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Faces of Florence by Joseph Luzzi

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HIERATIC IS A WORD that calls for illustration rather than definition. In Piero della Francesca's diptych of the Duke and Duchess of Urbino from 1465-72, the crimson-robed Federico da Montefeltro looms against an idyllic landscape, his profile accentuating a famously absent nasal bridge. To his left, the equally hieratic — there is no better word — Battista Sforza absorbs his gaze with regal impassivity. The online version of the Uffizi catalog describes the profile view as an "inescapable choice" designed to hide the couple's deformities (Federico's missing right eye; Battista's unusually high forehead). By the time the painting appeared, the severe profile was giving way to a three-quarter view that allowed for eye contact between subjects and viewers. But Piero had wished to emphasize the duke and duchess's nobility, in the manner of ancient commemorative medals. He fixed them in a stiff conjugal gaze that blocked out the world and let in only each other — an eternal standoff between two unyielding equals.

For over twenty years, the impenetrable duke and duchess were my faces of Florence. I explored much of the art the city had to offer: the overstuffed walls of the Palatine Gallery, the somber medieval panels in the Accademia surrounding the *David*, the high-backed rooms of the Palazzo Signoria, even the plaster casts and scaled models of the Duomo Museum. It was the twin corridors of the Uffizi, though, home to Piero's diptych, that kept me coming back. Contemplating Michelangelo's muscled women and Botticelli's elegant allegories, I understood that the artistic ideal embodied in those fluid forms died long ago, along with the humanist philosophy that inspired them. In their self-contained stare, the duke and duchess seemed to accept their distance from the modern world with dignity, and I admired them for it.

Still, I didn't realize the pull of those hieratic faces until I encountered their kindred in an unexpected place. In the winter of 2012, I attended the exhibit "The Renaissance Portrait from Donatello to Bellini" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Seeing the damsels and knights, lords and ladies, sinners and saints of my Renaissance city in New York recalled the distant time when I met my parents at a religious festival on Canal Street in lower Manhattan. They had immigrated to the U.S. from rural southern Italy in the 1950s, and traveled to the city that day to see the patron saint of their Calabrian village, the Beato Angelo of Acri, who reputedly received divine rays of light from a painting of the Virgin Mary. As ever, my father arrived turned out in his finest traveling clothes. His left arm was completely paralyzed; he had suffered a massive stroke years earlier and still walked with the aid of a cane. Once a powerfully built factory worker, he now dragged his stooped form through the busy street. Nowhere, in the hectic array of fake Rolex watches and Gucci bags, were there patches of brown and green land like those he had spent his life cultivating, first as a farmer in Italy, then as a gardener and landscaper in suburban New England. As we walked to a restaurant in Little Italy, my body pulsed with a protective love I'd never felt before. I wished I could slow the traffic, silence the crowd — anything to make him seem less vulnerable to the city's monstrous energy.



And so my insides tugged that winter day at the Met as I stared at the walls of Renaissance faces. In Florence, the proud, even haughty, profiles blended into the symmetrical calm of the surrounding architecture. But in New York, the transplanted portraits brought to mind Goethe's words about Hamlet: his soul was like an oak planted in a vase that should have held only precious flowers. Thankfully, Piero's diptych was not part of the exhibit. Baring the cultural riches of a democratic nation, the walls of the Met were no place for hieratic gazes.

Portraits were rare before the fifteenth century, but as Florence's wealth increased, its merchants and leading citizens wished to create images of themselves and their families for posterity. The challenge to the painter was to fashion something original, to capture something distinctive and representative while respecting well-defined conventions. Before seeing the exhibit, I did not realize how entrenched these conventions were, and how dramatic even the most innocuous-seeming innovations could be. In an attempt to render their subjects more human, empathetic, and psychologically complex, Italian painters in the late fifteenth century followed the style of painters in the Netherlands and moved away from the profile toward the three-quarter view. In this quarter-turn, the modern contours of the portrait began to emerge, as painters revealed previously hidden personality traits in their models. Many tenets of Renaissance humanism found their boldest expression in this minor rotation of axis.

Although it is impossible to reduce Renaissance humanism to a simple formula, in general terms its emphasis on the secular world, rediscovery of pagan antiquity, and rejection of medieval scholasticism paved the way for unleashing human potential in the arts and sciences. The portrait distilled this humanist impulse by changing the way that painters approached their subject's identity. Whereas medieval portraiture tended to flatten the image and disregard the specifics of human anatomy, the resurgent interest in realist representation pushed Renaissance painters to instill volume, form, and movement into their subjects. This exploration of human individuality led the painter to unexpected discoveries that could fill a canvas with marvelous contradictions. For example, Domenico Veneziano's *Profile of a Man* from 1440-42 traces a blur of shadow along the cheekbone to give the rigid, masculine subject a soft, almost feminine air. The vaunted empiricism and scientific bent of the humanist artist is in full effect: the man's features are kinetically aligned, and one can sense his underlying skeleton. It is difficult to paint breath, but in Veneziano's portrait, one feels its warmth.

Whereas portraits of men aimed to represent their virtue and prowess, the female version typically paid homage to a woman's beauty or celebrated her nuptials. Nowhere is this tendency more in evidence than



in Sandro Botticelli's portraits of Simonetta Vespucci, the legendary beauty and paramour of Giuliano de' Medici, the Florentine leader slain in the Pazzi Conspiracy of 1478. Botticelli's painting of Simonetta from 1475-80 recalls Veneziano's young man: the warm white skin reveals a blur of shadowed cheekbone, just enough shade to give the face volume while maintaining its lofty, mythological aspect. Unlike the mostly anodyne female paintings from the period, the portrait has a voluptuous, faintly sexual quality. (We're not talking the plunging necklines of a Caravaggio, but Botticelli seems to revel in Simonetta's curves.) The caption at the Met mentioned "a certain awkwardness" in her physiognomy, and indeed, the facial features are slightly off kilter. But this slip makes the impossibly gorgeous Simonetta feel more human, and thus more alluring, than the more acclaimed painting of her from the same period — a work whose perfection keeps us mere mortals at arm's length.

More than these renowned canvases, a modest painting from 1460-65 indicates how rich Florence was becoming in the fifteenth century and how central portraiture was to showing this wealth. In *Portrait of a Lady* by Antonio Pollaiuolo — hardly a name from the pantheon — the subject, sheathed in a brocaded maroon, green, and smoky white dress, rests against a marble balustrade. If there was one work at the Met exhibit I could feel against my skin, this was it. In the landmark *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger explains the ascendancy of oil painting in socioeconomic terms: "What distinguishes oil painting from any other form of painting is its special ability to render the tangibility, the texture, the lustre, the solidity of what it depicts...Oil painting celebrated a new kind of wealth — which was dynamic and which found its only sanction in the supreme buying power of money." The lone painting mentioned thus far to employ oil, Pollaiuolo's anonymous lady inhabits a world of lush textures and sumptuous objects that corroborate Berger's thesis.

But it was not all about money. Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Portrait of an Old Man and a Boy*, from 1490, reveals a vulnerability and sweetness at odds with the generally austere Florentine portraiture; the work contains the humanizing quarter-turn. Bernard Berenson, the eminent art historian, once compared the old man's nose to a many-eyed potato, but the deformity only adds to his majesty. The relationship between the two figures is dynamic. Seeing the painting in person, I imagined for the first time what it would be like to be a grandfather, with that overwhelming yet fraught love you feel for your own child mitigated by an intervening generation. Free from the endless worries of parenting, Ghirlandaio's old man radiates joy devoid of anxiety. The gray wisps of his hair mirror the leaves bending on slender boughs in the distance. The push of the boy's hand on his grandfather's cloak gently expresses the very Italian sentiment of family as an organic force that transcends its constituent mortal parts.



Renaissance poetry held that love entered through the eyes. In Renaissance portraits, however, the nose often conveyed the most potent messages. A painting from 1476-77 by Pietro di Spagna of Federico da Montefeltro — the very Duke of Urbino immortalized in Piero della Francesca's diptych — once again presents the self-absorbed patriarch and his dramatically configured nasal septum in left-side profile. But a world of differences separates the two portraits. Pietro avoids the hieratic, and depicts instead the dynamic array of the duke's empathy-inducing roles: the humanist reading his tome; the soldier dressed in armor; the ruler swathed in ermine; above all, the father keeping vigil over his son.

Like Ghirlandaio's old man, Pietro's duke displays his imperfections openly. But the composition of the portrait manages to emphasize his greatness without advertising his grandeur. The low angle accentuates his looming presence, and we feel the full height and weight of the man, in all senses of the word. It would be a stretch to describe the connection between Pietro's duke and his son in terms of the warm atmosphere enveloping Ghirlandaio's old man and grandchild. However, the staging in Piero's painting is delicate enough to suggest the glow of filial love. Piero della Francesca paints a husband looking through his wife; Pietro di Spagna gives us a father joined to his child by touch at the knee.

In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger describes the distance between an early self-portrait by Rembrandt in 1634 and a later one from 1660:

Rembrandt [in 1634] is using traditional methods for their traditional purposes...The painting as a whole remains an advertisement for the sitter's good fortune, prestige and wealth...And like all such advertisements it is heartless...In the later painting he has turned the tradition against itself...He is an old man...And the painter in him — who is both more and less than the old man — has found the means to express just that, using a medium which had been traditionally developed to exclude any such questions.

One finds few such opportunities for similar identification in the Florentine portraits. Even in the pathos of Ghirlandaio's *Portrait of an Old Man and a Boy*, the emotions are submerged, and the relationship



between the subject and audiences is implied rather than directly expressed. In Rembrandt's painting from 1660, the rheumy eyes say it all: *I'm nearing the end, I have doubts about myself and my life, which has culminated in this painting.* The eyes look into our own. This gesture by the painter toward the viewer is a true beginning of modern portraiture — more than that slight rotation in late-fifteenth-century Italy from profile to three-quarter view, which still hid as much as it revealed. In the final tally, the portraiture of Renaissance Florence straddles the line between the early modern and the modern; it refracts rather than reflects us.

Like hieratic, *refract* is a word better illustrated than defined. It depends on the ability of an object to change an angle of light, with the etymological inflection of breaking or “fracturing” it. Five thousand miles away in the Uffizi, but ever-present in my mind, Piero

della Francesca's profile of the Duke and Duchess of Urbino continues to refract my gaze, offering me neither empathy nor eye contact. I confess that I used to find much Renaissance art, in the manner of Piero's diptych, ungenerous and even frustrating in the lack of access it offered. I took it personally. Florence was like a beautiful oyster that I continually sought to pry open, greedy for a pearl, but the shell would just not give. Even after twenty years of constant visits, I often felt more like an eternal tourist than a sometime resident. Seeing the faces of Renaissance Florence in New York, I understood that the indifference of the duke and duchess was actually a gift. The world of humanist thought that they inhabited was bound to a moment in the past that cannot be repeated. But the forms generated by humanism remain — breathtaking anachronisms that continue to inspire our love without asking us for it, their eyes fixed on a disappeared world, showing no interest in our own.

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