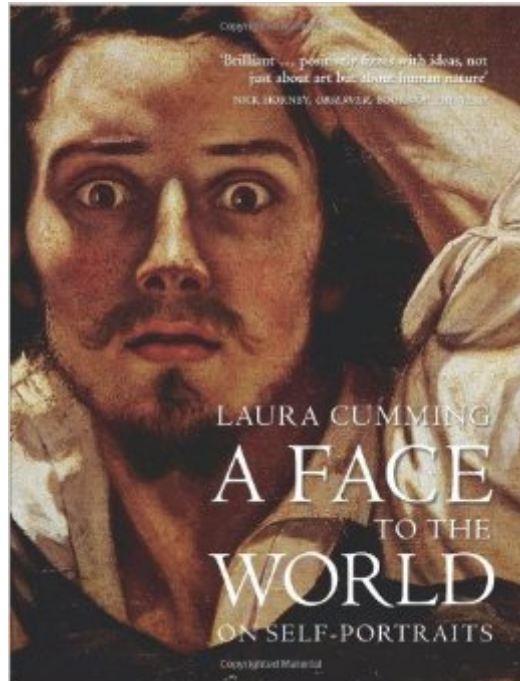


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# A Face To The World: On Self-Portraits



## Synopsis

Focusing on the art of self-portraiture, this effortlessly engaging exploration of the lives of artists sheds fascinating light on some of the most extraordinary portraits in art history. Self-portraits catch your eye. They seem to do it deliberately. Walk into any art gallery and they draw attention to themselves. Come across them in the world's museums and you get a strange shock of recognition, rather like glimpsing your own reflection. For in picturing themselves artists reveal something far deeper than their own physical looks: the truth about how they hope to be viewed by the world, and how they wish to see themselves. In this beautifully written and lavishly illustrated book, Laura Cumming, art critic of the Observer, investigates the drama of the self-portrait, from Durer, Rembrandt and Velazquez to Munch, Picasso, Warhol and the present day. She considers how and why self-portraits look as they do and what they reveal about the artist's innermost sense of self -- as well as the curious ways in which they may imitate our behaviour in real life. Drawing on art, literature, history, philosophy and biography to examine the creative process in an entirely fresh way, Cumming offers a riveting insight into the intimate truths and elaborate fictions of self-portraiture and the lives of those who practise it. A work of remarkable depth, scope and power, this is a book for anyone who has ever wondered about the strange dichotomy between the innermost self and the self we choose to present for posterity -- our face to the world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I have always been fascinated by self-portraits, and so was delighted by the appearance of this book. Laura Cumming is a minute observer: her descriptions of the paintings have alerted me to many details of paintings of which I had previously been unaware. How many viewers of Van Eyck's

Van der Paele Madonna, for example, would have noticed the portrait of (presumably) the artist in the tiny reflection on the armour of the attendant St George? The book has a detail of this passage in the painting, but the matt illustration is so muddy that it is completely useless and I had to go to Google Images to find a more readable version of it. The illustrations are the weak part of the book, and some are really poor, for you cannot see many of the details to which the author refers: the glove which Sofonisba Anguissola is carrying or the important key tucked into the belt of Velasquez in Las Meninas; nor can you make out the cat and the dog at the bottom of Gump's self-portrait. In the reproduction of Carracci's, you can just about make out the dog, but not 'the spectral cat'. The illustration of Kahlo's 'The Wounded Deer' is cropped so that the word 'Carma', referred to in the text, is lost. Also, increasingly so as the book proceeds, Cumming discusses a number of self-portraits by lesser-known artists, which are not illustrated at all (and are not available on Google Images either); and there are some paintings which she describes without giving their titles, so those cannot be looked up on Google anyway. That's all more than a little frustrating. But the text is immensely rewarding.

Laura Cumming, in addition to being the art critic of the distinguished British journal *The Observer*, is a learned communicator and extraordinary writer. Given that she has been influential in the grace of productions offered by the Tate Museum while at the same time being able to be arts producer and presenter for BBC, she comes by her depth of knowledge about the visual arts naturally - and at the same time communicates in a tone not dissimilar to that of Alistair Cooke of *Masterpiece Theater* fame. All of these assets she bestows on the reader of this amazingly original book, *FACE TO THE WORLD: ON SELF-PORTRAITS*. Not content to simply list the artists of history and of now who shared their own perceptions of themselves with self-portraits, Cumming instead includes the vision, in her words, 'For all a self-portrait can ever be is the illusion of the artist's self. It can never be a substitute, an embodiment, the last word or the whole summation, and yet the artist paints, even as he doubts, uncertain whether anything of himself will ever get through..... Now I am here - and yet I am not.' Her dialogue with the reader is infectious as she explores famous as well as not so famous artists who deigned to leave us 'self-portraits' - the ultimate evidence of vulnerability. Cumming divides her book into chapters of ideas rather than episodes delivered chronologically. The names of her chapters describe the contents of each well: *Secrets; Eyes; Dürer* (whose image serves as the cover of this book); *Motive, Means and Opportunity; Rembrandt; Behind the Scenes; Velázquez; Mirrors; Performance; Stage Fright; Loners; Egotists; Victims; Pioneers; Falling Apart; and Farewells.*

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