

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/open-arts-objects>

## Teaching Support Sheet

**Presenter: Leah R. Clark**

**Alesso Baldovinetti, *Portrait of a Lady*, c. 1465, National Gallery, London**

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-object-alesso-baldovinetti-portrait-lady-c-1465-national-gallery-london>

How many pictures of family and friends do you have access to on your phone or computer? In this short film, Dr Leah Clark discusses how artists in the Renaissance recorded likenesses by examining a new genre: the female profile portrait. The film explores the function of female profile portraits, a genre that became popular in fifteenth-century Italy. Many of the sitters of these portraits are unknown, but by looking closely at the clothing and the jewellery in the portraits, it is likely that these paintings were commissioned at the time of marriage. Portraits are extremely relevant today because we are bombarded with pictures of people in the media and on social media, while we also have the capacity to make our own images—taking selfies. By learning how identity was constructed through clothing, jewellery and even posture, can also help us to critically assess how portraits are constructed today.

### *Before watching the film*

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Before watching the film, locate the work online and download an image of the work here that you can use to show to your class: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/alesso-baldovinetti-portrait-of-a-lady>

Questions to ask your students before watching the film (students to complete on the attached form)

1. What do you know about portraits and their functions?

For an overview on portraiture see [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/port/hd\\_port.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/port/hd_port.htm)

2. How has the artist rendered this portrait? Describe what you see on the screen. Is the sitter easy to identify with? How does the viewer interact with her? What clothing is she wearing? Do you think she is poor or wealthy?
3. Where do you think this work would have been viewed originally?
4. What function do you think this work might have served?

Questions to ask your students after watching the film.

### 1. What effects do you think the artist was trying to achieve in this work?

The sitter does not engage with the viewer. The profile portrait genre largely drew from Classical profile portraits found on coins, for example, but the genre also may have spoken to theories on female propriety, where women were not to make eye contact with male viewers. However, there also exist male profile portraits from this time, but fewer were produced.

### 2. Has the film helped you define some of the formal elements of the work? Consider scale, subject matter, medium, and other formal elements

It is a painting of a woman in profile; she wears a yellow dress and stitched to her sleeve is a device of three palm leaves which is probably not merely a decorative pattern but the emblem of her family or of one into which she has married, or is soon to marry into.

She wears a considerable amount of jewellery. Her hair is pulled back, and she wears a form of headband, with a beautiful jewel at the top. When you look more closely at the painting, you can see that the artist has paid attention to really depicting some of the fine details—individual hairs, the gloss on the beads of the necklace, little white dots on the beading at the border of her dress.

Her hairline probably looks a little too far back for modern viewers, but this was actually a practice of plucking hairs in the Renaissance, understood to be beautiful.

The profile genre doesn't allow us to make eye contact with her and as such, she is not as lively or interactive with the viewer. This genre also enables the painter to really highlight the profile—the lines of the face which form the lips, the nose—the identifiable features which is how we recognise people—their physiognomy. It also allows for the profile of the jewel to stand out

### 3. Does it have a recognisable purpose or function? Does this relate to the time period in which it was made?

In general, men had previously been portrayed more than women, but what we see emerging by the mid-15<sup>th</sup> c, is suddenly a real fashion for these profile female portraits.

In these paintings, identity is literally embodied. Here the body is adorned with social signifiers that often link that body to a network of associations/connections—family, business, or diplomatic connections.

-Portraits can help us locate a society's ideals, for instance, the proscribed roles of gender

-it is generally understood that these paintings probably commemorate a woman at the time of her marriage—either just before or shortly after.

-Some scholars have linked the portraits to socio-economics, where the female portrait acted as a symbol within marriage exchange. Marriage at this time, was not as today, for love, but generally was seen as a transaction between male heads of families, who saw the marriage as a way to broker relations—whether diplomatic, political or for business reasons.

-The age and dress of many of the women portrayed seem to allude to the time of their marriage.

-Marriage jewels are often represented in female portraits, in the form of the shoulder brooch, the head brooch and the pendant, which were commonly described in *ricordanze* as jewels relating to marriage.

-A sumptuary law of 1472 addresses the regulations concerning feminine status: "...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.”<sup>1</sup>

-It seems the adornment of the bride was allowed for the period around marriage, whereby the jewels and clothing acted as symbolic agents of the wife’s new status and her integration into her new family. For Randolph, it was a way for Florentines to make the bride legible by unambiguously inscribing her “physical and legal transition” upon her body; but also underlining her sexuality.

-The emblem on the woman’s sleeve in Baldovinetti’s painting is composed of three palm leaves and two feathers bound together with a ribbon. It is suggested that the coat of arms is from the family of Angelo Galli, a diplomat and poet from Urbino. If this is true, then the lady could possibly be Francesca delle Palme known as Contessa delle Palme, the second wife of Angelo Galli (palms = palmi). In 1445 she uncovered a plot against Count Federigo da Montefeltro of Urbino and was celebrated in the Urbino court for her courage. There is no evidence as to the specific commissioning of this portrait, but if she were to be Contessa delle Palme, her portrait would act as a visual display of her ideal qualities that we find in contemporary humanist literature celebrating famous women.

- It is also possible to link female portraiture to the literary traditions of the time that applauded and exalted female virtues both from antiquity and from contemporary accounts known as ‘on famous women’ literature

Portraits in general in the Renaissance:

- The rendering of a portrait in the Renaissance was an act of remembrance; a construction of commemoration for a family and its descendants. Portraits handed down from generation to generation.
- Leon Battista Alberti, the well known Florentine humanist and artist alluded to this when he noted ‘painting...contains a divine force that not only makes absent men present, as friendship is said to do, but moreover makes the dead seem almost alive.’

#### 4. How has this film helped your understanding of portraits?

Hopefully students can reflect here on what they have learned-covered in the points above. They may pick up on the aspect of clothing, still relevant today in how we portray ourselves and how others ‘interpret’ us.

#### 5. What is its relevance for today?

Portraits are extremely relevant today because we are now bombarded with images of people we know and don’t know on social media. We also have the capacity to make our own images—taking selfies. But understanding how in the past, identity was constructed through clothing, jewellery, and even engagement with the viewer, can also help us critically assess how images are constructed today. Whether that is simply an image of a friend on facebook, or the image of a celebrity or someone in power, like a prime minister. Codes such as dress, and demeanour are still relevant today in our ability to ‘read’ a portrait.

#### Online Activity

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1. Searching the image/collection of database of a museum to look for other portraits to see how the format and rendering of the composition and sitter has changed over time.
2. Read about Roman portrait sculpture:  
[https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ropo2/hd\\_ropo2.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ropo2/hd_ropo2.htm)
3. Explore portraits of the Renaissance on Google Arts & Culture:  
<https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/usergallery/dAIC5c6N2UYrJg>

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<sup>1</sup> C. Mazzi quoted in Randolph, "Performing the Bridal Body in Fifteenth-Century Florence." 189.

For an overview on portraiture see [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/port/hd\\_port.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/port/hd_port.htm)

### Renaissance Resources online

<http://italianrenaissanceresources.com/> : This is a comprehensive site on a number of different issues related to the Renaissance provided by the National Gallery in Washington, DC

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/r/renaissance/> : This is a comprehensive site on a number of different issues related to the Renaissance provided by the Victoria and Albert Museum

### Bibliography

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Simons, Patricia. 'Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture.' In *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism in Art History*, edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, 39-57. Boulder: Westview Press, 1992.

### *Comparative analysis*

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This painting could be compared to a Renaissance portrait of a man to bring out gender differences, such as that by Francesco del Cossa: <https://www.museothyssen.org/en/collection/artists/cossa-francesco/portrait-man-ring> (see table below). You might also consider comparing it with a modern portrayal found in a recent newspaper.

You could also consider other portraits from the Open Arts Objects films:

1. Velazquez, Prince Baltasar Carlos in Silver, 1633, The Wallace Collection:

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-object-velazquez-prince-baltasar-carlos-silver-1633-wallace-collection>

2. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, La Parisienne, 1874, National Museum Wales:

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-object-pierre-auguste-renoir-la-parisienne-1874-national-museum-wales>

3. Beaton's portrait of Queen Elizabeth II on her coronation day:

<http://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-object-beaton%E2%80%99s-portrait-queen-elizabeth-ii-her-coronation-day>

Comparative table:

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|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| Works of art                         | <b>Alesso Baldovinetti, <i>Portrait of a Lady</i>, c. 1465, National Gallery, London</b>  | <b>Francesco del Cossa, <i>Portrait of a Man with a Ring</i>, c. 1472 – 1477, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid</b>  |
| date                                 | c. 1465   | c. 1472 – 1477   |
| What is it?                          | Portrait of a Lady  | Portrait of a Man  |
| Material                             | Tempera and oil on wood   | Oil on panel   |
| Size/scale                           | 62.9 x 40.6 cm  | 38.5 x 27.5 cm   |
| Subject matter                       | Female, possibly of a bride   | Male, in landscape holding a ring  |
| Original location in the Renaissance | In a home   | In a home  |
| How is the figure depicted?          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-profile</li> <li>-no engagement with viewer</li> <li>-stiff, and flat, against a plain background with no setting</li> <li>-details carefully rendered such as the tendrils of her hair, the beading of her dress, the lustre of her pearls</li> <li>-detailed emphasis on the heraldry on her arm, suggests this might identify her natal or marital family</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-3/4 almost full face, abandoning the profile portrait</li> <li>-engages with viewer by looking into the viewer's eye</li> <li>-still some stiffness to the pose, however, even though it's more engaging than the profile portrait</li> <li>-the landscape situates the viewer in a setting</li> <li>-careful rendering of details of his clothing and hair</li> <li>-landscape is a bit fanciful with strange rocky outcrops often seen in northern Italian paintings of this time</li> <li>-the ring likely has symbolic meaning: either referring to his family (the diamond ring was an emblem of the Este family in Ferrara where Cossa worked); or might even be representing a prize from a jousting competition</li> </ul> |
| Composition                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-flat profile portrait with some emphasis on realistic body renderings in the clothing and details of the face</li> <li>-stiff, and flat, against a plain background with no setting</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-spatial depth is alluded to by the fact that the sitter is located on the edge of a parapet with the shadow of his hand and arm reflected on the parapet; as if his hand recedes</li> </ul>  |

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|           |   | into the viewer's space   |
| Condition | -no obvious deterioration   | -no obvious deterioration   |
| Function  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-probably a marriage portrait to commemorate an individual female</li> <li>-showed the wealth of the family off in the jewels on display and her dress</li> <li>-would have been placed in the home and seen by generations</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-commemoration of an individual for no apparent reason but probably commemorated a particular moment in his life— perhaps even a successful jousting competition or even sent as a portrait to a potential bride</li> <li>-would have been placed in the home and seen by generations</li> </ul> |
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