



Citizenships and Identities: Inclusion, Exclusion, Participation / edited by  
Ann Katherine Isaacs. - Pisa : Plus-Pisa University Press, 2010  
(Transversal Theme. Citizenships and Identities)

323.6 (21.)

1. Cittadinanza I. Isaacs, Ann Katherine



CIP a cura del Sistema bibliotecario dell'Università di Pisa

This volume is published thanks to the support of the Directorate General for Research of the European Commission, by the Sixth Framework Network of Excellence CLIOHRES.net under the contract CIT3-CT-2005-006164.

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Published by Edizioni Plus – Pisa University Press  
Lungarno Pacinotti, 43  
56126 Pisa  
Tel. 050 2212056 – Fax 050 2212945  
info.plus@adm.unipi.it  
www.edizioniplus.it - Section "Biblioteca"

Member of



Association of American  
University Presses

ISBN: 978-88-8492-739-2

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# Identities and Roles: the Self Portraits of Lovis Corinth

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## ABSTRACT

The prolific self portraiture of the German artist Lovis Corinth (1858-1925) is used to explore the ways in which a creative individual provides insight into shifting human identities. Themes emerge about sexuality and gender relations, the processes of sickness and ageing, and about political and social discourses during Corinth's lifetime.

The complexity of individual and social identity is nowhere better explored than in the self portrait of the artist, especially when that artist subjects him- or herself to examination over long periods of time and on numerous occasions. The individual is presented in his or her social and political context, accompanied by reflections on age, gender, social and personal roles, external events, and the passage of time. There are many artists whose careers lend themselves to such analysis – most obviously Rembrandt and Van Gogh – but none more so than the German painter, Lovis Corinth (1858-1925). In a life spanning tumultuous events in German history and radical changes in the world of art, Corinth was an extraordinarily prolific practitioner in all genres and media of the western canon: historical and biblical scenes, portraits, still lifes, and landscapes, in oils, watercolours, prints and drawings. Just as his political views were towards the right, so his aesthetic precepts were conservative. His art nonetheless underwent considerable – sometimes dramatic – change, and he is not easily placed within one stylistic category. His work is at times realist, symbolist, impressionist and expressionist, and towards the end of his life some of his nocturnal landscapes tended towards the abstract.

Within this vast range of work, the self portrait plays a crucial and deliberate role, supplemented by Corinth's autobiographical writings<sup>1</sup>. The literature identifies at least 43 oil paintings, 70 prints and uncounted drawings and watercolours<sup>2</sup>. They span most periods of his adult life, and for many years Corinth chose his birthday of 21 July as the date on which to paint a new version of himself. Characteristic inscriptions on such works are "Ich", "Ego", and "Aetatis suae LI". In other words, they were explicit reflections upon his changing physical and mental state over time. But these were not just realistic assessments in the mirror; Corinth also portrayed himself in different guises and disguises. Not surprisingly, he was frequently the painter at the easel, but he also appeared as lover and father, bourgeois and bohemian, and in costume as Bacchus or a knight in armour. The explicit self portraits do not exhaust the matter either; Corinth often alludes to his state of mind through other roles and characters. Religious personages in particular are portrayed with a strong suggestion that they stand in for the artist's feelings at the time: Job, Samson and Christ himself.

A full analysis of the Corinth self portraits would be a major study, which cannot be attempted here. Instead, some pointers will be provided as to how the themes of Corinth's work can be employed to consider the nature of identity and social role as expressed by a creative individual. It will



Fig. 1  
 Lovis Corinth (1858-1925), Self Portrait.  
 Credits: Photo Scala, Florence/BPK, Bildagentur fuer Kunst, Kultur und  
 Geschichte, Berlin.

not be possible to include all potentially relevant works, but reference will be made to a number of characteristic images that can be found in the illustrated literature<sup>3</sup>.

Franz Heinrich Louis [later Lovis] Corinth was born in Tapiau in East Prussia in 1858. His relationships with his mother and her sons from a previous marriage were not good, but he was very close to his father. The latter encouraged his artistic education by relocating the two of them to Königsberg in 1876, where Lovis studied at the Academy of Fine Arts. From 1880 to 1883 he continued his training in Munich and then from 1884 to 1887 in Paris at the Académie Julian. After visiting Berlin and then returning to Königsberg (where his father died in 1889 and left his son financially secure), Corinth went back to Munich, where he lived and worked from 1891 to 1900. His contacts in the art world and his personal reputation were growing rapidly. In 1901 he relocated to Berlin, which was his permanent home until the end of his days. He married one of his art students and models in 1903, the twenty-two years younger Charlotte Berend, and the couple had two children: Thomas (1904) and Wilhelmine (1909). During these years Corinth was at the heart of the Berlin art scene, involved in the various controversies surrounding the development of the so-called Berlin Secession. His reputation remained strong and his work in high demand, even

as he criticised the new styles emanating from the artists who later became known as the German Expressionists. A dramatic caesura came on 11 December 1911, when Corinth suffered a stroke. He was not completely incapacitated for long, but thereafter his painterly style and his outlook on life changed in a number of ways. His brushwork generally became more expressive in nature, his continuing health problems exercised him and were portrayed in his self portraits, and his mood became ever more sombre. The First World War excited his wholehearted patriotism, but as it progressed relentlessly and then culminated in Germany's defeat and the fall of the Prussian and German monarchy, Corinth despaired. He found comfort and inspiration at the Bavarian Alpine lake, the Walchensee, where Charlotte had a house built for him in 1919 and where he spent an increasing amount of time painting landscapes and still lifes. His health was not good, but did not prevent him from continuing an extraordinary rate of production, creating major works up until his death during a visit to Amsterdam, on 17 July 1925, days short of his 67th birthday. His posthumous reputation has ebbed and flowed. At its low point during the Third Reich nearly 300 of his works were confiscated from public collections, and a number of his masterpieces were held up to public ridicule in the Degenerate Art Exhibition of 1937 in Munich<sup>4</sup>.

There are several early self portraits of Corinth as a teenager and young man, serious and purposeful. The full beard which he sported in the 1880s subsequently gave way to the flamboyant drooping moustache which characterised his visage for most of the rest of his life. It is unmistakable in one of the first major autobiographical paintings of Corinth's maturity, "Self Portrait with Skeleton" (1896)<sup>5</sup>. This work shows the artist in a surprisingly modern checked shirt and tie, in his atelier, with the roofs and smoking chimneys of Munich visible through the large windows. The interior and exterior coloration is bright, but a sombre note is cast by Corinth's facial expression and by the presence beside him of a skeleton hanging by a hook. It is clearly a studio prop, but it resonates with countless images of the artist overshadowed by death. One of the most celebrated was "Self Portrait with Death" (1872) by Arnold Böcklin, whose Swiss star was high in the firmament of the German art world in the 1890s. Corinth transforms that allegorical prototype of mortality into an ostensibly mundane image of rational modernity. Nonetheless, the reference to his 38th birthday in the top right corner and his brutal portrayal of himself, prematurely ageing and affected by heavy drinking, make clear a preoccupation with death which was to recur in his work. An etching from much later shows "Death and the Artist" (1920-21), in which the distorted head of Corinth is observed from behind by the ghastly grimace of a skull. The *memento mori* effect is enhanced by the perversely modern inclusion of a wristwatch worn awkwardly on the artist's left hand<sup>6</sup>.

The 1896 work may have been a studio picture, but no smock, easel, palette or brushes are in evidence. These traditional accoutrements of the artist self portrait are, however, to be found in numerous other paintings. Probably the first was "Self Portrait without Collar" (1901)<sup>7</sup>. The red of the artist's cheeks is matched in the colours of the mirror-image of his painting of a naked girl getting out of bed. Carousing and eroticism are frequent companions in Corinth's oeuvre, but here the perplexed face of the artist scarcely conveys wild pleasure. A more formal tone is caught in the contemporaneous "Self Portrait with Model" (1901)<sup>8</sup>. Again holding his brush and palette, Corinth appears here in a large floppy hat, jacket, waistcoat and wing-collared shirt. A young woman simpers beside him, but he gazes sternly into the distance. To anyone of the time, his resemblance to the recently-deceased former Reich Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, would have been obvious. This was a time when a veritable Bismarck cult was spreading throughout Germany, and – as a loyal adherent of the Empire and admirer of the Iron Chancellor – Corinth delighted in the similarity.

The stalwart artist-model motif could scarcely be more differently employed two years later in "Self Portrait with Model" (1903)<sup>9</sup>. Here Corinth stands confidently with unbuttoned collarless shirt, palette and brushes in hand. With her back to the viewer, a naked woman – to be identified

with Charlotte – holds to his chest and buries her head in his shoulder. Corinth's palette-bearing arm (the mirror-image causes it to be his right) enfolds her. His stance as *pater familias* in the later "The Artist and his Family" (1909) might be expected to be similarly protective, but in fact his mien is almost angry<sup>10</sup>. The young Thomas stands to the left, his hand on his mother's shoulder. She is extravagantly attired in wide-brimmed hat and revealing frothy dress, and cradles the baby Wilhelmine, whose eyes gaze into the viewer's. Corinth towers over the two of them to the right, raising his palette over Charlotte's head in almost aggressive manner. It is hard to believe that this was the intention, since Corinth was reportedly a doting husband and father. That he had a temper is also known, however. Amongst many other easel images is "Self Portrait in the Studio" (1914) – illustrated here (Fig. 1) – which is a sketchier portrayal of the painter at work, surrounded by his canvases, and looking much more haggard than in his pre-stroke days<sup>11</sup>.

If all these studio-centred images convey a serious expression, Corinth also adopted a stance of bravado in many of his other works. His bibulousness comes to the fore in "Self Portrait with Charlotte Berend and a Glass of Champagne" (1902), in which he raises his drink with one hand and tweaks his girl's nipple with the other<sup>12</sup>. "Self Portrait as a Howling Bacchant" (1905), shows Corinth more explicitly drunk, and not in an attractive way. A wreath of vine leaves around his head, he screams out of the picture<sup>13</sup>. In "Self Portrait with a Glass" (1907), Corinth stands alone, his bare broad hairy chest dominating the canvas, as if in confrontation with the viewer<sup>14</sup>. This swaggering posture is even more in evidence in one of many striking images in Corinth's oeuvre of knights in armour: "Self Portrait as Standard Bearer" (1911)<sup>15</sup>. Today – perhaps there was even at the time – there is something comical about this medieval play-acting, but it would be wrong to underestimate the potency of this image. The suit of armour was ubiquitous in the painting of 19th- and even early 20th-century Europe, especially in Germany, and Corinth was one of the most prolific users of the motif. Encouraged perhaps by a spell designing costumes and sets for the theatre director Max Reinhardt in 1902-07, Corinth included a lot of dressing-up in his works<sup>16</sup>. In particular, he portrayed armoured characters from the stage – Florian Geyer and Götz von Berlichingen, for example – but he also showed himself and his son in full military harness. In what is thought to be a lost painting, "The Victor" (1910), the artist Corinth has been replaced by a knight in armour, holding the bare-breasted Charlotte, who smiles with pleasure. In his left hand the soldier holds erect a huge phallic lance<sup>17</sup>. In the 1911 self portrait his chin is uplifted and his chest puffed out in braggart fashion, as he carries a heavy flag over his shoulder. It would be wrong perhaps to interpret this immediately as a reflection of the bellicose pronouncements emanating from the German Empire at this time, but there is no doubt that once war was declared in 1914, Corinth used the armoured knight to convey his attitude to the conflict. Though not recognisably a self portrait, "Beneath the Shield of Arms" (1915) is a defiant response by Corinth to the invasion by the Russians of his homeland of East Prussia and the attack on his native Tapiau. At the feet of a lance-bearing knight in full armour and helmet cowers a naked woman<sup>18</sup>. Both in this image and the earlier "Victor", there is a more-or-less explicit association of the knight with aggressive and protective male sexuality.

There were still some more confident and hopeful images in Corinth's work after December 1911, but by and large the self-reflections after his stroke were more about debility and fear. In one of his most powerful pictures, "The Blinded Samson" (1912), Corinth only alludes to his own predicament, since there is no obvious facial similarity in the person of Samson, but the connection with his own life is scarcely to be missed. Naked apart from a loincloth, the biblical figure seems to be stumbling into a modern room. His hands are in chains, and his bloodied blinded eyes are covered with a white mask. His cheeks are dripping red and his face is in a terrible grimace<sup>19</sup>. Samson and Delilah were already a popular subject for 19th-century painters,

but here Corinth highlights in an intensely personal fashion the theme of strength destroyed and vision terminated. A similar poignant image is to be found in Corinth's pencil drawing of the same year, "Job and his Friends" (1912)<sup>20</sup>. Here the decline into suffering of the male body is highlighted by the fact that the seated Job is shown in the same attire as Corinth in "Self Portrait with a Glass" (1907): a cloth head-dress – red in the earlier painting – and loincloth. The barrel-like hairy chest of 1907 is now flabby and emaciated.

The theme of physical decline is marked in many of the self portraits of the years between the end of the war and the artist's death in 1925. Marking the passage of time, Corinth showed himself sometimes with revived confidence in jaunty hats, but increasingly as a thinner figure with haunted eyes. His autobiography also testifies to his disconsolate feelings about the state of Germany and his personal miseries. Writing in March 1925, he summoned up his feelings of despair: "I have never been visited by such moral depressions as now. It makes me want to howl. A disgust with all painting grips me. Why should I continue to work, everything is filth. This constant horrible labour is making me puke"<sup>21</sup>. Two very different images from the last year of his life bear witness to this sad decline. "Self Portrait as the Man of Sorrows" (1925) is a crayon drawing which appears at the end of the autobiography. Blood drips down the face again, but this time from a crown of thorns; the eyes are wide and staring<sup>22</sup>. And in the much-reproduced "Last Self Portrait", dated 7 May 1925, Corinth depicts his hollowed cheeks and frightened eyes not only once, but twice. As if already leaning away from himself is a reflection in the mirror. Gone are the splendid moustache and the burly physique, but there remains a capacity to scrutinise ruthlessly his own person. Charlotte later reported her husband as saying, "I want to live to be seventy. I still don't have any wrinkles or a single grey hair on my head. I would like to paint myself with a wrinkled face and white hair; that would make a completely different picture"<sup>23</sup>. Corinth was not spared that long, but he nonetheless had produced one of the most compelling self-images of human frailty and mortality.

Identity and identities can be analysed historically from without, but there is value in understanding how some individuals can provide insights from within their own experience and through their own expression. This does not mean that they are always reliable observers and critics of themselves, and no doubt Lovis Corinth was no exception. Nonetheless, the compendium of his self portraiture provides an extraordinary means of appreciating the complementary and conflicting roles which he played during his lifetime. Within his work are to be found open and subliminal explorations of male identity in a particular historical period, exercised within social, personal and family relationships. Supplemented by the full range of his works – allegorical extravaganzas and sober portraits of others included – a fuller picture of his society and the politics of his time emerges. He was proudly a Prussian and a German, and it is instructive to see how he presented that aspect of himself, including when the values he held dear appeared to be under threat. Corinth also touched upon a theme perhaps more current in today's debates, that of ageing. Through his life he documented the physical changes which affect all in one way or another. And, not least, Corinth revelled in the human capacity for humour and mischief, shifting identities and playing different roles at will. To end with one of Corinth's favourite authors, Friedrich Nietzsche, he was "human, all too human".

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> L. Corinth, *Selbstbiographie*, Leipzig 1926.
- <sup>2</sup> H. Uhr, *Lovis Corinth*, Berkeley - Los Angeles - Oxford 1990, p. 303, note 11.
- <sup>3</sup> See particularly *Ibid.*; the catalogue of the major retrospective exhibition shown in Munich, Berlin, St. Louis and London: P.-K. Schuster, C. Vitali, B. Butts (eds.), *Lovis Corinth*, Munich - New York 1996; and the catalogue of the Corinth self portrait exhibition in Hamburg: U. Luckhardt, U. Schneede (eds.), *Ich, Lovis Corinth: Die Selbstbildnisse*, Hamburg 2004.
- <sup>4</sup> For a summary biography of Corinth, see Schuster, Vitali, Butts (eds.), *Lovis Corinth* cit., pp. 11-24; for a fuller account, see Uhr, *Lovis Corinth* cit., passim; for the history of the Berlin Secession, see P. Paret, *The Berlin Secession: Modernism and Its Enemies in Imperial Germany*, Cambridge Mass. 1980.
- <sup>5</sup> Schuster et al., *Lovis Corinth* cit., Plate 19, p. 116.
- <sup>6</sup> Uhr, *Lovis Corinth* cit., figure 167, p. 261.
- <sup>7</sup> Schuster et al., *Lovis Corinth* cit., Plate 43, p. 142.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, plate 46, p. 145.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, plate 56, p. 157.
- <sup>10</sup> Uhr, *Lovis Corinth* cit., figure 89, p. 145.
- <sup>11</sup> Schuster et al., *Lovis Corinth* cit., plate 113, p. 225.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, plate 55a, p. 156.
- <sup>13</sup> Uhr, *Lovis Corinth* cit., plate 17.
- <sup>14</sup> Schuster et al., *Lovis Corinth* cit., plate 69, p. 173.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, plate 92, p. 199.
- <sup>16</sup> Uhr, *Lovis Corinth* cit., p. 165.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, figure 105, p. 173.
- <sup>18</sup> Schuster et al., *Lovis Corinth* cit., plate 110, p. 222.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, plate 94, p. 203.
- <sup>20</sup> Uhr, *Lovis Corinth* cit., figure 117, p. 196.
- <sup>21</sup> Corinth, *Selbstbiographie* cit., pp. 184-5 [translation JO].
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, final page.
- <sup>23</sup> C. Berend-Corinth, *Lovis*, Munich 1958, p. 259, as cited in translation in Uhr, *Lovis Corinth* cit., p. 290.

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