Are you finished in there yet? How the bathroom selfie became so huge

A powder room snap can reveal more than its subjects might realise - which is why one hotel isn’t so keen on the abuse of its facilities

In the bathroom at the Met Gala Ball – as taken by model Joan Smalls. Photograph: joansmalls/instagram

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There was a time when the bathroom was the ultimate private space - but that was before people stood in front of the mirror, phones held aloft, and captured images of their shirtless pecs and duckfaces. Or, in the case of Kim Kardashian (as so much is when we’re talking about selfies), a topless friend.
Bathroom selfies are divisive. This week, a spokesman for the five-star Waldorf Astoria Dubai Palm Jumeirah hotel publicly pleaded for a stop to semi-naked selfie-taking, much of which occurred in the establishment’s lavish bathrooms. “We have had a lot of complaints from families with children,” he told the Mirror, which handily reproduced the photographs of a group of Russian models who were staying in the hotel during a shoot. There are bubble-bath shots and an awkward one of three girls in bra tops and cut-off denim shorts, two touching the other’s bottom. “We do not want to see our geolocation on photos of girls in semi-naked and erotic poses.”

Historically, the bathroom selfie used to be perceived as fairly cringeworthy. If you had to take a picture of yourself in the bathroom mirror, camera flash obscuring half your face, it implied you had no friends to do it for you. But the bathroom selfie has evolved – as the million-plus hashtagged Instagram bathroom selfies attest – a shower selfie also proves how good you look without makeup, sticking a leg out of bathtub bubbles gives you the chance to flash some flesh while pretending not to be too craven in your attention-seeking. At the Met Gala Ball, the bathroom was where people went to take the selfies that had been banned by host Anna Wintour, the modern celebrity equivalent of smoking in the loos at school. The most interesting bathroom selfies are political. In the US, transgender people have been taking selfies in public lavatories to protest against laws which insist they use the bathroom of the gender they were assigned at birth.

But for most, a bathroom backdrop is simply an alternative to the golden sunsets or plush bedroom suites that already litter Instagram’s most epicurean snaps. “The essential psychological motivation is always going to be some form of validation,” says Aaron Balick, author of the Psychodynamics of Social Networking. A bathroom selfie is no different. Although, he points out, a bathroom provides a feeling of privacy in which to photograph yourself, at odds with your decision to share it.

An exhibition which opens at the Saatchi Gallery in March, From Selfie to Self-Expression, will review the history of the self-portrait from Rembrandt to our current glut. There will be bathroom selfies, including a rather famous one by Kardashian in which the reality star and her
A self-portrait only became possible because of the invention of the mirror, and so the bathroom selfie is a practical construct,” says Nigel Hurst, director of the Saatchi Gallery. It must also have something to do with our mirror image being our most familiar view of ourselves, not to mention a means by which to perfect the image we hope to capture.

However, a selfie is not a self-portrait in the way a Rembrandt self-portrait is, says Hurst. “He’s really trying to get to the bottom of what makes him a human being, how he shares that humanity and what is unique about his character, and what his face gives away. Most selfies are a construct; it’s more to do with how we want the world to see ourselves, and also our lifestyle, our environment, our social world.” Nowadays, you can even get guides to restaurant loos where the most interesting or glitziest bathroom selfies can be taken. Quite why so many

Lena Dunham's take on the bathroom selfie. Photograph: Instagram