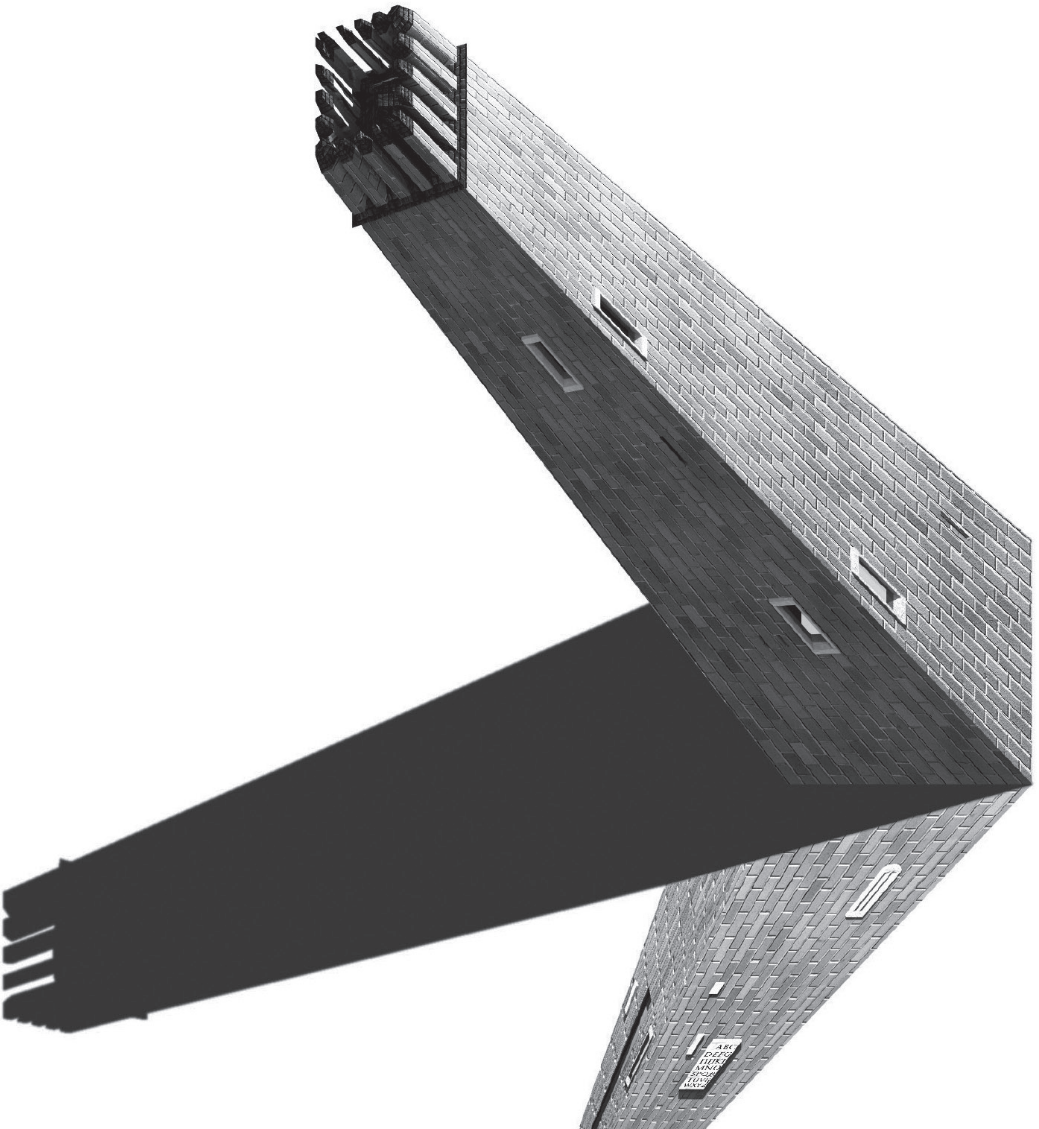
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Thomas Kelley

Five Self-Portraits

Self-promotion begins with self-image. Amid the many socioeconomic tidings of Renaissance self-portraiture was this: to *act the part*, you must first *look the part*. The trick to upward social mobility during the early 15th century was to sell a lie. Actually, *lie* is maybe too anticipatory a term for what would later become a baroque tendency. Still, it is used here to foreshadow the cockeyed, and much idealized, sense of self that began drawing currency in the visual arts well before shadowplay and the softened edge. It is during this earlier period of classical revivalism where we encounter visual artists, as is often the case, contending with issues of rank, social status, and outdated formal vocabularies. Like Vitruvius before him, the Florentine theorist Filarete's grim declaration that the scale of a building must be proportionate to the social status of its occupant only affirmed this cyclical obsession with class across the arts during the Renaissance.[1] As public attention was shifting away from previous metrics where physical labor, artistic or otherwise, occupied the lowest social rungs, more fashionable valuations were being shaped that underscored the artist's own personal history and intellect. As a result, the artist was given a unique opportunity to offer patrons hyperbolic portrayals of the self and in turn to unlock the doors to brisk social ascent. The outward-looking canvas was succeeded by a mirror in which the artist could sell a not-so-forthright reflection. This mix of ego and technical expertise would eventually mold the public's perception of the craftsman into the image of the cognizant artist: mind trumps hand.

Unsurprisingly, artistic self-awareness during the Renaissance gave way to the genre of the autonomous self-portrait. This familiar yet novel form of representation is defined by art historian Joanna Woods-Marsden as a self-sufficient painting "within whose frame one portrait head or a half- or full-length figure appears."[2] The classification opens up further to comprise self-likenesses in which the artist presents the self at the center or periphery of a recognizable scene, as shown in Piero della Francesca's *The Resurrection*. In this example the artist superimposes his guise onto that

Thomas Kelley, *The Nativist, A Castle In Two One-Point Perspectives*, 2013. Digital drawing. Derived from Piero Della Francesca, *The Resurrection*, 1463–65. All images courtesy the author.

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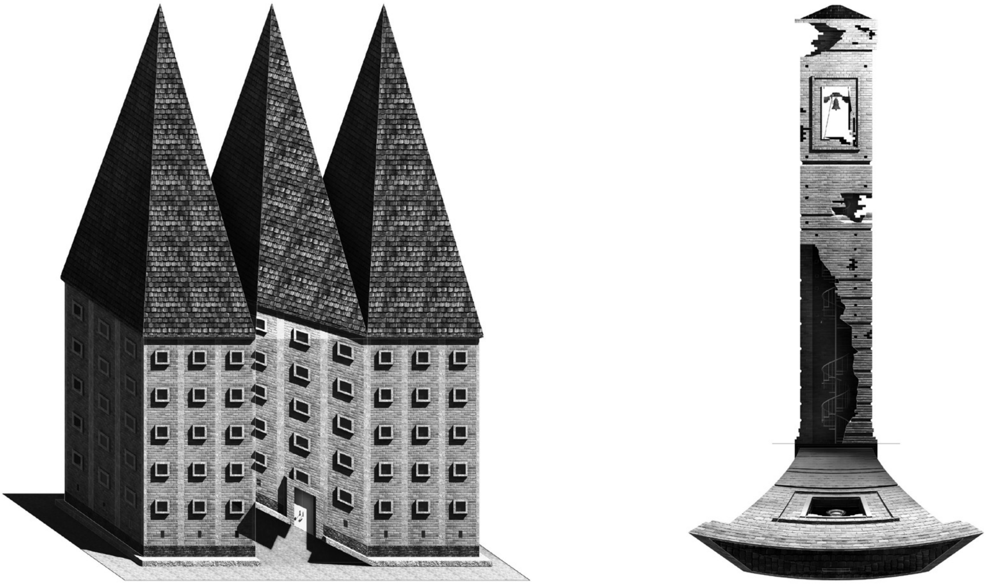
[1] John Onians, *Bearers of Meaning: The Classical Orders in Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

[2] Joanna Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture: The Visual Construction of Identity and the Social Status of the Artist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 1.

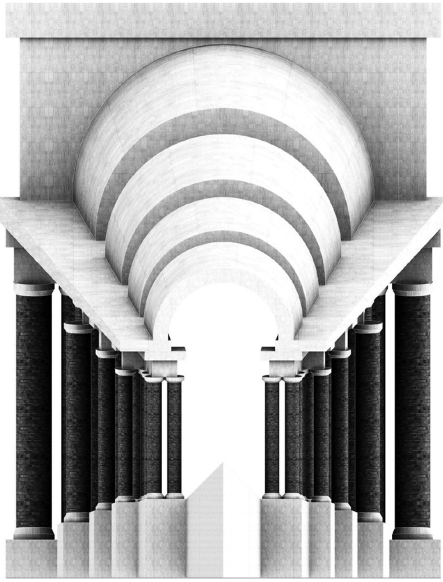


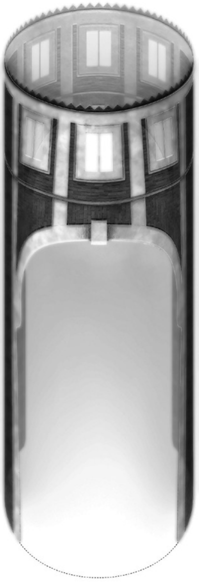
Thomas Kelley, *The Allegorist, Palace In Axonometric With Local Vanishing Point*, 2013. Digital drawing. Derived From Artemisia Gentileschi, *Self-Portrait As The Allegory Of Painting*, 1638–39. Right: *The Imaginist, Elevation And Anamorphic Mirror Of A Bell Tower*, 2013. Digital drawing. Derived From Luca Cambiaso, *Portrait Of The Artist Painting A Portrait Of His Father*, 1575–80.

of a sleeping soldier, which calls into question two competing readings: religious devotion or self-admiration? However candid or sly the conceit, the self-portrait would become the business card par excellence, often presented as a gift to a willing patron in the hope of receiving commissions, even political favors. For the first time, if only briefly, the artist served the self, and the self-portrait epitomized the collapse of both subject and object into a single frame.

Although initially driven by concerns of class and status, such freedom licensed artists to take risks in two dimensions. Unique, even strange appropriations of exotic projection styles, vantage points, and subject matter were up for grabs. Where before it may have seemed trivial, for instance, to utilize and render a convex mirror within a scene, now artifice was not only accepted but expected. For it was in the artist's best financial interest to exhibit mastery over the painted surface as concisely as possible and with equally as much finesse. The self-portrait did not serve as an accurate depiction of its painter-subject but rather as an accurate depiction of painterly talent. Here, we return to the aforementioned lie. If accuracy no longer signifies truthful depiction, then false depictions are also accurate as long as they exhibit a mastery over two-dimensional representation. In other words, actual form is valued less than the representation of form.

Fast forward to the present. Imagine that the self-portrait no longer requires an artist. Remove the self as subject and replace it with something less prideful, less animate – a





Thomas Kelley, *The Introvert, Reversible Elevation Of A Portico*, 2013. Digital drawing. Derived From Andrea Mantegna, *Meeting Scene*, 1465–74. Right: *The Egotist, Convex Elevation Of An Arch*, 2013. Digital drawing. Derived From Parmigianino, *Self-Portrait In A Convex Mirror*, 1524.

building, perhaps. Be careful to also remove from the conceit its literary analogy, or the ambition to convey the scary "larger truth" that Giorgio Vasari loved so much. Almost impossible, right? By definition the self-portrait depends on these conceits, or else we are left with too positivist an outlook on form and its visual registration. When applied to architecture, the self-portrait sets a precedent for acts of representation (to present anew) and misrepresentation (to present falsely), or the ability to take something ordinary and have it suggest something extraordinary by virtue of how it is represented. Think airbrushed model meets anamorphic fresco of a hermit saint. To further examine the charge, five self-portraits are presented here that replace the human figure with five building archetypes: a castle, an arch, a portico, a palace, and a bell tower. Each building has been selected for its objective and self-effacing features. Represented in a seemingly skeumorphic manner, whereby a derivative object (or drawing) casually imitates aspects necessary to the original, each drawing aims to preserve the optical devices or cues from five derivative Renaissance self-portraitists: Piero, Mantegna, Cambiaso, Parmigianino, and Gentileschi. Through a playful exploitation of illusory tricks, such as double vanishing points and trompe l'oeil styling, each drawing both respects and misappropriates its source. Lies are heightened and new narratives are introduced to produce a set of five alternative archetypes, now characters, to charm the close-looking patron into believing that the respective forms are anything but bland.

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