

REVIEW

MASTERPIECE: 'SCHIAVA TURCA' (1531-34) BY PARMIGIANINO

A Captivating Beauty, and An Enigma

BY JAMES GARDNER

NOTHING IS KNOWN about the identity of the lovely young woman in Parmigianino's great painting, "Schiava Turca," or "Turkish Slave," other than that she is neither Turkish nor a slave. The title was rashly bestowed upon the portrait in the early 18th century, nearly 200 years after its creation, by a cataloger who was misled by the admittedly turbanlike headdress that the sitter wears. In fact, the accessory in question, known as a *balzo*, was quite common among women of fashion in the courts of Northern Italy.

The painting has just arrived in our hemisphere for the first time ever and can be seen at the Frick Collection from Tuesday through July 20, before it travels to the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco. On loan from the Galleria Nazionale di Parma, it was painted between 1531 and 1534 in Parma, the city in which the artist had been born some 30 years earlier, and to which he now returned after extended sojourns in Rome and Bologna.

Perhaps more than any other artist, Parmigianino (1503-1540) incarnates the spirit of Mannerism, the movement that dominated Italian art from the death of Raphael in 1520 down to the end of the 16th century. Following the more austere classicism of the

High Renaissance, and succeeded by the more austere spirit of the Counter-Reformation, Mannerism was as conspicuous for its chromatic audacity as for its elongated and "mannered" forms. Though Parmigianino's "Madonna of the Long Neck" could stand as a paradigm of the entire movement, its extravagant stylization represents only one half of this painter's oeuvre. The other half, ably summed up in

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"Turkish Slave," is more sober and expressive of the realities of the sublunary world. Throughout his career, from the Bardi Altarpiece, painted when he was 18 years old, to "Lucrezia Romana," from the last year of life, Parmigianino could shift in an instant from one style to the other.

In the case of "Turkish Slave," a woman perhaps in her later 20s, we have the unmistakable sense that we are dealing not with the sort of abstracted human form that populates Parmigianino's devotional and mythological works, but rather with a creature of flesh and blood: If we ran into her on the street, we could recognize her on the evidence of this painting. Surely the living, breathing model has been transformed through the artifice that Parmigianino always imposed upon his subjects.



THE ARTIST had the power to summon into being any texture—feathers, lace—that he chose.

But beneath that artifice we still sense the human core, like crystallized wood that preserves a trace of the organic matter it once was. The shoulders of the sitter are too idiosyncratic for idealization, the eyes too focused, the chin too pointed, the cheeks too ruddy. And then there is the frank frontality of her gaze, which pierces the mythological fog of Mannerism to confront the viewer head on.

Of course, Parmigianino is not Hans Holbein: He is not interested in an almost forensic register of the face in question. Nor, for that matter, is he interested in penetrating the soul of his sitter, as Titian so often did. Parmigianino's ambition was always the creation of beauty, beauty before piety or truth or status or any of the other inveterate aims of portraiture and religious art. In "Turkish Slave" the painter

has stood his subject against a grayish-green background, with none of the dizzy patterning that jolts so many of his other portraits into life. He clearly delights in the concentric curves that rise like radio waves from her hat and from the shawl, or partlet, that covers her shoulders. He thrills as well to the jagged arabesques formed by the silhouette of her dark-blue sleeves against the neutral ground, while the ostrich

feather in her hand and the gold lace of her balzo exemplify the power of his paint to summon into being any texture that he chooses. The sitter's hand, as well, is pure invention: No human hand has ever looked like that. And yet it resembles every other hand that Parmigianino painted, including the one in the foreground of his famous "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror."

The Frick has accompanied its display of "Turkish Slave" with several other works by Parmigianino, as well as contemporary paintings from its permanent collection. But behind this exhibition of "Turkish Slave" a persistent question remains: Who could this captivating figure possibly be? In the catalog to the show, the curator, Aimee Ng, a research associate at the Frick, has drawn attention to the gold medallion in the lady's balzo, depicting a winged horse that may be Pegasus, as well as to the feathery object that she holds in her hand, which suggests a pennon, and so a pen, and so, perhaps, a metaphor of poetry itself. From this sequence of associations, Ms. Ng puts forth the bold conjecture that the sitter may be Veronica Gambara, a fine poet and the ruler of the town of Correggio from 1518 until her death in 1550. Although this identification seems no less plausible than any of the others that have been put forward, the evidence does not appear sufficiently strong to support it, especially since, at the time when Parmigianino painted the portrait, Gambara was far older than the woman he depicted. And so, for this viewer at least, the mystery of the subject's identity remains to be solved.

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