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THE FRICK COLLECTION

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Iconic Painting is Newly Interpreted and  
Comes to the U.S. for the First Time

## ***THE POETRY OF PARMIGIANINO’S “SCHIAVA TURCA”***

**The Frick Collection, New York**

May 13 through July 20, 2014

**Legion of Honor, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco**

July 26 through October 5, 2014



Parmigianino, *Schiava Turca*, c. 1531–34, oil on panel, Galleria Nazionale di Parma, photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY

Francesco Mazzola (1503–1540), called Parmigianino after Parma, the Northern Italian city of his birth, was one of the most prolific and celebrated artists of the sixteenth century. Known as “Raphael reborn,” he mastered the arts of painting, drawing, and printmaking and was renowned for his portraits. Today his exquisite portrait of an unknown woman called the *Schiava Turca* (Turkish Slave) is an icon of Parma. The painting, which has rarely been seen outside its home institution, the Galleria Nazionale di Parma, travels to the United States for the first time for its presentation at The Frick Collection (and subsequently at the Legion of Honor, part of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco). The showing at the Frick marks the museum’s third collaboration with the Foundation for Italian Art & Culture (FIAC), a series of loans focused on the female portrait in the Renaissance. The collaboration previously featured Raphael’s *La Fornarina* (Rome, Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini) and Parmigianino’s

*Antea* (Naples, Museo di Capodimonte). *The Poetry of Parmigianino’s “Schiava Turca”* will be accompanied by a catalogue and numerous public programs. The exhibition is curated by Aimee Ng, Research Associate at The Frick Collection and Lecturer in the Department of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University, and is organized by

The Frick Collection with the Foundation for Italian Art & Culture. Support for the presentation in New York is generously provided by Gabelli Funds, Aso O. Tavitian, The Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. Hubert L. Goldschmidt, Hester Diamond, and the Foundation for Italian Art & Culture.

## **A RARE OPPORTUNITY ENHANCED BY THE ADDITION OF ANOTHER PORTRAIT BY PARMIGIANINO FROM A PRIVATE COLLECTION**

Comments Guest Curator Aimee Ng, “We are particularly thrilled with the rare opportunity that this project presents, as there are no portraits by Parmigianino in public collections in the United States. We will be able to present two of them at the same time. The *Schiava Turca* will be joined in the Oval Room by a private-collection work by the artist, *Portrait of a Man*. These paintings will be shown with the Frick’s own magnificent Renaissance portraits by Titian (*Pietro Aretino* and *Man with a Red Cap*) and Bronzino (*Lodovico Capponi*), creating a very special panorama of Renaissance pictures in the Oval Room this spring and summer.”



Parmigianino, *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1527–31, oil on canvas, private collection

## **AN ENIGMATIC SITTER ELUDING INTERPRETATION, NOW RECONSIDERED**

Parmigianino painted the *Schiava Turca* in the early to mid-1530s. The sitter wears an extravagant, almost theatrical costume comprised of a ball-shaped headdress, voluminous sleeves, and a striped garment with a plunging neckline. She holds an ostrich-feather fan in her left hand. In the early eighteenth century, when the portrait was in the collection of the Uffizi Gallery, the style of the woman’s costume inspired a cataloguer to invent the title “Turkish Slave” by which she has since been known. He likely mistook her headdress for a turban, associated her feather fan with the exotic East, and interpreted the small gold chain tucked into the slashes of her right sleeve as a reference to captivity. Her costume, however, is not Turkish, and is certainly not that of a slave. Her sumptuous garments of silk, accessories of gold, and a fan made from imported feathers and ivory reveal her elite social status. Her turban-like headdress, called a *balzo*, was worn by Italian Renaissance women of high standing and identifies her as a member of the Northern Italian courts.

For centuries the *Schiava Turca* has eluded interpretation and, to date, no proposed identity for Parmigianino’s mysterious woman has been convincing. Scholars even have suggested that the portrait does not depict an actual person but rather an ideal woman invented by the artist for the delectation of male viewers.

## **CONNECTION TO POETRY CLARIFIED THROUGH NEW RESEARCH**

At the center of the sitter’s headdress is a gold ornament depicting the winged horse, Pegasus. Classical myths tell how Pegasus struck the ground of Mount Helicon with his hoof, thereby creating the Hippocrene spring, whose water was the source of poetic inspiration sacred to Apollo and the Muses. In Renaissance Italy, Pegasus was the quintessential emblem of poetic inspiration. (Pietro Bembo, the most significant poet of Parmigianino’s time, adopted Pegasus as his

personal device in the 1540s.) Poetry was often associated with portraits of women through the Petrarchan tradition, in which the poet Petrarch competed against the painter Simone Martini to determine what best captured female beauty—the poet’s pen or the painter’s brush. Because the *Schiava Turca* wears the poetic emblem of Pegasus, scholars have emphasized her connection to poetry, although the precise nature of this relationship remains to be clarified.



Detail of *Schiava Turca* showing the headdress ornament depicting Pegasus; photo: Scala, Art Resource, NY

Parmigianino’s portrait differs from other Renaissance female portraits in several ways. Her active pose—with her face turned toward the left and her body to the right—is common in depictions of men of the time, but not women. Also, her direct gaze and lively expression stand out when compared to the reserved, aloof expressions often seen in Renaissance portraits of women, in which it was considered appropriate to retain a dignified modesty. Finally, the Pegasus ornament on her headdress is an accessory borrowed from men’s fashion: it is likely a hat badge, an adornment worn almost exclusively by Renaissance men that bears a personal, usually humanist, emblem. With her frank expression, typically “masculine” pose, and an accessory appropriated from male fashion, it seems reasonable to believe that

the *Schiava Turca* was intended to be seen not so much as the passive recipient of male poetic dedication, but to be regarded as a poet herself. After all, she wears on her head—the source of intellect and creativity—an emblem of Pegasus, the symbol of poetic inspiration.

## AN ATTRIBUTE SUGGESTS A CLEVER PLAY ON WORDS

When representing a sitter as a poet, Renaissance painters would sometimes include an attribute of the writer’s profession, such as a pen, book, or sheet of poetry. Parmigianino does not mark the *Schiava Turca* as a poet with an explicit attribute; he chose instead for her to hold an ostrich-feather fan, a luxury item commonly owned by Northern Italian noblewomen. The fan she holds so prominently before her may, however, be interpreted as a play on words that occurs in poetry of the period: in Italian, the words *piume* and *penne* mean “feathers” and, in their singular forms (*piuma* and *penna*), “pen.” Rather than holding an explicit symbol of a poet, Parmigianino’s *Schiava Tura* may instead be challenging the viewer to decipher a clever play on words that identifies her profession. The artist seems to enter into the competition between painting and poetry by using a tool of the poet—word play—to paint his portrait.

If there was a practical function for the gold chain visible through the slashes of the *Schiava Turca*’s right sleeve, it is unknown. Usually gold chains were used to connect fans or similar items to a belt worn around a woman’s waist, but the chain in the portrait does not seem attached to anything. Figuratively, the chain evokes a central motif in Renaissance poetry of “the chains of love” and the power of love to enslave its conquests. It also may allude to the idea of Love chained by Chastity, which is a Petrarchan theme. Perhaps Parmigianino intended this detail to be more evocative than direct, compelling his audience to engage in a witty game of poetic invention, enticing the viewer into a more complex interpretation of his art.

## RESEARCH CONSIDERS RELATED DRAWINGS AND MAY HAVE LED TO A DISCOVERY

Parmigianino was one of the most prolific draftsmen of the Italian Renaissance, and he explored ideas extensively on paper before painting. His process of invention was complex, and often a single drawing can relate to more than one painting, or vice versa. Two drawings—both head studies in red chalk—have been connected to the *Schiava Turca*: one at the Louvre and a second from the École des Beaux-Arts, Paris. The first, which appears to have been drawn from a live model, resembles the *Schiava Turca* in the turn of the head, the smiling expression, and, to some degree, the facial features. The second depicts a woman with highly idealized features and an aloof expression unlike those seen in the painting and the Louvre drawing. Like the subject of the *Schiava Turca*, however, the woman in the École des Beaux-Arts drawing wears a *balzo* that includes a circular ornament at its center (although it is left blank).

Recent research conducted in preparation for the Frick’s exhibition has related a third drawing to the *Schiava Turca*: Parmigianino’s compositional drawing of a *Bust of a Woman*, in the Devonshire collection at Chatsworth (not borrowed for the exhibition, but illustrated at right and in the accompanying catalogue). The pen-and-ink drawing, which had not previously been linked to any specific project, shares the bust-length format of the *Schiava Turca* (although the woman in the drawing poses with her head facing in the same direction as her body). In the drawing, the woman wears a *balzo*-like headdress decorated with a wreath of laurel leaves. In the classical tradition, laurel leaves are used to crown accomplished poets. As it shows the artist experimenting with the standard iconography of poetry, the drawing may record an early idea for the *Schiava Turca*. In the end, Parmigianino’s use of an ornamental badge of Pegasus to mark the *Schiava Turca* as a poet is a more subtle (indeed, more poetic) solution.



Parmigianino, *Bust of a Woman Turned Three-Quarters to the Right*, c. 1531–34, pen and brown ink, © Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth. Reproduced by permission of Chatsworth Settlement Trustees.

## CHALLENGES REMAIN IN CONNECTING THE SITTER WITH A SPECIFIC FEMALE POET

Interpreting the *Schiava Turca* as a portrait of a poet suggests that the woman represented was an actual person. A good candidate for the sitter would be a writer of high social standing who lived in the area around Bologna or Parma in the early- to mid-1530s and one who perhaps was associated with the circle of Pietro Bembo. Although no documentary evidence is known that would connect the portrait to a specific female writer, one possibility is Veronica Gambara. Gambara was an accomplished poet with close ties to Bembo and other notable figures of Northern Italian courts including Isabella d’Este and Pietro Ariosto. Parmigianino had ample opportunity to meet Gambara, who ruled Correggio—a city twenty miles from the artist’s native Parma—from 1518 until her death in 1550. She is known to have visited Parma when he was there in the early 1520s, and both poet and artist lived in Bologna from 1528 to 1530. She was also close friends with the artist Antonio Allegri, called Correggio, Parmigianino’s former master.

No portraits of her are known to survive. One problem with identifying the *Schiava Turca* as Veronica Gambara might be her age, as she was around fifty years old in 1534, about the time that the *Schiava Turca* was painted, and the subject of the painting is seemingly a much younger woman. An important comparison, however, is Titian's well-known portrait of Isabella d'Este (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), which was painted contemporaneously with the *Schiava Turca*. Titian's portrait presents Isabella as a young woman even though, when it was painted, she was about sixty years old. If the mysterious subject of the *Schiava Turca* cannot be positively identified as Gambara, at least the interpretation of her as a poet may bring us closer to discovering her identity.

## EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

### Lectures

*Lectures are free. Seating is on a first-come, first-served basis, and reservations are not accepted. Selected lectures will be webcast live and made available on our Web site and The Frick Collection's channel on FORA.tv. Please visit our Web site for details. These lectures are made possible by the generous support of the Robert H. Smith Family Foundation.*

**Date** Wednesday, May 14, 6:00 p.m.  
**Speaker** Aimee Ng, Guest Curator, The Frick Collection  
**Title** *A Portrait and Its Mysteries: Parmigianino's "Schiava Turca"*

Parmigianino's exquisite *Schiava Turca* (Turkish slave) is shrouded in mystery. Who is this woman whose elaborate, almost theatrical, costume inspired an early eighteenth-century writer to give the Renaissance beauty her fantastical name? In this lecture, the guest curator of the special exhibition *The Poetry of Parmigianino's "Schiava Turca"* will present a new interpretation of the work. Ng's research suggests that the sitter likely held a special status as a poet in the court culture of Northern Italy.

**Date** Wednesday, May 21, 6:00 p.m.  
**Speaker** Andrea Bayer, Curator, Department of European Paintings, The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
**Title** *Court Portraiture in the Age of Isabella d'Este*

During the early sixteenth century, rulers and courtiers all across northern Italy commissioned portraits that not only captured their appearance but also subtly alluded to their status and accomplishments. By examining such portraits—in particular, those of the most fastidious of all patrons, Isabella d'Este—this lecture will place Parmigianino's enigmatic *Schiava Turca* (the subject of the special exhibition) in a larger context.

### Introductory Gallery Talks: Fridays June 13 and July 11, 11:00 a.m.

Guest Curator Aimee Ng will offer a twenty-minute overview of the special exhibition. *Talks are free with admission; reservations are not necessary.*

### Free "Summer Night" Event

***Schiava Turca: Friday, June 27, 6:00 to 9:00 p.m.***

Enjoy a night of programs and activities when we open our doors to the public after-hours to celebrate our special exhibition. The evening will include gallery talks, open sketching, music, and performances. *Admission to this Summer Night is free, and visitors are admitted on a first-come, first-served basis. Reservations are not accepted. Children under ten are not admitted. Music and dance performances are supported by Ayesha Bulchandani-Mathran.*

## PUBLICATION

*The Poetry of Parmigianino's "Schiava Turca"* is accompanied by an illustrated catalogue with a foreword by the noted Parmigianino authority David Ekserdjian and an essay by Guest Curator Aimee Ng, who brings a fresh and intriguing perspective to the interpretation of the painting. The book (hardcover, 52 pages, 23 illustrations; \$14.95, Member price: \$13.46) will be available in the Museum Shop or ordered through the Frick's Web site ([www.frick.org](http://www.frick.org)) and by phone at 212.547.6848.

## BASIC INFORMATION

**General Information Phone:** 212.288.0700

**Web site:** [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:** 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:** \$20; senior citizens \$15; students \$10; "pay what you wish" on Sundays from 11 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

<b>PLEASE NOTE TO YOUR READERS: Children under ten are not admitted to the</b>
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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 audio tour of the permanent collection 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 Admission for the Permanent Collection:** Please call 212.288.0700 for details and to make reservations.

**Public Programs:** A calendar of events is published regularly and all content is available online.

#233, April 3, 2014

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

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