

# Portraits - Seminar 2

## *Background Notes*

Bernard Courtis - 27 November 2008

Notes relating to National Gallery Exhibition:

Renaissance Faces; Van Eyck to Titian

15 October 2008 - 18 January 2009

**WAHG**

## PORTRAITS Lecture Notes N°2

### Brief notes on the sitters and the painter of their portrait

#### 1a. **THE SITTER: Margaret van Eyck**

She married Jan van Eyck's around 1433. When she became a widow she became known as **damoiselle Marguerite** by ducal letters patent of 1441. At the Burgundian court *Damoiselle* implied a certain status; Margaret was probably of the same rank as Jan, who used a quartered coat of arms. She seems to have survived until 1456 or later and would probably have been entitled to continue running his workshop, which appears to have functioned for several years after his death in 1441. She had an annuity of £2 payable by the town of Bruges and she risked a year's payment in the lottery drawn at Bruges in 1446.

She had several children, including one who was the Duke of Burgandy's godchild and Levina, who became a nun at Maaseik.

#### 1a **THE PAINTER: Jan van Eyck (ca. 1390-1441)**

His elder brother Hubert (*died 1426*) and he are considered the founders of the early Netherlandish School of painting.

In the first decade of the 15<sup>th</sup>C an elaborate technique of painting in oil glazes on wooden panels emerged and was perfected in the Low Countries. Jan did not invent oil painting as many people assume, but he did improve the way oils were then used – he gessoed a smooth wooden surface and painted in an opaque style, with many overlays of transparent colour glazes. He was also one of the first to show faces in three-quarter view and pay detailed attention to light and shade. The brothers' brilliant coloration, luminous surfaces, their amazing sense of reality and detailed precision of their paintings

remain to this day one of the greatest achievements of Western art. Jan's motto was '*As Best As I Can*'

### **2a. THE SITTER: Leonello d'Este (1407-50)**

An illegitimate son born into the aristocratic ruling family of Ferrara; a small but wealthy city-state in northern Italy. He later became the Marquis of Ferrara, Reggio and Modena. He was educated by the eminent humanist scholar Guarino da Verona.<sup>i</sup> A skilled politician, he was also a man of culture; Leon Battista Alberti wrote his *De Re Aedificatoria* that at Leonello's Ferrarese court worked artists such as Pisanello, Jacopo Bellini, and Piero della Francesca. Leonello was responsible of the construction of the first hospital of Ferrara and during his rule the University of Ferrara gained a European prestige as a centre of learning.

Consciously mimicking the practice of the ancient emperors he commissioned Pisanello to make a series of portrait medals, which would not only preserve his fame in the future, but also proclaim his strength as a ruler to his subjects.

### **2a THE PAINTER: Pisanello circa 1394? – 1455**

A medallist and a fresco and panel painter he was one of the most distinguished painters of the early Italian Renaissance and Quattrocento. He was acclaimed by poets such as Guarino da Verona and praised by humanists of his time who compared him to such illustrious names as Cimabue, Phidias and Praxiteles. His rare surviving panel paintings are characterised by exquisite detail and complex surface design.

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<sup>i</sup>. In 1436, he became a professor of Greek at Ferrara. From 1438 on he interpreted for the Greeks at the councils of Ferrara and Florence

**2b THE PAINTER: Giovanni da Oriolo.** Little is known other than he painted this painting and that he died between 1480 and 1488.

**3a. THE SITTERS: Assumed Grandfather and his Grandson.**

An unknown Florentine patrician generally assumed to be Francesco Sassetti (1420 - 1490) a Florentine Medici banker.

**3a THE PAINTER: Domenico Ghirlandaio 1449 -1494**

Florentine painter. He trained with Baldovinetti and possibly with Verrocchio. His style is considered by some to be solid, prosaic, and rather old-fashioned especially when compared with that of his great contemporary Botticelli, but he was an excellent craftsman and good businessman who ran one of the most successful painting studios in late 15<sup>th</sup>C Renaissance Florence. His speciality was fresco painting, in churches such as Santa Maria Novella and the Ognissanti in Florence, as well as the Palazzo Vecchio

**3b. THE SITTER: Francesco Sassetti 1421 – 1490**

Built his fortune through his employment by the Medici family. In 1460 he acquired a country estate on a hill outside the city and rebuilt it in a magnificent manner. Now known as *Villa La Pietra*, From 1463 Sassetti became general manager of the Medici bank and was later held responsible for its decline in the 1470's, with the closure of branches in London, Bruges, Avignon, Milan, Venice, Rome and Naples

**3b. THE SCULPTOR: Antonio Rossellino 1464-5**

Florentine sculptor trained by his brother Bernardo. Examples of his works can be seen in several museums/galleries

**4. *THE SITTER: Giovanna Tornabuoni 1468-1488***

She came from one of the most important Florentine families the Albizzi A known beauty. In 1486 she married Lorenzo Tornabuoni. Two years later she died in childbirth.

**4a *THE PAINTER Domenico Ghirlandaio. Viz 3a above***

**4b. *THE MEDALLIST: Niccolò di Forzoro Spinelli 1430-1514***

Born into a Florentine family of Goldsmiths. His medals are notable for their vigorous and vivid modelling

**5. *THE SITTER: Doge Leonardo Loredan 1436-1521***

Doge from 1501 to 1521, led Venice's heroic resistance to the League of Cambrai, the coalition of states led by France established in 1509 to deprive Venice of all her possessions. After initial losses Venice regained her territories.

**5a *THE PAINTER: Giovanni Bellini c1431- 1516***

Son of Jacopo with his brother Gentile<sup>ii</sup> were the leading Venetian painters.<sup>iii</sup> Giovanni is considered the most talented and influential of this gifted family.<sup>iv</sup> He achieved through a highly personal synthesis of Tuscan pictorial construction, based on geometric calculation, with Netherlandish optical empiricism and technique of painting in glazes to represent mathematically measurable space and volumes suffused with light.

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<sup>ii</sup> Despatched by the Venetian government to Istanbul where he worked as an artist in the service of Sultan Mehmet II and painted the sultan's portrait

<sup>iii</sup> Their brother in law was Andrea Mantegna

<sup>iv</sup> The Brothers' students included Titian, Vittore Carpaccio and Bartolomeo Veneto.

**6a. THE SITTER: Peter Gillis 1486-1533**

An author and translator who held the high position of Antwerp's town clerk. He was a friend of both Desiderius Erasmus, Europe's foremost humanist and Thomas More *inter alia* the author of *Utopia*, which he started when staying with Gillis in Antwerp. The work was finished in London and published in 1516 with illustrations by Holbein.

**6a. THE PAINTER: Quentin Massys 1465-1530**

A Flemish artist who painted both religious pictures and secular portraits. His work represents an early effort to synthesize the artistic tradition of the Northern Renaissance with that of the Italian Renaissance. Influences of Italian art, especially of Leonardo da Vinci, may be seen in his work, particularly in the delicate modelling, the subtle nuances of tone, and in the adoption of Leonardo's grotesque head studies. Massys sought inspiration also in works of earlier Flemish artists, especially of Jan van Eyck. The combined Flemish and Italian influences aided Massys in evolving a calm and measured style, with solid figures and soft textures. He developed a type of portraiture in which the sitter was placed against an appropriate background. *The Ugly Duchess/the Old woman* (1515?) is probably an illustration he created for *The Praise of Folie*, by Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus, and carries Massys's secular and satirical style to its culmination.

**7a THE SITTERS: Andrea Navagero and Agostino Beazzano**

The Venetian scholar, poet and diplomat Pietro Bembo (1470-1547) was Raphael's patron at the courts of Urbino and Rome. Navagero (1483-1529) and Beazzano (c1390's-1549), were learned humanist

friends of theirs at Pope Leo X's court. Leo X born Giovanni de' Medici was Pope from 1513 to his death in 1521

**7a THE PAINTER: *The Painter: Raphael Sanzio, 1483 –1520***

His career falls naturally into three phases, first described by Giorgio Vasari: his early years in Umbria, then a period of about four years (from 1504-1508) absorbing the artistic traditions of Florence, followed by his last hectic and triumphant twelve years in Rome, working for two Popes and their close associates. Though he died at 37, Raphael's example as a paragon of classicism dominated the academic tradition of European painting until the mid-19<sup>th</sup>C.

**8a. THE SITTER: A Young Princess (Dorothea of Denmark?)**

Dorothea and Christina of Denmark resided at the courts of Margaret of Austria and Mary of Hungary. Both Margaret and the Emperor Charles V, their uncle gave them enormous quantities of jewellery including huge numbers of pearls.

**8a. THE PAINTER: Jan Gossaert 1478 -1552 called Mabuse**

Flemish painter Jan Gossaert's journey to Italy in 1508 with Philip of Burgundy led to a revolution in Netherlandish art because he brought home new painting ideas and a new trend. For the next 150 years, Flemish painters regularly visited Italy, often adopting an Italianate style of painting. Gossaert drew upon the iconographical and technical resources of the Flemish tradition and the inspirational example of Dürer and combined them with the inventions of the Italian Renaissance, in particular the new approaches to anatomy, perspective and use of classical motifs. Gossaert's version of the style married Flemish figures with Italianized architectural elements and

classical poses. Gossaert's Royal commissions took him to Brussels, Malines, and Utrecht, and his work had wide influence.

**8b THE SITTER Christina of Denmark, Duchess of Milan 1522 – 1590.** In 1533 she married by proxy Francesco II Sforza, Duke of Milan, who died in 1535. After the death of Jane Seymour in 1537 Henry VIII considered marrying her. Holbein was despatch to paint her. Christina sat for a portrait, wearing mourning clothes. Christina, then only sixteen years old, made no secret of her opposition to marrying the English king, who by this time had a reputation around Europe for his mistreatment of his wives. She supposedly told the English ambassador that "*If I had two heads, one should be at the King of England's disposal.*"

**9a. THE SITTER: An unidentified Man**

**9a THE PAINTER: Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen ca.1500-1559**

Dutch painter, etcher, and tapestry designer, active in Flanders and Spain He was famous above all because he had accompanied the Emperor Charles V as a war artist on his expedition to Tunis in 1535. He designed the twelve tapestries of the Conquest of Tunis which were finished just in time to be sent to England to be displayed -and greatly admired -at the marriage of Philip II and Mary Tudor at Winchester on 25 July 1554.

**10a. THE SITTERS: Giovanni della Volta, his Wife and Children**

Giovanni della Volta was a rich Venetian merchant. He lived with his family in the Rialto district of Venice. He paid for the painting by providing free lodging in his home to Lorenzo Lotto

**10a THE ARTIST: Lorenzo Lotto (c 1480-1556/7)**

A Northern Italian painter draughtsman and illustrator traditionally placed in the Venetian school. He painted mainly altarpieces, religious subjects and portraits. His style of painting was viewed as unfashionable in an age dominated by the two great Venetian painters, Titian (c. 1488-1576) and Tintoretto (1518-94). Lotto's vision enabled him to create remarkable paintings which have a contemporary resonance today. His realistic and empathetic works, filled with distinctive sharp lines and vivid colours, lean towards Flemish art rather than Venetian

**11a THE SITTER: Mary Neville, Baroness Dacre 1524-1576**

Widow of Thomas Fiennes, 9<sup>th</sup> Baron Dacre who was hanged as a common criminal for the death of a servant during a poaching expedition on a Sussex estate, and his lands and title were forfeited. In 1558 her surviving son, Gregory (1539-1594), became 10<sup>th</sup> Baron Dacre when Queen Elizabeth I responded to their petitions to annul the verdict on Thomas. Mary was thrice married

**11a. THE PAINTER: Hans Eworth or Ewouts c. 1520 – 1574**

An Antwerp Painter who worked in London from 1545 painting allegorical images and portraits of the gentry and nobility. He enjoyed great success at the courts of both Mary and Elizabeth Tudor His predecessor in the royal court was Hans Holbein the Younger who strongly influenced his style.

**12. THE SITTER: The Tailor ('Il Tagliapanni')**

Unlike the majority of the portraits in the Exhibition *The Tailor* clearly belongs to a different category of work; the *genre portrait* in which the sitter is shown doing rather than just being.

**12a THE PAINTER: Giovanni Battista Moroni, ca.1520-1578**

The son of an architect he is best known for his elegantly realistic portraits of Milanese nobility and clergy; considered one of the great portrait painters of sixteenth century Italy. His portraits are remarkable for their psychological penetration, dignified air, and exquisite tonality

**13a. THE SITTER; Sir Henry Lee KG of Ditchley 1553 - 1611**

Master of the Royal Armouries and Queen's champion under Queen Elizabeth I. In 1568, during the first stage of a diplomatic tour which took him on to Germany and Italy he had the opportunity of sitting to Mor, the leading portraitist of his time. He was one of Elizabeth I's favourite courtiers. He was responsible for organising the Accession Day tilts, chivalric events in honour of the Queen. After the death of his wife Ann Paget in 1590, Lee openly lived with his long-time mistress, Anne Vavasour, formerly one of the Queen's Ladies in Waiting. After the Queen's visit to his home at Ditchley he declined to invite her again as the cost of entertaining her and her extensive retinue was too high.

**13a THE PAINTER Antonuis Mar (Mor) c.1517 - c 1576-8**

Born in Utrecht, he was a well travelled artist and absorbed a great variety of influences during his career. His style combines elements of Italian portraiture with the meticulous style of Netherlandish School. He was court painter to Philip II of Spain and painted some of the most important people of the day. Later he made portraits of wealthy Antwerp merchants and their families.

**14a. THE SITTER: Pope Paul III 1468 –1549 born Alessandro Farnese**

Aged seventy five when this portrait was painted. When elected pope in 1534, he recognised the need for substantial reform of his Church. In 1537 Paul III promulgated the papal bull *Sublimus Dei* against the enslavement of the indigenous peoples of the continent of America. He called the Council of Trent in 1545. Paul III was in earnest in the matter of improving the ecclesiastical situation, nonetheless, even by the rather inglorious standards set by his predecessors, Paul was extreme in his nepotism - promoting the worldly interests of his son Pierluigi and grandson Ottavio, and, just two months after his election, making Ottavio's brother, Alessandro, his spiritual heir, raising him to the cardinalate at the age of only fourteen.

**14a THE PAINTER: Titian c1490 -1576<sup>v</sup>**

Titian's composition is closely related to that of Raphael's Julius II, which had set the standard for portraits of popes in this period

**14b. THE SITTER: Julius II 1443-1513**

Pope from 1503, born Guiliano della Rovere in Albizuola, nephew of Sixtus IV. His public career was mainly devoted to political and military enterprises for the re-establishment of papal sovereignty in its ancient territory and for the eradication of foreign domination in Italy. Julius II was a liberal patron of arts, he employed Bramante for

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<sup>v</sup> Titian's payment was reduced as he sought ecclesiastical preferment for his priest son, Pomponio

the design of St. Peter's cathedral, which began in 1506, had Raphael brought to Rome to decorate his private apartments (*now known as Stanze di Raffaello,*) and commissioned Michelangelo for the frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and for his own tomb. His military exploits inspired Erasmus' satire *Julius Exclus*

**14b . THE PAINTER: Raphael viz 8a above**

**15a. THE SITTER: The Emperor Rudolph II 1552 -1612 (as Vertumnus - "god of seasons)**

King of Hungary (as Rudolf, 1572-1608), King of Bohemia (as Rudolf II, 1575-1608/1611), Archduke of Austria (as Rudolf V, 1576-1608), and Holy Roman Emperor (as Rudolf II, 1576-1612). He was a member of the Habsburg family. He is remembered as an ineffectual ruler whose mistakes led directly to the Thirty Years' War; a great patron of Renaissance art; and a devotee of occult arts and learning which helped seed the scientific revolution

**15a. THE PAINTER: Giuseppe Arcimboldo 1527?-1593.**

Italian painter best known for creating imaginative portrait heads made entirely of such objects as fruits, vegetables, flowers, fish, and books

**!5a THE PAINTING**

Arcimboldo was living in Milan in 1591, having returned to his native Italy after a long period -from 1562 to 1587- at the courts of Vienna and Prague, employed by the Emperors Ferdinand I (1503-1564), Maximilian II (1527-1576) and Rudolph II (1552-1612). During this period he had developed an extraordinary series of disguised portrait heads, taking as their themes the seasons or the

elements, and built out of the objects and produce associated with each. These heads were often sent as princely gifts to other courts and reflected the imagery used in courtly festivals. Their origin may lie in the grotesque and fantastic figures popular in sixteenth century decoration and in the court poetry of the time. Celebrated by Comanini as playfully inventive, they can be interpreted as witty allegories of the harmonious rule of the Habsburgs over the microcosm, man and the macrocosm, the universe and the body politic.

The painting is described in a poem included in the 1591 treatise on painting, *Il Figino*, by Gregorio Comanini (died 1608), which was evidently designed to accompany the work when it was sent to the Emperor Rudolph II in Prague

This portrait appears to have been conceived as a single example rather than one of a set. It is closely based on an elegy on Vertumnus by the Roman poet Propertius, who described the god as made from fruits and ears of corn, arranged as they appear in the painting. Arcimboldo may have intended a parallel with ancient Rome; the presence of spring and summer flowers suggests a single eternal season, a golden age over which the Emperor Rudolph held sway. The painting would have had a particular appeal for the emperor, who was deeply interested in science, astronomy, astrology and alchemy. His “*Kunstammer*”<sup>vi</sup> brought together scientific specimens and natural objects of all kinds in an attempt to understand the world.

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<sup>vi</sup> A *Kunstammer* collection of 'curiosities and wonders', where Renaissance and Baroque art meet science. Objects made from a variety of exotic materials