

# Volunteer Quarterly Training Session - Watts's Early Self-Portraits

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### Introduction

- Watts created self-portraits throughout his career despite declaring that he 'should feel a sort of absurdity' exhibiting them.
- In a letter to his patron Charles Rickards he wrote: *'I paint myself constantly; that is to say whenever I want to make an experiment in method or colour, and I am not in the humour to make a design'*.
- We can look at his self-portraits as vehicle in which he could experiment with methods, techniques and colour but also his own artistic identity.

### Self Portrait in the Style of Van Dyck, charcoal on paper, 1831

COMWG2007.273 (in storage)

- Created when he was around 14 years of age, during his apprenticeship with William Behnes (one of the country's most prolific and successful portrait sculptors in the 1820s, 30s and 40s.)
- During this apprenticeship the young Watts would have been tasked with copying engravings, such as those of Van Dyck.
- (Sir Anthony van Dyck (22 March 1599 – 9 December 1641) was a Flemish Baroque artist who became the leading court painter in England after success in the Southern Netherlands and Italy.)
- Van Dyck's print reproductions were held at the British Museum, where we know Watts was also spending time studying the Elgin marbles.
- This is a study of a print, not an oil painting – he is recreating the engraving technique – imitation of thin, sharp lines, cross hatching to depict tone and shadow – demonstrates his dexterity with the medium
- Imitating the technique but also the subject matter – 17<sup>th</sup> century hair, the clothing and the pose as demonstrated in Van Dyck's Self Portrait.





Anthony van Dyck, *Anthony van Dyck*, oil on canvas, c. 1640, National Portrait Gallery, London



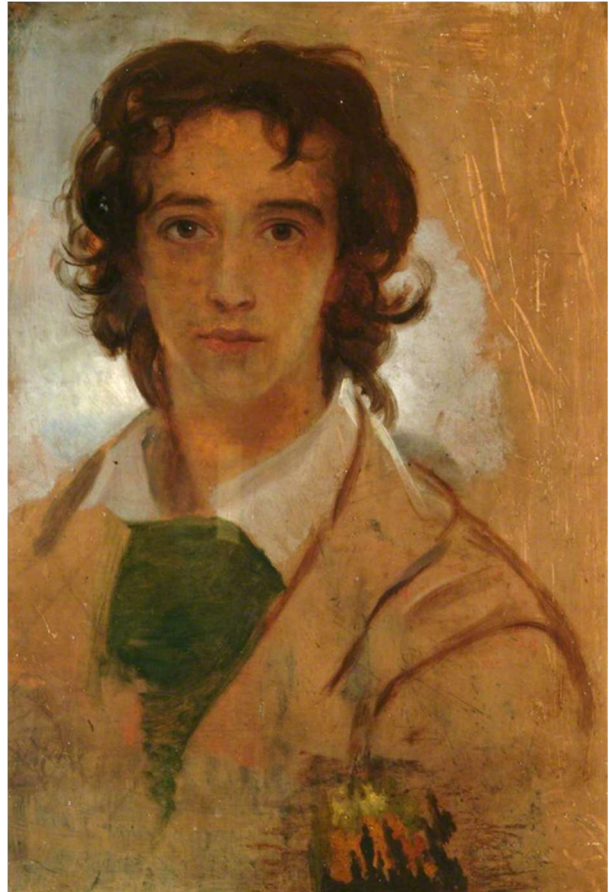
Anthony van Dyck, *Prince Rupert*, oil on canvas, unknown date, Chequers Court, Aylesbury

- The choice of elaborate lace collar worn by many of Van Dyck's sitters during the 1630s – became known as 'Van Dyck points' – Watts emulates this decorative lace work in chalk.
- In doing this, Watts demonstrates the high regard in which he held the painter and he continued to admire him throughout his career.

## Self Portrait aged 17, oil on canvas, 1834

COMWG.10 (on display)

- A study of the 'ever-at-hand model' - *Self-Portrait aged 17*, executed in 1834, is Watts's first painted self-portrait.
- Unfinished, yet confident sketch.
- The flesh of the face has not been extensively painted and relies heavily on the neutral ground applied to the canvas.
- We can see that his white shirt collar and green cravat, with the lapels and shoulders of his jacket briefly sketched out in a few strokes of brown paint.
- Towards the bottom left corner of the canvas, a small pencil drawing of a male nude is visible and along the bottom edge, where the crease of his sleeve would be is an unidentifiable mass of black, orange and yellow paint.
- Watts adopts a simple expression, whilst staring directly out at the viewer. We in turn, gaze back at him, just as he gazed at himself in the looking glass. This creates an intimate exchange between the viewer and the artist, as we stand arm length away, and inhabit the space in which he saw himself.
- By meeting our gaze, he appears self-assured, as if aware of his artistic talent in the year before he received formal training when he enrolled at the Royal Academy school.
- This portrait is often compared to Amelia Curran's *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 1819 and Sir Joshua Reynolds' *Self-Portrait*, c.1747-8 due to the similarities in pose, gaze, hair and clothing – marketing himself as a Bohemian, dandy and romantic.



Amelia Curran, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 1819, oil on canvas, National Portrait Gallery, London



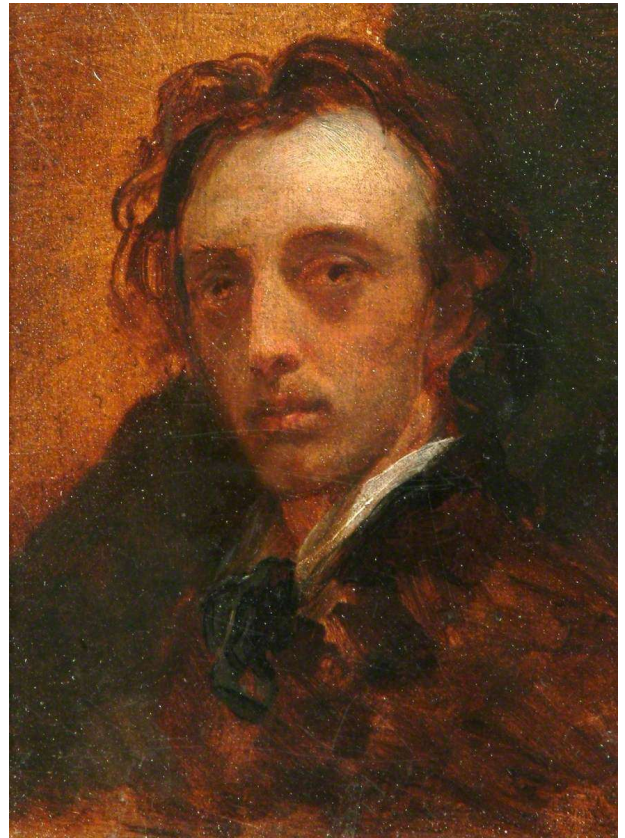
Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Sir Joshua Reynolds*, c.1747-49, oil on canvas, National Portrait Gallery, London

- Yet, unlike the Shelley or the Reynolds portraits, Watts is not painted with the tools of his trade in his hands, or as artistic props. He allows the painted surface, with its 'deceptive ease and fluidity' to speak for his artistic talent, without having to include clear identifiers.
- The work remained in Watts's studio during his lifetime and wasn't exhibited until much later in his career at the New Gallery in 1896-7. It was then included in the 1905 memorial exhibitions which began at the Royal Academy before travelling to Birmingham, Manchester, Newcastle, Edinburgh and Dublin.

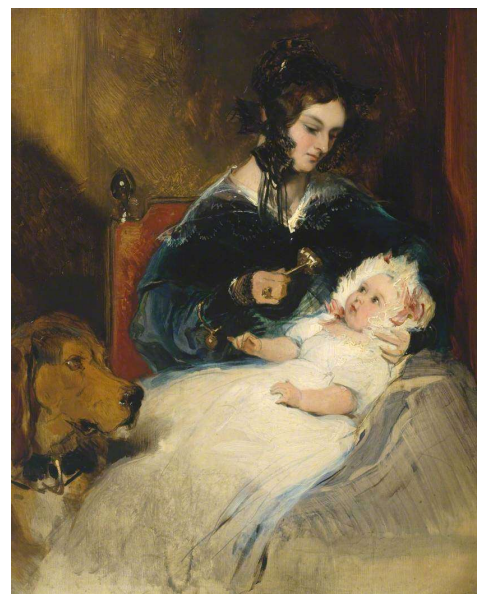
**Self-Portrait, also known as Self-Portrait Aged 24, oil on copper, c.1840**

COMWG.184 (in storage)

- The only work we know of Watts's on copper.
- It is extremely rare and unusual within his career, but shows his ability to turn his hand at a new technique.
- Art historical precedence for painting portraits on copper.
- Widespread practice of painting on copper in northern and southern Europe c. 1600.
  - Rubens was an advocate.
  - Deliberate intention of fashioning something that would be out of the ordinary, unusual, remarkable, for these small cabinet-pictures with their jewel-like surfaces
  - A painting technique which emerges from the decorative practice of painting on enamel.
- An extremely satisfactory support for small format pictures, as it allows the artist the ability to capture fine, minute detailing – ideal for portrait painters.
- Similar dress to his younger portrait, still a Romantic, a bohemian.
- Slightly older – high hairline, shorter style.
- Not the most flattering portrait? – TO DEBATE!
- Some 19<sup>th</sup> century examples by his contemporaries, but it was far from being a dominant trend – demonstrates his ability and willingness to experiment.



Jules Bastien-Lepage, *Laura, Lay Alma-Tadema*, 1879, oil on copper, The Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Oxford.



Edwin Henry Landseer, *The Duchess of Abercorn and Child*, 1834-36, oil on copper, Tate, London

## Self-Portrait in a red robe, oil on canvas, c.1853

(on display)

- Aged 36, almost 20 years after the first painted self-portrait.
  - The largest self-portrait of his career: *Self-Portrait in a red robe*, c.1853.
  - During the 1850s Watts experimented with the Italian Renaissance technique of fresco. Indeed, this self-portrait in its restrained approach to paint application, but created on an ambitious scale, is like that of *Lady Sophia Dalrymple* c.1850-53, (Watts Gallery Trust) and was painted whilst the artist was undertaking work for the Lincoln's Inn mural commission.
  - Painted almost life size and with a low viewpoint, the viewer must literally look up at the artist in this portrait.
  - We know from photographs that it later hung in his studio, on this death but also on the staircase, in the entrance to his studio space in Little Holland House.
  - As with the earlier self-portrait, he gazes directly out at us.
  - Colour wise, it's extremely simple – three main blocks of colour.
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- Because of the dominant red robe, this work is often referred to as *The Venetian Senator* and was surely influenced by his first visit to Venice during the summer of 1853.
  - Tintoretto examples – rich red robes were indicators of a male's profession and associated with Venice.



Jacopo Tintoretto, *Portrait of a Procurator of St Mark's, Venice*, oil on canvas, V&A, London.



Jacopo Tintoretto, *Portrait of Geronimo Foscarini, Procurator of St Marks*, oil on canvas, V&A, London.

- No longer a Victorian, Watts here presents himself a Renaissance man at this crucial point in his career.

## Conclusion

- Each of the self-portraits discussed here remained in Watts's personal collection during his lifetime.
- As private studies they were created for his own amusement to experiment with colour, method and identity – we can trace through each of them a process by which he invented and reinvented himself – elements of role play during his formative years.
- In these works, he is also recognizing the artistic past, identifying with it and inserting himself with these traditions.
- We can regard them as important historical records of this great artist.
- But also, it is key to remember that these self-portraits establish an intimate relationship between artist and viewer – he is looking out at us, as he looked at himself. We as the viewer are now standing where he would have been holding his mirror/looking glass. We are inhabiting his space.

*If you have any questions about these or any of the other portraits in the collection, you can contact me at [curatorial.projects@wattsgallery.org.uk](mailto:curatorial.projects@wattsgallery.org.uk) or you can usually find me in the archive!*