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The significance of household-name *Impressionists* such as Monet and Pissaro are still known to this day, so it is important to look at the works that followed to combat the principles of this 19th-century trend. Impressionism and Post-Impressionism are two sides of the same artistic coin, of which they have a high contrast and clear difference when put side by side. This is most obvious in the form of portraiture, a type of art that is extremely personal to both the creator and the viewer. Each experience of viewing a piece is different for each viewer, due to the conditions in which it is perceived.

Theorist John Berger states “As you look at them now on your screen, your wallpaper is round them […] At this same moment, they are on many other screens, surrounded by different objects […] different sounds.” (*Berger*, 1972). This essay aims to showcase the way in which portraiture has adapted itself over time, and how the Post-Impressionist scene aided in this.

According to etymology, ‘portraiture’ comes from the mid-16th century French word ‘portraict’, meaning to portray. However, the specific origins of this style of technique are unclear. It is believed to have been present during the Han Dynasty (189AD-220AD) when Han artists would utilise surfaces such as walls, pillars and boxes in order to paint important figures in Han society (World History Encyclopedia, 2017). However, it may be

possible that portraiture was established even before this time, due to the construction of Ancient Egyptian sculptures over 5000 years ago (Fig. 1), (Tate, n.d.).

Fig. 1: Unknown author (2350s BCE) *Raherka and Meresankh*

Portraits transcend the form they take in order to showcase to the viewer a key aspect about the subject: whether that be their wealth, power or beauty as a few examples. This element of emphasis was required to a degree, as portraying the exact image of a subject was dismissed extensively.

The opinion on portraiture has risen and fallen throughout history and cultures. According to Michelangelo specifically, ‘there were not enough beautiful models’ to paint (*West*, 2004, p. 12), extending the idea of it being useless unless a narrative can be

portrayed (astounding beauty, for instance). Over time, however, this view shifted from producing a physical recreation of the subject to focusing more on the semiotics within the piece. Symbolism first started arising in the mid-1880s (Met Museum, 2007), around the time that Post-Impressionism began taking stride within artist communities. This combined with the main principles of Post-Impressionism (mainly using symbolism to construct these images) allowed for a massive change in perspective on the best type of portraiture.

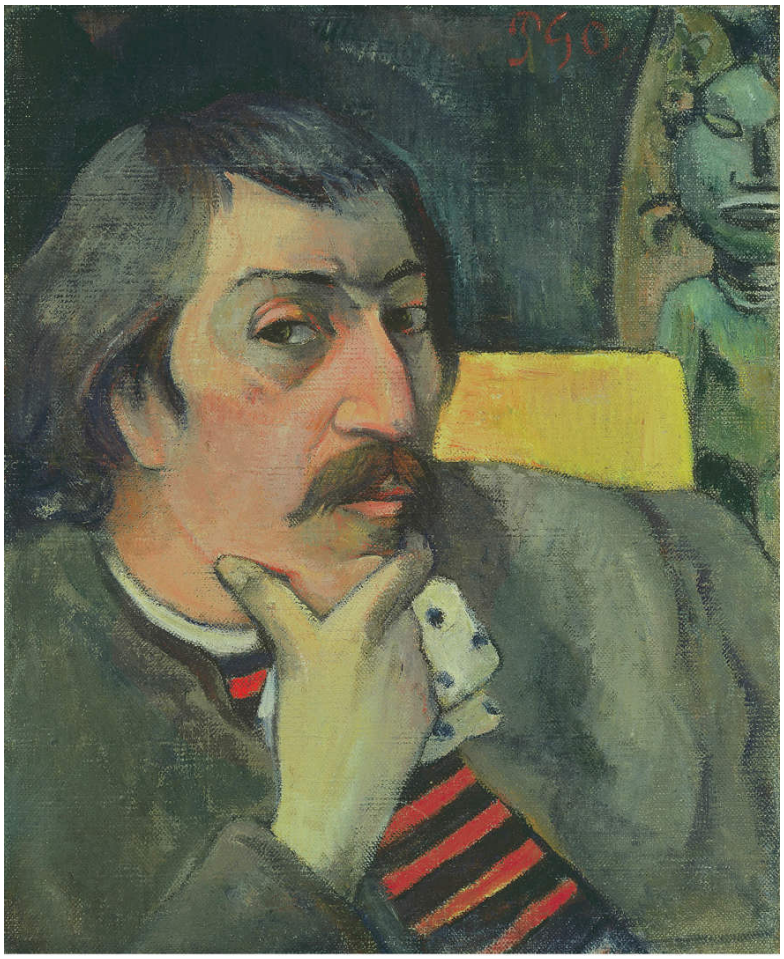

Fig. 2: Gaugin (1893), *Portrait of the Artist with the Idol*

As an example of this, the Post-Impressionist painting above (Fig. 2) allows us to see inside the artist's head, through his decisions of the pose to paint, the perspective to use and what objects to include in the background of the image. Through this, we can assume there is supposed to be an emphasis on the idol and begin to theorise about its importance to Gaugin.

Portraiture also encompasses the theme of identity within all of its works (*West*, 2004). This is a universal concept, as these pieces always show a person, their expression, how they are dressed and the area surrounding them. This can allow the viewer to lead to discussions about the mood of the piece or the greater emotions of the subject. This allows for a great introspective into the minds of the person who created the piece.

Van Gogh’s portraiture is a prime example of how identity can be conveyed through the mood portrayed by a piece of artwork. The timeline of his portraits is a staple in understanding his mental health - such as the highs, lows and his decline as he got older. His identity is shown through the variety of self-portraits constructed over his art career.

According to *Berger* (1972), “Paintings lend themselves to easy manipulation,” due to the fact that the context of the time has been long lost. This means that the original meaning is no longer truly clear, encouraging the viewer to be wary of how they interpret material such as paintings, sculptures and photography. This statement emphasises the

importance of using what is known of the time-frame to complete educated guesses on the meaning of a piece.

Fig. 3: Van Gogh (1889), *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*

This survived self-portrait by Van Gogh displays one of over thirty paintings of the artist (Van Gogh Museum, n.d.). Before his unfortunate decline, Van Gogh was staying with his brother - Theo - in Paris whom he relied on to help further his art career (*Van Gogh et al,* 2002), to which he began to show struggles with his mental health. This led to the infamous removal of his ear during a particular episode in December 1888 (Van Gogh Museum, n.d.). After his admission and discharge from the hospital Van Gogh would

express guilt at his brother's distress over his breakdown; in a letter dated January 1889 he wrote: 'I hope I have just had simply an artist's freak […] So please do quite deliberately forget your unhappy journey and my illness…'. (*Van Gogh et al,* 2002, p. 392)

Following his breakdown, Van Gogh used this newfound trauma to throw himself into his work, continuing to produce artwork to distract himself from his struggle and assure close friends and family that he was managing. This self-portrait displays Van Gogh's mental crisis clearly, from the clear focus put on his bandaged ear (both visually and from the title of the piece) and the bold choice of colour. This vibrant red is not present in any other known self-portrait, so it appears clear that this is an overcompensation for Van Gogh to appear mentally sound by doing something unlike his previous work, making this appear instead as a cry for help.

Despite his efforts, family and friends continued to worry for him and Van Gogh continued to struggle with his illness. This unfortunately would lead to his demise, as in 1890 Van Gogh passed away (Van Gogh Museum, n.d.).

Van Gogh is one of many Post-Impressionist artists who made their own splash in the history of art, though there are plenty of others whose work led the Post-Impressionism movement. Between the late-19th and early-20th Century, the scene was dominated by independent artists who rejected the simplistic ideals of Impressionism, choosing

instead to follow their own ideals and ignore the praise of this style of creation (*Brodskaïa*, 2014).

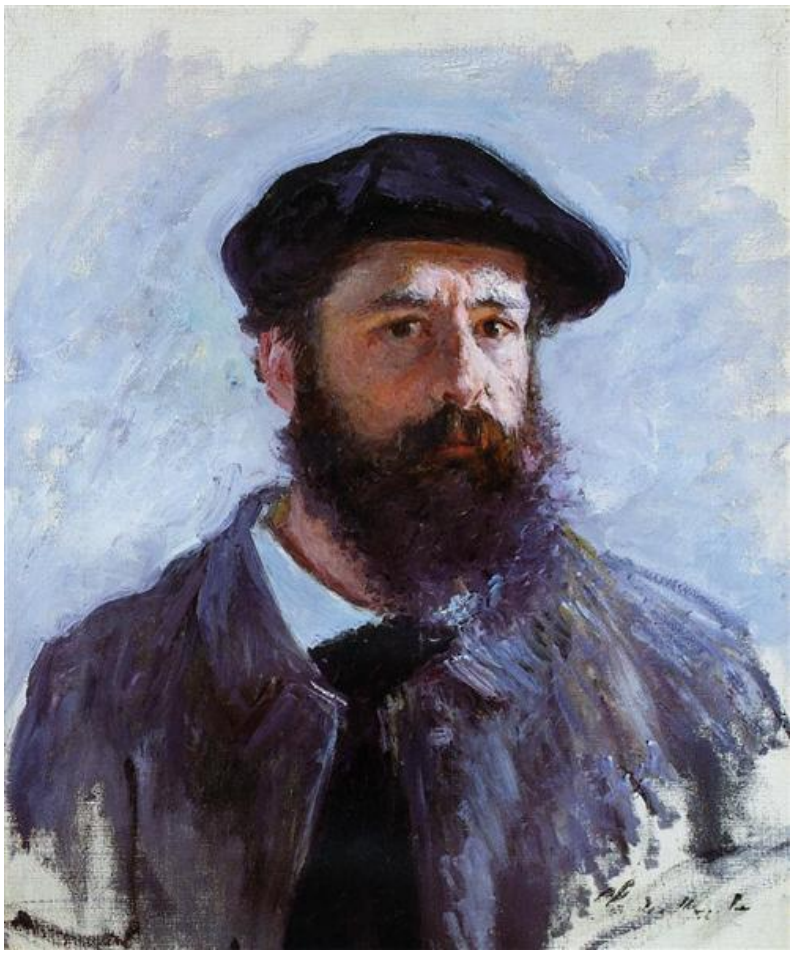

Fig. 4: Monet (1886), *Self-Portrait with a Beret*

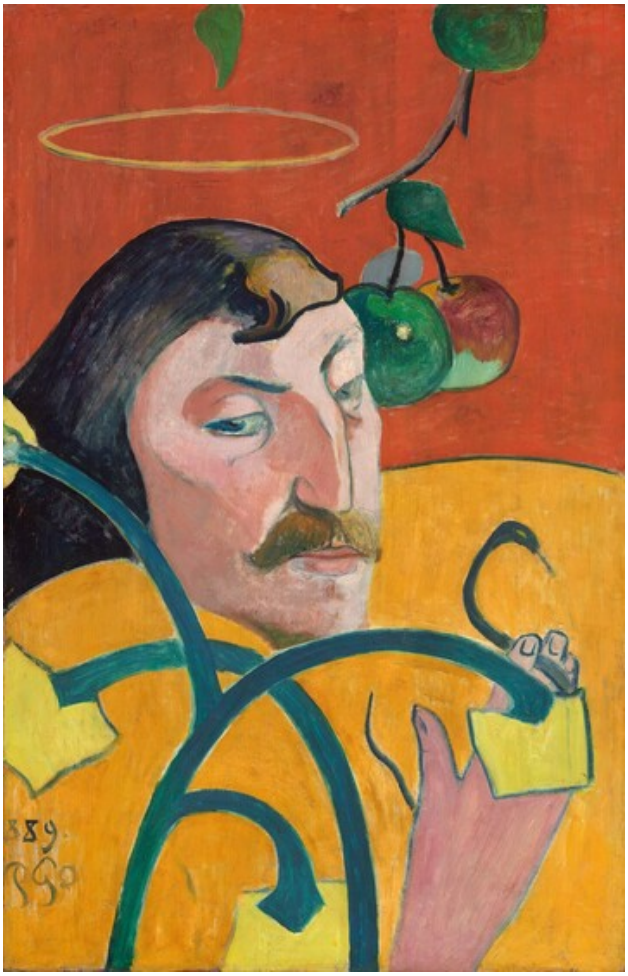

Fig. 5: Gauguin (1889), *Self-Portrait with Halo and Snake*

There is a stark contrast in style between these two movements – Fig. 4 being that of an Impressionist portrait versus Fig. 5 demonstrating a Post-Impressionistic style. The dissimilarity displays how the Post-Impressionists' view of art is a lot looser and more abstract than that of the era before them. The artists within this time frame rejected the bold but simple strides of the Impressionists and were able to build opposition to this using vibrant colours, distorted proportions and (usually) religious symbolism. This is illustrated by the religious symbols of the forbidden fruit, snake and halo within Fig. 5.

Grouped together under their joint disdain, these artists focused primarily on opposing the legacy that the Impressionists built. At the time, however, these artists were not necessarily aware of each other (Met Museum, 2004). While risky, the style of Post-Impressionism within portraiture sought to put the focus back on the subject and to inject the element of identity back into the artwork. Whether this be by use of colour, objects, facial expressions or other features of the piece, the Post-Impressionists felt it necessary to utilise these components to combat what they felt was a dissipation of the self. It is no secret that Impressionist artworks consisted of realistic lighting, colours and subject matter, as clearly shown in Fig. 4, which shows even more clearly the intentions of the Post-Impressionists. Understanding these principles is crucial in order to grasp the impact of portraiture as a topic.

Portraiture has assumed a variety of forms, meanings and feelings over the course of history. From creating perfect replicas of a person to describing their identity through religious means, it is clear that this practice has transcended its original meaning.

Van Gogh's discovery of himself and his mental health through his portraiture has allowed the viewer to be able to understand how this form of illness can impact identity, which is crucial when discussing Post-Impressionist artists in particular. Despite his untimely death, Van Gogh is still pedalled as a pioneer of Post-Impressionism to this day, portraying the impact of his work perfectly. Post-Impressionism as a movement was largely impactful, with work from this era showcasing a dramatic change in the way

portraiture was viewed. The swaying in meaning over such a short time period shows how revolutionary this trend was, with artwork from this era increasing in value per year.

Post-Impressionism aided the way in which portraiture adapted itself by infusing it with new life, and re-establishing the roots of identity that made it so interesting in the first place. Due to the popularity of Post-Impressionism, this meaning has not faded, and hopefully will continue to not in years to come.

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