

“Here’s Looking at You”: Ambiguities of Personalizing the Nude

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A precisely observed naked man’s body with nothing covered in shame, nothing prettified—this is the way Albrecht Dürer presented himself in a brush drawing in black and white on green paper (fig. 103). One’s attention is drawn to the two poles of the face and the genitals. The intended position of his left arm is simply indicated by a single line (if at all, and Dürer is not hiding the arm behind him), the right is rendered only down to the elbow, the legs only to the knees. The dark background and the bright illumination from the right suggest a nighttime setting with an artificial light source. On the sheet, which has recently been thought to date from the decade 1499–1509, the Nuremberg painter doubtless meant to show himself as a man in or close to his prime, his fourth decade of life, in which his powers have presumably been fully developed, and at the same time close to the ideal thirty or thirty-three years that Christ lived, an age that according to Christian belief the resurrected will enjoy in Paradise.¹

At first glance the situation seems as simple as it is intimate: Dürer is studying his own naked body. But in the decades around 1500 this represented a distinct challenge. How was one to deal with the fact that the new possibilities for realistic representation permitted capturing not only portraits but even (theoretically) individualized likenesses of entire bodies, even completely naked ones? And how did such individualized

pictures of bodies relate to the increasingly popular idealized depictions of nudes on the one hand and distorted, mocking pictures on the other? Here, starting with Dürer’s spectacular self-portrait as a nude, I mean to discuss the ambiguities of personalized nudes in the period between 1400 and 1530.

These ambiguities have to do with the differences between depictions of male and female bodies,² how recognizable the head and the rest of the body were, and whether such pictures were intended for public or more private viewing. One has not only to note the differences and similarities in how people felt about the body south and north of the Alps, but also to clarify the conscious decisions for or against specific positions. But above all it will be shown that in the years around 1500 the chief aim in personalized nude depictions was apparently to find such a visually open solution that they could be perceived as both likenesses of specific figures and idealized, symbolic renderings. Parallel to this growing interest in personalized nude bodies, an increasing eroticization in the art discourse of the Renaissance reached a first peak around 1530–40.

On Nude Men, Virtue, and (Pro)creativity

Simply from the technical difficulty of realizing such a study, one can see how unusual Dürer’s rendering of his own naked body was at the time. It was already possible to make flat mirrors, of course, but not of a size Dürer would have required.³ It appears that he used a hand mirror to study, first, his upper body, then his lower half. The two sections are rendered from slightly different viewpoints, and the way they are



joined at the level of the hips is not fully satisfying. Also, the face and genitals appear to have been studied from closer up than the rest of the body.

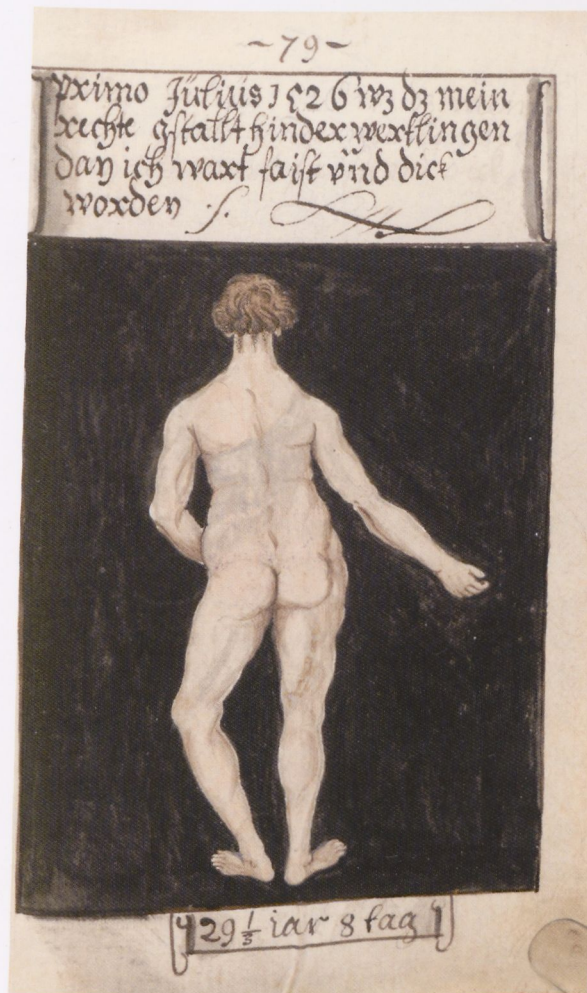
Using their own bodies as patterns was a matter of course for Renaissance artists, though mainly only for individual parts. One of the rare examples of a depiction of the entire body is provided by Pontormo's self-portrait in underwear from the years around 1525,

which is mainly a matter of complex foreshortenings (see fig. 94).⁴ Comparing it with Dürer's, one immediately appreciates what value the Nuremberg painter placed on picturing his own, personal body. Dürer's drawing can hardly be seen as a mere study of a model. This impression is further strengthened by earlier drawings in which he studied various mental states by referring to his own face. Even Dürer's drawings of his own hands were obviously not simply preliminary studies; often they are art-theoretical reflections as well.⁵

Dürer's interest in his actual, individual body appears all the more remarkable in that at this same time, around 1500–1504, he occupied himself intensively with ideal bodies, as presented, for example, in his *Adam and Eve* engraving from 1504 (cat. no. 60).⁶ These ideal bodies were based on models from antiquity and the Italian Renaissance. To be sure, at no point did Dürer proceed solely from a single physical ideal; instead, he always allowed for several relative ones. His posthumously published *Vier Bücher von menschlicher Proportion* (Four books on human proportion; 1528) juxtaposes well-proportioned thin, medium, and plump bodies of men and women (cat. no. 61). His introductory text explicitly points out that these depictions are not necessarily norms derived from nature, and that in principle they might be produced by anyone at will.⁷ The notion of a single ideal was at odds with the period's theory of the temperaments or humors, which provided for at least four different psychological and physical dispositions. Presumably Dürer wished to present these different natures in *The Bathhouse* (ca. 1496; cat. no. 51). That woodcut also reminds us that, around 1500, bathhouses were the best places, both north and south of the Alps, to see other people nude.⁸ In a note from 1508–9, Leonardo da Vinci reminded himself: "Go to the baths every Saturday to see naked people."⁹

Dürer pictured himself nude in other contexts as well, and comparison with these other nude pictures allows us to recognize more precisely what makes the Weimar drawing so special. For example, a sheet from the years around 1516 shows Dürer, then ill, pointing to a spot where his spleen(?) pained him. Here, he was

Figure 103 • Albrecht Dürer (German, 1471–1528), *Nude Self-Portrait*, 1499–1509. Pen and brush and black ink, heightened with white lead on green prepared paper, 29 × 15 cm (11¹/₁₆ × 5³/₁₆ in.). Weimar, Klassik Stiftung, Graphische Sammlungen, inv. KK 106



clearly documenting a specific instance in a picture.¹⁰ Similarly, in his 1526 *Trachtenbuch* (Book of costumes) Matthäus Schwarz had himself pictured in the nude from the front and back, in order to determine how "fat and round" he had become (fig. 104a, b).¹¹ It has also been suggested that the Weimar sheet pictures an emaciated Dürer after an illness in 1503 (and even that the dark spot on Dürer's right side alludes to the wound in Christ's side).¹² Yet the visual evidence is far from clear, and the elaborate depiction as a whole can hardly be understood in such a way.

Around 1500, Dürer had already given his own features to the classical hero Hercules fighting the Stymphalian birds with a bow and arrow (fig. 105). With this *portrait historié* in an ideal classical body the painter presented himself not only in the guise of the

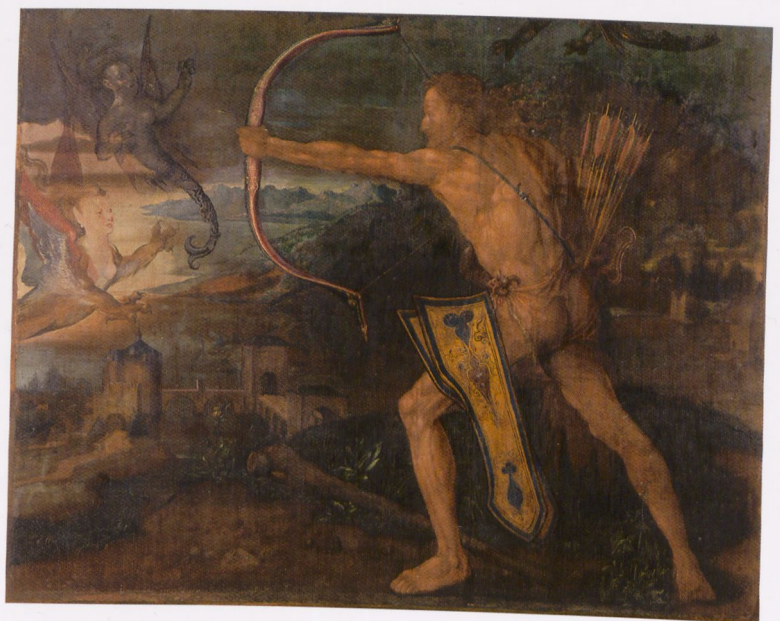


Figure 104a, b • Narcissus Renner (German, ca. 1501-1536), *Matthäus Schwarz from the Front and from the Back*. From *Trachtenbuch* (Book of costumes), 1526. Tempera colors on vellum, 16 × 10 cm (6¹/₁₆ × 3¹/₁₆ in.). Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum, inv. Hs. 27, no. 67a

Figure 105 • Albrecht Dürer (German, 1471-1528), *Hercules Killing the Stymphalian Birds*, ca. 1500. Painting on canvas, 84.5 × 107.5 cm (33³/₄ × 42³/₁₆ in.). Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, inv. GM166

exemplary classical hero—the drawn bow could also point to Dürer's bowstring-taut intellect, learnedness, and specific virtue as an artist.¹³

By contrast, perhaps as early as 1493, but for certain in 1522, Dürer pictured himself posed as a seated Man of Sorrows. Here, in Christian humility he emphasized his physical frailty as a follower of Christ. Combined in these drawings of himself are the centuries-old ideas of "following naked the naked Christ" and of the humble "artist who becomes one with his work."¹⁴

The Nuremberg artist had already experimented with both ways of employing the naked body, as the classical ideal and as a symbol of Christian frailty. Since the late fourteenth century, people might again present themselves in ideal nudity and claim for themselves the dignity and distinction of ancient gods, heroes, and Caesars. The new genre of the medal played a decisive role: not only did the powerful have themselves portrayed in heroic nudity (for example the Carraresi in Padua and the Este in Ferrara; cat. no. 95a, b), but so did humanists (Guarino da Verona, Giovanni Pontano, Pietro Monti) and artists (Donato Bramante, Peter Vischer). The nude figures on the tomb monuments of Francesco Sasseti (ca. 1485) and the father and son Della Torre (1516–21) refer to the deceased but do not represent their actual bodies.¹⁵ This concept could be applied in a Christian manner as well, as in the suggested ideal nude on the medal of the bishop Niccolò Palmieri, who wished to present himself as a naked creature of God.¹⁶ Finally, it takes on a remarkable form on two self-portrait medals of the jurist and amateur artist Giulio della Torre from 1519. On one of the reverses he pictures himself clothed, on the other completely nude; the inscription on both explains: "I love myself in an honorable way."¹⁷

The opposite extreme in the depiction of the body is equally ambivalent, namely, the decomposing corpses of *transi* tombs. There, too, the nude body appears mainly as cipher and symbol, as a humble admission of one's own frailty and an expression of hope in the Resurrection, not an actual, individualized likeness.¹⁸ It was not until 1563 that Germain Pilon, in a highly original invention, would depict the deceased on the double-decker tomb

for Henri II and Maria de' Medici not as *transis* but with an ideal beauty that was probably meant to represent their resurrected bodies at the end of time.¹⁹

But the two self-portrait medals of the Venetian Giovanni Boldù, both produced in 1458, already appear to present the above-outlined options between classical and Christian nudity side by side—nudity as a declaration of virtue and fame as well as of weakness and frailty (cat. no. 96).

Although Dürer was surely aware of these traditions, they do not adequately explain his own nude self-portrait. They do not help us to understand his so precise rendering of his own body or the emphatic depiction and erotic charge of his genitals. Yet his sex is not obscenely displayed and emphasized for itself, as is frequently the case in Nuremberg and generally north of the Alps in connection with the Carnival madness of the period.²⁰ Nevertheless, Dürer's physical attractiveness and suggested potency appear to identify him also as a "talented lover," which indeed he was, according to the horoscope Lorenz Beheim prepared in 1507: Dürer was born a "child of Mercury," with a strong secondary influence of the planet Venus, a combination that empowered him as a painter as well as a lover.²¹

In the Renaissance, extraordinary erotic appeal and sexual potency could be expressive of a man's *virtus* (his virtues in the sense of a full development of his existence and skills), as could extraordinary self-control. Myths about Jupiter's countless liaisons were contrasted with the *continentia* of Alexander the Great and Scipio. What was decisive about the two complementary qualities was that they were out of the ordinary. Accordingly, "superhuman" abilities in love and the notion of an "eroticism of power" could be utilized as attributes of rulers.²² Surviving pictorial allusions to such qualities tend to exhibit a discreet ambiguity: such is the case with Giulio Romano's mythological love scenes in the Palazzo Te, with their allusion to Federico II Gonzaga and his mistress, the eroticized atmosphere created by Francis I at Fontainebleau, and Philip of Burgundy's collection of erotica with paintings by Jan Gossart (cat. nos. 31, 40).²³



By contrast, the extraordinary miniatures produced around 1400 that show the King of the Romans Wenceslas IV of Luxembourg in his bath in the company of almost nude bathing attendants are as yet inadequately explained (he had adopted the bathing attendant as a personal device). These depictions are found in both the king's Bible (fig. 106) and a copy of the Golden Bull, clearly highly ostentatious texts.²⁴ By contrast, a series of scribbles that have survived from the sixteenth century were probably intended solely for the eyes of the lovers. Despite their schematic quality, certain men apparently wished to depict themselves masturbating, and with these intimate pictorial confessions indicate to their lovers their lust and affection.²⁵

Back to Dürer: he pictures himself not only as a man of above average endowment, he is also a draftsman who has produced his own likeness. Ultimately, the main motivation behind his self-portrait as a nude could have been a desire to demonstrate his "erotic artistry": the relationship between biological and intellectual fecundity and the connection between love and artistic (pro)creativity. Cicero believed that the similar-sounding Latin terms for penis (*penis*), brush (*penellus/penicillus*), and writing pen (*penna*) had the same etymological root because they all "generate" something.²⁶ This notion was widespread not only among humanists, but also in sixteenth-century metaphorical usage.²⁷ Even the period's natural philosophy theorizes in a similar vein: with his sperm a man passes along his form to his progeny, for the sperm is formed in the middle ventricle of the brain, whose formative power

also determines a man's appearance. This ventricle is also responsible for all the other forms a man produces, for example, the pictures or statues he creates.²⁸ Here is the basis in natural philosophy for the saying "Every painter paints himself." In the light of this early modern theory, Plato's notion that a man's (literary) works might be called "children of the mind" no longer seems merely metaphorical.²⁹

Such ideas were also known north of the Alps. For example, two paintings by Lucas Cranach the Elder of a nude Venus from the years around 1520 bear an identical Latin inscription: "It is reported that Venus was born out of the foam of the ocean. / Now I live reborn from your foam, Lucas."³⁰ The joke behind this sexualized statement was obvious: Saturn had thrown the genitals of his father, Uranus, into the sea; the sperm flowing out from them, together with the seawater (perceived as female), engendered Aphrodite as the "foam-born" (*anadyomene*; cat. no. 39). The humanists explained this etymology: "*aphru* means 'foam,' for semen is foamy."³¹ Thus the love goddess's rebirth from the "foam of Lucas" means more than simply her visualization thanks to the "foam" of the painter's pigments. Instead, it is an allusion to the painter's creative potency, to his formation of a new figure on the canvas with his pigments as a kind of act of procreation.

In this context, Dürer's self-portrait as a nude, with its emphasis on the head and genitals, becomes a clear manifestation of his (pro)creative virility. Dürer the "lover" presents his naked body as proof of his manly and artistic creativity. At the same time, Dürer could

Figure 106 • *Bathing Scenes*. From the Wenceslas Bible, ca. 1390s. Illumination on vellum, 53 × 36.5 cm (20 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 14 $\frac{3}{8}$ in.). Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Pal. Vindob. 2759, fol. 85 (detail)

have been pointing to his relationship—as a creature of God and descendant of the “perfect man,” Adam—to the creatures created by him in pictures.

Dürer’s self-fashioning, however it is interpreted, fits in with the general eroticization and sexualization of art discourse that first peaked around 1530–40. Indications of it are not only the theories cited above regarding male (pro)creativity but also the increasing eroticization of the Muses, which will be discussed in the following section. Also decisive is Marcantonio Raimondi’s publication of the engraving series *I modi* around 1524–27. It represented a moral scandal: its sixteen scenes picturing different sexual positions showed couples making love without any mythological gilding, and, since they were prints, there was no way to limit their circulation. Moreover, Raimondi’s depictions provoked discussion about whether sexual urges give wing to the artistic imagination, because they make one conceive of new bodily poses, and where, in fact, the limits of artistic freedom lie.³² The large engraving of a perverted Parnassus by an unknown monogrammist, “HFE,” from the years around 1530–35, provided a visual contribution to this debate. It pictures, satirically and critically, how the new sexualization itself leads to orgiastic behavior, even on the mount of the Muses.³³ And in the medium of writing, Pietro Aretino would garnish his dream journey to Parnassus, *Al Parnasso in sogno* (To Parnassus in dreams; 1537–38), a short time later with erotic and obscene allusions.³⁴

Lorenzo Lotto’s highly unusual Parnassus painting still appears to belong in this context. Though it is generally dated to the period around 1545–49, a date around 1525–30 has also been suggested.³⁵ In the right half, it pictures Apollo, asleep in a laurel grove and surrounded by the discarded clothing and attributes of the Muses. The Muses are racing down Parnassus nude, possibly toward the lake in the background, probably meant to represent not the Hippocrene but the Castalian Spring, into which the nymph Castalia had flung herself in her flight from Apollo. The precise meaning of Lotto’s scene has long been disputed; all that seems clear is that here, in some form, Lotto intended to comment on the state of the arts. In his account book

the painter himself is somewhat ambiguous about the subject matter: “Apollo on Mount Parnassus with the Muses, he sleeping, they deranged.”³⁶ A poem written before 1506 by Pacifico Massimi, who had achieved fame in his youth for what was probably the most offensive poetry collection of the fifteenth century, is surely not the only text on which the picture was based, but it describes a comparable event. Massimi turns against “maligners of poets,” and argues that a lascivious poem is permitted to have its own rules. It needs to follow its “course,” in which the Muse “abandons” her garments and all sense of shame, then, naked and drunk, “belches forth” her work.³⁷ Lotto’s Parnassus depicts several Muses, to be sure, yet with its idyllic atmosphere also preserves decorum. Nevertheless, the unusual painting may also relate to the new, eroticized direction in the arts in the 1530s and ‘40s, having set aside their old ways, their old sense of shame, and their old norms.

North of the Alps something quite similar can be observed. Now especially sexualized, even obscene picture subjects were employed to define art-theoretical positions, whether in illustration of a statement by Pliny the Elder that sexual desire can stimulate artistic invention³⁸—as in the decoration of the Holzschuh Goblet (ca. 1535–40) in Nuremberg, which shows a contemporary in a sexually debauched train of Bacchus³⁹—or to satirize and deride what was perceived in the north as Italy’s moral decline.⁴⁰

In Pedro Mexía’s widely read *Silva de varia lección* (A forest of various lessons), first published in 1540 and later translated into a number of languages, painting is defined as “naked poetry.”⁴¹ In parallel with this, the idealized female became, certainly with Titian, a metaphor for the seductive beauty of consummate painting (cat. no. 39).⁴² In accordance with this new concept of the female in art, the naked Dürer appears to present himself as her potent lover and “form giver.”

On Nude Women, Fantasy, and Erotic Inspiration

When lovers are parted, they often feel that they can recognize in others bearing only the slightest similarity, and even in inanimate objects, the facial features of

the absent beloved. This power of projective imagination was already noted by Aristotle.⁴³ Petrarch—and, following him, the writers of the Renaissance—then elevated the phenomenon into a central feature of amorous desire, the intensity of the imagination fired by love and lust indicating the strength of a person's love. In extreme cases the wanderings of the continually unsatisfied erotic imagination turned into a sickness (*amor [h]ereos*), one that could at least be cured at times with a proper portrait of the beloved. Leonardo would expand this belief in the power that such pictures held over the imagination into a *Paragone* argument against poets: the portrait of a beloved person or even an erotic depiction can be more effective than any equivalent verbal descriptions.⁴⁴

In other contexts, this quasi-anthropological, basic disposition could become a problem, namely, when the imagination, fueled by love and lust, fixed on the wrong objects. In 1415, Master Nicholas of Dresden, who was teaching in Prague, warned in his treatise on images against depicting saints in such a way that they reminded viewers of loved ones and the sensual delights they had enjoyed with them, thus leading them into temptation.⁴⁵ Among theologians it was widely held that the more skillful the work of art the more likely it was to awaken carnal desires, indeed that pictures in general were "whores" and viewers of them their "paramours."⁴⁶ Here this is narrowed down to the special case of similarity to a beloved person. Conversely, often even talk of a beautiful woman was enough for many to wish to at least see a portrait of her.⁴⁷ Especially warned against were the dangers of pictures of nude saints, in the contemplation of which the imagination of the faithful was uncontrollable.⁴⁸ To be sure, in most cases where contemporaries slipped into the role of saints they are clothed. This is a reminder that erotic attraction does not necessarily require a naked body. On the other hand, the cases in which naked saints' bodies, even distorted by martyrdom, evoke erotic associations point to the fact that nudity always harbors the potential for erotic fantasy.⁴⁹

Concrete proof for surviving paintings is frequently difficult: all the claims that female saints wear



the facial features of the painters' lovers are based on later tradition. This is true of a wall painting of Saint Margaret in Avignon that was supposedly a portrait of Petrarch's Laura, and also of a fresco of the Madonna and Child by Pinturicchio, formerly in the Vatican, for which Giulia Farnese, the lover of Pope Alexander VI, was said to have posed.⁵⁰ And it is true of the painter Jean Fouquet's Melun Virgin, with her bared breast (cat. no. 102). Even if the visual evidence appears to argue in favor of the theory that here we are looking at the French king Charles VIII's mistress Agnès Sorel, that claim cannot be traced back any further than the seventeenth century.⁵¹

Significantly, different rules applied to the treatment of the saint's image and the personalized male nude. At first glance a surviving life-size painting by Bernardino Luini from the period around 1530 appears

Figure 107 • Bernardino Luini (Italian, ca. 1480–1532), *A Lover as Saint Sebastian*, ca. 1530. Oil on canvas, 196 × 106 cm (77³/₁₆ × 41³/₄ in.). Saint Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum, inv. ГЭ-247



to depict Saint Sebastian with a contemporary portrait head (fig. 107). And indeed, the inscription panel that Sebastian indicates explains that the contemporary subject—possibly Duke Francis II Sforza of Milan—wished to show his beloved how gladly he suffered the god of love’s sweet arrows for her sake.⁵² Several levels of meaning are evoked: Petrarch’s central notion of love as painful desire is visualized; the lemon as bittersweet fruit exemplifies the double nature of love; and the broken arrows on the ground indicate that the man has resisted Amor’s temptations up into his maturity, and only now been struck. Finally, in presenting himself to his lover standing as love’s bound slave he is counting on the erotic effect of the naked male body presented frontally.⁵³ It can hardly be coincidental that we are told of the sexual fantasies of churchgoers viewing a *Saint Sebastian* by Fra Bartolommeo.⁵⁴ Given the present example, one has to wonder whether other paintings, for example, Agnolo Bronzino’s youthful *Saint Sebastian*

(cat. no. 107), are truly meant to represent saints or men similarly struck by love’s arrows.

Needless to say, Luini did not really see his patron as a naked model, but combined an ideal body with a contemporary portrait. One might compare this with the earliest assured example of such a practice in a nude female portrait, Titian’s *Danaë* for Cardinal Alessandro Farnese (fig. 108). A letter documents that here the female body was to be even more provocative than that of the *Venus of Urbino*, and that then the portrait of a certain courtesan was to be “superimposed” on it.⁵⁵ Although it was possibly only in a second step that Titian changed the recumbent female nude into the mythological Danaë, doubtless in no state was the woman’s portrait anywhere close to being recognizable as Farnese’s lover. Apparently, composite nude depictions of men were meant to be clearly identifiable, whereas female figures retained a visual ambiguity that might satisfy varied expectations and viewers.

Figure 108 • Titian (Tiziano Vecellio; Italian, ca. 1477 or 1488/90–1576), *Danaë*, 1544–45. Oil on canvas, 117 × 69 cm (46 $\frac{1}{16}$ × 27 $\frac{3}{16}$ in.). Naples, Museo di Capodimonte, inv. Q 134



Even though sixteenth-century painters did in fact make increasing use of nude female models,⁵⁶ this did not mean that the naked bodies depicted were strikingly individualized. Giorgio Vasari reports that various Renaissance painters, most notably Filippo Lippi, supposedly employed as models their respective lovers or wives, but this cannot be verified.⁵⁷ His explanation for what he considered to be inadequate depictions of nudes by Dürer could have been invented: he asserts that no female models were available to the German, for which reason he had to rely on workshop boys.⁵⁸ By contrast, in 1522 the Ferrarese ambassador reports that

Titian studied prostitutes, and that he was accordingly so exhausted, because the sight of naked women in his workshop caused him to sexually spend himself excessively.⁵⁹ In Pietro Aretino's *Dialogo nel quale la Nanna insegna a la Pippa* (Dialogue in which Nanna instructs Pippa; 1536) it is said of Sebastiano del Piombo that he had already painted an especially beautiful female model as "an archangel, a Madonna, the Magdalene, St. Apollonia, St. Ursula, St. Lucia, and St. Catherine."⁶⁰ And in Angelo Firenzuola's *Discorsi delle bellezze delle donne* (On the beauty of women; written in 1540–41) one of the participants in the conversation relates that he would use an especially beautiful girl as a model for Venus.⁶¹ Benvenuto Cellini even boasts in his *Vita* (1558–59) of having sired a child with his model for the *Nymph of Fontainebleau*.⁶² Yet a glance at the bronze relief of the nymph (1542) does not suggest that it depicts a specific woman. To be sure, when, in 1518, Francis I was presented by the Marquis of Mantua with what we would today think of as an "idealized" female nude by Lorenzo Costa, because the French king was considered a "great connoisseur of physical beauty—above all feminine beauty," Francis immediately asked whether a lady of the court had served as the model (fig. 109).⁶³ On the other hand, an episode in Pierre de Brantôme's *Vies des dames galantes* (*The Lives of Gallant Ladies*)—written only at the end of the century—suggests that men would not recognize the bodies of their own wives if the face was hidden, either because they had never carefully looked at them before or because they had always remained hidden under blankets or clothing.⁶⁴

In all these statements, it must also be remembered that classical topoi must have played a role: a number of ancient sources tell of courtesans or lovers modeling for painters. In the *Deipnosophistes* of Athenaeus, first printed in 1514, we read that Apelles and other painters studied the hetaera Lais because of her beautiful breasts. Apelles also made use of her competitor Phryne as the model for his foam-born Venus.⁶⁵ About the Roman painter Arellius, Pliny the Elder reports that "for, being always in love with some woman or other, it was his practice, in painting goddesses, to give them the features of his mistresses; hence it is, that there

Figure 109 • Lorenzo Costa (Italian, 1460–1535), *Venus*(?), sixteenth century. Location unknown

were always some figures of prostitutes to be seen in his pictures."⁶⁶ There is the even more famous case of Zeuxis, however, who did not employ prostitutes for his portrait of Venus—or, according to another tradition, Helen of Troy—but rather the most beautiful young women in Kroton. He was aiming for the opposite effect. The work was not to depict one specific model; to create supreme artistic beauty, he chose to combine the young women's best features into an ideal whole (cat. no. 38a).⁶⁷

In a series of female nudes, the intended impression was one of ambiguity; viewers were not to know whether they were idealized beauties or women identifiable by name. On the occasion of a famous tournament in Florence in 1475, a flag designed for Giuliano de' Medici was graced with a lightly draped, recumbent nymph. In the tournament Giuliano presented a married woman, Simonetta Vespucci, as his "beloved." Even among his contemporaries it appears not to have been clear just how, or even whether, the recumbent, seminude nymph related to Simonetta or how the image was to be interpreted. The poet Giovanni Aurelio Augurelli explicitly pointed out that it was its very ambiguity that made the pictorial invention so beautiful.⁶⁸ Though at first glance wholly unrelated, a case published in a collection of stories by Niccolò Liburnio in 1513 leads to a similar conclusion: a woman was accused of being unfaithful, and presented as evidence was a painting in her possession by Giovanni Bellini, which pictured her and her lover in an intimate embrace with his hand on her breast. During the trial it could not be definitely proved that the accused was in fact the woman represented.⁶⁹ Apparently, the depiction was so generic that, though those present felt reminded of the accused, to be sure, she was not, however, identifiable. Conversely, the depiction of a woman never intended to be individualized could nevertheless become the likeness of one's lover. Leonardo relates the case of a man who had fallen in love with the picture of a saint.⁷⁰

Perhaps the best evidence for how the naked bodies of lovers were pictured at this time is provided by the poetry collection of Girolamo Angeriano, first

printed in 1512. There, in two places, we read of the paradox whereby simply observing a lover's agony causes a painter to produce from his imagination an "individualized" female nude:

As Celia, dressed in cloth of gold, was surveying a picture of herself naked and taking pleasure in touching the portrait, she said: "Tell me, painter, when did you see me with my naked body? When did you set eyes on my white unblemished thigh? Tell me, when did you see legs, feet, breast and all my other parts which are so vividly portrayed in such accurate colours?" The painter replied, "Isn't it obvious to you now? I got my information from the man who is your true-hearted, faithful lover." On that assertion she retorted, "My lover has seen me naked? I completely and utterly spurn his love!" Then the painter explained to her, "His sadness, his paleness and his passion show me how very comely your beauty is."⁷¹

If, with his *Monna Vanna*, Leonardo did in fact create a nude portrait of the lover of the younger Giuliano de' Medici in Rome around 1510–12, one that was reflected in several copies as a "naked Mona Lisa," the portrait must have been produced by superimposing a more or less idealized portrait onto an idealized body (fig. 110).⁷² And the same could be said of other eroticized, semi- or wholly nude female portraits, whether of courtesans or wives with more or less individualized portrait features or ideal goddesses and mere male wish projections.⁷³

Only one small group of female nude portraits fails to fit into this narrative of ambiguity. The earliest known example of it is Piero di Cosimo's picture of Simonetta Vespucci as a young woman in profile and with bared breasts in front of a landscape (fig. 111). What is known about Simonetta's person and her portraits has long since been entangled in countless myths. Only in recent years has it become clear, for example, that there is nothing to indicate that a series



Figure 110 • Follower of Leonardo da Vinci, *A Naked Mona Lisa (Monna Vanna)*, 1514–16. Black chalk on brown paper, 72.4 × 54 cm (28½ × 21¼ in.). Chantilly, Musée Condé, inv. DE 32



Figure 111 • Piero di Cosimo (Italian, 1462–1522), *Portrait of Simonetta Vespucci*, ca. 1480s. Oil on panel, 57 × 42 cm (22¼ × 16⅝ in.). Chantilly, Musée Condé, inv. PE 13

of pictures of women by Sandro Botticelli and his workshop are related to Simonetta. In Piero's painting, however, the nude young woman is identified by name.⁷⁴

For one thing, restorations in 1970 and 2014 revealed that the inscription was added at the time the work was painted, as the craquelure continues into the letters undisturbed.⁷⁵ So when, in the first mention of the work, Vasari speaks of a "Cleopatra" but does not acknowledge the inscription, it is because either he was misinformed or at that point the name was covered by a frame.⁷⁶

In any case, Simonetta's portrait was created only after the young woman's unexpected death on April 26, 1476; on the basis of style it can be dated to the 1480s. The picture type of a young woman with bared breasts is neither unprecedented nor limited to depictions of courtesans, as is frequently maintained.⁷⁷ Early examples are a marble bust in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, and a marble relief in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, which were attributed in older scholarship to either the workshop of Bernardo Rossellino (ca. 1440–45) or the young Andrea del Verrocchio (1460–65).⁷⁸ Both attributions, as well as the datings, seem problematic. The bust, especially, is reminiscent of classical sculptures, and the reference to classical antiquity is unquestioned in an album of drawings by Marco Zoppo, possibly produced around 1472–75, that also pictures two women with fantastic helmets and bared breasts.⁷⁹ The only earlier textual evidence of nude female portraits also comes from classical sources: Apelles, on commission from Alexander the Great, painted the conqueror's favorite concubine, Campaspe, naked.⁸⁰ And, in a caricature, Ctesicles pictured the Syrian queen Stratonice dallying with her lover, a fisherman.⁸¹

Most importantly, Piero's painting does not picture Simonetta in the role of Cleopatra. The serpent around her neck is not biting her; it is, rather, an ornamental accessory, like the necklace around which it winds. The snake is to be understood in connection with another piece of Simonetta's jewelry: the red gem that crowns her unusual headdress—and that late fifteenth-century viewers would surely have noticed

immediately.⁸² It was believed that such "carbuncles" were created on or in the heads of snakes, especially asps. The gems thus became symbols of the snake's virtue, prudence, and justice.⁸³ According to this notion, the asp's prudence was shown by its habit of plugging its ears from the enticement of its enemies with the end of its tail.⁸⁴ In contemporary love poetry the asp with its ears plugged could also symbolize a female lover who fails to listen to her lover's entreaties.⁸⁵ But Simonetta's snake does not plug its ears, nor does it bite its own tail and thus become the *ouroboros*, symbol of the eternal cycle of time. As the black cloud behind her profile might signal, Simonetta had already died, and the portrait was painted posthumously. It is possible that the multiple clouds behind her head were also meant to suggest the projective, cloudy imagination of loving viewers. The circumstances may have made this novel depiction possible: because she is dead, she can be presented half nude and erotically inspiring and simultaneously virtuous and named. Simonetta is presented in her seductiveness and at the same time as a symbol of virtue and prudence.⁸⁶ She is the virtuous beloved, attends to her lovers, and at the same time appears as a remote, imaginary ideal.

Moreover, the torrent of love poems (and possibly pictures) inspired by Simonetta continued unmatched for decades after her death. To the men of Florence in the late fifteenth century she served as a kind of modern Muse, her erotic appeal unleashing their creativity. Already in antiquity poets routinely cast their lovers in the role of Muses, and conversely wished for the Muses to be their lovers. In Italy, Giovanni Boccaccio would insist that the Muses functioned not as abstract personifications but by virtue of their feminine qualities.⁸⁷ The eroticization of the Muses can already be observed in the first reconstructions of their ancient appearance around the mid-fifteenth century,⁸⁸ but a naked Muse is first met with around 1464 on a medal by Sperandio Savelli for the Ferrarese humanist and poet Lodovico Carbone, to whom a virtually nude Calliope extends a laurel wreath beside the Muses' spring.⁸⁹ Erotic concepts like that of the "kiss of the Muse" also came into being in the late fifteenth



century.⁹⁰ Then, around 1500, there are indications that even Petrarch's exemplary love for Laura was understood as sensual, physical eroticism, as when the two appear nude together in a manuscript as Apollo and Venus (fig. 112).⁹¹

Piero's posthumous painting of Simonetta with bared breasts marks the beginning of the pictorial tradition of beloved persons who serve as erotic Muses, the vision and memory of whom are inspiring. If the highly idealized female figure next to the self-portrait of Tullio Lombardo (before 1499) in fact represents the Venetian sculptor's wife, this would be a next example. Giorgione's *Laura* and Raphael's *Fornarina* (cat. nos. 103, 105) continue the series: female nudes suggestive of portrait likenesses but evading identification with specific persons, in accordance with the erotic ambiguity detailed here.⁹² Only in the third quarter of the sixteenth century did the medalist known as Bombarda depict identified women, among them his own wife, as *all'antica* embodiments of virtue and beauty.⁹³

With these female nudes the circle comes back around to Dürer. Whereas those depictions feature nudity and erotic appeal as symbols of inspiration, the naked Dürer presents himself as a virile artist-lover capable of turning that inspiration into concrete works of art. In any case, this double notion of female nudity as inspiration and male virility as artistic potency established itself so quickly that, as early as 1516, the Swiss artist Urs Graf could play with it. Numerous Graf drawings have survived in which he pictures himself and his artistry under the spell of the female body. Mostly these are naked prostitutes, either toying with Graf's signature or with an old fool as the artist's alter ego. Most interesting here is a sheet grounded in a bright red and with an obscene inscription, in which a woman identified by name, Magdalena Truchsessin von Wolhusen, appears to interact with the artist's monogram at her feet (fig. 113).⁹⁴ She lifts her skirt in such a way that from the perspective of the monogram—not the actual viewer—she offers a glimpse

Figure 112 • Unknown Artist, *Petrarch and Laura as Apollo and Venus*, ca. 1500. Rome, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma, Ms Varia 3 (612), fols. 139v–140



Figure 113 • Urs Graf (Swiss, 1485–1527), *Magdalena Truchsessin von Wolhusen*, 1516. Pen and black ink, heightened with white on red prepared paper, 22.1 × 14.5 cm (8¹¹/₁₆ × 5¹/₁₆ in.). Basel, Kupferstichkabinett, Amerbach-Kabinett, inv. U.X.67



Figure 114 • Unknown Italian Artist, *Veronica Franca* [sic]. From *Mores Italiae*, 1575. Watercolor, 28 × 21.8 cm (11 × 8⁵/₁₆ in.). New Haven, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University, MS 457, fol. 6



Figure 115 • Leone Leoni (Italian, 1509–1590), *Charles V and the Fury*, 1551–55. Bronze, 251 × 143 cm (98³/₁₆ × 56³/₁₆ in.). Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, inv. E00273

between her legs (if she does not intend to urinate on the signature).⁹⁵ On the one hand the artist thus has a privileged position, closer to the lust of painting than all others. On the other hand, Graf enlists the power of his art to mock the behavior of his contemporaries—here, a woman, who has apparently married a man of higher rank and thus elevated herself to the rank of a *Truchsessin* (lord high steward's wife).

Over the course of the later sixteenth century these ideas were considerably refined. The book containing portraits of Charles VIII's sexual conquests while on the 1494–95 Italian campaign has been lost, so it remains uncertain whether the women (prostitutes?) were dressed or already pictured nude.⁹⁶ The first two clearly identified nude portraits of courtesans appear to be in a manuscript known under the title *Mores Italiae* (fig. 114).⁹⁷ It may be that after mid-century in France the mistress of Henri II, Diane de Poitiers, was portrayed as a nude Diana. In the series of paintings picturing one or two women in a bath it is to this day unclear, given the ambiguity sketched here, whom they were meant to represent; it is only around 1600 that we find a first identifying inscription.⁹⁸ And by then we also see examples of "documentary nude depictions of abnormalities," for example, Bronzino's double-sided painting of the dwarf Nano Morgante.⁹⁹

Finally, let us look at Leone Leoni's bronze statue of Charles V, which shows the emperor in triumph over Fury (fig. 115). In a second step, the emperor, first heroically nude, was clothed in armor, supposedly as a "new caprice" on the part of the artist,¹⁰⁰ and thus was changed from a classical hero into a *miles christianus*, a Christian soldier. To be sure, the emperor's apparent lack of interest in this novel statue, first displayed only in the seventeenth century, could suggest that already by that point—thus well before Antonio Canova's nude statue of Napoleon I—the depiction of contemporary figures in heroic nudity appeared problematic to specific persons and in specific places.¹⁰¹ It may be that, even as the personalized nude was developing its full potential in the arts, the very concept was becoming passé.

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- 1 Klassik Stiftung Weimar, Graphische Sammlungen, inv. KK 106; Koerner (1993, 239-42), proposes the year 1503; Demele 2012, 1509; and Pokorny 2013, 1499. For notions of life stages north of the Alps, see Westhoff-Krummacher 1965, 69-71, and Wirag 1995.
- 2 Cropper 1986; Simons 1995; Simons 2011; Pfisterer 2012b; Burke 2018.
- 3 Schechner 2005; Warwick 2016.
- 4 Van Cleave 2007, 170-71.
- 5 Koerner 1993, 5-14, 139-59.
- 6 Bonnet 2001; Porras 2013.
- 7 Dürer 2011.
- 8 Paris 2009a; Wolfthal 2010, 121-54.
- 9 Institut de France, Paris, MS. F (2177), inside front cover (datable to 1508-9 or earlier); see Leonardo da Vinci 1988, vol. 3, [3].
- 10 Vienna 2003, 232-33, no. 53 (entry by Matthias Mende).
- 11 Rublack and Hayward 2015, 128-29, fols. 79-80, 288-90.
- 12 Panofsky 1955b, 90; Koerner 1993, 179 and 241-42.
- 13 Lavin 1993, 34-35.
- 14 Fricke 2010.
- 15 See Chapeaurouge 1968; Chapeaurouge 1969; Himmelmann 1985a; Burke 2018; and Stephen J. Campbell's essay, "Naked Truth," in the present volume.
- 16 Hill 1930, vol. 1, 192, no. 742; the inscription is from Job 1:21.
- 17 Hill 1930, vol. 1, 145-46, nos. 570, 571.
- 18 Cohen (K.) 1973.
- 19 Flemming 1998.
- 20 See, for example, the paean on male power by Magnus von Anhalt, on the occasion of a Carnival visit to Magdeburg in 1506; Anhaltische Landesbücherei, Wissenschaftliche Bibliothek und Sondersammlungen, Dessau, Georg Hs. 151 8°, fols. 40-41v. For Italian phallus graffiti in relation to "male power," see Simeoni 1903.
- 21 Dürer 1956, 254.
- 22 Pfisterer 2016.
- 23 Wilson-Chevalier 1993; Waddington 2001; Tauber 2009; Crawford 2010, 204-7; Schrader 2010b; Bass 2011; Maurer 2016.
- 24 Theissen 1999; Nuttall 2012, 303-4.
- 25 Guerzoni 2010; for the later sixteenth century, see Weinstein 2000, 133. On pornographic images in the Renaissance, see Findlen 1993.
- 26 Cicero, *Epistulae ad familiares* 9.22.2.
- 27 Toscan 1981, vol. 2, 851-57; Cropper and Dempsey 1996, 241-49; Arasse 1997; Quiviger 2003.
- 28 Bauer 1970; Simons 2011; Klemm 2013.
- 29 Kemp 1976; Pfisterer 2014a.
- 30 University Art Museum, Princeton, inv. F-R 1932, 98e, and Niedersächsische Landesgalerie, Hanover, inv. PAM 1031; see Werner 2007, 104-5.
- 31 Equicola 1999, 426-27.
- 32 Talvacchia 1999; Turner (J.) 2004.
- 33 Pfisterer 2005b.
- 34 Cairns 1985; Dreiling 2016, 45-53.
- 35 Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest, inv. 947; Ruvoldt 2004, 65-89; Florence 2013c, 84-85, no. 12 (entry by Véronique Dalmasso); Dreiling 2016, 33-39, 135-51.
- 36 Lotto 2003, vol. 1, fol. 44; see also fol. 98v.
- 37 Massimi 2008, 8-13 (1, 3, II.59-62).
- 38 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, 33.139-40.
- 39 Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, inv. HG8601_1; Pfisterer 2017.
- 40 Müller (J.) 2007.
- 41 Mexia 1540, fol. 152.
- 42 Pardo 1993; Suthor 2004; Chare 2009.
- 43 Aristotle, *On Dreams* 2.
- 44 Farago 1992, 228-33 (part 1, chap. 25).
- 45 Nechutová 1970, 225 (fol. 177v); see Schnitzler 1996, 54-61. For other comment on nude saints, see Burke 2018.
- 46 See, in 1417, Jakobellus von Mies, *Posicio... de Ymaginibus*, Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel, cod. guelf. 669 (Helmst.), fol. 188; Karlstadt 1522, 29-30.
- 47 Henricus von Kepelen, *Tractatus de imaginibus et earum adoratione et veneratione*, Staatsbibliothek, Berlin, Ms. Theol. Lat. Quart 174, fol. 4v (after 1433).
- 48 Eck 1522, fol. 102 (chap. 15).
- 49 For nude Christ images, see Trexler 1993, and Thomas Kren's essay "Christian Imagery and the Development of the Nude in Europe" in the present volume.
- 50 Michiel 1888, 22; Acidini Luchinat 2017.
- 51 Polleross 1988, vol. 1, 151-52; Kren 2017.
- 52 Kustodieva 1994, 250-51; Koos 2006b, 194-96; Koos 2014; see also Campbell (S.) 2005 and Corry 2013.
- 53 See the example of Giusto dei Conti, *La bella mano nuda*, Bologna 1472, British Library, London, inv. C.6.a 17, fol. 4v, with the drawing of a "slave of love" by Marco Zoppo.
- 54 Freedberg 1989, 346-48.
- 55 Santore 1991; Zapperi 1991; for the principle of such "composite bodies," see Schade (S.) and Wenk 1995, 371-94. An important predecessor was the medal of Elisabetta Gonzaga (probably 1495), which combines her portrait on the obverse with a depiction of the nude Danaë on the reverse; see Settis 1985.
- 56 Bernstein 1992; Burke 2016; Burke 2018.
- 57 Verrier 2005; Kok 2011.
- 58 Vasari 1966-87, vol. 5, 4.
- 59 Gronau 1928, 246, doc. B II.2; Hope 1973.
- 60 Aretino 1969, 311.
- 61 Firenzuola 1552, fol. 26.
- 62 Vickers (N.) 2006.
- 63 Fritz (M.) 2002, 442-43.
- 64 Brantôme 1960, 41-42.
- 65 Aretainetos, *Deipnosophites*, 13.54 and 13.590-91; for corresponding passages in Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia*, see cat. no. 39 in the present volume. Hans Holbein the Younger's painting *Laïs* (1526) and a *Venus with Amor* (after 1526, probably not by Holbein) were first identified in the Basilius Amerbach inventory of 1585-87 as *portraits historiés* of a woman well known in the city at the time; see Mamerow 2006, 428-31.
- 66 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia* 35.37; translation from *The "Natural History" of Pliny the Elder*, ed. and trans. John Bostock and H. T. Riley (London 1855-57), 6:271.
- 67 Lecercle 1987; Burke 2018.
- 68 Campbell (S.) 2006, 179.
- 69 D'Elia 2006.
- 70 Farago 1992, 228-33 (part 1, chap. 25).
- 71 Angeriano 1995, 112-13 (13), cf. 83-84 (30).
- 72 Brown (Dav.) and Oberhuber 1978; Knauer 2009; Kemp 2016.
- 73 For examples, see Dal Pozzolo 2008; New York 2008a; and Lüdemann 2008.
- 74 Schmitters 1995; Geronimus 2006, 48-75; Lazzi and Ventrone 2007, 135-41; Körner 2009; Pacini 2011.
- 75 Chantilly 2014, 134-38 (entry by Valentina Hristova and Élisabeth Ravaud).

- 76 Vasari 1966–87, vol. 5, 71.
- 77 Following Trexler 1990, 210, Körner (2009), for example, maintained that the portrait of a prostitute with bared breasts was already described in Antonio Beccadelli's poetry collection *Hermaphroditus* (1425). But, in fact, what is mentioned there is that the breasts of Clodia were "bare and painted," probably meaning that the nipples were painted red; see Beccadelli 2010, 110–11 (2.37.17).
- 78 Pope-Hennessy 1980a, 272, no. 78; Pope-Hennessy 1964, vol. 1, 168–69, no. 142. See Schumacher 2007, 232–33.
- 79 Armstrong (L.) 2003, vol. 1, 37–75.
- 80 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia* 35.36.
- 81 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis historia* 35.40.
- 82 On the hair ornament and hair jewels, see Muzzarelli 2006.
- 83 Berchorius 1731, vol. 3, 93, s.v. "Serpens."
- 84 This was why Pierfrancesco de' Medici chose an asp with its tail in its ear as a personal device around 1500; Schüssler 2003.
- 85 Petrarch, *Canzoniere* 1.210.7–8; Poliziano 1976, 138, no. 9, vv. 27–28.
- 86 On the title page of Bernardino Corio's *Patria historia* (1503), female figures with bared breasts represent the appeal of "eternal youth."
- 87 Gittes 2008.
- 88 Campbell (S.) 1995.
- 89 Hill 1930, vol. 1, 92, no. 359.
- 90 Ludwig 1996.
- 91 Trapp 2001, 87.
- 92 Pfisterer 2012a.
- 93 Toderi and Vannel 2000, vol. 1, 411–17; Pollard 2007, vol. 1, 526–30.
- 94 The two inscriptions on the drawing give voice to the artist (?): ICH SCHIS DIR INS FÜD LOCH 1516 (I shit you into your cunt hole, 1516) and identify the woman as MAGDALEN DRVGSES. VON WOLHVS; see Basel 2001, no. 72.
- 95 Christadler 2011, 257–58; Mamerow 2006, 428–31.
- 96 Campbell (L.) 1990, 209.
- 97 Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, MS 457, pls. 3, 6. For earlier courtesan portraits, see Held 1961; Rogers 2000; Mamerow 2006; Knauer 2009.
- 98 Zerner 1990; Jollet 1997, 260–75; Conisbee 2009, 115–22 (entry by John O. Hand); Ruby 2017.
- 99 Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence, inv. 1890, no. 5959; Hendlar 2016.
- 100 "New caprice" are Leoni's words, from a letter he wrote to the bishop of Arras in 1551, quoted in Plon 1887, 367.
- 101 Otherwise in Di Dio 2011, 73–79; Himmelmann 1985a, 17–19.