

Who's Who: The Problem With Great Portraits

4. Renaissance Faces

By Simon Abrahams
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The number in parentheses next to each title identifies its entry in the Prado catalogue of *Renaissance Faces*.

A rare display of great portraits, *Renaissance Faces*, arrives at London's National Gallery in mid-October after several months, in expanded form, in Madrid. It will still be very impressive. As an important exhibition on our subject, this entire issue is devoted to it. This series began three months ago with the revelation that early Netherlandish portraits, long heralded as the first visual evidence of a new interest in individual identity, are not portraits as we think of them at all. The patrons surely thought so but not the artists. Some of the best known portraits are so similar to the artist's own face or to one another that they can never have been intended as a true likeness.¹ That is why art scholarship's practice of using the sitter's biography to understand the art is so misguided. Yet, though few art scholars – writers by trade - grasp that “every painter paints himself”, many visual artists have and still do.

Cindy Sherman and Yasumasa Morimura, for instance, have photographed themselves in the guise of other people or as figures in famous works of art for decades. They may lack the craft, originality and creativity of, say, Titian but they understand than a generation of art scholars. Take a look at four portraits by Titian, all in the exhibition.



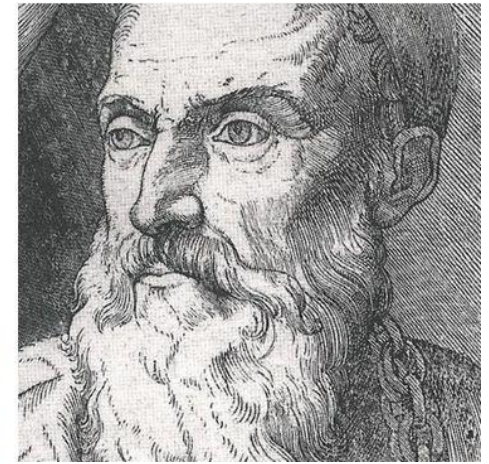
Charles V by Titian
(115, Madrid only)



Titian by Titian



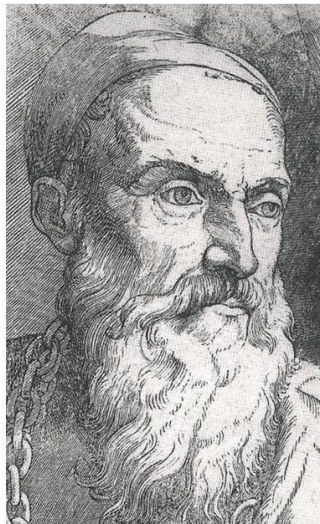
Philip II by Titian
(118, Madrid only)



Titian by Titian



Pope Paul III by
Titian (London only)



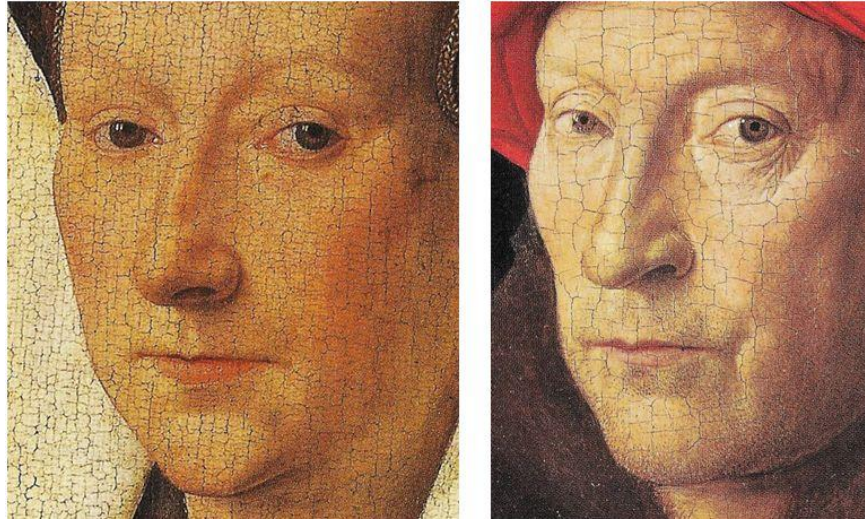
Titian by Titian



Federico II Gonzaga,
by Titian (30, Madrid only)

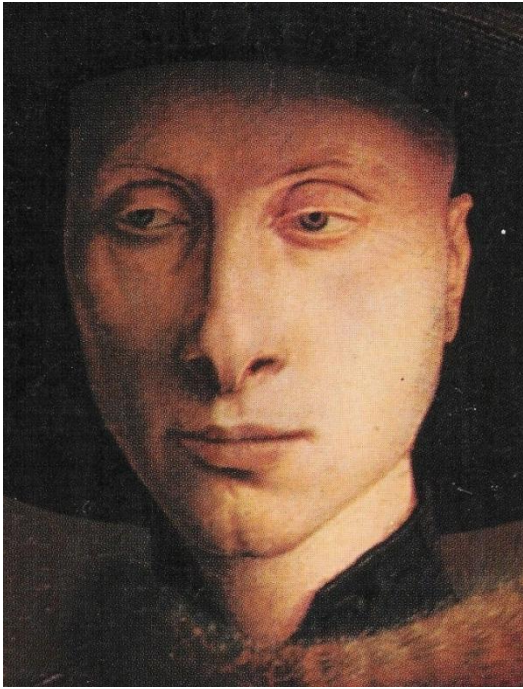


Titian by Titian

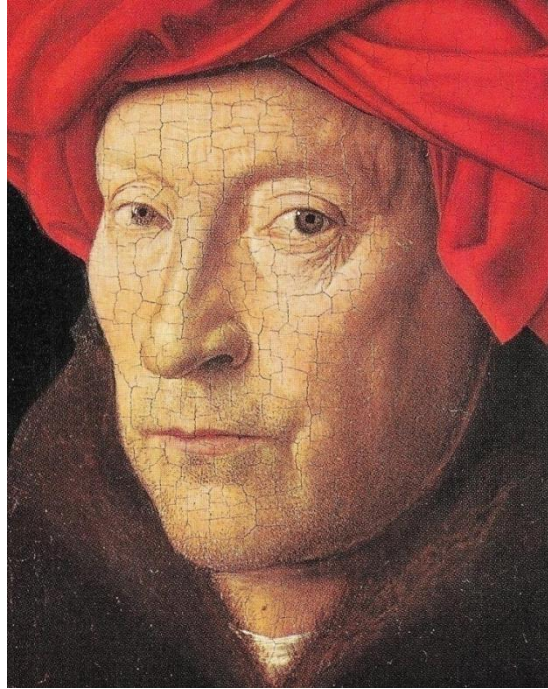


Margaret van Eyck by van Eyck (16) Van Eyck by Van Eyck (London only)

The Spanish-language catalogue (the only one available so far) proposes that a portrait's prime purpose was to record the sitter's likeness accurately while demonstrating with strange logic that many are full of intentional distortions.² However, just as I showed in Issue 1 that Margaret van Eyck's face has been changed to match her husband's (above) so Lorne Campbell notes how van Eyck changed the man's face in the *Arnolfini Portrait* from what he had earlier sketched in the underdrawing. He enlarged the eyes, nose and mouth and placed them higher up the head. Campbell believes those changes were intended to make the face more life-like yet, as I reveal here, they also allowed Arnolfini's face to become a precise metamorphosis of Van Eyck's own self-portrait.



Arnolfini by Van Eyck



Van Eyck by Van Eyck



Both faces at left fused

The Italian's long nose, longer than in the underdrawing, now matches the proportions of the artist's exactly, as do his eyebrows and the almond-shape of his eyes. (Disregard the eyelids). The mid-line of their lips is positioned identically with both their lower lips markedly off-center, as Margaret's is also in her portrait. That must be significant. Even their chins, after Van Eyck widened Arnolfini's, now match though one is cleft. Finally, when the two finished faces are superimposed, the

position of their features match exactly (fig. 5).³ That would not happen with the underdrawing. 'Face fusion' must therefore be intentional and part of Van Eyck's meaning.

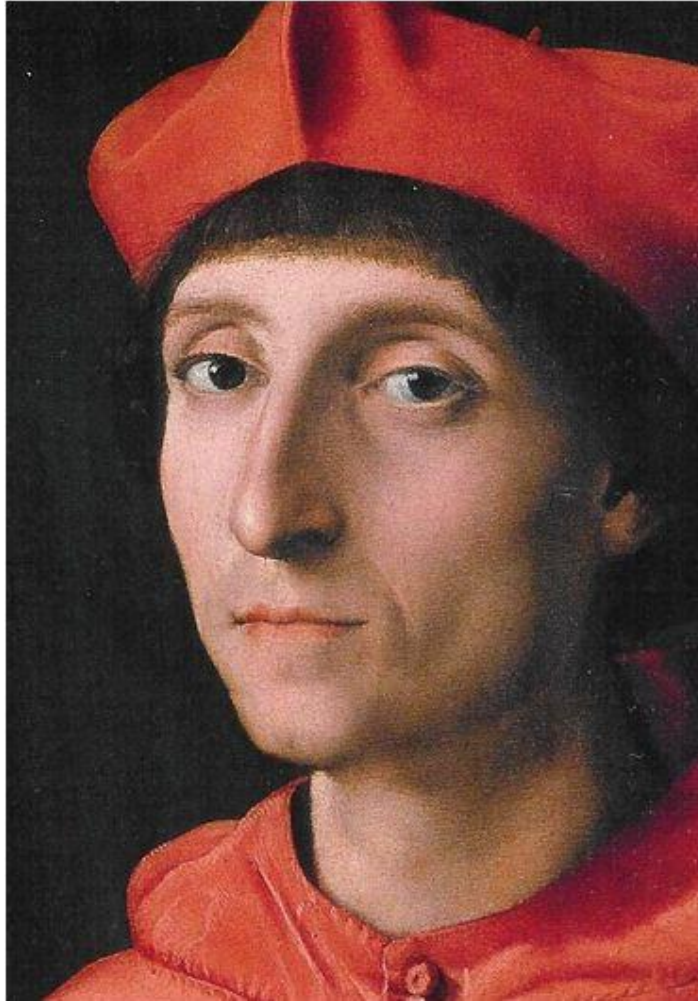
Furthermore, the artist and the Arnolfini all share a similar first name: Jan, Giovanni and Giovanna (all versions of John).⁴ Thus Van Eyck's identification with a masculine and feminine 'John' as they unite in a formal bedroom ceremony may well illustrate the androgyny (and fertility) of his own creative mind. Both themes are widely used in great art, as I have shown in Michelangelo's work in the Sistine Chapel (see Abrahams....). Similar symbolism was also used in the practice of spiritual alchemy and was probably common contemporaneously in the language of mystics.

As for Giovanna, it has been noted that while Giovanni's features are individually specific, hers are idealized. However, as I demonstrated in Issue #1, Giovanna's face is identical to that of Van Eyck's Angel Gabriel and Virgin Mary elsewhere. This facial type must be meaningful, just as the repetitive faces that Emerson saw in Leonardo's work must be too (see Issue 1, p.) Indeed a repetitive facial type, specific to the artist, is a

common feature in Renaissance art, found in the work of Piero della Francesca, Perugino and Parmigianino, to name just a few.⁵

Although this discussion has been longer than usual, commentary on the remaining exhibits will be more brief though a list of similarities can be found in the Appendix. They are organized into three segments: single portraits of the same gender as the artist, those of the opposite gender and double portraits.

Single Portraits of the Same Gender



An unknown cardinal by Raphael
(29, Madrid only)



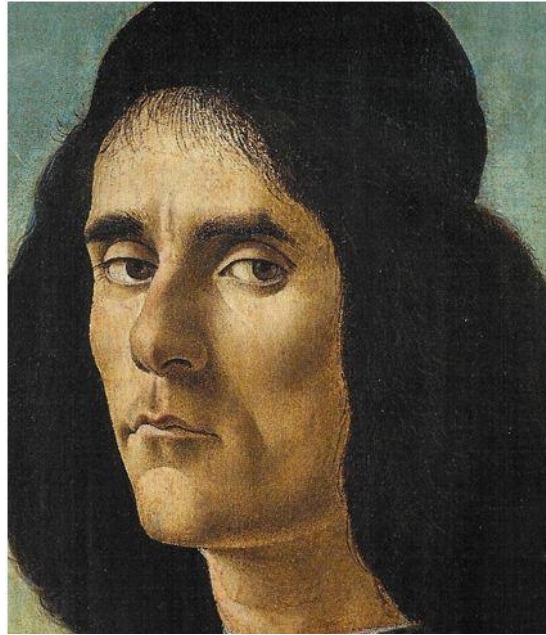
Raphael by Raphael



An Unknown Cardinal by Raphael
(left)

Raphael by Raphael (right)

In this portrait Raphael symbolizes an aspect of his mind as a high churchman with ecclesiastical authority. When compared to a self-portrait (opposite page) the shape of his face and the lit portion of the cardinal's are virtually identical as are their proportions. The eyebrows and eye-openings match, as do the lengths of the nose, chin and long neck. As for their mouth, only the positioning is similar but if compared to an earlier self-portrait (above) the lips match exactly, as does the contour of the Cardinal's hair with that of the artist's hat.



Michele Marullo Tarcaniota by Botticelli (106)

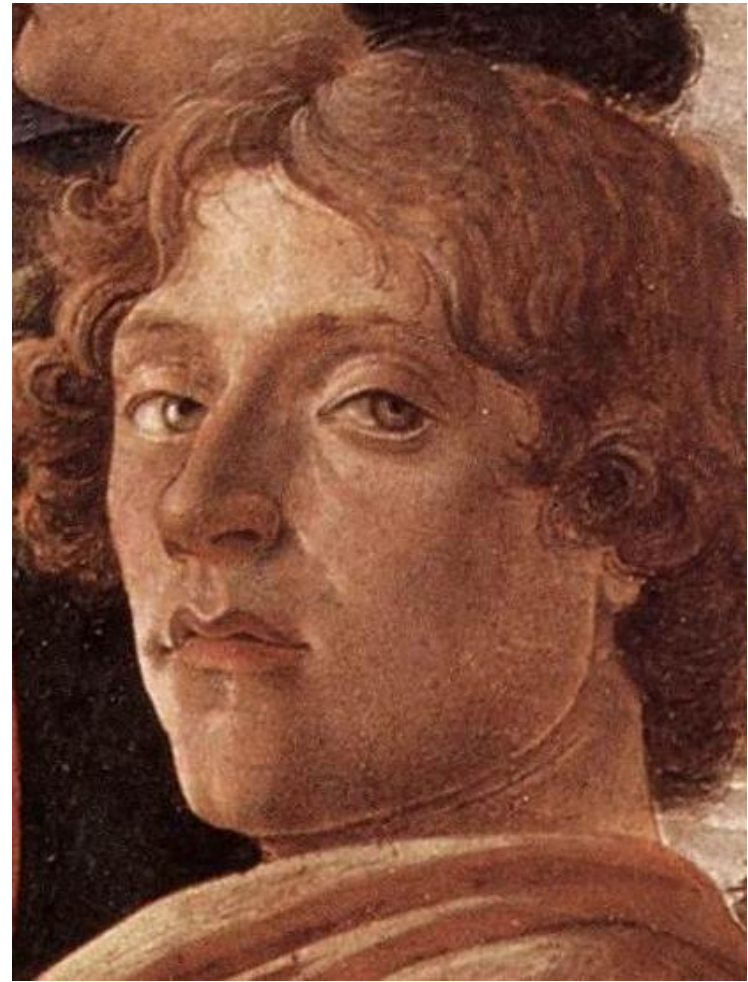


Botticelli by Botticelli

In Botticelli's portrait of Michele Marullo Tarcaniota, the artist's wavy lips reappear, as do the chin, eye-openings, sideways glance, slant of the nose, prominent nostril and hair centrally parted. The catalogue remarks that Marullo's eyes are his most fascinating feature in this portrait, a telling comment because, as substitutes for Botticelli's, they ought to be.⁶ Marullo who wrote poems and epigrams in the style of Lucretius is likely to be a personification of the visual poetry in Botticelli's mind, poetry conveyed through the eyes.



Young Man Holding Medallion by Botticelli
(London only)



Botticelli by Botticelli



Emperor Maximilian by Dürer (99)



Dürer by Dürer

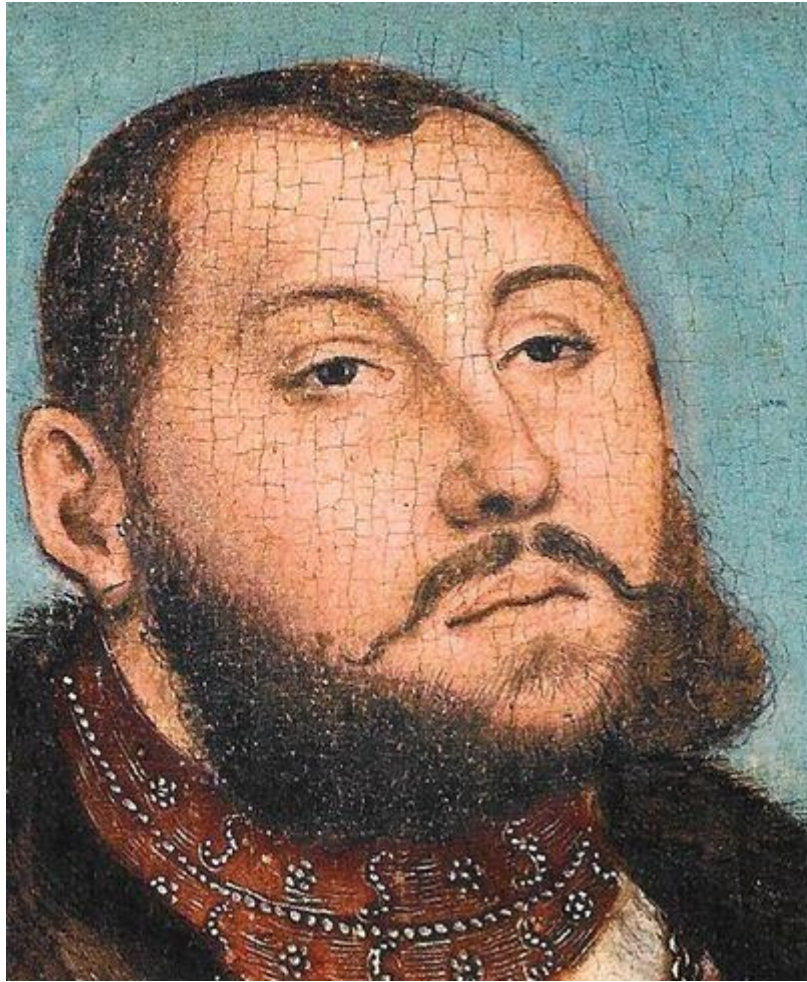
Although Maximilian did have a hooked nose, Dürer could still associate it with his own. A real feature can be as useful for self-representation as a fictional one. Besides, their portraits also share the same eyebrow, upper lip and chin.



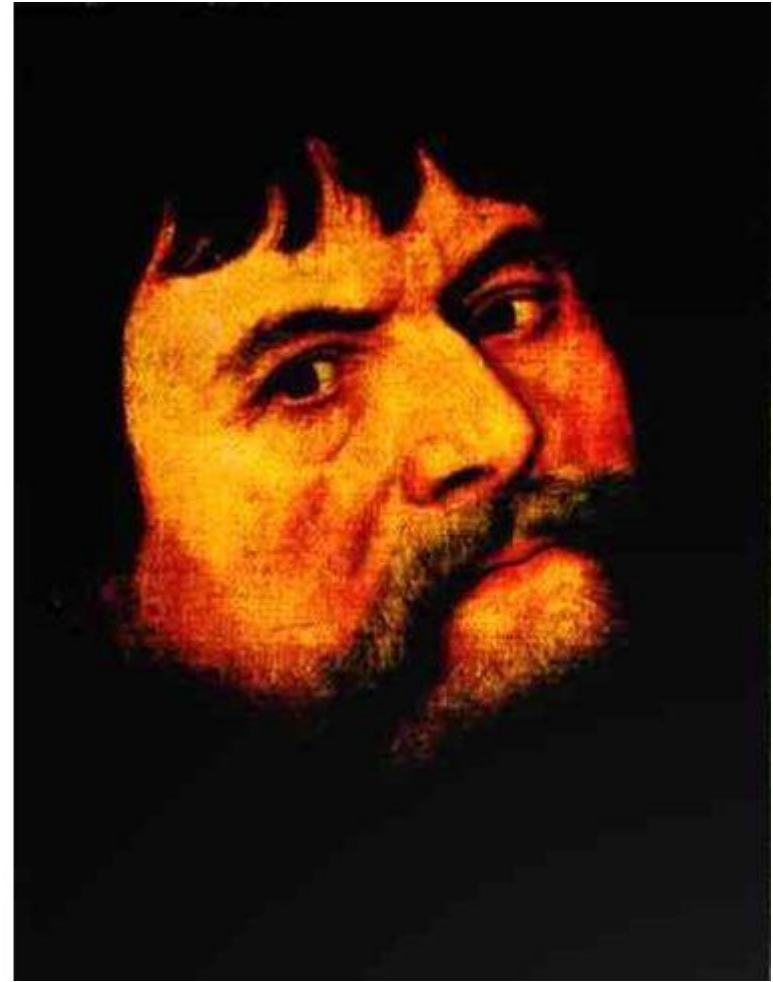
Frederick the Wise by Dürer (98)



Dürer by Dürer



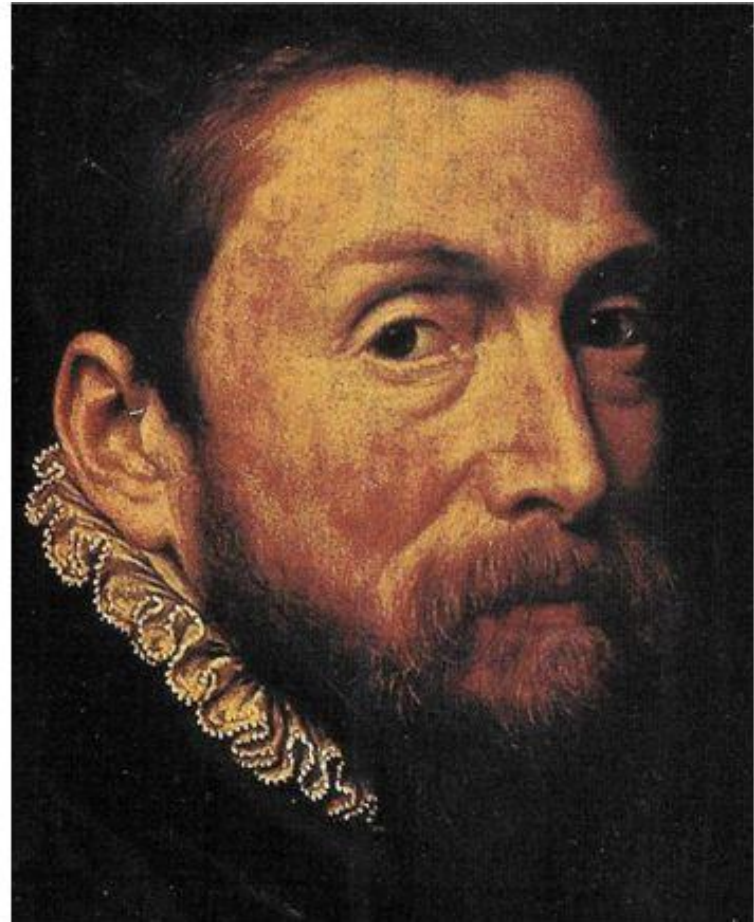
Electoral John Frederick of Saxony by Cranach (93)



Cranach by Cranach



Philip II of Spain by Mor (119)



Mor by Mor



Isabel de Valois by Anguissola (122)



Anguissola by Anguissola



Pier Maria Rossi III by Parmigianino (38)



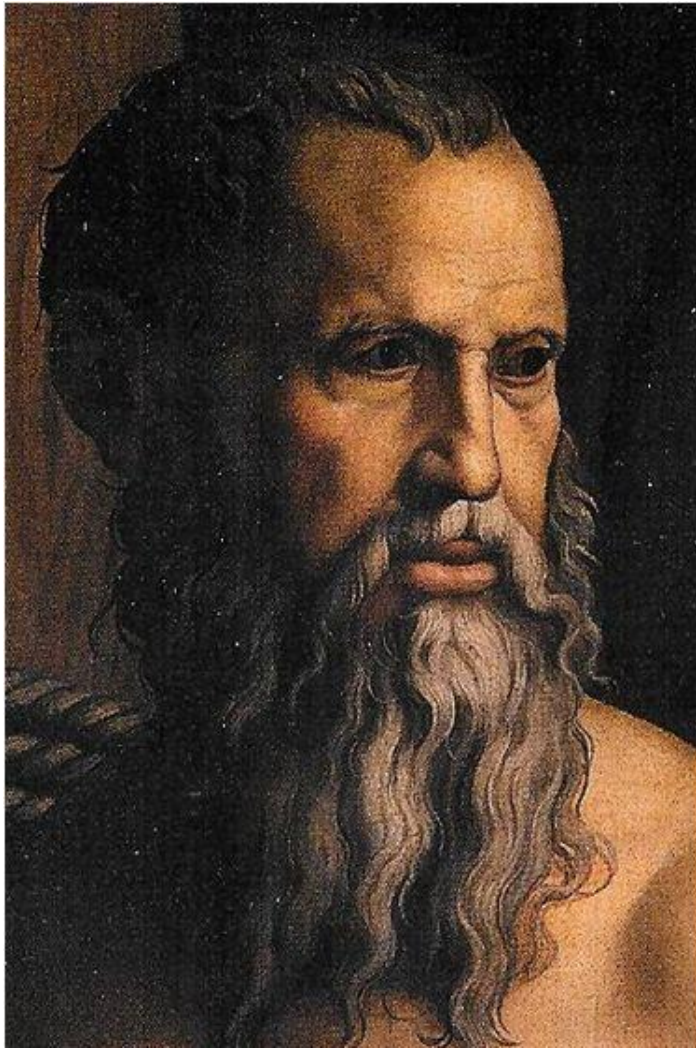
Parmigianino by Parmigianino



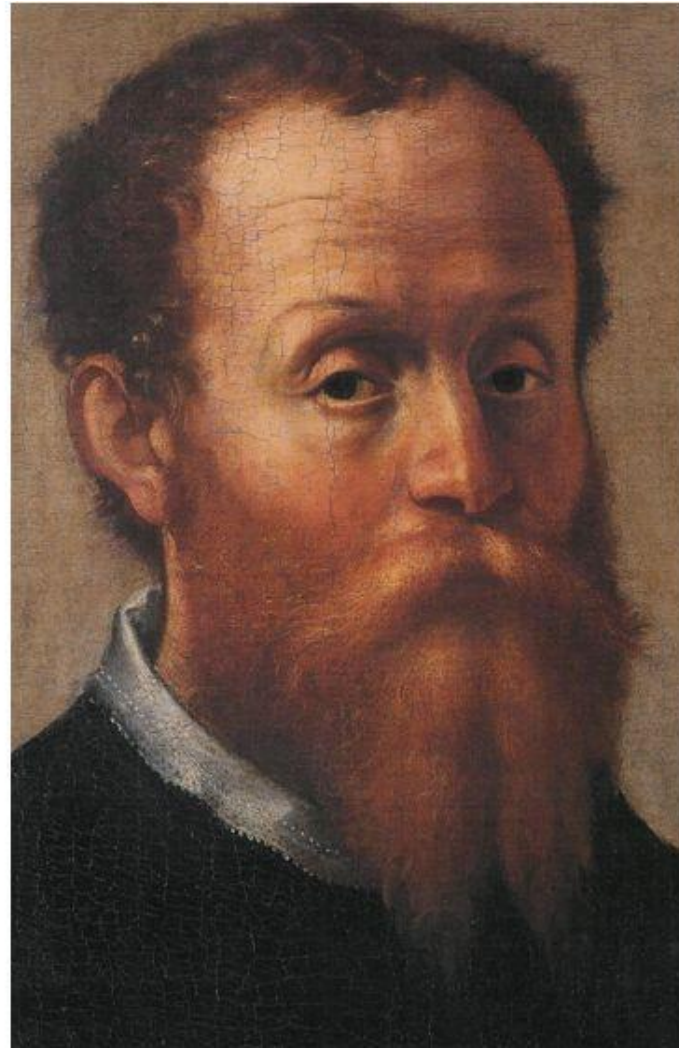
Unknown man by Key (40)



Key by Key



Andrea Doria by Bronzino (113)

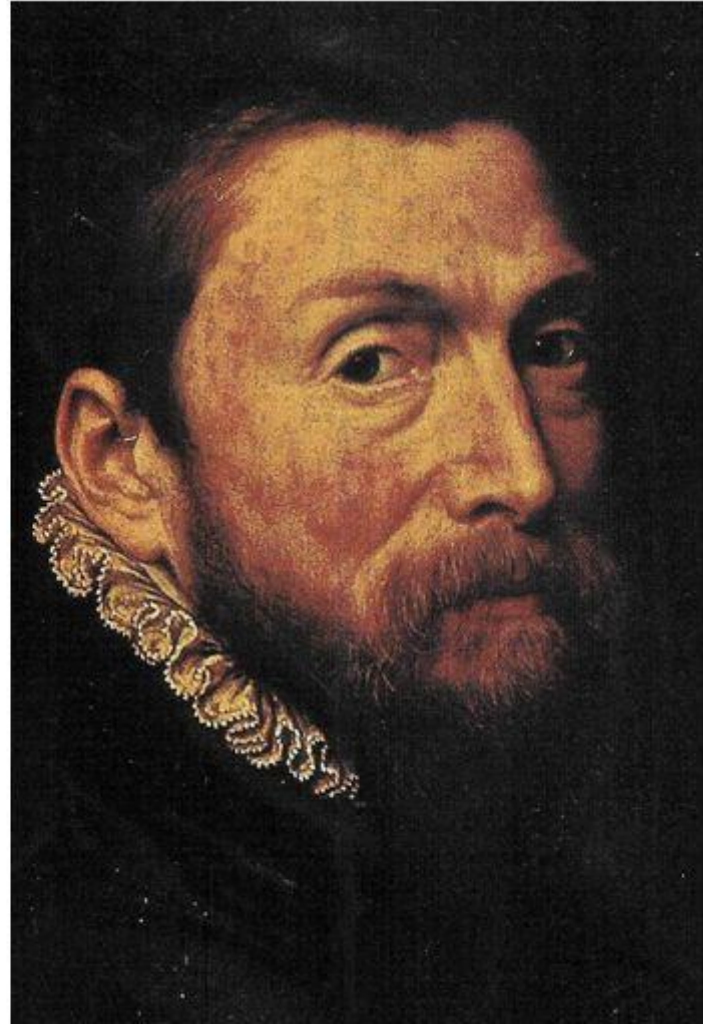


Bronzino by unknown artist*

* There is no known self-portrait by Bronzino



The Buffoon Pejeron by Mor (78)



Mor by Mor

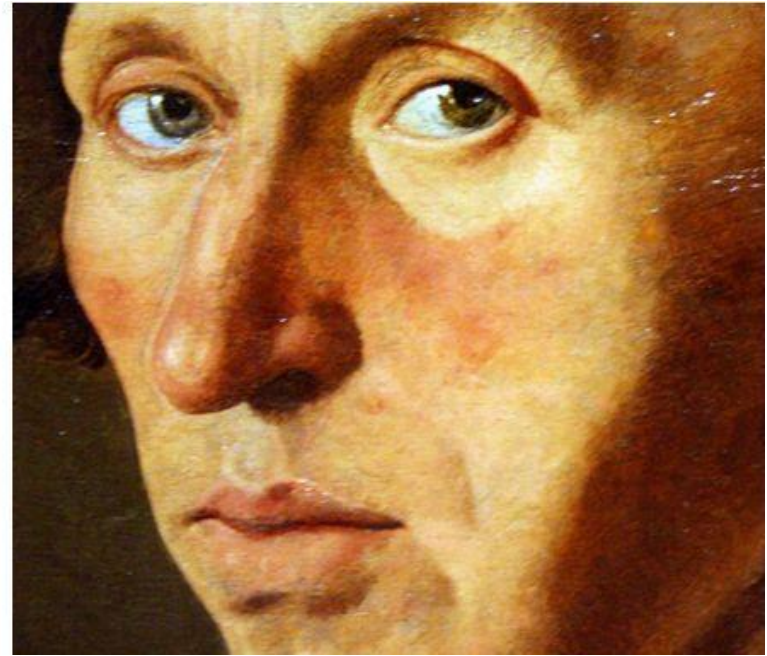
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SINGLE PORTRAITS OF THE OPPOSITE GENDER

One might think that artists only use face fusion on sitters of their own gender but, as Lillian Schwartz demonstrated of Leonardo and the *Mona Lisa*, a male artist can turn himself into a female sitter.⁷ Androgyny, the fusion of the masculine and feminine, has always been considered essential in a perfect mind, a divine mind and, thus, a creative one too. Reference to it can be found in mystical tracts, spiritual alchemy and many great masterpieces from every century. Even Jesus was sometimes called 'Mother' in the Middle Ages. The Virgin, for instance, becomes secretly androgynous in Renaissance art when one side of her chest appears flat while God does too when breast-like forms appear under His cloak, as they do on the Sistine ceiling.⁸ Some artists paint effeminate men or muscular women (as Michelangelo did too) for the same purpose. There are many ways. Edouard Manet, a modern master, painted Amazons, equestriennes who rode unescorted in Paris and whose name derives from the mythical tribe of warrior women in antiquity. Picasso drew phallic symbols on women. Androgyny as a symbol is so common that in this exhibition alone at least nine artists paint themselves *as women*, not counting other means of conveying the same idea.



Agatha van Schoonhoven by Van Scorel (33)

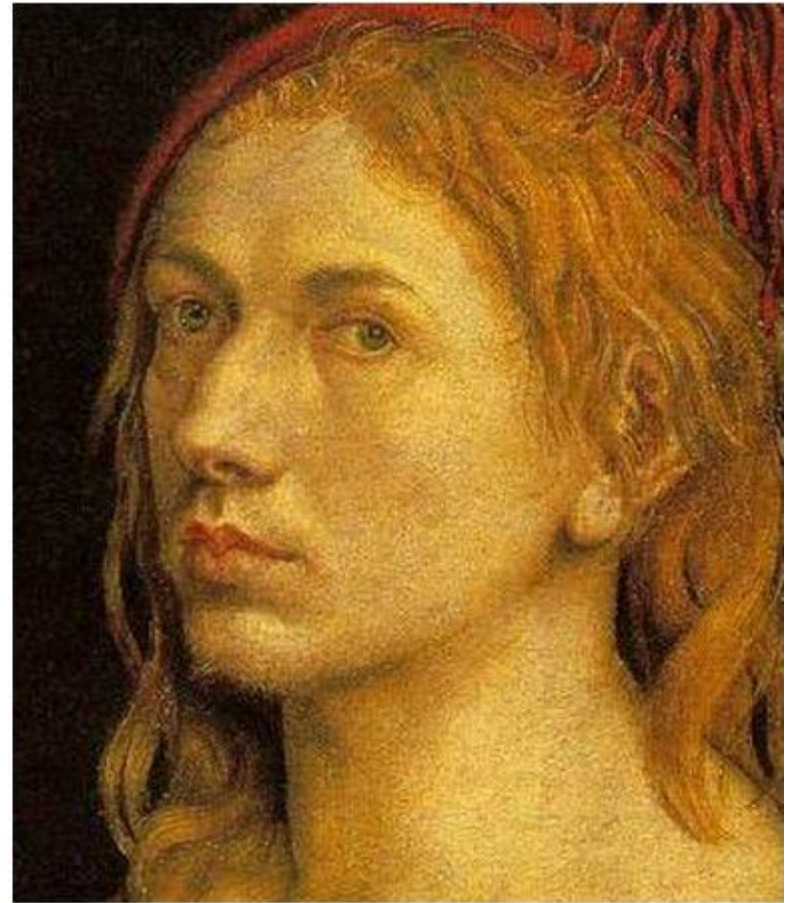


Van Scorel by Van Scorel

Although van Scorel's nose, above, and that of his sitter are quite different, they are of the same length and depth with a tip that is shiny and prominent. The eye-shapes are also similar, ignoring the lids. Their mouths have a similar lower lip with an upper one, of different size, but both noticeably higher on the right-hand side. If the images above were superimposed, the main points of their faces would match. The direction of the light is identical.

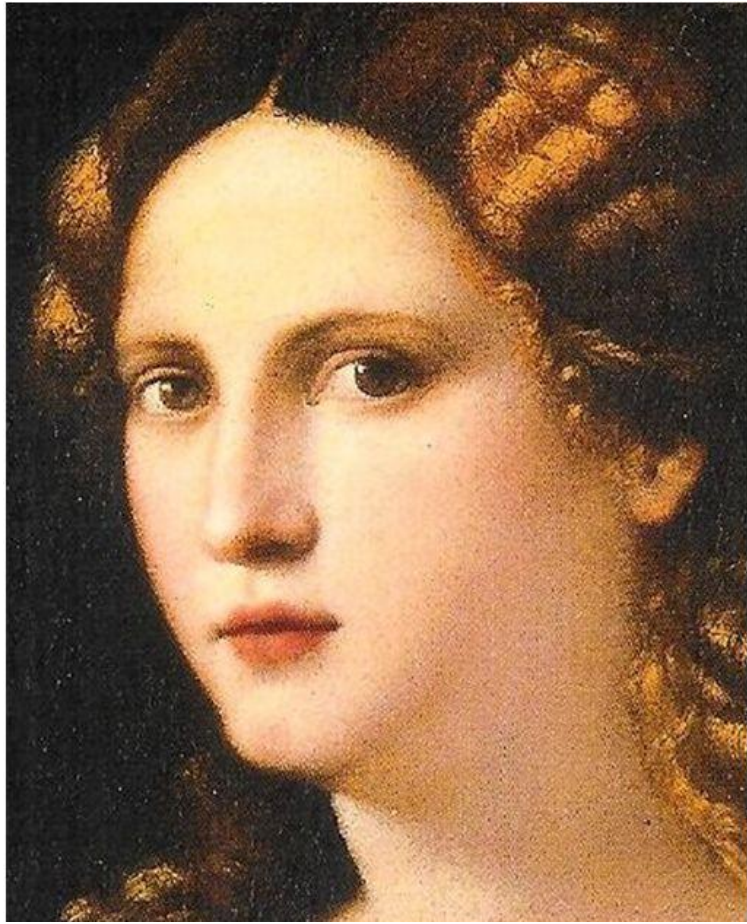


A Young Woman by Dürer (31)



Dürer by Dürer

The same is largely true of Dürer's portrait above. Note the eyes, far eyebrow, tip of the nose, mouth and chin. Although both this and the prior example are not obviously similar at first sight, they are just like the other examples on further reflection.



Unknown Woman by Palma Vecchio (76)



Palma Vecchio by Palma Vecchio

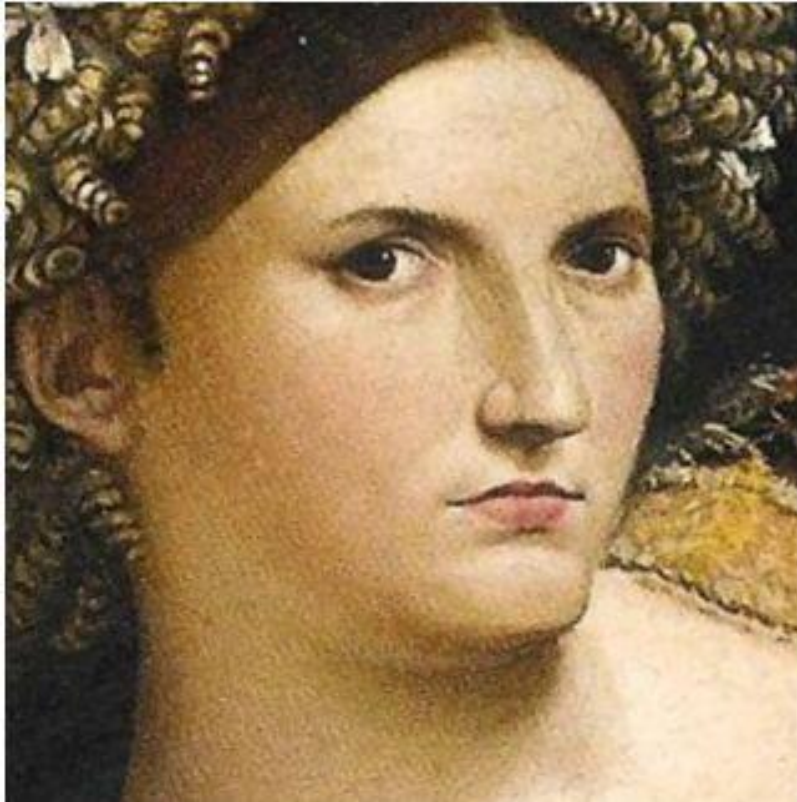
In Holbein's portrait, used to promote the exhibition in Madrid, the line of their noses match and their eyebrows almost. They share diagonal strands of hair on their left temple, similar eye-openings and a large lower lip. The corner of the white cap on the far side mimics the corner of Holbein's beard while its diagonal line on this side may suggest his beard as well, though less precisely.



A Lady with a Squirrel by Holbein (55)



Holbein by Holbein



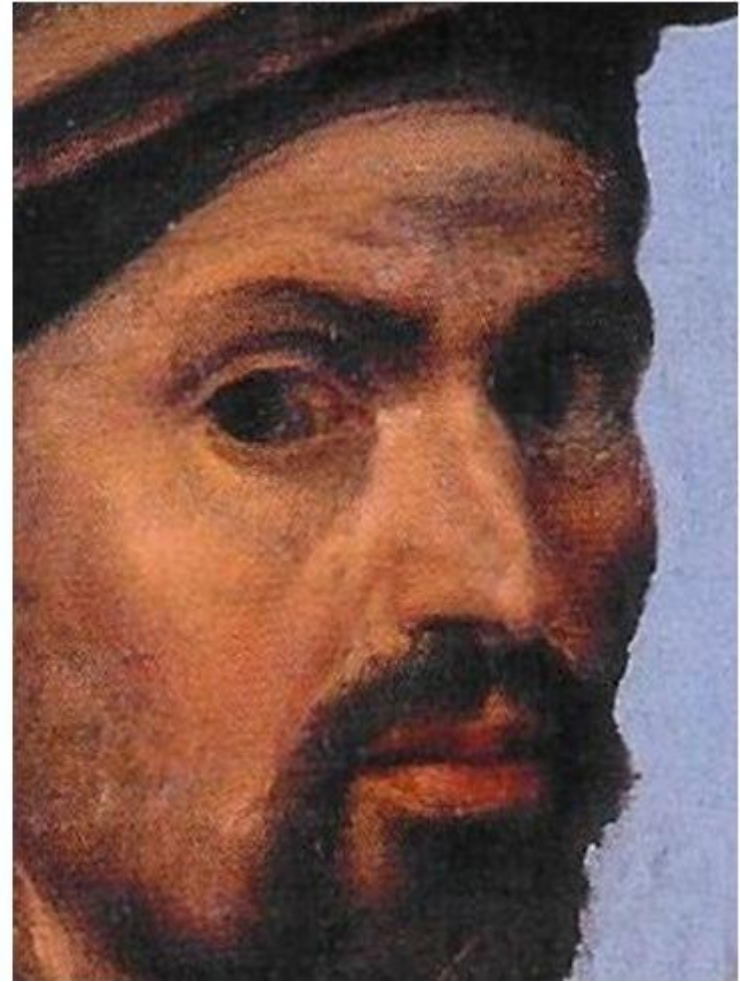
Unknown Lady by Lotto (58)



Lotto by Lotto



Unknown Woman by Licinio (32)



Licinio by Licinio



Unknown Lady by Savoldo (59)

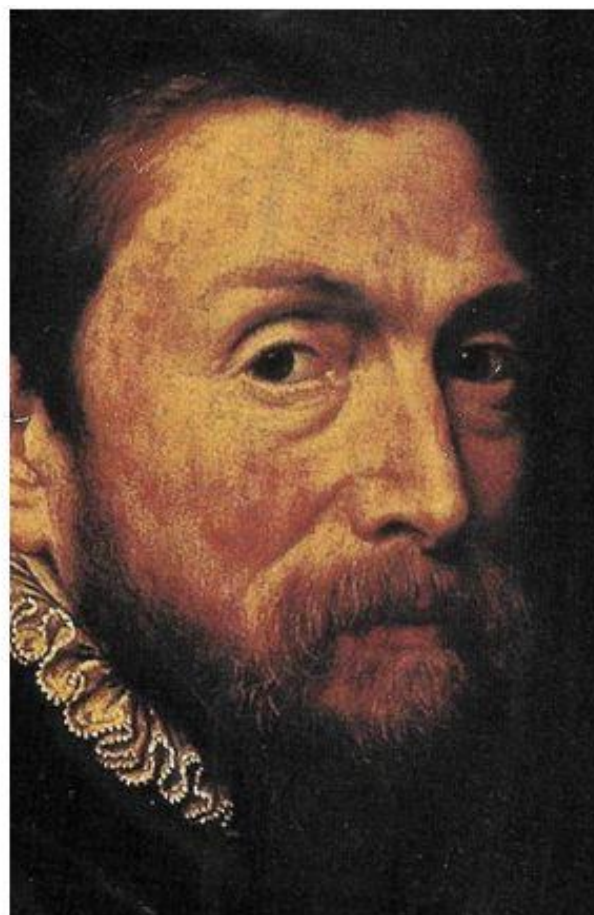


Savoldo by Savoldo

The catalogue, ignoring a facial resemblance here, recognizes “stylistic affinities” between these two images which “helps to establish a date.”⁹ Most of the entries are more concerned with attribution, dating and identification of the sitter than with any poetic meaning.



Dona Juana of Austria by Mor (121)



Mor by Mor

Androgyny is doubly emphasized here, not only in the princess' fusion with the artist's face but, as the catalogue notes, Juana was such a firm leader that contemporaries referred to her "manly strength of will."¹⁰



Brigida Spinola Doria by Rubens (126)



Rubens by Rubens

The catalogue notes: “It has been aptly stated that Rubens captured the Marchioness’ face in the manner of a window onto her soul and not in the manner of a façade.”¹¹ Really?

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DOUBLE-PORTRAITS

One of the most revealing features of double-portraits by great artists is that so many pairs resemble each other, whether of friends or spouses.¹² Examples from the exhibition, by Tullio Lombardo and Lorenzo Lotto, are illustrated below. This common practice suggests not only the self-reflection central to the concept that ‘every painter paints himself’ but, at least in marriage portraits, symbolism similar to that which Van Eyck used in the *Arnolfini Portrait* (discussed above): the spiritual unity of masculine and feminine in the artist’s mind.

The mirror-reflection is even evident when the portrait depicts two identifiably different individuals, as in the examples by Raphael or Pontormo. Apparently, the underdrawing in *Portrait of Two Friends* made this so evident that Pontormo increased the differences to veil his meaning further. The catalogue notes that: “Infrared reflectography reveals that originally the two men ... mirrored each other more closely, the one on the left wearing longer hair and a larger three-cornered hat similar to that of his companion.” The theme continues in the letter that one of the friends holds, citing a dialogue by Cicero in which “a true

friend acts as a mirror or reflection of the self.”¹³ Both sitters, incidentally, were friends of the artist, not just each other, and therefore reflect him. Even after the revisions, similarity remains because both faces resemble the same self-portrait of Pontormo (see below), which coincidentally was also part of the exhibition in Madrid. It cannot be coincidence, though, that the friends in Raphael’s double-portrait also each bear resemblance to the same self-portrait.



*Young Couple as
Bacchus and Ariadne*
by Tullio Lombardo
(36)



The Man



The Woman

It is a little unclear why this work is even included in the exhibition as there is no evidence, as the catalogue itself notes, that these were ever identifiable individuals.¹⁴ Their eyes and eyebrows are identical.



*Micer Marsilio
Cassotti and His
Wife Faustina* by
Lotto (37)



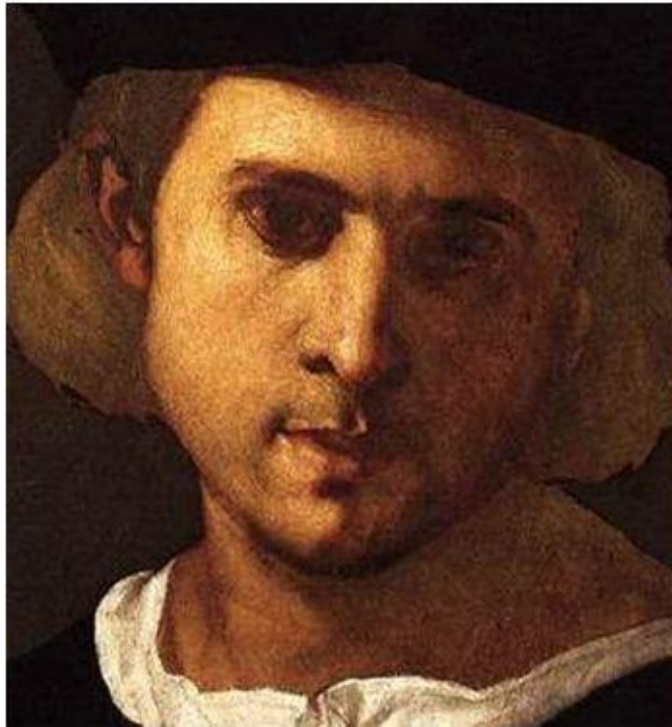
Husband



Wife



Portrait of Two Friends by Pontormo (52)



Friend on right by Pontormo



Pontormo by Pontormo (66, Madrid only)

Both friends in this portrait not only bear resemblance to the self-portrait illustrated here but also to a drawing that Elizabeth Pilliod has recently suggested is a self-portrait as well.¹⁵



Portrait of Two Friends by Pontormo (52)



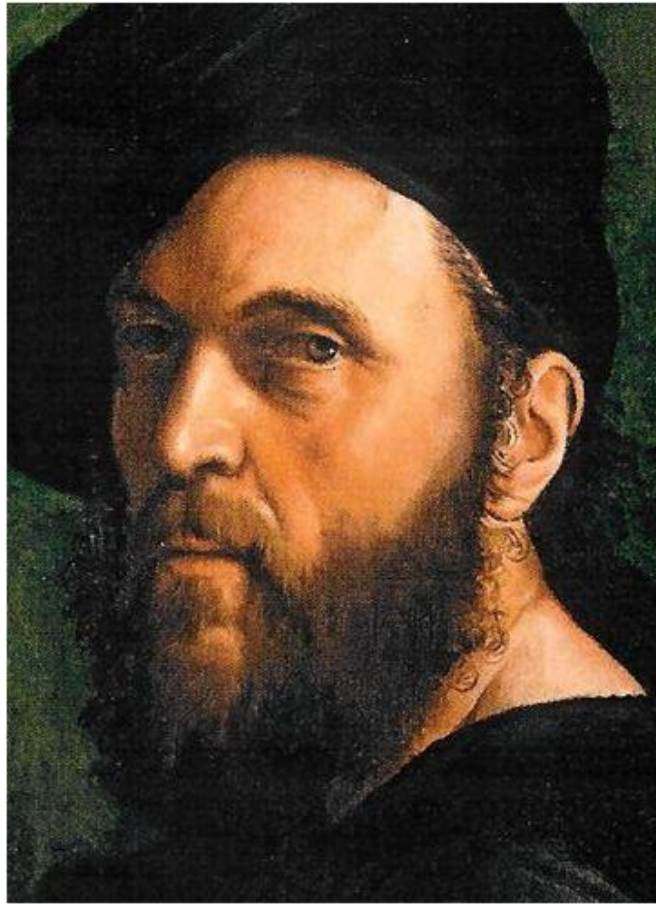
Friend on left by Pontormo



Pontormo by Pontormo (66, Madrid only)



Portrait of Andrea Navagero and Agostino Beazzano by Raphael (51)



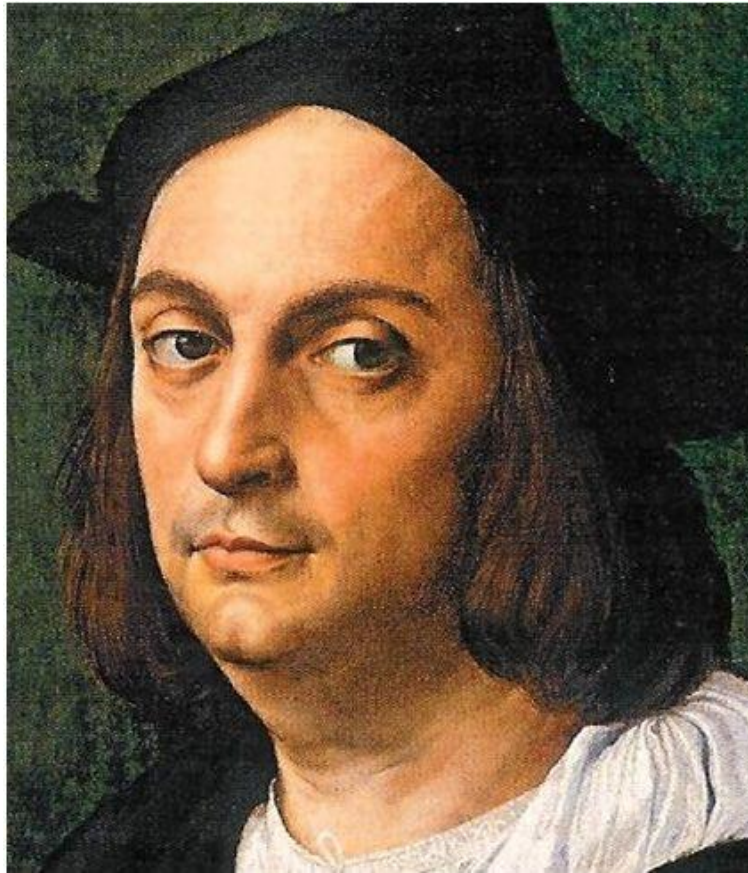
Navagero by Raphael



Raphael by Raphael



Portrait of Andrea Navagero and Agostino Beazzano by Raphael (51)



Beazzano by Raphael



Raphael by Raphael

Art scholarship's failure, reflected in this exhibition, to distinguish between a mere painter and an artist is its fundamental misunderstanding. They should have figured it out by now. Great art is not photography. Nor illustration. Nor mere craft which has no meaning. Great art is poetry on the level of Petrarch, Chaucer, Dante and Shakespeare and the site where the action takes place, regardless of the apparent subject, is the poet's mind. This is as true of the *Divine Comedy*, *Hamlet* and *Paradise Lost* as it is of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, Goya's *2nd May 1808* or Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*. And it is equally true, more obviously, of music. That is why great artists from Leonardo to Picasso have always said: "Every painter paints himself."

Portraiture, a deceptively simple genre, is the easiest arena in which to start demonstrating these facts to an audience long used to thinking of art as a form of illustration. Art is something else entirely, not a window on the world as Alberti described it in the fifteenth century but a mirror in the artist's mind. Indeed true art has no place for a spectator, only a thinker, because the only figure looking at the mirror in the artist's mind is the artist. That is why to see the art, we must *think* like the artist. Had I still thought of myself as a spectator, I would never have noticed that

portraits resemble the artist, similarities that even specialists, intimately familiar with each artist's *oeuvre*, have never seen.

My research, largely unpublished, clearly demonstrates that there is no method in art scholarship that can more successfully solve the art world's most enduring mysteries than the concept that every painter paints himself. That is why portraiture, especially self-portraiture, is so important. It is not a side-show to other forms of painting but the ground on which all the more complex forms of art depend. It is time that art scholars recognized this. Artists have.

APPENDIX

A list of similarities between the portrait and self-portrait on each page to aid the viewer's recognition of the artist's intentional similarities. The list is incomplete.

Page 5: Titian / Charles V, Philip II, Pope Paul III and Federico II Gonzaga

All are self-explanatory with each of them making use of Titian's beard and eyebrows.

Page 6: Van Eyck / Margaret van Eyck

Eyebrows, eyes, nose, mouth, chin and proportions

Page 7: Van Eyck / Giovanni Arnolfini

Explained in text

Page 10: Raphael / Cardinal

Eyebrows, eyes, nose and nostril, overall shape of Raphael's face vs. the lit portion of the cardinal's and proportions

Page 11: Raphael / Cardinal

Contour across forehead, eyebrows, eye-openings, mouth and chin

Page 12: Botticelli / Tarcaniota

Centrally-parted hair, horizontality of eyebrows, eye-openings, line of nose, approximate similarity to nostril, pronounced philtrum, wavy lips and chin

Page 13: Botticelli / Young Man

Far eyebrow, eyes, nostril, similar lips but without gaps in the parting, chin

Page 14: Dürer / Maximilian

Eyebrows, hooked nose, broad space between nose and mouth, chin and proportions

Page 15: Dürer / Frederick the Wise

Creased eyes, handlebar-shaped moustache, unruly facial hair, deformation to upper lip, baggy skin

Page 16: Cranach / Elector of Saxony

Unusual angle to head, narrow eye-openings, similarity to beard and moustache

Page 17: Mor / Philip II

Pose, hair and beard from temple downwards, eyebrows, eyes, lines under eyes, lips, ruff

Page 18: Anguissola / Isabel

Pose, eyebrows, eyelids, bridge of nose, narrow mouth

Page 19: Parmigianino / Pier Maria II Rossi

Eyebrows, eye-shape disregarding lids, nose, fullness of beard and moustache, proportions

Page 20: Key / Unknown Man

The gap between eyebrow and eye is the only significant difference

Page 21: Bronzino / Andrea Doria

High forehead with receding hairline, thin eyebrows, small eyes, bi-forked beard, proportions from nose upwards. Doria's large lips seems as though they might be present under Bronzino's protruding moustache.

Page 22: Mor / Buffoon

Pose, hair, eye-openings, ear, nostril, lips, beard and especially moustache

Page 24: Van Scorel / Agatha

Eyes, high cheekbones, length of nose with its prominent, shiny tip, nostril, upper lip higher on the right, bulbous lower lip, proportions

Page 25: Dürer / Young Woman

Far eyebrow, near eye-opening and gaze, strange ear lobe, tip of nose, prominent philtrum, elevated upper lip overlapping lower lip in the center, similarity to chin though contour different, proportions

Page 26: Palma Vecchio / Unknown Woman

Hair, forehead, eyes, nose, lips though mid-line is different, angle of neck

Page 28: Holbein / Lady with Squirrel

Diagonal strands of hair near temple, far eyebrow and inner portion of near eyebrow, line of nose and tip of nose, large lower lip with narrower upper lip, impression that lower lip is off-center, far corner of cap mimics the corner of his beard, the near line of cap may also suggest the line of his beard, perhaps from a now-lost self-portrait.

Page 29: Lotto / Unknown Lady

Eyebrows though his are wider, eye-openings, both small as well, angle formed by nose and nostril, narrow space between nose and mouth, shape of ear, proportions

Page 30: Licinio / Unknown Woman

Shape of contour across forehead, far eyebrow, shape of near eye-opening, wavy line of nose, protruding lower lip with thinner upper lip

Page 31: Savoldo / Unknown Lady

Eyes, nose, chin, proportions

Page 32: Mor / Dona Juana

Hairline though more diffused, eyebrows, eyes (disregarding lids), bridge to nose, angle of nose, mouth, proportions

Page 33: Rubens / Doria

Eyebrows, eyes, line of nose, cheek, proportions

Page 37: Lombardo / Couple

Eyes and eyebrows identical; line of nose, mouth and chin similar; hair wavy

Page 38: Lotto / Cassotti

Shape of eyebrows and eyes (disregarding lids), nose, lips, chin

Page 39: Pontormo / Friend on right

Near eyebrow, nose, nostril, mouth, chin

Page 40: Pontormo / Friend on left

Line of eyebrow (straight), depth of eye, nose, chin, angle-of-view (unusual but the same, from the side and below)

Page 41: Raphael / Navagero

Far eyebrow, eye-openings, contour stretching from nose to far eyebrow, lower lip

Page 42: Raphael / Beazzano

Far eyebrow identical, near eyebrow similar but larger, eye-openings same but larger shape, contour of nose and far eyebrow, oblique plane above and to the right of near eye.

NOTES

¹ Portraits of Napoleon by three different artists all look like the artist (see Issue 2, pp. 4-7) as many of the most iconic portraits of British monarchs do too (Issue 3). By coincidence, the exhibition in London will prominently feature both Jan van Eyck's self-portrait and that of his wife, two paintings both in the Gallery's permanent collection and already shown to be eerily similar (Issue 1, pp. 6-7).

² Luke Syson outlines the objective of portraiture in the Renaissance (*El Retrato del Renacimiento*, p. 415) while Lorne Campbell explains how "certain painters who are commonly considered to have made objective and truthful portraits...habitually distorted their renderings to achieve more immediate and expressive likenesses." (ibid., p. 428).

³ This is what Linda Schwartz did in convincingly demonstrating that Leonardo's self-portrait and the *Mona Lisa* share the same proportions (see note 7).

⁴ I am grateful to Francesca Del Rio for this insight. Self-identification with a sitter's name has been used by a number of great masters, including....

⁵ Although I later explain how figures in double-portraits often mirror each other, differences are also common, even in the same image, with a meaning of their own. The man's face may be individually specific while the woman's is idealized, as is the case here, or, as in Raphael's double-portrait of Navagero and Beazzano (51), one is painted in a Venetian style while the other is in the crisp, clear style of his early years. In Raphael's other double-portrait (65) he stands while his friend sits. In Manet's *Olympia* the nude is painted "flat" and without form, as Courbet noted, in stark contrast to the rotund maid. All these differences indicate that each figure, though apparently in the same scene, are allegorically on separate levels of reality. The reasons and their meaning will be explained in a forthcoming paper.

⁶ *El Retrato del Renacimiento* (Madrid: Prado) 2008, p. 503

⁷ Lillian Schwartz, "The Art Historian's Computer", *Scientific American* 272, April 1995, pp. 106-11

⁸ Images of the Virgin with apparently dissimilar breasts include Dosso Dossi's *Holy Family* in the Capitoline Museum in Rome and a painting by Niccolo di Pietro Gerini in the Musee du Petit Palais, Avignon. Rembrandt's *Lucretia* does not appear to have breasts under her chemise. The subject will be discussed in a forthcoming paper. For Michelangelo's God, see Abrahams, "Michelangelo's Art Through Michelangelo's Eyes", Part 2, p. 7, available at www.artscholar.org/articles.asp

⁹ *El Retrato del Renacimiento*, p. 484

¹⁰ *El Retrato del Renacimiento*, p. 510

¹¹ *El Retrato del Renacimiento*, p. 512

¹² Others include Reynolds' Portrait of George III and Queen Charlotte or Charles Willson Peale's self-portrait with his wife and daughter.

¹³ *El Retrato del Renacimiento*, p. 481

¹⁴ *El Retrato del Renacimiento*, p. 474

¹⁵ See Pilliod, *Pontormo, Bronzino, and Allori: A Genealogy of Florentine Art* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London) 2001, fig. 117b