

# Self-Portrait: Philippe de Champaigne

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The piece assigned to me, a 1668 etching by Flemish-born, French artist Gerard Edelinck, depicts the head of the French Royal Academy of Painters, Philippe de Champaigne. In the style of a self-portrait painted by Champaigne, the etching demonstrates the great skill and natural talent of Edelinck. Born in Antwerp in 1640, Edelinck travelled to Paris in 1666 and studied under masters like Philippe de Champaigne.<sup>1</sup> He rose to prominence and soon caught the eye of Charles Le Brun, the court painter and arts administrator to Louis XIV, and Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the chief advisor to the King.<sup>2</sup> Rumors report that Colbert convinced Louis XIV to keep Edelinck from studying in Italy because he feared the artist might not return.<sup>3</sup> Because of his close to connection to Le Brun, Edelinck gained several important engraving commissions including a few portraits of Louis XIV.<sup>4</sup> These portraits, as well as those depicting members of the King's court –like the one of Philippe de Champaigne—helped to display the prominence of France and improve the reputation of King Louis XIV.

Over the course of history, rulers have desired to see themselves, and their families portrayed in a certain manner. While these portrayals varied, they rooted themselves in the notion of 'Divine Rule' and the royal family's 'responsibility' to the throne.<sup>5</sup> Because of its all-encompassing nature the portrait medium best fit the desire of both the subject –the royal family—and the artist. During the reign of Louis XIV, 1643-1715, the royal portrait adopted

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<sup>1</sup> Turner, J. Pg. 718.

<sup>2</sup> Marchesano, L & Michel, C. Pg. 39.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Pg. 43.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Schama, S. Pg. 164.

many roles in addition to helping structure the reputation of the monarchy.<sup>6</sup> In the court of Louis XIV, portraits, and their related art forms like busts, allowed the “Sun King” to display the wealth of his kingdom, the vast geographic coverage of his domain, and his divine right to the throne.<sup>7</sup> This paper will examine the uses of royal portraiture in the court of Louis XIV and the methods employed by the royal artists to illustrate him as *Le Roi-Soleil*.

Born to King Louis XIII, the second Bourbon King of France, and Anne of Austria, sister of the Habsburg King of Spain, Philip IV, Louis XIV arrived during a tumultuous time for the French Kingdom, as numerous foreign wars left the country in financial troubles and the constant religion question encouraged social unrest.<sup>8</sup> However, by the end of his seventy-two year rule, the French Kingdom stood as a beacon of culture and art. Even though this incredible culture growth eventually cost France its monarchy, the importance of Louis XIV contribution to the arts cannot go overlooked. One should not look at the rule of Louis XIV as an “...age of poverty, discontent, tyranny, and fanaticism,” but rather as a time “... of stability, an age of classical dignity, of strong Catholic faith, and of autocratic solidarity.”<sup>9</sup> Because of the dichotomy of the interpretations around the rule of Louis XIV the official depiction of the king carried great importance. As noted by Brown, “... the power of the absolute monarch grew, the images of the ruler became more assertive in their claims and richer in their references to the virtues embodied in the [monarch].”<sup>10</sup> For a King like Louis XIV, who held a profound belief in the divine nature of his throne, the royal portrait allowed him to highlight a close connection to a higher power and display his authority. For example, in Charles Le Brun’s 1681 work, *Assembly of the Gods (The Palace of the Sun)*, Le Brun depicted the king as the sun god, Apollo –a telling detail, as Apollo

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<sup>6</sup> Posner, D. Pg. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Pg. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ashley, M. Pg. 1-10.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Pg. 250.

<sup>10</sup> Brown, J. Pg. 137.

is known as the god of knowledge and truth, as well as a patron of the arts.<sup>11</sup> This representation did not come by mistake, but rather a calculated approach by Le Brun to both bolster the image of the King and to gain favor –and potential commissions—from his highness.<sup>12</sup> While the connection between the King and Apollo contributed to the notion of the King’s inherent ‘godliness’ so did the placement of the King in the work. The image of the king appears central to the picture with the other gods appearing to listen attentively to his proclamations. For any member of the court who saw the work, the holiness of the King could not be questioned.

In addition to solidifying the claim of the throne as divine right, portraits served a political purpose, as seen with Hyacinthe Rigaud’s portraits of Louis XIV and the King’s grandson, Philip V. Commissioned following the death of Charles II, the works depict the respective Kings laying claim to their kingdoms.<sup>13</sup> While these two portraits ostensibly demonstrated the connection between the two great kingdoms, it also reinforces the idea that Louis XIV held the right to name the new king of Spain.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the works display a sense of French superiority, as the portrait of Louis XIV hangs much larger than that of Philip V and employs a rich color scheme of “...resplendent blues and whites against golds and reds” compared to the muted colors of Philip’s portrait.<sup>15</sup> For an independent Spain, this appeared as France implying its sovereignty of the Spanish throne –a powerful message wrapped up in two innocent looking portraits. Even though these works carried an important diplomatic message, and an imposition of Louis XIV as the divine ruler of the human race, the portraits also looked to highlight the artistic talents nurtured by the French court.<sup>16</sup> The underscoring of the ability of

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<sup>11</sup> Marchesano, L & Michel, C. Pg. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Posner, D. Pg. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Pg. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Pg. 7.

the French artists imparted the notion of French superiority yet again, a superiority that could only be achieved in the court of a Bourbon king.<sup>17</sup> By employing the best artists to produce royal portraits and depictions, Louis XIV stated both his great political power and his ability to cultivate a society of great intellect and culture.

Due to the importance of depicting the Royal court in the highest possible manner, it is no surprise that Le Brun entrusted Edelinck to engrave a few portraits of the King. Charles-Nicolas II Cochin, a noted engraver, stated, "...Edelinck brought copperplate engraving to the highest point of perfection. Though there were in his time excellent artists in this field, none surpassed or indeed rivaled him...."<sup>18</sup> This ability for copperplate etchings is apparent in the work owned by the Fleming Museum. Edelinck's use of cross-hatching breathes life into the robes of Champaigne, capturing their malleable nature as they flow over the body of a seated Champaigne. Further detail emerges in the faint mustache hairs of the subject, each one carved by a strong hand. The portrait provides an intimate look into the soul of Philippe de Champaigne by focusing the viewer's attention to Champaigne's comforting stare. It is a look of incredible knowledge, coupled with deep humility. By examining the portrait, one can understand why Colbert prevented Edelinck from travelling to Italy –his talent was too great for the Court of Louis XIV to lose.

Gerard Edelinck's engraving of Champaigne's self-portrait shows us the importance of Philippe de Champaigne. Born to a lower class Brussels family in 1602, Champaigne studied in Brussels under Jacques Fouquier until 1621, when he followed Fouquier to Paris.<sup>19</sup> Once in Paris, Champaigne developed into one of the premier portrait painters of 17<sup>th</sup> century France,

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Marchesano, L & Michel, C. Pg. 43.

<sup>19</sup> Garnot, N. Pg. 1.

beginning his career in the court of Louis XIII in 1625. He continued his prolific career through the reign of Louis XIV, including a few commissions directly for the King.<sup>20</sup> These achievements of Champaigne help one discern why Edelinck would have chosen to create an etching of Champaigne's self-portrait. Just as royal portraits helped depict members of the royal family in a favorable fashion, a portrait of Champaigne could accomplish a similar mission. Clearly, Edelinck saw the need to represent one of the founding members of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture and a great contributor to art in 17<sup>th</sup> century France.

The use of the royal portrait during the Baroque period developed into its own style, a style that looked to capture a realistic image of the subject while displaying the wealth and power of the royal family and its kingdom.<sup>21</sup> This era saw artists depicting rulers with opulent presentations of affluence, as seen in Rigaud's portrait of a Louis XIV bedecked in robes of fur and silk, with *Joyeuse*—the sword of Charlemagne—on his hip.<sup>22</sup> The inclusion of such items as *Joyeuse* cements the Louis's claims of the divine nature of his throne. Other Baroque artists would employ similar techniques, as well as including artifacts from the ruler's "empire". This style is featured heavily in Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, which includes various items from across the Spanish dominion. These details promote the legitimacy of the ruling powers and improve the images of the people they depict. For Louis XIV, the royal portrait served as an important tool in promoting himself as the divine ruler of the world's people, as well as displaying the cultural achievements of the artists in his court.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Brown, J. Pg. 138.

<sup>22</sup> Posner, D. Pg. 4.

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