

Self-portraiture is akin to what used to be called self-abuse: often done for want of anyone else at hand. Artists' models cost money and, with the invention of colour photography, the demand for oil portraits declined. But, just as every autobiographer is the world authority on his or her subject, so the artist has maximum familiarity with the face in the mirror. Self-portraits give much the same chances as memoirs: they can be vain or modest, revealing or concealing, superficial or deeply introspective. So, when a mass of self-portraits is set before you, as in this finely produced book, you soon begin to work out who is posturing and who is for real — and to decide whether Keats was right in equating truth and beauty.

The core of the book is 100 British self-portraits of the last century collected by the late Mrs Ruth Borchard, of Reigate, Surrey. I feel I should have known her. I was born in Redhill in the borough of Reigate, spent seven years at Reigate Grammar School and stayed longer in Reigate town than anywhere else. Though I now live in Hampshire, I shall always think of Reigate as home, while slightly regretting that I was not born somewhere grittier that might have furnished plots for D. H. Lawrence or Melvyn Bragg novels. (To be fair, Redhill — once described as 'a punch below the Green Belt' — did inspire Sheena Mackay's entertaining novel, *Redhill Rococo*.)

I thought I knew the *haut ton* of Reigate, from its former MP, Sir John Vaughan-Morgan, downwards. When he became Lord Reigate I wrote in some magazine that he had bagged the title I had rather hoped for one day. He wrote to me, 'Don't despair. You can still be Lord Gatton Bottom' — a local beauty spot. But I never encountered the self-portrait collector. Pardon, Mrs Arden, there's an aardvark in your garden; but I'm tortured, Mrs Borchard, I was never in your orchard.

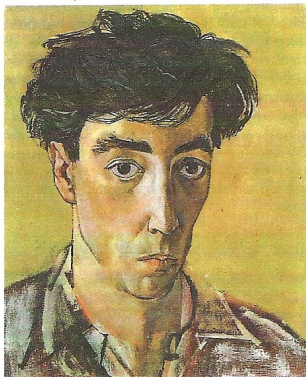
Mrs B bought most of her paintings in the early 1960s, often from Royal College of Art students, and dirt-cheap. The usual sum she offered was 21 guineas, and she bought several paintings for much less. I am reminded of J. Paul Getty, who was always on the lookout for a 'bargain'. As a result, his Malibu museum at his death contained a disproportionate number of standard works of art. (His legacy soon put that right.) John, Duke of Bedford, thought that the reason Getty always looked so miserable was that he had had a facelift on the cheap, too.

How they saw themselves

Bevis Hillier

FACE TO FACE:
BRITISH SELF-PORTRAITS IN THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY
edited by Philip Vann

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Self-portrait of John Minton, 1953
(National Portrait Gallery, London)

Largely as a result of Mrs Borchard's acquisition policy, this book is disappointing. There is a case for a new book on the British self-portrait. It would have to include the sublime examples by J. M. W. Turner and by Samuel Palmer — the latter, as it happened, a Reigate resident whose large slab tomb is in Reigate churchyard, just beyond my former school playground. (Gray's lines never applied to us lot — 'Alas, regardless of their doom, The little victims play!')

Philip Vann, the editor of *Face to Face*,

does include some 20th-century self-portraits from outside the Borchard collection. They include magnificent portraits of Stanley Spencer in youth and old age; Augustus John and Gwen John, both looking like Amishes; Dame Laura Knight with a nude female model; Hockneys of 1962 and 1983; Leonard McComb in a smoking cap; and Cyril Mann with his trousers and Y-fronts round his ankles. Also here is the haunted countenance of John Minton with, for comparison, the equally superb head of Minton by Lucian Freud. And there is a virtuoso pencil study by Mark Gertler. Minton and Gertler both committed suicide. I wonder if there is some link between self-portraiture and suicide — both cases of executing oneself.

An odd paradox: from its style, Francis Bacon's self-portrait could not be by anyone else; but, judging by the bleary, smeary face alone, it could be anyone else — to paraphrase Alan Bennett's joke, a screaming Pope or a screaming queen. It looks as if a well-trained team of slugs has trailed its slime over his features. I could also have done without Ronald Moody's self-sculpted mask in stained elmwood, which suggests that Dutch elm disease may have been a blessing in disguise.

Then we come to nearly 200 pages illustrating and describing the Ruth Borchard collection. Most of the works are no more than competent. Some could be of just anyone, because of the malign influence of David Bomberg, who favoured swashbuckling brushstrokes, virtually dispensing with such trivia as eyes, noses and mouths. But the majority of the Borchard hoard are solid, stolid, full-face efforts, often of bearded men. Only five of the 100 artists are women: Mrs B seems to have formed her collection on the same principle on which Mrs T formed her cabinets.

They say you get what you pay for, and one feels that some of the artists gave Mrs B less than their best. At his best, Patrick Proctor was a captivating artist, almost in Hockney's league; but the self-image he palmed off on Mrs B looks like the picture of Dorian Gray — I mean, 'after' rather than 'before'. Sometimes the letters the artists sent the *patronne* are more interesting than their works of art. Michael Ayrton, who had beautiful calligraphy, wrote, 'I will accept the 21 guineas and I much admire anyone who can obtain so many works for no more than that figure per work.' The sketch he sent is a pedestrian academic study.

Of the 100 artists, only 15 strike me as any good, at least on this showing. Among

them is Jack Simcock, whose landscapes I praised to the skies they depicted so well when I was art critic of *Cherwell* in 1960. Also represented are Feliks Topolski who, as ever, allows us to tease out a likeness from a fevered imbroglgio of lines; a sketch of extreme economy by Keith Vaughan; and luscious oils by Alberto Morrocco and Carel Weight. The self-portrait by (Lady) Lucinda Mackay — one of the highlights of the Borchard hoard — shows her in an ivory dress and black feather boa, much as I remember her in the early 1970s when it was painted. Another masterly self-portrait is of David Tindle. Vann has neatly reproduced opposite it a painting of Tindle by John Minton, which — as with Freud's image of Minton himself — confirms the verisimilitude of the self-portrait.

Vann is an impressive editor. He has gone to endless trouble to trace the careers of the artists represented, admitting defeat only in the case of Anthony Freeman, whose confident painting is one of the best in the book. Vann contributes a perceptive introduction on self-portraiture and has a gift for phrasemaking. He writes of the 'gaunt grace' of Leo Davy's self-portrait and the 'somewhat hieratic look' of Eric Gill's. He is interested in the influences the artists have absorbed.

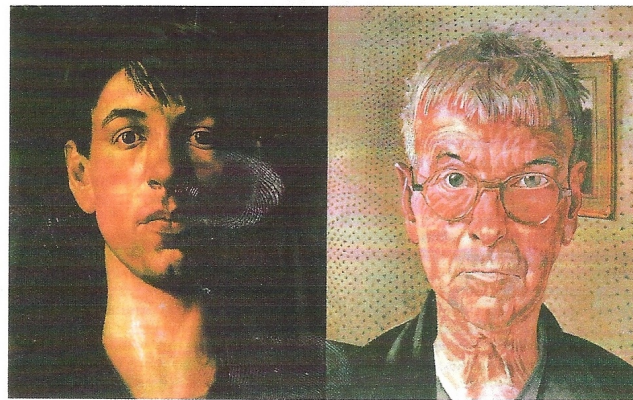
The young man's wan regard, the sensitivity of the brushwork and the deliberately attenuated palette, all relate this work to early northern European psychological portraits, such as Hans Memling's 'Man with a Roman Coin' (c. 1480), in which a countenance of enigmatic youthful gravity is framed by a flourishing array of black curls...

Living in Reigate, Ruth Borchard inevitably bought some works by Reigate artists. The best known of these is Michael Noakes, whom I did meet in my Reigate days. Represented by a characteristically strong oil painting, he is very much an Establishment artist. He has painted sever-

al royal portraits and Vann records how in 1999 Noakes and his wife Vivien (author of the standard work on Edward Lear) accompanied the Queen, 'formally, informally and behind the scenes', throughout the year, collaborating on a book published as *The Daily Life of the Queen*. Hugo Powell, whose profile relief of himself is like a Roman emperor on a coin, lived in Reigate and had his studio in Redhill.

George Hooper, of Redhill, portrays himself in a hairdresser's in 1946 — an ingenious way of acquitting oneself of mere narcissism and of bringing an element of narrative into the picture. (Possibly he was influenced by Russell Reeve's barber-shop self-portrait of 1921, illustrated in the non-Borchard section of this book.) I'm almost sure that Hooper's scene is Mr Voller's barber shop in Redhill. In 1946 I was in St Matthew's Infants' School opposite (both that and the hairdresser's have gone now) and Mr Voller cut my hair too, ending the process with the dreaded spray — a foul miasma that made one smell like someone from *Schéherzade*.

My father was mainly an art historian, but he was also an accomplished amateur painter and wood-engraver. On Sunday evenings, he, my mother, my sister and myself would draw and paint each other. Some terrible daubs of 'Daddy' survive. He also encouraged us to draw self-portraits and gave us a useful tip: 'When you've finished, it may look all right to you; but hold it up to a mirror and see if it still looks all right — that's the acid test.' I've held up some of the illustrations in this book to the mirror and I'm afraid they fail the acid test. The reflections helped me to understand a comment made by Craigie Aitchison, one of whose self-portraits is reproduced: 'It looks like a self-portrait even if it doesn't look like me.' Keats was right.



Self-portraits of Stanley Spencer. Left 1914, Right 1959
(Tate, London)

£2.50

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