

## Portrait of the adolescent artist

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If we look at the dictionary definition of “self-portrait” we find: “A portrait of someone done by themselves”. That is precisely what Dalí often did over the course of his life. I would nevertheless like to focus here on the self-portraits made by the very young Dalí —the ones he painted between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, i.e. from 1919 to 1921.

These portraits are particularly interesting for the intention they reveal: the image that Dalí wishes to offer us of himself. They are an attempt at personal and artistic selfaffirmation. Starting out from this premise, we might note that the self-portraits from these years are closely connected with the youthful diaries that Dalí wrote over the course of 1919 and 1920 and which Fèlix Fanés published in 1994 under the title *Salvador Dalí. Un diari: 1919-1920. Les meves impressions i records íntims* (Salvador Dalí. A Diary: 1919-1920. My Private Impressions and Memories”).

In the diary, we find a Salvador Dalí who is writing almost on a daily basis, leaving a record of his day-to-day activities and of his views on politics and art. An enthusiastic, impetuous, sentimental and romantic Dalí who revels in spending the summers in Cadaqués where he can paint and is highly interested in the impressionist school Ramon Pichot had acquainted him with. Proof of that is to be found in the letter that Dalí wrote to his uncle Anselm Domènech in 1920, also included in his diary. I feel that it is appropriate to reproduce an extract of it here, due to the relationship we can find with the paintings of those years:

“Dear Uncle,

I’ve spent a delicious (summer), as they all are, in the ideal and dreamlike village of Cadaqués. Here, by the Latin sea, I have imbibed light and colour. I have spent the burning hot summer days painting frenetically and trying to capture the incomparable beauty of the sea and the sunny beach.

The further I go the more I realise how difficult art is; but also, the further I go the more I like and enjoy it. I still admire the great French impressionists *Manet, Degas, Renoir*. They are the ones that point out my path most decisively. I have changed technique almost entirely: the colour hues are now much lighter than before and I have completely abandoned the dark blues and reds that before contrasted (inharmoniously) with the lightness and brightness of the other colours.

I’m still not much concerned with outline, and indeed entirely do without it. Colour and feeling are what I direct my efforts at.

[...] I find portraiture increasingly interesting, although technically I consider it like landscape or still-life painting [...]”.

I will not call into question Dalí’s own words, but apart from the self-portraits of these years being a pictorial exercise, might we not see them as a manifestation of his awareness of his own singularity?

To return to the diary, we find a Dalí who in April 1920, on finding out that his father had decided he should pursue his studies at the Special Painting, Sculpture and Etching School of the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in Madrid, declared: “I will be a genius, and the world will admire me. I may be despised and misunderstood, but I’ll be a genius, a great genius, because I am sure of it”.

Dalí’s desire to be a painter was clear from early on, as was the fact that engaging in pictorial activity would be what would allow him to become a genius. Already around 1919 (1), he was making self-portraits of himself painting in his Cadaqués studio, and — as Dalí’s own words above recount — we can grasp his interest in impressionism, colour, mastery of pink and reddish hues, and particularly the study of light. If we look closely at *Self-portrait in the Studio*, belonging to the Salvador Dalí Museum of St. Petersburg (Florida) collection, we may well feel that Dalí might have been acquainted with the early Fauvist works that Matisse painted in Collioure in summer 1905 and that can be seen up to 2 October 2005 in the magnificent exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Ceret: *Matisse-Derain. Collioure 1905, un été fauve*. This Fauvist influence is suggested by the theme of brightly lit interiors with a balcony opening out over the Mediterranean, and particularly the chromatic similarity to Matisse’s *Open Window*.

Dalí was to return to self-portraits of himself in the act of painting at the same Riba d’en Pichot studio in Cadaqués, in a painting we might date from around 1920 but whose whereabouts is unfortunately now unknown.

Other diary extracts corroborating the parallelisms between Dalí’s writings and what he sets down in the self-portraits are the ones that reveal how Dalí often adopted a distant and superior stance towards his peers, while his behaviour was at the same time designed to make an impact on those very peers and on people in general. Then again, and for the same purpose, we find a Dalí who has been modelling his physical appearance, allowing his hair and sideburns to grow long and dressing in an extravagant manner.

The *Self-portrait* from c. 1919 belonging to the Gala-Salvador Dalí Foundation, the one from c. 1920 from the E. Isern Dalmau collection and the one from c. 1921 at the Salvador Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg (Florida) share an unusual feature that largely backs what we have said so far. The artist shows himself to us in profile, looking at us, though with one of his eyes concealed. That pose — at the same time as permitting a magnificent study of light and chiaroscuro — cannot hide a certain arrogance, not to mention the iconological connotations of the eye in the course of the history of art.

In the *Self-portrait* from c. 1920 from the former Serraclara collection, and the *Selfportrait with Raphaellesque Neck* from c. 1921, Dalí depicts himself with the Cadaqués landscape as a backdrop, thereby combining his favourite themes of those years. Landscapes are always a good excuse to experiment with light and colour, which become ever brighter. Dalí himself remarked that he painted from nature and felt a special interest in the light of dusk, which allowed him to capture all of its chromatic hues. His brushstrokes are broad and free-flowing, which as he explained in 1922 was to avoid a sunset looking like a postcard view.

While in the *Self-portrait* from c. 1920 he presents himself with his head turned towards the spectator in a more romantic stance, in the one showing a strong empathy with nature (in *Self-portrait with Raphaellesque Neck*) we find Dalí staring at the spectator almost severely. As its title implies, this oil painting is a homage to one of his favourite painters, Raphael, whose self-portrait was only too well-known to Dalí, since it was reproduced in the frontispiece of the Gowans collection volume (Dalí had the full set) devoted to that artist.

We might well say, then, that in general the portraits from those years convey a narcissistic Dalí who dominates the pictorial space and exalts his own individuality, hinting at the exhibitionism that was to characterise him throughout his life. Artist and work became inextricable from one other, for Dalí is at once the author and main player both of his paintings and of his writings. According to Robert Lubar: “To speak of the self-portrait in Dalí’s oeuvre is to a large extent tautological, for Salvador Dalí – the man, the artist and the person — is the subject and the privileged object of his artistic trajectory”.

#### Note:

1. It should be pointed out that the approximate nature of the dates of execution of the works is due to their not having been signed or dated, with the exception of the *Selfportrait* from the former Serraclara collection, which is signed. The dates given in this article are taken from the Gala-Salvador Dalí Foundation’s *Catalogue Raisonné* of paintings [1910-1930].