

## IDEALISED REALITY

### THE ART OF PORTRAITURE IN THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

#### *Background Notes*

Dr Antonia Whitley — 19 April 2023



Leon Battista Alberti, 1404-1472

National Gallery of Art, Washington

This is the earliest independent self-portrait - c.1435.

## The cultural roots for the development of portraiture in Renaissance art

Petrarch, the 14C scholar and poet, talked of his own age as one of ‘revival after centuries of cultural darkness’ which separated the glorious achievements of classical antiquity from those of his day. He saw the Middle Ages as a fallow period of 1000 years. Petrarch himself collected Roman Imperial coins while his follower Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459) collected classical sculpture. Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-75), Petrarch’s friend, described how Giotto had brought back to light that art that had been buried for many generations and elsewhere he wrote how Dante had restored to life the dead art of poetry. This revival was in reference to the whole intellectual scene and not art in particular. The 15C in Italy was a time when new ideas introduced by humanists affected the whole cultural spectrum.

The word *humanista* emerged in the Renaissance as slang for someone who studied the liberal arts. Someone, so-called, because he was following a course in the humanities, or as they were then called the *studia humanitatis*.

They included what was known at the time as grammar and rhetoric - which actually meant literature, poetry, history and the skill of communicating clearly and convincingly. The implications of the study of the humanities for the period as a whole proved far-reaching.

First, it marked a decisive break with the traditional university curriculum which was concerned with teaching logic and with drumming into students dry intellectual formulae. Secondly, the humanities tended to emphasise secular rather than transcendental values. The *humanista*, either as a student or as a scholar, was less concerned with studying metaphysics and theology than with both trying to understand human action and striving to improve himself as a person. Classical literature provided a guide in the endeavour. Out of this arose the humanists’ preoccupation with reading the histories of Livy, the poetry of Horace, the speeches of Cicero and the dramas of Terence and Plautus.

***You may be wondering what this has to do with art.*** In reality, the study of classical literature which absorbed humanists and the discourse of new ideas in intellectual circles had a profound effect on the development of art.

It also paved the way for a transition from the so-called 'International Gothic style' — the visual language of both medieval Europe and the style of northern European courts— **to one in which new forms of art that derived from Antiquity were sought by enlightened patrons.** They included portrait medals, busts, classical mythological themes and depictions of the nude, which were now called for, in addition to the religious art that had prevailed up to this point.

Alberti presents himself in this bronze self-portrait, pictured here, in classical guise; both his hairstyle and his garment knotted in front recalling portraits of famous ancient Romans, while the relief in oval format recalls a cameo. The winged eye was his personal emblem. His name is abbreviated L[EO].BAP[TISTA].

Profile portraits were rich in cultural references. We see this connection taken up by Alberti in On Painting II, 26 from the words of both Pliny's Naturalis historia XXXV, 15 and from Quintilian's Institutio oratoria X,2,7.

Humanist studies also gradually changed the relations between patrons and artists, because the literature of ancient Greece and Rome revealed new attitudes to art and artists. Ancient texts revealed that Pliny and Cicero had appreciated statues and paintings for their aesthetic qualities and that they had considered artists to be creators. By the end of the 15C, these ideas had spread throughout the Italian peninsula whilst the medieval perceptions of painters and sculptors as mere craftsmen gradually became eroded. In The Book of the Courtier, written in the early 16C, the author Baldassare Castiglione wrote how painters such as Mantegna, Leonardo, Giorgione, Michelangelo and Raphael conversed as professionals with popes and princes.

It was not until Jacob Burckhardt, the 19C Swiss historian, that the term 'Renaissance' was in particular associated with the Italian Peninsula and that it was seen as a revolutionary age (The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, of 1860).

According to Burckhardt, 'Man had escaped from the medieval thought-dungeon in which he was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people or group and of one in which Man thought of the hereafter rather than the world in which he lived'.

This new awareness of himself as an individual during the Renaissance, coincided with the great age of exploration (Columbus) - a time in which man was expanding the physical as well as the mental horizons of his world.

Additionally, according to Burckhardt, Renaissance intellectuals turned to classical models not so much out of any reverence for the Ancients as because they found in the classics the most satisfactory expression of what they themselves were trying to affirm.

## The Renaissance portrait medal

Medals are monuments in miniature, designed to flatter the living and commemorate the dead. Rome had immortalised her heroes on coins, Renaissance Italy was ambitious to do the same.



Obverse: Nero Clavid Caesar Aug Germ P M TR P Imp P P<sup>1</sup>

Nero bare head facing left

Reverse Nero laureate advancing right in the flowing robes of Apollo Citharoedus, playing with right hand the lyre held in left hand, c.62AD, British Museum.

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<sup>1</sup> Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus, Victor over the Germans, Emperor High priest, Holder of Tribunitian power, father of the country

Pisanello was the greatest early creator of this art form with his masterly profile portraits on the obverse and a variety of designs on the reverse which could include personal emblems or allusions to historical events. These medals named the subject portrayed and, because they were made from metal, were more durable than organic substances.



Medal of John Palaeologus of 1438 with, on the reverse, the Byzantine emperor riding before a wayside cross. The emperor attended the Council of Ferrara that year, when it is thought to have been commissioned. The most striking aspect of the portrait is the emperor's hat. The inscription in Greek reads: John, emperor and autocrat of the Romans, the Palaeologus. British Museum.

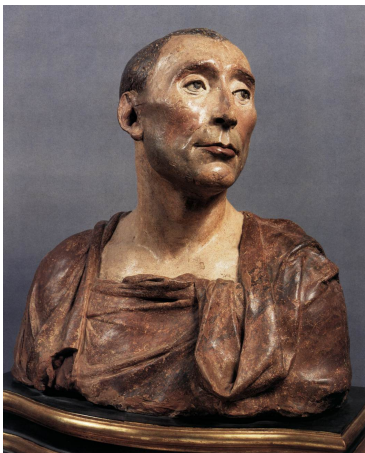
## The Renaissance carved bust

Roman classical portrait busts tended to transform the body into an abstract ideal shape, which included the head, shoulders and part of the torso. They were rounded at the bottom, hollowed out at the back and set up on a base.

The Renaissance bust is cut straight through just above the elbow. It is carved fully in the round and it has no base.



Bust of Piero de' Medici by Mino da Fiesole c.1453. It was known to have been set in a niche over a door in the Palazzo Medici, Florence. Bargello Museum, Florence.



Bust of Niccolò da Uzzano by Donatello, 1430s.

Polychromed terracotta, believed to have been created posthumously based on a death-mask. Niccolò had been the 'gonfaloniere' of justice (standard bearer) in Florence, an important public figure. Donatello has captured a sense of his strong personality and something of his proud and confident manner. Bargello Museum, Florence.



## The Renaissance Portrait

Two examples of portraits displaying what Leonardo called **Motions of the Mind**, a concept which will be discussed in the seminar.



Leonardo, Cecilia Gallerani,  
c.1489, The Princes Czartoryski  
Museum, Kraków



Leonardo, Ginevra de' Benci,  
c.1475, National Gallery of Art, Washington

Leonardo wrote that 'in portraits, beauty is preserved which otherwise nature and time would destroy....'

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### Some Further Reading

Campbell, Lorne. *Renaissance Portraits: European Portrait-Painting in the 14th, 15th, and 16th Centuries*. New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1990.

Campbell, Lorne, Miguel Falomir, Jennifer Fletcher, and Luke Syson. *Renaissance Faces: Van Eyck to Titian*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011.

Christiansen, Keith, and Stefan Weppelmann, eds. *The Renaissance Portrait: From Donatello to Bellini*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011.

Pope-Hennessy, John Wyndham. *The Portrait in the Renaissance: The A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1963, (Delivered at) The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.

## Donor Portraits

In an often-quoted passage, John Pope-Hennessy caricatured 16th-century Italian donors as follows:

“the vogue of the collective portrait grew and grew ... status and portraiture became inextricably entwined, and there was almost nothing patrons would not do to intrude themselves in paintings. They would stone the women taken in adultery, they would clean up after martyrdoms, they would serve at the table at Emmaus or in the Pharisee's house. The elders in the story of Suzannah were some of the few figures, respectable Venetians, were unwilling to impersonate...

The only contingency they did not envisage was what actually occurred, that their faces would survive but their names go astray.”



**Perugino, The Baptism of Christ, 1482, Sistine Chapel, Rome.** On the right hand side in the foreground are Giovanni Basso della Rovere and members of his family. He was the brother-in-law of the Pope Sixtus IV.

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