

# THE SLEEVE SHOULD BE ILLEGAL

*& Other Reflections on Art at the Frick*

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## ROSANNE CASH

### Hans Holbein the Younger, *Thomas Cromwell*, 1532–33

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The first thing you notice is the gold ring on his left index finger. In the center is a cerulean blue stone, opaque but somehow also transparent, set in a luminous carved band. The blue in the stone speaks to the darker blue in the tapestry behind him: they are a visual diphthong. That's the first thing: you feel the bounce between the blues. Then, awareness spreads out to the four corners of the painting, past his hand, his robe, his desk, and the walls that close him in.

I once heard an art teacher say, in regard to a still-life painting of a bowl of fruit, "This is not a bowl of fruit. This is paint on canvas." But Thomas Cromwell is not just paint on canvas. Holbein has dipped his brush in alchemy. There are papers before him on his desk, which is covered in a velvety green cloth. The seal is broken on a document. A gold-and-black locked book, a quill, and what appears to be a small leather bag are artfully scattered on the table. He is clutching a piece of white paper between the index finger and thumb of his left hand. He is in his late forties, under tremendous pressure and in possession of tremendous power. He is the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Master of the Rolls, Principal Secretary, Master of the Jewel House, a dozen more titles and positions, and the chief confidant and counselor to Henry VIII. He is intelligent, cunning, well-fed, and sober. His rich black cloak, wide fur collar, and serious cap denote his status. One is visually warned that no one has the ear of the king without first going through Thomas Cromwell. It is seven years before he will be beheaded. It is three years after his wife and two young daughters die of the "sweating sickness." Although his expression is forbidding, our compassion is aroused, knowing what has—and will—happen. He is still grieving, and he must know his current abundance can't last. The king is violently impulsive and prone to turning on his courtiers. Cromwell will sit on the mountaintop of power until Henry destroys him. Perhaps Holbein senses it as well, because Cromwell's considerable figure is set in the middle distance of the portrait, not rendered in the foreground, where he could command and intimidate. He is removed with artistic calculation. It is like a chastisement or a slow, forced disappearance. The message of perspective is only one of many layers of emotion and prescience—both Cromwell's and Holbein's—that must be pulled apart, only to wind in on themselves again and again.

The Cromwell painting sits to the right of the Living Hall's lovely fireplace, and mirroring the great man on the left side is his friend, nemesis, and human harbinger of execution, Thomas More, also painted by Holbein. Cromwell looks toward More, but More looks away, into the distance. Locked in perpetual historical conflict and eternal contemporary proximity at the Frick, these two men tell a story that can be read in a blue ring, a broken seal, a fur collar, and an icy stare across carved marble in a magnificent Gilded Age drawing room. Their figures may be bonded in exquisite chromatic notes of blue, moss green, and black, but they are not just paint on canvas; they are the apotheosis of suffering, and they are residents of history and non-linear time. They are human beings with our same longing and loss, wrought by a master hand during a brief moment in a lost season of power and tranquility.



## ROZ CHAST

### Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, *Self-Portrait*, 1658

The Frick is one of my favorite museums in New York. It's not too big, and almost all the paintings and objects are not only interesting but also iconic. When one walks around, one asks oneself: Am I really looking at the actual Ingres painting of Comtesse d'Haussonville, with that incredible pale blue satin dress and that weird right arm, and not just a facsimile? Am I witnessing, with eyes that minutes ago were staring mindlessly at an ad on the subway, this Holbein painting of Sir Thomas More? How is it possible that I am standing in front of an actual Vermeer?!? Oh my God. There's Manet. There's Constable. I hope I don't make a fool of myself in front of this Bellini. It's like being in a magnificent house filled with art celebrities.

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I thought of writing about the Bronzino painting of Lodovico Capponi, which fascinated me when I was a teenager, even though Lodovico looked like a sneery, snobby person. And also, what was with that codpiece? I considered writing about that Nevers blue oval platter with the yellow flowers that would look really great in my apartment, should the Frick someday decide they were tired of it and were looking for someone who would give it a loving home. But a couple of weeks ago, I was walking through the room with the Rembrandt self-portrait, the one he painted when he was fifty-two. It literally stopped me in my tracks. He's wearing a big floppy black hat and a cloak of maybe fur or velvet. Under that, he is wearing a golden-yellow billowy tunic. The whole outfit is tied together with a red sash. It's very theatrical. It's a costume. But it was his face that mesmerized me. I felt his self-awareness. He knew of his power as an artist and also of his frailty and his mortality. This communication felt so real that, for a second, I felt as if I might cry. You don't have to tell me how cheesy that sounds because I know. I kept standing there and looking at it. I felt as if he were saying to me: Once I was alive, like you. Sometimes I suffered. Sometimes things seemed funny, or maybe absurd, especially myself. I was a man. I was an artist. I was a great artist. My name was Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn. I painted this painting. I lived. I died. Yet here I am. There you are. We are looking at each other.



## MARK DOTY

*Anthony van Dyck, Marchesa Giovanna Cattaneo, 1622–27*

The motion, the energy with which she entered the frame barely arrested. Nothing about her of stasis, no sign of a willingness, even briefly, to stop paying attention, to cease consideration of what's before her. She hasn't come to be looked at, and if she has, this will in no way limit her looking back. Imagine, being content merely to be gazed upon!

*Her* gaze brims with curiosity and intelligence as she studies him studying her—to see if she can read in his look something of how he sees her? Is she perhaps attracted to him, as she might be indicating through that fraction of a smile?

How can he work, how focus with that inquiring presence before him, a woman who makes those in other portraits seem on the verge of sleep, possessed by being looked at, barely concerned with their own seeing? How, under this pressure, that lively mind, its frisson of humor, can he work, how produce a rendering so steady and exact? The architectural tilt of her collar, a lace valentine floating on darkness, that he can perfect alone, in the studio. But her superb right hand, alive and individuated as every bit of her face—that he must do while she holds it in the air, just so, thumb and forefinger pressed against a single loop in the golden chain that seems to measure, precisely, the degree of time she will allot to him.

And, though I suppose she did not think of this, just the degree of time she will devote to us, before she turns and walks on along that dark brown corridor, a little wind from her passing still lifting the white silk cape attached to her dress at the shoulders.



## BILL T. JONES

Jean-Siméon Chardin, *Still Life with Plums*, ca. 1730

**Meeting Chardin's *Still Life with Plums*** As a performer and maker of theater and dance, I've often been confronted with audience members clamoring to know, "What does this performance *mean*? What is its message?" I have found it useful to encourage these viewers to watch themselves watching. This advice rang loudly when I accepted the invitation from the Frick to write about a work in the collection that speaks to me. Like many in our identity-driven era, I am burdened (or gifted, depending on one's point of view) by the need to see myself and my experience in all cultural products past and present. The personalities, deities, places, and events represented in the various works of art at the Frick leave me exhilarated but also exhausted by this need to "see myself."

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It is Chardin's *Still Life with Plums* that I am most drawn to, and this has something to do with the absence of human figures. This small-scale, expertly rendered depiction of a green bottle, a glass of water, a couple of vegetables, and a basket of plums is a peculiar mirror through which to "watch oneself watching." Call it habit, but I look at the world inside the frame as a kind of stage. In my art form, the basic elements are space, time, and gesture. These elements are present, though altered, in Chardin's mysterious, concise composition.

Space in this compressed two-dimensional world is a deft illusion. The relationship among the various objects, like players on a stage, would have us believe we're in the presence of a unified group, but in truth each object is bound and isolated in its "thing-ness," participating in a community by the artist's crafting of pigment, shape, and, yes, light. Time here, represented by light itself, is what gives this work an eerie otherness, as if suspended in a dimension, a place, outside of time. I often call this "the theater of the mind." Most artists toil there and find it near impossible to say what happens when the viewer enters this realm.

Gesture in a world where all movement is arrested, called *nature morte* (dead life) by the French. The connoisseurs would lean closer to examine brushstrokes, but for others, gesture is the dance of an invisible hand, mind, and heart, which needs to create such an illusion. Even though *Still Life with Plums* has no distracting human figures, its very existence—as suggested above—is proof of human agency. Like many other painters of the time, Chardin was indebted to the Dutch, in particular to Vermeer. The art historian Jean Leymarie attributed the rise of Dutch still life in the seventeenth century to the desire felt by men of the time to make themselves into what Descartes called "masters and possessors of nature," a desire inferred by "the outlook of a realistic-minded middle class society founded on the free exchange of goods, a society accustomed to assessing things in the light of their practical utility and market value."

And so, the "self," my self is torn here. Chardin's lovely, curious mirage was painted at a time when I, as a black person, could have been the property of the owner of this magical arrangement of things. So, do I experience a kind of empathy for the objects in this painting having a history in which I too have been reduced to objecthood—"thing-ness"—with "a practical utility and market value"? That being said, history, economics, and morality in the eyes of the viewer become an impediment to seeing this picture. This is the case with all art that survives its era of creation. As Diderot said in his eulogy of Chardin, "He used to say that the hand and the palette are needed in order to paint, but that painting is not made with the hand nor the palette." Might I paraphrase as a response to my engagement with *Still Life with Plums*: The eyes are used to recognize the visual world, but we need more than eyes to "see" this painting!



## MAIRA KALMAN

Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *Portrait of a Lady (María Martínez de Puga?)*, 1824

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Why am I so wild about her?  
I am pretty sure it is the scalloped hair.  
The scalloped hair and the eyebrows.  
And the color of the Background.  
And the BLACK of her dress against the taupe background.  
My mother said taupe was a great color for shoes  
because it goes with everything.  
So the taupe is good.  
And the strangely big white glove.  
And her neutral gaze.  
Pensive? Uncomfortable? Indifferent?  
It is near the end of his life, after the BLACK paintings,  
and he can do this with his eyes closed.  
Maybe he said, I can do this with fewer strokes.  
With LESS. Hello impressionism.

Lately, every time I leave the Frick, I go to  
Ladurée and have a pot of tea with tea sandwiches.  
They are wrapped in wax paper and labeled.  
Comté cheese.  
Tuna and cucumber.  
Ham and pickles.  
Salmon and cream cheese.

I have taken to saving the wrappers.  
They will always be together.  
The paintings. The Frick. The tea sandwiches.  
Which is pretty much all I need.



## DANIEL MENDELSON

**Agnolo Bronzino (Agnolo di Cosimo), *Lodovico Capponi*, ca. 1550–55**

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People don't generally talk about the emotions in Bronzino's work. In the pictures that made him famous and sought after, those glacially elegant portraits of the Tuscan grand duke Cosimo I de' Medici and his family and of the Florentine patricians who buzzed around the Medici court, it's the accoutrements that first dazzle the eye, the intricate damasks and elaborate laces, the meticulously stage-managed props—medallions and cameos, classical statuettes and vellum-bound books carefully opened to let you see the sonnets within—that, often, seem more expressive than the sitters themselves. Small wonder. These were people less interested in revealing their private selves than in asserting their public status: the aristocratic sons of bankers eager to make sure we're aware of their literary enthusiasms, the trophy brides like Eleanor of Toledo, Cosimo's first wife, encased in their stiff brocades as if it were armor and clutching the infant sons who earned them the ropes of pearls that cascade from their slender necks.

If the faces are arresting, it's because they are part of the theater—masks rather than windows. Eleanor's dark eyes, as opaque as the fabric of her gown, give absolutely nothing away as they coolly stare us down; when the anonymous young black-clad *litterato* in the Metropolitan Museum's *Portrait of a Young Man* of the 1530s deigns to look at us, it's merely to suggest that we're unlikely to understand the contents of the book he's holding in his right hand, his forefinger marking the passage he was reading before we interrupted his leisure.

At first glance, it's tempting to dismiss the teenaged courtier Lodovico Capponi (b. 1533) as just another jaded member of the Florentine *jeunesse dorée*. The scion of a wealthy family, Lodovico was about sixteen when he sat for the picture. The youth is severely dressed in a black doublet with white sleeves, with just a bit of white ruffle peeking above at his collar; arrestingly, Bronzino has set him against an emerald-green backdrop, a silk hanging the richness of whose color seems intended not so much to set off as to mock the dour sobriety of the sitter. Green and white may have been the colors of youth, hope, and generation in Renaissance iconography, but there isn't much verve in this picture. The only organic colors are the pale pinks and ochres of the young man's hands—one clutching a pair of gloves, the other holding a cameo in elegantly elongated fingers—and of his sallow, unsmiling face. The light brown hair is fine, the brows elegantly arched, the line of the cheek slightly plump, the cupid's bow lips pursed; the hazel eyes, with their hooded lids, have a slightly hypothyroid bulge. It's a face you can still see in many a *liceo classico* in northern Italy today.

But something is wrong here; this mask has ever so slightly cracked. Look at the eyes again. No teenager should have those weary smudges, that downcast expression. Unlike the eyes of Eleanor of Toledo or of the disdainful young man in the Met's portrait, which meet ours straight on and, if anything, challenge our own right to be looking at them, Lodovico's eyes are averted, slightly downward and to the left, as if they can't bear to meet our gaze. Why not? The medallion may contain a clue. Partly obscured by the youth's hand, it bears the face of a woman and the legend *sorte*: "fate." And indeed, Lodovico's unhappy fate took the form of a woman. For years, he suffered for love of Maddalena Vettori, a young woman whose stepfather, a certain Salviati, refused to let her marry Lodovico; Salviati went so far as to shut Maddalena in a convent to keep her away from him. When the girl was finally allowed to emerge—in order to become the lady-in-waiting to Eleanor of Toledo—she was

permitted to show herself in public only on days of court processions through the city. Undaunted, Lodovico bought himself a palazzo along the processional route so he could glimpse his beloved. We are told that crowds of onlookers used to gather before the Capponi palazzo in order to witness the ardent looks that the two lovers would exchange—their only means of communication.

94 No wonder the youth in the portrait looks so weary; no wonder he cannot meet our gaze. He is tired of looking, tired of being looked at. However cool its palette, however much it seems to adhere to the marmoreal conventions of attitude and pose that Bronzino himself established so successfully, there is a dark emotion here. Fracturing, for once, the Florentine *disinvoltura*, a great wretchedness has broken through to the surface, where it now leaks out of those sorrowing, exhausted eyes.

