

Through The Looking Glass

Whatever your view on selfies, there's no denying they've become ingrained in our world narrative. A new exhibition, ***From Selfie To Self-Expression***, goes beyond the surface image to explore the link between modern selfie culture and art history

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What is art? A question posed by Leo Tolstoy in 1897 and one that remains impossible to answer in any finite way. Wherever you stand on the subject, though, most of us would agree that the work of the old masters – Van Gogh, Rembrandt, Velázquez et al – is worthy of the title. Each of these artists had a particular affinity for self-portraiture; Rembrandt painted, drew and etched close to 80 versions of his own image, effectively documenting his life through his chosen media. Fast-forward a few hundred years and add in a bit of modern technology, and this kind of self-reflection is no longer the preserve of a gifted few – anyone with a smartphone is capable of capturing their likeness, frame by frame, and broadcasting it to the world. So does that make Kim Kardashian an artist, the Frida Kahlo of a new age? It's an ideological (if provocative) leap explored in a new exhibition at London's Saatchi Gallery, *From Selfie To Self-Expression*.

Explains Nigel Hurst, the gallery's CEO, "The slideshow of a teenager trying out various poses can by no means be compared to the skill and

rigour of Van Gogh's self-portraits, but the art world cannot ignore the selfie phenomenon. Whether it's an excited fan meeting a celebrity on the red carpet, or a traveller showing the backdrop of their latest adventure, the selfie is how many choose to document their lives."

Celebrity and adventure are both major players in the selfie universe, and form a key pillar of the exhibition – the former through images of everyone from Kardashian, who's turned the act into a million-dollar business, to Hillary Clinton, who made its empowering potential a cornerstone of her presidential campaign; the latter through so-called extreme selfies epitomised by astronaut Tim Peake's famous shot taken thousands of miles above Earth. "They all provide arresting images of our time," says Hurst – as do the parallel stars of the exhibition, who range from the aforementioned masters to more contemporary image-makers like Cindy Sherman, Tracey Emin and Gavin Turk.

As you wander the gallery's halls – themselves no strangers to controversy – the exhibition explores the evolution of self-portraiture, from iconic





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A selfie – 1920s style
From far left: Vincent Van Gogh's *Self-Portrait With Bandaged Ear*, from The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London; Frida Kahlo's *Self-Portrait With Thorn Necklace And Hummingbird*, courtesy of Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust



Clockwise from top left:
George Harrison's *Taj Mahal Self-Portrait*; Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Still #32*, courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures New York; Barbara Kinney's *Hillary For America*; Daniel Rozin's *Mirror No 12*

when you consider the calibre of the judging panel: “Tracey Emin is known for her autobiographical and confessional artwork that spans a number of artistic mediums,” he explains, “Juergen Teller is renowned for his intimate and playful take on celebrity and fashion photography, Idris Khan uses photographic processes to explore his own social and religious upbringing, and Juno Calypso’s surreal projection of femininity in her alter ego Joyce highlights some of the absurd constructs associated with womanhood.”

The world’s first exhibition exploring the history of the selfie – a form of expression that is oft derided but

nonetheless inescapable – is certainly ambitious in its scope, but it marks an important crossroads in the way we view, document and communicate with our world. “We hope,” says Hurst, “by positioning everyday selfies alongside celebrated artworks to inspire debate about selfies and how we choose to express ourselves. We also hope that visitors will realise the potential of their smartphone as an artistic tool, and encourage them to photograph their daily lives with even more creative vigour and individuality.” *From Selfie To Self-Expression, in partnership with Huawei, is at London’s Saatchi Gallery until 30 May; saatchigallery.com/selfie*

paintings like Van Gogh’s *Self-Portrait With Bandaged Ear* (produced shortly after the world’s most famous act of self-mutilation) and Frida Kahlo’s richly symbolic (and self-therapeutic) *Self-Portrait With Thorn Necklace And Hummingbird*, right through to Benedict Cumberbatch’s 2014 Oscars photobomb, via the era-defining fisheye portraits of George Harrison and feminist reflections of Juno Calypso.

Of course, admits Hurst, “Selfies aren’t self-portraiture in the way that a Rembrandt self-portrait is. He seems to be trying to get to the bottom of what makes him a human being, how he shares his common humanity and what’s unique about his character. Most selfies are constructs, more to do with how we want the world to see us than how we really are.” Constructs they may be, but they’re also the most popular form of self-expression of our time – over a million selfies are taken every day, and they’re an important thread in the fabric of our shared global experience. “From fine art to news reportage, they have emphatically become one of the most significant expansionist forms of visual expression,” says Hurst.

Such a shift has only been made possible by the new and increasingly powerful documentary tools at our disposal. “In the 16th century it was only artists that had the tools to create self-portraits,” explains Hurst. Now, more than two billion people around

the world own smartphones – a number that’s set to triple by the year 2020 – and many of those smartphones are capable of producing (and sharing) studio-quality photographs at the tap of a screen. “They’ve become an integral part of how we document our world,” says Hurst, a concept illuminated by another of the exhibition’s pillars, the Young British Photographers – who the gallery hopes will have the same impact as the Young British Artists before them, led by Damien Hirst and championed by Charles Saatchi.

In conjunction with the exhibition’s partner Huawei, makers of the only mobile phone to incorporate dual Leica lens technology, the new P10 (in Hurst’s words, “a photography studio in your pocket”), the gallery commissioned 10 visual artists to capture the world around them using the device. The resultant collection, which forms part of the show, includes works by light-photography pioneer Chris Levine, who produced Queen Elizabeth II’s holographic Diamond Jubilee portrait, Jonny Briggs, whose images explore the constructed reality of the family, and acclaimed London street photographer Matt Stuart.

The final pillar of the exhibition is a selection of 10 works shortlisted from 14,000 entrants to the gallery’s #SaatchiSelfie competition, the range, diversity and flair of which exceeded the expectations of everyone involved, says Hurst. No mean feat

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