

Between Antwerp and Florence:  
The enigma of *Bust of a Woman  
with a Veil*



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**BILBOKO ARTE  
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The *Bust of a Woman with a Veil* [fig. 1] has intrigued scholars since it was bequeathed to the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum in 1953<sup>1</sup>. At first appearance, the sitter, with her enigmatic smile, high forehead, and dark, penetrating eyes, resembles a Florentine woman as she might have been painted by an artist in the circle of Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572) or his disciple Alessandro Allori (1535-1607), two Florentine painters who excelled in the genre of portraiture<sup>2</sup>. Yet the oak wood support, the pigments, and even the handling of the oil paint in this bust-length portrait are consistent with contemporary artistic practice in the Southern Low Countries, another great center of innovation in portraiture in the 16th century. Only recently has it been suggested that the *Bust of a Woman with a Veil* actually resides at the crossroads of these two rich cultures and was made by a Flemish artist exploring Italian form and style<sup>3</sup>.

In this article, I shall seek to locate the *Bust of a Woman with a Veil* in the long-standing cultural dialogue between Florence and the Low Countries. By the mid-16th century, when this panel was painted, Florentine merchants had established a sizable presence in the bustling metropolis of Antwerp. Building on the collecting habits of previous generations of Florentine bankers in Bruges, these entrepreneurs became important patrons of the arts. Concurrently, painting in the Low Countries entered a period of transition. The technical marvel and devotional nature of early Netherlandish painting gradually gave way to a new art based on the progressive assimilation of Italian motifs and styles, a growing interest in mythological subjects, and a new appreciation of the painter as a learned practitioner of a noble art.

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1 For earlier discussion of this painting, see De Lasterra 1967, p. 151, no. 367 (as anon. Italian, 16th Century); Bilbao Fine Arts Museum... 2006, p. 33, no. 19 (record by Ana Sánchez-Lassa; as anon. Italian, c. 1550-1570).

2 Campbell 1990, pp. 25-27; Cropper 2010.

3 This was first suggested by Denis Mahon in a letter of 30 May 2000 (files of the Museum). Similar proposals have been advanced for other portraits in recent years including the *Portrait of a Woman* in Frankfurt, which has recently been attributed to Pietro Campaña, a Flemish painter active in Spain, and to Girolamo da Carpi; see the discussion in Pattanaro 2008, *passim*.

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1. Anonymous, Flemish  
*Bust of a Woman with a Veil*, c. 1550-1570  
Oil on oak panel, 47 x 36 cm  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Inv. no. 69/367

Whereas in the 15th century Italians, and Florentines especially, had actively sought Netherlandish art to enrich their collections with brilliant oil paintings, by the 16th century tides turned, and Flemish artists often looked to Italian art as a model. What follows is an investigation into the economic and cultural exchange between two societies—Antwerp and Florence—in which the visual arts were granted pride of place in commemorating individual and collective identity. This paper endeavours to show that the *Bust of a Woman with a Veil* not only represents a Florentine woman with a specific connection to Antwerp, but also that the artist who portrayed her was trained in the Southern Netherlands and was eager to show his fluency in the idiom of Florentine portraiture while using northern techniques and materials. This exploration will contextualize and, it is hoped, explain the seeming contradiction of this remarkable portrait, which reveals the intersection of the sitter's expatriate status and the northern painter's emulation of Italian visual language.

## Visual and technical evidence

The *Bust of a Woman with a Veil* is a demure yet seductive portrait of a woman who captivates the viewer with her direct gaze. The painter, through extraordinary sensitivity and attention, has described her pearl-like skin, rose-colored blush, gracefully elongated nose and neatly coiled red hair held in place by a band. Using the technique of *sfumato*, the smoke-like blending of light and shadow generally associated with the work of Leonardo da Vinci, the artist of the *Bust of a Woman with a Veil* balanced suffused light and modulated tones in order to soften the figure's features<sup>4</sup>. Her life-size face appears as if to emerge from the undefined, dark background, and her penetrating, flickering eyes and hovering smile create an enhanced sense of immediacy and intimacy. With fine brushwork, the artist scrutinized the restrained luxury of her dress, single earring, elegant strand of black pearls and golden chain. These features, as we shall see, not only distinguish this beautiful young woman as an important individual, but also encode her beauty in the complex conventions of mid-century portraiture, a genre which was understood as a vehicle for representing status and conveying both the likeness and presence of someone absent<sup>5</sup>.

Technical evidence indicates that this striking painting was produced in Antwerp around 1570. The support [fig. 2] has been identified as a single piece of Baltic Oak, a hard wood that was common in the north but was generally not used in Italy<sup>6</sup>. The wood retains its original thickness and was never cradled; bevelling may be seen on all four edges, although the left has been trimmed slightly, presumably to fit an earlier frame. Markings on the back reveal that the panel was prepared with a hand saw according to the custom followed in Antwerp, where the mechanical saws generally used in the Northern Netherlands were prohibited<sup>7</sup>. The ground contains chalk (calcium carbonate), rather than sulfate, a near-certain indication that the picture was not made in Italy<sup>8</sup>. As demonstrated by this cross section [fig. 3], the chalk ground was then prepared with a pale gray priming layer in a manner consistent with Netherlandish practice in the latter half of the 16th century<sup>9</sup>.

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4 On *sfumato*, see Nagel 1993.

5 See Campbell 1990, pp. 1-39.

6 Campbell/Foister/Roy 1997, pp. 16-18; Bruzzone/Galassi 2011, pp. 253-259; Klein 2008, pp. 189-191.

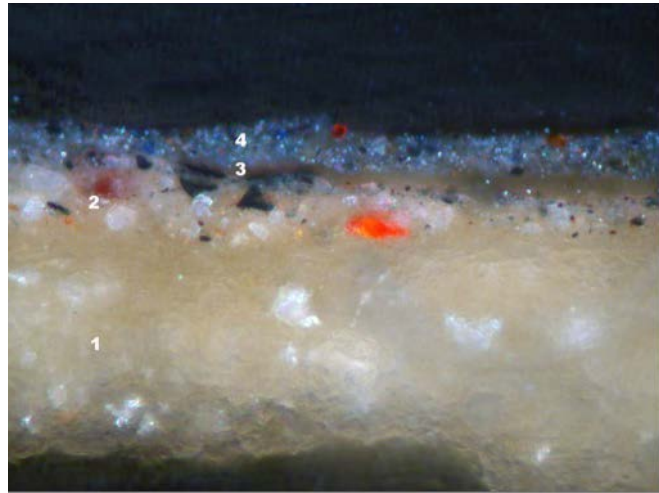
7 I am grateful to Jean-Albert Glatigny for sharing the results of his examination of this panel.

8 Pigment analysis included PLM, micro-chemical analysis, HPTLC, FTIR, and SEM-EDX, and was performed by Andrés Sánchez Ledesma and María Jesús Gómez García, from Arte-Lab, S. L. The x-radiograph and infrared reflectography were carried out at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum under the direction of José Luis Merino Gorospe.

9 See Dunkerton/Spring 1998, pp. 120-130. From their large sample of panel pictures, the authors locate only one Italian painting with a chalk ground in a work "attributed to Bassano," which may in fact be a northern picture. See also Campbell/Foister/Roy 1997. The only traces of sulfate-based gesso (CaSO<sub>4</sub>) in the Bilbao painting appear at the very edge of the panel in an area that received extensive restoration in the 1950s. I am most grateful to Michael Gallagher and Jill Dunkerton for discussing this with me.



2. Anonymous, Flemish  
*Bust of a Woman with a Veil*, c. 1550-1570  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Reverse



3. Anonymous, Flemish  
*Bust of a Woman with a Veil*, c. 1550-1570  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Cross section of a sample taken from the grey of the veil  
 1. White calcium carbonate (chalk) ground  
 2. Pale grey priming layer of white lead, calcium carbonate, charcoal (b. p.), red earth (m. b. p.), vermilion (m. b. p.) and organic red colouring (m. b. p.)  
 3. Grey-brown  
 4. Blueish repaint of titanium white, zinc white, synthetic ultramarine, red earth, bone black and chrome green

## Historical background

In Flanders they paint, with a view to deceiving sensual vision, such things as may cheer you and of which you cannot speak ill, as for example saints and prophets [...] And all this, though it pleases some persons, is done without reason or art, without skillful selection or boldness, and, finally, without substance of vigor. Nevertheless there are countries where they paint worse than in Flanders<sup>10</sup>.

This famous condemnation of Netherlandish art, purportedly spoken by Michelangelo in one of his dialogues with the Roman noblewoman Vittoria Colonna, reflects a distinctly 16th-century prejudice against northern art. In his *Lives of the Artists* (1550, 1568) Giorgio Vasari marveled at the technical wonders of early Netherlandish painting, but he largely discounted the contribution of northern art in the development of the Renaissance that he described as the gradual but conscious revival of ancient content and form<sup>11</sup>.

Yet in 15th-century Italy, Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden were held in high esteem<sup>12</sup>. As Paula Nuttall has recently noted, Tuscan patricians actively collected northern paintings, and the Florentine merchant bankers who settled in Bruges to trade and conduct business became important patrons of the arts<sup>13</sup>. By commissioning works from local artists to export to their homes and family chapels in Florence, these merchants became conduits for the transmission of Netherlandish art to Renaissance Italy. The Portinari Altarpiece by Hugo van der Goes [fig. 4], today in the Uffizi, is arguably the most famous example of Florentine patronage of northern painting. Tommaso Portinari, a representative of the Medici bank in Bruges, commissioned this impressive triptych for the high altar of his family chapel in the choir of the hospital church of Santa Maria Nuova, Florence, which was already decorated with frescoes by some of the leading

10 Translated in Klein/Zerner 1966, p. 34.

11 See Melion 1991, esp. pp. 109-128.

12 Baxandall 1971, pp. 106-109.

13 See Nuttall 2004, passim.



4. Hugo van der Goes (1440-1482/1483)  
*Adoration of the Shepherds*  
*Portinari Triptych*, central panel, 1476-1479  
Oil on panel, 253 x 304 cm  
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence  
Inv. no. 1890, 3192





5. Hans Memling (c. 1435-1494)  
*Tommaso di Folco Portinari (1428–1501) and Maria Portinari (Maria Maddalena Baroncelli)*, c. 1470  
Oil on panel, 44.1 x 33.7 cm (approx., each one)  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
Inv. no. 14.40.626–27

artists of the Quattrocento: Domenico Veneziano, Piero della Francesca, Andrea del Castagno and Alessio Baldovinetti. The altarpiece replaced an earlier work by Lorenzo Monaco executed in tempera with extensive areas of gold. For Portinari, Hugo van der Goes offered an unrivaled appeal to realism, rich colors, and the naturalistic attention to detail in the fabrics, landscape, and still life, all permitted by the use of oil paint<sup>14</sup>.

If Portinari chose Van der Goes as the artist best suited to deliver a monumental altarpiece, he turned to another northerner, Hans Memling [fig. 5], for a spectacular portrait diptych representing himself and his young wife, Maria Baroncelli, who wears sumptuous clothing and a luxurious necklace painted with extraordinary attention to detail<sup>15</sup>. Taken together, Portinari's commissions not only attest to his status and taste, but also to the scope of a cross-cultural dialogue in which Italians turned to northern artists for certain types of images, in this case devotional paintings and portraits, and these pictures, in turn, had a direct impact on Florentine art<sup>16</sup>.

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14 Ibid, esp. pp. 60-72, 133-191. On the dialogue between Italy and "The North" in portraiture, see Campbell 1990, ch. 9. On the Lorenzo Monaco painting, often assumed to be the Adoration of the Magi in the Uffizi, see Eisenberg 1989, p. 119. See also Guicciardini 1567, p. 98.

15 See the essays in Borchert 2005. For the jewelry in the portrait, see Florence 2003, p. 20.

16 See the famous studies of Aby Warburg, "Flemish Art and Florentine Art in Lorenzo de' Medici's Circle around 1480" and "Artistic Exchanges between North and South in the Fifteenth Century," in Warburg 1999, pp. 281-303 and 275-280.



## The Florentine community in Antwerp: art and civic identity

In brief, a school, that of Bruges, had disappeared. Politics, war, travels, all the active elements that comprise the physical and moral constitution of a people helped another school to form in Antwerp. Italian beliefs inspired it, Italian art guided it, princes encouraged it, all the national needs called for it. It was at once very active and very hesitant, very brilliant, extraordinarily productive yet almost unobtrusive; it morphed completely, to the point of no longer being recognizable<sup>17</sup>.

With the decline of the commercial and artistic importance of Bruges around 1500, Antwerp rose to dominate the economic and cultural life of the Southern Netherlands<sup>18</sup>. Fernand Braudel has argued that due to a variety of factors, ranging from geographic location to political structures, Antwerp became the center of a global economy. Under Spanish rule, wealth from the New World permitted the city to flourish, and its unusual structure of governance enabled foreign nations to establish themselves and to trade with freedom and security<sup>19</sup>. While Florentine traders and bankers assumed a more modest importance alongside intrepid Hanseatic, French, English, Portuguese and Spanish traders as well as other Italians, especially the prominent Genoese, the merchants from Florence remained dynamic and eager to assert their cultural identity and superiority<sup>20</sup>.

This great shift from Bruges to Antwerp occurred at the same time as a dramatic change in the artistic climate of the north. With increasing urgency, Netherlandish artists began to look to Italian art for new pictorial possibilities. Whereas Francois Ier acquired Italian art by importing Italian artists to work at his court, in the Netherlands painters began to travel to Rome in ever greater numbers, drawing antiquities and Renaissance works, and subsequently returning home to produce pictures that pointed to Italy in content and form<sup>21</sup>. Courty patrons, including Philip of Burgundy, Philip of Cleves, Margaret of Austria and Énard de la Mark, encouraged young Netherlandish artists such as Jan Gossart and Lambert Lombard to use their direct experience with Italian visual culture to explore modes of painting that had little precedent in the north<sup>22</sup>. Soon, these patterns of patronage were echoed in the nascent art market, where secular subjects, depictions of the human nude, and mythological paintings gained new importance for growing audiences. In a parallel development, artists returning to the north brought a new awareness of Italian art theory and began to conceive of their profession as an intellectual endeavor with humanist aspirations.

In 1549, just one year before Giorgio Vasari published his seminal *Lives of the Artists*, the Florentine expatriate community in Antwerp sponsored one of the monumental ceremonial arches that adorned the processional route of Charles V and Philip II during their triumphal entry to the city [fig. 6]. The almost two-metres high stage was conceived so as to impress the Emperor and future King—and the residents of Antwerp—with Florence's dominance in the spheres of literature and the visual arts. In addition to images of the patron saints and current rulers of Florence, the structure featured portraits of the poets Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, as well as the two artists who would frame the narrative of Vasari's text: Giotto, proverbial founder

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17 "En résumé, une école avait disparu, celle de Bruges. La politique, la guerre, les voyages, tous les éléments actifs dont se compose la constitution physique et morale d'un peuple y aidant, une autre école se forme à Anvers. Les croyances ultramontaines l'inspirent, l'art ultramontain la conseille, les princes l'encouragent, tous les besoins nationaux lui font appel; elle est à la fois très active et très indécise, très brillante, étonnamment féconde et presque effacée; elle métamorphose de fond en comble, au point de n'être plus reconnaissable." Eugène Fromentin, *Les Maîtres d'autrefois*, 1875, p. 25.

18 See Wee 1963, vol. II, pp. 109-142.

19 See Braudel 1979, pp. 118-129.

20 On the establishment of the Florentine community in Antwerp, see Goris 1925, pp. 78-79.

21 See Dacos 1995. For the situation in France, see Zerner 1996, "introduction," et passim.

22 Denhaene 1975; Sterk 1980.



6. Anonymous  
*Stage of the Florentine Nation for the Entry of Philip II to Antwerp*  
 Wood engraving, 22.4 x 15.8 cm  
 In Cornelius Grapheus. *Le triomphe d'Anvers, faict en la susception du Prince Philips, Prince d'Espaign[e]*, p. 57  
 Antwerp, Pieter Coecke van Aelst, 1550  
 British Library, London  
 C 75 d 15

of the Tuscan school, and Michelangelo, the “divine” artist who had recently completed the *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel<sup>23</sup>.

The extraordinary iconography of this arch is pertinent to our discussion because it reveals the extent to which the Florentine merchants in Antwerp self-consciously adopted the history of their art as a symbol of national pride and civic identity<sup>24</sup>. Just as the city chose to represent itself as the *patria* of Giotto and Michelangelo, a Florentine merchant might choose to have his wife painted according to contemporary Florentine customs by an artist eager to demonstrate his fluency with Italian art. Indeed, we owe the most thorough description of the Low Countries to the Florentine merchant Lodovico Guicciardini (1521-1589), nephew of the Florentine diplomat and historian Francesco Guicciardini. In his 1567 *Descrittione... di tutti i Paesi Bassi, altrimenti detti Germania inferiore*<sup>25</sup>, Lodovico not only describes the region’s topography, natural resources, and industry; he also praises many contemporary artists precisely for their ability to work in an Italian manner, be it in their treatment of the nude, musculature, foreshortenings, or human expression.

Frans Floris de Vriendt (1519/1520-1570) was the leading painter in mid-16th century Antwerp. He descended from an artistic family, and his brothers Cornelis and Jacques excelled in sculpture, architecture, and the decorative arts. In 1539, Frans Floris took the decisive step of leaving Antwerp to gain exposure to new artistic practices, first by studying with the Liégeois *pictor doctus* Lambert Lombard, and soon by following Lombard’s example and traveling to Italy, where he spent approximately five years during the 1540s<sup>26</sup>. There, Floris drew extensively after the antique, after Michelangelo, and after Raphael and his followers. He returned to Antwerp to establish a *bottega* based on the model of Raphael’s workshop, and at one time he purportedly had one-hundred twenty pupils, a veritable generation of Netherlandish artists who carried his style and innovations to new heights<sup>27</sup>.

23 Jacquot 1960, p. 463; Becker 2002.

24 On the role of civic identity in the creation of these stages, see Meadow 1999.

25 Guicciardini 1567; on the editions of this book, see Touwaide 1973.

26 See Velde 1975, vol. I, esp. pp. 29-30.

27 See Wouk 2008; on Floris’s atelier, see Velde 1975, vol. I, pp. 99-122.



7. Frans Floris (1519/1520-1570)  
*Head of a Woman*  
 Oil on panel, 46 x 33 cm  
 Národní Galerie, Prague



8. Francesco Salviati (1510-1563)  
*Charity*  
 Oil on panel, 156 x 122 cm  
 Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence  
 Inv. no. 1890, 2157

During his time in Italy, Floris was also exposed to recent Florentine painting, especially works by Francesco Salviati, a contemporary of Vasari who was praised for his *bella maniera*<sup>28</sup>. Floris was attracted to Salviati's rippled, muscular nudes, his imposing narrative history paintings, and his ornate female heads. Floris made a delicate study in oil on panel [fig. 7] of the head of Salviati's famous *Charity* [fig. 8], now in the Uffizi, paying careful attention to the tresses of the woman's hair and the pearls around her neck that emphasize the pearl-white tone of her flesh<sup>29</sup>. Salviati's elegant, bejeweled women, possibly inspired by Michelangelo's drawings of *teste divine*, captivated Floris<sup>30</sup>. He set about painting dozens, if not hundreds, of life-size head studies, some of men with crowns of laurels or hats, and many of women with elaborate coiffures draped in pearls and jewels.

Yet while these heads are all approximately the size of the *Bust of a Woman with a Veil* and share many qualities with this painting, they were not conceived as portraits. Rather, these inventive studies were intended for reuse in later narrative compositions. In the case of the Prague study of Salviati's *Charity*, Floris modified the head slightly and used it for an allegorical figure of *Summer* [fig. 9], shown nude from the waist up amidst lush fruits of the season. Salviati's gracefully mannered depiction of the head in full profile has been altered in this new context, as the figure gazes over her shoulder at a gesturing satyr behind her<sup>31</sup>.

28 Rome/Paris 1998.

29 Carl van de Velde suggested this in Velde 1975, vol. I, pp. 293-294, no. S152; vol. II, fig. 76. See also Zuntz 1929, pp. 65-66, 68, 102, pl. XV. On Salviati's *Charity*, see Mortari 1992, p. 113, no. 16. Luisa Mortari notes two early copies of the work and dates the original to 1544-1548.

30 On the *teste divine*, see Vasari 1966-, p. 113; Shearman 1967, p. 57 (probably a "presentation drawing" for Gherardo Perini). The drawings were later acquired by Francesco de' Medici.

31 Signed at right: "FF IV" [macron above "IV"]. Velde 1975, vol. I, pp. 294-295, no. S154; vol. II, fig. 77.



9. Frans Floris (1519/1520-1570)  
*Aestas (Summer)*, 1564-1565  
 Oil on canvas stuck to panel, 115.5 x 134 cm  
 Hallwylska Museet, Stockholm  
 Inv. no. 3200 XXXII:B.15

This example of Floris's reinterpretation of slightly earlier Italian types is entirely consistent with Van Mander's explanation of how the artist used his head studies: "Frans set his journeymen to do the dead-coloring after he had indicated to them his intention somewhat with chalk, letting them get on with it, after having said: Put in these or those heads; for he always had a few of those to hand on panels<sup>32</sup>." Yet while Van Mander explains the practical use of these paintings in the workshop, he does not discuss their genesis or touch upon their creativity. Floris may have first encountered the format of the painted head study in the work of an Italian artist such as Domenico Beccafumi, who pioneered the study of expressive heads in oil<sup>33</sup>. While it is unclear if these works left the studio, Salviati's expressive heads, rich sources of what John Shearman termed "elaborate fantasy<sup>34</sup>," were copied and circulated widely<sup>35</sup>.

According to Peter Sutton, Floris's painted head studies were among the artist's most significant contributions to the Netherlandish tradition. These panels, nearly all approximately 45 by 35 centimeters in size, opened the way for later painters to develop the representation of human emotion and character types in the *tronie* (Dutch for "face"), a painted study of an expressive or typical face<sup>36</sup>. The *tronie* became an important genre in later 16th- and 17th-century Flemish and Dutch painting, and was explored by artists such as Brouwer and Rembrandt<sup>37</sup>.

32 Mander 1604, fol. 242v; Miedema 1994-1999, vol. I, p. 229.

33 For Raphael's drawings of heads, see Bambach 1999, pp. 321-328; for Beccafumi's oil on paper headstudies, see Siena 1990, nos. 116, 121-123, 128.

34 Shearman 1967, p. 57.

35 This has recently been studied by Rearick 2001, pp. 455-478, esp. pp. 460-462. Justus Müller Hofstede suggests that the *Head of a Man* by Palma Giovane in Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera, might have served as Floris's example (Müller 1968, p. 247, no. 4). Carl Van de Velde points out that the works are probably contemporaneous (Velde 1975, vol. I, p. 71).

36 On the term *tronie* and its uses, see Pauw-de Veen 1969, pp. 190-193. See also Vries 1990.

37 On Floris's innovative use of the painted head study, see Müller 1968, pp. 223-253. Most recently, Sutton/Wieseman 2004, pp. 24-25. Zuntz paid particular attention to the painted head studies in her monograph on Floris and attempted to create a chronology of their development and use. See Zuntz 1929, p. 68; Velde 1975, vol. I, pp. 65-68.





10. Frans Floris (1519/1520-1570)  
*Portrait of a Young Boy*, c. 1560-1565  
 Oil on panel, 35.7 x 27.2 cm  
 Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Gemäldegalerie  
 Inv. no. GG\_3532



11. Frans Floris (1519/1520-1570)  
*Head of a Woman*, c. 1560  
 Oil on panel, 46.5 x 32.5 cm  
 Museum de Fundatie, Heino / Wijhe in Zwolle, Netherlands

Floris seems to have painted relatively few portraits, but his surviving works nearly all treat the subject in full face with almost startling immediacy<sup>38</sup>. Floris's pupils and followers, including his favored journeyman Frans Pourbus as well as Frans's father, Pieter, and his son, Frans II, later carried Floris's experimentations in this genre further, although their portraits generally lack the spontaneity of the master's finest works<sup>39</sup>. Most of Floris's portraits are considerably larger than his painted head studies, but some are nearly the size of the *Bust of a Woman with a Veil*. For example, a *Portrait of a Young Boy* [fig. 10] in Vienna demonstrates how Floris used vivid brushwork to capture a likeness in the intimate format of the small head study. It has even been suggested that this daring image may represent one of the painter's sons<sup>40</sup>. Indeed, the line between *tronie* and portrait is not always clear. Certain Floris types, such as his *Head of a Woman* in Heino [fig. 11] have highly individuated features and a noticeable psychological presence, even if the costume indicates that the panel was a study prepared for a narrative painting and was not intended as a portrait<sup>41</sup>. In light of Floris's careful negotiation of these two related genres, it is essential to consider how and why the features and dress of the *Bust of a Woman with a Veil* may have been altered to conform to ideals and conventions of representation without sacrificing recognition.

38 See Philippot 1965, pp. 169-171.

39 Ibid.; also Velde 1975, vol. I, p. 76.

40 Velde 1975, vol. I, pp. 304-305, no. S165; vol. II, fig. 85.

41 Signed: "FFF". Ibid., vol. I, p. 296, no. S157; vol. II, fig. 79. The painting was previously considered a *Portrait of a Woman*. See Philippot 1965, p. 171, no. 17. A drawn copy is recorded in Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett (inv. no. 12325, red chalk, 335 x 236 mm); see Bock/Rosenberg 1930, vol. I, p. 28, no. 12325; vol. II, pl. 22.

## Virtue and Law

Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies [...]. She maketh herself coverings of tapestry; her clothing is silk and purple.

Proverbs 31: 10, 22

The artist responsible for the *Bust of a Woman with a Veil* went to special lengths to describe the sitter's jewelry, including her crystal earring, gold chain, and single strand of pearls, which are of a precious black variety that we see in slightly earlier portraits of distinguished Florentine women, such as Bronzino's famous *Portrait of Eleonora di Toledo* of 1543 [fig. 12]. As signs of the sitter's standing in Florentine society, these objects, all probably of Tuscan manufacture<sup>42</sup>, display a restrained luxury. They are precisely the sort of jewelry that a woman of her social status would be permitted to wear according to the strict sumptuary laws (*Provveditori alle Pompe*) that were imposed by the Florentine government, but often went unenforced<sup>43</sup>. Since antiquity, the control of women's dress was deemed a matter of public consequence. Livy explains that women competed with one another through dress and display of finery because "they have no political offices, no priesthoods, no triumphs, no gifts, no spoils of war to give them prestige<sup>44</sup>." In Renaissance Italy, and in Florence in particular, women were subject to strict laws aimed at controlling their outward appearance, which was considered an external manifestation of their inner virtue and, at a collective level, as a sign of civic virtue<sup>45</sup>. To that end, the text of an important Florentine law of 1433 declared: "the ornaments of women which are worn in a city, if they are worn in moderation, add to the honor and splendor of the city<sup>46</sup>."

Sumptuary legislation in Florence was repeatedly revised during the 16th century in an attempt to prevent women from dressing in a manner not deemed appropriate to their social standing. In a letter of 1562, Cosimo de Medici defended the sumptuary laws he had implemented. His description of how a well-to-do woman should dress corresponds closely with what we see in the *Bust of a Woman with a Veil*: "First of all we do not wish to prohibit pearls altogether, that is to say only one string may be worn, to a maximum value of 500 scudi. That much we grant because all ladies have pearls. We do not wish to deprive them of (among other items): necklaces of gold and silver without enamel they may wear as stated in the law, for this is an investment in capital<sup>47</sup>."

Yet while this woman's jewelry is consistent with Florentine fashion of the mid-16th century, her costume is more difficult to decode. Sumptuary laws generally included highly detailed proscriptions regarding dress, yet none of the extensive documentary sources related to the *ornamenta mulierum* describe the sort of dress worn by the woman in this portrait<sup>48</sup>. The sitter's white chemise with simple lace border is consistent with contemporary Flemish garments<sup>49</sup>; however, the way it is worn open and tied in a knot, with a brown garment concealing a green under-shirt, has no precedent in the portraits I have examined. Moreover, the virtuosic veil that covers the head and shoulders and wraps across her neck is a beautiful flourish of painterly bravura, but it is also a highly unusual garment, and it is not clear how the leather straps that descend from both

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42 Hackenbroch 1979, pp. 26-36. See also Florence 2003.

43 For the history of sumptuary laws in Italy, see Killerby 2002.

44 Titi Livy. *Ab urbe condita*, lib. XXXIV, 7; in Livy 1985, p. 437.

45 See Killerby 2002, pp. 111-132.

46 As quoted in Killerby 2002, p. 115.

47 Carnescchi 1902, pp. 12-13, 37-39. The letter in Cosimo's own hand is preserved in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze, milza medicea 615, inserto 19: "In prima vorremo non proibir le perle, cioè un vezzo solo di valor la più di 500 scudi. Questo lo facciamo, perché tutte le gentildonne l'anno. Non vorremo provarle; d'oro e d'argento non smaltato potessin portarne come la legge dice, perché questo è un mantenere il capitale." Translated in Hackenbroch 1979, p. 26.

48 For an overview, see Rainey 1991.

49 See Cornelis de Zeeuw, *Pierre de Moucheron et sa famille*, portrait of 1563, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; ill. in Philippot 1965, p. 182, fig. 13.





12. Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572)  
*Portrait of Eleonora di Toledo*, 1543  
Oil on panel, 46 x 59 cm  
Národní Galerie, Prague

her shoulders function. The costume appears to be that of a huntress, possibly suggesting that this might be a *portrait historié*, a portrait of a known figure represented as a specific historical type. This tradition of “allegorical” portraiture was well-established in the Renaissance, and Florentine artists including Bronzino painted figures dressed “as” mythological or historical subjects. No prototypes for the *Bust of a Woman with a Veil* have been found, however, and the absence of a crescent moon, a quiver, or any arrows seems to exclude identification with Diana, the most frequently depicted huntress<sup>50</sup>.

## A question of status

The status of women in both Florentine and Flemish society in the 16th century has been the subject of important recent studies<sup>51</sup>. The art historian Patricia Simons has associated the stereotyped lack of individuality in many images of Florentine women with the subservient role of women in the male-dominated society, famously interpreting the conventions of profile portraiture with the voyeuristic “male gaze”<sup>52</sup>. Yet, as Dale Kent has recently emphasized, art history has done much to revise the image of Renaissance Florentine men as free agents and Florentine women as powerless objects. While it is true that an Italian woman’s destiny was largely controlled by her father, her husband, or the church, and that her rights to own property, inherit, and act in the public sphere were strictly controlled, men, too, were subject to social constraints. Portraits of members of both sexes represent a complex negotiation of, on the one hand, a recognizable person and, on the other, an amalgam of “idealized features and stylized attributes,” to present “a self as defined by society”<sup>53</sup>.

50 See Zerner 1996, pp. 184-201; Fanlo/Legrand 2002.

51 See the ground breaking essay of Kelly 1977 ; also the collection of essays Hutson 1999 and Thomas 2003; for Antwerp, see Kittell/Suydam 2004.

52 See Simons 1992, Simons 1995.

53 Kent 2001, p. 26, *passim*.



13. Anonymous, Flemish  
*Bust of a Woman with a Veil*, c. 1550-1570  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Infrared reflectography

Technical evidence reveals that a complex negotiation of the real and the ideal took place during the process of painting the *Bust of a Woman with a Veil*. The infrared and x-radiograms produced during recent analysis demonstrate that a startlingly different face lies beneath the painted surface [fig. 13]. Although the woman's basic features remain recognizable, significant changes were introduced between the earlier conceptions of the portrait and the final image. These had a profound effect on the representation of the sitter, whose individuality has been sacrificed to notions of beauty current in contemporary Florentine portraiture<sup>54</sup>. Most noticeably, the woman's distinctive nose has been smoothed and elongated in order to conform to contemporary fashion. Her chin and cheeks have been rounded, and her hairline pushed ever higher. Her slightly uneven eyes are clearly recognizable in both images, but they have been given a rounder, softer shape in the final picture. Taken together, these modifications not only make the sitter look older and more mature; they also give her the appearance of an idealized Florentine woman whose likeness was modified in response to the more lavish portraits of members of the Medici court such as Bronzino's aforementioned *Portrait of Eleanora di Toledo* [fig. 12], in which the artist modulated features and played with tonal values so that the sitter's face appears unusually pale and almost ivory-like, an outward manifestation of her inner grace<sup>55</sup>.

One result of this process of idealization is that the *Bust of a Woman with a Veil* now closely resembles images of Bianca Capello (1548-1587), the famed mistress and then wife of Grand Duke Francesco de' Medici, seen here in a delicate, life-size portrait on copper by Alessandro Allori, now in Florence [fig. 14]<sup>56</sup>. In this portrait we see that Bianca's famed red hair has been pushed far back and her deep brown eyes peer

54 On the conventions of Florentine portraits of women at this time, see Cropper 1986.

55 Compare, for instance, the famous portraits by Bronzino of Eleanora di Toledo (1543, Národní Galerie, Prague) [fig. 12] and Eleanora di Toledo and her son Giovanni (ca. 1544-1545; oil on panel, 115 x 96 cm; Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, no. 748); Campbell 1990, p. 27.

56 For the Allori portrait, see Giovannoni 1991, pp. 305-306, no. 191, figs. 426, 427. The reverse of the copperplate is painted with a copy of a drawing of the *Sogno della vita umana* after the drawing by Michelangelo in the Courtauld Institute, London (inv. no. D.1978.PG.424), which was disseminated in a print by Béatrizet; see London 2010, no. 14. A similar portrait formerly considered to be Bianca Capello and attributed to a follower of Bronzino is in the National Gallery, London (inv. no. NG 2085; oil on panel, 58.7 x 49.6 cm); see Gould 1975, p. 46.



14. Alessandro Allori (1535-1607)  
*Portrait of Bianca Capello*, c. 1578  
Oil on copper, 37 x 27 cm  
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence  
Inv. no. 1890, 1514

directly out. Her right eye is slightly larger and less focused than her left, and her round face glows with delicate touches of white and red in the cheeks which are offset by the subtle shadow caused by her slightly protruding chin. Bianca Capello, born to one of the wealthiest families in Venice in 1548 and famed for her beauty, became a mythic figure in Florentine history, and the legendary story of her life served as the subject of several famous dramas. She married a young Florentine, Pietro Bonaventuri, and moved to Florence in 1563, but later attracted the attention of Francesco de' Medici, son of Grand Duke Cosimo I who was at the time married to Joanna of Austria. Following the latter's death, Francesco and Bianca married against the objections of Cardinal Ferdinand, Francesco's older brother<sup>57</sup>. Legend has it that when Bianca failed to produce an heir, she despaired of her fate should Francesco predecease her. The two lovers died mysteriously on the same day in 1587 at Poggio a Caiano. Rumors ran wild about a possible poisoning, and as recently as 2006 a medical study was conducted on the couple's remains to test for the actual cause of death<sup>58</sup>. In a lost panel [fig. 15]<sup>59</sup> that has been attributed to both Bronzino and Allori, Bianca Capello captures the viewer's gaze with arresting eyes that are similar to those of the *Bust of a Woman with a Veil*. While these comparisons are not sufficient to identify the sitter of this portrait as Bianca Capello, the resemblance indicates that

57 On Bianca Capello, see *Dizionario biografico...* 1960-, vol. 10 (1968), pp. 15-16. I am grateful to Eve Straussman-Pflanzer, of the Art Institute of Chicago, for discussing images of Bianca Capello with me. Bianca's wedding was commemorated in a series of prints by Raffaello Gualterotti entitled: *Feste Nelle Nozze Del Serenissimo Don Francesco Medici Gran Duca Di Toscana : Et della Sereniss. sua Consorte la Sig. Bianca Capello* (Firenze : Giunti, 1579). Bianca Capello's story inspired several works of fiction, including: Thomas Middleton. *Women Beware Women* (1657). Modesto Rastrelli. *Bianca Capello, tragedia* (Firenze : Giovacchino Pagani, 1792); Primo Vignoli. *Notte Fatale, Drama* (Bologna : Nicola Zanichelli, 1947); Paul Paraire. *Bianca (La Circé vénitienne); tragédie en 5 actes* (Paris : Éditions du Scorpion, 1959).

58 See Mari... [et al.] 2006; Mari... [et al.] 2007.

59 Sold 29 March 1930, Canessa Sale, American Art Association, New York, cat. no. 95.



15. Anonymous, Florence  
*Portrait of Bianca Capello, Duchess de' Medici*  
 Present whereabouts unknown

the woman represented in the Bilbao painting, or the commissioner of her portrait (probably her husband), desired an image that would allude to powerful Florentine prototypes and conform to contemporary ideals of beauty and decorum.

There is one feature, however, that distinguishes the *Bust of a Woman with a Veil* from the representations of many of her Florentine contemporaries: the diaphanous and delicate veil that surrounds her head. By the mid-16th century, veils appeared most frequently in religious images, especially of the Virgin, yet there are also important, albeit slightly earlier precedents for portraying female sitters veiled. The most famous, perhaps, is Raphael's so-called *La Donna Velata (Woman with a Veil)* in Florence [fig. 16]. The composition is loosely based on Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (who also wears a transparent veil), but the tactile treatment of fabric and flesh recall contemporary advances in Venetian portraiture, and these effects combine to create a life-like image that Vasari, the first to describe the painting, called "a most beautiful portrait, which seemed really alive"<sup>60</sup>. While Vasari considered the sitter to be Raphael's mistress, *La Fornarina* (the baker's daughter), the woman is now generally regarded as a wealthy Roman precisely because of her sumptuous veil, a popular feature in Roman costume at the time<sup>61</sup>.

Yet in contrast to Raphael's painting, the veil in the Bilbao portrait is transparent. Earlier images of the Madonna frequently show her with a transparent veil. In secular portraiture, however, the motif had more

60 Vasari 1966-, vol. IV, p. 190: "un ritratto bellissimo, che pareva viva viva."

61 See Carol Plazzotta in Chapman 2004, pp. 278-279, no. 101. See also Wittkower 1963, pp. 165-169.





16. Rafael (Raffaello Sanzio) (1483-1520)  
*La Donna Velata*, 1514-1515  
Oil on canvas, 82 x 60.5 cm  
Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence  
Inv. no. 245

nuanced associations that may be traced to antiquity. The Roman historian Tacitus recounts that Sabena Poppaea, the second wife of Emperor Nero, rarely appeared in public, but when she did it was with her face half-veiled “so as not quite to satiate the beholder, or, possibly, because it so became her<sup>62</sup>.” While the most celebrated Renaissance “portraits” of Sabina Poppea have an erotic charge lacking in the Bilbao work, these paintings indicate that contemporary viewers might have had a range of responses to a woman wearing such a garment<sup>63</sup>. Bronzino experimented with the properties of a diaphanous veil in his exceptional portrait of the poetess Laura Battiferri (Florence, Palazzo Vecchio, inv. no. MCF-LOE 1933-17), who appears in profile, wearing modest jewelry, and holding open a book of Petrarch’s sonnets in praise of his Laura, an allusion both to Laura Battiferri’s name and to her profession<sup>64</sup>. As in the Bilbao painting, Bronzino’s treatment of the transparent cloth is not only a technical *tour de force*; it is also a subtle metaphor for the sitter’s interiority.

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62 Tacitus, *Annales*, XIII.XLV: “rarus in publicum egressus, idque velata parte oris, ne satiare aspectum, vel quia sic decebat.” In Tacitus, vol. V, trans. John Jackson (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1937; Loeb Classic Library 332).

63 On the portrait, see Sylvie Béguin in Paris 1972, pp. 213-214, no. 241.

64 Cropper 2010, pp. 248-249, fig. 91.

## The Antwerp context

In the bustling Antwerp metropolis, women enjoyed comparatively greater freedom than in Florence. They participated in spheres of public and commercial life, and they often amassed large collections of art either through their husbands or as their own agents<sup>65</sup>. As Guicciardini noted, women who engaged in commerce in Antwerp were accorded many liberties that they did not have elsewhere, certainly not in his native Florence. It is possible to sense Guicciardini's surprise, and perhaps that of his Tuscan audience, when he wrote about the freedoms women found in the mercantile life of Antwerp:

But in this land, if the woman does not engage in mercantile commerce, as many do, she is not beholden to the debts of her husband, but rather her husband is beholden to the wife's debts, both for debts incurred before marriage and for those that she made after. But the woman, without the permission and license of the husband, cannot take on debts when buying or selling outside of the shop, except for those women who engage freely in the market<sup>66</sup>.

While recent scholarship has underscored the continued legal limitations women faced in Antwerp, it is generally agreed that Guicciardini's observations pointed to the unusual degree of freedom Antwerp women commanded: they were often given superior education and became active members of the mercantile society, even if the law still considered them generally subservient to men<sup>67</sup>. Women also held cultural agency through religious communities including the Beguines, who commissioned many works of art from leading artists<sup>68</sup>.

The woman in *Bust of a Woman with a Veil* is not shown with any attributes of commerce, although her self-confidence suggests a public persona. Netherlandish artists from Floris's workshop were adept at probing the genre of the female portrait, balancing conventions of representation with a desire for individuality. As we have seen, the direct, frontal depiction of women was something in which Floris specialized by translating the rhetorical postures his contemporary Antonis Mor used to represent royalty into a more popular pictorial language for the Antwerp merchant classes. While the *Bust of a Woman with a Veil* is too fine to be by Floris's hand and probably dates to the end of his career or shortly after his death, the careful balance between public and private identity, between convention and individuality, reflect Floris's innovative treatment of the genre.

The mystery of this painting extends to its modern history as well. We do not know how the panel came to the collection of Manuel Taramona y Díaz de Entresotos, who was born 12 February 1872 in Casco Viejo, Bilbao Old Town, and died 23 August 1933. Don Manuel was an important industrialist in the Basque region, elected deputy to the Congreso de los Diputados seven times from 1910 until 1923<sup>69</sup>. He deserves an important place in the history of the industrialization of the Basque country for his promotion of the rubber industry in the region and for serving as one of the "Representantes de Industria" on the Comisión Nacional Asesora Patronal y Obrera<sup>70</sup>. He was chosen as the first president of Firestone Spain just before his death<sup>71</sup>.

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65 Aert 2006, pp. 297-313; more generally, the essays in Hanawalt 1986. The fundamental study of Antwerp's commercial ascendancy remains Braudel 1979.

66 "Ma in questa terra, se la donna non traffica mercantilmente, come pur fanno molte, non è obligate a' debiti del marito, ma il marito è ben obligato a' debiti della moglie, tanto a quelli che ella havesse fatti innanzi al matrimonio quanto a quelli che ella facesse dopo. Ma la donna senza permissione et licenza del marito non si può obligare, salvo quelle che esercitano liberalmente la mercatura, comperando et vendendo fuor di bottega." Guicciardini 1567, p. 108.

67 Vandenbroeck 1991; Howell 1998.

68 See Simons 2001.

69 He represented the Fracción liberal for the district of Torrijos (Toledo, district 245). The Liberales held the majority of the chamber in 1910 (ministerio Canalejas) with 229 votes and again in 1923, a year of great upheaval within the party (ministerio García Prieto) with 200 of 417 seats; see Romero [n.d.], p. 115, passim.

70 Don Manuel served on this committee under the term of Presidente V. Inocencio Juménez Vicente; see Instituto Nacional de Previsión... 1932, no. 317, p. 19.



Together with his wife Mercedes Basabe y Cotoner of Getxo (Bizkaia)<sup>72</sup>, Don Manuel amassed an important collection that demonstrates a broad interest in both local and international art. Mercedes Basabe y Cotoner donated part of the couple's collection to the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum in 1943 and left further works when she died without issue in 1953. This collection constitutes an important core group of works in the museum and includes Spanish, Dutch, French and Italian paintings, sculptures, and tapestries as well as drawings and an important group of small bronze antiquities, many representing deities worshiped in the region during Roman occupation<sup>73</sup>.

Little is known about where Don Manuel and Doña Mercedes acquired their art. One of their most celebrated acquisitions was a series of four panels attributed to the Master of San Nicolás, a Spanish artist of the latter half of the 15th century who incorporated Flemish motifs and techniques into his work<sup>74</sup>. An interesting anecdote relates that the composer Richard Strauss also acquired a work by this master depicting the *Dance of Salomé*, but the location of his painting remains unknown<sup>75</sup>. In contrast to this famous work, the *Bust of a Woman with a Veil* received little attention when it was first shown, and only two reviews of the 1954 exhibition of the Taramona-Basabe bequest mention the picture as "Cabeza de Mujer" without further comment<sup>76</sup>.

The *Bust of a Woman with a Veil* remains surrounded by mystery. Our research has not uncovered this woman's identity, or that of the artist who painted her. Yet technical evidence demonstrates that this painting was made by a Netherlandish artist who attentively studied conventions of contemporary Florentine art to produce a likeness that combines elements of the Netherlandish and Italian traditions. As a portrait, this enigmatic work celebrates the public persona of a woman largely freed from the most restrictive conventions of her day, although scientific analysis reveals the extent to which her most distinctive features were modified to conform to contemporary ideals of beauty. Renaissance portraiture eludes easy categorization and, as Elizabeth Cropper has noted, "the image reflected in the mirror is grasped only by the self, which the face both betrays and masks"<sup>77</sup>. A follower of Floris would have been singularly suited to capture the character and grace of a woman who straddled the distinct cultures of Antwerp and Florence, leaving for posterity an object as intriguing as the subject he portrayed.

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71 González García 1998, pp. 187-193.

72 Doña Mercedes Basabe y Cotoner descended from the Cotoner family. Her forebear Don Marcos Antonio Cotoner y Sureda was granted the title of Marqués de Arainy on 13 January 1717. The family's history and armorials are described in *Estudios genealógicos y heráldicos...* 1985-, vol. I, pp. 284-285 s. v. Casa de Basabe.

73 These statues, most originating in Hispania Citerior and Hispania Ulterior, will be the object of a future study to be published in this Bulletin. On the arts of Roman Spain, see Hübner 1888.

74 See Galilea 1995, pp. 217-231. The paintings were attributed to Jorge Inglés by Sterling 1976, pp. 497-525.

75 The painting was lent by the Strauss family to the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen from 1957 until 1976, when it was returned to the family. Its present whereabouts are not known. I am grateful to Dr. Andrea Bambi, Chief Curator of the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich, for providing me with this information. The work is illustrated in Post 1933, p. 265, fig. 92. The anecdote was mentioned in one of the reviews of the first exhibition of the Taramona-Basabe Bequest in *Hierro*, 8 February 1954, p. 9: "Exposición de obras del Legado Taramona-Basabe".

76 "Exposición de obras del Legado Taramona-Basabe," *Hierro*, 8 February 1954, p. 9; "Exposición de las obras legadas por la familia Taramona-Basabe," *El Correo Español — El Pueblo Vasco*, 9 February 1954, p. 2.

77 Cropper 1986, p. 175.

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