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THE FRICK COLLECTION

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**FRICK TO PRESENT FIRST MAJOR NORTH AMERICAN
EXHIBITION ON RENAISSANCE PAINTER
GIOVANNI BATTISTA MORONI**

MORONI: THE RICHES OF RENAISSANCE PORTRAITURE

February 21 through June 2, 2019



Giovanni Battista Moroni (b. 1520–24; d. 1579/80), *Portrait of a Young Woman*, ca. 1575, oil on canvas, private collection; photo: Michael Bodycomb

In Renaissance Italy, one of the aims of portraiture was to make the absent seem present through naturalistic representation of the sitter. This notion—that art can capture an individual exactly as he or she appears—is exemplified in the work of Giovanni Battista Moroni. The artist spent his entire career in and around his native Bergamo, a region in Lombardy northeast of Milan, and left a corpus of portraits that far outnumbers those of his contemporaries who worked in major artistic centers, including Titian in Venice and Bronzino in Florence. Though Moroni never achieved their fame, he innovated the genre of portraiture in spectacular ways. This winter and spring, the Frick presents the first major exhibition in North America devoted to his work, bringing together nearly

two dozen of Moroni's most arresting and best known portraits from international collections to explore the innovations and experiments that belie his masterful illusion of recording reality. They will be shown alongside a selection of complementary objects—Renaissance jewelry, textiles, arms and armor, and other luxury items—that exemplify the material and visual world that Moroni recorded, embellished, and transformed. *Moroni: The Riches of Renaissance Portraiture* was organized by Aimee Ng, Associate Curator,



Moroni, Giovanni Gerolamo Grimaldi, called *The Man in Pink*, dated 1560, oil on canvas, Fondazione Museo di Palazzo Moroni, Bergamo; Lucretia Moroni Collection; photo: Mauro Magliani

The Frick Collection; Simone Facchinetti, Researcher, Università del Salento, Lecce; and Arturo Galansino, Director General, Palazzo Strozzi, Florence. Presented in the Frick's main floor Oval Room and East Gallery, this exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue and series of public programs.

Creator of both religious paintings and portraits, Moroni is best known for works that seem to capture his sitters exactly as they appeared before him. According to an anecdote first published in 1648 in Carlo Ridolfi's *Le meraviglie dell'arte*, Titian, when approached by a group of would-be patrons, recommended that they instead sit for Moroni, praising his *ritratti di naturale* (portraits from life). The naturalism for which Moroni was most acclaimed, however, also became a point of criticism: his apparent faithfulness to his models caused some to dismiss him as a mere copyist of nature, an artist without “art”—that is, without selection, editing, or adherence to ideals of beauty. Bernard Berenson derided him in 1907 as an uninventive portraitist who “gives us sitters no doubt as they looked.” Subsequent scholars restored his reputation; the art historian Roberto Longhi, for example, in 1953 praised Moroni's “documents” of society that were unmediated by style, crediting him with a naturalism that anticipated Caravaggio. But Moroni's characterization as an artist who faithfully recorded the world around him—whether understood as a positive quality or a weakness—has obscured his creativity and innovation as a portraitist.

Moroni was born in the early 1520s in Albino, a small city less than ten miles from Bergamo. Although it was part of the Venetian Republic during the sixteenth century, Bergamo was geographically—and, in some ways, culturally—closer to the Duchy of Milan, then under Spanish rule. Thus, Moroni encountered sitters, fashions, and luxury goods from both Milan and Venice, which were both significant points of access to larger international markets, communities, and cultures. In the early 1540s, Moroni trained in Brescia in the workshop of Moretto da Brescia. The paintings of Lorenzo Lotto, who spent more than a decade in Bergamo in the first quarter of the Cinquecento, were also a significant influence. After brief periods in Trent during the late 1540s and early 1550s, Moroni worked from the mid-1550s predominantly in his native Albino and Bergamo, providing local clientele with religious paintings and breathtakingly lifelike portraits.



Moroni, *Lucrezia Agliardi Vertova*, dated 1557, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Theodore M. Davis Collection, Bequest of Theodore M. Davis, 1915

He achieved his characteristic naturalism through exacting attention to detail, psychologically potent and vivid expressions, and a “warts and all” approach that, at times, resulted in seemingly unidealized portrayals. For example, his *Lucrezia Agliardi Vertova* conveys with emphatic clarity his elderly sitter's goiter, her sagging neck, wrinkled skin, and other features that do not conform to Renaissance ideals of female beauty. At the same time, she is as dignified as his most dashing *cavalieri*, including the celebrated *Man in Pink* (see front page).

Among Moroni's inventions is a genre of so-called "sacred portraits." These derived from the tradition of donor portraits, which depict individuals (usually the person who commissioned the work) alongside sacred figures. Moroni's three surviving sacred portraits are united for the first time in the exhibition, calling attention to the varied roles that portraiture played during his time. Presumably intended for domestic settings, Moroni's sacred portraits—including *Two Donors in Adoration before the Madonna and Child and St. Michael*—are distinguished by the scale and the naturalistic depiction of contemporary individuals in relation to the divine figures. In a departure from the tradition of donor portraits, in which the donors are subordinate to the divine beings they worship, the sitters of Moroni's sacred portraits dominate the composition. Stylistic disparity also plays a significant role in these paintings. Moroni applied his strengths in naturalism to the depiction of humans—those he saw and studied with his own eyes—but not to imaging the divine; his sacred figures are rendered in a more stylized mode, often modeled on earlier devotional images. For example, in *Two Donors*, the unidentified couple appears to have been studied from life while Saint Michael and the Madonna and Child are reproduced from figures in an altarpiece of about 1540–45 by his teacher, Moretto da Brescia, in Verona's Church of Sant'Eufemia. This and Moroni's other sacred portraits dispel the notion that his works were unmediated by style.



Moroni, *Two Donors in Adoration before the Madonna and Child and St. Michael*, ca. 1557–60, oil on canvas, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund; photo: ©Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond/Katherine Wetzel

It has been convincingly argued that Moroni's sacred portraits present the sitters practicing a kind of meditative prayer popularized by the *Exercitia Spiritualia* (Spiritual Exercises) by Saint Ignatius of Loyola (1548). The text instructs devotees to contemplate sin and episodes of Christ's life and afterlife, imagining the use of their five senses to fully immerse themselves in the experience. Thus in the portraits, the divine figures would represent the objects of the devotee's contemplation. Included in the exhibition, a first edition of the *Exercitia Spiritualia* from the collection of the Library of Congress represents the popular practice of using a material aid like a prayer book to achieve spiritual enlightenment. As Moroni's sacred portraits may record the practice of a particular type of prayer, they also emphasize the sitters' religious piety (an important aspect of social respectability), and, as part-sacred image, they memorialize the sitter in perpetual association with the divine.



Moroni, *The Tailor*, ca. 1570, oil on canvas; The National Gallery, London

Moroni's most famous painting, *The Tailor*, is unusual for its portrayal of a tradesman at work. It has impressed viewers for centuries with its lifelikeness and suspended action. In 1660, Marco Boschini, in his celebrated poem about Venetian painting, *La carta del navegar pittoresco*, proclaims Moroni's *Tailor* so lifelike that it seems able to speak "more eloquently than a lawyer." Paintings like *The Tailor* anticipate the narrative portraits for which Rembrandt would be celebrated the following century. Scholars have debated the precise meaning of *The Tailor*, prompting consideration of the social status of Moroni's clientele: does the painting simply present a tailor carrying out his daily tasks, or is it an allegorical portrayal of the unidentified man's family name (one such as *Tagliapanni*, meaning "cloth-cutter")? Based on the sitter's clothing—fashionable and costly (though made of wool, rather than the more expensive silk), the painting most likely depicts a well-to-do tailor.

The portrait of the sculptor Alessandro Vittoria was presumably painted early in Moroni's career, when both artists were in Trent in the early 1550s. It shares a number of qualities with *The Tailor*, above all the portrayal of the figure as if suspended in an act related to his profession, here addressing the viewer as if interrupted while presenting, studying, or working on a sculpture. Vittoria's sleeve is rolled up to reveal his muscular forearm, as if to suggest the physical strength that sculpting requires. Vittoria owned at least five painted portraits of himself, and Moroni's is probably one of two large paintings listed in the inventory of the sculptor's possessions made after his death.



Moroni, *Alessandro Vittoria*, ca. 1551, oil on canvas, Gemäldegalerie, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; photo: KHM-Museumsverband



Moroni, *Isotta Brembati*, ca. 1555-56, oil on canvas; Fondazione Museo di Palazzo Moroni, Bergamo-Lucretia Moroni Collection

Moroni's surviving works suggest that he offered his clients relatively standard bust, half- and three-quarter-length, and full-length portraits. Interestingly, he produced at least three full-length portraits of women, a format typically reserved in Europe for depicting men of the highest social rank. Two of these, *Isotta Brembati* (shown to the left) and *Lucia Albani* (National Gallery, London), present the women seated majestically in Dante chairs. His *Pace Rivola Spini*, the pendant of *Bernardo Spini* (Accademia Carrara, Bergamo), is arguably the first full-length portrait of a standing woman shown alone, painted during the Italian Renaissance. Using this format for his depiction of a relatively unknown noblewoman of Albino, Moroni defies portraiture's



Moroni, *Pace Rivola Spini*, ca. 1555-56, oil on canvas; Accademia Carrara, Bergamo; photo: Fondazione Museo di Palazzo Moroni, Bergamo

conventional social hierarchies. The choice of format raises questions about the nature of the commission and who suggested that Pace Rivola Spini be portrayed in this way: the painter, the sitter, or her husband. Unfortunately, no document related to this portrait (or any other by Moroni) has come to light.

Moroni may have first encountered full-length portraiture through his teacher, Moretto, who is credited as the first artist of the Italian Renaissance to paint, in 1526, a full-length portrait of a standing man (*Portrait of a Gentleman*, now in the National Gallery, London). The various full-length portraits Moroni painted throughout his career demonstrate his diverse approach to the format, from the austere Spini pendants to the sensational *Man in Pink* (front page), a composition enriched with allegorical imagery. In it, a relief on the wall to the right of the subject depicts the biblical scene of the Prophet Elijah ascending to heaven, and letting fall to his successor, Elisha, his miraculous cloak. On the ground, a fragment of an antique sculpture appears to have toppled from a niche in which remains the sculpture's right foot, possibly alluding to the passage of time or the succession of the ages. The Spanish inscription—MAS EL ÇAGUERO QUE EL PRIMERO (More he who follows than the first)—seems also to refer to succession. The portrait, dated 1560, presumably commemorates an event in the sitter's life, but to what specific aspect of his biography it corresponds remains unknown. The antique torso is similar to that held by Alessandro Vittoria, but they function differently: in contrast to the allegorical sculpture in *The Man in Pink*, Vittoria holds an object that probably existed in his studio.



Italian or Spanish, *Fragment of Brocaded Velvet*, 16th century, 11 3/8 x 22 3/4 inches, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of Nanette B. Kelekian, in honor of Olga Raggio, 2002; photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York/Art Resource, NY

The objects displayed alongside Moroni's portraits bring new perspectives to the artist's achievements in paint. The unidentified sitter in *Portrait of a Young Woman* (see front page), for example, wears a pink brocade dress woven in silver and silver-gilt thread, the result of an extremely costly, labor-intensive process in which extremely thin strands of precious metal are wound by hand around silk threads then brocaded into the fabric. The painstaking process is difficult to appreciate without close inspection of an actual piece of fabric made in this way. In the exhibition, a fragment of a sixteenth-century brocaded velvet affords viewers the opportunity to discover the physical and visual qualities deftly translated by Moroni into paint. It also brings to the fore the extraordinary craftsmanship of the objects Moroni encountered through his sitters and the artistic challenges and opportunities they presented.

The objects also enable viewers to better grasp the discrepancies between Moroni's paintings and the reality they purportedly record. For example, the spectacular green and gold dress worn by Isotta Brembati (previous page) seems to be painted with precision; however, considering the weaving techniques used during the sixteenth century, it would be extremely unusual for the repeating pattern of a textile to increase in scale, as it does in the portrait, from the bodice to the skirt. Though the dress may have been based on one worn by the sitter, Moroni appears to have

manipulated the pattern for heightened visual effect; his painted portrayal may lie somewhere between fact and fiction.

The other luxury items with which Isotta is depicted—the fan; pendant cross of rubies, emerald, and pearls; and marten fur—also may have been embellished or altered for the portrait. Rare surviving examples of each type of object are included in the exhibition. Though marten furs were highly popular among elite women during the Italian Renaissance, very few have survived. The extraordinary example included in the exhibition is the only one with a gold head with precious stones and enamel. It is composed of a sheet of gold, hammered paper thin and chased to simulate fur, adorned with enamel, pearls, garnets, and a ruby. Its display alongside Moroni’s painting—in which the sitter’s marten fur with an enameled gold head drapes casually around her neck—underscores the opulence of this accessory as well as its duality, being at once beautiful and grotesque.



Venetian, *Marten's Head*, ca. 1550–59, gold with enamel, rubies, garnets, and pearls; modern pelt; synthetic whiskers, 3 5/16 inches (jewel only). The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore; Museum acquisition by exchange, 1967

The artist’s visually stunning representations of sitters of varied social ranks have been appreciated as “documents,” but not sufficiently as innovations. Perhaps it is because of the relative freedom Moroni enjoyed outside the major artistic centers that he was able to exercise the moments of license and experimentation that complicate traditional notions of him as a mere documentarian. This exhibition draws attention to the remarkable achievement of his portraiture and brings to life a Renaissance society at the crossroads of the Venetian Republic and Spanish-ruled Milan.

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PUBLICATION



In conjunction with this major exhibition, The Frick Collection and Scala Art Publishers, Ltd., New York and London, have produced the most extensive scholarly assessment in English of Moroni's portraits to date. This essential volume, *Moroni: The Riches of Renaissance Portraiture*, features two illuminating essays by the show's curators Aimee Ng (Frick); Simone Facchinetti (Università del Salento, Lecce); and Arturo Galansino (Palazzo Strozzi, Florence). These, together with thirty-seven entries, provide new insight into the artist and his sitters and reveal Moroni's creativity in translating their world into paint. The book is available in the Museum Shop or can be ordered through the Frick's Web site (frick.org) or by phone at (212) 547-6848 (244 pages, 147 color illustrations; hardcover \$65.00, member price \$58.50; softcover \$45.00, member price \$40.50).

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BASIC INFORMATION

General Information Phone: (212) 288-0700

Web site: www.frick.org

Building project: www.frickfuture.org

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App: frick.org/app

Museum address: 1 East 70th Street, near Fifth Avenue

Hours: Open six days a week: 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on Tuesdays through Saturdays; 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Sundays. Closed Mondays, New Year's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. Limited hours (11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.) on Lincoln's Birthday, Election Day, and Veterans Day

Admission: \$22; senior citizens \$17; students \$12; Pay-what-you-wish hours on Wednesdays from 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. **PLEASE NOTE TO YOUR READERS:** Children under ten are not admitted to the museum

First Fridays: Museum admission and gallery programs are free from 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. on the first Friday evening of the month (except January and September)

Subway: #6 local to 68th Street station; #Q to 72nd 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 museum admission is an Acoustiguide Audio Tour of the permanent collection. The tour is offered in six languages: English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish.

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

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

Public Programs: A calendar of events is available online

Library address: 10 East 71st Street, near Fifth Avenue

Hours: www.frick.org/visit/library/hours

Admission: Open to the public free of charge

#341, January 22, 2019 - For further press information, please contact Heidi Rosenau, Associate Director of Media Relations & Marketing; Phone: (212) 547-6866; E-mail: rosenau@frick.org