PORTRAITS UNMASKED

‘Not by the face shall the man be known,
but by the mask’

Karen Blixen,
Seven Gothic Tales, 1934

FRANCESCA BONAZZOLI & MICHELE ROBECCHI

PORTRAITS UNMASKED

THE STORIES BEHIND THE FACES

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LOVE WILL TEAR US APART

APPEARANCES CAN BE DECEIVING

BEHIND THE CURTAINS OF POWER

BREAKING BOUNDARIES

LIVES ON THE FRINGES

DANGEROUS LIAISONS

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INTRODUCTION

What identities do some of the most famous portraits in the history of art conceal? What were the events that filled the lives of these frozen faces? When we go to a museum, we admire forms and colours, or the skilful hand that painted or sculpted these figures, but for the most part we know nothing about their stories or sometimes even their names.

Many people have seen Titian's *Danaë*, yet few know that this stunning nude was actually a portrait of Angela Pisana, the favourite courtesan of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, or that Velázquez's Venus was the young Roman painter Flaminia Triunfi, who gave the married Spanish painter his only male heir. Even the elegant silk dresses of Lady Venetia Digby, painted by Van Dyck, disguise the story of an English aristocrat whose loose morals were much gossiped about; and the four upper-class, impeccable Cambridge students portrayed in 2016 by Lucy McKenzie were in fact double agents at the service of Moscow.

The aim of this book is to unmask some of the most famous faces in art, revealing their identities and the events that contributed to securing their immortality. The ancient stories of Pygmalion and Faust, the creators of the *golem* in Jewish legends and even the biblical tradition that has God moulding Adam out of clay seem to suggest that picture makers always have the upper hand over their subjects. The latter negotiated the idea of being consigned to posterity in visual form with an odd combination of fear, flattery, gratitude and mistrust. It is a phobia masterfully described by Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and that finds numerous examples in history – Isabella d'Este declining the opportunity of having Leonardo paint her portrait for fear that the artist might delve too deeply into the secrets of her soul being one of the most renowned instances.

What, then, are the rules of this *pas de deux* in which the roles of leader and follower can be so fluidly exchanged? Despite the unbridgeable social gap between artist and sitter that long defined these dangerous liaisons, conventions varied wildly. Nobles would grudgingly agree to tedious sittings, contenting themselves with a sketch of their face and then leaving it up to the artists to decide how to paint clothes, dogs, horses, furniture and everything else to be included within the composition. Already in the seventeenth century Van Dyck had become so in demand (he would charge incredible sums for a portrait and potential patrons had to join a waiting list) that the situation had been turned on its head, with the English royal family visiting his

studio at Blackfriars accompanied by a delegation of servants, carriages, horses, musicians and jesters to make their stay more pleasant.

The arrival of photography radically changed the ritual of the posing session, abbreviating or in some cases obliterating the relationship between artist and model. Warhol is possibly the best-known exponent of this change: his Polaroid camera (at the time the only one capable of producing immediately verifiable results) was the tool he elected to use in order to 'capture' the long line of celebrities, businessmen, collectors and heiresses featured in his paintings. The relationship was no longer intimate, but mediated by a technological and spatial distance that would contribute to broadening the scope of possibilities. Continuing along this path, in the modern era Gerhard Richter has been able to turn an old black-and-white family photograph of his Uncle Rudi into a universal political and cultural message thanks to the fact that the smiling relative in the picture is wearing a Nazi army uniform. The incredible stories behind Warhol's *Most Wanted Men* or, even more poignantly, Marlene Dumas's *The Neighbour* – an otherwise unremarkable man who was soon known to everyone after hitting the headlines as the murderer of film-maker Theo van Gogh – are further examples of this.

Cultural historian and philosopher Thomas Macho notes how we now live in a 'facial society' – one that is constantly producing faces. The world of advertising has quickly absorbed the lesson imparted by weekly and monthly magazines about the importance of having a face on the cover, and even the most casual glance at a phone or computer is enough for the viewer to be inundated with selfies – the contemporary version of the self-portrait. According to art theorist Hans Belting, the ascendance of Internet culture coincided with a democratic, classless reading of the face. Through the development and widespread use of digital technology, portraiture is no longer accessible only to the upper classes. 'Formal' exceptions notwithstanding – such as Lucian Freud's portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, or the former US President and First Lady Barack and Michelle Obama (painted by Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald respectively) – the creation of a unique, 'official' image no longer seems possible in an age when technical devices are generating millions of portraits every day. Perhaps this explains Alfredo Jaar's choice to immortalize the photojournalist Kevin Carter through a dark, silent room lit by short sentences projected on to the wall. *The Sound of Silence* narrates the tragic story of Carter, but his face does not appear. In much contemporary art the portrait has been transformed; both questioning the form of portraiture itself and – as Christian Boltanski discovered in 1994 when he put together *Menschlich* – recognizing the medium's inability to fully represent the constantly changing face of humanity.

LOVE WILL TEAR US APART

LADY WITH AN ERMINE

LEONARDO DA VINCI
1489–90

This story takes place in Milan at the end of the fifteenth century but it can be perfectly epitomized in one of Oscar Wilde's famous epigrams: 'We live in an age when unnecessary things are our only necessities.' It all began when the Italian city's arrogant ruler, Ludovico 'Il Moro' Sforza, believed he could live under the same roof as both his wife and his lover.

Sforza managed to get away with this double liaison for more than a year and a half until he made a serious mistake – he presented both women with the same gown. The mistress in question was Cecilia Gallerani, the *Lady with an Ermine* portrayed by Leonardo da Vinci at the Castello Sforzesco in Milan between 1489 and 1490. His wife Beatrice had turned a blind eye to having her husband's lover in their home; she even overlooked him raising their son at court. But being given the same dress was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

The lord of Milan had fallen in love with the beautiful Cecilia four years before. It is not known how or where the pair met, but it is thought to have happened in early 1489, when she would have been about seventeen. Cecilia was beautiful, intelligent, a sparkling conversationalist and skilful poet – all qualities that Ludovico must have greatly appreciated. This was, after all, a politically unscrupulous but very cultured man who had transformed Milan into one of the most refined courts in Europe. Although Ludovico was used to getting what he wanted, he was not an insensitive man: he had already legitimized Bianca Giovanna, the daughter he had with Bernardina de Corradis. Historians believe he had the courtesy to have only one lover at a time and that his amours were treated with the utmost respect. As for Cecilia, she had been educated despite the loss of her father when she was seven, and, highly unusually for a woman at that time, knew Latin. Promised to Stefano Visconti in 1483, four years later Cecilia asked for the dissolution of their vows; documents dating from 1489 confirm that by then she was no longer living in the family home in the parish of San Simpliciano, but in that of Monastero Nuovo. Given that it was during this period that her brothers obtained various legal benefits and career promotions, everything would seem to suggest that Cecilia had become the duke's new favourite.

But Ludovico was also betrothed. In 1480, he had been committed to the five-year-old Beatrice d'Este, the youngest daughter of the Duke of Ferrara. The marriage was planned for 1490, when she would turn fifteen, but Il Moro was in no hurry to tie the knot. Beatrice was an immature girl who loved dancing and parties, and was 'nice' at best, as he

Leonardo da Vinci, *Lady with an Ermine*, 1489–90, oil on wood, 54 x 39 cm (21.26 x 15.35 in.), Muzeum Narodowe, Kraków

Giovanni Ambrogio de Predis, *Portrait of a Lady*, c.1490, tempera and oil on panel, 51 x 34 cm (20.08 x 13.39 in.), Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Milan

confided to Giacomo Trotti, the Ferrarese ambassador to Milan. The latter also had the thankless task of explaining to an increasingly irritated Ercole d'Este that the real reason for the postponement was the presence at court of a lover who was 'as beautiful as a flower' (not to mention pregnant) whom Ludovico adored. Cecilia had been allocated apartments in the fortress at the Castello Sforzesco that Il Moro continued to visit regularly even after the arrival of Beatrice, whom he finally married in Pavia on 17 January 1491.

When Ludovico married Beatrice, his new wife was not particularly thrilled at the idea of having his lover at home. About a month later, in February, Il Moro had to promise Ercole, in a letter conveyed by Trotti as usual, that he would no longer see Cecilia, who had been given a house and land in Pavia. The intention was to calm the waters and show that the favourite would be leaving the city for her new country estate. But Ludovico had built his empire on a succession of murders and deceits; clearly, he was not going to be intimidated by a child bride. Cecilia stayed at the castle in Milan, where she gave birth to Cesare Sforza Visconti on 3 May 1491. His father recognized the child, but for dynastic reasons he could not be legitimized. The court poets celebrated the birth with sonnets composed in his honour and in that of the 'magnifica Domina Cecilia', who received the town of Saronno as a gift. The odd family continued to reside permanently at the Castello Sforzesco and, to the delight of his father, tiny Cesare soon became pleasingly chubby. However, when the imprudent duke gave identical fabric to both women and Beatrice saw Cecilia wearing the same dress, she gave him an ultimatum and demanded that Ludovico send her rival away. The duke swore – according to Trotti – that he would send his lover to a convent or marry her off. On 27 July 1492, Cecilia celebrated her wedding to Count Ludovico Carminati di Brambilla, known as

Il Bergamino, and was furnished with a dowry worthy of a princess and the Palazzo Carmagnola, a gift to her son Cesare from his father.

The new bride also took with her the portrait that Leonardo had painted before she became pregnant. We know this with certainty because on 29 April 1498, she packed it up and sent it to Isabella d'Este, the sister of Beatrice – who had died in childbirth meanwhile, at the age of 21 – accompanied by a curious letter in which she appears to dismiss Leonardo da Vinci's work. The painting, Cecilia explained, did not resemble her at all ('there is no one who thinks it was made for me'), not through any fault of the painter ('I do not believe there is a painter in the world who is his equal'), but because it was painted 'when I was at an imperfect age and I am greatly changed since that effigy'. Isabella was keen to have her own portrait painted, but was unsure of which painter to commission. She had asked her friend Cecilia to send hers, with the promise to return it immediately after comparing it to one by Giovanni Bellini. Leonardo was summoned to Mantua and made a drawing of Isabella, who judged it too revealing of the secrets of her soul and abandoned her plan. As for the portrait of Cecilia, Leonardo had succeeded in capturing in Cecilia's face the air of surprise produced by the sudden interruption of her thoughts running through her head before his arrival, while the ermine had the same liveliness and rapacious expression as Ludovico – nicknamed 'Italico Morel bianco ermellino' (Italian Moor, white ermine) – who had recently received the insignia of the chivalric Order of the Ermine from the king of Naples.

Sforza died a prisoner in France in 1508, while Cecilia lived for over sixty years, giving birth to at least four children by her husband and receiving praise as a learned muse in the stories of Matteo Bandello. In the portrait, Ludovico and Cecilia remain joined in each other's arms.

LEONARDO DA VINCI (Vinci, Florence, 1452 – Amboise, 1519) was an Italian painter, sculptor, architect, engineer and writer. The illegitimate son of notary Piero da Vinci, he started a period of apprenticeship in the workshop of Andrea Verrocchio – the site where many young students, such as Ghirlandaio, Botticelli and Perugino, learned their artistic craft. When Leonardo moved to Milan in 1482, he had already elaborated his own typical style, called *sfumato* (nuanced), with figures defined by gentle changes of colour rather than contour lines. He offered his considerable scientific knowledge to Duke Ludovico il Moro, who hired him on the spot. During his twenty-year tenure at court, he painted the *Last Supper* in the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie, a wall painting that became famous just as quickly as it began to deteriorate. When Il Moro was defeated by the French army, Leonardo received an invitation to move to France from King Francis I, who took him to Amboise and bought from him the *Mona Lisa* painting that is now in Louvre in Paris.

GABRIELLE D'ESTRÉES AND ONE OF HER SISTERS

FONTAINEBLEAU SCHOOL
c.1594

If this artwork were merely a portrait of two nude women, it would never have become so famous. What makes the most renowned painting by the Fontainebleau School stand out is the enigmatic gesture of one of the two ladies squeezing the other's nipple with her fingers.

But who were these two women? And why did someone portray them in this riddle-like *mise en scène*, in which the details inserted into the image – the ring in the foreground and the servant intently sewing in the background, for example – work as clues to help solve it?

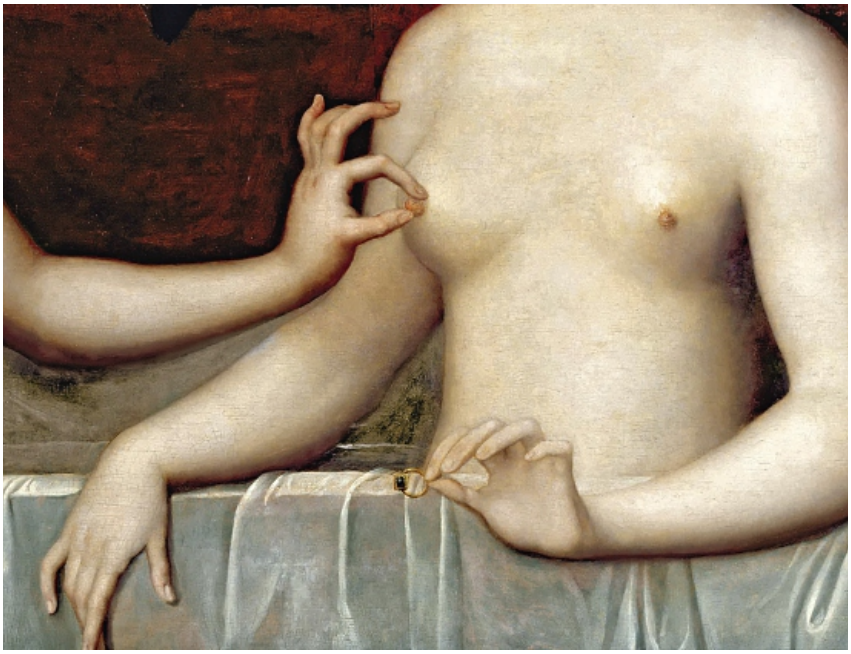
The blonde woman on the right was Gabrielle d'Estrées, while the brunette next to her, the Duchess of Villars, was one of her six sisters. All together they were affectionately nicknamed 'the seven deadly sins' by their father. In *Les amours du Grand Alcandre*, thought to have been written by Mademoiselle de Guise, we can read a description of Gabrielle:

> *Her eyes were the colour of the sky and so bright it was hard to tell whether they took their brightness from the sun or if the sun had taken its own from them. Her eyebrows were arched and pleasingly dark and her nose a little aquiline; her mouth was ruby; her breasts whiter than ivory, more beautiful and smooth, and the complexion of her hands like that of roses and lilies.*

At the age of seventeen, she fell in love with the Grand Squire of France, the handsome Roger de Saint-Lary, Count of Bellegarde, who imprudently advertised the young woman's extraordinary beauty to his friend Henri de Navarre. This revelation changed Gabrielle's destiny, as the intrigued Henri arranged to meet the girl and immediately fell in love with her. The fact that Henri was married to Marguerite de Valois, a princess of the blood, did not pose a problem because the couple had found a way to cope with their respective lovers without denting their mismatched marriage.

Gabrielle was initially disgusted by the warmongering Henri, whose breath smelt of garlic and who was twenty years older than her. Their relationship turned into an idyll only after the birth of their first child, later followed by two younger siblings. The main reason behind the capitulation of Gabrielle, who had until then continued to flaunt her undaunted passion for the Count of Bellegarde, was that in 1594, due to the Salic law that prevented women from inheriting lands, the Valois dynasty died out and Henri de Navarre found himself as the

Fontainebleau School, *Gabrielle d'Estrées and One of Her Sisters*, c.1594, 96 x 125 cm (37.8 x 49.21 in.), Musée du Louvre, Paris



Fontainebleau School, *Gabrielle d'Estrées and One of Her Sisters* (detail)

Bourbon dynasty's first king of France. This was an extraordinary opportunity – Gabrielle could realistically aspire to become his queen. After all, had she not been the one to give the king his only male heir? César de Vendôme – the name and title of the boy – had been recognized by parliament and his younger siblings Catherine-Henriette and Alexandre were baptized with the pomp reserved for princes and princesses of the blood.

As the years passed (nine in all), Gabrielle became the confidante, counsellor and companion that Henri had never had, and she had finally given him the family that Marguerite had denied him. On 23 February 1599, during the Shrove Tuesday celebrations, in front of the entire court, the king removed the blessed ring with which he had been consecrated in Chartres cathedral and slipped it on to the finger of his beautiful lover, making a formal commitment to marry her on the first Sunday after Easter. This promise would seem to explain the ring Gabrielle, a bride, is holding prominently in the picture, while her sister's gesture of squeezing her nipple points to her fourth pregnancy and the breastfeeding of her son, for whom the woman in the background is sewing swaddling bands.

Regrettably, Henri's decision didn't go down well with the court, who shuddered with indignation: Henri and Gabrielle's children had been born out of wedlock and the transition from king's favourite to queen wasn't as smooth as he would have liked. And then there was Queen Marguerite. While prepared to grant the annulment of her marriage, as the last descendant of the Valois, Marguerite would never allow the French crown to end up on the head of a whore, as she called Gabrielle. And so, while his lover was preparing her crimson velvet dress for their wedding, the king began secret negotiations with an envoy from Florence. A Medici princess – like Marguerite's mother Catherine – had been identified to secure Henri's line. The chosen girl was called Maria; she was 25 and physically the opposite of Gabrielle, but she would bring with her the cancellation of the huge debt Henri had racked up with the Florentine banks as her dowry.

As expected, the atmosphere was rife with suspicion: the Florentine emissaries feared Henri was using his negotiations with the Medici to get leverage for an annulment from the queen so he could marry Gabrielle. Gabrielle, in turn, feared her wedding would never take place when Henri sent her to Paris 'for the sake of appearances'. Tragedy struck when the pregnant bride-to-be started suffering with such terrible convulsions as to persuade doctors to induce the birth. Overcome with fever,

‘The king removed the blessed ring with which he had been consecrated in Chartres cathedral and slipped it on to the finger of his beautiful lover’

blindness, loss of hearing and speech, and then with a disfigured face, she fell into a coma and died on the morning of Easter Saturday. The king had been stopped en route to Paris and told, mistakenly, that his beloved had already passed away before he could see her. Eclampsia is the medical term we would use today for the condition that struck Gabrielle’s pregnancy, but there was immediately talk of poisoning – a plan hatched with the consent of Pope Clement VIII, cousin of Ferdinand, Grand Duke of Tuscany, who had a vested interest in seeing a Medici on the French throne. The king was devastated: ‘The root of my love is dead and will sprout no more,’ he wrote to his sister Catherine de Bourbon.

But in the end, he had already found a new mistress before Maria de’ Medici arrived from Florence. On 5 October 1600, he finally married Maria by proxy. As the ultimate insult, he gave the honour of representing him at the wedding to Roger de Bellegarde, the young man with whom Gabrielle had fallen in love and whom she had dreamt of marrying years earlier.

The FONTAINEBLEAU SCHOOL was an artistic trend developed in France in the sixteenth century. It takes its name from a castle in the Bièvre forest, just outside of Paris, which King Francis I wanted to be finely decorated in order to compete with the most important European courts. To accomplish his goal, the monarch called on the most famous manneristic painters of the day, such as Rosso Fiorentino, Primaticcio and Nicolò dell’Abate. The group developed a particularly elegant style where sinuous nude figures would intermingle with obscure allegories and mythological themes. Many rooms of the castle were destroyed or radically transformed during the Wars of Religion. In the early 1600s, under the guidance of Ambroise Dubois, Fontainebleau made a brief and ill-fated attempt to reprise its activities before being definitively outdone by the rise of the Dutch and Flemish schools.

PILGRIM'S MADONNA

CARAVAGGIO
1604

Look closely, because this beautiful woman portrayed in the guise of the *Pilgrim's Madonna* was responsible for the downfall of Michelangelo Merisi, better known as Caravaggio.

The Virgin leaning against the door jamb is not just any model; her name is Maddalena di Paolo Antognetti, known as Lena, or Roscina in her youth. Like her mother Lucrezia and sister Amabilia, she worked as a prostitute. However, she was not one of those low-ranking hustlers confined to the Ortaccio ghetto by Clement VIII – the pope who had Giordano Bruno burned in Campo de' Fiori, beheaded Beatrice Cenci, banned Carnival and forbade women from going out unaccompanied at night.

Lena was different: blessed by an astuteness that matched her beauty, by seventeen she was already the lover of Cesare Barattieri, a nobleman close to Cardinal Farnese, who in turn generously shared her services with Cardinal Alessandro Peretti Montalto and Monsignor Melchiorre Crescenzi. With clients of such rank, Lena could legitimately hope to have a decent life, but she made the error of being seduced by the dark eyes of one Giulio Massino from Viterbo. We have to assume that he was handsome and charismatic because he did not even have a roof over his head and – again in accordance with Clement VIII's regulations about decorum – was captured during periodical police sweeps intended to clear the city of vagabonds. He was sent to the port of Ripa Grande to become an oarsman enslaved on the papal galleys, though not before Lena became pregnant. She gave birth to a son she christened Paolo, only to leave him with a wet nurse and move in with a notary, Gaspare Albertini, who took her with him to Rome's Borgo district.

Lena could have happily settled down there and then, but young girls, as everybody knows, are not prudent when they fall for boys' charms and run after the loves of their dreams. On the night of 2 November 1604, she was detained by the police near her old house on the Via del Corso – the very same place where Caravaggio would be apprehended two weeks later. Someone was clearly following them. Albertini had been warned that Lena was cheating on him but his attempt to set her up failed: the two youngsters would continue to see each other, as demonstrated by the subsequent re-arrest of Caravaggio on 28 May. Not only was he enjoying Lena's company, but he was also painting her portrait in the guise of the *Pilgrim's Madonn*a. To add

Caravaggio, *Pilgrim's Madonna*, 1604, oil on canvas, 260 x 150 cm (102.36 x 59.06 in.), Basilica di Sant'Agostino in Campo Marzio, Rome

Caravaggio, *Madonna and Child with St Anne* (*Dei Palafrenieri*), 1605/06, oil on canvas, 292 x 211 cm (114.96 x 83.07 in.), Galleria Borghese, Rome