

Self-Portraits by Judith Leyster and Jacob Lawrence

Judith Leyster painted her self-portrait in 1635 using oil paints. Jacob Lawrence painted his self-portrait in 1977 using tempera and gouache paints. Although these two paintings were done 342 years apart, they have much in common. Both paintings depict the artists holding paintbrushes while in their studios. This represents their profession as painters. Both show artwork made by the artist in the background. Both artists painted themselves to the left of center of the composition, creating asymmetrical balance in their self-portraits. Both are smiling, looking outward and engaging the viewer, as if they are inviting us into their studios.

In Leyster's portrait we can see how this 17th century artist looked and dressed. Leyster's flesh looks soft, her collar looks stiff and her clothing looks heavy and warm. Although the painting she is working on is in the background, many directional lines and shapes lead the eye to it, indicating its importance. Can you find these lines and shapes? Leyster painted during the Baroque period, a time which emphasized color and light. Forms are shaded and modeled to appear realistic. There is a sense of three dimensional space, and it looks like the room is softly lit. Although color is important, it is not as bright and saturated as those that we see in Lawrence's painting. Both artists use neutral colors repeatedly throughout their paintings.

In his self-portrait, Lawrence is surrounded by a variety of tools and materials, including tubes and jars of paint, a drill, a c-clamp and a hammer. Lawrence was a lover of tools. He saw them as a means to extend the body. On the left, one of Lawrence's paintings hangs on the wall. It shows Harriet Tubman leading slaves to freedom. Below, a figure dressed in blue climbs a staircase. Perhaps this figure is from another of Lawrence's paintings, or maybe it is an actual person. The right side shows more paintings by Lawrence. The primary colors of red, yellow and blue are very dominant and repeated often in this self-portrait. There is also a variety of neutral colors. Forms are depicted as flat opaque shapes with sharp distinct edges with very little suggestion of modeling. Space is flattened and distorted.

The way Lawrence used the paints makes his face look like a mask. He looks comfortable and relaxed. Leyster's pose looks somewhat uncomfortable as her arm rests lightly on the decorative knob of the chair's back post. It is as though she is taking a momentary break to acknowledge us, the viewers, before returning to her painting. Lawrence also looks as if he is taking a break, or perhaps just getting ready to start a painting.

Most of the symbolism in these paintings is straightforward and obvious. Many things in each painting represent Leyster and Lawrence's lives as artists. Though Leyster wanted us to know something about herself, she also wanted us to see that her life as an artist was both important and enjoyable. Although Lawrence's career concentrated on depicting the history and struggles of African Americans, he appears to be happy and relaxed in this self-portrait. When Lawrence was growing up in the 1930's people were poor, but they brightened their lives with color. Lawrence's primary influences were the shapes and colors of Harlem, New York. Leyster was a female artist in the city of Haarlem, Holland in the 17th century. There were not many woman painters at this time. In fact, this painting was originally thought to be painted by a man named Frans Hals. It was considered one of his greatest masterpieces. When it was discovered that it was painted by a woman, "experts" described it as an inferior piece of work, showing the weakness of the feminine hand. Although they lived centuries apart, both Leyster and Lawrence faced discrimination and similar challenges during their lifetimes.