

Keith Christiansen and Stefan Weppelmann, eds. *The Renaissance Portrait: From Donatello to Bellini*.

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*The Renaissance Portrait from Donatello to Bellini*, edited by Keith Christiansen and Stefan Weppelmann, is what remains of an extraordinarily beautiful exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in winter of 2012. The two organizing institutions, the Metropolitan and the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, each of which has its own rich collection of portraits, were able to combine their clout to ensure some spectacular loans.

The exhibition, which was limited to Italian works of the fifteenth century, brought together portraits by most of the major artists in this genre, often works from obscure locations that many viewers would not otherwise get to see, such as the early male profile from Chambéry, attributed here to Domenico Veneziano, with the remarkable inscription *EL FIN FA TUTTO*, “the end makes all,” signifying probably that “death is the great equalizer” (cat. 4), and, from Budapest, Gentile Bellini’s portrait of Caterina Cornaro, the Queen of Cyprus.

The exhibition also had the great merit of including works in different media beside painting: many bronze medals, primarily by Pisanello but including the dazzling loan from Vienna of Gian Cristoforo Romano’s medal for Isabella d’Este in gold studded with diamonds; marble, terracotta, and brass sculpture busts; miniatures from codices; a stucco death mask; and a group of large black chalk portrait drawings, variously attributed to Mantegna, Giovanni Bellini, and Bonsignori.

One of the features of this exhibition and catalog was its occasional juxtaposition of several images, often in different media, of the same sitter, such as a drawing, a medal, and the stucco death mask of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Being able, for instance, to compare the more informal terracotta model (Berlin) created, presumably from life, in preparation for the more official bust in marble of Filippo Strozzi (Paris) was very rewarding. Sometimes, however, the organizers’ enthusiasm for comparison led to the display of works that did not seem worthy of inclusion, such as the marble bust of a boy attributed to Gian Cristoforo Romano from the Metropolitan’s own collection (cat. 130) or the bronze bust of the Neapolitan humanist Giovanni Gioviano Pontano attributed to Adriano Fiorentino from Genoa (cat. 135).

What kind of Quattrocento portrait did the Met show construct? The most recent previous exhibition of Renaissance portraiture, seen in London and Madrid in 2008, organized the works by chronology and theme. In many ways, the presentation here was old-fashioned, given that the focus was on the artists’ city of origin, or what used to be called schools: Florence, the Northern Courts, Naples, Rome, and Venice, in that sequence. Florence, which was given the most space in the show and the catalog, came off as the city that produced the most exciting works, starting as it did with the remarkable loan of Donatello’s *San Rossore*, a reliquary bust in gilded bronze that was presented as playing a pivotal role between the medieval reliquary bust and the Renaissance portrait bust.

The city that was least well represented in the exhibition was the last, that of Venice. Despite the magnificent male head by Giambono and the beautiful one of San Bernardino by Jacopo Bellini (cats. 139 and 140), the portraits in the Venetian room seemed diminished in comparison with the other exhibited works. Even the Antonellos and Giovanni Bellinis appeared of lesser quality, perhaps due to their small scale. As it happens, this scale was more or less identical to that of Mantegna’s portrait of Francesco Gonzaga from the 1460s, which in turn is precisely the same dimensions as Pisanello’s profile likeness of Leonello d’Este from the 1440s, suggesting that one aspect of the latter’s output continued to influence North Italian work through the end of the century.

It was plausibly presumed that the saint's image in Donatello's *San Rossore* was based on the features of an existing individual. But not every portrait in the show necessarily referred to a living human being. This statement was particularly relevant to such works as Botticelli's fantasy beauties sporting elaborately bejeweled hairstyles with added ornamental hair pieces that, it is suggested, may have been intended to visualize "humanistic formulations of ideal beauty" (cats. 19 and 20).

This comprehensive catalog, which includes some excellent essays, cannot be too highly praised. It is an indispensable resource for anyone seriously interested in the invention and evolution of the Quattrocento Italian portrait, with the most up to date bibliography, and many judicious entries, especially those by its New York organizer, Christiansen.

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