists and strangers. She was raised in a typical American middle class family and studied in an all-female art school in Philadelphia. She shows her sensitivity towards emotion and relationship through innovative usage of color and lines.

Alice Neel made a lot of female nude portraits. They often are anonymous, vulnerable women figures. She refuses to paint her subjects as realistic figures and choses to instead focus on the emotional state. Her female perspective reflects her thinking about the female identity in an unequal world dominated by male influence. This is a kind of modern thinking not reflected in the time of Vigée Le Brun. She was seen as one of the greatest portrait artists in the U.S. because she was able to push boundaries, challenge status quo, and her work make people think about conventional thinking like beauty, gender, and relationships.



Figure 1 Self-Portrait (1790) by Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun



Figure 2 Self-Portrait (1980) by Alice Neel

The self-portrait of Vigée Le Brun was done in 1790 in France, when she was 35 years old. The self-portrait of Alice Neel was done in 1980 in the U.S. when she was eighty years old.

To illustrate the difference, the following analysis examines the two self-portraits based on the differences in clothing, the props, the postures, facial expressions and the relationship between the background and the figure in the paintings.

We already know enough about the two artists' lives. Born in different times and locations, they have very little in common. Their painting style is also very distinctive. This information will help us see the differences in the art work.

3. THE CLOTHING IN THE SELF- PORTRAITS

The first impression one get from a self-portrait is usually the clothing. These two paintings could not be further different from each other. The clothing of the character can be usually seen as a reflection of her social position.

In Vigée Le Brun's Self-Portrait, she wears a dark long dress, and the white ruffled collar echoes the white turban she is wearing. The color of the dark dress shows the heaviness and the opacity of the black silk, which contrasts with the loose and flowing white fabrics. The bright red color behind the black dress highlights the figure. Everything was in fine quality.

This is in line with the fashion culture of the French noblesse at that period, which reflects that the figure in the painting has a high status in society. In fact, Vigée Le Brun enjoyed a high status and was one of the most popular portraitists of her time. If a modern artist makes such a self-portrait, everyone would use the word pretentious. But for Vigée Le Brun's time, it was simply a reflection of her reality.

This contradicts with Self-Portrait by Alice Neel in which she depicts herself as a nude figure. Alice Neel was known for using the body as fragments in her artwork.[3] Here, instead of being a sex symbol, the nude body here is more likely to be her manifestation of getting rid of the shell frame established by society. Alice Neel didn't care about the view of the public, so she didn't want to emphasize the social status of the figure by putting herself in elegant and luxurious clothing in her self-portrait. Therefore, from the aspect of clothing and trimming, Vigée Le Brun's work calls attention to her dignity and high social status, while Alice Neel's work intends to let the viewers ignore the labels that society put on her.

4. THE SELF IDENTITY REFLECTED IN THE SELF-PORTRAITS

A close look at the props in the painting, we can discover a lot of hidden information. For example, by evaluating the props in the painting, we can see their different sources of receiving approval as an artist.

Vigée Le Brun depicted herself as a successful and respectable artist in her self-portrait. She painted herself with a palette and some paintbrushes in hand, in front of a canvas on which she was painting the portrait of the queen. This demonstrates the figure's prestige and ability to paint for the royal family of France [4], and shows that she was a talented painter at that time. This indicates that, in her perception, her talent as an artist needs to be testified by the royal client she painted.

In Alice Neel's Self-Portrait, she depicted herself as a woman who holds a paintbrush on the right hand, and a white duster cloth on the other hand, without showing any canvas or artwork. Thus, we only can get the message that she might be painting. This is also in line with her reputation as an abstract painter. [5] Instead of getting clues from her painted artworks, the viewers focus on her identity as an artist.

As the result, Vigée Le Brun's work emphasizes her identity as a respectable painter by showing her painting of the queen, while Alice Neel only wanted to emphasize that she is an artist. This is because of the situation that in the period of Vigée Le Brun, painters needed to work for others, and in the period of Alice Neel, artists mostly worked for themselves.

5. THE POSTURES AND THE FACIAL EXPRESSIONS IN THE SELF-PORTRAITS

Moreover, from the postures and the facial expressions of the figures, we can compare the characteristics that the two artists wanted to demonstrate.

Vigée Le Brun depicted herself as a young, beautiful, and snappy woman who worked for the

traditional royal family. Vigée Le Brun idealized her youth and beauty by depicting her skin as smooth, flawless, and pure white, like an infant's skin, even though at the time of the painting she was a mature woman. [6] At the same time, her energy as a bright young painter can be shown from two aspects: color and posture.

First, the saturated red of her belt forms an apparent contrast with the darkness of her dress and the brown background of the painting, implying her vividness under solemnity.

Besides, her action of holding the paintbrush not only indicates her occupation but also highlights her consciousness of holding the power to paint like a woman.

Also, she faces directly to the viewers, showing her confidence, but at the same time, her line of sight doesn't focus, in line with the humbleness and the weakness that society required of women at that time.

Alice Neel depicted herself as an elder woman with sagging breasts and flabby flesh. She was eighty years old when she created this painting, almost towards the end of her life. In terms of body and appearance, she is significantly more realistic, conforming to her real body in her old age without any idealizing and beautifying.

Besides, she especially painted more strokes in her right arm, showing her muscle lines in that arm of holding the brush. Like Vigée Le Brun, this also emphasizes Neel's consciousness about power as an artist. The paintbrush is their weapon and the symbol of their power.[7]

Furthermore, in terms of facial expression, her mouth drops down and her eyes are focused, showing that she is a serious elder woman who is not easy to please.

To sum up, Vigée Le Brun showed her characteristic of a young, pretty, and vivid woman with the idealization of her appearance. Conversely, although Alice Neel had a more abstract style of painting, she depicted the reality of her sagging body at her age. And at the same time, both of the artists demonstrated their consciousness of the power of an artist by emphasizing their hands of holding the paintbrush.

6. THE BACKDROPS IN THE SELF-PORTRAITS

Finally, the backgrounds of these two paintings give the self-portraits a different theme and color. The treatment also reflected the styles that these artists are known for and the way they see themselves.

In Vigée Le Brun's self-portrait, the background has a graduation: the dark parts render the surroundings of the picture, and the bright parts surround the characters,

helping people to focus on the characters. Secondly, Vigée Le Brun modeled the figure to the shadows of the characters, and the changes in the depth of the shadows also confirmed the volume and validity of the figure. This shows that in her self-portrait, the background plays a role in highlighting and validating the character.

In Alice Neel's Self-Portrait, the shadow only appeared on the yellow ground, not on the green ground, showing that Neel painted the shadow at will. She didn't need the shadow to highlight her character, instead, she used the line to outline the contour of the figure. Besides, there are only three color fields (blue, yellow and green) in the background, and these color fields have only surrounded the figure of Neel, which means that the margins of the painting are left blank. In Neel's work, the background is not for emphasizing the being of the figure, but is just existing for the figure. The relationship between the figure and the background is opposite in these two paintings, highlighting the self-hood of Alice Neel.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Self-Portrait (1790) by Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun depicted the artists as a courageous and pioneering in her eagerness to prove that she was a successful and respected woman painter at a time when few women entered the painting industry. But at the same time, she did not get rid of the shackles that society put on her, and she was content to assimilate into the existing social background.

In Self-Portrait (1980) by Alice Neel, Neel made an expression of female body's authenticity that was far ahead of its time. Although her painting style is relatively abstract, she dared to show the real image of her subjects, even if it is ugly in the eyes of the public.

Self-portraits contain a lot of information and meaning. In addition of being a piece of creative expression by the artist, they are best evidence of the artists' values, emotions, and self-identities. These are motifs that can help us understand the artists and their work in a more profound way. They also demonstrate the evolution of art and how society has changed over time.

Female artists in different eras have different ways of advancing. Perhaps today's pioneers will become tomorrow's conservative groups. Therefore, artists' thoughts should always race with society and history.

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