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The Importance of the Beard and Mustache in Art

“While walking down a corridor in his New York hotel one day, Igor Stravinsky [and his wife] encountered Salvador Dali - who suddenly appeared before them carrying a small silver bell:

'It was the little silver bell carried before the priest when he goes through the street to bring the viaticum to a dying person,' said Stravinsky.

He paused and greeted Dali, who replied, 'Bonjour, Igor, bonjour, Madame,' and then stood waiting... It was in the period when Dali wore waxed spikes of mustache which reached to the corners of his eyes. 'But I said nothing, and Vera said nothing, we smiled tres doucement, and started to go by.'

At that Dali rang his little silver bell.

'What is your little silver bell doing there?' asked Stravinsky.

'I carry it and I ring it,' replied Dali, and Stravinsky imitated him, 'so people will see my moustaches.'"

Salvador Dali's mustache may be the most famous piece of facial hair to grace the pages of art books since the discovery of the Pazyryk Horseman (300 BC) (1). There are many truly notable mustaches in the art world, yet so little has been written on the subject - the portrayal of facial hair is just as integral to a piece of art as the techniques and subject. In his book *Lectures and Lessons in Art*, Moody claims: "Hair is a subject of immense importance to the artist, and is the source of almost as much variety as is drapery. Putting aside the numberless gradations of colour and thickness &c., which mark the age and sex, and its quality, which is so expressive of character, and looking at hair from the pictorial point of view alone, how invaluable are its uses! ...What piquancy is given by a dark moustache, what dignity by a flowing beard!" (6). One can discover so much about an artist if they take facial hair into account. Salvador Dali maybe be the

most simple extension of this. Because he was so much in the public eye, one can experience the changes in an artist that Dali goes through in his lifetime. Dali's mustache was like its own language - he wore his mustache tied into a bow, straight and sharp jutting into different physical fields, split into forks, and curving up like the horns of a bull, and sometimes straight up to his eyes, resembling exclamation points. Philippe Halsman dedicated an entire book to the functioning of Salvador Dali's mustache (5). In fact, Dali's mustache was remarkably like his paintings - attention-grabbing, extroverted, disruptive of social norms, and more often than not defying the laws of gravity. Not only did his mustache resemble his art, but it resembled the tools he used to create his art, in the preface of *Dali's Mustache*, Dali himself claims: "This very morning, and just at the moment of not shaving myself, I discovered that my mustache can serve as an ultra-personal brush. With the points of its hair, I can paint a fly with all the details of his hair. And while I am painting my fly, I think philosophically of my mustache, to which all the flies and all the curiosities of my era came to be monotonously and irresistibly stuck. Some day perhaps one will discover a truth almost as strange as this mustache- namely, that Salvador Dali was possibly also a painter"(5). It is not a surprise to discover that Dali used his mustache to paint, it is completely imaginable that he would even use his mustache clippings to build paintbrushes.

Another blatantly attention-grabbing mustache belongs to the contemporary painter LeRoy Neiman. His artist's biography claims that he is "probably the most popular living artist in the United States"(4). LeRoy Neiman provides a prime example of painting style/mustache comparison. A contemporary artist, Neiman is famous for his paintings of athletes and, as he calls it, "the good life". In his paintings, Neiman uses bold colors in thick strokes; in his self portrait, it looks as if stood in the way of his paint brush, which swiped him from one ear to the

other, across his philtrum - a solid black line splitting the mans' face in two. The portrait portrays the artist smoking a cigar, featuring his mustache in the center-most area of the canvas. Neiman was once quoted saying: "I guess I created LeRoy Neiman...I'm a believer in the theory that the artist is as important as his work", thus admitting to his self-proclaimed caricature. However, Neiman sans mustache would be no caricature at all.

This example in mind, it becomes clear that the given facial hair of so many painters resemble the art that they made in their life. Another obvious example of this would be Vincent Van Gogh. Portraying himself with a scraggly yellow-red beard, Van Gogh also painted vast yellow fields, prickly sunflowers and huge bushels of hay. In addition to the subjects in which he painted, one must take into consideration his unique style. Each brush-stroke parallels a strand of hair. Van Gogh painted clothing, landscapes and backgrounds in the same way that he painted his beard - the only way of distinguishing skin from hair is change of paint color. There are few self-portraits by Vincent Van Gogh that do not feature a bushy beard, one entitled simply: "Self Portrait Without a Beard". This piece is one of the most expensive paintings in history, going for 71.5 million dollars. One must ask why this piece is so much more "valuable" than any of Van Gogh's other paintings. "Self-portrait Without a Beard" seems alien at first glance, the artist is almost unrecognizable - his face shape appears to be different and his lips look pursed. Perhaps to see a man without his famous beard makes him less of an icon and more of a human. "Self-portrait Without a Beard" was one of the last self-portraits Van Gogh painted before he committed suicide, and in this portrait he looks vulnerable and naked. In his book *Philosophy of Beards*, T.S. Gowing states that "the absence of Beard is usually a sign of physical and moral weakness" (3), this could be a reason explaining why seeing Van Gogh sans beard is so alarming. It strips away any protection that he had. Perhaps this is because in his previous

self-portraits his beard hid his true facial expression, thus seeing the artist without his beard breaks down the barriers which hid his true emotions.

A case similar to that of Van Gogh, is that of Claude Monet. Sporting an extremely impressionistic beard, Monet dedicated much of his life to painting misty landscapes and . His beard, large and amorphous bears an uncanny resemblance to his piece “Wheatstacks (End of Summer)”. In fact, if one were to seclude the right most haystack in the painting, and turn it upside-down, it mimics both the shape and consistency of Monet’s beard in one of his self-portraits (see below)

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In addition to this, Monet’s piece “Vétheuil dans le Brouillard” looks as if he painted it with his own beard. The brush strokes are soft and fuzzy, there are no hard lines in the work, and it appears that all of the forms are somewhat blended together. If looking for it, one can find inspiration in all things, hair is no exception to this.

After looking at the works of Gustave Courbet, it is undeniable that he was a man who loved hair. Gustave Courbet created a series of portraits a woman named Joanna Hiffernan, all of which highlight the models’ masses of thick red hair. They show Hiffernan grabbing her own hair Whether focusing on a subtly hairy piece such as “The Woman in the Waves” or an a piece as outlandish as “L’Origine du Monde”, there is no mistaking the painstaking detail that Courbet applied to the hair he painted. “L’Origine du Monde” is a close-up painting of a woman's genitalia - featuring a thick dark patch of pubic hair, which also happens to resemble Courbet’s own facial hair. (See below)

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An extraordinarily hairy man himself, Courbet never failed to paint himself with a beard. While

his early self-portraits feature post-pubescent peach fuzz, his later self-portraits highlight a full and magnificent beard that is characterized in all representations of Courbet. He thought of himself as a man of the people, and he identified with peasants, perhaps this is what fueled his hair obsession. At the time Napoleon III was in power, a man who sported an extremely sculpted mustache and goatee, Courbet's full beard seems to be an absolute rejection of this type of facial adornment. This is a prime example of the ability in which facial hair has to decipher a time-line of a painter's life. Between the years 1842 and 1855 Gustave Courbet created around twenty self-portraits, making a sort of visual time-line of his life; much like the mustachioed painter Rembrandt.

Rembrandt had a small, and subtly wispy mustache that was portrayed in the majority of the 90 odd self-portraits he painted in his lifetime. Though not nearly as overpowering as Courbet's beard, Rembrandt's mustache still played an important role in his art. Looking at his self-portraits, the fullness of his mustache forms somewhat of a bell-curve. It is common belief that Rembrandt suffered from poor eyesight - thus the lack of clarity and detail in his paintings. Not unlike his painting style, Rembrandt's mustache is imprecise and lacking the detail in which an artist such as Dali meticulously applies to his paintings - despite this, to view a Rembrandt in person, one is capable of seeing the human palpability of skin and hair. His paintings are three dimensional in their palpability, and portray texture to their fullest.

Frida Kahlo may be the only female painter in history who, through years of painting, made herself into a mustache wearing icon. Her work depicts her through all of the struggles she experienced in her life, leaving out no detail. Kahlo's numerous representations of her mustache are a constant in her self-portraits, whether depicting emotional or physical ailments she always viewed herself with the utmost scrutiny. Kahlo's brush served as a microscope in which she

experienced herself, forcing viewers of her art to see her under the same light. Though she depicted herself in so many different physical states, her mustache constantly symbolized her internal strength. Because she may be the only female painter to take such pride in her mustache, she becomes even more important in the hairy pages of history, and even without knowing her autobiography, her identity as a strong Mexican female is apparent through her pride in all aspects of her race and persona. The importance of Kahlo's mustache is incontestable when viewing her work, she often went as far as to exaggerate the thickness of her lip ornament.

Though there have been many artists through-out history who have become well known for some type of facial hair, there are very few that have had a style of facial hair named after them (7). Sir Anthony Van Dyck was on commission by Charles I, and painted numerous portraits of the king, all of which featured the famous pointed mustache and goatee. Van Dyck wore this mustache goatee style himself, but also featured it in many portraits of various subjects. Dyck's portrait of Frans Snyders shows a man wearing a Van Dyck, as does "Family Portrait", "Prince Emmanuel Philibert of Savoy", "Portrait of Adrian Stevens", "Nicholas Lanier", and "Portrait of a Gentleman, Putting on his Gloves" to list a few. This uprising on the Van Dyck style mustache can be ascribed to the power a king holds on the masses in accordance to style. This style was later abolished when Louis XIV found grey hairs in his Van Dyck style mustache, and shaved it off in 1680 (7).

After regarding so many mustache comparisons, the importance of facial hair in art is undeniable. It seems as though present-day, the significance of the mustache is often overlooked, and the fact that the majority of books which reference facial hair in art were written in the 19th Century is further proof of this epidemic of neglect. Not only does facial-hair in art

serve aesthetic purposes, it is the common muse of so many painters throughout history. The aesthetic decisions which painters make in their personal lives more often than not transgresses the mere purpose of style, and begins to act as fuel for the artistic imagination. In this way the artist's mustache acts as a signifier for painting style, and thematic content.

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