

= Portrait of a Lady (van der Weyden) =

Portrait of a Lady (or Portrait of a Woman) is a small oil @-@ on @-@ oak panel painting executed around 1460 by the Netherlandish painter Rogier van der Weyden . The composition is built from the geometric shapes that form the lines of the woman 's veil , neckline , face , and arms , and by the fall of the light that illuminates her face and headdress . The vivid contrasts of darkness and light enhance the almost unnatural beauty and Gothic elegance of the model .

Van der Weyden was preoccupied by commissioned portraiture towards the end of his life and was highly regarded by later generations of painters for his penetrating evocations of character . In this work , the woman 's humility and reserved demeanour are conveyed through her fragile physique , lowered eyes and tightly grasped fingers . She is slender and depicted according to the Gothic ideal of elongated features , indicated by her narrow shoulders , tightly pinned hair , high forehead and the elaborate frame set by the headdress . It is the only known portrait of a woman accepted as an autograph work by van der Weyden , yet the sitter 's name is not recorded and he did not title the work .

Although van der Weyden did not adhere to the conventions of idealisation , he generally sought to flatter his sitters . He depicted his models in highly fashionable clothing , often with rounded ? almost sculpted ? facial features , some of which deviated from natural representation . He adapted his own aesthetic , and his portraits of women often bear a striking resemblance to each other .

The painting has been in the National Gallery of Art in Washington , D.C. since donated in 1937 , and is no . 34 in the de Vos catalogue raisonné of the artist . It has been described as " famous among all portraits of women of all schools " .

= = Composition = =

The woman , who is probably in her late teens or early twenties , is shown half @-@ length and in three @-@ quarters profile , set against a two @-@ dimensional interior background of deep blue @-@ green . The background is flat and lacks the attention to detail common in van der Weyden 's devotional works . Like his contemporary Jan van Eyck (c . 1395 ? 1441) , when working in portraiture , he used dark planes to focus attention on the sitter . It was not until Hans Memling (c . 1435 ? 1494) , a pupil of van der Weyden , that a Netherlandish artist set a portrait against an exterior or landscape . In this work the flat setting allows the viewer to settle on the woman 's face and quiet self @-@ possession . Van der Weyden reduces his focus to four basic features : the woman 's headdress , dress , face and hands . The background has darkened with age ; it is likely that the angles created by the sitter 's hennin and dress were once much sharper .

The woman wears an elegant low @-@ cut black dress with dark bands of fur at the neck and wrist . Her clothes are of the then @-@ fashionable Burgundian style , which emphasises the tall and thin aesthetic of the Gothic ideal . Her dress is buckled by a bright red sash pulled in below her breasts . The buff @-@ coloured hennin headdress is draped with a large transparent veil , which spills over her shoulders , reaching her upper arms . Van der Weyden 's attention to the structure of the clothing ? the careful detailing of the pins pushed into the veil to fix its position ? is typical for the artist .

The woman 's veil forms a diamond shape , balanced by the inverse flow of a light vest worn beneath her dress . She is shown at a slight angle , but her pose is centred by the interlocked broad lines of arms , décolletage and veil . The woman 's head is delicately lit , leaving no strong tonal contrasts on her skin . She has a long , thin face , plucked eyebrows and eyelids , and a plucked hairline to create a fashionably high forehead . Her hair is tightly pinned back on the rim of the bonnet and rests above her ear . Her high headdress and severe hairline accentuate her elongated face , giving it a sculpted appearance .

The woman 's left ear is set , according to art historian Norbert Schneider , unnaturally high and far back , parallel to her eyes rather than to her nose ; this position is probably an artistic device used to continue the flow of the diagonal line of the veil 's inner @-@ right wing . In the 15th century , veils were normally worn for modesty , to hide the sensuality of the flesh . In this work the veil has the

opposite effect ; the woman 's face is framed by the headdress to draw attention to her beauty .

The woman 's hands are crossed tightly as if in prayer , and positioned so low in the painting as to appear to be resting on the frame . They are rendered as tightly compressed into a small area of the picture ; it is likely van der Weyden did not want them to result in an area of high tone that might distract from the description of her head . Her slender fingers are minutely detailed ; van der Weyden often indicated the social position of his models through his rendering of their face and hands . The sleeve of her dress extends beyond her wrists . Her fingers are folded in layers ; their intricate portrayal is the most detailed element in the painting , and echoes the pyramidal form of the upper portion of the painting .

Her eyes gaze downward in humility , in contrast to her relatively extravagant clothes . The piety of her expression is achieved through motifs common to van der Weyden 's work . Her eyes and nose are elongated and her lower lip made fuller by the use of tone and pronounced finish . Some vertical lines around these features are emphasised , while her pupils are enlarged and her eyebrows slightly raised . In addition the contours of her face are highlighted in a manner that is slightly unnatural and abstract , and outside the usual spatial constraints of 15th @-@ century human representation . This methodology was described by art historian Erwin Panofsky : " Rogier concentrated on certain salient features ? salient both from a physiognomical and psychological point of view ? which he expressed primarily by lines . " Her high forehead and full mouth have been seen as suggestive of a nature at once intellectual , ascetic , and passionate , symbolic of " an unresolved conflict in her personality " . Panofsky refers to a " smouldering excitability " .

The sitter is unknown , although some art historians have speculated on her identity . On the grounds of similarity of facial features , writer Wilhelm Stein suggested in the early 20th century that she might be Marie de Valengin , the illegitimate daughter of Philip the Good of Burgundy . However , this is a contentious assertion and not widely held . Because her hands are shown as resting on the painting 's lower frame , art historians generally accept that this was an independent portrait , rather than a devotional work . It is possible that it was intended as a pendant to a picture of the woman 's husband , however no other portrait has been suggested as a likely companion .

= = Break from idealisation = =

Van der Weyden worked in the same tradition of portraiture as contemporaries Jan van Eyck and Robert Campin . In the early to middle 15th century , these three artists were among the first generation of " Northern Renaissance " painters , and the first northern Europeans to portray members of the middle and upper classes naturalistically rather than in a medieval Christian idealised form . In earlier Netherlandish art the profile view was the dominant mode of representation for the nobles or clergy worthy of portraiture . In works such as Portrait of a Man in a Turban (1433) , Jan van Eyck broke this tradition and used the three @-@ quarter profile of the face which became the standard in Netherlandish art . Here , van der Weyden utilises the same profile , which better allows him to describe the shape of the head and facial features of the sitter . She is shown in half @-@ length , which enables the artist to show her hands crossed at her waist .

Despite this new freedom , van der Weyden 's portraits of women are strikingly similar in concept and structure , both to each other and to female portraits by Campin . Most are three @-@ quarter face and half @-@ length . They typically set their models in front of a dark background that is uniform and nondescript . While the portraits are noted for their expressive pathos , the facial features of the women strongly resemble one another . This indicates that although van der Weyden did not adhere to the tradition of idealised representation , he sought to please his sitters in a manner that reflected contemporary ideals of beauty . Most of van der Weyden 's portraits were painted as commissions from the nobility ; he painted only five (including Portrait of a Lady) that were not donor portraits . It is known that in his Portrait of Philip de Croÿ (c . 1460) , van der Weyden complimented the young Flemish nobleman by concealing his large nose and undershot jaw . When describing this tendency in relation to the Washington portrait , art historian Norbert Schneider wrote , " While van Eyck shows nature ' in the raw ' , as it were , Rogier improves on physical reality , civilising and refining Nature and the human form with the help of a brush . " The

high quality of the painting is highlighted when compared to the National Gallery 's very similar workshop painting . The London subject has softer , more rounded features and is younger and less individually characterised than the c . 1460 model . The technique also is less subtle and fine in the London work . However , both share a similar expressions and dress .

Van der Weyden was more concerned with the aesthetic and emotional response created by the pictures overall than in the specific portraits . Art historian and curator Lorne Campbell suggests that the popularity of the portrait is due more to the " elegant simplicity of the pattern which [the sitter] creates " than to the grace of her depiction . While van der Weyden did not stay within the traditional realms of idealisation , he created his own aesthetic , which he extended across his portraits and religious pictures . This aesthetic includes the mood of sorrowful devotion which forms the dominant tone in all his portraits . His figures may be more natural than those of earlier generations of artists ; however , his individualistic approach to the depiction of his sitters ' piety often leads to the abandonment of the rules of scale .

John Walker , former director of the National Gallery of Art , referred to the subject as " outré " , but believed that despite the awkwardness of her individual features , the model was nonetheless " strangely beautiful " . By the time of the work 's completion van der Weyden had eclipsed even van Eyck in popularity , and this painting is typical of the austere spirituality , over the latter 's sensuality , for which van der Weyden is renowned .

= = Condition and provenance = =

Although van der Weyden did not title the work , and the sitter 's name is not recorded in any of the early inventories , the style of her dress has been used to place the picture very late in van der Weyden 's career . The c . 1460 dating is based on the high @-@ fashion dress and the work 's apparent chronological position in the evolution of van der Weyden 's style . However , it is possible that it was executed even later (van der Weyden died in 1464) .

Portrait of a Lady was painted on a single oak board with a vertical grain and has an unpainted margin on each side . The panel was prepared with gesso , upon which the figure was then painted in monochrome . Glazes of oil pigment were then added , which allowed for subtle and transparent tonal gradations . Infra @-@ red reflectography reveals that van der Weyden did not sketch the work on the board before he began to paint , and there is no evidence of underdrawing . It shows that the lady was portrayed as more slender before changes were made as the work progressed ; thickly applied background paint underlies some of the belt , demonstrating that the original silhouette was widened . These changes are also visible in x @-@ ray images . It is in relatively good condition , having been cleaned a number of times , most recently in 1980 . There is some loss of paint on the veil , headdress and sleeve , and abrasion on the ear .

The provenance of the painting is unclear , and there is doubt as to which painting is referred to in some early inventories . An Anhalt prince , likely Leopold Friedrich Franz (d . 1817) of Wörlitz , near Dessau , Germany , held it in the early 19th century , after which it is likely to have passed to Leopold Friedrich (d . 1871) . The painting was loaned for exhibition in 1902 , when it was shown at the Hôtel de Gouvernement Provincial , Bruges at the Exposition des primitifs flamands et d 'art ancien . It was held by a Duke of Anhalt until 1926 when he sold it to the art dealers Duveen Brothers . They in turn sold it that year to Andrew W. Mellon . It was loaned the following year to the Royal Academy of Arts , London , for an exhibition covering six centuries of Flemish and Belgian art . Mellon willed the work to his Educational and Charitable Trust in 1932 , which in 1937 donated it to the National Gallery of Art where it is on permanent display .

= = Gallery = =