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Exhibition note

by Mario Naves

On “Moroni: The Riches of Renaissance Portraiture” at the Frick Collection, New York.

We all know the Mona Lisa. Leonardo da Vinci’s portrait of Lisa del Giocondo is among the most recognizable images in the history of world art, perhaps the most recognizable. Has it been altogether proved that del Giocondo was the sitter? Historical accuracy is important, but it’s clear that verifiable fact—or its fuzziness—hasn’t stifled the painting’s allure. Ambiguity is woven into the fabric of the image, just as it is in *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, another portrait of an unknown and, in many respects, unknowable personality. Vermeer’s masterwork belongs to a subgenre of art I call “The Almost Mona Lisa”: portraits of women whose identities are obscured by history, but whose presence remains indelible and undeniable. Other examples are Raphael’s *La Fornarina* and Parmigianino’s *Antea (Portrait of a Young Woman)*—both of which were subjects of past exhibitions at the Frick, as was *Girl with a Pearl Earring*—along with Giorgione’s *Portrait of a Young Bride (Laura)* and *Portrait of a Young Girl* by the Netherlandish artist Petrus Christus. Add to this far-from-encyclopedic list *Portrait of a Young Woman* (ca. 1575) by the Italian painter Giovanni Battista Moroni (1520/24–1579/80).



Giovanni Battista Moroni, Portrait of a Young Woman, ca. 1575, Oil on canvas, Private collection.

Portrait of a Young Woman is the centerpiece of “Moroni: The Riches of Renaissance Portraiture” and is installed with appropriate emphasis—smack dab in the center of the Frick’s oval gallery. Appropriate but not ideal. The Moroni canvas, measuring less than two feet in both height and width, has been cordoned off, presumably due to safety and conservation concerns. Fans of painting can expect to be frustrated, because close inspection of the picture’s surface is impossible. And inspection is inseparable from delectation—as is made clear from the rest of the paintings, which one can nose right up to. And, boy, is it worth nosing up: Moroni is a paint-handler of rare dexterity and astonishing variety, a virtuoso deserving of the name. Whether his brush alights upon flesh or fabric, or gives shape and fullness to pictorial space, Moroni applies oils with a

suppleness that is documentary in focus and sensual in effect. Titian is said to have considered Moroni's skills as a portraitist superior to his own. Given the distinctiveness of character evident in *Portrait of a Young Woman*—an individual of keen intelligence and no little skepticism—you can't help but think this apocryphal footnote is God's honest truth.

“**T**he Riches of Renaissance Portraiture” is the first major show of Moroni's art mounted in North America. It hasn't come soon enough. A few years back, the Met hosted “Bellini, Titian, and Lotto: North Italian Paintings from the Accademia Carrara, Bergamo,” an exhibition in which two Moroni works, *Portrait of a Little Girl of the Redetti Family* (ca. 1570) and *Portrait of a Twenty-Nine-Year-Old Man* (1567), stole the thunder from the title luminaries. Coming across the stern rectitude of Bartolomeo Bonghi (1553) in the permanent collection of the Met prompts a similar head-turning. No mere gallery-filler is Moroni. He's a master who has been given short shrift almost from the get-go. Writing in 1648, Carlo Ridolfi, the artist's biographer, claimed that while Moroni “can only be praised,” his art lacked “the vivacity of his genius, being obliged to imitation.” Note Moroni's absence from *The Lives of the Artists*. Did Vasari consider him too much of a bumpkin, ensconced, as Moroni was, in either Bergamo or his native Albino? Closer to our time, the art historian and connoisseur Bernard Berenson flatly dismissed Moroni as an “uninventive” painter who “gives us sitters no doubt as they looked.” Yeah, well: even the most discerning eye can mistake a master for a journeyman.



Giovanni Battista Moroni, The Tailor, ca. 1570, Oil on canvas, The National Gallery, London.

Lucky for us, the exhibition organizers—Aimee Ng, Associate Curator at the Frick; Simone Facchinetti, Curator at the Museo Adriano Bernareggi in Bergamo; and Arturo Galansino, Director General at the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence—know what they’ve got in the bag. “The Riches of Renaissance Portraiture” features twenty-three Moroni canvases, along with an array of objects that elaborate upon the work’s costumery, props, and settings. These include a sixteenth-century Spanish pendant, a marble sculpture of a male nude *circa* second-century Rome, a bejeweled marten’s head from sixteenth-century Venice, and a pair of iron shears from sixteenth-century France. The latter are displayed in proximity to *The Tailor* (ca. 1570), the painting considered

Moroni's signature work. Unlike the upstanding men and fine ladies typical of the genre, here is a tradesman caught both at work and in a moment of reflection. There continues to be discussion as to what, exactly, the social standing of the title figure might have been, but the class consciousness of the picture was remarked upon early on. In the 1660 poem honoring Venetian painting, *Le Carta del navigar pitoresco*, the artist and engraver Marco Boschini praised *The Tailor* as being "so beautiful and well painted that he's more eloquent than a lawyer."

The Tailor is a fine picture, but privilege and power—with their finery, opulence, and arrogance—gave Moroni license to delve into the sumptuousness of the material world. Fabric, especially, prompted consummate painterly extravagance. Really, try taking in the gown worn by *Lucia Albani Avogadro* (ca. 1554–57) or the elaborately patterned raiment of *Isotta Brembati* (ca. 1555–56) without undergoing palpitations. When subtlety was called for, Moroni was no less formidable. Only Frans Hals and Velázquez used black with as much nuance, and it is seen at the Frick in stunning abundance. Attention to the tactility of things is matched by Moroni's skill at navigating character. Though he's no Rembrandt in terms of empathy or acuity, Moroni did possess a distinct gift for locating the willfulness typical of our species. Haven't we all had to suffer the confident impetuosity inherent in *Bust Portrait of a Young Man with an Inscription* (ca. 1560)? The lone off-note in the exhibition is a trio of "sacred portraits," wherein wealthy patrons are pictured alongside devotional imagery; the contrivance of these compositions is overplayed and will strike contemporary viewers as self-aggrandizing and silly. Otherwise, make no mistake: "The Riches of Renaissance Portraiture" is what it says, and, as such, qualifies as a prize.



Giovanni Battista Moroni, Bust Portrait of a Young Man with an Inscription, ca. 1560, Oil on canvas, The National Gallery, London.

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