AUCTORIAL IMAGE AND REPRESENTATION AS FORMS OF IDENTITY IN RENAISSANCE TIME

Carmen DOMINTE[*]

Abstract: *Starting with Dante's "Vita nuova" or with Petrarca's autobiographical writings, a new type of literature began. It was the literature of self-representation, whose most important reference, at the end of Renaissance, was Montaigne's "Essais". The autobiographic text uses the technique of introspection in the same way the self-portrait plays with the limits of visual representation, having a key function within the Renaissance aesthetics as a symbol of cultural authority. Continuing Ghiberti's artistic ideology, Giorgio Vasari, in his "Le vite de' piú eccelenti pittori, scultori e architettori", developed a magnificent history of Italian art, introducing as a model of analysis, the allegory of the three artistic stages. The auctorial images and representations, in both literature and painting, could be considered as forms of identity, belonging to the same forma mentis and cultural paradigm, influencing each other on the basis of artistic conscience.*

Keywords*: auctorial representation, identity, Renaissance.*

Auctorial Image and Representation

Before starting it is necessary to pencil down the relationship between the work of art and its author. There could not be imaged such a work without taking into account the auctorial discourse that develops inside the artistic piece. But what is an author? The same question was asked by Michele Foucault in his lecture given in 1969 at the French Society of Philosophy. Although there is no clear answer, for Michele Foucault this relationship functions as a discursive figure generated by the author who places himself between the real person and the fictive locator. The auctorial function that is to be found in any art work may be realised through this dissociation and in the space that was created between the two sides of the author. The auctorial representation as the image of the author in his own work of art, shapes itself in relation with the author and with the art work created by the same author, it could be attributed the value of a formative function. At the first glimpse the auctorial ego presupposes a discourse in the first person but this does not happen all the time. Most of the authors prefer to express their inner personality in different ways, using masks or subterfuges or even elements belonging to other types of discourses, confusing the receiver of their artistic pieces. From one artistic current to another there could be identified different ways of artistic representation of the auctorial image and discourse specific to each art and to each author. The auctorial representations are to be discovered beyond the psychological dimension that is supposed by any type of auctorial discourse of any artistic piece. More than that, the auctorial representation reflects the author's explicit way of self-defining.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the specific manners used by Renaissance painters for self representation both in literature and painting. The analysis will focus on the evolution of the auctorial image as a specific manner of artistic self-representation from embedded to autonomous. Thus, the image of the artist will be interpreted as an artistic identity constructed both pictorially and literally.

[*] Hyperion University, Bucharest, carmendominte@yahoo.com

BDD-A24528 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:25 UTC)

The auctorial representation uses a mixture of different approaches that, simultaneously, belong to the visual and textual self-perception and then self-portrayal. The same author has a distinct manner of perceiving himself but his auctorial image is reproduced differently when it takes a visual or a literal form. First of all, the autobiographic text needs what Philippe Lejeune called the *autobiographic pact* based on the formal coincidence between the narrator's name and the author's name. In his opinion, the proper name links the author with his discourse (Lejeune, 1989: 220). Secondly, it shapes itself according to a figure, the space which contains the auctorial image related to the historical and artistic context seen as a *locus* (Marin, 1999: 117). The self-portrait also needs a name, a signature which functions as an identification text, and a manner for introducing the temporal dimension inside the space of the tableau. The auctorial representation may be considered the explicit image of the author displayed in his own work of art, being it literal or visual. The relationship between the two forms of creating the auctorial identity is related to a larger context which develops a history of representing the auctorial self-conscience. As seen in a mirror, the textual and visual representations are nothing but reflections of the auctorial conscience.

According to art history, Renaissance was the period when the auctorial representations developed and diversified. Although Montaigne's *Essais* from 1580 were considered an inaugural work, the self representations, in textual or visual version, were already under the painters' interest. During Renaissance the auctorial representation was related to the social, religious, aesthetic and psychological implications which were involved in the process of transposing the auctorial self in an artistic form. Such a form gave another meaning to the self representations, the meaning of *auctoritas*[1].

The Renaissance artistic revolution imposed the new status of the art and the artist on theoretical and scientific basis, introducing the concept of artistic identity and authority. During Renaissance time, the auctorial representations were better and much more displayed in the visual form than in the textual one. The self-portraits could capture the intensity of the author's introspection with all the aesthetic implications. The author became his own model. He invested himself with the authority based on *studium* (study of the artistic techniques) and *ingenium* (personal talent)[2]. He created an artistic image of his own self in order to be the particular self-portrait that functioned as a symbol not only of his cultural authority but also of his social statute. That was the time when the self-portrait was imposed as the auctorial representation par excellence and as a manner of systematizing the idea of art. The same intensity of introspection was not to be found in the textual version of the auctorial representation, not even in the autobiographies of the late Renaissance[3].

The new manner of creating the self image in a textual form started with Petrarca's autobiographical notes and with Dante's *Vita nouva*. Unfortunately, these writings as textual approaches of auctorial representations did not stand for a crucial point concerning their originality of content and of form. The further development of

[1] The term *auctoritas* is used here to express the relationship between the artistic form of representation and the author's ego. This type of relationship is made possible because of the fact that the author perceives his self image as an auctorial self exposed representation in a particular art work.

[2] Maybe this is the moment when the modern relationship between the author and his work of art is beginning to be sensed.

[3] It is the case of the autobiographies written by Cellini and Cardano.

BDD-A24528 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:25 UTC)

the literary self representation took different aspects, from embedded inscriptions inside the paintings to the personal journals and to the autobiographies that belonged to the late Renaissance. The self-portrait, in general, represents the artist's image about the self. It also stands for the particular facets of his identity that the author intends to make visible (Woodall-Marsden, 1997: 9). The meaning of the term could be related to the Italian word *ritratto* which originally indicated a visual reproduction of any specific item under scrutiny and it was used to designate a person or a place or a building. The Italian term is very close to the meaning generated by the English word *portrayal*. In Renaissance time, the understanding of the word did not carry a precise sense of an "individual's individuality" (*ibidem* 17). It suggested the artistic rendering of any specific object. The autonomy of the author was not recognized as much as it is in modern times. Generally speaking, a portrait represents a likeliness made by an artist of a living or once living human being having the purpose to be recognizably the individual portrayed (Brilliant, 1991: 8). The portrait is generated by the oscillation between the art object and the human subject. The intended reference is based on the significance that a representation of an individual may be developed by the author in his attempt of creating an artistic work. The portrait's allusion to a particular individual generates the function of that work of art and constitutes the cause of its coming into being (*ibidem*).

Each cultural context proposed a prevalent formality of the portraits as a code of right behaviour, meant to reflect the constraints imposed by the conventions that govern that society. The same formality was imposed to the self-portrait too[1]. The Renaissance portrait is intended to resemble the subject's outward appearance and to reveal some aspects of his/her character or identity. At this point, the resemblance must take into account most of the characteristics of the subject in order to deep into his/her identity[2]. By extension, the self-portrait is first a portrait which was created by the person it portrays, having the same purpose. The portrayal created by the author who also is the subject becomes a reflective surface of the physical aspect and of his character and identity. In a metaphorical sense, the self-portrait becomes a mirror casting the reflections of the soul, providing insight into the character (Brown, 2000: 50). According the Brown, the physical limitations associated with the painting the self-image which most of the times, was represented by the positioning of the body in relation to the reflective surface and to the medium of depiction (*ibidem* 52). The result was a three-quarter view with both eyes intently focused to one side. That was the most common pictorial representation for (self) portrait in Renaissance.

For a further analysis it is needed to examine the difference between the self-portraiture and the embedded self-portraiture. According to the Renaissance artistic context, the first one, the embedded self-portraiture, represented a single element within a larger context. The focus was not on a particular item but on the event that composed the historical or religious narrative. The image of the author belonged to the narrative in

[1] There could be said that portraits reflect social realities and their imaginary combines the conventions for behaviour and appearance which were appropriate to a certain society at a particular period of time. These conventions were defined by the categories of age, gender, occupation, social status, social class and physical beauty.

[2] This type of resemblance depends on the memory that can raise the images of the subjects' past perceptions, because memory discovers the identity that hides beneath the surface of a physical aspect. It does not produce but reveal the personal identity by showing the relation between cause and effect among the various perceptions that a particular artistic representation may generate.

BDD-A24528 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:25 UTC)

the same proportion as other elements. Sometimes the features of the author's representation inside the narrative may be imposed by the nature of the event, by the purpose of the representation or by the time when the event took place. There are other cases when the author might have portrayed himself as a witness or a non-participant character. As opposed to the *participant portrait*[1], the *non-participant portrait* reveals the figure of an individual among other individuals, or among other elements such as buildings, objects, nature. In a narrative in which several images of figures identified as self-portraits could not be said to participate in the narrative, instead they seem to be removed from the action either by their placement or scale or by their inattention to the event (Meller, 1963: 55-67).

During the Quattrocento period, there were several cycles, including Benzo Gozzoli's Chapel, which display large groups of individuals who appear as witnesses at an event whose subject is the focus on the scene and not on themselves or on a particular individual. These grouping of figures were intended to represent very well-known individuals in meaningful relationships to each other (*ibidem*). The origin of the embedded self-portraiture was given by the narrative itself; this kind of self-representation cannot exist outside the context. The other type of self-portraiture is the autonomous one in which the figure of the author, most of the times, can be easily recognized. In this case, the focus is on the subject, there are no other elements included. The autonomous self-portrait is intended to function as a possibility of introspection, as a technique of visual self representation exposing the author's identity. The autonomous type of self-portrait is not the case of the *participant portrait* because there is no event which supposes to integrate the figure of the author and there is no active role that the author has to take. It is only the self-image displayed on a reflective surface. The autonomous self representation becomes an image of an image, the one that the author is conscious about. Both, the embedded self-portrait and the autonomous self-portraiture represent created likenesses of the artist's self intended to express the author's identity but also designed specifically for the affirmation of the artist rather than of his patron because now is the time when the artist's autonomy begin to affirm more and more (Woodall-Marsden, 1997: 5).

Visual Auctorial Representation

The embedded self-portraits could be considered the precursors of the autonomous self representation and even more than that.

The image of the artist as a possibility of expressing the auctorial identity began to concern several writers even from 14th century. Among them there could be mentioned Filippo Villani, the author of *Le vite d'uomini illustri Fiorentini*, dated about 1382-96. In his work, he stated that artists too could bring distinction to their cities as well as to themselves. A bit later, Leon Battista Alberti, in his *De pictura* from 1435, made clear that the contemporary practice, meaning the Renaissance practice, consists of including portraits in the history of paintings as representations of the important artists. Even Giorgio Vasari, in his *Le vite de' piú eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori*, specified that the Italian Renaissance painters used to place their patrons and sometimes themselves or their peers or assistants in narrative paintings. Thus, the image of the artist started to be reproduced and recognized as such, laying the basis for

[1] The *participant portrait* implies a central figure who is supposed to take an active role in a scene.

BDD-A24528 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:25 UTC)

the autonomous representations. In Quattrocento period, the place where the embedded portraiture and self-portraiture were mostly to be found were the chapels and not the domestic or private spaces of the painters or of their patrons. At that time, the chapel became an important *locus*, a place that belonged to historic families, who developed their own identity and who passed through generations their heritage. In such a chapel, one of the most important artists of the Italian Renaissance, Tommaso di ser Giovanni di Monte Cassai, called Massacio, placed his self-image in a narrative painting entitled *The Tribute Money*, dated 1426-27 and displayed in the Brancacci chapel whose patron was, at that time, Felice Brancacci.





Massacio: The Tribute Money *Massacio: The Tribute Money-detail*
Source: www.artble.com
http://www.google.ro/search?q=massacio+the+tribute+money&espv=2&biw=1280&bih=675&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=0CIsB

The narrative presents the story of Peter and the tax collector. The event is divided in three main parts: the central part, which is the most important one because it correlates the other two, is marked by the image of Christ who was asked by the tax collector to pay a tribute for the Temple; on the left side it is Peter who was getting a coin from the mouth of a fish and on the right side, the same Peter is paying the taxes. Among other witnesses of the event, there could be seen the author's image. His appearance was very accurate, looking absolutely alive[1], but the focus was not intended to be on him but on Christ and the event itself. Most of the embedded self-portraits, belonging to Quattrocento period, are introduced into the narrative settings together with the images of other contemporaries as recognizable witnesses of the event. Later, the image of the artist was extracted from such narrative paintings and placed in a more autonomous position. The idea of autonomous self representation is evident in a work by Pietro Perugino, who painted his self image in 1500, in Sala delle Udineze inside the Collegio de Cambio in Perugia. His self-portrait appeared on a fresco that was included in a fictively autonomous panel. The author's name was written explicitly on an inscription under the self-portrait. The artist's image was hung between two lunettes, each featuring a pair of personifications. The four allegories that were impersonated were Fortitude and Temperance for one side and Prudence and Justice for the other. Placed in a symmetrical position, the lunettes contain their own inscriptions: *Forteza e Temperanza sopra sei eroi antichi* and *Prudenza e Giustizia sopra sei savi antichi*. Floating above the six classical heroes displayed for each lunette, the allegories were represented sitting while the heroes were placed in a standing position in front of a foreground of a beautiful landscape.

[1] According to Vasari's history, the image representing Massacio was very similar to the figure of one of the apostles, presumably St. Thomas. This was also Massacio's name-saint.

BDD-A24528 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:25 UTC)



Fortitude and Temperance



Prudence and Justice

Source: settemuse.it
http://www.google.ro/search?q=perugino+pietro+images&espv=2&biw=1280&bih=675&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=0CCEQsAR

Containing the rectangular panels, the lunettes were intended to serve for the integration of the autonomous self-portrait together with the epigram that was beneath it. The epigram was written in Latin and it was composed by Maturanzio: Petrus Perusinus Egregius/Pictor/Perdita si Fuerat Pingedi/Hic Rettulit Artem/Si Nusquam Imenta Est/Hactemus Ipse Dedit (Pietro Perugino, celebrated painter. If art of painting become lost, he would restore it. If it had never been invented, he alone could bring it to this point). The placement and the wording of this epigram proved that the author was very proud of his accomplishments and he wanted to be remembered as a famous man himself. His artistic identity was related to the historical and artistic context emphasizing the importance of the author's figure. Being surrounded by antique important figures fitting a historicized context, the artist's self-portrait is the only true portrait of a "living person" (Lewis, 2002: 218).

The true autonomous image of an artist did not exist as a genre during the Italian Renaissance. In fact, the self-portraits of the artists did not refer to themselves as artists but as important men, emphasizing their social role more than their image as artists[1]. When the intellectual and social status of the visual arts escalated enough, then the artists could portray themselves as practitioners and creators of the autonomous self-portraits, embracing their palettes and brushes (Lewis, 2002: 220). The self representation of Perugino, and later Pintoricchio, could only be related to the concept of autonomous panel portraying the artist who, by the nature of the depiction together with the context, is identified as the artist of the work in which his image appears (Lewis, 2002: 221). Although the artists continued to create embedded self-portraits included within the general imagery, prior to the end of Cinquecento, the artists also represented themselves as gentlemen in autonomous panels that make no claims concerning their creation of another specific work of art.



Perugino's Self Portrait Source: Web Gallery of Art
http://www.wga.hu/html_m/p/perugino/cambio/2selfpo1.html

[1] The image of the artist which is supposed to be recognized as such means directly revealing the artist's identity and autonomy by the display of the tools of his trade around him.

BDD-A24528 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:25 UTC)

Textual Auctorial Representation

As a literary genre, the autobiography developed at the end of the 18th century, but the term was recorded in different dictionaries beginning with the second part of the 19th century. On a general overview, it could be said that there were few autobiographical writings from the antique period that were conserved, because, at that time, history and autobiography meant the same thing[1]. Although Marcus Aurelius preferred to write his *Meditations*, dated from the 2nd century A.D., in an autobiographical nuance, his text did not represent a true autobiography, but a historical writing. Only later, the Renaissance artist, the sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti, elaborated an autobiographical text which was included at the end of the second book of his *Commentaries* written between 1445 and 1448. This new type of writing was developed by Giorgio Vasari in his huge project *Le vite de' piú eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori* which was partly a historical writing mixed with a memorable collection of the artists' lives and textual portraits. This impressive work was influenced by an aesthetic thinking, meaning the author's aesthetic judgement, and by the principle of an art history, a history that presents the evolution of art in relation to the artists' lives. What is particular for Vasari's work is the fact that he mingled his own life with the life of the artists[2].

There were two manners according to which Vasari realized the textual portraits. The first one is used for placing the image of the artist in a relevant context which guaranteed the authority that could be sustained by a group or by society. It was the case of artists such as Filippo Lippi, Paolo Uccello, Domenico Ghirlandaio, Agnolo Gaddi, Rafael, etc. The second manner presupposed the representation of the artist's textual portrait as a living image in a more general context. This type of textual framing was based on temporal, spatial and aesthetic coordinates that facilitated the importance of the artistic conscience. This manner was used for the artists as Pietro Perugino, Parmigianino, Pinturicchio, Annibale Carracci, etc. Vasari's work was the moment when the representations of the artists began to be understood as reflections of their artistic conscience which the will of self representation would depend on. Autobiography becomes a distinct genre in the moment when the human being receives its importance, when the autobiographical search becomes an instrument through which the self becomes intelligible for the self, when the awareness of the self could emphasize the conscience of the self. Gusdorf uses the three dimension definition for the autobiography: *l'autos* (the self-consciousness), *le bios* (the organic existence of the self) and *le graphein* (the writing) (Gusdorf, 1990: 10-14). The autobiography stands for the synthesis of the triple dimension concepts which need to inter-relate, in the form of a retrospective prose narrative. But in the beginning, the autobiography took different other shapes, less complex.

Before Cellini's writing, the textual self representations were written by artists who did not focus on their life history meant for the public. Their autobiographical notes corresponded to their aesthetic and artistic studies. None of these early autobiographical writings fit into the form of the autobiography as a mixture of those

[1] This fact could be easily noticed in Herodotus' *Histories*, in Caesar's *Commentaries* or in Xenophon's *Anabasis*.

[2] In the first edition of his writing, Vasari referred to his life in relation to Michelangelo's, but in the second edition of the same work, he placed many references about his autobiography in many other presentations of most of the artists.

BDD-A24528 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:25 UTC)

three principles. Analyzing Dürer's travel journal or Pontormo's last three year journal and Leonardo's few autobiographical notes included in his notebooks, all belonging to Renaissance period, it would be impossible not to observe the fact that they are very different from the self-portraits of the same authors. In the visual self representations, these artists used a more contemplative or even melancholic version, while in the textual self representations, they were more objective. They placed themselves in a more neutral position referring more to the art, dreams or exceptional events than to their introspections. The common character of these writings is the realistic way of presenting the context, introducing drawings or artistic illustrations in order to render the whole picture. There are few differences among these autobiographical representations but nothing to link the text to the particular way of self contemplation. In Dürer's writing it could be noticed the very objective style, while in Pontormo's case what shocks is the concision. Leonardo's autobiographic fragment[1] is full of oscillations between a real and a possible version. These textual self representations lacked any form of introspection or self contemplation but they created the opportunity for the autobiography to be later developed. The only purpose of these autobiographical notes was to create the author's history for himself focusing on their aesthetic and artistic legacy rather than on their textual self-portraiture[2]. The first autobiography was Cellini's work, *Vita di Benvenuto Cellini scritta da lui medesimo*, written between 1558 and 1566.

This writing represented an autobiography in the full understanding of the term. Based on a diary, the autobiographical writing was an act of introspection, having a revealing function, within the meaning of discovering the personal self. Although the same oscillation between objective and subjective is to be found, the text was consciously elaborated for the public. In his discourse, the author was addressing not only to the contemporary readers but also to a future audience who might become the real evaluator of his artistic works. Knowing that, Cellini tended to romanticize the real events, presenting his subjective perspective. That is why sometimes the real history seemed a bit improbable, mostly the fragments which presented the traumatic experiences[3]. Even so the author stuck to the history of his life, not distancing from the truth. Having a moral and social motivation, Cellini approached the discourse of a *uomo virtuoso* who narrated his adventures and described his artistic accomplishments. Revealed from a retrospective perspective, this autobiography focused on an individual life, proving the existence of the author's self consciousness as an artist. These early textual auctorial representations, from the autobiographical notes, very objective and concise, to the subjective version of Cellini's autobiography, represented only the starting point for the subsequent evolution of the genre.

[1] It is needless to mention Leonardo's peculiar handwriting which requires considerable practice to read. He wrote backwards, with his left hand and in rude characters, using no punctuation and, sometimes constraining several short words into a long one.

[2] All three artists made excellent self-portraits in which the self-contemplation is the main feature and the introspection helps the author to expose his self as his own double.

[3] Cellini's autobiographical writing was supposed to have been started with the fragment entitled *Capitolo* which was written during his incarceration inside Sant' Angelo castle.

BDD-A24528 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:25 UTC)

Conclusion

Being visual or textual, the auctorial representation during Renaissance was understood as a moment when the artistic identity and authority begin to develop. All the self representations, pictorial or literary, represented artistic constructions which were meant to mediate between the creators' artistic self and the Renaissance audience, emphasizing the role of the artist in that particular society and later in history. The visual and the textual forms are considered to be mutually reflective of *visuality* as a shared understanding of how human beings perceive their relationship to the world in both physical and metaphysical terms (Hendrix, 2012: 94). Given in two different forms, visual and textual, the auctorial representation developed the auctorial conscience. Even so the category of the artist together with the idea of the self had a slow evolution over many centuries and it was always in close relation to the contemporary social history. Being recognized as the image of an image, the visual and textual portraiture was cultivated as the *fizione* (illusion) or the *inganno* (deception) just because it was a form of artistic representation (Woodall-Marsden, 1997: 27). In self-portraiture, where author and model represent the same individual, the dialogue took places between the self and the self. The auctorial representation as a form of artistic identity, starting with Renaissance, became a symbol for artistic authority representing first the social and later the historical importance of the artist.

Bibliography

Brilliant, Richard, *Portraiture*, Reaktion Books, London, 1991
Brown, K., *The Painter's Reflection: Self-Portraiture in Renaissance*, Michigan UP, Michigan, 2000
Gusdorf, Georges, *Auto-bio-graphie*, Lignes de vie 2, Odile Jacob (ed.), Paris, 1990
Hendrix, J., Carman, Ch. (ed.), *Renaissance Theories of Vision*, Ashgate Publishing Ltd., Surrey, 2012
Lejeune, Philippe, *On Autobiography*, translated by Katherine Leary, Minnesota UP, Minnesota, 1989
Lewis, Francis, *The Intellectual Life of the Early Renaissance Artist*, Yale UP, Yale, 2002
Marin, Louis, *L'écriture de soi*, PUF Paris, 1999
Meller, Peter, "Physiognomic Theory in Renaissance Heroic Portraits" in Ida E. Rubin (ed.), *Studies in Western Art: The Renaissance and Mannerism*, Princeton UP, Princeton, 1963
Woodall-Marsden, Joanna, *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, Manchester UP, Manchester, 1997

BDD-A24528 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 09:01:25 UTC)