Introduction

- Research clearly demonstrates that people infer personality traits based on appearance.
- Artists' painted self-portraits offer an opportunity to examine several questions related to the literature on personality perception and self-presentation.
- Some art historians suggest that self-portraiture reveals the artist’s personality.
- We examined whether viewers of self-portraits agree on the personality traits they attribute to the person portrayed in the painting.
- We also attempted to assess the accuracy of portrait-based perceptions by comparing novices’ perceptions to experts’ ratings.

Study 1: Naive Perceptions

Study 1 determined the extent to which viewers agree on the traits attributed to the subject of a portrait.

Method

Participants

- 74 undergraduates; 72% female, M age = 20.24

Materials

- Four 8 x 11” color portraits (see below, left)

Dependent Measures

- Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI), a brief measure of big five personality traits for each of the four individuals depicted in the portraits

Results

An average absolute deviation index (ADI; Burke & Dunlap, 2002), a measure of agreement among raters, was calculated for each of the five personality trait composite scores for each artist. The ADIs indicated that students agreed on the personality traits they attributed to each artist.

Comparing Novices and Experts

Comparisons of the students’ and experts’ TIPIs indicated that the students rated all four artists significantly lower (p<.0025) on Neuroticism and Openness than did the experts. They also rated Mondrian lower on Conscientiousness, Extraversion, and Agreeableness, and Macke lower on Extraversion and Agreeableness. The experts and students agreed on the remaining comparisons.

Study 2: Experts’ Ratings

Study 2 addressed the degree of agreement between the traits attributed to the artists based on the self-portraits and those traits generally believed to characterize the artist.

Method

Participants

- 50 art historians

Dependent Measures

- Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI) for each of the four artists (no portrait was provided)

Results

Once again, ADIs revealed significant agreement among the historians indicating consensus on the personality traits thought to characterize each of the four artists.

Discussion

Self-portraits can be seen as self-presentational behavior. Our results indicate that those behaviors resulted in consensus among perceivers. However, the disagreement between experts and students indicates that self-portraits may not be accurate presentations of the artists’ personalities. Future research could compare inferences of personality based on self-portraits to artists’ self-reported personalities.