This essay seeks to interpret the historical meaning of European portraits from the early fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth century by reintegrating them into the context of contemporary religious and philosophical systems of ideas, ideological structures of power, and, wherever possible, the social circumstances of their sitters. (A portrait’s subject is commonly referred to as a “sitter,” even when this figure stands.) Restricting itself to painted images created in Italy and the Netherlands, the two centers that produced the most innovative works in the genre, the essay further explores issues of gender difference and reception as well as the art form’s formal development. Addressing, first, images of the single figure during the whole period, then paired likenesses, and finally group portraits, the essay starts with works that reflect the culture of late medieval Italy and ends on the cusp of our modern world by considering paintings from baroque Holland.

Throughout the period, portraiture was class-specific; only the features of the socially and economically privileged were recorded. In 1435, the theorist Leon Battista Alberti conceived of the portrait as a sign of the sitter’s role in society, in which male identity was politically – and that of the female socially – determined. Identity, which was established by birth, centered on the “role” and was essentially social rather than personal.\(^1\) An individual’s sense of place within society was defined collectively, with the family as the primary point of reference and great importance being attributed to social rank. Exploration of self was made in conscious relation to the groups to which an individual belonged, and in which he or she was embedded: household, kinship, guild – or, in the case of rulers: dynasty, state. In short, our modern distinction between the particular self, on the one hand, and his or her societal role, on the other, was not made. Finally, this was a culture in which identity was constructed largely through externals, one in which outward appearance was interpreted as, in effect, “reality,” a factor that was particularly relevant to the portraits it produced.
The Single Figure

A portrait focuses on the human face but, until the 1430s, only the features of holy personages, as seen in altarpieces, were available for public scrutiny. Two contemporary paintings depicting the same individual, Leonello d’Este, Marchese of Ferrara, in different guises, illustrate the invention of the independent portrait. In a small portable altarpiece by Jacopo Bellini (ca. 1440; Louvre, Paris; http://www.wga.hu), the lord is presented full-length as a kneeling sinner worshipping the Virgin and Child. Expressing the traditional relationship between humans and the divine, Leonello is shown on a much smaller scale than the sacred figures. The second work, by Antonio Pisanello (ca. 1440; Accademia Carrara, Bergamo; http://www.wga.hu), one of the earliest surviving independent portraits, shows only Leonello’s head and bust, albeit also in profile, without a religious justification. Recalling the heads of Roman emperors on imperial coins, Pisanello’s profile view embodied the culture’s fascination with classical antiquity. The rigidity of the profile format further bespoke the sitter’s social distance from the viewer, as if elevating him to a higher, inaccessible sphere above the mundane affairs of the world. In these two works, Leonello may be said to be presenting himself to God, on the one hand, and to his peers, on the other. Representing the invention of an art form whose purpose was to record, or rather construct, the features of a living person—sinner, not saint—the novelty of Pisanello’s portrait must have stupefied its first viewers. It is impossible to exaggerate the degree of modernity informing the invention of the independent portrait.

Thirty years later, two new developments were introduced into the Italian likeness: the profile presentation was exchanged for a three-quarter view of the sitter’s features, and hands were added to the image. Trade relations brought many Italian businessmen to Flanders, with the result that the sitter’s presentation in three-quarter view in Flemish portraits (discussed below) became widely known in Italy, where it influenced the Florentines Sandro Botticelli and Leonardo da Vinci. Both artists adopted a radical shift in pose that depicted their sitters turning around to gaze boldly out at the audience. This development must have been encouraged by the emergence of humanism, the study of classical cultures through their rediscovered literatures and artifacts. Indeed, the philosophy’s emphasis on the human’s place in the universe and the meaning of personal experience had already promoted the early modern invention of the portrait per se. Thus humanism, which fostered human agency and sanctioned subjectivity, may be said to have further encouraged the kind of personal interaction represented by the direct gaze.

In Man with a Medal (ca. 1475; Uffizi, Florence; http://www.wga.hu) Botticelli constructs the unknown man as using his hands to hold up a three-dimensional image of the medal created after the death of Cosimo il Vecchio de’ Medici, virtual ruler of Florence, in 1464. Both hands and medal are pushed assertively against the picture plane, as if the sitter of this politicized portrait were determined
to communicate his strong allegiance to the Medici political faction. Whereas Pisanello’s profiled prince, with which we started, was fashioned as if addressing the world in the third person, the formal Italian *Lei*, this man’s forthright eye contact with his audience must have resonated like an address in the more intimate Italian *tu*.

Leonardo da Vinci’s portrait of Lisa Gherardini, known as Mona (or Madonna, “my lady”) Lisa (ca. 1503–06; Louvre, Paris; http://www.wga.hu) also constructs the lady as addressing her audience, albeit more placidly. The prevailing ideology of gender in this patriarchal society demanded “virtue” of the patrician female. Translating primarily as chastity, the term also included the qualities of obedience, modesty, and silence that would ensure sexual innocence before marriage. As the female social role was strictly procreative, only virginity before marriage and fidelity after it could guarantee the purity of the husband’s lineage. Thus the function of the female portrait was to embody the prevailing social construct of the patriarchal ideal rather than to mediate that woman’s individual life experience. In addition, the Renaissance concept of “beauty” was closely linked to that of “virtue,” so that a lady’s pleasing appearance was read as an external sign of her inner virtue.

When Leonardo’s portrait is compared to that by Piero della Francesca of Battista Sforza (mid-1470s; fig. 21.1), it can be seen that he has rethought a number of issues: the loggia setting; the sitter’s chair; her bodily *contrapposto* (“counterpoise”); her address to the audience; and the emotional warmth of her famous expression. Both Piero and Leonardo positioned their sitters against a landscape, but the latter rationalized the relationship between figure and background by locating Lisa in a narrow loggia in front of a low wall that sustains two colonnettes, the bases of which are still visible. Making the seated pose explicit for the first time, Leonardo placed Lisa in an armchair set parallel to the picture plane, on whose visible arm she rests her arms and hands, thus providing a monumentalizing base for her bust as well as forming a discrete barrier that keeps the viewer at a distance. While Lisa’s unseen lower body faces left in profile, her torso is presented as rotating ninety degrees as she spirals to greet the viewer. Whereas Piero’s Battista Sforza was shown in a stiff, unyielding pose, Leonardo offered the daring concept of the female body as mobile and flexible, her head on a different axis from her torso. Leonardo’s use of *sfumato* (especially the blurring of the forms at the corners of the eyes and mouth) produces an impression of relaxed and serene facial muscles. In contrast to the tense confrontation of Botticelli’s *Man*, Leonardo introduced the illusion of emotional warmth to the portrait. Thus, Lisa’s expression should be understood not as a “smile,” which would not have been in keeping with the disciplined control demanded of a lady, but as a nuanced, transitory expression of pleasure at the arrival of her friend, the viewer, in her loggia.

Unlike either Botticelli’s *Man* or Piero’s Battista Sforza (fig. 21.1), whose figures dominate the landscape behind, Leonardo sought to identify his female sitter with Nature, by placing the horizon line at the level of her eyes rather than at that of her neck. The distinction between woman and Nature is blurred, so that
she seems to personify the mysterious forces embodied in the mirage of untamed Nature behind. Scholars have linked Leonardo’s vision of the microcosm of the woman’s body placed against the macrocosm of the earth’s body to his belief in the procreative power of all living things. Leonardo surely intended the portrait to be read as a metaphor for the interconnection of all life and the harmony between the generative universe and the generative female.

The portrait reveals some anomalous aspects. First, very importantly, honor and status depended on an ostentatious display of wealth similar to the sumptuous fabrics and precious jewels that adorn Piero’s Battista Sforza. Leonardo depicted Lisa, however, very simply dressed in dark colors without any jewelry whatsoever. Thus, in comparison to Raphael’s contemporary Portrait of Maddalena Strozzi (discussed below), Leonardo suppressed the traditional markers of wealth and rank. Second, loose hair on a married woman implied loose morals; Lisa’s unbound hair, by tumbling indecorously down on her shoulders, could have been read as a negative comment on her virtue. Third, the timing of the commission was anomalous. A strong case can be made that most Florentine portraits of women, commissioned when they were brides, were intended to celebrate the magnificence of their trousseaux and, by extension, the honor and social status of the marital union. Lisa, however, had married Francesco del Giocondo, a Florentine merchant, in 1495 at the age of sixteen. Thus, when Leonardo began painting her, she had already been married for eight years and given birth at least three times. In conclusion, although we will never know why Leonardo’s portrait was not delivered to the patron, it cannot be denied that it contains some features that might have made the latter reluctant to accept it.
Influenced by Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa*, Raphael also created a half-length, seated pose for the likeness of his close friend, the humanist Count Baldassare Castiglione, painted while he was an ambassador at the papal court in Rome (1515–16; Louvre, Paris; fig. 21.2). The viewer is both very close and on a level with Castiglione’s eyes, implying that Raphael constructed the diplomat sitting at the same level as, and in intimate proximity to, himself as he sat painting – and hence to the audience. The impression of Castiglione’s compelling physical presence is further enhanced by Raphael’s typical tight framing of his body and deliberate cropping of his hands. Here the ease and intimacy that obtained between the two friends may be said to have been transmuted into that between sitter and viewer. Castiglione himself defined this intimacy as that between husband and wife in a poem written in his wife’s voice, in which he imagines her seated, like the artist, close to his likeness, so that she and their baby son could commune with his painted alter ego during his absences from home. Indeed, it can be shown that the perceived living presence embodied in portraits encouraged Renaissance audiences to respond to, and engage with, the painted figures as if they were sentient human beings. In effect, the Renaissance viewer seems to have accepted the depicted sitter as a surrogate for that individual’s physical presence.

The count’s social rank as a member of a minor, but ancient Mantuan dynasty, is denoted by his attire. Though sober in hue, as he himself recommended,
Castiglione’s fashionable dress is nonetheless made up of sumptuous materials redolent of opulence and status: sultry black velvet with sleeves of beaver fur in delicate shades of gray and brown against a gray-gold wall. The relative absence of color highlights the brightest hue in the work: the intelligent gaze of his deep blue eyes placed at the horizontal center of the canvas. A prominent, wide-brimmed hat hides his baldness and haloes his features, from which no background features detract.

Castiglione’s literary fame rests on his Book of the Courtier, immensely influential throughout Europe, which defined the physical, intellectual, and moral qualities of the “perfect” courtier. An aristocrat, whose profession was arms, the courtier had to be an excellent conversationalist and to perform at all times with grace and nonchalance of bearing (sprezzatura, without apparent effort) while pursuing restraint and moderation. Raphael’s likeness conveys an elegance and sophistication that appear unstudied, a sprezzatura, or artless art, in which the harmony of the forms suggests that the diplomat’s relationship to the rulers he served and the peers he negotiated with was equally harmonious and gracious.

Seducing us into reading Castiglione’s portrait as the “truth” rather than a pictorial construction, Raphael may be said to have created a pictorial identity for the diplomat that must have corresponded closely to the self that he wished to project in the sixteenth-century corridors of power.

The full-length format was normally reserved for emperors, kings, and those at the apex of power, as seen in Titian’s portrait of Emperor Charles V with a hound (ca. 1533; Prado, Madrid; http://www.wga.hu). Like a holy personage, the emperor stands frontally in elegant contrapposto beside his hound, his gaze far away. Revealing the role played by costly textiles and elegant tailoring in the fashioning of identity, he chose to be recorded for posterity in the most expensive clothes possible: a torso-hugging doublet in brocaded cloth of gold, covered by a sumptuously gold-embroidered overgown with huge lapels of luxurious Russian sable. The overall impression conveys wealth, majesty, and political authority. The latter is further reinforced by the wide expanse of padded shoulder that gives astonishing girth to the emperor’s upper body. The hound reinforces this symbolism of nobility and temporal power. The notion of linking a hound, interpreted as noble, with a ruler goes back to antiquity, when Horapollo stated that a dog symbolized the magistrate or judge, interpreted in the Renaissance as the prince himself.

With pictorial tact, Titian blurred the imperial facial features. The emperor inherited the Habsburg genetic deformity of a pronounced jaw, his lower teeth extending so far beyond the upper ones that he was apparently unable to speak distinctly or chew his food properly. German artists usually portrayed Charles as the Venetian diarist Sanudo described him: “with his mouth always open.” The Italian cultural need for idealization, however, required that the Renaissance portrait always artfully refashion the appearance of the sitter that the work ostensibly described. In his 1584 Treatise on Painting, Gian Paolo Lomazzo wrote that modern artists, like those in antiquity, should dissimulate, or conceal, the sitter’s natural
imperfections. Portraits of the Emperor Charles V, he added, needed to embody the majesty that corresponded to his rank, and to seem to breathe nobility and gravity – especially if he lacked these very characteristics. Lomazzo may have been thinking of this likeness in which Titian glossed over Nature’s obvious error to offer a vision of Charles V that Nature must have intended but failed to produce.

As previously suggested, many portraits were profoundly influenced by the rise of humanism in the early Renaissance. Sometimes this influence would take the form of sitters posing with antique objects from their collections. In Moretto da Brescia’s portrait possibly of Count Fortunato Martinengo Cesaresco (ca. 1540–45; National Gallery, London; http://www.wga.hu), a learned figure who corresponded with humanists, the bronze oil lamp in the shape of a sandaled foot, probably used as an inkstand, was surely intended to pass for an antiquity, even if it was a Renaissance imitation. The Greek inscription on the badge of his black silk cap, which translates as “Ah, I yearn so strongly,” emphasizes the count’s melancholic mood and may be characterized as yet another humanist conceit.

But the influence of humanism on portraiture was more pervasive than the mere inclusion of classicizing objets d’art. Agnolo Bronzino’s portrait of the Genoese admiral Andrea Doria as Neptune (ca. 1532–33; Brera, Milan; http://commons.wikimedia.org) illustrates the influence of classical mythology and the discovery of antique statues of nude gods and emperors. Here the admiral, with long gray beard, is depicted appropriating the identity of Neptune, god of the seas. Standing on the deck of a ship before a mast (symbol of fortitude) and sail, his unrealistically athletic torso completely nude, he holds Neptune’s trident. His barely covered genitals may seem shocking, but in the Renaissance sexual virility signified martial valor. Intended to display the sitter’s inner essence as commander of the seas, this portrait in allegorical disguise no doubt bears little physical resemblance to Doria, then in his sixties.

In the next century, the Flemish painter Anthony Van Dyck continued the Italian tradition of portraits that were deeply flattering to their aristocratic sitters with his full-length likeness of Marchesa Elena Grimaldi Cattaneo of Genoa (1623; fig. 21.3). Implying the sitter’s grace and elegance, the artist aggrandized her presence by attenuating her proportions, depicting her di sotto in su (as though seen from below) on a canvas of narrow vertical format, and placing her beside soaring classical Corinthian columns. The marchesa’s transitory forward stride onto her terrace introduces movement into the history of the portrait. Given that she holds a sprig of orange blossom, symbol of marriage and chastity, it is unfortunate that the date of her marriage to Giacomo Cattaneo is unknown. The sitter’s aloof grandeur is reinforced by the obsequious black slave holding the circular red parasol to protect the lady from sunlight, a secular halo that focuses attention on her face. A strong case can be made that power relations were here being articulated visually. In a society that espoused the ideal human forms of classical antiquity, display of the subsidiary figure’s malformed, or brutto (“ugly”), body acted as a foil for the well-formed proportions and upright bellezza (“beauty”) of his aristocratic mistress, promoting her superiority and virtue.
In this century, Holland in northern Europe had a different political history and pervasive ideology from those of Italy. The Dutch Republic, in which Protestantism became dominant, was principally governed not by hereditary aristocrats but by merchants, lawyers, and soldiers. Hence, many seventeenth-century Dutch likenesses were imbued with an apparently spontaneous, informal character that differed profoundly from portraits of southern European aristocrats. Nonetheless, while portraiture also became more accessible to a wider social class, the genre was still dominated by the wealthy and socially powerful.

Frans Hals constructed Willem Van Heythuysen (ca. 1634–35; private collection; http://commons.wikimedia.org) as balancing on his chair’s back legs rather than sitting staidly, as in countless earlier portraits. Resting one leg on his knee, the sitter is shown tilting diagonally and precariously, a bold invention that introduced a transitory quality into the portrait by focusing on a nonchalant pose of extreme tension. The sense of momentary movement is increased by Hals’s usual vivid brushstrokes that imbue the work with vitality. Such casual informality may have been encouraged by the painting’s planned location in a private chamber.

**Figure 21.3** Anthony van Dyck, *Portrait of Marchesa Elena Grimaldi Cattaneo*, 1623. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Art Resource, NY.
Although the sitter was a Haarlem merchant, not a nobleman, he had accumulated a great fortune in the textile trade. Given that the hunt was the prerogative of the hereditary nobility, Van Heythuysen’s riding attire, spurs, and the crop that he flexes suggest that he entertained pretensions to high social standing. In addition, it seems that the hat in Spanish Habsburg circles was a privilege restricted to royalty and grandees; it has thus been speculated that wearing a hat had become a Dutch symbol of freedom from social oppression.

The informal pose given to Jan Six by Rembrandt (1654; private collection; http://www.wga.hu) also conveys the impression that it captures a fleeting moment in time: Six is performing the prosaic task of pulling on a glove, as he pauses on the threshold of his house before venturing into the world outside, an act that Rembrandt highlights with a virtuoso display of rough brushstrokes. The gesture of Six, who is also dressed in what may be a riding outfit, with a gray coat and scarlet cloak, has been interpreted as marking the boundary between home and the world, between the private and public self. Six was a patrician of the regent class (holders of civic office), who wrote poetry and collected art and books. Treatises on conduct, such as that by Castiglione, which Six owned, advocated striking a balance between one’s active and contemplative lives, and, shortly after this portrait, Six became a member of the Amsterdam City Council and was eventually appointed Burgomaster. Here, however, Rembrandt, a personal friend of the patron, omitted all incidentals to portray him, standing slightly off center against a plain background, head at an angle, as a private individual seemingly withdrawn in thought, in keeping with the new emphasis on introspection and self-knowledge that came to the fore in seventeenth-century Holland. Comparison with the likeness created by Pisanello for Leonello d’Este some 200 years earlier vividly reveals the evolution of the portrait, beyond the latter’s small scale and rigid profile pose, where the presentation of one eye only, seen from the side, had the effect of concealing rather than revealing the sitter’s thoughts and emotions.

Pendant Portraits

The obverse of Piero della Francesca’s double-sided diptych of Federico da Montefeltro and his consort Battista Sforza (fig. 21.1) presents the facing bust profiles of the count and the recently deceased countess of Urbino. The prince is clothed in red doublet and berretta, his consort adorned with the expensive pearls that symbolized her purity and chastity. The reverse presents his Triumph of Fame, deriving from his successful military campaigns, and her Triumph of Modesty, as symbolized by her Christian piety. Federico, a condottiere (leader of men in war), is being crowned, accompanied by the four Cardinal Virtues: Justice (holding sword and scales); Prudence (with mirror); Fortitude (holding broken column); and Temperance (seen from behind). Reading a prayer book, Battista is accompanied by the three Theological Virtues: Faith, Hope, and Charity. The backgrounds of both obverses and reverses, inspired by painted Flemish landscapes,
provide a continuous vista of land that unites the two panels. Such a view of land, for the Quattrocento, did not represent a “landscape,” but the territory with which the count identified as feudal lord.

Pendant portraits often both reflect and construct the ideologically gendered roles mandated by this patriarchal power system. Early modern culture was convinced that women were born inferior to men; hence, the relation between the two genders, of male dominance and female dependence, was seen as ordained by God. Here the ideology is revealed by the hyperbolic inscriptions on the reverses. While Federico is praised for his military prowess equal to that of the greatest captains of antiquity, Battista is merely said to have been “adorned by the praises of her great husband’s deeds,” although, well-educated and intelligent, she ruled the state very competently during the count’s many absences on the battlefield.

The woman was usually placed on the man’s sinister (left-hand), or lesser, side, in accord with theological and social formulas that valued the dexter (right-hand) position more highly. Very unusually, Federico is shown on the sinister, giving Battista the more honorable dexter, because he had broken his nose and lost an eye in a tournament. In the late Middle Ages the loss of an eye, metaphor for the phallus, could have been read as a sign of impotence, and Federico’s facial disfigurement might thus have been interpreted negatively as an outward sign of moral as well as physical deformity.

As enunciated by Leon Battista Alberti and other theorists, Italians artists sought to render a recognizable portrayal from life that at the same time ennobled Nature’s product. We would never guess how idealized was Piero’s presentation of Federico’s features without the existence of a portrait by a Flemish artist that did not censor the count’s worn appearance, drooping pockmarked cheeks, sagging double chin, down-turned mouth, and wispy, thinning hair.23

The Flemish painter Hans Memling’s portraits of the Italians Tommaso Portinari and Maria Baroncelli were probably commissioned to commemorate their marriage in 1470 (ca. 1470; Metropolitan Museum, New York; http://www.wga.hu).24 These were the wings of a devotional triptych, not a diptych; the missing central panel almost certainly depicted the Madonna and Child to whom the donors’ praying hands were directed. A leading member of the large Italian mercantile community in Bruges during the second half of the fifteenth century, Portinari was manager of the Medici bank. Facing the Madonna and Child, the evenly, brightly lit heads of husband and wife are placed against dark backgrounds within painted trompe-l’œil frames that Memling used to push the likenesses closer to the viewer. As a result, the veil hanging down from Maria’s hennin, or Flemish headdress, has an ambiguous, overlapping relationship to the frame. Flemish painting, especially that of Memling, was well known and immensely popular in Italy, and the three-quarter-view pose used here was extremely influential on Italian portraiture, especially in Florence where, as we have seen, Botticelli and Leonardo emulated it.

Tightly framed, cut below the waist, and placed at a slight diagonal to the picture surface, Agnolo Doni and Maddalena Strozzi face each other in Raphael’s
pendant portraits in complementary but subtly asymmetrical poses, the groom in the usual place of honor on the dexter (ca. 1507–8; Palatine Gallery, Florence; http://www.wga.hu). Unlike Leonardo’s contemporary *Mona Lisa*, Raphael silhouetted the couple’s heads and shoulders against a sky that overlooks a Flemish-inspired, placid landscape. Also unlike the *Mona Lisa*, the sitters are conventionally and richly attired in brilliant colors and sumptuous fabrics. Maddalena displays her nuptial jewels, such as the huge pearl hanging from a bejeweled pendant, against orange-red watered silk and deep blue damask. A strong gender distinction can be read in the vertical and horizontal grid that structures Raphael’s presentation of Agnolo, compared to the voluptuous curves with which he described Maddalena’s billowing sleeves, transparent veil, and the bodice that emphasizes her breasts; the continuous curve that Raphael imposed on her silhouette in effect eliminates her shoulders.

Titian used the standard Italian gendered poses – the ruler standing dynamically, his consort seated primly in a chair canted diagonally to the picture plane – in his pendant portraits of *Francesco Maria I Della Rovere* and *Leonora Gonzaga*,

---

**Figure 21.4** Frans Hals, *Pendant Portrait of Stephanus Geraerdts*, 1650–52. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp. Photo Giraudon / The Bridgeman Art Library.
War was endemic throughout the period, and the armor worn by the duke carried ideological significance that embodied his political intentions regarding strategies of conquest. The *bastoni* of command behind and in the Della Rovere condottiere’s hand sum up his long military career as commander of the Papal, Florentine, and Venetian troops. Extremely rare in the Quattrocento, beards suddenly became central to masculine identity in the Cinquecento. Indeed, although the duke was short of stature and suffering from gout and syphilis, his likeness could hardly be more aggressive in its construction of his masculinity in old age. In life he was an exceptionally violent, or choleric, man, and here his steel-encased fist crashes aggressively through the picture plane. The image implies that the duke plunged into the fray at every opportunity, despite the fact that his military strategy often consisted in avoiding engagement with the enemy. The diarist Marin Sanudo nicknamed him “leaden foot,” and the historian Francesco Guicciardini made him parody Caesar with the assertion: “I came, I saw, I fled.” Richly dressed, the

*Figure 21.5 Frans Hals, Pendant Portrait of Isabella Coymans, 1650–52. Private collection.*
duchess wears a gold cross on her breast with the letters IHS, derived from the name of Jesus in Greek. She holds a sable or marten fur, an animal that was believed, like the Virgin, to conceive through the ear, and thus symbolized the Incarnation and Virgin Birth. Since members of the weasel family were further said never to soil themselves, Leonora’s fur may be read as a symbol of purity, while her small lapdog signified marital fidelity. The Cardinal virtue of Temperance, involving moderation and self-restraint, often holds a clock, which, moreover, as a microcosm of the ordered universe, stood for fixed order, an attribute eminently appropriate to the so-called “disorderly” sex, in a culture that insisted on female self-control.

“In women,” wrote Lomazzo in 1584, “beauty must be found, and art used to remove the errors of Nature as much as possible.” Although Leonora was in her mid-forties and worn out by continual pregnancies, Titian has artfully refashioned the sitter’s appearance by smoothing away her wrinkles of care, fatigue, and pain to give the illusion of beauty and youth. When read together, these paintings can be said to form a contrapposto composition in which Titian conspicuously opposes the male principle of hardness, action, and virility to the female principle of softness, passivity, and chastity.

The casual informality of Frans Hals’s visual construction of amorous affection in his pendant portraits of Stephanus Geraerds and Isabella Coymans (1650–52; figs. 21.4 and 21.5) contrasts strikingly with the formal Italian precedents just considered. Through transitory poses and interrelated movements, Hals offers a highly charged interaction that strikes a modern note by suggesting that their marriage may have been non-authoritarian rather than patriarchal.

The sitters, identified by their respective coats of arms, were married in 1644, six to eight years before the commission of these pendants. Here the couple’s standing and seated poses are reversed from those previously used by Titian. Placed on the conventional sinister, the standing Isabella turns lithely toward her husband to offer him a red rose, token of love. On the dexter, a stolid Stephanus reaches from his seat to accept her gift of love. The gestures, glances, and smiles with which Hals endowed this couple bind the pendants together rhythmically and emphasize the new emotional verisimilitude that Hals brought to portraiture. Clearly, such qualities of emotion and interaction were not among those sought by Piero della Francesca when creating his pendant portraits of the count and countess of Urbino two centuries earlier, when Italian rulers sought depiction of their public rather than their private personae.

**Group Portraits**

Mantegna’s frescoed Camera Picta, or Painted Chamber (also known, incorrectly, as Camera degli Sposi) (1474; fig. 21.6) contains the earliest surviving Italian group portraits. The frescoes were commissioned by Lodovico Gonzaga, Marchese of Mantua, a humanist-educated and discriminating patron, from his court artist, Andrea Mantegna, for the audience chamber where he received
visitors, which also held his bed. The two walls that served as the background for Lodovico’s bed are painted with gold brocade curtains. On the other two walls, these painted curtains (ancestors of the draped curtain that became the conventional prop of European portraiture) are pulled aside to reveal imaginary events, domestic and political, ostensibly taking place behind them. On the north wall, Mantegna used the fireplace mantel as a dais on which the marchese and his wife, Barbara of Brandenburg, are seated domestically within a walled terrace amidst their assembled children, household, and courtiers (including Lodovico’s dog Rubino [“Little Red”] under his chair and his wife’s pet dwarf, the only figure to address the viewer). The gendered relations between ruler and consort are reflected in their respective locations within the composition: Lodovico is on the foremost picture plane on the dexter, the position of honor, whereas Barbara, although her social status was higher than his, was nonetheless placed in a subordinate position, her head lower in the composition, albeit centralized.

On the west wall, the feigned architecture creates a tripartite outdoor scene, political in nature, in which only males participate. Signaling the line of dynastic succession, the marchese and Federico, his heir, together with his grandsons, flank his sixteen-year-old second son, Francesco, who had just been created a cardinal. In the background, Mantua, in reality low-lying, is presented instead as a walled city on a hill full of Roman buildings. On the left, portraits of a horse (from the stud for which Mantua was famous), grooms, and hunting dogs stand before an extensive open landscape with several castles under construction (Lodovico was very knowledgeable in the art of building). In the center, a gold tablet bearing Mantegna’s signature and dedication to his patrons is sustained by winged putti standing on the actual lintel of the doorway to the room.
Although the painted chamber is an eight-meter cube, the ceiling is painted illusionistically to simulate the vaulted dome of the Roman Pantheon, its central oculus (opening at the center of a dome) seemingly open to the sky. Around the oculus balustrade, depicted in steep foreshortening (illustrating Mantegna’s mastery of *di sotto in su* construction), putti cavort and play visual jokes and courtiers laugh. In simulated marble relief against simulated gold mosaic, the fictive vault’s coffers display frontal busts of the first eight Roman emperors (the ultimate source of Gonzaga rule of the imperial fief of Mantua). By associating the Gonzaga dynasty with the grandeur of Roman antiquity in a dazzling display of virtuosity, Mantegna glorifies it at the very moment of political triumph, when the family had succeeded in raising the teenager Francesco to the exalted dignity of cardinal (1462). Showing how painting could be used as an instrument of power politics, the room presents idealized images of the ruler and his brilliant court in imaginary encounters, by turns domestic, political, and humanist – in short, the dynasty as it wished to be perceived by its contemporaries.

Mantegna depicted the Gonzaga with considerable tact, given the family’s well-known deformities of humpbacks, double chins, and protruding jaws. Nonetheless, his characterizations were deemed too faithful to Nature by his patrons and hence disliked; as Lodovico famously complained: “in portraits, [Andrea] could have more grace (*grazia*); in portraiture, he does not do so well.”30 As propaganda, however, the frescoes were extraordinarily effective. Called “the most beautiful room in the world” by the Duke of Milan, it became instantly famous and attracted aristocratic tourists.31 Visitors would enter the chamber, gaze at the painted Gonzaga on the walls, and then turn to compare the images with their live counterparts assembled within the Mantuan Pantheon under the protection of the Roman Caesars painted on the vault.

Most group portraits impose a narrative (in the sense of Alberti’s *istoria*) on the sitters in order to create unity within the composition. In the case of Titian’s *Vendramin Family Venerating a Relic of the True Cross* (1540s; National Gallery, London; http://www.wga.hu), the male members of the family are shown adoring a prestigious Venetian holy relic with which their family had long been associated: the reliquary containing splinters of the True Cross that had been presented to a Trecento Vendramin who was *guardiano* of the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista, a leading confraternity in Venice.32 The painting is in the tradition of Venetian votive paintings, which usually exclude female donors, but without the saints who customarily intercede on the donors’ behalf.

Steps lead up to a massive outdoor altar in sharp foreshortening, on which the Gothic reliquary is flanked by flickering candles. Although the identification of the two brothers in the center is controversial, Gabriel is more likely to be the man who kneels with his hand on the altar and invites the viewer’s participation. It is probably his elder brother Andrea who, in profile, one hand on heart, the other reaching out in a rhetorical gesture to the audience, leads his seventeen-year-old son Lunardo in prayer. The brothers, who were both Venetian senators, wear splendid purple and crimson velvet gowns lined with lynx fur, with the
flowing *ducale* sleeves appropriate to their class. Below, Andrea’s six younger sons, whose inclusion in the composition may not have originally been planned and most of whom were additions by the workshop, kneel in prayer and play with a pet dog. Titian’s visible brushstrokes brilliantly evoke the contrasting textures of marble, fur, velvet and silk, producing a dazzling chromatic richness within a rather limited range of hues.33

The painting was likely commissioned by Gabriel, a friend of Titian’s and a great art collector; in 1569 it was hanging in the Palazzo Vendramin in Venice, which the brothers had shared. The low vanishing point confirms that it was hung high on the wall, probably in the *portego* (the long central hall set at right angles to the façade of a Venetian palace) on the *piano nobile* (second floor), in a location where the actual light came from the right.

Whether coincidentally or not, the painting’s creation was contemporary with the opening of the Council of Trent in 1545, which initiated the Catholic Counter-Reformation in addition to affirming the veneration of relics. Expressing a piety that was as patriotic as religious, the Vendramin brothers, representative of Venice’s ruling class, are shown prostrating themselves before the relic that was an important source of family prestige.

The artist’s female gender explains the unusual iconography and all-female cast of Sofonisba Anguissola’s *The Artist’s Three Sisters Playing Chess* (ca. 1555; Muzeum Narodowe, Poznan; http://www.wga.hu). Respectable unmarried women, expected to live cloistered lives, were restricted to the domestic sphere.34 Anguissola, a noblewoman who became one of the first women artists of the modern era (see chapter 11), was thus limited to subject matter that could be found within the home. Indeed, no other group portrait comprising women alone is known from this century. Nonetheless, it is notable that, even in the privacy of their own garden terrace, the sisters are shown chaperoned by a *duenna*, as if their chess game were taking place in the public sphere.

Anguissola exploited the subject by imposing a unifying activity on the sitters in a work that was called a narrative (*cosa storiata*), or history painting, by an early source.35 The artist’s three sisters are posed around a table as if playing chess, an intellectual pursuit in that the game required considerable intelligence to master and hence, given the low esteem in which females were held, not many Renaissance women were expected to play. The narrative is played out through the children’s glances: a smiling Europa in the center looks across to Minerva, who concedes the game to Lucia by raising her right hand. Lucia, however, directs her attention outside the picture space to her eldest sister, who sits, as it were, on the fourth side of the table. The painting’s primary audience was the artist’s relatives, and only those familiar with the close-knit family group could fully comprehend the nuances of interaction among the sitters.

We move from consideration of southern European group portraits focused on family ties to exploration of a northern European portrait type depicting a professional group celebrating its corporate identity. Rembrandt’s *Night Watch (The Militia Company of Captain Frans Banning Cocq)* (1642; Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam; http://www.wga.hu) is a group portrait of eighteen life-sized, prominent citizens as members of one of Amsterdam’s militia companies.36 It was one of six military group portraits commissioned in the 1640s from various artists for the assembly hall in the companies’ headquarters, the Kloveniersdoelen. The painting has been cut down at the top and on the left, where figures were lost; originally the unifying triumphal arch (signifying glory) was centered.

Of the two strongly lit foreground figures, the captain, whose commanding gesture breaks through the picture plane, orders the lieutenant to muster the company to march forward and turn left, bypassing the viewer. The officers stride ahead, and the men follow, ceremoniously firing their muskets. The visual distinction between the foreground officers and the other militiamen corresponded to differences in social class: the captain and the lieutenant were patricians called regents, whereas the men were successful merchants, mainly drapers, who lived near each other in a small quarter of the city.

The sitters paid according to the place each occupied, on average 100 guilders, which was Rembrandt’s normal fee for a half-length portrait. The artist then added other figures, integrating them into an orchestrated ensemble, submerging the details in deep shadow to unify the composition, with the exception of the mysterious light, more usual in religious scenes, that bathes the two foreground officers. Captain Cocq’s outstretched hand, for instance, casts a deep shadow on the lieutenant’s yellow costume, as does the glove held in his other hand on the woman behind. This small-scale female, the third brightly lit figure, is, however, not a portrait but the personification of the militia company. The only female in the composition, she can be seen to belong to a different order of reality by virtue of her small scale and her movement to the right, against the company’s flow. The prominent claws of the fowl suspended from her belt refer to the Kloveniersdoelen’s emblem of a bird of prey’s claw.

The Night Watch was part of a cycle showing some 100 successful Amsterdammers in their corporate identity as militiamen who stood for civic virtue and public service in their local communities. The paintings are seen as reflecting the long struggle conducted by an earlier generation of Protestant Dutch to regain their country from colonization by Catholic Spain, although the militia themselves did not for the most part fight in the war. Rembrandt’s painting, in which some of the men are shown wearing sixteenth-century costume, is often read as imbued with nostalgia for what was seen as an earlier, more heroic, era.

Fusing the conventions of portraiture and history painting, reality and symbol, past and present, Rembrandt imposed unprecedented drama on the group portrait, filling it with movement and emotion by imbuing an ostensibly contemporary event with an air of the timeless and the heroic. His stress on action and the theatricality of the juxtaposition of strong light with impenetrable darkness differentiate his work vividly, not only from those of his Dutch predecessors and contemporaries, but also from the static and evenly lit groups of the Gonzaga family that Mantegna had frescoed on the walls of the Mantuan Camera Picta almost two centuries earlier.
Conclusion

From the mid-fifteenth century to the mid-seventeenth, from Pisanello’s *Leonello d’Este* to *The Night Watch* or from Piero’s Urbino diptych (fig. 21.1) to Hals’s pendant likenesses (figs. 21.4–21.5), a huge evolution took place within the genre of the European portrait: from a very small-scale, static format, limited to the sitter’s upper body shown in profile, to the large, life-size, animated and frontal presentation of the full-length sitter. As a result, rather than the formal, reticent, and dignified demeanor considered appropriate to Italian rulers, the portrait in the Dutch Republic sought the active and relatively informal expression of emotional and physical narratives pertinent to married love and public order. The very theatricality of *The Night Watch* underscores the fictional nature of all portraits. The illusion of verisimilitude that the artists’ skills gave to all these likenesses imparts the idea that they literally embodied the “truth.” But such interpretations would be ahistorical. As we saw when considering Titian’s portrait of Charles V, in 1584 Gian Paolo Lomazzo characterized portraiture as *dissimulazione*, “dissembling,” “deception,” “disguise,” an interpretation that should help us to read Renaissance and Baroque portraits as dissembling fictions or illusory dreams, despite their creation for, and within, European cultures that privileged theories of pictorial realism. In short, all these likenesses need to be interpreted as works of visual poetry rather than of factual prose. Indeed, the Venetian humanist Sperone Speroni would seem to have confirmed this construction of historical meaning when he wrote in 1543 that portraits were “none other than the dreams and shadows of our being.”

Acknowledgments

This essay, which was finished in December 2010, is for Moira and Guido, and her and my father’s American grandchildren: Rowan, Sophie, Cliodhna, Oisín and Darragh. I wish to thank Dawson W. Carr for his help in obtaining an illustration.

Notes

1 Martin, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism*.
2 There were a few, minor exceptions.
7 Woods-Marsden, “One Artist, Two Sitters, One Role,” 120–40, 129–30. It has recently been argued that the work should be dated to 1519. Late Raphael, eds., Paul Joannides and Tom Henry (Exh. cat., Madrid: Museo del Prado, 2012), cat. 81.


9 Woods-Marsden, “The Sitter as ‘Guest’.”


12 It should be noted, however, that the paint surface in the area of the emperor’s face is damaged.


20 Woodall, “Sovereign Bodies,” 75–100, 87.


23 See Christiansen and Weppelmann, The Renaissance Portrait, cat. 120.


27 See n. 14.

28 Seymour Slive, Frans Hals (Exh. cat., London: Royal Academy, 1989), cats. 68 and 69.


31 Ibid.


33 Peter Humfrey, Titian (London: Phaidon, 2007), 127.


35 Raffaele Soprani, Le vite de’ pittori, scultori et architetti genovesi (Genova, 1674), vol. 1, 412.
36 Haverkamp-Begemann, Rembrandt: The Nightwatch.

Bibliography


