Brief Articles and Notes

"MY LAST DUCHESS": A STUDIOLO SETTING?

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In "My Last Duchess" Browning provides little information about the physical location of the Duke of Ferrara's interview with the envoy; all we can be sure of is that the dowry negotiations are conducted on an upper floor of the Duke's palace, since, toward the end of his monologue, he suggests meeting "The company below."[1] The Duke expressly invites the envoy to sit and contemplate a portrait of his last Duchess, which the Duke, as a mark of favor, is showing him. As the proud possessor of the picture, the Duke is ready to explain the remarkable "depth and passion" of the Duchess' "earnest glance" (l. 8) and so satisfy a supposed curiosity in the envoy that he says he has also detected in previous interlocutors—few, if any, of whom have had the temerity to express it.

Where is this portrait of the Duchess? Many commentators have assumed that the Duke is acting as cicerone in his own picture gallery:[2] Joshua Adler writes of the envoy's being "led to an upper gallery suitably adorned with *objets d'art*," whereas R. J. Berman imagines the portrait as hanging on "the wall bordering the staircase" and tells us that "that staircase must have been enormous to have supported a landing of a size sufficient to hold a divan—although not a particularly, and typically, sybaritic one—and some feet of viewing space before the portrait of the 'last' Duchess of Ferrara";[3] B. R. Jerman also suggests that "the Duke has been taking the emissary on the rounds of his art gallery," giving him the kind of experience

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[1] *The Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins (London, 1981), I, 349–350, l. 48. References to "My Last Duchess" are from this edition and will be cited by line number.

[2] Edward Berdoe, *The Browning Cyclopaedia* (London, 1928), p. 281; P. de Reul, *L'art et la pensée de Robert Browning* (Brussels, 1929), p. 148. Robert Langbaum, in *The Poetry of Experience* (1957; rev. ed. New York, 1971), p. 84, uses the term "cicerone."

[3] Adler, "Structure and Meaning in Browning's 'My Last Duchess'," *VP*, 15 (1977), 221; Berman, *Browning's Duke* (New York, 1972), p. 23.

to which Michelangelo was treated by an earlier Duke of Ferrara.[4] These assumptions about the location of the Duchess' portrait are, however, questionable, for Browning may have been more subtle in setting the scene of this poem than has previously been acknowledged.

B. N. Pipes, Jr., argues that the portrait is not a "work in oils" in a gallery but rather a fresco ("painted on the wall," l. 1) and that this accounts for Fra Pandolf's speed of execution as his "hands / Worked busily a day" (ll. 3–4).[5] The reference to Fra Pandolf, though, need imply neither that the portrait was executed in fresco nor that it was, as Jerman argues, "a perfunctory job" in oils.[6] In the Renaissance it was not uncommon for a court portraitist to have limited access, sometimes of less than a day, to his aristocratic sitters; he usually "worked up" the portrait from an oil sketch rapidly executed in a single sitting. The portrait is clearly a bravura piece and the Duke's articulate enthusiasm for it demonstrates, at the very least, that he can use the connoisseur's jargon. In commending Fra Pandolf's expeditious execution and the vivid illusionism of the finished portrait (ll. 2–4), the Duke echoes many of Vasari's panegyrics on the importance of *natura* (naturalism), *grazia* (grace), and *facilita* (rapidity and ease) in portrait painting. Vasari, along with other Renaissance art historians, always insisted that any sign of laboriousness destroyed the grace of a painting: he reserved his highest praise for those artists, like the apocryphal Fra Pandolf, who worked with rapidity and facility (see Vasari, II, 246, 33).

When the Duke uses the phrase "painted on the wall" he (and Browning) may not be using it in the strictest technical sense.[7] Vasari, for example, usually uses the phrase to mean frescoes, but sometimes to refer to oil paintings mounted on the walls of a room, or paintings on panel or canvas let into the walls.[8] It is quite conceivable that the Duchess' portrait has been let into the wall, creating the illusion of having been literally "painted on the wall," just as Titian's monumental canvases were installed in the d'Este palace in Ferrara.

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[4]"Browning's Witless Duke," *PMLA*, 72 (1957), 490. Cf. Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. A. B. Hinds, ed. W. Gaunt, 4 vols. (1927; rev. ed. London, 1963), IV, 136. Browning had almost certainly read Vasari in Italian before he wrote this poem.

[5]"The Portrait of 'My Last Duchess'," *VS*, 3 (1960), 384. Pipes successfully counters Jerman's dismissal of the Duke's connoisseurship, but his remarks about sixteenth-century painting are not always convincing or germane.

[6]p. 491. Laurence Perrine, "Browning's Shrewd Duke," *PMLA*, 74 (1959), 157–159, suggests that "busily a day" need not be taken literally and may refer to the sitting.

[7]Berman suggests, without adducing any evidence, that the portrait is on canvas.

[8]Vasari, II, 40, 112–113, 341; III, 36; IV, 24, 202, 250, 251, 276. Francis Haskell, in *Patrons and Painters* (1928; rev. ed. Yale Univ. Press, 1980), p. 8, also refers to pictures being let into the surface of the walls of a room or gallery.

There are, in any case, good reasons for believing that the portrait is not a mural painting. Louis S. Friedland has shown that the prototype for Browning's Duke was Alfonso II,[9] and this means that Browning must have imagined Fra Pandolf as working in the middle of the sixteenth century. By this period, the format for portraiture was the easel painting on panel or canvas. Those portraits appearing in frescoes of the period are either artfully "introduced" portraits in genre or allegorical scenes, or, more commonly, series of retrospective portraits of ancestors or important historical figures, most of which were idealized, and obviously not portraits *ad vivum*. The Duke speaks of the Duchess' "pictured countenance" (l. 7), and the term "pictured," as opposed to "painted," suggests an easel painting; possibly the very fact that the envoy is invited to sit to contemplate the painting implies that it is a small-scale work. The naturalism of the portrait, with its distinctive "spot of joy" and "depth and passion," suggests, on stylistic grounds, that this portrait is most unlikely to be one of those frozen serial paintings of dignified scions of the house of d'Este; that the Duchess lacked dignity of that kind is indeed the dramatic point of the Duke's monologue. The connoisseur-Duke draws the envoy's attention to Fra Pandolf's uncanny depiction of the Duchess' blush—as an admirer of virtuosity he can respond to the *morbidezza* (the painter's lifelike treatment of the flesh)—but this connoisseur's appraisal of the naturalism of the portrait ("looking as if she were alive") is, of course, turned to dramatic account by the later sinister repetition of the phrase when the Duke, as husband,

> gave commands;
> Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
> As if alive. (ll. 45–47)

The strongest hint that the portrait is an easel painting is its concealment behind a curtain. Berman writes that the painting is "strangely obscured, for the most part, by curtains hung from a rod affixed to the frame" (p. 23), but such curtaining was by no means strange in the period. Most commentators have concentrated on the curtain as an idiosyncratic proof of the Duke's possessiveness, and he is certainly a jealous custodian, but the covering of paintings with curtains was a common conservation practice in the Renaissance and much later, so that the covering is consistent with the Duke's connoisseurship too. Browning was aware that the covering of valued paintings on panel or canvas, with a single curtain suspended on a rod, was a common method of setting them apart and protecting them from the dilapidating effects of sunlight (which faded them, or in the case of panel paintings, caused them to "cradle") and from the dust and the blackening

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[9] "Ferrara and *My Last Duchess*," *SP*, 33 (1936), 656–684.

caused by candle smoke (cf. "Pictor Ignotus," l. 67). Browning presumably gathered this from his own knowledge of the paintings of interiors and of the literature of the period,[10] and he refers to the custom in his poetry on at least two other occasions (in both these instances, the curtained paintings are executed in oils, and one of them is a portrait).[11] Yet another reason for the curtaining of the painting is to be found in the nature of the portrait itself. As Robert Langbaum has said, "The duke has taken from [the Duchess] what he wants, her beauty, and thrown the life away" (p. 84); he clearly keeps the portrait for his "private delectation." A conservation practice on an ironic psychological level, the Duke's curtaining of the portrait enables him to conserve for himself alone that provocatively "deep and earnest glance" which in life was not reserved solely for his "presence"; and, as a ducal connoisseur, he can, on the one hand, exhibit the painting as a literal breathing likeness and, on the other, monitor the effect the portrait has on the viewer and protest at his late consort's lack of aristocratic reticence. Seen in this light, the monologue which follows the drawing of the curtain is not so much an "outrageous indiscretion" (p. 82), as Langbaum says, as a discreet expression of the Duke's sense of outrage. The portrait is covered for the same reason the Duchess' "smiles" were eclipsed at the Duke's command. Her "pictured countenance," like her former mien, does not convey the proper sense of station; the "spot of joy" and the "depth and passion of her earnest glance" are at variance with the expressions of impassive aloofness (at best) and superciliousness (at worst), which are features of sixteenth-century court portraiture. Fra Pandolf's striking depiction of the Duchess' natural expression—with the blush which the Duke "reads" as a sign that the Duchess has been "too easily impressed" by the painter's "courtesy" (ll. 23, 20)—graphically demonstrates the lack of *gravitas* for which the Duke condemns her:

> she liked whate'er
> She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
> . . . .

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[10]There is ample pictorial evidence for this custom: in the Uffizi Gallery there is a sixteenth-century drawing by Federigo Zuccari portraying Zuccari and Vincenzo Borghini working out the plan for the dome of Florence Cathedral; on the wall behind them is a picture of the Holy Family partially covered by a curtain. The covered painting is commonly to be seen in seventeenth-century painting of interiors: in Willem van Haecht's "The Art Gallery of Cornelius van de Geest," now in Rubens' House, and in David Teniers' "The Archduke Leopold's Gallery," now at Petworth, Sussex. Sometimes paintings were covered with a *timpano*, a canvas painted with an allegory, which served to cover the more precious painting underneath. For literary references, see, for example, *Twelfth Night*, I.iii and I.v, and the first Dumb Show in II.ii of John Webster's *The White Devil*. These refer to the custom of covering portraits.

[11]"Beatrice Signorini," ll. 292–293; *The Ring and the Book*, ed. Richard Altick (Yale Univ. Press, 1971), IV.888–889.

> Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
> Or blush, at least. (ll. 23-31)

The Duke's comments on the Duchess' expression are not a "shallow judgment of the painter's art" (Adler, p. 227) but rather a judgment, shallow or otherwise, of his former wife's character. The most appropriate position for a portrait curtained for reasons of jealous possessiveness, conservation, and censorship would be in the private ducal apartments; it is surely most unlikely that this particular portrait would be part of a genealogical fresco series glorifying the "nine-hundred-years-old name" (l. 33) of the house of d'Este (Pipes, p. 385). There is reason to believe that the Duke's studiolo is the setting for Browning's monologue. The studiolo or "wardrobe" was usually the most elaborately furnished apartment in the palace; as Kenneth Clark says, Renaissance princes "gave . . . prolonged attention . . . to the decoration" of their studies.[12] The studiolo was the sanctum of the master and housed his collection of fine paintings, books, manuscripts, antique and neo-classical bronzes, medals, and other objects of *virtu*. Vasari makes it plain that the best portraits and the most valuable paintings invariably ended up in the ducal "wardrobes"; *Lives of the Painters* contains numerous references to the treasures housed in the "handsome" studioli of the Dukes of Ferrara, Mantua and Urbino and Florence and of the Farnese and Gonzaga families.[13] Vasari himself orchestrated the decoration of the studiolo of Francesco I of Florence and this particular studiolo contained "a frescoed ceiling, thirty-four panel paintings of easel size and finish, and eight pieces of bronze statuary. Presiding over these, two tondo portraits of Cosimo and Eleonora by Bronzino, were inset in the lunettes at each end of the room."[14] Since in the Renaissance considerable prestige was attached to an important art collection, the studiolo would be an appropriate venue for the conducting of important betrothal negotiations: where better for the Duke to impress on the envoy his "just pretence" (l. 50) for a large dowry and his fastidious taste in art and wives? The token avowal of interest in the "fair daughter's self" (l. 52) pales before the repeated claim to that dowry (guaranteed by the Count's "known munificence"); the dowry is, after all, the prime factor in dynastic marriages and the Duke, with his "gift" of a "nine-hundred-years-old name," his patronage of the arts, and his aristocratic distain for his last Duchess' plebeian enthusiasms, represents himself as a worthy beneficiary.

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[12] *Piero della Francesca* (London, 1951), p. 14.

[13] See Vasari, I, 310; II, 40; III, 11, 115, 118, 316; IV, 58, 63, 205.

[14] Sydney J. Freedberg, *Painting in Italy, 1500-1600* (London, 1971), p. 311.

Clearly Browning thus uses the Renaissance custom of covering paintings as a dramatic indicator of the collector-Duke's possessiveness. In much the same way, the connoisseur's objet d'art, the bronze by Claus of Innsbruck (mentioned after the avowal that the Count's daughter is his "object" l. 53) is also a vivid indicator of its owner's domineering impulse:

> Notice Neptune, though,
> Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
> Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me! (ll. 54–56)

In this connoisseur's scale, "thought a rarity" places the bronze in the highest aesthetic company along with the "wonder" of a portrait; "rarity" refers to the fine quality of execution of the bronze object, as commissioned from Claus by the Duke, rather than to the subject of the bronze, which was common in the period (particularly in Venice, where it served, even on grand palazzo door-knockers, as an emblem of Venetian sea power). Renaissance connoisseurs valued subjects like "Neptune taming a sea-horse" partly for their ornamental classicism and partly for their characteristic *contrapposto* (the dynamic modeling of contours, gestures, and muscular torsion). One guesses that the Duke esteems the "rarity" of his bronze as a striking study of power and aggression just as highly as its eurhythmic quality. "Neptune taming a sea-horse" is clearly in the vicinity of the curtained portrait and is, in all likelihood, a studiolo piece.[15]

One might summarize, then, and speculate on the immediate circumstances of the opening of the monologue. It may be that the envoy has just presented the Duke of Ferrara with another fit object for his collection, a portrait of his "intended," either in large or in miniature, as was customary when marriages were negotiated at this level. As Ellis Waterhouse puts it, "Matrimonial occasions between sovereigns . . . were the chief means of familiarizing one nation with the portrait art of another" in the sixteenth century.[16] If the Duke has just been given a new portrait by the envoy, he will no doubt ensure that it finds its rightful place in the collection, just as he will expect the "original" to know her place and properly esteem his "gift."

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[15]Freedberg mentions the "eight pieces of bronze statuary" in the studiolo of Francesco I (p. 311). Vasari also mentions statuary and small bronzes as typical studiolo pieces (I, 310; III, 316; IV, 71).

[16]*Painting in Britain, 1530–1790*, 3rd ed. (London, 1969), p. 2.