

## 2 The Self at Work

The computer key-board and the mirror may at first glance seem to have little to do with each other, and even less with the period of this book. Yet their existence is rooted in the emergence of the modern individual that we have been following. An individual has to have a sense of self, and what this new self needed to ensure its complete break from the medieval person was the ability to both see itself and express itself. In 1530 mirrors and desks were rare indeed: By 1700 they were commonplace. Their development was part of, and necessary for, the development of the modern sense of self.

“But when my glass shows me myself indeed...”

Shakespeare, Sonnet 62.

### Seeing Ourselves

The mirror is one of the many taken-for-granted features of today that began as a privilege in the sixteenth century and became a commonplace in the second half of the seventeenth. Living as we do now in a society of the self and of self-image, it is hard for us to imagine a life in which we could never see ourselves as others see us. A life without mirrors would be for us a life of well nigh unbearable anxiety.

Not so in medieval England. The absence of a fully developed sense of the individual meant that the inability to see themselves caused people no problems. There is no evidence from the period that people wanted to see their own features, or to recognize their own uniqueness, or



Hans Holbein the Younger:  
*Sir Thomas More*. c. 1527.  
Frick Collection, New York.

to assess how they appeared to others. In a pre-individualistic culture, peoples' appearance functioned to make their social position visible, not to assert their individuality. They could see their clothes: they could not see their faces. They could see what was necessary.

Like all elements of a medieval culture, this was to begin changing early in the sixteenth century. Probably the first clear indication of the change was Henry VIII's appointment of Hans Holbein as court painter and portraitist. Holbein was a paradigm changer. His portraits captured his sitter's unique appearance and character: looking at them today we can easily imagine knowing the sitter in a modern way, that is, as an individual. Holbein's sitters were the first Englishmen and women to see what they looked like. Holbein did for portraiture what Shakespeare, at the end of the century, did for literature: he held a mirror up to nature.

*Woman at Her Toilette*, School of Fontainebleau, 1550-70. Her mirror is small and set within a gilded bejeweled frame supported by carved and painted female figures. Her maid is reaching into a coffer.



Seeing oneself in a portrait was a privilege enjoyed only by those at the very top of the social hierarchy. But soon, a technology developed that extended the opportunity to see oneself at least to

the middle classes. The looking glass, the technological equivalent of the portrait, first appeared in England in the sixteenth century, and by the end of the seventeenth it had become a fixture in every middle class household. By the end of the seventeenth century people were thinking of themselves as individuals, and modern individuals, unlike medieval people, really do want to see themselves. It is difficult, if not impossible, to have a sense of self, if one can never see oneself: self-reflection has dual and inter-related meanings.

Yet, till about 1660, only the wealthiest could see their own reflections, and then of their faces only. People never saw full-length reflections of themselves, and did not seem to miss the opportunity. Narcissus may have seen himself reflected in the water, but doing that is harder than it seems: the water has to be perfectly still and the light must fall on the face, not the water. It takes quite a bit of staging (I've tried it), the results are not very satisfying, and there's no evidence that medieval people were motivated to do it.

### The Looking Glass

## Queen Elizabeth: What did she really look like?

Two years before Hilliard painted his miniature, a German traveler, Paul Hentzner, described the Queen in words:

*Next came the Queen, in the sixty-fifth year of her age, as we were told, very majestic; her face oblong, fair but wrinkled; her eyes small, yet black and pleasant; her nose a little hooked; her lips narrow, and her teeth black (a defect the English seem subject to, from their too great use of sugar); she had in her ears two pearls, with very rich drops; she wore false hair, and that red; upon her head she had a small crown...; her bosom was uncovered, as all the English ladies have it till they marry; and she had on a necklace of exceedingly fine jewels; her hands were small, her fingers long, and her stature neither tall nor low; her air was stately, her manner of speaking mild and obliging. That day she was dressed in white silk, bordered with pearls the size of beans, and over it a mantle of black silk, shot with silver threads; her train was very long, the end of it borne by a marchioness.*

*Paul Hentzner, Travels in England (1598)*

Whose Queen should we believe? Hentzner's (wrinkled, bald, black-toothed) or Hilliard's?



Nicholas Hilliard. *Portrait of Queen Elizabeth*, aged 67, c. 1600, 2-1/2" tall, mounted in a jeweled locket. Her flowing hair was a symbol of her virginity.

Mirrors were in use in ancient Rome and Egypt but the first European mirrors did not appear until the thirteenth century, and they were made by an ingenious process. The maker blew a large glass globe, and while it was still hot, injected it with molten lead or tin. He swirled it around to spin the molten metal onto the inside of the glass, let it cool, and then cut it into pieces to make convex mirrors. These mirrors reflected light efficiently, but distorted people. Improvements, however, were just around the corner.

In Tudor England, “glasses to look in” were known, but rare. A few glass mirrors were imported at great expense from Venice, where the use of tin-foil and mercury to produce a reflective surface behind a flat sheet of glass had been developed around 1500. Glass making became so important to the economy of Venice that glass makers were confined to the island of Murano: the penalty for leaving and taking the mystery of glass making to others was death. Of course, one might think that a daily job of coating glass with mercury had much the same outcome, even if more slowly.

In the sixteenth century, the only English-made mirrors were of what they called “steele,” which was actually speculum (a silvery white alloy that took a high polish,) rock crystal, tin or silver. People did not appear to be confused by the fact that a “glass” could be made of either glass or metal. In 1588, for instance, the furnishings of Leicester House included “three greate glasses, one standing in a verie faire frame, with beares and ragged staves on the top, with a steele glasse in it, the other II of cristall.”

Writing in 1577, however, William Harrison, painted a broader picture:

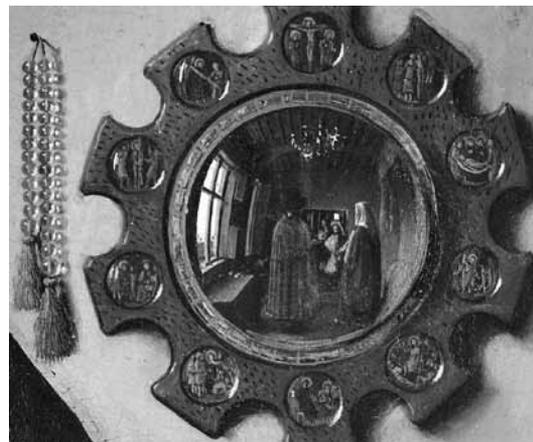
The Romans made excellent looking glasses of our English tin...and very highly were those glasses esteemed of till silver came generally into place, which in the end brought

the tin into such contempt that in manner every dishwasher refused to look in other than silver glasses for the attiring of her head... Howbeit the making of silver glasses had been in use before Britain was known unto the Romans, for I read that one Praxitiles devised them in the young time of Pompey, which was before the coming of Caesar into this island.

We notice, incidentally, that a lowly dishwasher wanting to see herself is, for Harrison, yet another sign of the disruption of the old social order in which

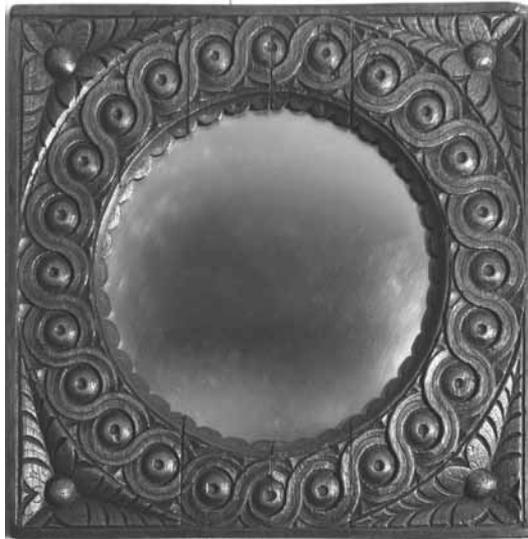


Van Eyck: *Marriage of Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami*, 1434. Marriage was more about property than about individuals coming together in a loving relationship. Notice how much painterly attention has been devoted to the textiles, the most expensive items in any household, and to other furnishings. National Gallery, London.



Van Eyck: *Marriage of Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami*, 1434, (detail.) The visual center of the painting is occupied by a convex mirror, a rare and valuable object. The mirror reflects the backs of the couple and, just visible, the artist painting them. Was Van Eyck playfully celebrating the way in which a scene could be accurately reflected with this new technology? National Gallery, London.

Tudor steel looking glass, c. 1575. Plate replaced. Frame: 15-1/2" square. Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.



people knew their place and the behavior appropriate to it.

Whether steel, tin or silver, "looking glasses" of metal were probably cheaper than those made of glass, and were thus more widely available. Mirrors made of glass were so expensive and so small that today we might classify them as jewelry rather than furniture. One was described in 1598 as, "A most perfect looking-glass ornamented with gold, pearl, silver and velvet, so richly as to be estimated at five hundred écus de soleil." Glass mirrors were so small because the technique of producing flat glass was still in its earliest

stages. Only the Venetians could produce clear, flat pieces of glass, and they charged large sums for these rare and desirable little plates.

Steel mirrors could be a little larger, up to about twelve inches square, because steel that was thick enough to keep the surface flat and undistorted was very heavy.

While these earliest looking glasses were small, they were highly prized, so they were given large, elaborate and expensive frames that were commensurate with their importance. Today, at least if we don't know our history, a small piece of cloudy glass can seem undistinguished, and our attention goes to the elaborate and beautiful frame. But the frame is so big and so beautiful only because the boring little glass was actually so special and so significant.

Some of the finest seventeenth-century artistry surrounded mirrors. Skilled and detailed needlework that often took a year or more of a girl's life was one way of showing the importance of the glass, and the "stumpwork" mirrors that resulted are high on many collectors' lists.

Then, toward the end of the century, there was a technological break-through in glass-making that also had an effect on the style of frames. Mirrors became both



Looking Glass in stumpwork frame. Courtesy Cora Ginsburg Antiques.



Mirror in a sewing/dressing casket. The casket signed underneath "Elizabeth Higgins her cabinet begun agust 29 165?" Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.



Small Looking Glass in stumpwork frame, 18'1/2" x 17-3/4" framed. Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.



Exceptional pierced and fretted crest over a veneered, ogee-molded frame. Courtesy George Subkoff Antiques.



Narrow inner and outer frames flanking a bolection-molded section with floral marquetry and oyster veneers. Courtesy Suffolk House Antiques.

larger and cheaper, so their frames became more subdued and functional, particularly for mirrors in middle class houses. Such “middle class” frames were often of figured walnut veneer: still beautiful, but no longer spectacular. They were often embellished with carved and pierced crests extending up from the frame. One step up from straightforward veneer, were marquetry frames where intricate patterns were inlaid into the veneer. For the wealthy, of course, the sky was the limit: and the frames became more and more magnificent.

### English Looking Glasses

The English glass industry began during the reign of Elizabeth, but it was not until 1621 that the English began to make mirrors, and then only a few. In that year Sir Robert Maunsell petitioned the King for the



Unusual mirror that appears to be the top plate of a pier glass, but was made like this. 12' x 17-1/4". Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.



Small looking glass in deeply molded and veneered walnut frame. Glass: 9-3/4" x 8". Frame: 15" x 13". Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.



A simple frame enclosing a small single-plate mirror, 14-1/2" x 12-1/2" x 8". Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.



Pier Glass. A veneered frame with fretted crest enclosing a two-plate mirror. These tall mirrors, possibly designed to hang on a pier between windows, usually have two plates, either because the technology had not yet advanced enough to make a single plate 38" long, or because a single plate was more expensive. 43" x 12." Courtesy Fiske & Freeman.

*Lady at Her Toilet*,  
Utrecht School, c. 1670.  
Her toilet mirror, “a  
square mirror resting  
upon its stay,” stands  
amid the rest of the  
accoutrements needed  
for dressing.



right to make looking glasses, employing “strangers from foreign parts to instruct natives ... in making ... Looking Glasse plates and theyre foyling.” The strangers had presumably escaped from Murano, and we may guess that their skills earned them far more in London than in Venice.

Sir Robert’s factory was moderately successful. In 1639, Lady Brianna Hartley badly wanted a good reflection of herself, and wrote to her son: “Dear Ned, if there be any good looking-glasses in Oxford, chuse me one aboute the bignesse of that I use to dress in, if you remember it. I put it to your choys, because I think you will chuse one that will make a true ansure to onse face.” We must remind ourselves not to give a modern meaning to Lady Brianna’s glass to “dress in”: in this period “dressing” was dressing the hair, not the body. Similarly, the dressing table, on which stood the newly fashionable dressing mirror, was also used for hairdressing and for applying cosmetics. “A true answer to [her] face” was the best that

Lady Brianna could hope for from the small looking glasses of the first half of the century.

In *The Academy of Armory* (1649/1688), Randle Holme defined a toilet mirror as “a square mirror resting upon its stay, having a ring also on the top of the glass to hang it by....these sorts of glasses are most used by Ladys to look their faces in, and to see how to dress their heads and set their top knots on the foreheads upright.” We note that toilet mirrors were made either to hang on the wall behind the dressing table or to stand on it.

A lady’s need to see her face was not confined to her dressing chamber. Black face patches became fashionable in the reign of Charles I. They covered pimples and blemishes resulting from bad diet or pox, and also emphasized the highly artificial whiteness of the lady’s skin. Their use became excessive: Pepys describes Lady Newcastle’s “many black patches because of pimples around her mouth.” (*Diary* April 26, 1667.) Men also used patches, sometimes even to indicate their politics – on the left cheek for Tories

and the right for Whigs. In *The Gentlewoman's Companion* (1673) Hannah Moore writes of patches “cut out into little Moones, Suns, Stars, Castles, Birds, Beasts and Fishes...” so that a woman’s face “may be properly termed a Landskip of living Creatures.” (Ribeiro 2005: 209) They also needed constant checking so the fashionable lady had to carry a mirror with her at all times. The mirror that did the job was called a “girdle glass” because it hung from her girdle. Girdle glasses, usually framed in feathers, were a fashionable accessory for most of the seventeenth century, but very few have survived today.

There is, incidentally, an intriguing definition of “mirror” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “a small glass formerly worn in the hat by men and at the girdle by women.” I have never seen any other reference to mirrors being carried in men’s hats. Seventeenth-century men’s clothes had no pockets, and the large hats of the first half of the century had plenty of folds and ribbons for a mirror to tuck into. Hats certainly carried spoons, so there’s no reason why they shouldn’t have held mirrors as well.

Later in the century, glass-making technology improved and 1660 saw not only the Restoration of the monarchy, but also the establishment of the Vauxhall glass works. This really kick-started the English glass-making industry. In 1664 the Worshipful Company of Glass Sellers and Looking-Glass Makers was formed and the importation of mirror glass was banned. By 1675 the Worshipful Company had as many as 85 members. The industry was booming, and in 1684 the diarist Anthony Wood could write that Lady Clayton bought a “verie large looking-glasse” in which she could see “her ugly face and body to the middle.”

The larger mirror that allowed Lady Clayton to see her ugly body to the middle was the result of a new process in which the glass-blower produced a straight-sided cylinder that he then cut along its length and unrolled to form a flat sheet about 12 or 14 inches wide and as long as 30 or even 36 inches. The size of plates produced by this method increased steadily. In 1700, according to an advertisement,

Large Looking-glasse plates, the like



Detail from an engraving by Wenceslaus Hollar, *Autumn*, 1644, showing a fashionable lady with a girdle glass in a feathered surround suspended from her girdle. British Museum.



Detail from Lambert Doomer: *An Interior with Peasants Dancing and Eating*, 1681. Pewter spoons were clearly carried in hat bands, and apparently, small mirrors were, too.

never made in England before, both for size and goodnesse, are now made at the old Glass House at Foxhall, Where all persons may be furnished with rough plates from the smallest sizes to those of six foot in length, and proportionable breadth, at reasonable rates.

These larger plates also allowed mirrors to be built in to the walls of houses. When Celia Fiennes visited the Duke of Devonshire in 1697 she marveled,

The hall is very lofty painted top and sides with armory: at the end of the dining room is a large door of Looking-glass, in great pannells all diamond cutt [beveled], this is just opposite the doores that runs into the drawing room and the bed chamber and closet, so it shews the roomes to all look double; the Duchess's Closet is wanscoated with hollow burnt japan [lacquer] and at each corner are peers of Looking-glass, over the chimney is Looking glass an oval, and at the 4 corners, after this figure 'O', and hollow carving all round the glass.

(Morris, 1982: 106.)

These mirrored rooms, scaled down versions of the famous *Galerie des Glaces* [the Hall of Mirrors] at Versailles, seemed so magical because, of course, they mirrored the company inside them: spectators stood in the middle of multiple images of themselves and of everyone else.

In 1651, a guest at a party given by the Archbishop of Sens was so moved by one of these *Galerie des Glaces* that he penned a verse expressing the company's delight in being able to see multiple images of themselves and others (the image was clearly more captivating than the reality.)

*Cinquante miroirs de Venise  
Des plus riches and des plus beaux  
Servoient d'agrables tableaux  
Pour représenter les figures,  
Les grimaces, les graces, les apas,  
Les ris, les mains, et les bras  
De toute la belle caballe,  
Qu'on festoyoit dans cette sale.*

Hall of Mirrors, Versailles.  
Courtesy Myrabella /  
Wikimedia Commons /  
CC-BY-SA-3.0



[Fifty of the richest and most beautiful Venetian mirrors serve as delightful pictures displaying the faces, the expressions and poses, the smiles, the graces, the charms, the bosoms, the hands and arms of all the fine company that is entertained in this room.] (Thornton, 1978: 75).

Toward the end of the century, mirrors took on new tasks – to be part of the décor, particularly in baroque interiors, and to reflect light rather than people. According to the 1688 inventory of Belton House, Lincolnshire, the most expensive items of furniture in the Great Parlour were “two very large seeing glasses,” and beneath each was a japanned table. Bowett (2002:19) suggests that they were probably hung on the window piers and that they may have been an incomplete version of what is now known as a “triad” (see p. 233). A triad is a large looking glass over an elaborate pier table that is flanked by a pair of tall stands. The triad became an essential fixture in wealthy, baroque houses of the post-Restoration period, and it is probably the first time that furniture was designed to be décor in a specified place in the room, instead of being movable objects that were taken to wherever they were wanted. But the triad takes us into the topmost tier of houses, and thus away from the focus of this book.

As a result of new glassmaking techniques, then, people could, for the first time in English history, see images of themselves. And they needed to. Restoration London became the center of “high society,” and the social life of the wealthy revolved around balls, banquets, theatre-going and all sorts of fashionable gatherings. Costume and manners became elaborate and often foppish. Individuals vied to impress each other with their dress, their hairstyle and their demeanor. In such a society, looking-glasses became a necessity. You can’t dress to impress without a mirror.

Looking glasses were not the only way for people to see themselves: portraits became as fashionable as mirrors. Peter Lely,

## Shakespeare Reflects

Shakespeare was ruefully aware of the difference between his face as he imagined it and the face that the mirror showed him was really his.

*Methinks no face so gracious is as mine,  
No shape so true, no truth of such account,  
And for myself mine own worth do define,  
As I all other in all worths surmount.  
But when my glass shows me myself indeed,  
Beaten and chopped with tanned antiquity,  
Mine own self-love quite contrary I read;  
Self so self-loving were iniquity.*

(Sonnet 62, published 1609, but written earlier.)

Geoffrey Kneller, Mary Beale and others took portraiture beyond the circles of the Court, and made good livings for themselves in Restoration London. They, and the equally prosperous looking glass makers, were responding to the same social demand and were producing equivalent products: self-images.

Technology and social desire run hand in hand. Medieval society lacked mirrors not just because it was unable to produce large reflective surfaces, but because it did not need to: technological incompetence alone is not an adequate explanation. The looking-glass industry and the sense of the individual grew in parallel. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the late seventeenth-century boom in looking glasses came at the same time as the boom in personal portraiture.

By the end of the seventeenth century, then, the looking glass had become a normal piece of household furniture: at least one would have been found in every middle-class home; and in the houses of the aristocracy, as in everyone’s home today, there would be many. The looking glass is, in fact, the forerunner of the camera: it was the first technological device to reproduce reality in two dimensions and to enable us to see ourselves as others see us.