

Leah Clark - Alesso Baldovinetti, Portrait of a Lady

LEAH CLARK: Hi. I'm Leah Clark, and I'm a lecturer in the Department of Art History at the Open University, and I specialise in the Italian Renaissance. Today, I'm going to be speaking about a Portrait of a Lady by the artist Alesso Baldovinetti. And it's in the National Gallery in London. It dates from about 1465.

The painting depicts a female in profile, probably modelled on classical prototypes. She wears a bright yellow dress. And the artist has paid attention to rendering the details of the material of the dress, as well as the jewels that she wears.

For example, you can see little dots of white that make up the beading on the border of the dress. The beads around her neck glisten. And on the top of her head, she wears a pearl brooch. And the artist has really paid attention to depicting the lustre of pearls. If you look closely, you'll also notice that he has paid attention to depicting individual hairs on the tendrils at the back of her head.

The profile portrait doesn't allow us really to engage with the sitter. She doesn't look at us. And in that way, she appears quite flat. This is also exaggerated by the fact that there's no background. This side view allows the painter to really highlight the profile, that is the lines of the face. These lines allow us to identify the individual features of the face - the physiognomy.

On her sleeve, you may have noticed an insignia or heraldry. There are three palm leaves and two feathers that are tied with a ribbon. This is probably alluding to either the family that she was born into or the family that she married into. We don't actually know the identity of the sitter, although it has been suggested that the palm leaves may reference a coat of arms that belonged to a family that was connected to the court of Urbino.

In the 15th century, the profile portrait, particularly of women, emerges as a popular genre. We have numerous surviving female portraits in museums around the world, but many of their identities are unknown. The jewels that are depicted and many female portraits have been connected to marriage rituals.

These portraits were likely then commissioned around the time of their marriage. We know from contemporary documents that these types of jewels were only allowed to actually be worn around the time of marriage. A law from 1472 trying to curb ostentation or conspicuous consumption reads as follows.

'Women may wear necklaces, veils, and two brooches - one for the head and one for the shoulder. And these above-mentioned things they may wear for three years from the day that they went to marriage. Thus also for those who have already gone to marriage, as for those who will go. And after the said three years, they may wear the necklace alone, and only one brooch for another three years. And after that, it is entirely forbidden them to bear any of the above said things'.

Portraits in the Renaissance were a way to commemorate individuals. They may be placed in the home as a form of memory. But they also, of course, commemorated that particular moment in a woman's life when she became a bride.

Today, we're bombarded with portraits of our families and friends on our computer, on our phones, on Instagram. We can even take selfies. But understanding how portraits are composed and how they commemorate individuals is important, particularly when we're looking at portraits or pictures of famous individuals today, from prime ministers to pop stars. Portraits are constructed, and they construct identity in interesting ways.