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## 'Schiava Turca' at Legion of Honor a portrait of mystery

Kenneth Baker

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Many museum visitors find it striking that mysteries still attend artworks admired since the time of their making, decades or centuries ago.

So do museum professionals, including Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco director Colin Bailey.

He has brought to the Legion of Honor an exemplary case: the luminous portrait of an unidentified woman known as "Schiava Turca" (ca. 1531-34) by Francesco Mazzola (1503-1540), called Parmagianino since his emergence in his early 20s as an artistic prodigy in Rome.

The panel painting hangs at the Legion as a centerpiece among related works from the FAMSF collection - a portrait by Bronzino, another by Tintoretto and one formerly attributed to Giorgione, as well as works on paper by Parmagianino and small sculptures by his contemporaries.

I wondered whether this show - small, digestible, but memorable - might set the pattern for future FAMSF programming in straitened times.

"It's not something that hasn't been done here before," Bailey said. "Remember, the Fine Arts Museums borrowed a single object from Rome" - Gianlorenzo Bernini's marble "Medusa," in 2011.

Anyway, "smaller numbers don't necessarily mean smaller costs," Bailey said.

For the Parmagianino project, "we had terrific support from the Field Foundation in San Francisco... and a very happy relationship with the Foundation for Italian Art and Culture."

Bailey has a wish list of other great loan objects around which he'd like to build small exhibitions, but will not yet tip his hand.

"The painting's in tremendously good condition," Bailey said, returning to "Schiava Turca."

"Luckily it wasn't over-cleaned, so we didn't lose any of the detail. Look at the cross-hatchings on the weave, or the feathers" in the fan she holds.

## **Turban led to title**

Before restoration in the mid-20th century, "it was very dirty," Bailey said. "This is a tiny patch of the varnish." He pointed to a microchip-size brown rectangle left by conservators, a vestige of its untreated condition.

Cleaning a painting of varnish once applied to protect it and darkened by time can be as revealing as scholarly research.

Parmagianino's "Schiava Turca" benefited by both on the occasion of its loan by Galleria Nazionale di Parma.

Aimee Ng, researcher and guest curator at the Frick Collection in New York, where Bailey worked for many years before coming to San Francisco, collaborated with the FAMSF on bringing the Renaissance treasure to the United States.

She wrote the exhibition catalog essay, marshaling evidence that the woman Parmagianino depicted may have been a poet, a reading that hinges on the medallion the sitter wears on her headdress, known as a balzo.

Eighteenth century admirers of the painting saw her headdress as a turban, Bailey noted, the chain woven into her sleeve as a prisoner's; hence the nominal title "Schiava Turca" - Turkish slave - that has stuck ever since.

Asked by Bailey how the "Schiava Turca" played in New York, Ng said, "People just loved this Renaissance mystery, especially on the heels of the Vermeer 'Girl with the Pearl Earring,' " which showed at the Frick following its appearance at the de Young among a selection of loans from the Mauritshuis, the Royal Picture Gallery in The Hague, Netherlands.

"What's nice about the single painting loan," said Ng, "is that these live in great collections that people flock to, but there, they're one of many masterpieces. When it comes over to be the focus of an exhibition like this, it gets a lot of attention, it gets new research, new conservation. It gets a life in the spotlight that it doesn't necessarily get at home."

## **Speculation about poet**

Ng's speculation that the sitter for "Schiava Turca" might have been Parmagianino's contemporary, the poet Veronica Gambara, turns on identification of the winged horse on her headdress ornament as Pegasus.

Offspring of the beheaded Medusa's spilled blood, Pegasus, was seen by Renaissance humanists as a symbol of poetic inspiration.

Unusual for a Renaissance woman's portrait, the balzo medallion is almost the only jewelry the

unknown sitter wears.

"Often you would see a necklace, or several, with other things dangling from her wrists," Ng said, "but all she has is that ring" - a very faint detail to which Ng brought fresh attention - "with not even a gem."

"If you take a survey of Italian Renaissance portraits of women," Ng said, "this picture does not look like any other. ... Her expression captures people from a distance. This is something that comes right at you and stops you where you are."

I wondered aloud whether in giving the portrait this aspect, Parmagianino might have had in mind the association with Medusa, whose monstrous appearance turned those who saw her to stone.

"I think you're absolutely right to make the connection to Medusa," Ng said. "I wouldn't say there's a tradition of that, but this is a very special picture."

Suppose a firm identification of the woman we know as "Schiava Turca" were made. Would that dim the light of the picture?

"No, I don't think so at all," Bailey said. "If you really could be sure who this woman was, who her husband was, what her milieu was, that would make it even more interesting."

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