The Portrait: Picturing Oneself in the World

Van James
Hawai'i
USA

So God made man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them. –Genesis, 2:27

If the human being is made in the image of God, then it stands to reason that a portrait of a person reveals not only a physical appearance but something of the hidden spiritual essence, something of the divine spark in the person portrayed. Therefore, having one's portrait painted may lead to self-knowledge and self-transformation. Creating a self-portrait may be yet a more effective means to self-understanding and soul metamorphosis.

Every artistic expression is a kind of self-portrait. Every time we do something in the world we express a *picture* of our self. Waldorf students, daily active in the arts, create countless self-portraits in their drawings of houses, their landscape paintings, essays, poems, and dramatic presentations. Even solving math problems and playing games portrays the student through that activity. A child's every creation is a snapshot of her nature and character and an indicator of her stage of development. Good teachers can discern disposition and development by means of the work their students produce.

Besides this, from the kindergarten and early grades, children in a Waldorf school are encouraged to draw the human form. Eventually they do portraits and self-portraits in the visual arts. This work, an intrinsic part of the Waldorf art curriculum, is not just an exercise in observation and training in artistic technique but also an opportunity for self-contemplation, self-comprehension, and self-realization. Portraiture can be an important part of a child's healthy development and process of self-discovery.

The Portrait in History

Images of pharaohs, kings, deceased ancestors, and saints were created through the ages, but usually the entire figure was depicted. The Romans first emphasized the facial portrait with the sculpted bust that captured only the person's head and shoulders. Often such busts were placed on pedestals. Although full-length portraits are not uncommon today, both in painting and in sculpture, we generally understand the word portrait to mean the image of a person's face. The word "portrait" originally meant an image of any natural or man made object, be it flower, rock, table, or animal. Beginning in the 15th century, and most especially since the 17th century, the term portrait referred to the image of a human being.

Fig. 1. Albrecht Dürer did his first self-portrait as a teenager. This silverpoint rendering, done on a specially prepared paper that does not allow erasing, was done in 1484 when the artist was thirteen years old. It is Dürer's first known work and the first known self-portrait in European art. This example was done by a ninth grade (class 9) Waldorf student.

The facial portrait became particularly significant during the Renaissance. Leonardo (1452-1519), Raphael (1483-1520), Michelangelo (1475-1564), and other great

Renaissance masters created portraits of contemporaries and established the tradition of self-portraiture. The Northern Renaissance artist, Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), did several penetrating self-studies over the course of his life (fig. 1). His pictorial self-examination set the standard for European self-portraiture in his time. This was the dawn of the scientific age. A new consciousness, which included an increased sense of the importance of the individual, used the self-portrait as a vehicle for self-reflection.

Nearly two centuries later, Rembrandt followed this theme of self-portrayal and used himself as a model for experimenting with light, dark, and the earthy Dutch palette of colors. At the same time he posed the simple and ultimate human question: "Who am I?" Rembrandt created more self-portraits than any other artist before him, about one hundred, and provided an example of the inwardly searching, morally striving human being (fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Rembrandt, a master of the effects of light and dark in painting, carried out repeated self-portraits as black and white etchings and as oil paintings on canvas. This watercolor rendering of Rembrandt's work is done by a class ten Waldorf student.

At the end of the 19th century, Vincent van Gogh, the post-impressionist artist, painted a number of self-portraits in the last few years of his life. He undertook an intense and desperate self-search to break through the veil of appearances in a quest for the deeper meaning of life (fig. 3).

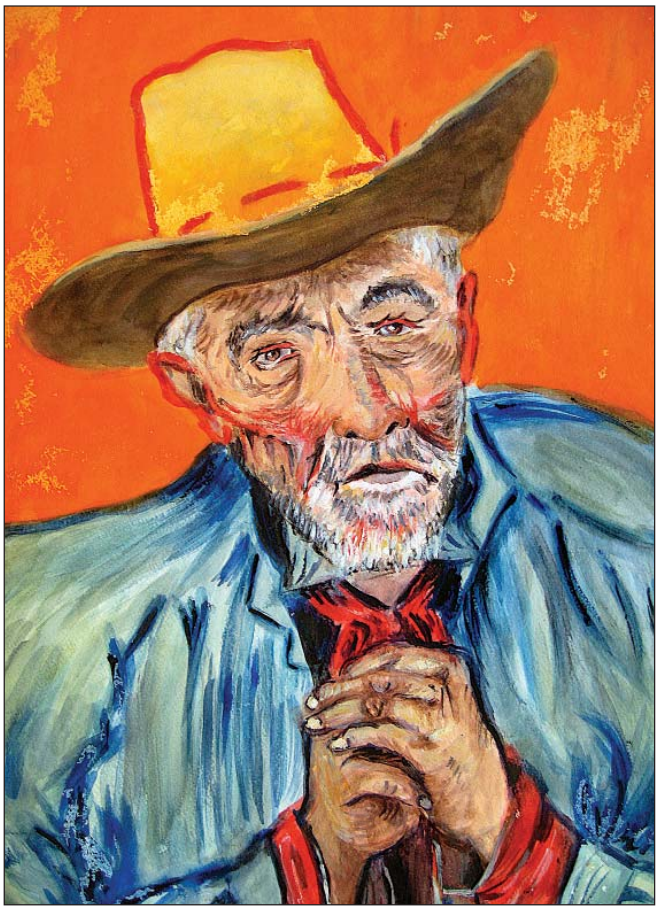

Fig. 3. This self-portrait of Vincent van Gogh was recreated in watercolor by a class eleven Waldorf student.

The portrait and self-portrait continue to be important, used by modern (fig.4) and contemporary artists today as a means of exploring the deep mystery of the human being. Although generally a very private and personal theme, the self-portrait actually reveals aspects of the universal search for self-knowledge and is therefore an area of art that has far-reaching appeal.

The Childhood Portrait

Children seek, in a natural and unselfconscious manner, to create their own portraits throughout their formative years. When the young child first discovers a crayon is not for eating but for making marks on tables, walls and even on paper, she begins to draw— around the age of one-and-a-half or two years old. She first produces a

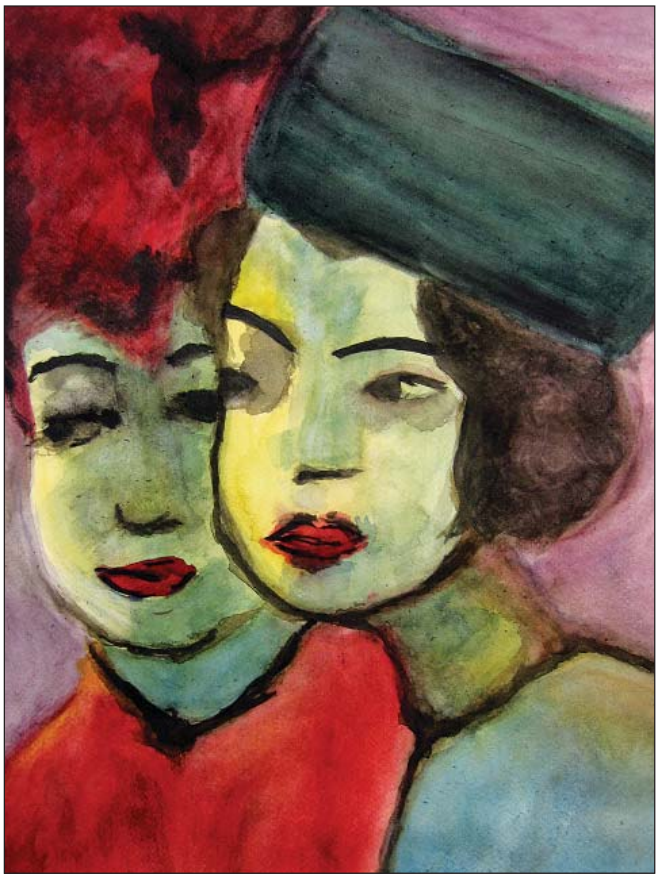

Fig. 4. Portraiture is a regular theme for the modern and contemporary artist; here is a double portrait after Emil Nolde, by a class eleven student. Class eleven students meet themselves in a special way through colorful, Expressionistic self-portraits.

combination of looping swirls and back-and-forth zigzag markings, referred to, fondly, as scribbles. These circular and straight line drawings become more controlled and specific, culminating in concentric circles, star forms, and circle-and-cross motifs around the age of three years (fig. 5).

Usually, by age three or four, human figures begin to appear as a further evolution of the circle-and-cross drawings. The Tree Man, Happy Face, and Ladder Person are often self-portraits of the child-artist even when they are said to be someone else. The creative imagination of each child is directly linked to her own growth processes. One sees the strength of the child's surging will forces in the Tree Man, the polarity between the head and the limbs in the Happy Face and, in the Ladder Person, the formation of the spinal column and the activity of the nerves and the sense organs.

Fig. 5. The stages of development in children's drawings, beginning around the age of two, show the gradual control over curved and straight scribbles, the closing of the circle and the crossing of the star, leading eventually to the forming of human figures; all of which are self-portraits of the child.

In these first attempts to render the human form the child naturally depicts the processes involved in her own physical development. As the forces that promote growth are freed from the task of forming the physical body they become the impulse for creative imagination in the child and the power of intelligence in the adolescent. These forces are essential to the healthy development of the child and can be cultivated as faculties and capacities. They should not be underestimated or allowed to atrophy.

In the Waldorf kindergarten, children are encouraged to draw simply by being given crayons and paper. No

Fig. 6. Class one chalkboard drawings should be simple, clear and archetypal. They are one of the most important teaching tools for instruction in drawing the human figure, but they support all other classroom subjects as well.

formal lessons or drawing instructions are necessary—no coloring books. The children need to be shown only basic use of materials—how to hold the crayon, for example.

In first grade the teacher helps the children with drawing techniques by means of chalkboard examples. Colorful, blocky forms without outlines, are viewed daily by the children as illustrations of stories told by the teacher and as part of the regular school lessons (fig. 6).

Figures are built up organically, from inside out, by surface areas of color rather than by contour lines that fix the form and that are only later colored-in as an after-thought. The teacher shows the first graders how one can "grow" the picture from a color "seed," gradually arriving at the finished "fruit" form (fig.7).

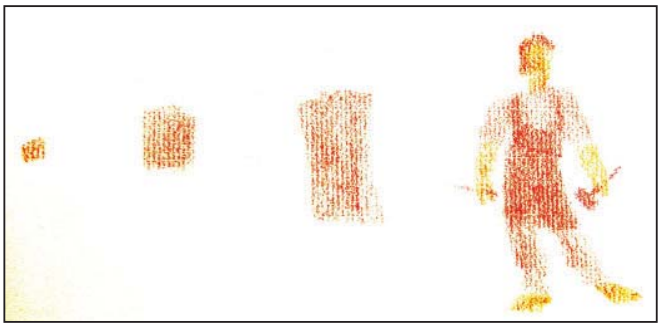

Fig. 7. The most natural way to draw is to "grow" a form from inside out. To build up a drawing from the ground up, so to speak, makes the process just as important as product.

Such a process is truer to the reality of things and has a moral integrity with relation to the object of perception. An outline intellectualizes and separates one from the phenomena, it makes the world into a fixed and finished concept. Outlines finish a form before it has any substance to justify its existence. As Paul Cezanne, the father of modern art, observed, "There are no lines in Nature." The natural philosopher and poet, Johann von Goethe, too, said, "The eye sees no lines, only colored planes in various shades of light and dark."

This surface area approach to creating a drawing is a holistic methodology, whole-to-part, that has important consequences for brain development and thought patterning in the life of the young child. To arrive at a picture of something after going through a process of growth and development that is true to the reality one is depicting has an ethical basis and veracity that contour outline drawing does not possess. This is as true in drawing landscapes, plants and animals, as in drawing people. Coloring books are not used in Waldorf schools because they thwart the child's own imagination by providing a fixed, linear image that someone else has produced. Giving children a blank paper on which to draw gives them creative freedom.

In the early elementary school—grades one through three—it is the full-length portrait of the human being that is important for the child to draw. Here the person is more than just a face! Arms, legs, torso, and head are all part of one whole person. This wholeness has an inside and an outside, a center and a periphery. This means starting drawings from a middle point and drawing outwards. In the case of a human figure, one naturally starts with the center of the body, the heart, and adds the extensions of the head, arms, and legs as appendages and connections to the outside world. The center-to-outside orientation is directly related to the child's own experience of herself: I am related to the world as a point is related to the circumference of a circle. It is also the simplest way to draw and develop a form or figure—from inside to outside.

Around age nine a dramatic change in the child's awareness takes place. She becomes aware of herself as a being separate and disconnected from the world. This makes possible a new approach to representing the human figure. In fourth grade, along with the study of the diversity of the animal kingdom, of fractionalizing numbers, and other subjects that address this new awareness, the child might attempt a first facial portrait, guided by the teacher.

The divisions of the face—where eyes, nose, and mouth are located—may be understood as parts of the whole, i.e. fractions. After guiding the children in creating a toned oval shape on their papers the teacher can show how half way between the top and bottom a guideline for the eyes may be drawn. Quarter divisions indicate the scalp line and bottom of nose, while a further division of one-eighth of the whole shows where the mouth may be placed. Ears are placed in reference to the eyes and nose guidelines, and the neck can begin at the outside corner of the eyes for a female or the bottom of the ear for a strong male portrait. When children are asked to use colors that approximate their own skin, hair, and eye color, the result

is a striking, unselfconscious self-portrait, done without the aid of mirrors or photographs.

The Adolescent Portrait

In class seven, while studying the Renaissance, the portrait work can be presented in the context of the great artists' search for the laws of human proportions. Studies by Leonardo and Dürer can be shown as students work now in a Renaissance style and technique. Both of these artists developed their own detailed proportional models for the human figure. It is important to point out to the students the fact that such systems were only designed as a framework and were never strictly followed by the artists who invented them. After establishing laws of proportion and perspective, these artists abandoned use of these rules in their later artistic work.

Recreating portraits of the Old Masters, just as adolescent apprentices did in workshops five hundred years ago is a time-tested, skill-building approach appropriate for the class seven and up into the high school. Working now with chiaroscuro, the effects of light and shade, the young person is challenged to pay much greater attention to outer details (see fig. 1). The resulting portrait may bring about a deep awakening of soul at this time.

In grades seven, eight, and nine there is a strong emphasis on the polarity of light and dark, scratchboard, and block printing. This is a good time to also experiment with different black and white drawing techniques. In class ten however, a gradual rediscovery of color can be approached with the earth tones of the Dutch palette. Working from Rembrandt portraits is well suited to this age group (see fig. 2). Building up the near-monochrome color scale of Rembrandts' oil paintings through simple watercolor applications of golden yellow, browns, and black, is key to successful results. Painting large, flat surface areas of color, rather than drawing, allows the human face to literally arise out of light, darkness and color. If the students follow their Rembrandt picture with a watercolor self-portrait in the same muted tones, they experience an immediate relation with the historic painting exercises.

In class eleven, after preliminary work with Impressionist, Post-Impressionist (see fig. 3), and Expressionist techniques (see fig. 4), the students can again attempt a self-portrait. This time the emphasis is on subtle color nuances, bright hues mixed by the eye of the viewer rather than on the actual plane of the picture, and on color as expressively charged, visual emotion. The visual drama of such an approach meets the interests and developmental stage of this age group—all the previously mentioned artistic work is done by all of the students.

As a culmination of the high school years, besides the creation self-portrait clay busts (the exact point where this and other artistic projects are done may vary from school to school), oil and acrylic portraits may be a worthwhile endeavour. If elective painting classes are offered in class eleven and twelve other more challenging, self-chosen projects that involve portraiture may engage students.

Picturing Oneself in the World

Even if in later life students don't draw, paint, or sculpt another self-portrait, it is the artistic learning process and the dealing with visual appearance, form, color and composition, during the formative years that can shape the very way they look at the world and see themselves in that world. The art of portraiture, the self-portraiture in particular, is a process of putting oneself into the world and creating oneself in that world. It captures both an outer image and creates an inner substance. The portrait gazes back at us and tells us something of who we are; it shows us things we did not necessarily know before. A moment in time is captured but is then transformed over time. The portrait can be a way of learning what it means to be human and, if we're lucky, realizing something of the divine spark within us.

(First printed in *Renewal*, Fall/Winter 2005)

(with acknowledgement and thanks to Ronald Koetzch, the editor of Renewal).