A Phenomenology of Vision: the Self-Portraits of Jean-Étienne Liotard[*]

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Abstract
This essay analyses the self-portraits of Jean-Étienne Liotard (1702-1789). Interpreting these objects through the lens of Maurice-Merleau-Ponty's writings on art and vision, I argue that Liotard's self-portraits can be understood as artistic experiments relating to the fundamental phenomenological problem of seeing and representing the lived-body. In making this argument this essay re-evaluates the art-historical tendency to read Liotard's self-portraits biographically as pictures of his unusual life or as tools of self-promotion.

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'It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body – not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement.'

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1961)[1]

'One must never paint anything that one cannot see …'

Jean-Étienne Liotard (1781)[2]

Introduction

[1]   Jean-Étienne Liotard (1702-1789) was a prolific self-portraitist. Throughout his career he made more than twenty self-representations, mostly in pastel, but also in oil, chalk, enamels, miniatures and mezzotints.[3] Compared to some modern artists for whom the self has become the primary object of their work, twenty self-portraits may not sound particularly remarkable, but when compared with the *œuvres* of his contemporaries,

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[1] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in: *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. Carleton Dallery, Evanston 1964, 162.

[2] Jean-Étienne Liotard, *Traité des principes et des règles de la peinture* (1781), Geneva 1945, 82.

[3] Marcel Roethlisberger and Renée Loche, *Liotard. Catalogue, sources et correspondance*, vol. 1, Doornspijk 2008, 37-39.

Liotard's interest in himself as a subject starts to look like an obsession. At a time when artists tended to confine their output to a particular specialism (history painting, portraiture, landscape, still life etc.), many eighteenth-century artists went their entire careers without ever painting a portrait, let alone a self-portrait. Even among the great portraitists of the day, the self was not always a subject of much interest: Louis Tocqué (1696-1772) never painted a self-portrait, and Jean-Marc Nattier (1685-1766) and Jean-Baptiste Perronneau (1715-1783) each painted only one. Indeed Liotard was rivalled in quantity perhaps only by Maurice-Quentin de La Tour (1704-1788), but while La Tour's (always pastel) self-portraits are characterized by variety in pose and the pursuit of lively expression, most of Liotard's self-representations are better described as repetitive (despite his engagement with various media) as he reworked compositions and revisited distinctive costumes time and time again.

[2]   Faced with the question of why Liotard produced so many self-portraits, most scholars have looked for answers in biography. And frankly, given Liotard's bizarre life and career, it is no wonder. Born in Geneva in 1702, Liotard came to Paris in 1727 to work as an apprentice with the academician Jean-Baptiste Massé, staying until 1735, when, according to Pierre-Jean Mariette, he made an unsuccessful attempt to compete for the Académie royale's *prix de Rome*.[4] Following this failure, Liotard became something of an itinerant, travelling first to Italy and then Constantinople and Moldova in his efforts to launch a career.[5] Then, before his return to Western Europe in the 1740s, Liotard underwent the physical and sartorial transformation that would assure his future notoriety, growing a beard and donning oriental garments to refashion himself as the soon-to-be famous '*peintre turc*'. Causing a sensation wherever he went – Vienna, Paris, London, Amsterdam, Geneva – Liotard established a reputation as a fashionable portrait painter, counting royalty and other influential figures among his clientele.[6]

[3]   Given the dominance of life over art in Liotard's historiography, it is not surprising that scholars have tended to view his self-portraits as so many 'chapters of a mémoire', recounting the narrative of his career through costume changes.[7] Nor is this an unworthy line of inquiry, for Liotard's life and art certainly appear enmeshed in his self-portraits. Through sale, gift, public exhibition and reproduction, the circulation of these works

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[4] P. de Chennevières and Anatole de Montaiglon, eds., *Abecedario de P. J. Mariette et autres notes inédites de cet amateur sur les arts et les artistes*, vol. 3, Paris 1854-1856, 206.

[5] On Liotard's movements across Europe see Anne de Herdt, ed., *Dessins de Liotard*, exh. cat., Paris and Geneva 1992, 9-23; and Marcel Roethlisberger, "Liotard and Europe," in: *Jean-Étienne Liotard 1702-1789. Masterpieces from the Musées d'Art et d'Histoire of Geneva and Swiss Private Collections*, exh. cat., New York 2006, 9-12.

[6] On the sensation caused by Liotard's cultural cross-dressing see Herdt, *Dessins de Liotard*, 15-18.

[7] N. S. Trivas, "Les portraits de J.-É. Liotard par lui-même," in: *Revue de l'art ancien et moderne* 2 (1936), 153. See also Roethlisberger and Loche, *Liotard*, vol. 1, 38; and Claire Stoullig, "Self-Portraits," in: *Jean-Étienne Liotard 1702-1789. Masterpieces from the Musées d'Art et d'Histoire of Geneva and Swiss Private Collections*, exh. cat., New York 2006, 24-30.

became, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau has argued, the means by which Liotard actively propagated a particular artistic identity as they carried the image of the '*peintre turc*' across Europe.[8] Promoting his unique selling point as the exotically cross-dressed artist, Liotard's 'Turkish' self-portraits clearly had a practical function from which he profited significantly. But this biographical emphasis tells only part of the story. The tendency to conflate self-portraiture with autobiography or to read self-portraits as presentations of self has distorted our understanding of these objects as works of art. In this light, they are seen problematically, as both Ewa Lajer-Burcharth and Mary Sheriff have pointed out, either as efforts to rehearse or reinforce Liotard's sartorial or professional self-redefinition, or as little more than commercial promotion.[9] Moving us beyond the autobiographical, both Lajer-Burcharth and Sheriff have looked to psychology in their analyses of Liotard's trans-cultural self-portraits, exploring 'cosmopolitanism' and 'dislocation' to examine his cultural crossings. Their re-interpretations offer valuable insights into our understanding of Liotard's 'Turkish' self-portraits, but what of his self-portrait practice more broadly? How do we explain Liotard's enduring interest in himself as subject before, during and after his heyday as the '*peintre turc*' and how do we account for those repetitions and revisitings, and the often strange appearance of his body within these works?

[4]   The objects themselves tell a different story. When Liotard's self-portraits are viewed as a group, it is evident from his preoccupations and repetitions that Liotard was attempting to work through certain representational problems. For self-portraiture in fact posed a fundamental challenge to Liotard. This was an artist for whom the task of painting was not to invent, improvise or idealize, but rather to study nature and represent the world as it appeared before his eyes. 'One must never paint anything that one cannot see', he asserted in his treatise on painting.[10] Liotard's artistic pursuit of visual exactness was decisively challenged by the act of painting a self-portrait, that representational feat constrained by the phenomenological impossibility of directly seeing one's own body – the unique property of *le corps propre*, to invoke Maurice Merleau-Ponty.[11] To claim, as I want to, that in his self-portraits Liotard was grappling with that fundamental phenomenological challenge of self-seeing, might seem somewhat anachronistic for a period that not only pre-dated such formulations of the phenomenology of perception, but also did not even have a distinct linguistic signifier for a 'self-portrait'. The word

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[8] Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Jean-Étienne Liotard: Facing the Enlightenment," in: *Art in America*, November 2006, 152.

[9] Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, "Jean-Étienne Liotard's Envelopes of Self," in: *Cultures of Forgery. Making Nations, Making Selves*, eds. Judith Ryan and Alfred Thomas, New York and London 2003, 128; Mary D. Sheriff, "The Dislocations of Jean-Étienne Liotard, Called the Turkish Painter," in: *Cultural Contact and the Making of European Art since the Age of Exploration*, ed. Mary D. Sheriff, Chapel Hill 2010, 100.

[10] Liotard, *Traité*, 82.

[11] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, London 2002, 103-111.

'*autoportrait*' did not appear in French dictionaries until 1928.[12] When Liotard painted a self-portrait, he was not painting '*un autoportrait*' (with all its self-reflexive, *auto-*connotations), but rather '*un portrait de l'artiste peint par lui-même*' – a portrait of the artist painted by himself.[13] The language employed is not incidental. For Liotard, the self-portrait was not conceived as an introspective act, nor just as a presentation of a social identity, but first, foremost and always as the physiological and perceptual process of 'painting himself'.

[5] Before Merleau-Ponty's writings explored the phenomenological conundrum of self-representation, Liotard's self-portraits stand testament to the artist's experimentations with this very particular experience of being at once subject and object, a process with which he seems to have become increasingly concerned throughout his career. By returning the art historical inquiry to Liotard's body, by, as Merleau-Ponty implores us, going back to the artist's 'working, actual body – [… that] intertwining of vision and movement', we can start to understand Liotard's self-portraits in terms of the artistic process of bringing the world bodily into representation.[14] In this essay, I examine a selection of Liotard's self-portraits to explore the development of his engagement with the genre, offering an alternative interpretation of these works based on close visual analysis of the objects and using the artist's writings as a guide to understand the artistic projects he set himself. Seeing through the lens of Merleau-Ponty's writings on art and vision, I argue that Liotard's self-portraits be approached not as pictures of his life, but as artistic experiments with the fundamental phenomenological problem of seeing and representing *le corps propre*.

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Seeing himself from start to finish

[6] Liotard's interest in himself as a subject and object for his art was prolonged but not always consistent. He made his earliest self-portrait during his late twenties in Paris (Fig. 1) and his last as an old man in his eighties in Geneva (Fig. 2).[15] In the biographical readings of his self-portraits, these two works become the bookends of his life: the ambitious beginnings of his artistic career in the French capital and its quiet, contented conclusion back in the city of his birth. But what if these works are considered not as the bookends of a life, but as different developmental stages in Liotard's approach to self-

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[12] *Le Petit Robert*, Nouvelle Édition, Paris 2003, 186.

[13] For a more detailed discussion see Hannah Williams, "Autoportrait ou portrait de l'artiste peint par lui-même? Se peindre soi-même à l'époque moderne," in: *Images Re-vues* 7 (2009), http://imagesrevues.revues.org/574 (accessed 27 January 2012).

[14] Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", 162.

[15] For the dating of Liotard's self-portraits, see: Roethlisberger and Loche, *Liotard*, vol. 1, 243-244, 661.

portraiture, that is, as his first and final experiments in representing himself?[16] Viewed in this way, what we see is not so much Liotard's aging face or his increasingly casual appearance, but rather a shift in his artistic concerns with self-portraiture as a genre, a shift that might be characterized as moving from self-presentation to self-representation.

1 Jean-Étienne Liotard, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1731-1733, oil on canvas, 46 x 37 cm.
Private Collection (after Roethlisberger and Loche, *Liotard*, 2, Fig. 20)

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[16] I have designated these as Liotard's first and final self-portraits to provide conceptual points of departure and conclusion. It is possible that Liotard painted an earlier self-portrait in his youth, and the final drawing was made in preparation for a now lost painting, but in the absence of firm attribution or the object itself, these two works provide a tangible beginning and end.
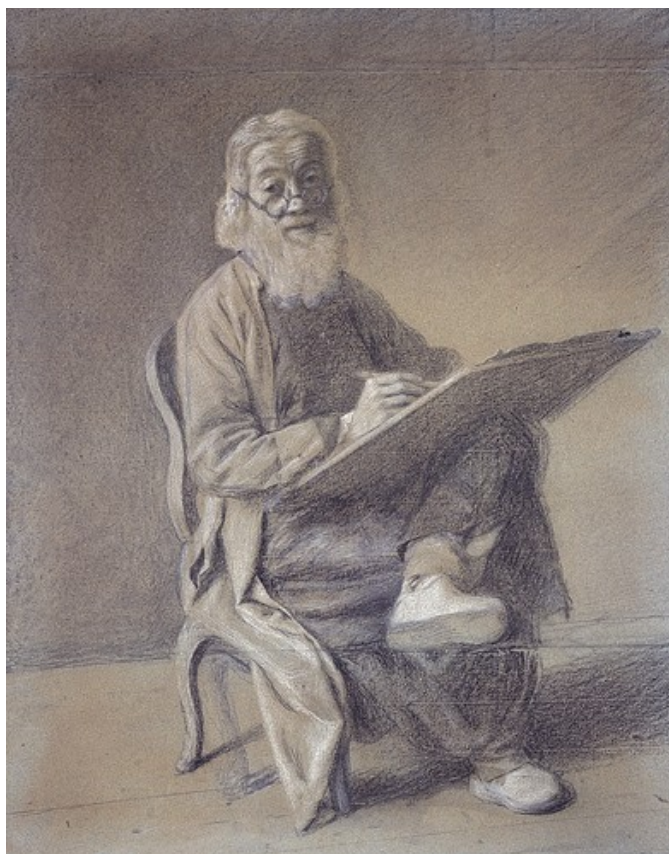
2 Jean-Étienne Liotard, *Self-Portrait 'dessiné et dessinant'*, c. 1782, black and white chalk on paper, 54 x 43 cm. © Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, Cabinet d'arts graphiques, inv. 1984-129 (Photo: Nathalie Sabato)

[7]   Liotard's first self-portrait (Fig. 1), with its bust-length format, takes a standard form for self-portraiture in early eighteenth-century France. Liotard shows himself here more as a young gentleman than a young artist; with the absence of hands, tools and painterly props, there is no artistic action and nothing to indicate Liotard's profession, let alone his role as the maker of the object. Intent on inscribing social status above and beyond even artistic identity, this could be a portrait of any young gentleman dressed in wig, suit and jabot, with only the sitter's fixed self-reflexive gaze (what T. J. Clark calls the 'look' of self-portraiture) hinting at its object-status as a self-portrait.[17] By the time of Liotard's final self-portrait (Fig. 2), however, everything has changed. Instead of the routine bust, Liotard has drawn a full-length image, a much rarer choice for self-portraits in the period. Sitting in a chair and sketching on a drawing board, it is now Liotard's body that has become the subject of the work – not just the body as a vehicle for communicating social identity, but the body as the working, active, living *corps* creating this image. This is a self-reflexive depiction of the corporeal experience of self-representation, which the artist referred to as himself '*dessiné et dessinant*' (drawn and drawing).[18] Liotard's direct 'look'

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[17] T. J. Clark, "The Look of Self-Portraiture," in: *Art Journal of Criticism* 5 (1992), 109-118; T. J. Clark, "The Look of Self-Portraiture," in: *Self Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary*, eds. Anthony Bond and Joanna Woodall, exh. cat., London 2005, 57-66.

[18] Liotard described this self-portrait in a list of works proposed for sale to the French royal collection in 1785. Roethlisberger and Loche, *Liotard*, vol. 1, 662.

remains the sign of self-portraiture, but it is now contextualized as only one of the bodily actions involved, inseparable from those other processes. Liotard's different concerns in the later image also explain another of its distinctive features, namely the artist's evident lack of interest in 'correcting' what he sees. The floor tips awkwardly behind him and seems to curve where it meets the wall; the parallelogram of his drawing board is slightly too acute to be an abstraction of a rectangle seen on that angle; and his crossed leg defies anatomical correctness as it seems to bend the wrong way as though from a joint in his calf. This is a representation of Liotard's vision of himself, not necessarily as he was, but as he saw himself. Taken as two moments in Liotard's artistic practice, the first and final self-portraits indicate a shift in what Liotard was trying to do (and how he was trying to see): from the 1730s, when Liotard was visualising an image of himself to be seen by someone else, to the 1780s, when he was attempting to visualize his own vision.

[8] Only a year before Liotard drew this final self-portrait, he produced a different kind of self-reflexive look at his artistic practice in his *Traité des principes et des règles de la peinture* (1781). The *Traité* was a manual, intended 'for young artists', in which Liotard elaborated certain technical and aesthetic theories.[19] Beginning with an essay that outlined his notion of the aesthetic principles of painting, Liotard then went on to expound twenty rules that offered the technical means of achieving those aesthetic ideals, usually phrased as imperative commands such as '*Peignez nettement, proprement et uniment*' or '*Evitez de peindre les objets que la peinture ne peut bien imiter*'.[20] Not conceived for oral presentation, unlike the majority of eighteenth-century artists' writings (e.g. the *Conférences* of the Académie royale or Joshua Reynolds' *Discourses*), Liotard's *Traité* was rather a handbook intended to be read and followed, designed 'to trace the path [that young artists] must follow, if they wish to attain perfection'.[21] For our purposes then, the *Traité* offers crucial insights into how, by the end of his career, Liotard had come to envisage his painting practice and what he imagined he was doing when he made a work of art. Of course, what Liotard did and what Liotard said he did are two different things not to be conflated, but his writings nevertheless reveal how his artistic interests had developed and how he conceptualised his task as an artist.

[9] What is most striking in Liotard's *Traité* is his constant drive for visual exactness, which pervades his theories of painting and his technical rules alike, and which ran so contrary to conventions of art theory during this period. He advocates an approach to painting in which the imitation of nature is the ultimate goal, to be achieved by painting with minute attention to detail (Rules 11 and 12), by eliminating visible traces of the artist's touch (Rule 7), and by avoiding taking as a subject anything that painting is not capable of

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[19] Liotard, *Traité*, 65.

[20] Liotard, *Traité*, 110, 114.

[21] Liotard, *Traité*, 65.

rendering, like rays of sunlight or glass (Rule 13).[22] Throughout the *Traité*, Liotard reveals a keen interest in the visual relationship between painting and nature, that is, between the object in the world and its representation on a flat surface. Describing painting as 'the immutable mirror' of nature, Liotard conceived of this relationship as a translation-like process in which the natural world was to be reflected in paint.[23] In startling contrast to the prevailing aesthetic theories of the day, Liotard thus privileged imitation over invention. While Reynolds in his *Discourses* declared that 'Nature herself is not to be too closely copied' for 'it is not the eye, [...but] the mind, which the painter of genius desires to address', Liotard saw the goal of painting otherwise.[24] Indeed, painting was unique as an art form, he claimed, not because of its appeal to the intellect, but because of its ability to reproduce 'all that it sees'.[25]

[10]   Liotard's notion of painting as an imitative translation of nature was not just a theoretical position, but also a practical concern, which was frequently noted by his contemporaries in their encounters with his works, some more positively than others. Liotard's imitations earned him the nickname the 'painter of truth', but they also incurred bitter critiques.[26] In his *Anecdotes*, Horace Walpole saw Liotard's painterly imitations as a misguided fault in his practice:

> Devoid of imagination, and one would think of memory, he could render nothing but what he saw before his eyes. Freckles, marks of the small-pox, everything found its place; not so much through fidelity, as because he could not conceive the absence of anything that appeared to him.[27]

[11]   Liotard's desire to paint only what he could see was, for Walpole, incomprehensible, and the artist's works suffered for his inability to invent or idealize: 'He cannot paint a blue ribband if a lady is dressed in purple knots'.[28] For Reynolds, Liotard's offense of visual exactness was enough to mark him as an amateur, as he allegedly remarked:

> The only merit in Liotard's pictures is neatness, [...] the characteristic of a low genius, or rather no genius at all. His pictures are just what ladies do when they paint for their amusement.[29]

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[22] Liotard, *Traité*, 81-101, 113-116.

[23] Liotard, *Traité*, 43.

[24] Joshua Reynolds, "Discourse III," in: *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, vol. 1, ed. Edmond Malone, London 1797, 35, 47.

[25] Liotard, *Traité*, 45.

[26] Pierre Clément, "Lettre CVII – 1 Septembre 1752," in: *Les cinq années littéraires, ou Nouvelles littéraires*, vol. 4, The Hague 1754, 143.

[27] Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of painting in England; with some account of the principal artists; and incidental notes on other arts*, vol. 4, Strawberry Hill 1765-1780, 90.

[28] Walpole, *Anecdotes*, vol. 3, 5.

[29] James Northcote, *The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, vol. 1, London 1810, 60.

[12]   What Liotard's critics saw as a lack of skill or misdirection was, as his *Traité* explains, actually a consciously conceived approach (whether it was successful or not), which intentionally sought visual exactness above all else.[30]

[13]   If we go back to Liotard's self-portraits with the technical and aesthetic ideas of his *Traité* in mind, then this is where the problem arises. For how could an artist whose entire aesthetic approach was based on the 'true' representation of the visible world, deal with the phenomenological problem of painting the one thing in the world that he could not see? In order to paint a self-portrait, one has to paint one's own body, but one can never see that lived-body in its entirety, the way we see other people's bodies, for our vision of ourselves is always either partial or mediated. As Merleau-Ponty notes, we can see our hands and feet, but never our faces or backs.[31] Our only visual access to our whole body is through the reflective surface of a mirror, providing what Merleau-Ponty terms a 'specular image'.[32] It is this visual impediment that makes self-portraiture unique as a form of representation, and which, for an artist intent on translating nature with visual exactness, makes 'true' self-representation technically impossible. To represent his own lived-body required the perceptual feat of self-objectification: to paint himself, Liotard had somehow to see himself. Perhaps an artist like Reynolds, who sought to improve nature through idealisation, could unconcernedly paint self-portraits via a mediated or partial vision of his body, but for Liotard, this phenomenological bind was a constraint that became a point of fascination as his aesthetic goals developed. Indeed, this is what we see when comparing Liotard's first self-portrait (Fig. 1) with his last (Fig. 2). Liotard's increasing concern with this phenomenological conundrum is manifest in that shift from being content to see himself as others saw him, to focusing entirely on his own corporeal experience of seeing himself, representing not only his body, but his body in the act of seeing his body.

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[30] For an analysis of Liotard's approach in terms of a cultural exchange with the alternative stylistic forms he encountered in his oriental travels, see Kristel Smentek, "Looking East: Jean-Étienne Liotard, the Turkish Painter," in: *Ars Orientalis* 39 (2010), 85-112.

[31] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, especially 103-105.

[32] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations with Others," in: *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. William Cobb, Evanston 1964, especially 125-129.

Seeing himself in the world

[14]   So how did Liotard get from start to finish, from self-presentation to self-representation? The *Traité* only indicates the artist's interests and goals as he envisaged them by the 1780s. As we have already seen, Liotard did not start out his career with his mature aesthetic approach intact, rather it was something that emerged through his artistic practice. To understand how Liotard's approach developed, it is the objects themselves that offer the most comprehensive record of his changing interests, something which becomes particularly evident when the self-portraits are isolated from his *œuvre* and observed as a group, for we start to discern shifts in his vision as he experimented with this distinctive genre. Though avoiding an emphasis on biography in this analysis of Liotard's self-portraits, it is thus nevertheless important to keep track of chronology. Staying with the early years of his career, I want to turn next to two portraits that Liotard produced after leaving Paris in 1735: one made in Italy before his Ottoman travels (Fig. 3) and the other after his return, at the moment of his European début as the '*peintre turc*' (Fig. 4). While there is a striking difference in his sartorial presentation in these two works, there is something very similar in how Liotard was seeing his body at this point, a representational approach that I would argue suggests how he was beginning to deal with finding an objective vision of himself.

3 Jean-Étienne Liotard, *Self-Portrait*, 1737, pastel, 38 x 24.7 cm. © Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, Cabinet d'arts graphiques, inv. 1934-12 (Photo: Bettina Jacot-Descombes)

4 Jean-Étienne Liotard, *Self-Portrait*, 1744, pastel, 61 x 49 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi,
Florence / The Bridgeman Art Library

[15]   About six years after his first self-portrait, during his time in Florence in 1737, Liotard
made a small pastel self-portrait (Fig. 3), which, in many ways, looks quite similar to the
earlier work. Again a bust-length Liotard appears as a model European gentleman in wig,
suit and jabot, and apart from the shift from oil to pastel, and the slightly brighter palette
that ensued, not much seems to have changed. Fast-forward seven years to Vienna in
1744 and Liotard looks dramatically different, at least on the surface (Fig. 4). Made after
his return from Constantinople and Moldova, Liotard has effected here his transformation
into the '*peintre turc*'. With a large fur tocque, a shapeless brown caftan, and a full bushy
beard, he is barely recognisable as the clean-shaven, wigged gentleman from the earlier
works. And yet beyond this costume change, nothing much, in terms of form and
composition, is intrinsically different. All three portraits show a bust-length figure, his
body turned but his eyes looking directly at the viewer, positioned before a monochrome
ground with just enough tonal variation to suggest some spatial depth. On closer
inspection, however, the two later self-portraits (Figs. 3 and 4) are distinguished from the
first by one significant detail: the inclusion of elaborate signature inscriptions.

[16]   Liotard's inscriptions demand particular attention because they are such an uncommon
feature in self-portraits (and indeed portraits generally) of this period, thus inviting the
question of how and why Liotard used them.[33] For why add words to a painting? In the
earlier self-portrait (Fig. 3), the words are written (more so than drawn) at the bottom of
the image and read: *Gio: Stefanus Liotard Ginevera Fatto da se medesimo l'anno 1737 in*

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[33] On signatures in eighteenth-century painting see Charlotte Guichard, "La signature dans le
tableau aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siecles: identité, réputation et marché de l'art," in: *Sociétés et
representations*, Special Issue (2008), 49-79.

Firenze. In the later self-portrait, the words appear in the top left corner, a little more resolved in their application but still 'written': *J. E. Liotard de Geneve Surnommé le Peintre Turc peint par lui meme a Vienne 1744*. As representations, words and pictures encourage different kinds of interpretations, but words-in-pictures prompt an ambivalent response, a switching back and forth between reading and viewing: do we interpret these words as linguistic signifiers, or do we analyse the formal relationship between these marks and the rest of the representational plane?

[17]   When read for their meaning, the phrases in both portraits say something similar. Each inscription clearly indexes Liotard's name (*Gio: Stefanus Liotard / J. E. Liotard*), his nationality (*Ginevera / de Geneve*) and the year (*l'anno 1737 / 1744*) and city (*in Firenze / a Vienne*) in which the portrait was produced. The inscriptions thus locate the artist temporally and geographically, but they also establish a more complex cultural location for Liotard, not least through language. In the first, the Genevan artist in Italy has perceived himself in Italian: even Jean-Étienne has become *Gio: Stefanus* as Liotard has linguistically and figuratively made (*fatto*) himself (*se medesimo*) Italian. In 1737, trying to fit into a new professional context in Italy, Liotard made himself like the others around him. In 1744, however, he instead tried to distinguish himself, by staying European but appropriating a cultural otherness that made him stand out from the crowd. In the later self-portrait, the inscription is in French, Liotard's native tongue as a Genevan, but also the court language of Vienna. Employing the lingua franca, this time Liotard did not have to translate himself for his audience, and yet within this French phrase is included that additional and alien cultural signifier, '*le Peintre Turc*'.[34] The meaning of the words thus reiterates what we see in the image of Liotard: this is a European fashioned as a foreigner, the Genevan artist '*Surnommé*' the Turkish painter. Taken with his sartorial presentations, both inscriptions thus work to create what Sheriff calls a cultural 'matrix' within which Liotard is suspended, as he attempts, quite literally, to locate himself in the world.[35]

[18]   What remains consistent is that these two self-portraits were conceived and constructed in relation to others: whether an other with which Liotard wanted to identify, or an other from which he sought to distinguish himself. By including these unusual inscriptions, Liotard reveals a hyperawareness of his works having an audience. In their third-person form (*Fatto da se medesimo / peint par lui meme*), the words are not, ostensibly, enunciated by Liotard, but they nevertheless function as a form of address, purporting to explain the image to someone else (someone other than the maker who would not require an explanation). It is not surprising then to find that Liotard actively ensured a public engagement for these objects. In 1737 the Italian self-portrait (Fig. 3) was

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[34] For a fascinating analysis of the inscription in this self-portrait see Sheriff, "The Dislocations of Jean-Étienne Liotard," 97-121

[35] Sheriff, "The Dislocations of Jean-Étienne Liotard," 103.

exhibited at the Florentine Accademia and then passed into the collection of the Italian amateur, Francesco Maria Niccolò Gabburri in Florence.[36] Meanwhile, the Viennese self-portrait (Fig. 4) was commissioned by Francis I, Grand Duke of Tuscany (and later Holy Roman Emperor), for the prestigious collection of self-portraits in the Uffizi Palace, where it remains today.[37] If these public lives of the self-portraits are considered in relation to Liotard's acts of signing them, then it is evident that the words were not just additions, but were integral to what the objects were intended to do. By inscribing them with these explanatory words, Liotard was seeing himself objectively as a social body – describing that body in the third person by locating it temporally, geographically and culturally so that others would understand what they saw. Underlying these acts of self-representation was Liotard's acknowledgment of himself as a social subject that was, for others, a social object. This was Liotard looking-at-himself, but more than that, it was Liotard-looking-at-himself-being-looked-at.

[19] But what about the pictorial form of these words? What happens when the words are not read, but rather viewed as marks within the representational plane? While semantically these inscriptions act to locate Liotard in the world, representationally, those subsemiotic marks that form the words trigger a significant counterpoint to their meaning, for the words are located 'nowhere'.[38] In the earlier work (Fig. 3), the words at the bottom are inscribed on a rectangular grey panel that serves as the stone ledge before which Liotard is seated. The words, however, do not appear carved into stone or in any way pictorialized into the scene; the black lines are instead chalked onto the layer of grey pastel already covering the surface of the paper. Written over their separate panel, Liotard has drawn these marks neither entirely in the painting nor entirely on it. The words are on the surface of the 'stone', but also on the surface of pastel that constitutes that fictive stone. Indeed this disjunction almost forces the grey panel visually to break away from the illusion of the scene above. In the later portrait, where there is not even a panel to contain them, the words of the inscription are even more ambiguously nowhere. In the top corner, the words appear against the undifferentiated background of the work, seen either as though written on a wall behind Liotard, or else floating superficially on the work's chalky surface. Simultaneously part-of and yet distinct-from the representational plane, these inscriptions confuse the boundaries between what is image and what is object: they force the viewer to oscillate between seeing the self-portrait as a visual illusion representing Liotard, and seeing its materiality as a surface painted by Liotard.

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[36] Nicholas Turner, "The Gabburri/Rogers Series of Drawn Self-Portraits and Portraits of Artists," in: *Journal of the History of Collecting* 5:2 (1993), 179-216.

[37] Sheriff, The Dislocations of Jean-Étienne Liotard," 98; Roethlisberger and Loche, *Liotard*, vol. 1, 321.

[38] On the subsemiotic pictorial register see James Elkins, "Marks, Traces, 'Traits', Contours, 'Orli', and 'Splendores': Nonsemiotic Elements in Pictures," in: *Critical Inquiry* 21:4 (1995), 822-60.

Through these word-shaped marks, Liotard declares the artifice of the vision before us, as they perpetually prevent us from succumbing completely to the illusion.

[20] These subsemiotic marks are not, however, merely abstract traces of chalk. The marks form letters, which form words, which not only have meanings, but also here act as signatures – the very indices of Liotard's artistic identity. The instability in their representation thus draws attention to a similar lack of fixity in the location of Liotard within these self-portraits. The signatures connect that painted body inside the frame to the real body outside – the Liotard who sat and the Liotard who signed; they emphasize Liotard's ambiguous, if not impossible, position here as maker of the object, subject of the image, and beholder of both. For which one of these agents is the 'Liotard' described, and which was doing the describing? In chalking these words onto the surface of the paper, it is as though Liotard was unable to decide where he was in these representations of his body. By placing the signatures simultaneously inside and outside the image, he becomes part-of and yet distinct-from the space of the painting: making and made. The disparity in meaning and the representation of the words disrupts the vision of his body: Liotard is not able to maintain either a wholly third-person view of himself, nor a wholly first-person view. Both self-portraits are an attempt on the part of the artist to represent himself objectively (both in word and image) as others saw him, but the illusion is impossible to sustain.

[21] Considered in relation to his self-portraits as a group, these two early inscribed works demonstrate an initial awareness of the conceptual problem that Liotard encountered when trying to paint his own body, and perhaps even a nascent questioning of whether indeed this act was possible. At one level, the inclusion of the signature inscriptions looks like a solution: by firmly locating the body through those linguistic signifiers of name, time and place, Liotard achieved an objective (third-person) portrait of himself as a social body. Yet at the same time, his inability to find a location for the words within the representational plane highlights the physical impossibility of that self-objectification, for evidently Liotard was unable to stand outside himself. Already then by the late 1730s and mid-1740s, Liotard had begun to grapple with the problem posed by the task of self-representation, where the roles of maker, subject and beholder were simultaneously occupied by the same person.[39]

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Seeing himself as art

[22] Some years later, Liotard started experimenting with a different solution to this problem of self-objectification. Having achieved considerable success as a society portraitist across

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[39] For an elaboration of this problematic see Derrida's notion of the triadic relation between 'subject', 'object', and 'signatory'. Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind. The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Chicago and London 1993, 62.

Europe, in 1757, Liotard re-settled in Geneva and shaved off his celebrated beard.[40] Over the next two decades, alongside his commercial practice, he developed a more self-reflexive engagement with the technical and aesthetic aspects of his art-making. Already at this point (nearly twenty years before his *Traité*), Liotard had begun formulating theory from practice, most notably in an essay he published in the *Mercure de France* in 1762. Primarily a discourse against painterly brushwork for not being true to life – '*la nature n'a pas de touche*' – Liotard also wrote here anecdotally about the process of copying, about how copyists do not merely reproduce form, but rather use form to create a new work of art that is often better than the original.[41] It was exactly this mechanism of copying that was informing Liotard's approach to self-portraiture during this period from the mid-1760s to the mid-1770s, when Liotard embarked on an unprecedentedly sustained engagement with the genre.

[23]   During this time Liotard made at least ten self-portraits in various media (oil, pastel, miniature, drawing, and prints), but despite their material differences, nearly all of these works are characterized by a remarkable sense of seriality (Figs. 5-7). Almost without exception, Liotard depicted himself in these works at bust- or half-length, his body oriented towards the right (or towards the left in his prints), wearing a jacket and shirt, with a cap upon his head of natural white hair.[42] Striking in their simplicity, the portraits are composed of minimal elements and, where colour is used, executed in a limited, mostly primary, palette of reds and blues with white and black. Gesture is restrained and in most cases there is little detail or texture in the sitter's costume or in his surroundings, which are usually limited to a monochrome background.[43] If Liotard's earlier inscribed self-portraits were attempts to achieve an objective vision of a social body, then these serial self-portraits of the 1760s and 1770s constituted experiments of a different kind, in which he was seeing himself not as a social identity or even as flesh, but always already as an image: a body located in, constructed by, and viewed as art.

[24]   In this repetitive engagement with self-portraiture over roughly a decade, Liotard was seeing his body as an objective assortment of colour and form. Looking at all these portraits together, we see Liotard working through that problem of self-objectification by repeatedly creating the same image of himself in a variety of media, on different scales, and by making subtle variations in colour, composition, pose and lighting. In two pastel self-portraits from circa 1768 (Figs. 5 and 6), for example, the bodies represented are

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[40] On Liotard's biography see: Duncan Bull, *Jean-Étienne Liotard (1702-1789)*, Amsterdam 2002; and François Fosca, *Liotard (1702-1789)*, Paris 1928.

[41] Jean-Étienne Liotard, "Explication des différens jugemens sur la peinture," in: *Mercure de France*, November 1762, 179, 177.

[42] Other self-portraits from this period not illustrated here include: *Self-Portrait*, c. 1765-67 (Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva) and the self-portrait known as *Liotard Laughing*, c. 1770 (Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva).

[43] The only notable exception being *Liotard Laughing* with its addition of a green curtain to the setting.

practically identical. Every kink in the collar is repeated, each fold in the jacket and depression in the hat is the same. Even the strands of hair around his head are in the same place. The iris of his strangely bulging right eye stares at the same angle, as does that of the slightly drooping left eye, and there are matching contoured lines across his forehead and around his mouth, giving him the same half-lipped semi-smile in each painting. Yet despite these similarities between the bodies, the portraits themselves are quite different, and the second is by no means an exact copy of the first. In the second self-portrait, which is markedly smaller than the first, the body was repositioned much further up the support and the background lightened from almost black to a reddish brown, which prevents it from overwhelming the figure as it does in the earlier work. Liotard's treatment of the pastel medium has also changed, with the extensive stumping in the earlier work giving way to a freer technique with less blending of colour in the later work. As a result of these changes, the second Liotard presents a less sombre demeanour than the earlier Liotard, making the same expression seem less firm and resolute.

[25]   Not a copy then, but certainly copied. In making the first self-portrait, Liotard presumably worked from the reflection of himself in a mirror. With the second portrait, however, rather than representing his body as directly as possible from nature via the mirror, Liotard instead used the earlier pastel body as a model, copying its form to create a new composition. For Liotard, art-making was always to some extent a process of copying – painting being that 'immutable mirror' of nature – but in the process of making that second self-portrait, he took these principles quite literally.[44] Painting the second (Fig. 6) from the first (Fig. 5) meant deferring the referent of the lived-body by yet another degree – first mediated by the mirror into a specular image, and then mediated further by the additional stage of representation. In painting a previously painted image of himself, Liotard's self-portrait was an act of representation achieved through a technically self-objectifying vision: Liotard was seeing himself, quite literally, as an object, as a work of art.
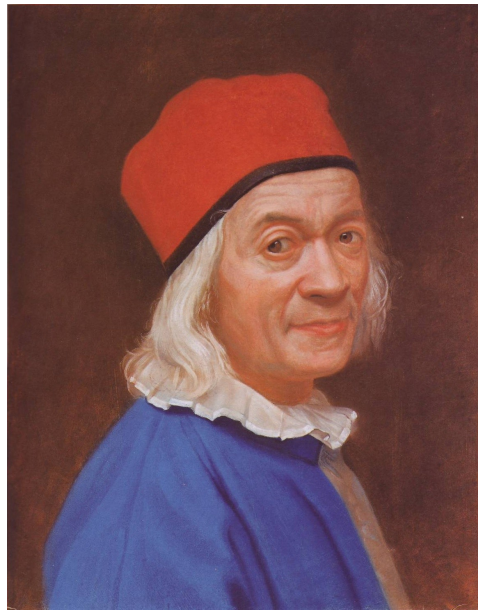
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[44] Liotard, *Traité*, 43 and 45.

5 Jean-Étienne Liotard, *Self-Portrait 'au bonnet rouge'*, c. 1768, pastel, 63 x 51 cm.
Bequest of Madame Louis Odier-Lecointe, Bibliothèque de Genève (Photo: BGE,
Centre d'iconographie genevoise)

6 Jean-Étienne Liotard, *Self-Portrait 'au bonnet rouge'*, c. 1768, pastel, 50 x 41 cm.
Private Collection (after Roethlisberger and Loche, *Liotard*, 2, Fig. 650)

[26]   A similar act of technical self-objectification, or an artistic 'copying' of the body, was also responsible for the mezzotint (Fig. 8) that Liotard made to serve as the first plate of his *Traité des principes et des règles de la peinture* (1781). Derived from the pastel self-portrait of circa 1770 (Fig. 7), the mezzotint was, as with any print after a painting, the result of a reproductive process. As an act of self-portraiture, however, the mezzotint once again involved a deferral of himself as referent through a technical and objective vision of his body. Representing the body in print did not require a visual encounter with his own body at all; instead the model was the pastel body, whose colour was translated into tone, and whose chalky form was rendered as marks and indentations on the plate.

As with the earlier example, this was not just a straightforward case of copying, for the reproductive process and the requirements of technique resulted in a very different image. Indeed, when compared with the pastel, the mezzotint looks in many ways like an original self-portrait. Apart from the crisper lines and more delineated features in the face and details in the clothing, there are also more substantive compositional differences. In the mezzotint, the figure's sleeve falls back to reveal a shirt cuff not present in the pastel, and a chair has been added, giving the figure a more grounded position within the picture plane. The composition was reversed by the printing process, but Liotard had already reoriented the figure's body, turning him further to the side thereby obscuring the other arm which is visible in the pastel. The figure's head is also turned and tilted differently, so our encounter with his face in the mezzotint is no longer so frontal. Perhaps most affecting, however, is the alteration to the position of his hand (once right, now left), which has changed from that strange and vulnerable gesture in the pastel where Liotard holds his throat, to a much more legible gesture of pensive chin-holding.

7 Jean-Étienne Liotard, *Self-Portrait 'la main au menton'*, c. 1770, pastel, 63 x 52 cm.
© Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, Cabinet d'arts graphiques, inv. 1925-5 (Photo: Bettina Jacot-Descombes)

8 Jean-Étienne Liotard, *Self-Portrait 'la main au menton'* (small version) (Plate No. 1 from Jean-Étienne Liotard, *Traité des principes et des règles de la peinture*, Geneva, 1781), mezzotint, 48 x 38.5cm. © Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, Cabinet d'arts graphiques, inv. E2010-13 (Photo: CdAG)

[27]   Once again, this is not a 'copy', but a self-portrait drawn from art rather than from life. Just how art-made the body had become for Liotard is suggested in the inscription that he added beneath the print: *I. E. LIOTARD / Effet. Clair obscur sans sacrifice*. Inscriptions beneath prints were much more conventional than inscriptions in paintings, but if Liotard's choice of words here is compared with those earlier inscriptions, the distinct shift in Liotard's vision is evident. Like the earlier ones, this inscription starts with his name (*I. E. LIOTARD*) and is followed by a set of words that describe their subject. The content of the description has, however, changed significantly. Gone are the temporal, geographical and cultural signifiers, to be replaced by a technical description of the work: Liotard is no longer a certain man in a certain place at a certain time; now 'Liotard' is an artistic effect, 'Liotard' is simply well-balanced chiaroscuro. Moreover this time the inscription visibly disentangles his role as maker of the object from his role as subject of the image. Traditionally the text under a print gives the name of the painter at the far left, the name of the printmaker at the far right, and beneath them in the middle, the title or subject of the work. In this instance, 'Liotard' should have appeared in all three, but instead his name occupies only the position of subject. 'Liotard' the work of art, is divorced visually from Liotard the maker by the expanse of white space separating *I. E. LIOTARD* from the words *gravé par lui meme*, which is the only disembodied sign of authorship, given that the painter's name has been replaced with the *No. I* that catalogues its place in the order of illustrations in the book.

[28]   In the text of the *Traité* itself, Liotard refers to the self-portrait on several occasions (often simply as 'No. I'), each time revealing the extent of his technically objective vision. Whenever he mentions the self-portrait, Liotard presents it as an example of various

formal effects, seemingly indifferent to the subject matter, as though it were comparable to any inanimate still life or landscape. He never discusses what he (the figure) is doing, but only how he (the artist) made it, seeing this image not in terms of *who* is represented, but rather *what* is represented. Amid a discussion of chiaroscuro, for example, he writes:

> See No. I, my portrait: here I have attempted to achieve a fine chiaroscuro; and while my shadows are deep, they are nevertheless soft, having sacrificed nothing to the lights. The shadow of the hair and the shirt being a little darker than the lightest light in the suit, this half-length figure is detached from his background; one can see here the application of several principles that I am attempting to explicate in this text.[45]

[29] The view of himself that Liotard articulates in the text of the *Traité* is resolutely objective: his body is simply form, modelled by shades of light and dark, located in a planar space; a good example of certain techniques.[46] Liotard's relationship with his represented self has become manifestly detached. There is a linguistic distinction in how Liotard, the maker, positions himself in relation to his art-made body-subject, where he differentiates grammatically between a first-person Liotard, who makes the image ('*I* have attempted to achieve a fine chiaroscuro…', '*my* shadows are strong…'), and a third-person Liotard, whose body is represented in the work ('*this* half-length figure is detached from *his* background…'). Just as Liotard's process of making the mezzotint self-portrait involved an objective gaze on an art-made body, so too did his experience of viewing it.

[30] Liotard's approach to self-representation in this mature period of his career involved a process of separating out his roles as maker and beholder from his role as subject of the image. If at this point we recall Merleau-Ponty's notion of the lived-body, we can understand Liotard's technically objective vision of his art-made body as Liotard separating, or at least distinguishing between, the 'phenomenal' body of the artist, seeing and making, and the 'objective' body of the artist, seen and made.[47] For an artist preoccupied with translating the visual world into paint – with painting 'all that [painting] sees' – Liotard's artistic self-objectification became a solution to that perceptual conundrum of seeing himself. By representing himself almost to the point of schematization in these serial self-portraits, by painting himself from art rather than from life, by increasingly deferring the referent of the lived-body through a series of representational stages, and then by viewing that represented body through a technical gaze as a composition of tone and form, it seems that Liotard had found, if not a way of, then at least a way around, painting the one thing in the world that he could not see.

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[45] Liotard, *Traité*, 57-58.

[46] Liotard, *Traité*, 60-61, 107, 109-110.

[47] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining – The Chiasm," in: *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Evanston 1968, 136-137.

Seeing himself seen

[31]   During that period in the 1760s and 1770s when Liotard was painting his serial self-portraits, he also painted a very unusual landscape (Fig. 9), one of the few landscapes that he ever produced. The work depicts a view from Liotard's home on the former rue Saint Antoine in Geneva, identified as the view from the room which served as Liotard's painting studio.[48] Through an open window, the scene looks across Liotard's garden, several fields and a canal, to the snowy peaks of Mont Blanc in the distance. I say 'looks' because that is exactly what the painting does. It is an intentional representation of the artist's vision. The truncated window frame is a startlingly modern detail for an eighteenth-century image, constructing an unexpectedly casual view that refuses the conventional anonymity of an early modern landscape scene by claiming that view as belonging to a specific individual.[49] Liotard's cropping suggests a consciously experimental attempt to depict exactly what he saw. When viewing this painting, we are blocked by the same object that impeded the artist's own sight line as he looked out the window of his studio; we encounter this scene through Liotard's eyes and experience the image as a representation of his vision.

9 Jean-Étienne Liotard, *View from the artist's studio in Geneva*, c. 1768, pastel,
45 x 58 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, SK-A-1197 (Photo: Rijksmuseum)

[32]   Problematically, however, at the same time as seeing through Liotard's eyes, we also see the body of Liotard. In the left foreground, opposite the cropped window frame, we see a

[48] The rue Saint Antoine is the present day rue des Chaudronniers. Roethlisberger and Loche, *Liotard*, vol. 1, 578.

[49] Solomon-Godeau, "Jean-Étienne Liotard," 152.

small image of the artist, recognisable in his blue jacket, white collar and red cap from the self-portraits he was making at that time. Yet we encounter Liotard here differently from in those serial self-portraits (Figs. 5-7), where he looked out directly with that distinctive 'look' of self-portraiture associated with viewing oneself in a mirror. In *View from the Artist's Studio*, by contrast, Liotard does not meet the viewer's gaze but looks perpendicularly across the picture plane, with his face and body in profile. This pose establishes a visual paradox, for the profile is an aspect that it is only possible to take on another person's body, never our own. The *View* is thus an impossible vision: though seeing through Liotard's eyes, we see his body in a way that only others could.

[33] In no uncertain terms, *View from the Artist's Studio* articulates the phenomenological conundrum of self-portraiture. Yet Liotard does not try here to find a solution to this problem of vision, instead he poses the enigma as a question: how is it possible that one can see and be seen at the same time? For the artist who wrote that 'one must never paint anything that one cannot see', this painting reads like a declaration that there is something that can be seen and therefore can be painted, but not by him.[50] There was nothing intrinsic to Liotard's body that made it un-paintable (it was not like rays of sunlight or glass), but Liotard could not paint himself as he saw himself, because he could not actually see himself. The impossibility of the vision is manifest in the composition and treatment of the *View*, where minute detail, such as the foliage in the garden, gives way to indistinct passages like the wall, which is so undefined as a form that it creates a cognitive optical illusion. Switching between appearing flat and appearing to turn a corner, the wall initiates a gestalt shift in the viewer (like Ernst Gombrich's duck-rabbit), in which we can see the figure's chalk as touching the wall, or we can see it as parallel to the wall, but not both at the same time.[51] This spatial uncertainty destabilizes the figure of Liotard, who is already proportionally too small for the scene. He has no clear position within the painting and the unfinished passage over his chest reiterates his extremely ambiguous and uncomfortable presence within the image, just as his 'un-located' inscriptions had in the earlier works.

[34] More than any of his other self-portraits, *View from the Artist's Studio* enunciates the representational problem posed by the lived-body. By constructing two distinct but simultaneous perspectives – the subjective first-person artist who sees from here, and the objective third-person artist who is seen over there – Liotard acknowledged the limits that conditioned his visual experience of his own body. In 'Eye and Mind', Merleau-Ponty's essay on the phenomenology of painting, he describes these conditions as 'the enigma' of the lived-body, that it 'simultaneously sees and is seen', that it 'sees itself seeing'.[52] It is

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[50] Liotard, *Traité*, 82.

[51] Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, 11th edition, Princeton 2000, 5-6.

[52] Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 162.

this perceptual enigma, he argues, that makes the self-portrait such an intriguing form of representation for artists, particularly those self-portraits made before a mirror showing themselves in the very act of making.[53] Liotard made several such act-of-making self-portraits throughout his career, among them his stunning pastel *Self-Portrait at the Easel* of circa 1751-1752 (Fig. 10) and his final self-portrait, which we encountered at the beginning of this essay, referred to as Liotard '*dessiné et dessinant*' (Fig. 2).

[35]   In the first (Fig. 10), Liotard sits before an easel and looks directly out of the image with a fixed gaze, his mouth gaping as though with the effort of studying himself in the mirror. Likewise in the later drawing, Liotard has represented himself in that moment of artistic self-scrutiny, looking long-sightedly over his glasses as though focusing on the distant mirror before turning back to look through the glasses at his drawing board. Merleau-Ponty argued that the mirror was a fascination to artists because of the visual possibilities it allowed, changing 'things into spectacle, spectacle into things' and most importantly with regard to self-portraiture, changing 'myself into another, and another into myself'.[54] In both *Self-Portrait at the Easel* and *Self-Portrait 'dessiné et dessinant'* – these act-of-making self-portraits – Liotard engages with the objective perspective upon his body that was permitted by the 'specular image' seen in the mirror.

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[53] Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 169.

[54] Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 168.
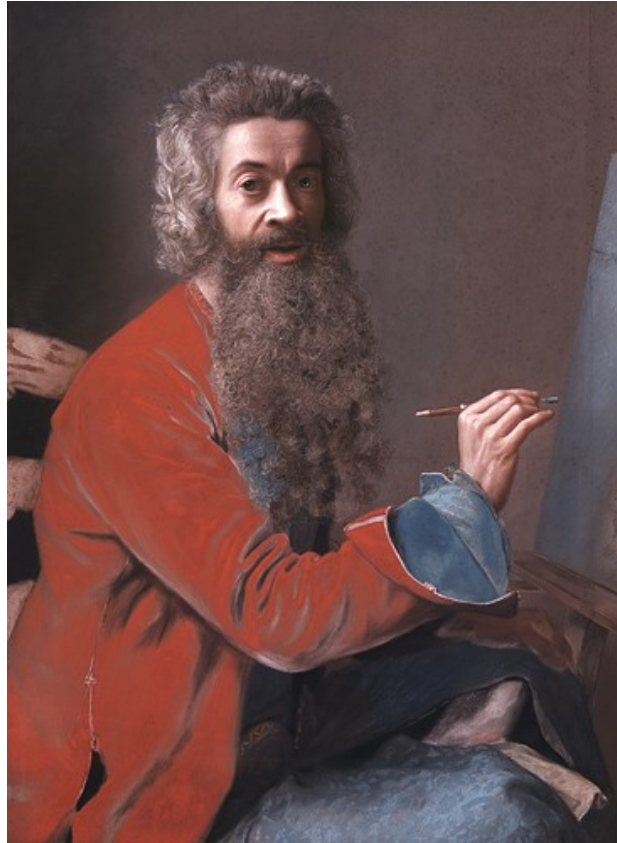
10 Jean-Étienne Liotard, *Self-Portrait at the Easel*, c. 1751-1752,
pastel, 97 x 71 cm. © Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, Cabinet d'arts
graphiques, inv. 1843-5 (Photo: Bettina Jacot-Descombes)

[36]   Supposedly showing Liotard drawing himself in the very act of drawing himself, these
works set up an elusory visual encounter between various bodies and surfaces. When we
see Liotard's chalked body on the surface of the paper, his direct gaze (and in the case of
Self-Portrait at the Easel, his life-sized dimensions) invite us to imagine a parallel with
the real Liotard's encounter with the surface of the mirror. In this face-off, where
beholder replaces artist and painting replaces mirror, we imagine that what we see on the
paper is what Liotard saw when he looked in the mirror.[55] In that sense, and given
Liotard's overarching concern with reproducing only what he could see, we might expect
Self-Portrait at the Easel and *Self-Portrait 'dessiné et dessinant'* to be exact
representations of the specular image that Liotard saw. As such, the chalked body on the
paper would replicate the reflected body on the mirror's surface, so that the represented
bodies would be reversals of the artist's real body. Yet this is not the case. These images
do not show what Liotard saw in the mirror because they are corrected versions of that
specular image. The self-portraits do not show Liotard as a reversed left-handed
reflection, but rather they show us his lived-body, as it actually was, working with his
right hand.[56] Rather than representing what he saw (his specular image), Liotard instead

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[55] On Liotard's concern with the mirror see: Solomon-Godeau, "Jean-Étienne Liotard," 154.

[56] The direction of Liotard's hatching in his drawings indicates a right-handed body orientation,
suggesting that Liotard was right-handed or at least drew with his right hand. Michael Fried,
Manet's Modernism, or the Face of Painting in the 1860s, Chicago and London 1996, 372. See also

represented how he was seen, a vision of himself which, like the profile in *View from the Artist's Studio*, belonged to another.[57]

[37] In these act-of-making self-portraits, Liotard demonstrates an awareness of the problematic interaction between his act of looking in the mirror and his act of representation, between what he saw and what he drew. In *Self-Portrait at the Easel*, we see the surface upon which Liotard is drawing, but instead of finding an image of the artist – the thing he is supposedly drawing – we see a passage of blue chalk nearly covering the sheet. In this strange abstract block of colour, Liotard calls attention to the impossibility of what is taking place. This support on the easel being steadily filled with blue chalk is made into a non-representational surface, which in turn negates whatever representational act is supposedly happening here: whatever Liotard is doing, it cannot be the impossible act of self-representation. In *Self-Portrait 'dessiné et dessinant'*, the title itself already directs our attention to the idea of the self-portrait as a representational act. Liotard is drawing and drawn, both subject and object of the work, an articulation that creates a revealing parallel with Merleau-Ponty's notion of '*voyant-visible*' – seeing-seen – by which he characterizes that experience of seeing one's body in a mirror.[58]

[38] Yet as viewers of *Self-Portrait 'dessiné et dessinant'*, we have to take the title on faith, for we are denied the opportunity of verifying whether at this moment Liotard was indeed drawing and drawn, seeing and seen. We see his body drawn on the sheet of paper and that figure is apparently drawing, his chalk poised over a drawing board, but the surface of this board is hidden, as is the point where the tip of the chalk might connect with this surface. Seeing only the back of the drawing board and the end of the chalk, we cannot know whether he is drawing himself or not. It is this kind of representational impossibility that prompts Jacques Derrida in his *Memoirs of the Blind* to argue that we must always qualify any discussion of a self-portrait by saying 'if there were such a thing'.[59] Writing of a self-portrait by Henri Fantin-Latour in a passage that resonates with Liotard's *Self-Portrait 'dessiné et dessinant'*, Derrida observes: '[e]ven if one were sure that [he] were drawing himself drawing, one would never know, *observing the work alone*, whether he were showing himself drawing *himself* or *something else* – or even himself *as something else*, *as other*'.[60]

[39] If Liotard's processes of making *Self-Portrait at the Easel* and *Self-Portrait 'dessiné et dessinant'* are considered in terms of Merleau-Ponty's analysis of what happens when someone looks in a mirror, then 'drawing himself as other' is exactly how we should

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Roethlisberger and Loche, *Liotard*, vol. 1, 661.

[57] As a contrast, see Fried's excellent analysis of Henri Fantin-Latour's 'ocular realist' self-portraits, which represent the specular image rather than a corrected vision. Fried, *Manet's Modernism*, 371-372.

[58] Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," especially 168.

[59] Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 62.

[60] Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 65.

understand these two act-of-making self-portraits. In the *Primacy of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty writes of the perceptual experience of looking in a mirror as a fundamental encounter, because in this moment the embodied subject is faced with an external image of the subjective self.[61] It is through this objectification of the subjective self that we come to understand ourselves as a self in the world: through the specular image in the mirror, we are offered an experience of how the lived-body is seen by other people. It is thus through this mirror experience that we gain an awareness of ourselves in relation to others, or in Merleau-Ponty's words: 'I understand […] that what is in the mirror is my image for being able to represent to myself, the other's viewpoint on me; and, inversely, I understand all the more the experience the other can have of me for seeing myself in the mirror in the aspect that I offer him'.[62] In Liotard's act-of-making self-portraits, the artist sees himself objectively. Looking in the mirror, Liotard saw his specular image (a reversal of his body) but in executing the portrait, he made a corrected version of this image to show his body as it was experienced by others. In the process of making the portraits, Liotard acknowledges that there is a viewpoint to be taken on him; he draws 'self' as 'other'. Despite his obsessive concern with reproducing the world as he saw it, with, as Walpole had it, rendering 'nothing but what he saw before his eyes', in these two works, Liotard represented what could only be seen by someone else.

[40]   Understanding this artistic process phenomenologically brings us back to Liotard's earlier inscribed self-portraits, for it reveals how fundamentally social the act of self-representation was for Liotard. His vision of himself, both in terms of an intellectual understanding and in terms of a perceptual experience, was always already socially situated: for Liotard to represent himself was for him to acknowledge that others saw him. Phenomenologically speaking, society comes before the self. We experience ourselves in relation to others; even at a perceptual level, our experience is social. It is no wonder then that Liotard began his engagement with self-portraiture by trying to locate his body in the world, nor that throughout his career he continued to envisage audiences for his finished self-portraits. Indeed, the two act-of-making self-portraits were no exception in this regard: Liotard exhibited *Self-Portrait at the Easel* at the *exposition* of the Académie de Saint-Luc in Paris in 1752 and later bequeathed the work to the Public Library of Geneva; and in 1785, he tried in vain to sell *Self-Portrait 'dessiné et dessinant'* to Louis XVI.[63] We might say then that Liotard's self-portraits were inherently social objects from start to finish: from that process of painting them that required a perceptual feat of self-objectification, to their exhibition and display before a public gaze.

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[61] Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations with Others," 96-155.

[62] Merleau-Ponty, "The Child's Relations with Others," 139.

[63] On Liotard's efforts to sell the drawing to the French crown via the comte d'Angiviller see: Renée Loche, "Jean-Étienne Liotard, peintre et collectionneur-marchande. À propos de quelques documents inédits," in: *Genava* 28 (1980), 206; and Roethlisberger and Loche, *Liotard*, vol. 1, 662.

Conclusion

[41]   During his long engagement with self-representation over fifty years, Liotard developed different approaches to the genre, but each can be understood as a solution to that persistent conundrum of self-seeing for an artist who wanted to paint only what he saw. In different ways, his self-portraits were representational acts that managed the objectifying process of seeing-himself-seen and acknowledged the look of the other on the self. In his early inscribed self-portraits, Liotard's inscriptions functioned as temporal, geographical and cultural indices that sought to locate his body in relation to others in the world. Later, in his serial self-portraits, Liotard achieved a more technical self-scrutiny, approaching his body as an art-made object that could be deferred from its living referent. Finally, in Liotard's act-of-making self-portraits, he engaged self-reflexively with the very act of self-representation. In alluding to yet eliding the specular image of his body, these self-portraits presented the beholder with a body that was consciously viewed as a body-object, seen, like his profile in the *View from the artist's studio*, as though through the eyes of another, while at the same time foregrounding his own vision and the perceptual impossibility that self-portraiture always elicits.

[42]   Merleau-Ponty's writings on art and vision offer a compelling lens through which to focus a phenomenological analysis of Liotard's self-portraits, not least because Liotard's understanding of painting resonates so closely with that which Merleau-Ponty found in Paul Cézanne, who, he claimed, 'conceived of painting not as the incarnation of imagined scenes, the projection of dreams outwards, but as the exact study of appearances: less a work of the studio than a working of nature'.[64] Cézanne became the case study for Merleau-Ponty's writings on the phenomenology of artistic vision because he found in Cézanne's canvases a painterly working through of his own ideas.[65] As I have argued here, Liotard offers an alternative case study for exploring the phenomenology of painting as a corporeal activity and the phenomenology of artistic vision experienced when representing the three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface. For an understanding of the history of self-representation, Liotard's self-portraits thus demand a shift in the conventional narrative of the genre that sees a progression from pre-modernist concerns with constructing identity, to modernist concerns with abstracting form and 'looking' differently. Long before Cézanne's studies of 'exact appearances', self-portraiture had become a site for formal and visual experimentation in Liotard's 'imitations' of nature, those attempts to represent 'all that painting sees'. At the same time, for an understanding of Liotard, this analysis of his self-portraits offers a

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[64] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt," in: *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus, Evanston 1964, 11.

[65] On Merleau-Ponty and Cézanne see: Joyce Brodsky, "A Paradigm Case for Merleau-Ponty: the Ambiguity of Perception and the Paintings of Paul Cézanne," in: *Artibus et Historiae* 2:4 (1981), 125-134.

reinterpretation of his art that escapes the overwhelming story of his life. In its place, there is room to consider instead his remarkably experimental practice, his contested theoretical approaches, and his unexpected ways of looking, all of which made him as extraordinary in his own time as his beard and caftan ever did.