

William Orpen's *Self-Portrait*

Kevin Parker

Self-Portrait by William Orpen is currently on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The painting was created in 1910 and was donated to the museum by Jacques Gelman and Natasha Gelman in 1914. The portrait is approximately 26 x 32 inches and is oil on canvas. The period in which the portrait was done is considered the modern period and the interesting aspect of this portrait is that it allows you to briefly become Orpen when you are viewing it.

The depth of the painting is displayed in the form of a mirror. The viewer looking at the painting can imagine himself as Orpen, although at first glance, you might not pick up on the details of the portrait, or know exactly what you are looking at. It appears Orpen simply wanted to capture himself in everyday life. This is a great example of realism in art.

The composition of the painting is interesting and works in terms of visual trickery. Orpen is placed in the center of the frame, which is within another frame that causes the viewer's eyes to be drawn to him. What appears to be merely a framed portrait within a frame is actually a painting of a large mirror on a shelf. Orpen is present in the painting because he is standing in front of the mirror looking at himself. The notes on the wall alongside the mirror are different colors and are like post-it notes or letters.

The precise duplication of the liquor bottles and a painting rag on the shelf below the mirror makes it clear that they are seen in the mirror. The various notes placed on and around the mirror create a feeling of space in the painting. Even though William Orpen is the main subject of the painting, you feel other areas in the painting get a lot of attention too. You may literally go from looking at a portrait, to imagining standing in the same spot as the artist, on the same day and at the same time.

William Orpen's *Self-Portrait*, displayed in the Jacques and Natasha Gelman Galleries, is very well placed. The setting of the gallery is similar to a formal living room, and the painting is on a wall with much open space around it, sort of the way a mirror would be. The space you are given to look at the painting helps you appreciate it visually. It is easy to become so drawn into the painting that you feel you are looking through the eyes of Orpen just by looking into his eyes in the mirror in the painting.

In the painting Orpen is a very distinguished well-to-do young man. The shelf below the mirror holds paintbrushes and rags, the tools of Orpen's trade. One also realizes that he has an appreciation for alcohol because of the two bottles he has on the shelf. Orpen is painted holding a riding whip, which is most likely present to let people know that he is an avid horseback rider. The bowtie, derby hat, gloves, and striking pose give Orpen an appearance of a refined man, although his eyes seem to have a tone of anger.

Orpen's *Self-Portrait* will continue to intrigue all viewers who simply see it as a traditional portrait until they make sense of all the elements and realize that they are actually staring into a mirror. Some may even make a case that this is not a true portrait, but rather a picture of a mirror's reflection. Either way, William Orpen does a masterful job of creating a painting that challenges viewers' perceptions and is playful at the same time.

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