

Botticelli and Renaissance Florence, audio tour transcripts

01 Directors' Welcome

Katie Luber:

Welcome to this celebration of the artistic achievements of Renaissance Florence. I'm Katie Luber, the Nivin and Duncan MacMillan Director and President of the Minneapolis Institute of Art. We are so excited to share this exhibition with you, one of the most comprehensive shows on Sandro Botticelli ever staged in the United States.

The exhibition contextualizes his works within the broader artistic and cultural climate of Renaissance Florence. The presentation of such rare objects of extraordinary quality is inspiring. What better moment to examine Botticelli in the Florentine Renaissance as we seek the rebirth of culture, art, and connection?

Thank you for being with us today.

Eike Schmidt:

Greetings from Florence. I'm Eike Schmidt, Director of the Uffizi Galleries. We're thrilled to share some of our most outstanding treasures with you in Minneapolis, and to have collaborated with Mia to recount these extraordinary moments of Renaissance art. It was

a period of extreme inventiveness and creativity that forged a course of world culture. We hope you enjoy the exhibition.

02, Botticelli and Renaissance Florence

Rachel McGarry:

Hi, I'm Rachel McGarry, the Elizabeth MacMillan Chair of European Art and Curator of European Paintings and Works on Paper. I'm a co-curator of the exhibition *Botticelli and Renaissance Florence*.

Florence in the 15th century was one of the wealthiest and most beautiful cities in Europe, and it is considered by many to be the cradle of the Renaissance. The word 'renaissance' literally means 'rebirth.' A reawakening of art, culture, learning began in this period, nourished by a deep interest in reconnecting with the ancient past.

Ancient Roman sculpture was being excavated, collected, and displayed. Classical texts were being recovered, particularly ancient Greek texts around the Mediterranean brought back to Florence, copied and translated. These wide-ranging sources provided inspiring new models for Florentine artists to borrow, mimic, and adapt.

Botticelli and his fellow artists took up pagan subjects from mythology and reinterpreted them in a new light. They borrowed the idealized figures of classical sculpture, often large-scale and nude, and adapted them to Christian themes and humanist values that shaped the times.

Artists in this period also benefited from remarkable patronage from the city's religious and civic institutions, trade guilds, and private citizens. The Medici family, Florence's de facto rulers, were model patrons sponsoring the building of churches, convents and palaces. They supported learning and scholarship, formed major libraries and art collections and antiquities collections.

Cosimo de' Medici and his grandson, Lorenzo de' Medici, were the most powerful men in the city in the 15th century. Lorenzo, known as the Magnificent, was essentially a prince with a court. He collected ancient manuscripts, antiquities, ancient Roman sculpture, cameos, and medals. He retained scholars, philosophers, and artists. Florence became a center of artistic excellence, which Lorenzo promoted through his sponsorship of art and learning, and also exporting Florentine art to other Italian states to demonstrate Florence's eminence and greatness.

Botticelli has come to symbolize the splendor of the era. He inherently understood how to meld ancient prototypes with contemporary fashion and style to create something wholly new and a new ideal of beauty.

Today, Botticelli enjoys enormous popularity across the globe. He's one of the most celebrated figures in the history of art and his influence on art, fashion, advertising, popular culture has been enormous and endures to this day.

03, *Pallas and the Centaur*

Rachel McGarry:

We see before us a beautiful young woman standing before a peaceful harbor and some kind of stone fortress or gate. The young maiden is taming a centaur, a hybrid creature that is half-man, half-horse. Botticelli executed this canvas in the 1480s around the time he painted his other famous mythological paintings of the *Primavera* and *The Birth of Venus*, both in the Uffizi collection and both prohibited by the Italian government from traveling.

Pallas and the Centaur, *Primavera*, and *The Birth of Venus* were probably all commissioned by Lorenzo il Magnifico de' Medici. The painting before us is usually dated to about 1482 as it is thought to have been commissioned on the occasion of the wedding of Lorenzo's younger cousin, also named Lorenzo, and known as Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, and his bride, Semiramide D'Appiano. The marriage between these two represented an important and strategic alliance for the Medici family.

Semiramide came from a wealthy family who controlled major iron mines on the isle of Elba. So, what does this painting represent, and how should we interpret it? The subject matter is rather mysterious, a young woman taming a centaur. The centaur lowers his bow and twists his head towards his subjugator. The young maiden pulls his hair very gently, in fact, with so little effort required that she doesn't need to lift her heavy halberd to bring the creature to submission. This commanding, stunning woman is traditionally identified as Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of war and wisdom, known to the Romans as Minerva. If this painting does represent Pallas Athena, her warlike side is given less emphasis. Botticelli does not depict her wearing her usual armor and helmet. In fact, her

shield is thrown over her shoulder as it's apparently not required for this task of controlling the centaur. And her elaborate halberd appears almost decorative given its scale and stunning metal work.

Botticelli instead shows that goddess in a white silk dress that is adorned with gold, acanthus leaves, and a verdant vine, perhaps myrtle leaves or maybe olive leaves. Thus, the painting would seem to represent the pacifying side of the goddess of wisdom. In this capacity, Pallas is a civilizing force, patroness of the arts and learning, bearer of abundance and peace.

Her dress, if you look closely, is also embellished with interlocking diamond rings, which might allude to the wedding. But more directly, in the context of Renaissance Florence, the interlocking diamond rings are an emblem of the Medici family. This suggests that this virtuous figure is an allegory for the Medici. Could the painting be encouraging them to tame uncivilized nature and disorder? These are things associated with the centaur who is frequently portrayed by ancient writers as wild and lustful, prone to violence and guided by base instincts.

Botticelli depicted centaurs a number of times. He was certainly inspired by ancient sculptures of centaurs like the ones exhibited nearby. For their meaning here, perhaps the creature is meant to represent the Medici suppressing disorder to foster peace, wisdom, and the arts, virtues nourished by the goddess Pallas Athena. Or maybe it is a more personal message intended for the young groom, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco. It might be advice to the young man to suppress his lust and submit to a virtuous wife for the attainment of a more exalted form of love and spiritual enlightenment.

There is another theory that this young woman is not Pallas Athena. A 1498 inventory of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici's collection records a painting that represents Camilla with a satyr, which some scholars believe refers to this painting. Camilla is a virgin warrior princess in Virgil's ancient epic poem, *The Aeneid*. Camilla fought fiercely in the Trojan War. She was as tough as an Amazon and she slaughtered many Trojan soldiers. Camilla was celebrated in Florence in the 15th century as a role model for brides and the embodiment of female virtue, chastity and love.

Botticelli seems to have meant for the painting to evoke endless meanings. The elusive aspect of his art has often been noted by commentators. His novel subject matter, dazzling detail, complex symbolism and wistful, enigmatic expressions on his figures appear almost like puzzles demanding interpretation.

Botticelli's drawing exhibited nearby is related to this painting, and also more directly to the figure of Venus at the center of his famous painting, *The Primavera*. It may have been preparatory for that picture. The two works show Botticelli's creation of a new feminine ideal of beauty. Botticelli's omniscient graceful goddesses are influenced by antiquity, but updated to contemporary fashion. Their faces are individualized, but they appear as immortal, perfect creatures.

04, Venus

Rachel McGarry:

Lorenzo di Credi's painting of Venus represents the goddess of love as a heroic female nude, life-size or almost life-size. The painting is a close copy of a work by Botticelli,

which likewise shows a nude figure standing on a parapet against a dark background, tightly framed with a gesture that partly covers her breasts. Botticelli recycled the figure imposed from his famous *Birth of Venus*, which depicts Venus floating atop a scalloped shell accompanied by gods and landscape, as Venus, according to myth, was born a grown woman that rose from the sea near the island of Cyprus.

Credi's and Botticelli's later paintings of Venus boldly omit all identifying attributes. There's no shell, there's no Cupid, her little son, so there's nothing to suggest this is the figure of Venus. The woman before us could be a mere mortal, but showing such a figure naked would be improper in Renaissance Florence. Only her status as a pagan goddess permitted such a representation.

Botticelli's painting of the lone Venus was popular. There are three versions by Botticelli and his workshop. Thus, it is hardly surprising that there might be demand for other artists to produce such paintings. Lorenzo di Credi, a successful painter, was known to follow and adapt other artists' designs very skillfully. There is evidence that Credi used a full scale cartoon to make this painting. Artists often produced cartoons, that is full-scale studies on paper that could be traced or pounced with charcoal to transfer the design to a painting surface or to replicate a popular design.

Botticelli's active workshop frequently used cartoons. In Credi's painting, there are small charcoal dots, called *spolveri*, that lightly outline the figure, which are now visible to the naked eye, particularly in the drapery folds and around Venus's eyes.

Perhaps Credi had access to Botticelli's cartoon, but Lorenzo reversed the figure and introduced some variation, giving her heftier proportions a simpler hairstyle and light

drapery to cover herself. She's less idealized, more human. This has led the painting to sometimes be referred to as *The Other Venus*, that is, not Botticelli's *Venus*. This painting is dated to around 1490. In the following decade, the zealous preachings of the Dominican friar, Savonarola, altered the artistic scene in Florence, and Credi was particularly influenced by his sermons. He put away these pagan vanities and devoted his work to religious art.

04, *Relief with Dancing Maenads*

Rachel McGarry:

This marble relief is over 2,000 years old and is in very fine condition considering. Two of the dancing women's faces are lost, but one is beautifully preserved and the crisply carved folds of the figures' drapery are beautifully intact. The curving forms of the women's bodies are enhanced by the illusion of transparent drapery clinging to their figures. Such virtuoso carving is a marvel to see.

Conservation of the relief in 2013 revealed traces of gold and red bole, which is used to prepare the surface for gilding. These were found on the pine cone *thyrsus* held by the central figure and also in the beautifully preserved figure on the right playing the large tambourine, with more traces of gold at the edge of her drapery, and on her headband, and bracelet. The pilasters that framed the relief were gilded as well, so this would suggest that the entire architectural frame was gilded. There are also traces of paint to describe the eye of the figure at right and the central figure's dress was probably originally painted red. Thus, the relief would have appeared quite different in antiquity.

The women depicted are Maenads, followers and priestesses of Dionysus, the god of wine. The woman at left dances with scraps of a dismembered goat and a large knife, alluding to the more violent aspects of the ancient Bacchic cult. A tragic play called *The Bacchae*, written by Euripides, was first performed in Athens in 406-405 BCE. It tells the grisly story of the death of King Pentheus. Dionysus tricked Pentheus into spying on the Maenads during an all-female religious festival. Men were absolutely forbidden from attending. When Pentheus was spotted, he was ripped apart by his mother and her fellow Bacchic followers in a frenzied state of ecstasy. They did not recognize him until it was too late.

The relief shows the women dancing in an abandoned state, spellbound. The play inspired the first dancing Maenads relief, which were probably made in Athens at the time of the play in 406-405 BCE. Renaissance artists were absolutely fascinated by these ancient reliefs and studied how the movements of these carved dancing figures were amplified by their drapery, the cloth swirls and flutters around them and clings to their bodies. Botticelli and his circle often deployed similar figures, usually without the violent aspect of the ancient prototypes. Botticelli's goddesses and nymphs, for instance, were often painted or drawn with similar flowing drapery so that they appear to float suspended by gentle imaginary breezes. The motion enlivens the scene.

05, *Young Woman Pouring Water from a Pitcher*

Rachel McGarry:

Domenico Ghirlandaio's drawing displayed here, a figure study for a fresco in a church depicting the birth of the Virgin Mary, reflects the influence of these pagan reliefs. It is a study for a maid servant bringing a pitcher of water to bathe the newborn Virgin Mary.

The ardent young woman gracefully moves toward the infant, her fluttering drapery, angled body, and downturned head create a fleeting moment of activity within the scene, as does her gesture of pouring water from a pitcher. The liquid is described with just a few tremulous pen strokes. Her mundane act as a water carrier is elevated by this deep rooted formal vocabulary.

Ghirlandaio has thoroughly transformed the pagan source. Elegant movements become expressions of feminine virtue, grace, and innocence.

07, *Three Satyrs Fighting a Serpent; Allegory of Fertility and Abundance*

Eike Schmidt:

An example of the ancient works displayed in the Garden of San Marco is the marble group *Three Satyrs Wrestling a Serpent*. This sculpture from the first century BCE is an unusual subject, and its distinctive sculptural quality places it close to the late Hellenistic

School of Rhodes. Its very likely presence in the San Marco Garden is proved by the echoes of the singular sculpture in Florentine Renaissance works, including an early sculpture by Michelangelo, who was part of the elite academy of Lorenzo as a young genius artist. Like Botticelli, Michelangelo had the opportunity to study the Medicis' precious antiquities up close. The tense composition depicts three young satyrs being attacked by a serpent. Satyrs are woodland figures with goat-like features. Here, the male youths have pointed ears, tails, and wattles, the small appendages goats have hanging from their necks.

The sculpture captures their suffering as they struggle to stay alive. Their naked bodies are strained and twisting, their arms frantically raised, their mouths parted, gasping for air. This sculpture's source may be reflected in Luca Signorelli's *Allegory of Fertility and Abundance*, exhibited nearby.

The work may have served as a headboard for a bed. The subject of fertility would've been a suitable subject for such a purpose.

The panel painting evokes a mythological past when figures sat around naked or dressed only in loose cloaks or fronds of vine leaves. This evocation of a bucolic antiquity is enhanced by the decision to paint the scene as a monochrome *grisaille*, which is suggestive of a shallow relief sculpture in stone, and may also have been intended to blend into a domestic interior. By doing so, Signorelli would not only have paid homage to Lorenzo de' Medici's golden age, but to his famous collection as well.

08, Madonna and Child in Glory with Angels

Rachel McGarry:

Botticelli's *Madonna and Child in Glory with Angels* presents a celestial vision of Mary and a very chubby Christ child. In fact, the infant is shown in larger scale relative to his young mother. She is seated on a throne of cloud-like angels portrayed as Queen of Heaven. Gilded rays emanate from the figures, and angels surround them in the shape of a mandorla or almond, an emblem of glory in the period. The supernatural character of the composition contrasts with a very human depiction of Mary and Jesus. She holds her son protectively and gazes solemnly down at him, seeming to foresee his fate. Relaxed in his mother's arms, Jesus looks down at the spectator with a kind of wistful look and raises his right hand to bless us.

This is the earliest work by Botticelli in the show, probably dating to the late 1460s when he was in his early twenties and just beginning his career as an independent painter. The distinctive figure types, particularly the curly-haired, dreamy baby, are indebted to the style of Botticelli's master, Filippo Lippi, whose drawing is exhibited nearby. The palette, a delicate symphony of grays, is also reflective of Lippi's influence.

The ornate frame is 19th century, but it is presumed to copy the original frame. It is decorated with gold coins, which suggests that this sacred image came from the headquarters of Florence's bankers' guild, the Arte del Cambio. Florence's trades guilds were important patrons of the arts and decorated their offices with religious art. Burn marks on the left side, in the area of the angelic mandorla and the virgin's robes, are undoubtedly the result of candles burning too close to the painting. They are masked by

later restorations, but demonstrate that the work was an object of deep devotion over the centuries.

09, *Adoration of the Child and Angels; Madonna and Child with Saint John and Angels*

Roberta Bartoli:

Hello, my name is Roberta Bartoli. I am a scholar on the Italian Renaissance and especially Florentine art at the time of Botticelli.

The circular shape, known by the Italian word, *tondo*, is a typically Florentine format. It recalls the shape of ceremonial birth trays, *deschi da parto*, and of many round window frames and other decorative elements in the architecture of the city, from the time of the architect Filippo Brunelleschi and onward. Displayed in the bridal chamber of Florentine palaces, tondi showed Marian subjects that augured well for the fertility of the couple, in particular, scenes of the nativity and the Adoration of the Magi. The two tondos in this room are particularly large. Because of their size, they were probably commissioned for patrician homes or palaces where they would hang in a bedroom, surely with a high ceiling.

The first one was painted by Francesco Botticini, a prominent artist in 15th century Florence, active during Botticelli's time. His tondo represents the Adoration of the Child set in a sumptuous terrace garden with an elegant balustrade. The amiable group of heavenly figures—the Virgin Mary in prayer, and angels of different ages—are set around the lovely chubby Jesus, who for sure will in no time start sucking his thumb. The scene

somehow conjures up the gathering of a loving family with many children, surely a good omen for the couple who had the chance of sleeping in the room decorated with it.

Botticelli's tondo, *The Madonna of the Roses*, was executed with the help of pupils who followed his design and instructions. This was a moment in Botticelli's life when pious thoughts prevailed due to the religious fervor that spread in Florence, following the preaching of Savonarola, a Dominican friar with a strong eloquence and a very convincing power of speech. As a consequence, the magnificence of the scene is veiled by an underlying melancholy, observed in the worried expression of the Virgin, who prefigures in her heart, the destiny of her child. We see in fact a real family playing in a garden with the young angels fussing like elder siblings around the Christ child. And the figures are set against the marvelous hedge of roses, symbol of both the Virgin Mary and for the thorns of the passion of Christ.

10, Wedding Chest

Roberta Bartoli:

During the Renaissance, chests were commissioned on the occasion of a betrothal by the bride's or by the groom's families and put in the bedroom of the newlyweds, therefore becoming symbolic of their union. For this reason, they were richly decorated, often with historic, literary or allegorical scenes, to which the family crest was often added. The scene on the left shows a combat with clubs between two monstrous creatures, half-lion and half-satyr, whose torsos are totally bent back in the struggle. This ferocious fight was

made popular in the celebrated *Battle of the Nudes*, a masterpiece by Antonio Pollaiuolo, a beautiful example of which is shown next to the *cassone*.

In the front panel on the right, a centaur with a lascivious air gallops while embracing a young woman who is calmly seated on his back holding aloft a lighted torch. The female figure is probably Demeter, Roman goddess of the harvest, who brings prosperity and civilization to humankind. Just as in Botticelli's *Pallas and the Centaur*, shown in the first room of this exhibition, here too Demeter embodies reason, and by bestriding the centaur and dominating his bestial power, she represents the civilizing impulse and the knowledge and plenty it brings.

This narrative gives great and striking importance to women and to a woman's role in the family, and its meaning is complemented by the figures of the four cardinal virtues positioned at the center. From left to right: temperance, justice, fortitude, and prudence. They are represented as maidens in the manner of classicizing nymphs familiar from Botticelli's work, dressed in rippling, floating draperies.

11, *Saint John the Baptist*

Eike Schmidt:

The Minneapolis bust of *St. John the Baptist* is seen as one of the cornerstones and most characteristic works of Benedetto's production in terracotta. The much idealized face with a slim, linear nose and lively, layered hair of the adolescent St. John the Baptist, very much embodies the ideal of youthful male figures, which we find in Botticelli's oeuvre since the 1470s.

Busts of St. John the Baptist as a boy were widespread in the Florentine Renaissance. Sometimes combined with a bust of the Christ child, these sculptures of the patron saint of Florence, and of the Merchant's ' Guild, the Arte Del Calimala, seem to follow the suggestion of Giovanni de' Medici in his *regola del governo familiare*, that is, the rule of family government of 1419, in which he asks the city's mothers to keep in the home painted images of saints in their childhood, including those of the little Saint John the Baptist, as well as the Christ child in order to teach their children proper behavior and to inspire pious thoughts in them.

We see such a children's bust in Jacopo del Sellaio's paintings displayed nearby. In Sellaio's *Triumph of Mordecai*, there is one gilded bust above the door and also in his painting *Banquet of Queen Vashti* over the door next to the ceremonial display of tableware.

12, The Studioli and the Barbadori Predella

Roberta Bartoli:

During the Renaissance, scholarly activities were often accomplished in a special room, the *studiolo*, an Italian word that means a small study. In private homes and palaces the *studiolo* was a secluded, quiet room, and its reduced space was conceived to help concentration while reading, writing, thinking, or, in merchants' houses, for work focused on accounting.

In this small space, the walls were covered by wainscoting to serve as insulation, and the furnishing consisted of shelves and a chair and a hatch, often with a raised platform that kept feet off the cold floor. On the desk were, predictably, all the materials connected with a scholar's activity: an inkwell, paper, notebooks, books, a bookstand, a lamp.

In the *Barbadori Predella*, the painter Filippo Lippi shows St. Augustine having the vision of the Trinity. The Saint, who was from North Africa and lived much of his early life in Italy, was a Bishop, writer, celebrated theologian, and one of the greatest Christian thinkers of all time.

Here he is depicted as a monk of the Augustinian Order, while sitting at a very functional hatch. This piece of furniture is a quiet, complex structure designed for the purpose of keeping everything near at hand, with built-in shelves, an inclined bookstand, and a small protruding drawer for quills and other writing instruments.

13, *Saint Augustine in his Study*

Roberta Bartoli:

Botticelli's *St. Augustine* is a small painting intended for private devotion. Small-scale objects like this could be easily transported, and their owners took them along on trips for prayer. Botticelli paints a green curtain, which is open to show the saint at work in his study, a small space imbued with a highly symbolic meaning, where every element is conceived to suggest the glory of Christianity over the pagan religions.

The space has a barrel vaulted ceiling, a type of architecture influenced by ancient Rome. The front wall is decorated with leafy garlands and medallions with profiles of Roman

emperors in a classical style. In the space where the saint is working, the back wall is decorated with the Christian image, an illusionistic, bas-relief tondo depicting the Virgin and child, in a continuation of the Roman style of depicting emperors, but surpassing it through the true faith.

Augustine is wholly absorbed in the act of writing. He sits at a simple desk on a slightly raised platform to keep him separated from the cold floor. Many books are piled on the shelves to the left, whereas the floor is strewn with torn pages and used quills, to convey the feverish intensity of Augustine's work.

14, *Adoration of the Magi*

Eike Schmidt:

Epiphany, the Feast Day of the Magi, celebrates one of the most important events connected with the nativity of Christ when the three kings travel to see the newborn Christ from the East, paying homage to the new king and bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

In addition to being an important sacred event recorded in the Gospels, it was quite a spectacle in 1400s Florence, an event halfway between religious ceremony and chivalric parade.

Religious practices honoring the Magi were introduced to Florence in the late 1300s, and the festivities were organized by a lay confraternity, which held a procession through the city streets on the 6th of January, their feast day.

On that occasion, theater plays with episodes from the legend of the Magi were represented. The actors were all members of the confraternity, wearing luxurious garments and displaying luxury goods manufactured or imported by them, carried by animals that were also richly costumed.

Since 1440, members of the Medici family were the patrons of the confraternity of the Magi. They took advantage of the parade by embodying the characters of the kings and assigning key roles to members of their circle, their allies, that is, other rich and influential families in Florence. Through this subtle strategy, the Medici were able to promote among the Florentine citizens, their family as the rulers of the city.

In Florence, in the second half of the 15th century, there was an increasing number of artistic commissions representing the adoration of the Magi. Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi* is among the most outstanding loans to this exhibition. The painting, originally commissioned for a private altar in the Church of Santa Maria Novella, represents three generations of the Medici family, some of whom are disguised as the three kings paying homage to the Holy Family.

Cosimo the Elder, the founder of the Medici fortune, is the old king. He is depicted, kneeling at the feet of the infant Christ, in profile, wearing a black mantle embroidered with gold. Below him are a pair of men, also kneeling, shown looking at each other, one in red, one in white. They are Cosimo's two sons, Piero and Giovanni. These three Medici men had died before Botticelli painted this panel, making their presence a tribute. This avoids any explicit identification between the Magi and members of the family currently in power, which could have been seen as a sacrilege.

Interestingly, the patron of the painting is shown as the oldest spectator, a white haired man standing on the right who looks directly at the viewer. And in the right foreground, the figure in yellow drapery, looking still more insistently at the viewer, has universally been identified as a self-portrait of Botticelli himself, his only known self-portrait.

15, *Portrait of a Woman*

Rachel McGarry:

This portrait by Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo depicts a beautiful young woman, life-size and in profile, sitting before a bright blue sky. Women were often portrayed in profile in the Renaissance. Portraits of men in the later 15th century were portrayed facing the viewer, in what we call three-quarters view. That is, a mostly frontal portrait with their body seen a little from the side, but their faces turned toward the spectator. The pose is seen in many of the portraits in this gallery. This allowed for the sitter to look directly at the spectator, connect with the spectator. When women were portrayed this way at the time, they usually averted eye contact.

Profile portraits also allowed for eye contact to be avoided and provided more psychological distance from the sitter. Thus, the format was favored longer for women. One can focus on their physical likeness, but not gain any familiarity with their personality.

Even within the confines of the profile format, the Pollaiuolo brothers here managed to bring this elegant young woman very much to life. The sitter is radiant, depicted with a

very subtle smile, yet a smile nonetheless. Her rosy cheeks, highlighted by the contrasting cool color of the background, painted in brilliant ultramarine, give the impression that she might be blushing.

Many meanings can be drawn from the exquisite details of the woman's hairstyle and luxurious dress. Conventions of feminine beauty of the time esteemed high foreheads. Our sitter may have had her hairline plucked to achieve the desired effect. Her light hair is arranged tightly in three sections beneath a bun of wavy curls, which are gathered under a snood. The veil is held in place by a sumptuous pearl headband, which wraps around her head, and at the top of her head is surrounded by a stunning ruby broach.

Loose hair was unacceptable for married women at the time, suggesting the sitter was either married or a bride. The veil gathers all her stray hairs around her neck and presses tightly on her earlobe. This fashion may reflect the fear in the period of impregnation through the ears, a risk warded off by covering them. Her beautifully painted brocade sleeve is decorated with pomegranates, a symbol of fertility. Her velvet dress, edged with tiny beads, fastens at her bosom.

I'm particularly struck by the representation of the pearl necklace around her neck, shown falling so naturally the sitter seems to breathe before our eyes. And look at that magnificent jewel suspended from her necklace, an angel formed of precious stones, a ruby, sapphire and pearls. All these luxurious gems, while a testament to the sitter's wealth, were invested with protective powers as well in the period.