

What do Facebook and Rembrandt have in common? Everything

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Facebook and artists like Rembrandt have much in common, says the author of "Friending the Virgin: some thoughts on the pre-history of Facebook" in the open access journal *SAGE Open*.

The main commonality lies in the act of portraiture, which consists of more than just the realistic depiction of a subject, but also a number of rhetorical decisions closely intertwined with evolving ideas of identity and society, according to author Larry Friedlander. The article points out the complex negotiations that artists had to make when painting some of their most famous works, similar to the choices people make today with respect to selecting images, interests, and descriptions to represent themselves on [Facebook](#).

"In traditional portraiture pose, [gesture](#), prop, costume, glance provided the raw materials out of which a specific presence was evoked," wrote Friedlander. "For example, in (the) portrait by [Rembrandt](#) of Nicolaes Ruts, the sitter presents himself to the viewer with admirable directness. Ruts was a Mennonite fur trader and his sable coat and hat refer to his trade. Nothing extraneous distracts from the image's message: this is a merchant, a rich man, evidently serious and respectable."

Similarly, today's Facebook –or any social networking site— profile allows contemporaries to share their collective portraiture. This may seem easier than sitting for a portrait, but Friedlander contends that today's tools of text, pictures and video almost allow for more potential for failure than the paintbrushes of masters.

"Anxiety, the subject's and the viewer's (of the painted portrait), is hidden well beneath the surface. But it is there precisely in the artist's effort to smooth those anxieties out of existence," wrote Friedlander. "We, in contrast, wear our anxieties on our sleeves. But both Rembrandt and Facebook strive for mastery over the challenges of representation."

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