



# Van Dyck

## The Anatomy Of Portraiture





**By James D. Balestrieri**

**NEW YORK CITY** — A great portrait is a balancing act between capturing likeness and revealing inner character, between fidelity to appearance — verisimilitude — and exposing the sitter's inner light to the light of day: the eyes of beholders, viewers, us. But in great portraiture there is another requisite element: mystery. The portraitist must hint at something else, something other, something that shimmers at the surface — often in the eyes, mouth or hands of the sitter — a moment that passed, perhaps, between the artist and the sitter, a secret we suspect but can never fully be in on.

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**“Cardinal Guido Bentivoglio,” 1623, oil on canvas.  
Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence, Italy.**

How can we know when a portrait has this quality? The simplest answer is that when a portrait moves us to try to bore into it, to decode its subject, the sitter, time and again, that mystery is present. But there is a more scientific method. If collectors and cultural institutions, over a lengthy period, single out, vie for and prize portraits of people they could never have known, people they have no relation to, people whose names may well be lost or mean little to history, then we may be sure that the artist has captured lightning in a bottle. When this is evident, as in the case of Flemish painter Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641), new questions emerge about the production and consumption of portraits, and about their place and meaning in disparate cultures over time. With more than 100 of the artist's works in the exhibition "Van Dyck: The Anatomy of Portraiture," on view at the Frick Collection until June 5, opportunities to consider these questions abound.

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**"Queen Henrietta Maria with Jeffery Hudson," 1633, oil on canvas.  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection.**







Anthony van Dyck must have been a wunderkind. Born to affluent parents in Antwerp, he began serious studies when he was 10 years old, opened a workshop with Jan Brueghel the Younger when he was 16 and was the star pupil and chief assistant to Peter Paul Rubens by age 19. In 1620, he made his first trip to England, where he worked for King James I and — perhaps most important — had the opportunity to view a number of Titian's paintings. As Stijn Alsteens, curator of northern European drawings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and organizer of the exhibition, writes in his essay for the Frick catalog *A Portraitist's Progress*, van Dyck would adopt the "free brushwork" as well as "the restrained informality and elegant liveliness of the sitter's pose" that characterized the Venetian master's technique.

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**"Prince William of Orange and Mary, Princess Royal," 1641, oil on canvas. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.**

Perhaps inspired by this exposure to Italian painting, van Dyck left Antwerp for Italy in 1621 and remained there, in Genoa for the most part, until 1627.

In Italy, building on Titian and others, van Dyck began to paint dramatic, full-length, multifigure portraits of prominent Italian families. He also injected some drama — in the form of rock star flair — into his public persona, favoring fine silks and furs and acquiring an entourage...

(Continued on page 30 inside the E-Edition)

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**“Self-Portrait,” circa 1620–21, oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, the Jules Bache Collection, 1949.**



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