

TURNING HEADS

TURNING

KMSKA

HEADS

HANNIBAL

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Tronies displayed a wide variety of facial expressions. Representations of basic emotions such as joy, fear, anger and sadness, they could also include odd character traits. It was believed that viewers would experience the same emotions they saw portrayed.

(DETAIL FIG. 86)
Peter Paul Rubens,
Head Study of a Man,
s.d., oil on panel,
Liechtenstein Museum
Vienna, GE II3





TRONIES

An Introduction to their Character and Origins

Koen Bulckens & Nico Van Hout

This book is about 'tronies' in paintings such as Rembrandt's *The Laughing Man* (Fig. 11). Tronies zoom in on a face, depicted against a monochrome background. They are mostly small pictures, meaning the heads are life-size or smaller, and appear to be painted from a live model. Lastly, and most importantly, the identity of the sitter is irrelevant in a tronie: Rembrandt based this picture on his own likeness, for example, posing before a mirror as he painted. His main aim, however, was for the work not to be recognised as his self-portrait. In pictures such as *The Laughing Man*, the real subject is the face itself, its form and expressive powers.

The term 'tronie' has a wide currency and poses no problem in generalised statements, such as those above. Its precise definition, however, has been the cause of much debate.¹ The features of a genre can be notoriously difficult to define, and this is especially true here. There are pictures which could pass as a tronie, as well as something else, such as a genre painting with a single figure. Other works greatly resemble tronies but deviate from the

format in one crucial aspect. These problems of categorisation are, in part, related to disagreement about where and when tronies originated, and which works can therefore serve as their prime examples.

This essay seeks to bring clarity to both issues. The first part explores the characteristics of the genre. We shall explore tronies in relation to other painted faces – such as portraits, head studies, and history and genre paintings – highlighting the differences and similarities between them, as well as issues in interpreting them. In so doing, we map several grey areas around the category 'tronies'. This is, in our view, more valuable than defining it in terms of black and white. The second part studies the origin of tronies. The majority of publications place this in the early seventeenth century, when tronies suddenly flooded the art market of the Dutch Republic. We believe, however, that significant precedents were painted earlier, in sixteenth-century Antwerp. For the first time, we integrate these works into a wider history of the genre.

(DETAIL FIG. 11)
Rembrandt,
The Laughing Man,
1629–1630, oil on
copper, Mauritshuis,
The Hague, 598

Character

A Recent Problem

Before diving into the troubled definition of tronies it should be noted that this matter is a relatively recent phenomenon. From the late Middle Ages until the nineteenth century the word simply meant 'face' in Dutch.² The term also had a broad and uncomplicated meaning in early modern sources on art, including correspondence, court cases, or inventories of art collections. In these contexts, 'tronie' referred to any sculpted, printed, but most often painted depiction of the human face. These included heads of peasants, fools and soldiers, as well as apostles, emperors or figures from classical mythology. They could be preparatory studies intended for use inside the workshop, as well as proper art works which would be displayed in picture galleries. There was no specific definition of the genre in contemporary art theory, which in itself is significant. Though they were popular and at times figured in esteemed collections, tronies were not considered the most ambitious form of painting.³

In the twentieth century, this broad definition posed a problem for art historians. Some painted faces had a function or meaning which was clearly different from others. This prompted scholars to devise a workable version of the concept. In this process, tronies were juxtaposed with other painted faces – specifically portraits, head studies, and single-figure history paintings and genre paintings – aiming to articulate each category precisely.⁴ Since the artists who painted these faces did not follow theorised formulae, however, some of these distinctions would have made little sense to them. Whereas the early modern notion of a tronie was extremely inclusive, we may now have swung too far the other way.

The Many Faces of Abraham Grapheus

As noted above, we do not believe that it is productive to aim to decide definitively on the border between tronies and their alleged opposites. Instead, we shall pursue a more nuanced analysis of their relationship. For this purpose, we refer to a range of depictions of one sitter, Abraham Grapheus. Grapheus was the messenger of the Antwerp Guild of Saint Luke and, in this capacity, a well-known figure in the city's art world. He also regularly modelled for painters in different types of pictures. In the paragraphs which follow, different genres of images of Grapheus's face are juxtaposed with what is here considered a tronie of him by Anthony van Dyck (Fig. 1).⁵ We start with simple distinctions before moving on to more complex issues of categorisation.



FIG. 1

Anthony Van Dyck, with additions by Jacques Jordaens the Elder, *An Apostle with Folded Hands*, c. 1618–20, oil on paper laid on panel, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, 790F

Tronies are Not Portraits⁶

Portraits are the most broadly known paintings of faces. They preserve the likeness of a specific individual. We find them in different media in cultures across time and space. In European Old Master paintings, portraits followed a range of conventions and codes with regard to pose, costume and attributes. These aspects all contributed to fashioning the subject's identity for posterity. The portrait of Abraham Grapheus by Cornelis de Vos shows these dynamics at play (Fig. 9). The work was painted for the chambers of the Antwerp Guild of Saint Luke, where artists gathered and held their banquets. Grapheus is wearing a fine ruff and proudly boasts the Guild's silver on his chest. His pose, the outward gaze, and one hand holding one of the Guild's golden cups, were carefully crafted to convey an air of spontaneity. The image displays Grapheus as a dignified member of the Guild.

Portraits were generally painted from a live model, the artist copying the sitter's face from nature. The same is true for tronies. Whereas portraits were typically painted on commission from the sitter, tronies were made at the artist's own initiative and for the open market. More importantly, the resulting image had a different meaning. Let us take the tronie of Grapheus (Fig. 1) by Van Dyck as a comparison. Van Dyck in this image abandons the conventions of Old Master portraiture entirely. Viewers consequently would not be concerned with the sitter's social identity, at least not in the first place. Rather, they may have marvelled at how the expression was rendered, and the response this provoked.⁷ Contemporaries also appreciated tronies as the result of artistic skill, resulting in a life-like image sometimes executed in sketchy brushwork, in turn seen as a display of artistic virtuosity.⁸ Lastly, some faces may have served as examples through the connotations they held, such as wisdom or piety.⁹

Portraits are about the 'who', while tronies are about the 'what'.¹⁰ Both genres historically held a different significance and show clear visual differences. Making the distinction poses no problems in the majority of cases, although exceptions exist.¹¹

Tronies are Not Head Studies

Another prevalent type of face painted from life is a head study. Such studies, mostly painted in oils and sketchy brushwork, were made in preparation for larger compositions. The faces were thus inserted into narrative scenes, generally derived from biblical and classical texts. Additionally, head studies were

an important didactical tool in large workshops. Students copied them often over the course of their apprenticeship.

The difference between a head study and a tronie lies in function. Artists made tronies to sell them, after which they would make their way to a collector's gallery. A head study, by contrast, served its ends inside the workshop. In some cases, the difference between a tronie and a head study is clear immediately. *Two Head Studies of Abraham Grapheus* (Fig. 10), for example, due to its composition and extremely rough brushwork, is obviously not a standalone work. With others, such as *Head Study of Abraham Grapheus*, in Douai (Fig. 51), the difference is less apparent. The latter head shows the same vivid manner regularly found in tronies painted for the market, such as our example by Van Dyck. We can be confident, however, that the Douai panel functioned as a head study, since we know several paintings for which it was the prototype.¹²

The resemblance between tronies and head studies brings us to a problem of interpretation. While these works had different purposes for the artists who made them, we cannot always tell them apart. Complicating matters further, one and the same object could also have held both functions. This is in fact believed to have been the case with our Grapheus tronie. The central part of this picture was once a preparatory head study, kept inside the workshop as a model. In a later stage, the support was expanded and the clasped hands were added, so that the study could be sold as an autonomous art work.¹³

Tronies are Not History Paintings

The large compositions in which artists inserted head studies are known as history paintings. History painting was the highest-value good for an early modern artist. Depicting different people convincingly in a pictorial space demanded true artistry, a command of both perspective and anatomy. There also exist what have been labelled 'single-figured history paintings'.¹⁴ Rather than showing multiple figures, these pictures concentrate on one specific character from a story. Sometimes such a figure is shown in a spatial setting, such as the prophet in his cave in Rembrandt's *Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem* (Fig. 102). In other instances the context was omitted, resulting in a half-length or bust depiction against a monochrome background. These figures can be linked to their story by way of costume or attributes. There are several examples of single-figured

history paintings featuring Grapheus as a model.¹⁵ In *The Apostle Peter* (Fig. 3), for example, the keys and yellow and blue cloak give away that he represents Christ's prime apostle. With *The Apostle Andrew* (Fig. 2) the X-shaped cross allows us to identify the depicted disciple.

It should also be noted, however, that apart from the significant attributes or costume elements, tronies and single-figure history paintings resemble one another closely. As was the case with head studies, there emerges an issue of interpretation due to the similarity between both types of picture. Meaningful costumes or attributes are all we have to go on to make the distinction in some cases. If we do not recognise the significance of these elements, therefore, we fail to see the artist's intent.

A man holding keys dressed in blue and yellow unmistakably represents Peter, although the situation is more ambiguous in other works.¹⁶ Incidentally, Van Dyck's Grapheus tronie has been considered a biblical figure by some authors. Like other Antwerp paintings with a figure praying or reading against a dark background, the work has at times been labelled 'an apostle'. This identification would disqualify the painting as a tronie. Due to the absence of attributes, however, we contend that Grapheus in this picture did not represent an apostle for Van Dyck. In this sense it differs, in our view, from single-figure history paintings such as the *Peter* and *Andrew*. It is still worth remembering that Van Dyck himself would have referred to all three works as 'tronies'.

A Concluding Complication: Tronies and Genre Paintings

The relationship between tronies and other categories of picture was relatively straightforward up to this point, although several possible problems around interpretation have been noted. The boundary between tronies and genre paintings discussed in the following paragraphs is more ambiguous. As we shall see, 'genre painting' is like 'tronie', an anachronistic art historical concept. It should therefore be kept in mind that neither category is set in stone.¹⁷

Whereas history paintings imagined great deeds by prominent people, another category of works depicted the everyday lives of common and anonymous folk. These include pictures of fairs or taverns, peasants or fishermen. They were mostly painted on a small scale, while history paintings were large. Different types of paintings from everyday life were first developed in sixteenth-century Antwerp.¹⁸ These were, however, only considered as a group and





FIG. 2
 Attributed to Jacques
 Jordaens, *The Apostle
 Andrew*, (1616–1622),
 oil on panel, private
 collection. Auction
 Vienna, Dorotheum,
 29.04.2014, lot 535

FIG. 3
 Anthony Van Dyck,
The Apostle Peter,
 (1613–1621), oil on
 panel, Hermitage,
 St Petersburg, ??-556

labelled ‘genre paintings’ in the seventeenth century.¹⁹ Genre painting was then ranked lower than history painting as it was believed to be less challenging artistically and to have less moral value. Though the hierarchy of genres has long been abandoned, genre painting has remained the commonplace term for scenes of everyday life.

As with history paintings, one variant of genre paintings has been described as ‘single-figured genre works’. This in turn has different subtypes. Some show the figures in context, like the *Fisher Boy* by Frans Hals (Fig. 4). He is shown at half-length, carrying a fishing net on his shoulder, standing in the dunes which give way to the sea in the distance. In others, we encounter only the figure’s head against a monochrome background, the earliest examples of which were produced in Bruegel’s circle in the sixteenth century. His *Head of a Peasant Woman* (Fig. 13) is a good example. The picture has the compositional focus on the face which is the hallmark of tronies. Nonetheless, scholars differ on the status of such works: some describe them as tronies, while others insist they must be genre paintings.²⁰

The key arguments of the second camp, as in our comparison between tronies and history paintings, concerns the identity of the depicted figures. Tronies and genre paintings are related in their association with anonymous people rather than with famous heroes or rulers. The people they display have no names. A perceived difference between both is that tronies depict real people, while genre paintings show stereotypes of social groups.²¹ We take issue with this distinction, however. Compare, for example, Bruegel’s *Head of a Peasant Woman* to the *Head of a Woman* (Fig. 14) by Michael Sweerts, a picture universally accepted as a tronie.







FIG. 10
Jacques Jordaens
the Elder, *Two Head
Studies of Abraham
Grapheus*, c. 1620–21,
oil on paper, glued on
panel, Museum voor
Schone Kunsten,
Ghent, I899-B



FIG. 11
Rembrandt,
The Laughing Man,
1629–1630, oil on
copper, Mauritshuis,
The Hague, 598



FIG. 12
Adriaen van Ostade,
The Merry Peasant,
c. 1646, oil on panel,
Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam, SK-A-302



FIG. 13
Pieter Bruegel
the Elder, *Head of a
Peasant Woman*, s.d.,
oil on panel, Bayerische
Staatsgemäldesamm-
lungen, Alte Pinakothek,
München, 7057

FIG. 14
Michael Sweerts,
Head of a Woman,
c. 1654, oil on panel,
The J. Paul Getty
Museum, Malibu,
78.PB.259



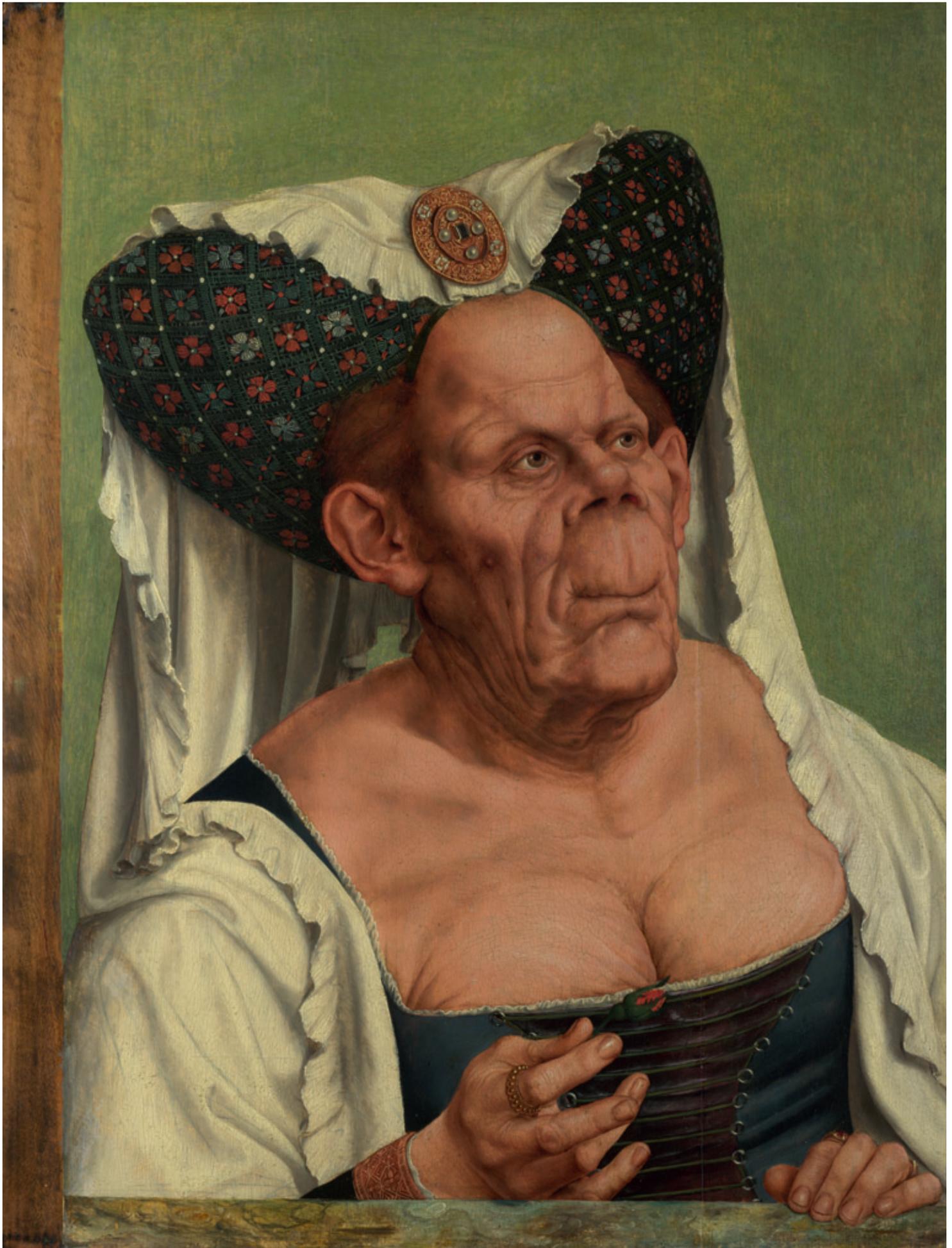




FIG. 15
Quinten Massys,
The Ugly Duchess,
c. 1513, oil on panel,
National Gallery
London, NG5769

FIG. 16
Quinten Massys,
An Old Man,
c. 1513, oil on panel,
private collection,
New York

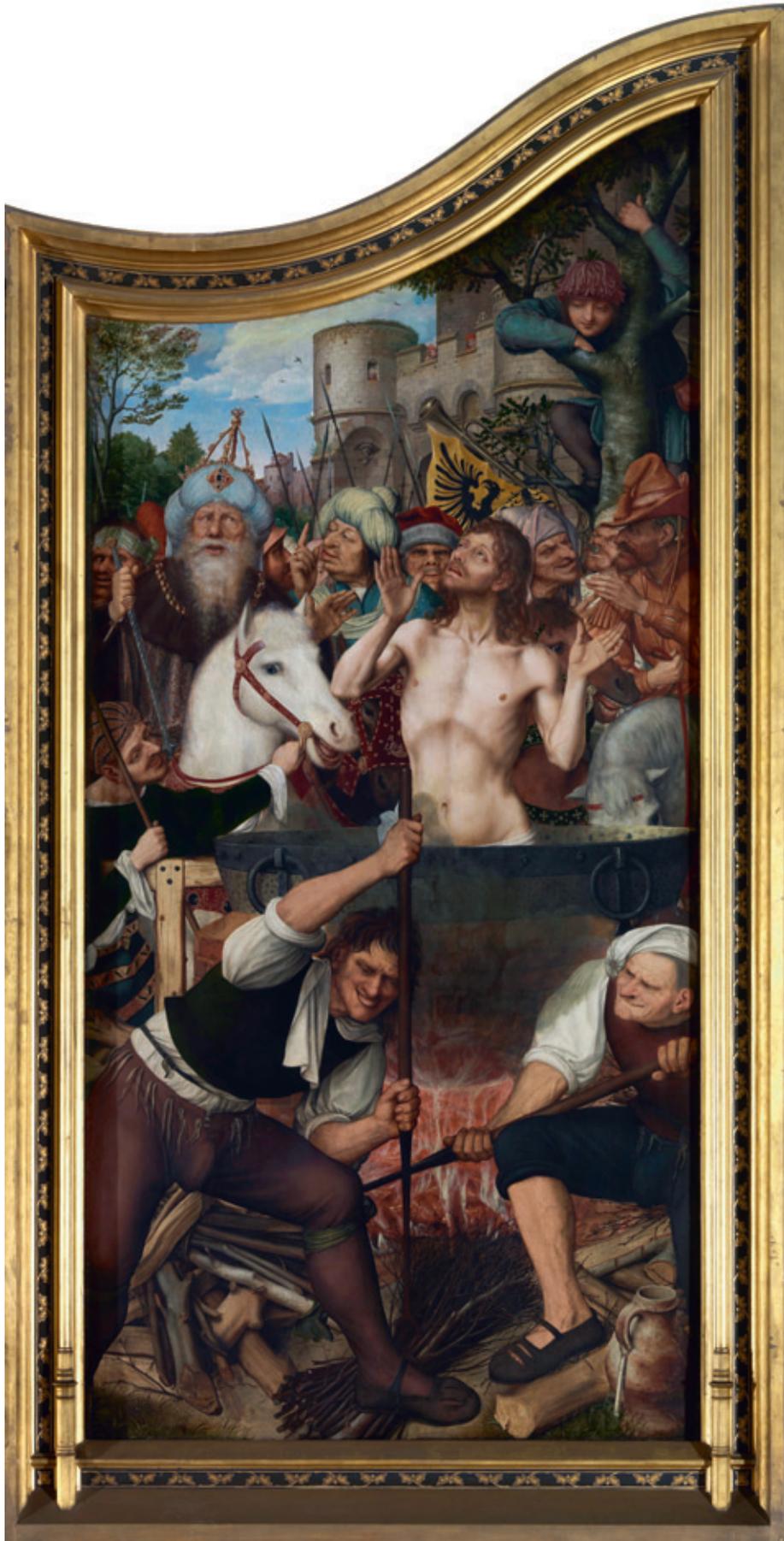


FIG. 17
Quinten Massys,
*The Martyrdom of
Saint John (right wing)*,
(1511), oil on panel,
KMSKA, Antwerp,
inv. 248





HEADS IN HISTORIES

From Likeness to Type in Verrocchio, Leonardo, Dürer, Massys and a Follower of Bosch

Michael W. Kwakkelstein

Among the Old Master drawings preserved at the Royal Library in Turin is a red chalk drawing by Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) depicting the head of an old man with bushy eyebrows, long wavy hair and a flowing beard seen in three-quarter view (Fig. 18). The drawing would never have achieved the status of one of the world's most famous drawings had it not been endlessly published and advertised as the artist's self-portrait during the last years of his life.¹ The melancholy or sorrowful expression of the man represented in the drawing has often led Leonardo's biographers to speculate about his inner life so as to compensate for the fact that his vast written legacy contains very little information about his personal life.² Doubts, however, have sometimes been raised about the identity of the sitter. Some scholars have pointed out that the old man's face bears little resemblance to that of Leonardo in the only known portrait of the artist made from life, while others have argued that it corresponds to a facial type that Leonardo employed in varying contexts throughout his career. Moreover, it has been noted that the style and technique of the drawing suggests a dating not to circa 1515/17, as is commonly assumed, but rather to the 1490s when Leonardo was in his forties.³

Accepting a much earlier date for the drawing than the final years of Leonardo's life makes it indeed difficult to understand why he would have depicted himself as old and bearded at a time when, in Italy, beards were considered "the preserve of the barbarous, Germans, Orientals, figures from ancient history, mythology and biblical times, philosophers, hermits, and penitents."⁴ These are compelling arguments that undermine the idea of a self-portrait that the Milanese painter and author Giuseppe Bossi (1777–1815) had introduced at the beginning of the nineteenth century when the now-famous drawing resurfaced.

Verrocchio: two head types

Leonardo's drawings attest to his special interest in physiognomy and its expressive power. In addition to drawing portraits, of which only a few have survived, Leonardo enjoyed drawing old men and women with monstrous faces in bust-length profile. Though most of these bizarre types are imaginary and are meant to be humorous, some sketches of profile heads that occur amidst his notes reveal a special interest in the physical changes that occur with old age, especially those caused by edentulism.⁵ A third category of head studies consists of drawings

(DETAIL FIG. 28)
Francesco Melzi
(after Leonardo da Vinci), *Head of a Man in Three-quarters to the Right*, s.d., Gallerie dell'Accademia, Gabinetto dei disegni e stampe, Venice, 262

with studies of heads of male and female figures of common or idealised beauty that reveal a close dependence on head types in the work of Leonardo's teacher, the Florentine sculptor Andrea del Verrocchio (1435–1488).

From the beginning of his career as an artist, Leonardo adopted not only Verrocchio's ideal of female beauty, but also his use of two classically inspired antithetical facial types: one representing a youth of epicene beauty, and the other depicting a mature, stern-looking man with an aquiline nose and a prominent chin.⁶ Both types are derived from ancient coins: the handsome youth bears a close resemblance to the profile portrait of Antinous but also to that of Alexander the Great, whereas the stern type of old man is based on the portrait of the aged Emperor Galba.⁷ On a large double-sided sheet with studies of heads in profile, dated to circa 1478, Leonardo illustrated both these classicising types, juxtaposing them to their variants, both male and female, so as to explore the contrasts in facial characteristics due to differences in age (Fig. 19).⁸

Comparable drawing exercises feature a double-sided sheet that once belonged to a Verrocchio sketchbook.⁹ The verso of this sheet includes a large study of the vigorous head of an old man, seen in near frontal view, whose features and expression resemble those of Galba (Fig. 20). On comparing this head study by Verrocchio with the head type that recurs, viewed from different angles, in Leonardo's drawings, it becomes immediately apparent that it reflects a sculptural model, and that this model provided the prototype on which Leonardo based many of his depictions of the Galba type (Fig. 21).¹⁰

Verrocchio employed Galba's aged and vigorous head type mostly for his sculpted figures of warriors – ancient or contemporary.¹¹ Leonardo followed this example but, in his own drawings and paintings, he extended the use of this ancient motif beyond that of the representation of warriors. In so doing, he changed the appearance of the Galba type by either aging a figure up (Fig. 23) or down (Fig. 25), lending it a beard (Fig. 24), giving it a full head of classically curled hair (Fig. 27), or transforming it into an absurdly deformed head (Fig. 29).¹²

Leonardo applied the same method to vary the appearance of the Antinous/Alexander the Great type (Fig. 26). As evidenced by his depictions of, for example, the *Angel of the Annunciation*, known from a copy (Kunstmuseum, Basel), St John the Evangelist in the *Last Supper* (Refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan),



FIG. 18
Leonardo da Vinci,
Self-portrait (?), c. 1490,
1517–1518, red and
black chalk on paper,
Biblioteca Reale,
Turin, D.C. 15571



FIG. 19
Leonardo da Vinci,
Heads in Profile,
c. 1478–80, pen and
ink on paper, The Royal
Collection, Windsor,
RCIN 912276 verso

FIG. 20
Andrea del Verrocchio
and assistant, *Figure
Studies*, s.d., silverpoint,
pen and brown ink and
wash on a pink prepared
paper, National Galleries
of Scotland, Edinburgh,
D642 (verso)

FIG. 21
Leonardo da Vinci,
*Head of a Man in Profile
Facing to the Left*,
1491–1494, pen and
brown ink, over soft
black chalk, The Metro-
politan Museum of Art,
New York, 10.45.1



the *Adoration of the Magi* and that of a figure illustrated in a drawing that has generally been accepted as a preparatory study for the figure of St Peter in the *Last Supper*.¹⁷

Given these considerations regarding Leonardo's design method, the possibility cannot be ruled out that the Turin drawing is indeed a self-portrait, but not one that faithfully records Leonardo's likeness. By advancing the age of the prototype head of Galba and adding long hair, a long beard, bushy eyebrows and a melancholic expression, Leonardo may have had in mind the image of an ancient sage or philosopher, perhaps one he admired or even identified with.¹⁸ The drawing would then represent a study of a type of character comparable to, for example, the type of character Leonardo illustrated in bust-length format in several drawings that have been dated to around 1508/10 (Fig. 24).¹⁹

FIG. 22
Andrea del Verrocchio,
Nude Male, called
'Il Pugilatore' (detail),
s.d., bronze, Museo
Nazionale del Bargello,
Florence, bronzi 288

FIG. 23
Leonardo da Vinci,
The Bust of a Man,
c. 1505–10, red chalk
with touches of
black chalk on pale
red prepared paper,
The Royal Collection,
Windsor, 912503

Leda (The Royal Collection, Windsor, inv. 912518) and *St John the Baptist* (Musée du Louvre, Paris), he used this facial type for both male and female figures. Since these figures share the same youthful age, the differences are primarily marked by varying hairstyles and the direction of the figure's gaze.¹³ The fact that *St John the Baptist's* facial type and expression bear a close resemblance to those of the young woman depicted in the painting known as the *Mona Lisa* (Musée du Louvre, Paris), shows that Leonardo also applied this ideal and interchangeable type to portraiture.¹⁴

Working with two facial stereotypes for his depictions of male figures meant that when Leonardo designed a multi-figure composition such as the *Last Supper*, he achieved variety mostly by juxtaposing heads modelled on the Antinous/Alexander the Great type to those modelled on the Galba type, whose appearance he changed by varying age, facial expression, hair and beard style.¹⁵ That he had previously followed the same procedure for the depiction of the heads of the figures in the *Adoration of the Magi* of 1481 (Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence), supports the view that repetition and adaptation are typical of his design method.¹⁶ It is this working method that explains the close resemblance between, for example, the head and face of the second apostle from the right in the *Last Supper* and that of the old man in the Turin drawing, and between the head of the old man immediately to the right of the Christ Child in

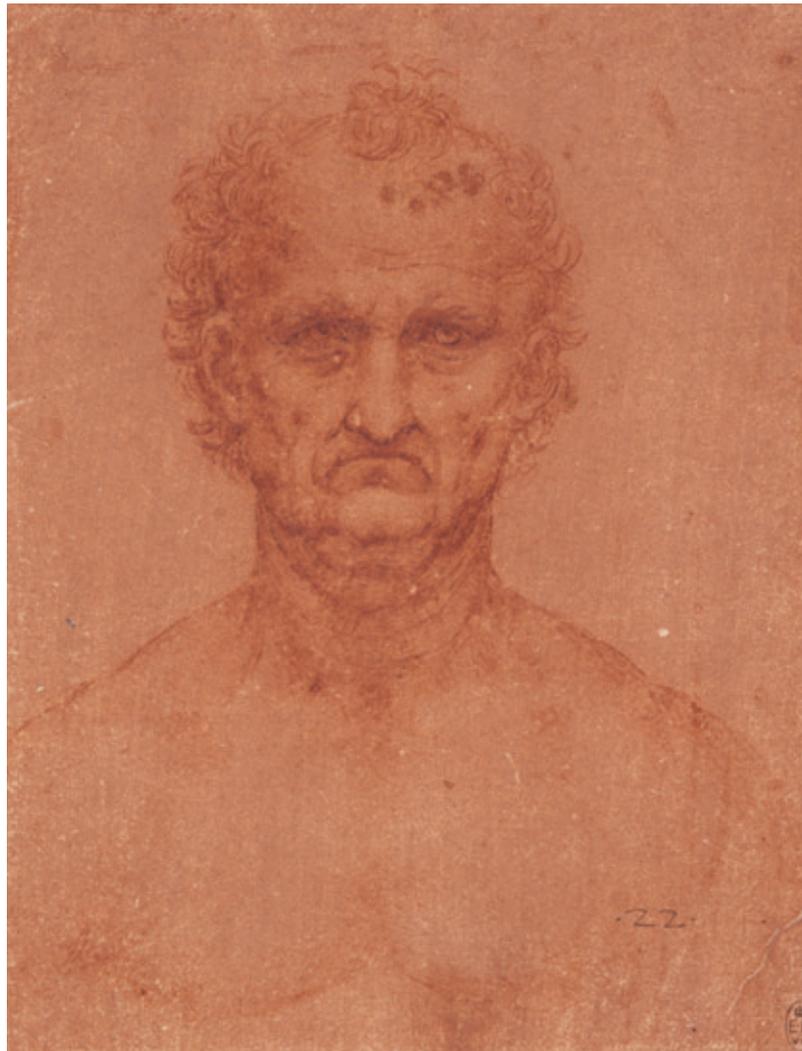




FIG. 24
Leonardo da Vinci,
*Half-length figure of
an Apostle*, 1493–1495,
silverpoint, pen and
brown ink on a blue pre-
pared paper, Graphische
Sammlung Albertina,
Vienna, 17614

COLOPHON

This publication accompanies the exhibition *Turning Heads – Bruegel, Rubens and Rembrandt* from 20 October 2023 to 24 January 2024 at the KMSKA, Antwerp, and *Turning Heads* from 24 February to 26 May 2024 at the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

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Binding
Brepols, Turnhout, Belgium

Publisher
Gautier Platteau

ISBN 978 94 6466 678 6
D/2023/11922/61
NUR 646

HANNIBAL

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The exhibition was made possible thanks to the support of the exhibition partners



and many others

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Joos van Craesbeeck,
The Smoker [detail], 1630–1640,
oil on canvas, Musée du
Louvre, Paris, M.I.906

Back cover image:
Michael Sweerts,
Head of a Girl [detail],
c. 1654, oil on canvas,
Leicester Museum and
Art Gallery, L.F201.1975.0.0