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Selfie Fashioning and the Self-Portraits of Calligrapher Esther Inglis

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In this blog post, guest blogger Taylor Clement explores the richly complex self-portraits of Esther Inglis.

By Taylor Clement

In 2013, the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* named “selfie” the word of the year and added the noun to the official English vocabulary. Since the rise of the selfie, art historians and media scholars have re-evaluated modes of self-representation, tracing a history of self-portraiture spanning from Dürer to Kardashian. Journalists and bloggers have also drawn comparisons between Renaissance self-portraiture and contemporary selfies. For example, a 2015 article in *The Atlantic* calls Matthäus Schwarz’s *Klaidungsbüchlein* (1520-1560) “the first book of selfies,” and *Bustle*’s “13 Selfie Lessons from Renaissance Portrait Paintings” gives advice to twenty-first-century photographers based on the sixteenth-century stylings of painters like Paolo Veronese and Hans Holbein the Younger. Earlier this year in *Frontiers in Psychology*, Claus-Christian Carbon examined the “Universals” in depicting the self across centuries.

Curators and museum educators on The Getty’s blog *The Iris* and Alli Burness’s *Museum in a Bottle* critique these anachronistic comparisons between selfies and self-portraits, but they mostly discuss paintings on panels or canvas (often by Rembrandt) and neglect artwork in different media, like the paper-and-ink portraits in early modern books. French-Scottish calligrapher Esther Inglis (1571-1624) was one of the first artists in Scotland to create a self-portrait, but she did not paint on panels or canvas. Instead, Inglis drew miniature portraits of herself on paper and tucked them away within the first pages of her handmade manuscript books. During her career as a scribe and bookmaker, Inglis created at least nineteen self-portraits that “authorized” her manuscripts.
Inglis was the child of Huguenot refugees; she was born in London in 1571 shortly before her family relocated to Edinburgh. Her father Nicholas Langlois worked as a French schoolmaster and her mother Marie Presot taught her to write calligraphy. Inglis made gift books on spec, copying French devotional poetry, the Psalms, and proverbs, among other texts in hopes of patronage from wealthy aristocrats and political leaders. Almost all of her self-portraits appear in gift books designed for royal patrons like Queen Elizabeth, King James I, and James’s sons, Prince Henry of Wales and Prince Charles. Her gift-books capitalize on both the private circulation of manuscripts and the novelty of print – two types of early modern social media.

Although Inglis’s drawings and paintings of herself are not selfies, they have more in common with millennial self-representation than one might assume. To understand this connection we have to move beyond assumptions that smartphone selfies are motivated by narcissism. Sure, twenty-first-century selfie photographers do promote themselves, but they also participate in online communities by mimicking others’ digital portraits. Many selfie photographers model their behaviors and self-representations on other photos already in circulation. In other words, a person may create a selfie using the same filters, poses, and/or backgrounds as her favorite celebrities on Instagram and her friends on Snapchat. At its core, the selfie is not so much about individual self-expression as it is about imitation and intertextuality.

Like postmodern selfies, Inglis’s self-portraits are conscious of other writers’ and translators’ presences and poses on the pages of early modern media. Although her work is in manuscript, Inglis’s self-promoting portraits have strong ties to Renaissance print culture where mass-produced portraits in books first appeared. Early modern printers created copperplate engravings or woodblock prints of authors’ or translators’ faces in the sticky, oil-based ink of the press, reproducing these faces again and again, stamping hundreds of books with portraits – some of the earliest “facebook pages,” so to speak. These pictures of authors or translators provided authorial credibility as they peered out at consumers from title pages and front matter of books.

Inglis modeled her own image after printed author portraits, but her drawings are radically different from print in construction and context. First of all, she meticulously designed every portrait by hand, unlike the mass production of portraits stamped into printed books. Second, Inglis did not broadcast her image to the reading public in ways that authors in print did. Instead, she designed her manuscripts for a coterie audience of likeminded readers. In some ways, these portraits have the conversational intimacy that selfies have because of the function of manuscript as a text shared among close friends and acquaintances.[2]

Bibliographers A.H. Scott-Elliot and Elspeth Yeo catalogue four main types of self-portraits that Inglis created: Type I (1599-1602), Type II (1606-1607), Type III (1612-1615), and Type IV (1624). These self-portraits mark subtle changes in her self-presentation over time. Sometimes Inglis mimics print through black and white frontispiece portraits, and other times she uses color to enliven the image, painting her reddish-blonde hair and rosy cheeks onto the page.

Inglis created eight renditions of the Type I portrait, and one of these appears in Le Livre de l’Ecclesiaste [and] Le Cantique de Roy Salomon (1601; Fig. 2), which Inglis dedicated to French poet and humanist Catherine de Parthenay. In the self-portrait, Inglis sits at her table with writing and music books; she holds a pen in her right hand and looks out at the reader. To produce this image, Inglis used a penwork style that mimics the engraver’s burin and framed her portrait with adapted designs from Clément Perret’s Exercitatio Alphabetica
One of Inglis’s Type II portraits can be found in the *Cinquante Octonaires...* (1607; Fig. 4) dedicated to Prince Charles. She depicted herself in a black dress and decorated the frame around her portrait with colorful scrolls, fruit, and animals. A. E. B. Coldiron has shown that additions of animals to translators’ portraits can signify fidelity to the original text; she argues that dogs can symbolize loyalty, while the monkey denotes the translator/printer’s “aping” or imitating the original text through translation.[3] Coldiron uses the example of John Harington’s translation of *Orlando Furioso* (1591), in which the title page frontispiece features an oval-shaped portrait of Harington near the bottom of the page. To the right of Harington’s portrait, an image of a dog rests in the corner. Inglis’s portrait frame also includes a dog below her portrait, but the squirrel in the right corner is a new addition. Inglis depicts the squirrel holding but not consuming an acorn, perhaps indicating her own role as a “collector” of verses. The two parrots that sit above Inglis’s portrait also denote mimicry. Again, Inglis constructs her own self-portrait by imitating and adapting others’ portrait conventions, and perhaps her strategies can be likened to modern trends in which selfie photographers frame their faces with flowers or use the popular deer and dog filters to capture their own likenesses on Snapchat.[4]

The Type III portraits appear in the smaller books in Inglis’s oeuvre, and they present a minimalist approach to self-representation. One of these Type III portraits appears in *The Psalms of David in English* (1612; Fig. 5), a manuscript dedicated to Henry, the Prince of Wales. The tiny book, smaller than the smallest iPhone (at around 3×2 inches), is a new acquisition by the Folger Shakespeare Library. In this portrait, Inglis wears the same black dress, ruff, and hat as she does in the Type II portraits. Below her image, Inglis included a sonnet upon the anagram of her name: RESISTING HEL. Anagrams were very popular among poets and other educated elite in the seventeenth century.[5] Inglis imitates and appropriates the self-stylings of writers in print, demonstrating her awareness of early modern popular culture.
Inglis's Type IV portraits are direct imitations of French emblematicist Georgette de Montenay (Fig. 6).[6] In De Montenay's Cent Emblemes Chrestiennes (1584), engraver Pierre Woeiriot depicted the French poet with a pen and inkwell, a small book at her right hand, and a music book at her left. In a similar fashion, Inglis displays her writing materials and books, as well as her lute, compass, and other objects that signify her status as an educated woman and artist. She models almost all of her poses and settings in portrait Types I, II, and IV on the portrait in Emblemes Chrestiennes. Inglis relies on De Montenay as an imitable icon throughout her works, much like twenty-first century selfie-photographers look to Kim Kardashian West for lighting tips and contouring tricks to enhance the appearance of their own portraits.

As I have written in my article "Moveable Types," the copying of portraits and faces in print informs early modern readers' conception of selfhood. Much like the intertextualities of her transcriptions, Inglis's self-portrayals are always in conversation with other authors and artists as she mimics their costumes, settings, and decorative frames. When we compare her self-portraits with postmodern selfie photography, the similarities might cause us to question how much of individual self-depiction relies on representations of others. Especially when we consider that millions of Snapchat and Instagram users are circulating similar photographs, constantly fashioning themselves with the same filters and frames.

Taylor Clement is a doctoral candidate in English Literature and History of Text Technologies at Florida State University. Her research interests include early modern print, illustration, remix, and copies. She is the recipient of a Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Completion Fellowship for her project, “Visualizing Verse in Early Modern England.”

Further Reading

On Esther Inglis


On portraits and print


[2] Alli Burness argues that selfies are “part of a conversation, a series of contextual interactions and are connected to the self-maker in an intimate, embodied and felt way.” See her 2015 blog post, “What’s the Difference between a Selfie and a Self-Portrait?” here.


You can read more about Inglis's imitation of De Montenay in Martine van Elk's blog post below.
Inglis, Esther, 1571-1624 (Calligrapher). Inglis, Esther, 1571-1624 (Illustrator). Collection. Inglis, Esther, 1571-1624. Type of Resource. Still image. Spencer Collection, The New York Public Library. (1601). Portrait of Esther Inglis, decorative border Retrieved from http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-eac7-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99. Wikipedia Citation. {{cite web | url=http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-eac7-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99 | title=(still image) Portrait of Esther Inglis, decorative border, (1601) | author=Digital Collections, The New York Public Library | accessdate=December 26, 2018 | publisher=The New York Public Library, Astor, Lennox, and Tilden Foundation}}. Esther Inglis, daughter of a French immigrant, was a celebrated calligrapher. She produced exquisitely illuminated documents and little books, illustrated with flowers not unlike the honeysuckle and the pink in the corner of the picture. Painted at about the time of her marriage, Esther wears a necklace composed of several strands of tiny beads and on her left hand she has three rings. One has an amber-coloured stone in a conventional quatrefoil bezel. On her small finger is a plain double hoop and her thumb has another double hoop. The rather joyous motif of the intertwined carnation and the honeysuckle at the top left would be appropriate for a marriage portrait, and it is tempting to imagine that there was once a companion painting of her husband which is now lost.