For artists across eras, the self-portrait has been the way to explore and express our understanding of who we are. If the eye is the window to the soul, the self-portrait is the view into an artist’s personal vision. Today’s cell phone “selfie” can be seen as the contemporary lens into our digital lives. Seventh- and eighth-grade students investigated these ideas in a collaborative venture as part of a master class entitled “Art and Photography in the Digital Age.” Together with technology specialist, Tracy Asplin, I designed this class to explore the many different intersections that exist between art and technology.

Beginning with History
Beginning with a visual exploration of early painting techniques, the class looked at self-portraits across eras in many different artistic styles and portraits needed to capture the idea of the self-portrait as a contemporary selfie, but in order to get the right photos, they would need a partner to take their picture. Using their tablets and a note-taking app, students searched for and compiled master self-portrait imagery that spoke to them. They could draw over photos, make notes, add audio or video, and link to other pages as necessary.

Making Aesthetic Choices
Once students chose a master self-portrait to emulate, they had to consider how to execute it. Considerations about lighting, position, camera angle, and height became paramount. Did they want to use the colors and textures from the master work in their selfie, or did they want to use contemporary props that communicated the spirit of the older work more conceptually?

And did they want to achieve these effects completely through physical staging, by digital manipulation and editing later, or through a combination of these techniques?

Taking Photographs
In a flurry of excitement, students grabbed their phones and began their work. Some used the classroom as the setting, others took their photos in other school spaces, and some went outside the school. Students who planned to use primarily digital means to edit their pieces were not dependent on props, lighting, or physical settings.

Can you identify the source artwork each student used as inspiration?

These wonderful selfies give the viewer powerful insight into what students find artistically important and who they are becoming as individual artists.

Reflections
Collaborating to explore the evolving nature of the self-portrait, recasting master artworks, and expressing visual ideas through digital techniques provides students with an amazing appreciation of personal vision. These wonderful selfies give the viewer powerful insight into what students find artistically important and who they are becoming as individual artists.

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