

The Spectacular Self: Jean-Etienne Liotard's *Self-Portrait Laughing*

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Upon seeing Jean-Etienne Liotard's *Self-Portrait Laughing* at a recent exhibition of the artist's work at The Frick Collection in New York, *The New York Observer's* Mario Naves commented: "it's the showstopper, if only because it's such a weird painting ... *Liotard Laughing* will give you the creeps, and that's the sole reason you'll remember it".¹[PI.1] A fittingly theatrical comment for such a theatrical work, Naves' powerful response to the self-portrait – a mixture of fascination and repulsion – is remarkably close to the reaction that a number of Liotard's contemporaries had upon seeing the artist in person. For example, when passing the artist in a public procession in Geneva one day the German traveller, Karl Gottlob Küttner, wrote in his journal: "Amidst the crowd of people I noticed a grotesque personage attired in a sort of bathrobe and night cap which, as I learned later on, was a turban and who carried a great Turkish sword. It was none other than the old painter Liotard".² The mixture of surprise and aversion encapsulated in the statements of both Naves and Küttner – and clearly articulated by means of words such as "weird", "creeps" and "grotesque" – invite us to question the deeper meanings and implications of the artist's self-styled theatrics that lie in both his work and his persona. My discussion aims to offer some insight into the layers of meaning that can be gleaned from the theatrics of Jean-Etienne Liotard's self-portraiture and, especially, from the artist's *Self-Portrait Laughing*.



1. Jean-Etienne Liotard, *Self-Portrait Laughing*, c. 1770, oil on canvas, 84 x 74cm, Geneva, Musée d'art et d'histoire.

In the course of his life Jean-Etienne Liotard (1702-1789) represented himself numerous times in various media including pastel, oils, and enamel. His self-portraits stand out in his oeuvre as some of his most dramatic, fascinating, and quite literally, spectacular works. Of all Liotard's self-portraits the enigmatic *Self-Portrait Laughing*, showing the artist grimacing and pointing off-stage, is perhaps the most overtly theatrical. Made when Liotard was around sixty-eight years old, it depicts the artist standing in a dark interior next to a curtain and pointing with a crooked finger at something unseen and unspecified to the right. Both the artist's grinning expression and pointing gesture are calculated to capture the viewer's attention. Although we do not know whether the self-portrait was a commissioned work, there is no doubt that Liotard considered it as among his most highly-prized works for it remained in his collection until his death when it passed to one of his five children. Liotard also mentioned the painting in his *Traité des principes et des règles de la peinture* (1781), where he refers to it as a model of illusionism and finish.³

Self-Portrait Laughing represents a significant shift in the trajectory of the artist's self-portraiture. Liotard's earliest self-portrait (1727, Geneva, private collection), executed at age twenty-five, shows the artist as an elegantly dressed gentleman just embarking on his career. Sporting a white stock with ruffle, a plain coat and a powdered wig this is a fairly conventional portrait of a French court artist in the making.

What came next is much less conventional and, for our purposes, much more theatrical. Executed when the artist was forty-two years old this self-portrait (1744, Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi) chronicles a rather unlikely and extraordinary change in the artist's personal appearance and dress.⁴ This transformation followed his five-year stay in the Ottoman Empire, at which time

Liotard adopted a Turkish costume and grew a full-length beard that eventually reached his waist. This may have facilitated his contact with the Turkish and Moldavian nobility there. The self-portrait was made during Liotard's stay at the Imperial Court of Maria-Theresa in Vienna. It was commissioned by her husband, Duke Francis Stephen of Lorraine, for his gallery of self-portraits in the Uffizi.⁵ It is the first self-portrait that Liotard painted specifically as a public image and it is an image of great theatrical appeal. In it Liotard appears as a self-styled "peintre turc"; a title he includes in the signature. The signature also states that the artist was a citizen of the republic of Geneva, perhaps to inform those spectators taken in by Liotard's disguise. While it is true that Liotard did not want to be mistaken for a "real Turk," his wish to specify his origins probably also had to do with his sense of pride in his political status. Being a *citoyen* of Geneva signified one's affiliation with the Republic's ruling social and political elite, something of which Liotard would have been immensely proud. This would have been of particular significance given his father's relatively-recent access to the bourgeoisie in 1701. Also, in the larger European context, Liotard's public assertion of his political identity would have made him an even greater rarity and thus would have contributed to raising the interest in his work among potential clients.⁶

Liotard continued to dress in Turkish clothing throughout the rest of his career, creating a sensation that helped him develop a huge and devoted clientele some of whom commissioned Liotard to make their portraits in Turkish dress.⁷ This was the case of the Irish archaeologist and theologian Richard Pococke (ca. 1738-42, Geneva, Musée d'art et d'histoire) who, like Liotard, is attired in a Turkish costume and wearing a beard.



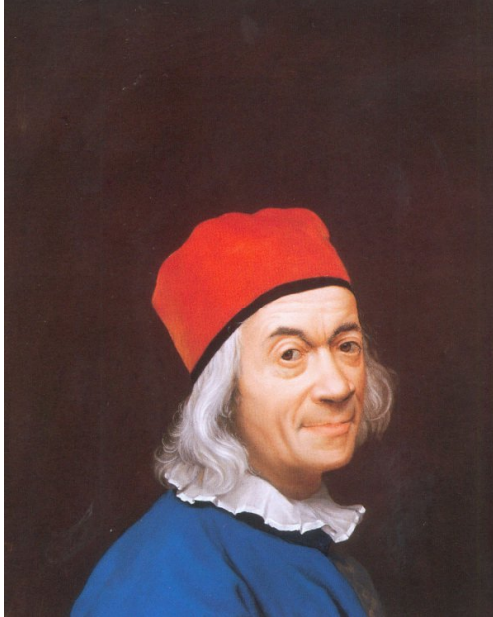
2. Jean-Etienne Liotard, *Self-Portrait with Beard*, c. 1749, pastel on paper pasted on canvas, 97 x 71cm, Geneva, Musée d'art et d'histoire.

Beards, incidentally, were subject to a heated debate in the eighteenth century. For the famous naturalist Carolus Linnaeus the beard was associated with masculinity, virility and strength. He believed that facial hair grew as a result of "excess bodily fluids" and reflected "resorbed semen".⁸ It is perhaps on account of this association that eighteenth century European men did not, in general, grow beards. On the contrary, shaving became a sign of Western civilization at that time.⁹ Given this interpretation of facial hair, it is understandable how Liotard's beard often caused a stir and sometimes drew the artist negative publicity during his career. The French art connoisseur Pierre-Jean Mariette, wrote dismissively that Liotard's success rested entirely on the spectacle he made of himself: "(it is) the novelty of the spectacle (that) affords him attention, facilitates his access to Versailles and secures him commissions and plenty of money".¹⁰

No portrait could provide a more forceful rebuke to Mariette's contemptuous remark than Liotard's monumental *Self-portrait with Beard* painted when the artist was aged fifty [PI.2]. Exhibited in Paris

in 1752, the picture shows Liotard dressed in Turkish garb and emphasizes the qualities of oriental exoticism through the use of a bright colour palette and the sensual rendering of luxurious fabrics.¹¹ Sitting stiffly erect in his chair with his eyes fixed on the viewer, his lips partially open as if he were breathing or talking, the image possesses an uncanny sense of real-life presence. Looking at this self-portrait we have the feeling of having just walked-in on the artist in his studio and that he is sharing a secret, private moment with us. The sense of intimacy and immediacy achieved by the image is reinforced by the proximity of Liotard's figure to the

picture plane and by the marvellous physiognomic detail; from the minutely drawn hairs of his beard to the shimmering glow reflected in the artist's left eye. With this self-portrait Liotard not only shows that he is able to make a convincing portrait of himself through the meticulous nature of his craft, but he also proves himself to be a master in conveying a sense of real-life presence in his work. Moreover, it may be argued that Liotard offers theatrical flair in the mastery of his medium and in the presentation of his self.¹²



3. Jean-Etienne Liotard, *Self-Portrait with Red Cap*, c. 1767-68, pastel on parchment pasted on canvas, 63 x 51cm, Geneva, Bibliothèque Publique et universitaire.

Five years later Liotard again reinvented his personal appearance when his decision to marry – at age fifty-four – prompted him to shave.¹³ Documenting this change is the artist's *Self-portrait with Red Hat*, which is striking for its use of strong lighting, simple colour palette and bold composition that leaves over one third of the picture completely blank [Pl.3].¹⁴

Liotard's self-portraits from his "married period" are notable for their boldness and experimental quality, epitomizing a significant shift that took place in the artist's approach to portraiture. It is as if the absence of his beard had encouraged Liotard to pursue other means of theatricality in his self-portraiture. And no self-portrait demonstrates this shift quite so strongly as his *Self-Portrait Laughing*.

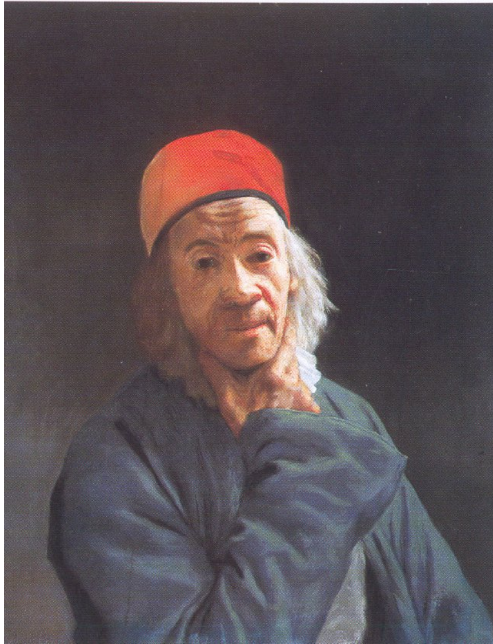
Having demonstrated his artistic virtuosity in his earlier self-portraits, his approach now alludes to the artificiality and the theatricality of his own role in the art-making process. One could say that Liotard's approach shifted from one kind of theatricality to another; the first utilizing self-portraiture as a vehicle for an exotic self-presentation and the second self-consciously referring to the artifice and performative aspect of self-portraiture

and art in general. The first implies a more conventionally passive role for the viewer while the second sets the stage for a dialogue between spectator and artist over the nature of self-portraiture.

Another example of a portrait where an emotion is staged in this interactive manner is Liotard's *Self-portrait with Hand on his Throat* [Pl.4]. The artist shows himself in a pose that suggests great physical and psychological vulnerability in a way that commands an empathic response from the viewer.¹⁵ The artist's hand gesture has been variously interpreted by scholars. For Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff the gesture draws attention to the absence of his beard which, for her, evokes the artist's aging process and corresponding decrease in creative and sexual potency.¹⁶ For Andrea Edel, on the other hand, Liotard's gesture derives from a traditional Turkish courtship ritual. What is certain, however, is that the self-portrait should be seen in the light of Liotard's more tentative, experimental approach to his self-portraiture – a kind of experimentation with masks – which signals the artist's renewed vigour and productivity during this late period.

Liotard's grinning, jeering countenance in his *Self-portrait Laughing* is perhaps the most forceful statement that Liotard ever made of his enduring creativity – one might even say sexual potency as Liotard is standing in front of what appears to be a four-poster bed; not to mention his overtly phallic pointing index finger.

The discursive element contained in Liotard's self-image, which had become increasingly popular in the course of the eighteenth-century, allows us to view his *Self-Portrait Laughing* in close relation with many other self-portraits made at that time. The French artists Maurice-Quentin La Tour (*Self-portrait Laughing*, 1737, Geneva, Musée d'art et d'histoire) and



4. Jean-Etienne Liotard, *Self-Portrait with Hand on Throat* c. 1770, pastel on paper pasted on canvas, 63,5 x 51cm, Geneva, Musée d'art et d'histoire.

Joseph Ducreux (*Self-portrait Laughing*, ca. 1793, Paris, Louvre), for example, both depicted themselves as rakish characters. In these self-portraits the elements of the pointing index finger, toothy grin and mischievously sparkling eyes are present as well.¹⁷

It is possible that Liotard's *Self-portrait Laughing* refers to the figure of Democritus. The Greek philosopher is often depicted laughing and sometimes pointing knowingly at the viewer as is seen for instance in a painting by the French painter, Antoine Coppel (*Democritus*, 1692, Paris, Louvre).¹⁸ While Liotard may not have seen Coppel's painting, a friend of his in Geneva, the collector François Tronchin, had a painting of Democritus by the seventeenth-century painter, Gerard Ter Borch, in his collection (date and location unknown).¹⁹ The overall composition of this picture – where the figure's overall countenance suggests a sceptical and malicious detachment – is similar to Liotard's self-portrait. Liotard may have wished to represent himself as a modern-day Democritus, thus placing himself in a tradition of artists such as Rembrandt (whom Liotard admired greatly) who had used the figure of Democritus to create their self-portraits.²⁰

Another canonical figure with whom laughter is associated and with whom artists frequently identified on account of his legendary status is the Greek painter Zeuxis. According to Karel van Mander's *Schilderboek* (to which Liotard had access) Zeuxis died laughing while painting a wrinkled, funny old woman. It is possible that, despite the absence of the old woman in question, Liotard's *Self-Portrait Laughing* alludes to this story, much like Arent de Gelder's *The Artist himself painting an old woman* (1685, Frankfurt, Staedelsches Kunstinstitut).²¹ The curtain in Liotard's painting could also be an allusion to a more famous story about Zeuxis. Zeuxis and his rival Parrhasius took part in a competition to see who was the better painter. Zeuxis painted a bunch of grapes that were so lifelike that the birds came to peck at them on the canvas. The winner of the competition, however, was Parrhasius who painted a curtain so realistically that it outsmarted Zeuxis himself who had attempted to pull on the curtain to reveal what lay behind it.²²

Possibly Liotard's *Self-Portrait Laughing* was a way for the artist to show his audience that he was no mere face painter but rather an intellectual artist who cleverly adapted an allegorical formula for his own purposes.

Another key for reading Liotard's self-portrait is provided by the world of the theatre. Liotard was an avid theatregoer and he portrayed several actors and actresses in the course of his career. It is probably not coincidental that many of these portraits stand out in his oeuvre as some of the most expressive in terms of gesture and physiognomy that he ever painted. While most of his portraits of the nobility follow a rather stolid bust-length picture formula, Liotard tried to infuse a sense of physical movement in his portrait of the celebrated English actor David Garrick. His pointing figure evokes that of Liotard's self-portrait. In his ebullient portrait of Marie-Justine-Benoîte Favart-Duronceray the sitter is posed as if she were on a stage.²³ Caught in a moment of her performance – complexion flushed, eyes sparkling, mouth open in song, her fingers strumming the strings of a guitar – the pastel effervesces with a sense of theatrical vitality for which Favart was well-known.²⁴ The world of the theatre is not only evoked through

