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Self-Portrait

RISD Museum

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I'm Fritz Drury. I'm a professor of illustration here at RISD, and also a painter. We're looking today at the self-portrait by Paul Brill. To me, this self-portrait stands as a kind of manifesto. It's not a gazing into the artist's soul. It's essentially him telling us who he is, and what he stands for as a painter. I can relate to this personally because I'm also a painter of landscape, and I think Paul and I share a certain attitude towards it that has broad, historical threads, and a lot of counterparts in world art history. That being the idea of landscape as a place of poetic reverie, of myth, of a kind of spiritual renewal, and certainly of history.

The thing I love in particular about this painting is that Brill is in effect serenading his own work. He looks towards us as he plays his lute.

But he very generously stares out at us, inviting us into this dialogue that he's having with his own work in progress, and I think that is a wonderful insight for non-artists into what it's like to be in the studio with a painting that's coming together. You start to feel this world that you're creating; its poetic power. This is not a painting that was painted outside. It's a studio product from the artist's imagination, and I believe that's true of all of his work. He may have done some drawings outside, but never set up his easel out there. So he's sharing this kind of gradually growing poetic force, giving it a metaphorical manifestation in the music that he's playing, and inviting us to be part of that mystery of creation.