Portrait Painting in Florence in the Later 1400s

It is hard to imagine a world without images of living people, but in western Europe portraiture had essentially disappeared with the collapse of Roman civilization. Only such figures as saints, the Virgin and child, and angels—or devils and the anonymous damned—were depicted in paint (although rulers, in imitation of Roman and Byzantine emperors, might put a generic profile on coins). It has been suggested that physical appearance was not a particularly important element of self-image or even a primary means of identification in the Middle Ages. Station in life, family and local affiliations, occupation—these were how people knew themselves and others. But by the time these paintings were made between about 1450 and 1500, a thousand years after the fall of ancient Rome, notions about identity and the individual had changed.

The earliest portraits had appeared in altarpieces, where tiny donors knelt in prayer to a central image of the Virgin or other holy personage. Independent portraits, however, would have to await the man-centered worldview of the Renaissance. Men and women now sought "speaking likenesses" for a range of purposes for the first time since antiquity. Portraits became part of the dynastic business of kingdoms and were deployed as statements of wealth and status. Portraits of prospective brides were reviewed by rulers contemplating marriage. Many aristocratic couples were "introduced" through images. Likenesses were also commissioned, as they are most often today, as a way to immortalize loved ones. The first such portrait we hear of was painted by Simone Martini for his friend Petrarch to capture the beauty and spirit of the poet's beloved Laura. Increasingly, as the works in this gallery demonstrate, painters strove to convey not simply physical appearance but personality and character as well: what Leonardo da Vinci called "the motions of the mind."

Leonardo da Vinci
Florentine, 1452–1519

Ginevra de' Benci, about 1474

She was the daughter of a wealthy Florentine banker, and her portrait—the only painting by Leonardo da Vinci in the Americas—was probably commissioned about the time of her marriage at age sixteen. Leonardo himself was only about six years older. The portrait is among his earliest experiments with the new medium of oil paint; some wrinkling of the surface shows he was still learning to control it. Still, the careful observation of nature and subtle three-dimensionality of Ginevra's face point unmistakably to the new naturalism with which Leonardo would transform Renaissance painting. Unlike the man in Castagno's portrait nearby, Ginevra is modeled with gradually deepening veils of smoky shadow—not by line, not by abrupt transitions of color or light.

Other features of Ginevra's portrait reveal young Leonardo as an innovator. He placed her in an open setting at a time when women were still shown carefully sheltered within the walls of their family homes, with landscapes glimpsed only through an open window. The three-quarter pose, which shows her steady reserve, is among the first in Italian portraiture, for either sex.

Oil (front) and tempera (back) on panel,
38.1 x 37 cm (15 x 14 9/16 in.)
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1967.6.1.a–b

At some time in the past, probably because of damage, the panel was cut down by a few inches along the bottom, removing Ginevra's hands. A drawing by Leonardo survives that may suggest their appearance—lightly cradled at her waist and holding a small sprig, perhaps a pink, a flower commonly used in Renaissance portraits to symbolize devotion or virtue. Ginevra's face is framed by the spiky, evergreen leaves of a juniper bush, the once brighter green turned brown with age. Juniper refers to her chastity, the greatest virtue of a Renaissance woman, and puns her name. The Italian for juniper is *ginepro.*

The vast majority of female portraits were commissioned on one of two occasions: betrothal or marriage. Wedding portraits tend to be made in pairs, with the woman on the right side. Since Ginevra faces right, this portrait is more likely to have commemorated her engagement. Her lack of obvious finery, however, is somewhat surprising. Jewels, luxurious brocades, and elaborate dresses were part of dowry exchange and intended to display family wealth.

Contemporaries called Ginevra "la Bencina," a diminutive. They praised her piety and virtue, the beauty of her golden curls and brown eyes, and her intellect. A single line of her poetry survives: "I ask your forgiveness, I am a mountain tiger." Lorenzo de' Medici—de facto ruler of Florence and great patron of learning and the arts—dedicated two sonnets to her. Other poets celebrate Ginevra and Venetian ambassador Bernardo Bembo. They shared a devotion informed by Neoplatonic philosophy, which saw beauty—physical and moral—as a way to apprehend the divine. Platonic love, which stirred the soul toward God, was exalted by humanists and became a courtly fashion among the Florentine elite.

On the back of the panel is a second "portrait," an emblematic image that links Bembo and Ginevra. The wreath of laurel and palm, symbols of intellectual and moral virtue, was Bembo's personal device. Here it frames Ginevra's juniper

sprig. Curling around all three is a scroll with the Latin inscription VIRTUTEM FORMA DECORAT (beauty adorns virtue). It is yet another reference to Ginevra, but was painted over a slogan that read "virtue and honor." The earlier motto was Bembo's and is strong evidence that it was he who commissioned Leonardo to decorate the portrait reverse. Who commissioned the front? We cannot say with certainty. Although Bembo may have ordered it, it was more likely commissioned by Ginevra's brother at the time of her engagement—we know he was a friend of Leonardo.

Leonardo was unique, at first, in using his fingers to blend oil paints, but soon this practice became common. Here, where the sky meets the juniper bush above Ginevra's shoulder, we can see his fingerprints. The blended paints allowed him to create soft transitions—and to re-create the natural world more convincingly than had ever been possible before.

Andrea del Castagno
Florentine, before 1419–1457

Portrait of a Man, about 1450

Today, we are accustomed to meeting the gazes of men and women who look out at us from portraits, but this has not always been the case. The first independent portraits of the Renaissance presented sitters in strict profile, a pose that offered a concise likeness while maintaining a hierarchical reserve appropriate to high status. By the 1430s or so, artists in northern Europe began to adopt a three-quarter pose, which could convey a much greater sense of personality. In Italy, however, profile views continued to dominate. Perhaps their popularity was linked with profile portrait medals—very popular among Italian collectors—and with the ancient Roman coins that inspired them. In any case, Castagno's image is one of the earliest three-quarter-view portraits from Italy to survive; it is also one of only two known until the appearance of Leonardo's *Ginevra de' Benci* (and another female portrait by Botticelli) some twenty-five years later.

The man's forceful personality is almost aggressively projected. His face is composed of brightly lit and sharply delineated planes, which seem almost to carve his features with palpable form. He turns a proud, animated face to hold our eye.

Tempera on panel 54.2 x 40.4 cm (21 5/16 x 15 7/8 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.17

Pietro Perugino
Umbrian, about 1450–1523

Portrait of Lorenzo di Credi, 1488

Before this painting was transferred to a canvas support, an inscription on the back of the original wood panel read, "Lorenzo di Credi, most excellent painter, 1488, age 32 years, 8 months." It was probably added in the sixteenth century, when Credi's reputation was at its height. He was one of many students in the busy Florentine workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio, which also included Perugino and Leonardo da Vinci.

The subject's aquiline nose and jutting chin compare well with another known likeness of Credi as an older man, and for many years the painting was accepted as a self-portrait. Now, however, it is thought to reveal Credi's face—but Perugino's hand. Other landscapes by Perugino have the same silvery quality we see here. Moreover, the strong planes of the face and tousled coiffure more closely resemble Perugino's bolder style than Credi's smoother, more polished painting.

The unusual backward tilt of the head reinforces the melancholy mood established by Credi's sad, distant gaze and set mouth. It has been suggested that Perugino painted this image of Credi just after the death of their beloved master Verrocchio in 1488, the same date inscribed on the panel. Credi was Verrocchio's heir and took over his shop. It was his unhappy task to accompany Verrocchio's remains back to Florence for burial after his death in Venice.

Oil on panel transferred to canvas, 44 x 30.5 cm
(17 5/16 x 12 in.). Widener Collection 1942.9.38

Agnolo di Domenico del Mazziere or Donnino di Domenico del Mazziere
Florentine; Agnolo, 1466–1513; Donnino, 1460–after 1515

Portrait of a Youth, about 1495/1500

The Mazziere brothers ran a significant workshop in Florence in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, but were known only through mentions in archives. It was not until 1988 that scholars were able to link them with actual paintings and drawings, which up to that time had been assigned to an unidentified artist called the "Master of Santo Spirito." The workshop seems to have eagerly adopted innovations—for example, this sitter, like Leonardo's Ginevra de' Benci, is posed against a deep landscape and sky.

The unidentified youth wears a tight-fitting red doublet of the type that came into fashion at the end of the fifteenth century. The slits in the arms of this doublet not only show off the fine quality of the young man's chemise, but they were also probably needed for full range of motion.

Much of Florence's wealth was based on textiles, and an appreciation for fine silk and woolen cloth was regarded as something of a Florentine birthright. Seven guilds oversaw the production of everything from wool berets, like the one worn by the youth in the painting, to shoe soles. It has been estimated that a weaver of brocaded velvets, the most luxurious fabric available, earned more in a year than the architect Brunelleschi, who designed the dome for Florence's cathedral. The color red, used for some official garments in Florence, was produced by a range of dyes. The most expensive red cloth, *chermisi,* was dyed with a pigment made from insects. Cardinals wore the same red, though only after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 cut off supplies of the even more rare purple dye derived from murex shells.

Oil on panel transferred to canvas and solid support, 51.5 x 34 cm (20 1/4 x 13 3/8 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.294

Filippino Lippi
Florentine, 1457–1504

Portrait of a Youth, about 1485

Opinion about this young man varies. To some viewers he has appeared "alert, spirited," his face "lively and full of strength." He has been called the perfect model of Florentine youth, noble and intelligent. But others see him as "coarse and sensual," perhaps cruel. Although he turns toward us almost full-face, he gazes past us. None of these speculations about character would have been possible about a profile portrait; until sitters turned to reveal their faces, their portraits were more about their status than about themselves. Florence was proud of its republican government—even if, in practice, the city was ruled by the Medici. Not surprisingly, in other cities with more princely, autocratic courts—in Milan or Mantua, for example—profiles continued to be used for ruling families, even while men and women of lower rank had themselves portrayed in ways that presented them as individual personalities.

Filippino Lippi was the son of painter Fra Filippo Lippi. After his father's death, Filippino studied with Botticelli, who earlier had been the elder Lippi's pupil. Botticelli had a profound influence on Filippino's style, and indeed the Washington portrait is so similar to the work of Botticelli that debate persists over its artist's identity. Although it has been attributed more often to Botticelli, the National Gallery gives the portrait to Filippino because the youth's facial structure so closely resembles that of other figures he painted.

Oil and tempera on panel, 52.1 x 36.5 cm
(20 1/2 x 14 3/8 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.20

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The works of art discussed here are sometimes temporarily moved to other rooms or removed from display.