



# PRESS RELEASE

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## THE FRICK COLLECTION

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### ***PARMIGIANINO'S ANTEA: A BEAUTIFUL ARTIFICE***

*Now extended through Thursday, May 1, 2008*



Parmigianino (1503–1540), *Antea*, c.1531–34, oil on canvas, 136 x 86 cm, Museo di Capodimonte, Naples

This winter and spring Parmigianino's hauntingly beautiful portrait of a young woman known as *Antea* (c.1531–34) will be on view in the United States for the first time in more than twenty years. Generously lent to The Frick Collection by the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples, this painting is one of the most important portraits of the Italian Renaissance. Like Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Parmigianino's *Antea* is a consummate example of a portrait with compelling psychological presence. The sitter's penetrating gaze and naturalistic presentation suggest that we may be encountering a real person, yet the identity of this young woman is unknown. Many questions about the painting remain unanswered. Of these, the most persistent concerns the sitter's identity. One of the earliest mentions of the painting, dating from the late seventeenth century, claims she is *Antea*, a famous Roman courtesan, and Parmigianino's mistress; other theories suggest she is the daughter or servant of the artist, a noble bride, or a member of an aristocratic family. Still others have suggested that the painting is an example of an "ideal beauty," a popular genre of Renaissance female portraiture in which the beauty and virtue of the sitter were of paramount importance, rather than her identity. This single-painting presentation will offer an opportunity to explore the many proposals put forward regarding this issue, based on a close analysis of her costume and jewelry and a study of the painting's provenance, as well as the chance to consider the work within its original social and cultural context. It will be accompanied by three public lectures and a fully illustrated catalogue written by Andrew W. Mellon Fellow Christina Neilson.

Presentation at The Frick Collection of *Parmigianino's Antea: A Beautiful Artifice* is organized with the **Foundation for Italian Art & Culture**. The exhibition is made possible through the generosity of the Alexander Bodini Foundation. Corporate support has been provided by Fiduciary Trust Company International. Additional support has been provided by Aso O. Tavitian and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Comments Colin B. Bailey, Peter Jay Sharp Chief Curator, "We are delighted to present Parmigianino's *Antea*, an exhibition that would not have been possible without the generosity of the Museo di Capodimonte and the assistance of the Foundation for Italian Art & Culture. One of the most beloved and mysterious of all Italian Renaissance portraits, *Antea* has captivated those who have confronted the work for centuries. With its very special, temporary display in New York this season, as well as through a stimulating group of lectures and a freshly researched publication, the beautiful, unknown sitter will undoubtedly find yet more admirers."

## **PARMIGIANINO: PAINTER OF DOZENS OF PORTRAITS**

The events of Parmigianino's life provide a broad context for the painting's conception and meaning. Girolamo Francesco Maria Mazzola, known as Parmigianino, was born in Parma in 1503 into a family of painters. In 1524 the gifted young artist traveled to Rome, where he was instantly regarded as "Raphael revived," owing to his imitation of Raphael's painting style and his own elegant demeanor. His success in the Eternal City was cut short by the Sack of Rome in 1527. He fled to Bologna and later returned home to Parma in 1530, probably at the invitation of the confraternity of Santa Maria della Steccata, which commissioned him to paint frescoes in the church's apse, a prestigious assignment. Though the project consumed Parmigianino for the next nine years, he never completed it. His slow progress so angered the confraternity it dismissed him in 1539 and had him thrown in jail. Following his release, he fled to nearby Casalmaggiore, where he died of fever in 1540 at the age of thirty-seven. Throughout his brief, peripatetic career, Parmigianino painted dozens of portraits. Most were of illustrious men, and a small number, including the *Antea*, were of beautiful women.

During his final years in Parma (1530–39), Parmigianino's most significant private patrons were members of the noble Baiardi family, who protected and befriended him. Elena Baiardi commissioned Parmigianino's *Madonna of the Long Neck*, arguably the artist's best-known painting today. Her brother Francesco is mentioned in early sources as Parmigianino's "very good friend," and he provided financial support for the artist during his troubled dealings with the Steccata. An inventory of Francesco's possessions—generally dated to 1561, the year of his death—indicates that he owned twenty-two paintings and more than five hundred drawings by Parmigianino, many inherited upon the artist's death. The *Antea* is among the works listed, but it is not known if Baiardi commissioned the portrait.

## **ANTEA: COMPELLINGLY REAL, YET STILL UNIDENTIFIED**

Parmigianino depicted Antea standing, gazing out at the viewer with surprising frankness. Her perfect oval face is set on an improbably ample body with wide shoulders and hips. The gold satin dress she wears is embellished with silver bands, while her apron and the cuffs of her underdress are decorated with delicate blackwork embroidery. Rubies and pearls further enhance her sumptuous costume, as does the marten fur draped over her shoulder. The painting contains areas of crystalline detail, such as the shiny enamel links in the gold chain hanging from her shoulders and the light reflecting off the black ribbon entwined in her hair. The almost full-length, frontal standing format, unprecedented in Renaissance female portraiture, evokes the possibility of movement. The gown, billowing gently at the left, suggests that she has turned to face the viewer. Antea's penetrating gaze further conveys the impression that the woman depicted before us is a living, sentient being. Using these contrivances, Parmigianino has created a convincing image of an individual who is compellingly real.

The *Antea's* naturalistic execution and intricate detail have been compared to the works Parmigianino executed some time between 1534 and 1539 (including his *Madonna of the Long Neck*). This has led most art historians to propose a similar dating for the portrait. An overlooked drawing, however, suggests that *Antea* may have been completed by about 1534. The preliminary chalk study of Antea's left hand, which captures the general position of her fingers and flexed thumb, lies beneath a pen-and-ink sketch of a putto. This figure, with minor variations, appears in Parmigianino's unfinished painting *Saturn and Philyra* (private collection), executed about 1534. As the putto was drawn over the study for Antea's hand, the sketch of the hand must predate 1534 and, thus, the finished portrait may as well.

The first identification of Parmigianino's sitter as "Antea" appeared long after the picture was painted. In 1671, in the *Painter's Voyage of Italy*, Giacomo Barri claimed that the portrait depicted a woman named Antea, who was Parmigianino's mistress. In fact, Antea was the name of a famous sixteenth-century Roman courtesan, and from the eighteenth century onward numerous sources assumed that it was to her that Barri referred. Such imaginative attempts to associate the name of a known courtesan with Parmigianino's portrait have since been dismissed, although the picture retains its romantic title. At various times, others have proposed that the woman in the painting was the daughter or servant of the artist; a member of an aristocratic northern Italian family; or an unidentified noble bride. Parmigianino is not known to have fathered a child, and the claim that the woman is a servant derives from the false assumption that only women from the lower ranks of society wore aprons. Antea's apron, however, with its expensive embroidery, was not an item donned by working women. Nothing about Antea's costume confirms her identity as a bride, and while she may represent a noblewoman, there is no evidence definitively linking her to a specific person.

## MISGUIDED QUEST

The unfulfilled, centuries-long quest to identify the portrait's sitter probably has been misguided from the start. *Antea* most likely represents an ideal beauty, a popular subgenre of portraiture during the Renaissance. In such portraits the beauty of the woman and the virtues she stood for were the primary subject, while the sitter's identity—and even her existence—were of secondary importance. It is significant in this regard that Parmigianino employed versions of *Antea*'s face in several very different works. These include a recently discovered pen-and-ink drawing of a young man and one of the beautiful angels in his *Madonna of the Long Neck*. His employment of an ideal facial type transcending gender suggests that the woman depicted in the *Antea* was his artistic invention, not the portrayal of a specific person.

With regard to the genre of ideal beauty, the poetry of Francesco Petrararch (1304–1374) was particularly influential. In his sonnets, Petrararch revived the ancient rhetorical tradition of the *paragone*, or competition, between poetry and painting by considering which art form could best capture the beauty of an absent, longed-for beloved woman. He concluded that the challenge was beyond the capabilities of the painter and could only be realized in the words of the poet. Yet, if paintings could not achieve the effect of poetry, they could inspire the poetic act. Petrararch himself expressed his claims for poetry's primacy in sonnets inspired by a portrait of his beloved and ever-absent Laura.

For centuries, scholars have been unsure if Petrararch's Laura actually existed or if she represented a poetic ideal. Parmigianino's *Antea* has recently given rise to similar questions. What can be stated for certain is that the painter created a woman with whom the viewer was meant to fall in love. The speculation regarding *Antea*'s identity—that she was a mistress, courtesan, or bride—testifies to Parmigianino's skill in conjuring a woman so alluring she seems to demand a personal history as someone's beloved. This appears to have been Parmigianino's intention. Most of the items worn by *Antea*—including the marten fur, gold chain, head brooch, ring, earrings, embroidered apron, and golden sleeves of her dress—were gifts commonly presented by lovers. Often, these were gifts given with the hope of erotic fulfillment, and, by wearing them, a woman stated her acceptance of her lover's advances. The idea that we are gazing on the beloved is furthered by Parmigianino's depiction of *Antea* interacting with these gifts. She fingers the chain and points with her hand to her heart, implying that she is accepting her lover's offer. As she meets our gaze, her pose and gestures create a dynamic of desire between herself and the viewer, who stands in for her lover.

*Antea* has removed one of her gloves to pass her fingers along the chain, which encircles her heart and draws attention to her partially exposed left breast. Her bare hand, which contrasts with her gloved—or clothed—one, becomes a focus of sensuous attention. The motif of the bare hand had particular erotic resonance in Renaissance culture as a synecdoche for the unclothed body. This detail suggests that the painter was appealing to his audience's familiarity with Petrararch, for whom the “bella mano” (beautiful hand) of the beloved was a well-

established poetic trope. Interest in Petrarch was strong in Parma, especially among the Baiardi family. Andrea Baiardi, Francesco and Elena's father, was a celebrated poet in the Petrarchan style, and Parmigianino himself copied excerpts of Petrarch's sonnets onto some of his drawings.

Parmigianino's *Antea* rivals Petrarch's poetry through its power to evoke desire. By creating an impossibly beautiful woman who, nonetheless, seems real enough to step out of the picture and speak to us, the artist invites us to dwell on his unrivaled capacity to conjure an illusion transcending nature itself. A painting such as the *Antea* challenges us to consider the relationship between desire and art, for the work inspires an emotion both sensual and elevated. Though the woman's youth is ephemeral, in Parmigianino's painting her beauty endures.

### **PUBLICATION OFFERS ASSESSMENT OF THEORIES**

The fully illustrated catalogue accompanying the exhibition, written by Andrew W. Mellon Fellow Christina Neilson, will offer a thorough assessment of the diverse identifications of the portrait, concluding that whomever the sitter was, Parmigianino succeeded in revolutionizing the genre of female portraiture by creating a woman with whom the viewer could fall in love. The publication will also offer a tentative new dating for the *Antea* following a close examination of two related drawings, both studies of her left hand. Based on a consideration of the chronology suggested by these drawings, the catalogue will propose a date of c.1531–34 for the painting, several years earlier than scholars have generally proposed, placing it within Parmigianino's second period in Parma. Published by The Frick Collection, the soft cover book will be available for \$15.95 in the Museum Shop of the Frick, on the institution's Web site ([www.frick.org](http://www.frick.org)), and by phone (212) 288-0700.

### **THREE FREE PUBLIC LECTURES** *(SEATING FOR LECTURES IS LIMITED AND UNRESERVED)*

**Date:** Wednesday, January 30, 2008, 6:00 p.m.  
**Speaker:** Christina Neilson, Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellow, The Frick Collection  
**Title:** *Painting Desire: Parmigianino's Antea*

Parmigianino's *Antea* (c.1531–34) is recognized as one of the great portraits of the Italian Renaissance, but who or what is the subject of the painting? Is *Antea* a bride, a courtesan, a member of a noble north Italian family, a servant, or Parmigianino's mistress? This lecture by Christina Neilson, organizer of the Frick's special exhibition *Parmigianino's Antea: A Beautiful Artifice*, will draw from new research to weigh up the different proposals about *Antea's* identity and present a new interpretation of the painting. Presentation of this lecture is made possible by the Italian Cultural Institute of New York.

**Date:** Wednesday, March 19, 2008, 6:00 p.m.  
**Speaker:** David Ekserdjian, Professor of History of Art and Film, University of Leicester  
**Title:** *Parmigianino and Portraits*

Parmigianino was one of the most prolific and remarkable portraitists active in Italy during the first half of the sixteenth century. This lecture will place the *Antea* within the larger context of Parmigianino's portraits, focusing on the surprising number of discoveries that recently have been made in this area. Presentation of this lecture is made possible by the Italian Cultural Institute of New York.

**Date:** Wednesday, March 26, 2008, 6:00 p.m.  
**Speaker:** Elizabeth Cropper, Dean, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts,  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.  
**Title:** *Portraying Beauty: Parmigianino and His Contemporaries*

Elizabeth Cropper, known for her studies of female beauty in the Renaissance, especially in the work of Parmigianino, will talk about *Antea* in relation to other portraits by the artist, and to the portraiture of such contemporaries as Pontormo, Bronzino, and Titian. She will consider Parmigianino's preoccupation with self-presentation in terms of style and substance.

## **ABOUT THE FOUNDATION FOR ITALIAN ART AND CULTURE**

The Foundation for Italian Art & Culture (FIAC) was established in New York in 2003 to promote knowledge of the Italian cultural and artistic traditions in the United States. FIAC works closely with the Italian Ministry of Cultural Affairs and the major Italian cultural institutions to organize its programs in the United States. Its inaugural project, in 2004, was the organization of the loan of Raphael's *La Fornarina*, from Palazzo Barberini in Rome, to The Frick Collection and two other venues. In the last three years, the Foundation has been able to arrange the first transatlantic loan of three Antonello da Messina paintings from the Region of Sicily to The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the unprecedented loan of three statues by Verrocchio, Lorenzo Ghiberti, and Nanni di Banco from Orsanmichele in Florence to the National Gallery in Washington, DC. Other significant projects have included the exhibition of the most important manuscripts of the Vatican Library at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York and the show of prominent Italian contemporary artists at P.S.1 MoMA. The Foundation, chaired by Ambassador Daniele Bodini and presided by Dr. Alain Elkann, is located at 112 East 71<sup>st</sup> Street, Suite 1B, New York, New York ([www.FiacFoundation.org](http://www.FiacFoundation.org)).

## **BASIC INFORMATION**

**General Information Phone:** (212) 288-0700

**Website:** [www.frick.org](http://www.frick.org)

**E-mail:** [info@frick.org](mailto:info@frick.org)

**Where:** 1 East 70th Street, near Fifth Avenue.

**Hours: open six days a week:** 10am to 6pm on Tuesdays through Saturdays; 11am to 5pm on Sundays. Closed Mondays, New Year's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. Limited hours (11am to 5pm) on Lincoln's Birthday, Election Day, and Veterans Day.

**Admission:** \$15; senior citizens \$10; students \$5; "pay as you wish" on Sundays from 11am to 1pm

<p><b>PLEASE NOTE TO YOUR READERS: Children under ten are not admitted to the Collection, and those under sixteen must be accompanied by an adult.</b></p>
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**Subway:** #6 local (on Lexington Avenue) to 68th Street station; **Bus:** M1, M2, M3, and M4 southbound on Fifth Avenue to 72nd Street and northbound on Madison Avenue to 70th Street

**Tour Information:** included in the price of admission is an Acoustiguide INFORM® Audio Tour of the permanent collection, provided by Acoustiguide. The tour is offered in six languages: English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish.

**Museum Shop:** the shop is open the same days as the Museum, closing fifteen minutes before the institution.

**Group Visits:** Please call (212) 288-0700 for details and to make reservations.

**Public Programs:** A calendar of events is published regularly and is available upon request.

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For further press information, please contact Heidi Rosenau, Manager of Media Relations & Marketing, or Alexis Light, Media Relations & Marketing Coordinator

Media Relations Phone: (212) 547-6844

General Phone: (212) 288-0700

Fax: (212) 628-4417

E-mail address: [mediarelations@frick.org](mailto:mediarelations@frick.org)