

# The artist

# SELF — PORTRAITS

## & his image

*During my lifetime I have made a good many portraits which reflect the changes that have taken place in my physical condition and in my mind; in a word, I have written my life.*

GUSTAVE COURBET, MAY 1854

What the works shown here have in common is that they are self-portraits, a genre that has interested artists of all times for very different reasons. Some, such as Rembrandt, Max Beckmann, Gabriele Münter and Raphael Soyer, use it to record their moods and bear witness to the passage of time and the changes it progressively wreaks in them, creating an intimate autobiography. Others to achieve that timelessness so sought after by humans, portraying the fleetingness of life and the certainty of the end. Their works are thus instruments that enable them to live on in time, as in the cases of Albrecht Dürer and Egon Schiele.

Sometimes various reasons are combined and artists depict themselves as people of high status, reaffirming their role in society and underlining their importance. This tradition originates from northern Italy, and many Renaissance painters wished to leave their mark for posterity – among them Lorenzo Lotto, whose likeness is shown here as an example. Although there are precedents in early art, from the Middle Ages onwards one form of self-portraiture was to portray one of the people depicted in a painting with the artist's own features. Even so, self-portraiture did not become widespread until the fifteenth century, beginning in Italy and Flanders, when artists proudly painted themselves with the symbols of their trade, and it has continued uninterrupted to the present day. Over time the genre evolved and certain restrictions and barriers were gradually overcome – something that was hitherto unthinkable. Jan Steen thus painted himself playing the lute in what could be a tavern interior; Giambattista Piazzetta turning to stare at the viewer and establishing an intimate dialogue with himself; and Lucian Freud freeing himself of all academic obligations.

Despite the different motives that impel an artist to portray himself, underlying them all is perhaps a certain narcissistic and psychological component, as John Pope-Hennessy points out: "Portraiture is the depiction of the individual in his own character." It is a reflexive action in which artist and model identify with each other. Likewise, the desire to know themselves and curiosity about their own body and psyche lead artists to produce self-portraits with many overtones and aims, conveying protests and social motivations, fantasies and much more. The instruments needed to create a self-portrait include the mirror – essential for the artist to see and in turn reflect his own image, which is presented to the viewer in the form of an artwork, transformed from something intimate into something public. There is thus a certain symbiosis between the mirror in the self-portrait and the face as the mirror of the soul. It was usually held upright opposite the artist, who could thus interpret what he saw when the image was reflected.