

El retrato del Renacimiento

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Icons and Early Modern Portraits

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HISTORY

Many Byzantine icons were exported to Europe in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and almost all of them were received and venerated in the West as hoary antiquities. Several were ascribed to Saint Luke; some were thought to date from the time of Constantine or Theodosius (fourth century); at the latest, it seems, they were assigned to the time of Justinian and Gregory the Great, the sixth century. In fact, most of these were Palaiologan productions of the thirteenth century and later; that is, they were made not long before they landed in Europe. Scholarly research has revealed a great deal about how this late medieval influx of Byzantine artefacts altered the course of Western art – how it provided a matrix, for example, for the art of Duccio and Giotto, the founders of Western painting, and also, in more general terms, what role it played in the development of private devotional images, in the rise of altarpiece painting, and in the improbable emergence of panel painting as a major artistic category in the early modern period.

It is now becoming clear that the importation of icons also had a powerful effect on the rise of modern portraiture. This relationship has been difficult to perceive until recently because it troubles traditional distinctions that have structured thinking in the field, distinctions such as 'medieval' versus 'modern', 'sacred' versus 'secular' and 'popular' versus 'elite'. What could these cult objects have had to do with the most modern and secular of artistic categories? The answer is, a good deal. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries icons were understood, first of all, as portraits of ancient people and second, as valuable antiquities themselves. They were precious visual testimonials of highly venerable personages, eagerly collected by the foremost art patrons and antiquarians of the time. They were primary guides as to what portraiture could be.

The collectors and propagators of the icons were, regularly, humanist scholars, prelates, and princes. One can speak of a veritable icon vogue among the *cognoscenti*, an enthusiasm linked to the presumed antiquity of these Greek paintings. Hard textual evidence documenting period views concerning the historicity of icons is rare, but occasional clear indications emerge. For example, in a letter of about 1470 describing the collection of Pietro Barbo (Pope Paul II, r. 1464–71), which contained many Roman antiquities, Cardinal Jacopo Ammanati noted 'images of saints of ancient workmanship brought from Greece, which they call icons'.¹ The phrase 'of ancient workmanship [*operis antiqui*]' is the one typically used when describing antiquities. In 1475 Pope Sixtus IV gave to Philippe de Croÿ, count of Chimay, a micromosaic icon of *Christ Pantocrator* from the fourteenth century [FIG. 16]. It soon acquired fame in Chimay as an *acheiropoieton*, or image made without the intervention of the human hand – an automatic antiquity, as it were.² Sixtus's contemporary Lorenzo de' Medici, a major poet and art collector, and

the de facto ruler of Florence, was also a collector of icons, and acquired some of those that had belonged to Barbo. He seems to have had a special preference for mosaic icons: he owned eleven Greek icons and all of them were in mosaic.³ The one surviving icon that can be traced without doubt back to Lorenzo's collection is a micromosaic of *Christ Pantocrator*, now in the Museo del Bargello in Florence, which is dated to the twelfth century [FIG. 17]. This may have been one of the icons he inherited from Barbo's collection – one of the 'images of ancient workmanship brought from Greece' seen there by Ammanati.

The evidence suggests that the collecting of Greek icons was an integrated feature of the antiquarian culture of fifteenth and sixteenth century Italy. As Roman statues were dug up from the ground and ancient texts were discovered in European and Greek monasteries, 'ancient' Greek paintings began to arrive in substantial numbers from the East, especially after the fall of Constantinople of 1453, and achieved similar fame and status. Icons mingled with antiquities in period collections, and came up in the discussions of antiquarians. For example, in the third dialogue of Book 2 of the Portuguese art theorist Francisco de Holanda's *Da Pintura Antiga* of 1548, Michelangelo (here appearing as one of the dialogue's interlocutors) invokes the example of Alexander, who allowed only Apelles to make his portrait, in the context of a discussion of the special authority granted to venerable portraits of the 'serene face' of Christ, such as that in the Lateran Sancta Sanctorum.⁴

The connection between icons and early modern portraits is easier to grasp if one sets aside the prevailing notion of 'the icon' as an inviolable category of religious art. In this period they were seen primarily as examples of ancient portraiture, visual records of the earliest and most important figures of Christian history. Their sacred power derived from the fact that they were considered authentic likenesses of sacred people.

One of the primary elements that distinguished these archaic icon portraits in Western eyes was the bust-length format. In sculpture, the bust portrait was known in various forms of ancient Roman art, such as profile portraits on coins, in reliefs, in *imagines clipeatae*, in which the head and/or bust are seen in a circular frame, and in three-dimensional busts in marble and bronze. In painting, however, the bust portrait was known mainly through Christian icons. Around 1211 Gervasius of Tilbury made special note of the fact that the image of the Veronica kept in St Peter's was an 'image from the breast upwards'.⁵ In his widely-read *Manual on Divine Offices* of 1286, the Bishop of Mende, William Durandus, explicitly associated the format with Greek painting, and found a moral explanation for it: 'The Greeks employ painted representations, painting ... only from the navel upwards, so that all occasion for vain thoughts be removed.'⁶ The bust format was such a powerful advertisement of Eastern, and ancient, origins that early Western imitations of Greek icons using the bust format were themselves regularly accorded a comparable authority, and even mistaken outright as Greek.

The comments of Gervasius and Durandus reveal that the bust-length format was a formal element that

attracted attention and even demanded explanation: the icons appeared to them primarily as cut-off figures, fragments of a witnessed whole. Although often described as rigid and hieratic by modern commentators, in the eyes of fifteenth century Europeans the icons delivered an intimate, zoom effect, which Western painters attempted to develop in their copies and adaptations. It is often observed that religious pictures in this period assumed the qualities of portraiture, but in fact it is likely that the development went largely in the other direction. The half-length and bust formats for portraits, no longer in profile but in frontal or three-quarter view, flourished in European art from about the 1430s, and especially after mid-century – that is, in the same years that saw an intensification in the importation of icons in the wake of the Ferrara-Florence Council of 1438–9 and especially the fall of Constantinople in 1453. As descriptors like *dal petto in sù* and neologisms such as *demy-image* and *mezza figura* came into use in fifteenth century inventories to describe Eastern icons,⁷ portraiture came into being as a genre. The icons were primary models for the painters of portraits to follow. It is no surprise that the artists most interested in the Eastern icons – the Limbourgs, Robert Campin, Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, Jacopo Bellini, Antonio Pisanello, Giovanni Bellini, Antonello da Messina – were the ones that contributed most significantly to the early history of modern portraiture. In both their icon-based religious pictures and in their portraits, these artists elaborated formal devices such as parapets or windows in an effort to articulate and rationalise the half-length format of icons.⁸

Given the almost complete non-survival of Greco-Roman painting, icons were taken as primary examples – perhaps the primary examples – of ancient portraiture, especially since, as we have seen, they were themselves often ‘backdated’ to ancient times. The field of sculpture provides a strong parallel to this phenomenon. The antique sculpted bust portrait persisted throughout the Middle Ages primarily in the form of the reliquary bust. Like icons, reliquary busts also lived an unstable temporal life: the presence of the saint’s relic inside them forced an association with the time of the saint, usually a fairly remote antiquity; very few people in the fifteenth century would have asked over-precise questions about when the sculptural ‘shell’ was produced. Irving Lavin noted that whereas ancient Roman busts are generally rounded at the bottom and hollowed out at the back, reliquary busts are usually cut straight across the chest and are modelled fully in the round. The ancient bust is presented as a complete and artificial whole, whereas the reliquary bust – like the bust-length icon portrait – is conceived as a fragment, a part of a human being. The fragment conception recapitulates the semiotic claims of the relic itself, which is also a part of a whole, a remnant of a living body that carries something of the force of the living person. The fragment conception was taken over in the early Renaissance portrait bust, which is generally shown cleanly cut off at the bottom.⁹

In both painting and sculpture, therefore, the bust motif carried powerful implications of authenticity and

testimony. Offering a fragment of a witnessed whole, the bust seemed, to fifteenth century viewers, to insist on the idea of a captured likeness. In the post-antique West, painted portraits of living people had appeared as attendant, marginal figures of larger scenes, with a few notable exceptions in the category of ruler portraits. To make a living individual the focus of his or her own panel was a momentous act of excision. In a profound sense, bust portraits are synecdochic in structure: they cut off the person from their environment, they make a given moment in the life stand for the life, and they make an external physical description stand for the person. The earliest modern ventures in the genre reiterate that structure insistently in their format. Icons as they were perceived in the West offered an important model for the idea of excerpting people in this way.

The best evidence of this threaded relationship is the development of the devotional diptych in northern Europe. Here, portraits of contemporaries were set into structural relation with religious images, most often images of the Virgin that were based on or derived from Greek prototypes. The diptych was itself an adaptation of a Byzantine format, and indeed some of the most venerated imported images were double panels showing two sacred figures set in relation to one another – such as a famous, now-lost Byzantine diptych in Avignon, showing Christ and the Virgin, which left a powerful impression on Campin, van Eyck and Pisanello, among others.¹⁰ As it was adapted in the West in the fifteenth century, the diptych observed a decorous separation between the secular and the sacred personages; on the other hand, it also provided a medium through which they could interact. Philippe de Croÿ, the man who received as a gift from Pope Sixtus IV the Byzantine Christ micromosaic discussed earlier, also commissioned a diptych from Rogier van der Weyden that shows him on one side and the Virgin on the other (now usually identified with the painting in the Huntington Library) [FIGS. 18 and 19]. The Virgin and Child are in a different realm, as indicated among other things by the gold ground, an archaism used here perhaps to suggest that Rogier is here ‘reporting’ a venerable image.

And yet in other ways the two halves of the diptych are not so far apart. Technical analysis has revealed that originally the background of de Croÿ’s portrait was not originally dark; it was made up of a thin green glaze over a silver ground, which has darkened and been overpainted.¹¹ The combination of gold for the sacred figure and silver for the secular one is not in the end very different from what we see in the Christ icon [FIG. 16] owned by de Croÿ, where the mosaic shimmers with gold, but the framing – added by de Croÿ and associated with him – shines decorously and deferentially in silver. The diptych thus observes the difference in status between the two figures, and yet at the same time it provides a ‘medium’ that is common to both. On the one hand, de Croÿ is shown praying not merely before the Virgin but before an icon of the Virgin. On the other hand, he has acceded to a privileged plane of communication precisely because he inhabits a parallel image. The portrait format here is undergoing dramatic changes on both sides. The icon is being modernised and the secular person is being elevated precisely by acceding

to the realm of the portrait, which for centuries had been reserved for royalty and religious figures. The diptych reveals the portrait format in a historical moment of extreme flexibility. The boundaries of the portrait are being extended, but these developments are nonetheless still extensions of the basic function of portraiture, which is to communicate the likeness of a person across time and space.

THEORY

The affiliation between portraits and icons is not surprising, given the primary role played by portraits in legends of the origins of image-making and religious cults. According to Pliny, one could not be sure where painting originated, or when, but all agree that it started with the outline of a man’s shadow. He develops the idea further, describing how clay modelling was discovered by the daughter of a Corinthian potter, who traced the outline of her departing lover’s shadow on the wall and thus provided a model for the first relief portraits.¹² The story dramatises the idea that the impulse to make an image arises out of the desire to commemorate and preserve the image of an absent person; the desire for the absent person, it is implied, will be directed at least in part to the ‘captured’ image of that person.¹³ Images of the beloved make the absent person present, but present in a particular way that acknowledges the fact of their absence. For the thirteenth century Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas, such visual commemorations of people stood at the origin of idolatrous worship. People have a tendency, Aquinas explained, to venerate charismatic people, and then to worship images of those people; that is how the pagan cults of antiquity began.¹⁴

The fifteenth century Italian art theorist Leon Battista Alberti also placed portraiture fatefully at the beginning of painting, and for him, too, these origins were bound up with the early formation of religious cults. At the beginning of Book 2 of his 1435 treatise *De Pictura*, Alberti says that painting is endowed with the power to make absent men present and to make long-dead men come almost back to life.¹⁵ These grand claims are immediately followed by an encomium of painting’s capacity to shape ‘images of the gods’ and thus to promote religion. This passage is quickly followed by another, more ambivalent one, in which Alberti proposes with remarkable originality (and a certain playfulness) that the first painter was Narcissus admiring his own image in the pool – again, a portrait of sorts, and an especially beguiling and delusive one. If in the one case images reliably relay likenesses, encourage religious propriety and foster memory and social cohesion, in the other the image casts a spell, encourages antisocial obsession, and ultimately proves fatal. In these brief comments that open Book 2, Alberti provides a sketch of the ambivalent future role of images in religion, marked by the constant tension between the ‘good’ image, which reliably transmits forms while attracting no undue attention to its own mediality, and the ‘bad’ idol, a surface for the projection of the beholder’s fantasies.

In Alberti's view of it, portraiture is at the root of the whole of history. The impulse to substitute an image for a body lies, in his view, somewhere very close to the origins of art making. When his laconic remarks move from the commemorative functions of portraiture to the religious uses of 'images of the gods', however, he is really speaking about Christian art, despite the fact that his language still sounds general. Unlike other gods, who do not have bodies in the usual sense, the Christian god assumed a human body. Not only that, but Christians are required to believe that this body did not remain on earth but returned to heaven, and will become visible again only at the end of time. With the possible exception of the foreskin removed at the Circumcision, no part of this body remains, putting a special onus on images as testimony to the temporary presence of this all-important body. The image, as Hans Belting has said, was not only justified but was specifically called for as a witness of this now absent historical body.¹⁶ The same applies, according to Christian doctrine, to the image of his mother, whose body was assumed to heaven three days after her death.

Christian authorities elaborated powerful legends concerning the likenesses of these two foundational personages, all of which were intended to bolster their evidentiary authority as portraits. In almost every case the image-function was reinforced through association with another means of verification. In the legends of Saint Luke as painter both of the Virgin and of Christ, image making is aligned with the authority of evangelists. Even as the Gospels are to be believed as testimony of Christ's life, so are these visual testimonies.¹⁷ In the legends of the Mandylion and the Veronica, according to which Christ's face was impressed 'mechanically' on a piece of cloth, the resemblance-function of the image is reinforced by the indexical evidence of the contact relic.¹⁸ In all of these cases, the fallibility of the man-made portrait is supplemented by a more reliable authority, the divinely inspired hand of the evangelist on the one hand and the complete avoidance of the mediations of human handiwork on the other.

The peculiar claims of the images of Christ and the Virgin established a precedent for Christian images generally, despite the fact that the bodies of saints, unlike those of the Virgin and Christ, were not in principle absent, and indeed relics of those bodies competed for attention with their images. Here again the efficacy of the icons of the saints, their sacred power, stemmed from the presumed authentic relation that existed between the images and the persons depicted. In other words, icons were powerful as religious images insofar as they were successful as portraits. Henry Maguire has shown just how stringent were the criteria for successful portrayal.¹⁹ If the saint were alive, it was necessary that the portrait originate in a 'sitting' with the portrayed person. If the saint was dead, accuracy was maintained through the activity of copying earlier authentic images. In the words of the ninth-century Greek theologian Theodore of Stoudios, the likeness exists independent of the material icon just as the image engraved on a signet ring can be impressed on different materials, such as wax, pitch or clay; the same image travels across the different media.²⁰

For this reason, a recently produced icon could still claim the status of ancient testimony.

The accuracy of icons as records and likenesses of long-dead saints was sometimes attested through visions. In the legendary vision of Constantine, for example, the sick emperor was visited by two figures identifying themselves as Peter and Paul, who informed him that he would be cured if he called Pope Sylvester to him. Sylvester came bearing two icons of the saints in which Constantine recognised the likenesses of the figures seen in the vision, a confirmation that thereafter encouraged the emperor to allow himself to be baptised. These two icons still exist in the Vatican Museum, and are now almost illegible due to repeated over-paintings in earlier centuries and ill-considered restorations in later centuries [FIGS. 20 and 21]. These icons were recognised as authentic portraits of the apostles by none other than Lorenzo Valla, an uncompromising critic of false legends and superstitions surrounding images and relics. In the midst of his treatise exposing the inauthenticity of the so-called Donation of Constantine, he endorsed these images as valid 'portraits of the apostles' even as he acknowledged that the actual panel on which they were painted was not the original one given by Sylvester to Constantine.²¹ Even Valla, therefore, subscribed to the icon theory that guaranteed the accurate transmission of visual information across a replication chain: the likeness could be authentic even if the material vehicle was a substitute. Against this background it becomes easier to see why icons were so often given the status of antiquities.

INTERACTIONS

We have reviewed some historical and theoretical conditions for the affiliation between icons and the development of early modern portraiture. But it would be wrong to identify icons and portraits too strongly. They are deeply related, and yet modern portraiture introduced important new features, in part out of its very dialogue with the icon. Early modern portraits 'reframed' the earlier icon tradition, in a sense turning it into a tradition, and in the process contributed to the establishment of a new, secular role for pictures. In closing, I propose to discuss in some depth two complex cases, which bring to light two major processes in the relation between icons and early modern portraits: the process of embedding, which was a form of reframing, and the process of sublimation, which was a form of secularisation.

EMBEDDING: BOTTICELLI'S SOLOV PORTRAIT

The gold-ground roundel visible in the *Portrait of a Young Man holding a Medallion* of about 1485 by Botticelli is an actual piece of fourteenth century painting that has been inserted into a cavity in the panel [FIG. 15]. This conjunction has bothered some art historians, as it clashes with still-prevailing conceptions of Renaissance art: why would the great Renaissance artist enshrine a fairly ordinary piece of gold-ground

painting and place it in the hands of a sophisticated youth who evidently prizes it? Roberto Longhi called this conjunction 'un antistorico nonsense', and scholars concurring with his view have suggested that the insertion of the roundel is a much later (nineteenth or twentieth century?) intervention, filling the cavity that originally held another object altogether.²² Perhaps due to this discomfort, the painting is now in private hands rather than in a major museum. But there is no obvious reason to doubt the originality of what we see here; technical examination has not revealed anything particularly 'wrong' with the surface.²³ Apart from the technical evidence, the context developed in this essay makes the conjunction much less 'nonsensical'.

The portrait can be compared to the famous portrait by Botticelli of a *Man with a Medal of Cosimo de' Medici* in the Uffizi (probably 1470s), where once again a real object – a gilt plaster cast of a medal of Cosimo de' Medici – has been inserted into a cavity in the painting [FIG. 22].²⁴ These are clearly two very different cases: Cosimo de' Medici had died only a decade or so earlier. But it may be worth considering whether in this period the categories of the medal and the icon were not as far apart as they are in the eyes of modern art history. Both were formats with powerful antique resonances that granted special authority to portraits.

The icon inserted into Botticelli's panel is not Byzantine, and has been attributed to the fourteenth century Siennese painter Bartolommeo Bulgarini [FIG. 23]. This is important information, especially given that interest in early Tuscan painting had begun to develop in the late fifteenth century.²⁵ And yet it is also important not to overstate how significant this information was to Botticelli, to his sitter, or to the presumed viewers of this portrait. It may be that late fifteenth century viewers looked through those details of production, seeing the image as a token of a venerable type. As we have seen above, icons, even ones produced in Italy on the basis of Greek models, were regularly backdated to ancient times.²⁶ Especially when embedded into a modern portrait, this panel is above all an image of a venerable and ancient saint, an image that speaks the language of antiquity. The saint's beard, cloak and the arcane hand gesture appear as neither the invention of a modern artist nor the fruit of antiquarian research, but instead as the attributes of the saint himself, reliably transmitted.

The pattern of the punch holes in the icon held by Botticelli's youth extend vertically off the top and bottom edges, indicating that it was not originally round; instead, it was given a roundel format at the time that it was inserted into the Renaissance painting. The roundel format at this scale is well known in Byzantine art but rare in Italian art, and in general is a form associated with antiquity. When the embedded panel was turned into a tondo, its similarity to objects like this was enhanced. Thus the reshaping and reframing that the panel went through in being inserted into this portrait had the effect of strengthening its antique associations.

In its new form and surroundings the object is presented in a new capacity: no longer an integral part of a larger structure but standing on its own as a symbol

of a larger whole. The circularity of its moulded frame articulates the new closure that attends the conceptual shift from functional image to collectible. The roundel is delicately propped by the youth directly on the parapet, another framing device, itself invented by Western painters in their adaptations of the half-length format of Byzantine icons. The figure of the saint is cut off at the same point as that of the youth, suggesting a profound relationship of succession between youthful portrait and venerable icon. Like the saint in the roundel, the figure of the youth is also starkly isolated. The alternating strips of dark and light that make up the embrasure around him insistently reiterate the work of framing that went into his portrait.

The youth props the roundel on the parapet and tilts it slightly up; we see the bottom of the icon's frame and appreciate its objecthood and portability. This is an object that needs to be held and presented, an object whose real frame is now the hands of its owner, and the polite conversation that begins when it is picked up and held for someone to admire. It is turned towards the light, upper left, which dramatically picks out all of these framing elements – the repeated ridges of the moulding and the youth's delicate fingers, which are carefully kept just clear of the relic's surface. The giant youth manipulates the now imprisoned diminutive saint and yet in a subtler way the icon fundamentally conditions our relation to the portrait of the youth.

Botticelli's portrait stages the transformation of an excerpt into a self-sufficient 'work', the process of framing and reframing that goes into making a work of art, and in this sense it tells its own prehistory. But it also marks the differences, the gap between the image of the venerable saint and this attentive but somewhat arch youth, who turns to the viewer and offers the old image for inspection and admiration. We are pulled between the two figures and our relation to one shapes the approach to the other. The saint's image becomes, in the hands of the collector, a model of the religious image, now understood quasi-anthropologically as a separate class of images, associated with a religious history and a set of religious institutions. But it also becomes the model for the modern portrait, and in a broader sense of the work of art. The religious image comes into being in the hands of art, and through that restaging it becomes a model for art.

SUBLIMATION AND SECULARISATION: LEONARDO'S MONA LISA

In these same years Leonardo, wrote a striking ethnographic account of the sort of activity that surrounded famous miracle-working images such as the famous Saint Luke icon in Santa Maria Maggiore [FIG. 24].

Do we not see paintings that represent sacred deities always covered with cloths of the greatest value? And before they are unveiled, great ecclesiastical solemnities are first celebrated with various chants and the sounding of instruments, and at the unveiling multitudes of people immediately throw themselves on the ground, worshipping and praying to the one who is figured in it, for the restoration of their lost health or for their eternal salvation, just as though the living deity were truly present there in the flesh.²⁷

This passage has the basic elements of a good anthropological description: the ritual procedure is described, the motivations and expectations of the actors are accounted for, and a hypothesis is proposed concerning the efficacy of the image, its ability to do what it does. Compare this description of the efficacious cult image with another of Leonardo's accounts, this time of one of his own paintings:

Once, Leonardo writes, I happened to make a painting that represented a sacred figure that was bought by someone who fell in love with it. He wanted to remove the attributes of the saint [lit. deity] so he would be able to kiss it without misgivings. But in the end his conscience rose above his sighs and his lust, and he was forced to remove it from his house.²⁸

The erotically wayward religious image prompts the intervention of what might be called a critical conscience (*conscientia*), and as Leonardo tells it this critical intervention can take two forms. Either the painting has to be removed or it has to be desacralised by physically overpainting or removing its religious attributes. This appears to be an act of reverse-sublimation, a demotion of the religious image into an object of secular erotic love. But in fact Leonardo diagrams the sublimation process itself. The libidinal energies invested in the religious image are to be extracted as if through a process of refinement and purgation, and then put into a dedicated place called art. The story suggests that this is not a singular occurrence. Leonardo presents this case as an example of what excellent painting, his above all, can do to a viewer. The implication is that modern painting is destined to trouble decorum, and thus to raise the question of the functions, categories, and settings of art.

In Leonardo's story the troubling painting is taken away. But he also clearly envisions the other possibility, that one could erase the image's religious attributes. What, one might ask, would one be left with after the attributes are erased: a painting of a woman, but surely not a portrait of any one woman. The cancelling is not quite what the reformers were calling for – the removal of the disfigurements and accretions of later centuries and the restoration of the original archaic Christian *imago*. Instead, here the stripping leads to something beyond or beneath the Christian image altogether.

The pairing of the two accounts brings out the curious family resemblance between the Santa Maria Maggiore icon and the so-called *Mona Lisa* [FIG. 25]. On a simple formal level, the similarities are striking, beginning with the three-quarter length format and the presentation of the figures. It should be noted that the formatting of this icon is in fact quite unusual – as was the *Mona Lisa* among portraits of its time. The similarities extend even to details such as the placement of the hands, and even facial features: the long nose, the round and well defined chin, the corners of the mouth tucked under the flesh of the cheek. These similarities in the features are brought together by a more general similarity in expression. Both figures are involved in reflection, their psychic reserve suggesting a mystery as yet unrevealed. The icon alludes to theological mysteries and it is carefully unveiled within a sanctioned ministration of religious power, as Leonardo

observed in the passage quoted above. In Leonardo's portrait we are dealing not with the powers of a specific religious personage but with something less determinate. The unveiling is no longer part of the external protocols of ritual, but has been internalised in the painting technique itself, in the slow unfolding of Leonardo's *sfumato*, which claims to offer an infinitely gradual path from the known to the unknown.²⁹

The comparison brings into view important features of Leonardo's painting. Most scholars agree that the work originated in a fairly standard portrait commission of 1503 (although some doubt it),³⁰ but no one can reasonably claim that in its present state this strange figure represents an individual. Leonardo was eminently capable of painting particular individuals, as his other portraits attest, but here the reference to a specific person is missing. In fact the painting was never given to its putative client: Leonardo kept it with him, and perhaps worked on it, for the rest of his life, taking it with him to France. It became more than a commissioned portrait, something more abstract, something closer to a demonstration of his art, a visual manifesto of the arguments in defence of painting that one finds in his writings – the same writings that include the passages quoted above. Given this development, it is no surprise that the painting should enter into contention with the icon, and attempt to internalise something of its formality and its stature. This is something other than the usual work of adapting and re-proposing a prototypical image. The icon is now framed off as a category, a prevalent model of the image – that is, it is understood quasi-anthropologically, as it is in Leonardo's written description of the image cult quoted earlier.

To ask after the archaic origins of the icon is already to ask what lies beneath those foundations, beneath icon painting itself. Leonardo's portrait-that-is-no-longer-a-portrait is thus something stranger than a return to the archaic image. It is closer to Leonardo's description quoted above – a sacred image that has had its sacred attributes removed. The logic of archaism here is not a formal one but a structural one, and so it does not stop at the image of the Virgin. Instead, it engages in a quasi-anthropological excavation. A female principle is abstracted from the Virgin cult and set before a cosmic landscape. This is one way of understanding the strange combination of hyper-realisation and abstractness, almost blankness, in the painting. The concentration of pictorial effects – the extraordinary density and continuity of the pictorial elaboration – is a colossal effort to stabilise what is left after moving to this register below established iconography. The painting labours to transform the fact of unsettled identity into something like an artistic principle.

This helps explain why the painting produced such a luxurious progeny of copies, and especially variations. In a cartoon in the Louvre based on the *Mona Lisa* and exactly to scale, the figure is now made to hold a branch of laurel. The painting also inspired a number of variations in which the figure is rendered nude. And of course also Virgin figures in response, by Raphael. No other portrait of the period provoked this kind of reception. And this is not, in my view, simply due to the fame of the artist, but is in response to this painting's peculiar under-determination.

Leonardo was not the only one to place his art into contention with the sacred image in these years. Albrecht Dürer's *Self Portrait* of 1500 also hovers between portrait and icon, but in a more explicit and polarised way [FIG. 26].³¹ The forced marriage of self portrait and Christ portrait is left clearly visible in the painting. It is clearly no longer a Christ image, and yet it is just as obviously a very estranged self portrait, an image of the self pulled into the magnetic field of the icon. The two gestures are very different: Dürer presents an image that is both icon and portrait; Leonardo's is neither icon nor portrait. And yet both works, highly self-conscious artistic manifestos, work within the space opened up between icon and portrait.

From the vantage point of Leonardo's ethnographic description, or of Dürer's meta-painting, the icon is already a suspended category, already an artefact. To treat it as a model of the image is already to frame it in anthropological terms, to see it as but one instance of a deep portraiture function, one that long precedes Christian art: the substitution of the image for the body, recognised as the basic and perhaps original act of image-making. New claims for art – even if they involve something that goes beyond mimetic doubling, and especially if they do – start here. The crucial point is that Dürer and Leonardo do not simply continue the work of culture by offering new portraits, new essays in effigy-making. Instead, they destabilise the subject of portraiture, leaving the figurations in a suspended, indeterminate state, as it were between codes. They stand in an oblique relation to their image traditions, and so prompt reflection on the portrait as a category and on art-making in general.

¹ Müntz 1983, vol. 2, pp. 131–2, n. 4, here p. 132: '*imagines sanctorum operis antiqui ex Graecia allatas, quas illi iconas vocant.*'

² Evans (ed.) 2004, no. 132.

³ Fusco/Corti 2006, p. 74.

⁴ Holanda 1984, p. 299: '*E lemos que Alexandre o Magno pôs grande pena a qualque pintor que o pintasse afora Apelles, porque este só homem stivava que fosse sufficiente de pintar o seu aspecto com aquela severidade e animo liberal, que não podesse ser visto sem dos gregos ser louvado, e dos barbaros temido e adorado. E pois um proveu homem da terra isto pôs por edito da sua fegura, quanta mór razão têm os príncipes ecclesiasticos ou seculares de pôrem mui grande cuidado em mandarem que ninguém pintasse a benignidade e mansidão de Nosso Redemptor nem a pureza de Nossa Senhora e dos sanctos, sendo os mais illustres pintores que podessem alañar em seus senhorios e provincias! ... E pois que Deos Padre quis que lhe fosse bem goamecida e pintado a arca da sua lei, quanto com mais stuido e peso deve de querer que seja emitada a sua serenal face e a de seu filho Senhor Nosso, e aquela seguridade, castidade e formosura da gloriosa Virgem Maria, que emitou São Lucas Evangelista; e assi no Sancta Sanctorum o vulto de Salvador que stá em São João de Laterano, como todos sabemos, e em especial Messer Francisco.*' My thanks to Joanna Hecker Silva for pointing out the relevance of this passage.

⁵ Von Dobschütz 1899, p. 292: '*effigies a pectore superius.*'

⁶ Durandus of Mende (Durando de Mende) 1995, I, iii, 2: '*Graeci etiam utuntur pingentes illas, ut dicitur, solum ab umbilico supra, et non inferius, ut omnis stultae cogitationis occasio tollatur.*' Also Ringborn 1984, pp. 39–40.

⁷ Ringborn 1984, pp. 39–52.

⁸ For the case of Giovanni Bellini, see Goffen 1975, pp. 487–519.

⁹ Lavin 1970, pp. 207–26. An excellent example of the proximity of the two traditions in the fifteenth century is the female bust by Desiderio da Settignano in the Louvre, long believed to be a portrait of a contemporary woman; after a recent cleaning, and on the basis of a newly revealed inscription, it has been shown to be a portrait of Saint Constance, daughter of Dorotheus king of Constantinople – that is, an image of a long dead saint, made very much in the mode of a reliquary. See Bormand/Paolozzi/Strozzi/Penny (dirs.) 2007, pp. 154–7, no. 8.

¹⁰ Pächt 1961, pp. 402–21.

¹¹ Hand/Metzger/Spronk (eds.) 2006, pp. 252–3, no. 38.

¹² Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, 35.15 and 35.151.

¹³ See, further, the excellent commentary on this passage by Suthor 1999, pp. 117–26.

¹⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part II–III, Question 94, article 1.

¹⁵ Alberti's formulation was to have a long afterlife. See, for example, Biondo 1549, p. 6: '*La pittura possede in se quasi la virtu divina, non altrimenti che si dice de la amicitia, perche la pittura ne rappresenta gli assenti come fossero presenti, anzi gli istessi morti ne mostra offerendo come vivi.*'

¹⁶ Belting 1998, p. 2.

¹⁷ On the family of Saint Luke legends, see Bacchi 1998.

¹⁸ See Von Dobschütz 1899, Morello/Wolf (eds.) 2000, and Kessler/Wolf (eds.) 1998.

¹⁹ See Maguire 1996, esp. ch. 1.

²⁰ Theodore of Stoudios defends icons against their enemies, in Mango (ed.) 1972, pp. 173–4.

²¹ Valla 1922, pp. 142–3: 'among sacred objects is shown the panel portrait of Peter and Paul, which, after Constantine had been spoken to by these apostles in his sleep, Sylvester produced in confirmation of the vision. I do not say this because I deny that they are portraits of the apostles ... but because that panel was not produced for Constantine by Sylvester.' Latin: '*inter religiosa demonstratur in tabella effigies Petri et Pauli, quam Sylvester Constantino ab eisdem apostolis in somnis admonito in confirmationem visionis exhibuit. Non hoc dico quia negem effigies illas esse apostolorum ... sed quia tabella illa a Sylvestro non fuerit exhibitae Constantino.*'

²² Longhi 1960. Brown (ed.) 2001, p. 177, no. 26, proposed that originally a round mirror occupied the cavity now occupied by the Trecento panel. Strong arguments in favour of the originality of the present arrangement were put forward by Stapleford 1987, pp. 428–36. See also the (inconclusive) counter-arguments presented in a letter by Christiansen 1987.

²³ The conservation documentation at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, where the painting has been on loan in recent years, reveals no damage to the edge of the cavity, rendering doubtful any proposed history of removals and replacements. The delicate painting of highlights on the frame immediately surrounding the roundel is all intact, save for one area of damage, lower left, which extends across both the surface of the Botticelli-painted frame and the icon, and thus certainly occurred after the icon was inserted. My thanks to David Bull, Larry Kantor, Nicholas Penny and Carl Strehlke for sharing their views on the matter.

²⁴ See Buzzegoli *et al.* 1993, pp. 23–9, 67–9, who shows that the cavity in the panel was slightly too large for the plaster cast medal; this fact might have something to do with the cracking of the plaster itself as well as with the evident signs of repair. In comparison, the insertion of the panel into the Solow portrait [FIG. 7] evidently went more smoothly. It is possible to suggest, on the basis of the Uffizi portrait, that the Solow portrait once held a medal, but this possibility is excluded by the presence of the fictive tondo frame, as medals were never framed in this way. Tondo paintings, of course, frequently were.

²⁵ For example, Piero de' Medici is known to have sought out a painting he believed to be by Cimabue, the double-sided panel of the *Presentation of John and Mary* and the *Lamentation* now in the Fogg Museum and attributed to the Master of the Pistoia Pietà; see Bellosi 1992, pp. 49–52.

²⁶ Two very famous examples: the *Madonna del Popolo*, a painting of about 1300 and then subsequently overpainted, heavily promoted in the later fifteenth century as a Saint Luke icon, and the *Cambrai Virgin*, a Byzantinising painting made in Siena about 1330, transported to Cambrai in 1441, where it too was celebrated as a Saint Luke portrait. On the *Popolo* icon, see Ricci 1924–1925, p. 97–102. The icon is copied from the splendid Byzantine icon in the church of the Carmine in Siena; see Belting 1994, p. 341 and pl. VI. On the *Cambrai Virgin*, see Wilson 1995, pp. 132–46. See also Evans (ed.) 2004, nos. 349–51.

²⁷ Da Vinci 1956, 3v: '*Hor non si vede le pitture rappresentatrici delle divine deita essere al continuo tenute coperte con coperture di grandissimi prezzi, e quando si scoprono prima si fa grande solennita ecclesiastica, de vari canti con diversi suoni. E nello scoprire, la gran moltitudine de populi che qui vi concorrono immediate si gittano a terra quella dorando e pregando per cui tale pittura, e figurata, de l'acquisto della perduta sanita e della eterna salute, non altra mente che se tale l'idea fusse li presente in vita.*' See also the remarks on this passage by Wolf 1993, pp. 437–52.

²⁸ Da Vinci 1956, 13v: '*Et gia interviene a me far una pittura che rappresentava una cosa divina, la quale comperata dall'amante di quella, volse levarne la rappresentazione de tal Deità per poterla bacciare senza sospetto. Ma in fine la conscientia vinse li sospiri e la libidine, et fu forza che lui cela leva lei di casa.*'

²⁹ For a fuller analysis of this process, see Nagel 1993, pp. 7–15.

³⁰ The strongest arguments in support of Vasari's contention that the painting is a portrait of Lisa, wife of Francesco del Giocondo, have been made by Zöllner 1993, pp. 115–138. For the counter arguments, see Greenstein 2004, pp. 17–38, who believes the painting was never meant as a portrait, but only as a demonstration of his art. The reading offered here reconciles these two views, each of which is unacceptably extreme on its own.

³¹ See also Wolf 1993 who sets these two paintings side by side as examples of the anthropological reevaluation of Christian image traditions about 1500.

The Making of Portraits

Lorne Campbell

The fifteenth century is the earliest period from which have been preserved relatively large numbers of European portraits painted on panel or on cloth. German sculptors of the mid-thirteenth century had created wonderfully vivid portraits, for example the series of twelve life-size benefactors in the west choir of Naumburg cathedral in Germany. They are marvellous portraits, even though they are not likenesses of the persons, long dead, whom they purport to represent. The accidents of survival should not lead us to believe that only in about 1400 did people begin to take an interest in individualised likenesses. During the fourteenth century, a great many portraits were painted. Only those in illuminated manuscripts are known in large numbers; but many of the portraits painted on panel or included in series of mural paintings are known from later copies. Across the centuries, portraitists faced the same problem: how to produce an image that was an accurate likeness and would satisfy the client. Here, fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth century evidence is used to address this question, and occasionally seventeenth century evidence when it supplements the kinds of information available for the earlier period. The sources for van Dyck's activity in England are of special interest. It seems legitimate to use later evidence, since the processes of making portraits had not changed and would not change radically until the invention of photography.

When a portrait was made, there was normally, though not invariably, contact between artist and subject. The subject might be dead or inaccessible because of distance, or might simply refuse to meet the artist. Usually the artist would be able to see the subject of his portrait and encounters between them might be organised where the artist studied and made representations of his subject. Even if the subject was neither seated during such meetings nor to be shown seated in the finished portrait, these encounters came to be called sittings; and the subjects, even if they were shown standing, came to be described as sitters.

It is difficult and probably futile to make many generalisations about sittings. Two artists, the Portuguese painter Francisco de Holanda and the English limner Nicholas Hilliard, wrote manuals on portraiture, both of which contain sound practical advice to portraitists. The first was finished in 1549 and was translated into Castilian in 1563; the second was written between 1598 and 1603.¹ Both authors would have acknowledged that every portrait was made under differing constraints; and that artists reacted to and treated subjects in different ways under different circumstances. No sitter of the time has left a full account of the making of his or her portrait. Only very occasionally is it known how many sittings were given or how long they lasted. Very little can be discovered about the interaction between artist and subject during the sitting. A huge amount of information, nevertheless, may be gleaned from disparate sources – such as letters,

FIG. 15 Sandro Botticelli
*Portrait of a Young Man
holding a Medallion*, c.
1485, New York, Solow
Collection





FIG. 16 *Christ Pantocrator*, beginning of the fourteenth century, Chimay, Belgium, Church of Saint Peter and Paul



FIG. 17 *Christ Pantocrato*, twelfth century, Florence, Bargello Museum



FIG. 18 Rogier van der Weyden,
The Virgin and Child, c. 1460, San
Marino, Huntington Library Art
Collections

FIG. 19 Rogier van der Weyden,
Philippe de Croÿ, c.1460,
Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum
voor Schone Kunsten



FIG. 20 and 21 Icons with
teh images of *Saint Peter*
and *Saint Paul*, Vatican
City, Vatican Museum



FIG. 22 Sandro Botticelli,
*Portrait of a Man with a
medal of Cosimo de Medici*, c.
1470-1480, Florence, Uffizi
Gallery

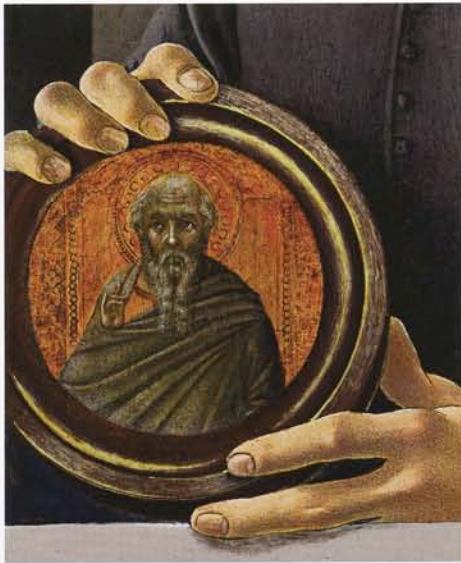


FIG. 23 Sandro Botticelli, detail of *Portrait of a Young Man holding a Medallion*, c. 1485, New York, Solow Collection



FIG. 24 *Virgin with Child* called “Protectress of the Roman People,” 6th century, Rome, Church of Santa Maria Maggiore, altar of the Paolina Chapel



FIG. 25 Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, c. 1505-1506, Paris, Louvre