Selfie Esteem

What do you guys think? Smile or pout? Is the peace sign too cliché? Sorry, I'm just getting ready for my close up. Not that I have any other option – my arms are really short. But anyway, I have yet to post a photo on Instagram today so I don't want to keep all my 1,000...ok, 15 followers deprived of my beautiful face. Now, if you believe what the media tells you, you think I subscribe to “selfie culture” and have already branded me narcissistic and selfish. However, given that the Pew Research Center found that 91% of teens have posted a photo of themselves online, I'm clearly not alone. These snapshots have most recently come under fire, especially after the Oxford English Dictionary named it the word of the year in 2013. But, like any speech topic, the selfie is nothing new. So let's explore the long tradition of the selfie by first, focusing our lens to take a look at the start of self-portraiture, second, turning on our flash to illuminate the first instances of selfies as we know them today, before finally, taking a photo of what we look like in the present, duck faces and all...but first, let me take a selfie.

Although nowadays, selfies are considered the manifestation of our self-obsession, self-portraits began as a way to preserve our past for posterity. Whether it was the caveman – or woman – scrawling a stick figure of themselves on the cave wall or the highly-regarded artist whose portraits are still in art exhibits today, selfies have always existed in some form out of a desire to keep a record of our existence and our experience. I tend to think of myself as more like the latter, but let's be honest for a second, all of this might look better if you couldn't see all the details. Louis XIV of France was not a painter himself – though he did have many, many portraits of himself commissioned. In one of his most famous portraits by Rigaud, Louis XIV was so obsessed with how he looked that he hired a leg model for a more strong-looking calf. And we thought filters were extreme. But, as I'd imagine any art critic would tell you, Vincent Van Gogh big or go home – and Van Gogh himself was an advocate for the selfie too. If you type “Van Gogh” into Google, the first autofill suggestion is “self portrait,” and this is for good reason. Van Gogh is known for creating dozens of self portraits throughout his lifetime; selfie king James Franco would be proud.

So you might argue that paintings don't count as selfies. You'd be wrong – but I'll accept the challenge. One of the first photographs of a person...was a selfie. In 1839 it took so long to take a photograph that Robert Cornelius was able to remove the lens cap, run into frame for a minute or more, and run back to cover the lens. At least that's what Wikipedia tells me. When the camera was first invented, the selfie was not just for us peasants. In fact, Russian Grand Duchess Anastasia Nikolaevna pioneered the mirror selfie in 1914 when she took her own picture to send to a friend. Her selfie game was on point. Furthermore, as the use of cameras diffused to the lower classes, the popularity of the selfie grew as well. Whether it was taking a quick pic of themselves to finish off reel of film or simply wanting to be in a photo while also taking, either way, the selfie soon grew and became the art form of the masses, made by the people for the people.

But let's adjust the frame to focus on the present. Not only does everyone from the pope to Kim Kardashian take selfies, but the Mars rover is programmed to be able to take photos of itself as well. While we can't really thank the Australians for much, the Australian internet forum ABC Online is credited with the first usage of the word selfie on September 13th, 2002. A poll commissioned by Samsung found that 30% of photos taken by people aged 18-24 are selfies. However, contrary to popular belief, selfies are not only used to brag about how good we look, or as Beyonce might say, how “I woke up like this.” Selfies are used to express our emotions, document our memories, and most importantly to build self-confidence. We are able to control the way we look and the way we are perceived so that we can be more comfortable with ourselves. No wonder big companies want the selfie to die; if we are all happy with the way we are, then how will they sell us more stuff that we don't need?

So today we have discovered the real history of the selfie, #nofilter. We learned that selfies are not a new creation, from self-portraits to Russian Grand Duchesses we have always wanted to record ourselves, it's just that now don't only use them to portray our best selves, but the good, the bad, and the ugly. Don't let The Man hold you down – instead hold your iPhones steady and take as many selfies as you want. Also, you should definitely follow me on Instagram; I know 15 followers is plenty, but it can't hurt right? I always follow back, and I promise to like all of your selfies. Let's spread the love so we can all have some selfie esteem.