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A Mischievous Half-Smile, Cloaked in Mystery

In the midst of a frantic week of art fairs and auctions, a splendid Renaissance portrait made a quiet and dignified entrance at the

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ART REVIEW

Frick, Parmigianino's "Schiava Turca," a painting of an unidentified woman with twinkling hazel eyes and a mischievous half-smile, invites us to settle in for a restorative session of close looking.

The museum's third collaboration with the Foundation for Italian Art and Culture, the small exhibition "The Poetry of Parmigianino's 'Schiava Turca'" is the painting's first appearance in this country. It follows other loans of Renaissance portraits of enigmatic women: Raphael's "La Fornarina" (from the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica in Rome) and Parmigianino's "Antea" (from the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples).

In the custom of those earlier single-painting exhibitions, "Schiava Turca" (circa 1531-34), from the Galleria Nazionale di Parma, has been installed in the Frick's Oval Room. It is accompanied by other portraits from the Frick Collection: two Titians and a Bronzino (and, for good measure, another Parmigianino portrait on loan from a private collection).

Like "La Fornarina," which may or may not be a portrait of Raphael's mistress, and the still-

"The Poetry of Parmigianino's 'Schiava Turca'" runs through July 20 at the Frick Collection, 1 East 70th Street, Manhattan; 212-288-0700, frick.org.



THE FRICK COLLECTION, NEW YORK

unidentified "Antea," the "Schiava Turca" ("Turkish Slave") arrives cloaked in mystery. For one thing, her title is a misnomer; contemporary scholars agree that she is neither Turkish nor a slave. An 18th-century cataloger at the Uffizi gallery, where the painting once resided, is thought to have misinterpreted the subject's turbanlike headdress (actually a "balzo," a high-status accessory associated with the Northern Italian courts) and the delicate gold chain on her right wrist, a possible allusion to the "chains of love" in Renaissance poetry.

That reading of the chains is supported by other bookish references in the painting. An emblem of Pegasus, the symbol of poetic inspiration, decorates the woman's headpiece. And the voluminous ostrich-feather fan in her left hand may be a kind of visual pun; in Italian, the words for "feathers" (piume, penna) are very similar to the words for "pen" (piuma, penna).

This "Turkish Slave" is more likely an Italian noblewoman



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Parmigianino's "Schiava Turca," circa 1531-34; left, Titian's "Portrait of a Man in a Red Cap" (1510); and right, Titian's portrait of the playwright Pietro Aretino, from around 1537.

with some literary connections. What we don't know is whether she was a real woman or an idealized "type," a muse perhaps. (The same question hangs over "La Fornarina" and "Antea.")

One answer is provided by the

show's curator, Aimee Ng, a research associate at the Frick and a lecturer at Columbia University. Ms. Ng theorizes in her catalog essay that the mystery woman may be the poet Veronica Gambara, who shared a mutual



THE FRICK COLLECTION, NEW YORK

friend with Parmigianino — the writer Pietro Bembo — and may have met the painter at one of Bembo's salons. The Pegasus ornament on the headdress may be a coded reference to Bembo, who appears with the winged horse in several portrait medals and seems to have used it as his personal emblem.

The takeaway from this scholarly guessing game is that this is a portrait of a powerful, confident female poet asserting her place among the literati. That theory would certainly help to explain her aggressive pose and her vivacious expression, attributes not often found in Italian Renaissance portraits of women.

The other paintings in the Oval Room are of men, but they make for some interesting comparisons. To the right of "Schiava Turca" is Parmigianino's "Portrait of a Man" (circa 1527-31), a painting of a scholar in a dimly lit den. The subject, who uses his hand as a bookmark, seems to want to get back to his reading; he is an introvert to the other image's extrovert.

The Poetry of Parmigianino's 'Schiava Turca'

Frick Collection

And to the left is Titian's "Portrait of a Man in a Red Cap" (circa 1510), relocated from the Frick's Living Hall. The young subject of this painting, cocooned in fur, satin and felt, appears introspective but also worldly. He has that in common with "Schiava Turca," although the sense of space in the two paintings could not be more different; the velvety recesses of the Titian make the Parmigianino, with its already exaggerated roundness, appear positively tumescent.

Another Titian from the Living Hall depicts the well-known poet, playwright and satirist Pietro Aretino, a friend of the artist's and, to judge from this likeness, an intimidating hulk of a man. He reminds us of the power of the pen in Renaissance Italy; the label notes that he was nicknamed the "scourge of princes."

The work at the Frick that's closest in spirit to Parmigianino's playful "Schiava Turca," however, is by his fellow Mannerist Bronzino, a portrait of the Medici court page Lodovico Capponi, who appears as a young striver with a bit of attitude.

"Schiava Turca" projects a similar presence, even though she is a mature woman with a wedding ring and a few crow's feet around the eyes. In the context of this show, her name starts to look less like a mistake and more like a delightful paradox; she is a slave to no one, except maybe the muse.