
Title of Object

Portrait of a Lady

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Benedetto Ghirlandaio

Country: Italy

Date of Object: 15th century

File Created: 5/16/2016

Accession Number: 68.41.9

Author of File: Lucy Hicks

Material/Medium: Oil on poplar panel

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Department: Paintings

Last Updated/Reviewed: 10/4/2016

Culture: Italian

Tour Topics

Women, Identity, Gender roles, power/status, beauty, daily life, fashion/dress

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

What do you see here?

What is the first thing you focus on?

What do you see that might seem odd by today's standards?

(Compare/contrast to other portraits in the gallery.)

Tell me about the lady in the portrait, what do you see?

Renaissance pieces often show wealth of the new merchant class. What here shows wealth?

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

New wealthy merchant class wanted paintings of themselves. They paid by the size--a bust cost more than just a head "shot."

Note the fine painting of the veil and how sheer it is, a very new option for the artist to paint. She is wearing lux fabrics and a lot of lovely jewelry which is a source of pride. This is to show off her new found wealth from her husband's prosperous business. Trade is bringing in great wealth to N Europe.

Painted on poplar. The wood has such a fine grain that nothing shows through. A super smooth surface for painting prior to canvas.

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

High forehead is very fashionable and some woman shaved their hairline to create a higher forehead. The bleached hair was also fashionable.

Background is dark so you really focus on her face and jewelry. Note the elaborate brocade trim on her gown and how detailed it is as well as her jewelry.

Her jewelry is a source of pride as it is a focal point

Benedetto was part of a family of painters. Brothers Davide and Domenico were very different painters but well established. All were considered Florentine painters. Benedetto was more of a portrait painter.

Encounters with the outside world bring treasures for the new merchant class and the agricultural economy transforms into a money economy. This new merchant/middle class supported the arts, literature and scholarship.

New appreciation for the classical art styles and perspective through observation.

The veil technique was new and possible due to the use of oil paints.

From the V&A: "In Renaissance Italy, most women from the upper classes had only two options in life: marriage or the cloister. Whether marrying a mortal man or Jesus, they needed a dowry. Since well-born women did not work, the dowry offset the cost of keeping a wife and family. The husband used the money to invest in property or business, but on his death the capital was returned to the woman. The expense of a dowry led some families to marry off only one daughter, while the rest were sent to a convent as nuns' dowries were considerably smaller. Nuns needed to bring dowries to ensure that their convents would continue to run smoothly and be able to house and feed them...Once married, a woman was expected to take care of the home, have children and maintain a decorous and chaste appearance so as to bring honour to both families - her own and her husband's. She was also responsible for the education of their young children. These children were later sent to school, or in the case of young girls, sometimes boarded at convents. There, the nuns taught them needlework, reading and writing."

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Benedetto was a member of an eminent family of artists. In this portrait, the sitter is depicted in accordance with the ideal of feminine beauty in fifteenth-century Italy, of which her high forehead, large, heavy-lidded eyes, arched eyebrows, and a long supple neck were prized characteristics. A pale

complexion and bleached hair were also desirable. The sitter's simple hairstyle, fine jewelry and modest demeanor indicate that she is a respectable married woman of an aristocratic family. The painter's skill at realistic representation is evident in her transparent veil.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Lucy's class notes/Class notes from Mia

artsmia.org (audio clip)

The family Ghirlandaio, at Web Gallery of Art: http://www.wga.hu/html_m/g/ghirland/index.html

Benedetto Ghirlandaio, at Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benedetto_Ghirlandaio

Florence and Central Italy, 1400–1600 A.D., Met Museum:

<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ht/08/eustc.html>

Women in the Renaissance, article at the V&A Museum:

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/w/women-in-the-renaissance/>

Art History by Stokstad, 2014

Art Forms by Patrick Frank, 2006