RA

Royal Academy of Arts
Exhibition in Focus

Giovanni Battista Moroni

An Introduction to the Exhibition for Teachers and Students

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For the Learning Department

Giovanni Battista Moroni
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Front cover: Cat. 17, **Portrait of Gian Gerolamo Grumelli (The Man in Pink),** 1560 (detail)
Back cover: Cat. 16, **Portrait of Isotta Brembati,** *c.*1553 (detail)

Royal Academy of Arts

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Introduction

Giovanni Battista Moroni (*c.*1520–*c.*1579/80) ranks among the greatest portraitists of the late Italian Renaissance, and is best known for his truthful approach to the likeness and character of his sitters. He was, in his day, the most important painter in Bergamo, a city in Lombardy in northern Italy. The artist rarely left his native region and largely resisted the influence of the prominent Venetian artist Titian (*c.*1488–1576), and the then-fashionable artificiality of Mannerism, an artistic style that flourished across Europe at the time. Instead, he remained true to his Lombard roots and exploited both the expressive potential of naturalism and his keen psychological insight to create portraits that are not only extraordinarily lifelike, but exceptional in their immediacy, directness and introspective quality. Moroni was sensitive to social nuances and portrayed a wide variety of people, from the local aristocracy and clergy to members of the emerging middle classes, many of whom he must have known well.

Historically, Moroni has been somewhat overlooked compared to other major Italian artists of the period. He is absent from the seminal art historical tome *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1568) by Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) – who never visited Bergamo – and was subsequently dismissed as 'the only mere portraitist Italy has ever produced'. His work however was justly re-appraised in the nineteenth century, when his paintings were enthusiastically collected in England and the United States. They are now in major international collections.

This exhibition at the Royal Academy celebrates the achievements of a relatively unknown genius who made outstanding advances in portraiture, from highly colourful and fashionable portraits of the Bergamasque nobility to increasingly pared down, intimate and searching portraits of unidentified individuals, executed in a masterly sober palette. The exhibition also examines Moroni's religious works. The artist was active during the highly charged climate of the Counter-Reformation, and his sacred works supported the beliefs of the Catholic Church at a time when it was challenged by the rise of Protestantism. Moroni devised a type of imagery that suited the demands of the Counter-Reformation by cleverly combining portraiture and biblical themes to encourage piety. This exhibition is the first comprehensive retrospective of Moroni's works in Britain and is presented broadly chronologically so as to trace the development of his portraiture alongside his devotional art, from his beginnings under his master Moretto through to his final years.

Moroni's Teacher: Moretto

Moroni was born in Albino, a small town in Lombardy close to Bergamo in the foothills of the Alps. Bordered in the north by Switzerland, Lombardy encompassed a major swathe of northern Italy and enjoyed flourishing agriculture, industry and commerce. During the Renaissance, Italy wasn't a unified country, but a collection of small states run either by a figurehead, an elected leader or a ruling family, which often led to intense rivalry and conflict. Divided into various centres, with Milan as its principal city, Lombardy had frequently been torn by internal struggles and its riches made it very attractive to neighbouring powers. Between the first part of the fifteenth and the end of the eighteenth century, Bergamo and Brescia came under the control of Venice, a major centre for art, and became part of the Republic of Venice. Both geographically and culturally, however, they remained closer to Spanish-ruled Milan, and boasted a distinctive artistic school.

Moroni's father, a respected citizen and well-to-do stonemason, went to live and work in nearby Brescia around 1532. At that time, it is likely that his son, the young Moroni, entered the studio of Alessandro Bonvicino, known as Moretto (*c.*1498–1554). That Moroni would have aspired to be trained by Moretto comes as no surprise, as Brescia was twice the size of Bergamo and Moretto was one of its leading artists. A very pious man, he mainly painted altarpieces but also made his mark as an innovative portraitist, both of which specialities determined the course of Moroni's own art. Moretto admired the painter Raphael (1483–1520) and even came to be known as 'the Raphael of Brescia'. He was also influenced by the light and colour of Venetian art and the example of Titian, which he integrated into his own style, taking it in a new direction.

Cat. 1 Moretto's *Madonna and Child on a Throne between Saints Eusebia, Andrew, Domneone and Domno*, *c.*1536–37, is an excellent case in point. Commissioned by a patrician family from Bergamo for the main altarpiece of their church, it represents the city's patron saints grouped around the Virgin and Child. On the left, an aged and emaciated Saint Andrew supports the heavy wooden cross on which he was martyred and gazes intently towards the Infant Christ wriggling out of his mother's arms to face him. The holy man is flanked by Saint Eusebia who, like her brother Domno on the opposite side, looks out at the viewer. Meanwhile, their uncle Domneone, poised and graceful, converses with the Virgin. According to medieval belief, the related saints were executed in the early fourth century on the orders of the Roman Emperor Maximian during the persecution of Christians, and each is accordingly depicted holding the palm leaf of martyrdom. The Virgin is seated on a throne at the top of the steps, placed against an imposing classical architectural background similar to Titian's *Pesaro Altarpiece*, 1519–26 (**fig. 1**), commissioned some ten years earlier by Jacopo Pesaro for his family chapel in the Frari Basilica in Venice. The strong colouring is also Venetian-inspired, but tempered by the silvery tonality of the architecture and variations in colour, like the warm russets and acid pinks and greens, that took their cue from local Lombard palettes, rather than Venetian.

The carefully orchestrated composition and the figures of the Virgin and Child remind us of altarpieces by Raphael, but most important is the natural depiction of many of the faces, in particular that of Saint Andrew, a characteristic singled out by Giorgio Vasari. Moretto has used his remarkable ability to observe and accurately depict the external world to

'In Milan, in the houses of the Zecca [mint], there is a painting by the said Alessandro of the Conversion of St Paul, and other very natural heads, and very well dressed as regards fabrics and clothing, because the artist took great pleasure in simulating cloth of gold or silver, velvet, damask and other fabrics of all kinds, and in these he would most diligently clothe his figures. The heads painted by his hand are extraordinarily natural, and possess something of the manner of Raphael of Urbino.'
Giorgio Vasari on Alessandro Bonvicino, known as Moretto, 1550

Fig. 1
Titian (Tiziano Vecellio)
The Pesaro Altarpiece,
1519–26
Oil on canvas, 488 x 270 cm
Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice, Italy / Cameraphoto Arte Venezia / Bridgeman Images

Cat. 1
Alessandro Bonvicino, known as Moretto
Madonna and Child on a Throne between Saints Eusebia, Andrew, Domneone and Domno,
1536–37
Oil on canvas, 224 x 174 cm
Church of Sant'Andrea Apostle, Bergamo, Città AltaChurch of Sant'Andrea Apostle, Bergamo, Città Alta
Photo © Marco Mazzoleni

Cat. 5
Portrait of M. A. Savelli,
c. 1545–48
Oil on canvas, 137 x 112 cm

Museu Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation
Photo © Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon MCG Photography: Catarina Gomes Ferreira

create a convincing religious narrative. The physical features of his figures are clearly modelled on those of people he would have seen in real life. This realism also applies to his handling of the textures of some of the protagonists' rich clothes, their tactile surface brought out by the artist's calibrated manipulation of light, but also to other details, such as the slightly worn and imperfectly patterned piece of white damask hanging from the Virgin's throne and the still life of fruit centrally placed on the paved floor, from which an apple has escaped. This latter motif, together with the rugged figure of Saint Andrew, are aspects that the revolutionary seventeenth-century realist painter Caravaggio would famously develop in his own work, but the composition was first highly influential on Moroni, who borrowed many elements from it for both his religious paintings and his portraiture. The outdoor classical setting with the broken column can, for instance, be found in his *Portrait of M.A. Savelli*, *c.* 1545–48 (**cat. 5**). The format of the portrait – with the sitter set at a slight angle, his head turned to meet the eyes of the viewer – also clearly derives from Moretto's style.

What do you think the broken classical column, so common in religious altarpieces, signifies?

Why do you think Saint Eusebia and her brother Domno are looking intently at the viewer?

Realism, Faith and Prayer

Various suggestions have been made to account for the Lombard painters' inclination to depict things as they are, rather than to idealise nature. Such idealisation was generally the norm in the other major artistic schools of Italy, which were inspired by the flawless classical statuary recovered during the Renaissance, and the philosopher Plato's idea that physical beauty equated to moral virtue.

As one author, Mina Gregori, has aptly suggested, despite its lively cities, 'Lombardy was an agrarian society of feudal origin […],' these simple roots help to explain 'the region's essentially empirical sensibility, found in the plainspoken nature of its language, which neither equivocates nor embellishes, and in the sense that life and death run their own measured, inevitable course.'

Other roots invoked are of a philosophical nature and linked to the Aristotelian thinking that largely prevailed in the broader region's universities in Pavia and Padua. The ancient philosopher's empirical study of the natural world may indeed have created a culture that stimulated Lombard painters to adopt a similar approach. This empiricism was

'Although "a vast array of artists with different interests and styles – Mannerist, Baroque, classicizing – worked in Lombardy over more than two centuries, from about 1500 to about 1740" it can be said that Lombard painters had "an inclination toward working directly from natural data, by fidelity to the truth of things", an approachable simplicity, a penetrating attention, a certain calm faith in their ability to express the "reality" around them directly, without stylistic mediation.'
Roberto Longhi, 1953

particularly prevalent in northern Europe, including Germany and the Netherlands, whose realistic mode of representation could only but influence Lombard artists, given their geographical proximity and the free movement of artists, works of art and ideas.

Last but not least, the demands of the Church for simplicity and clarity during the great period of Catholic revival known as the Counter-Reformation almost certainly contributed to the trend towards naturalism. Under attack from the Protestants on matters of doctrine and religious practices, the Catholic Church set out to put its affairs in order through a series of meetings held from 1545 to 1563 in Trent, then an ecclesiastical state in northern Italy belonging to the Holy Roman Empire. It reasserted and defended its core beliefs, and restored ecclesiastical discipline and morals. Part of this process was the reform of religious imagery, whose use was decried as idolatrous by the Protestants. The Catholic Church did not legislate on matters of style but its decrees, which were intended to purify and restrain religious imagery while enhancing its pious appeal, affected art from the 1540s onwards. The new religious art was to be direct, compelling and accurate in its narrative, and in so doing encourage healthy devotion.

Cat. 13 Moroni was one of the chief artists working in Trent during the first two sessions of the Council of Trent, between 1545 and 1547 and again when it re-opened 1551–52. After his return to Lombardy, he worked on a number of ecclesiastical commissions and devotional portraits that clearly reflect the ideals of the Counter-Reformation Church, which furthered the drive towards naturalism in the art of the region. Moroni's 1557 portrait of Lucrezia Vertova Agliardi, painted a few years after Moroni's last stay in Trent, is certainly striking for its uncompromising realism. The artist has observed and ruthlessly rendered on canvas the signs of ageing of this elderly widow. The deep wrinkles furrowing her face, her sagging skin and prominent goitre are neither disguised nor diminished. The Latin inscription painted on a marble plaque on the ledge on which her hands are resting reveals the woman's identity and the reason for her commemoration: 'Lucrezia, daughter of the most noble Alessio Agliardi, wife of the most esteemed Francesco Cattaneo Vertova, personally supervised the building of the church of Sant'Anna at Albino, 1557'. Moroni has eschewed any attempt at physical idealisation and instead used a naturalistic style to effectively call attention to the sitter's dedication, moral rectitude and piety. Her sober attire, which is accentuated by the painting's monochrome background, reflects her rejection of the material world. The viewer is drawn to her deep, contemplative expression as she holds a prayer book, evidently praying. The austerity of Lucrezia's likeness also echoes the strict manner in which the nunnery of Sant'Anna, was run. Also, the portrait perfectly conforms to the opinion of Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti (1522–1597), the

Cat. 13
Portrait of Lucrezia Vertova Agliardi,
1557

Oil on canvas, 91.4 x 68.6 cm

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. 30.95.255. Theodore M. Davis Collection, Bequest of Theodore M. Davis, 1915
Photo © 2014. Image copyright The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence

author of a treatise elaborating on the Council's decrees on art, that only those people whose 'moral goodness or Christian saintliness would be an incitement to virtue' should be represented in portraiture.

Cat. 8 Sitters represented not only in prayer but experiencing a vision as a result of their silent worship formed another important part of Moroni's religious works and innovative approach. In *Gentleman in Contemplation Before the Madonna and Child*, *c.*1555 the elegant individual depicted in profile with his hands joined in prayer has conjured up an image of the Virgin and Child, likely following a practice recommended by the Jesuit St Ignatius of Loyola. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, first published in 1548, the founder of the Society of Jesus encourages Catholics to kneel down in prayer and picture any significant moment in the life of Christ or mystery of the Christian faith on which they wish to meditate, in order to draw closer to God. Here, the subject of the vision is a tender exchange between the Virgin and her Son, who clutches his mother's thumb with one hand and with the other holds an apple – symbolic of the sins of mankind and foreshadowing his future, redemptive sacrifice. Based on earlier examples by Moretto, such as *Devout in Contemplation of King David*, *c.*1535–40, (**cat. 2**) Moroni's

Cat. 8
Gentleman in Contemplation Before the Madonna and Child,
*c.*1555
Oil on canvas, 59.7 x 64.8 cm

National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, inv. 1939.1.114. Samuel H. Kress Collection
Photo Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington

Cat. 2
Alessandro Bonvicino, known as Moretto
Devout in Contemplation of King David,
*c.*1535–40
Oil on canvas, 74 x 84 cm

Kinnaird Castle, Brechin.
The Southesk Collection
Photo: Southesk collection, courtesy Museo Lechi, Montichiari, Italy
Photo @ Fotostudio Rapuzzi Brescia

painting represents a new pictorial genre, which brings together both his religious painting and portraiture.

The inclusion of the patron or 'donor' in a devotional painting was not unusual, but a hierarchy prevailed, giving prominence to the holy figures, who were often separated from the donor by a fictive ledge to distinguish between the heavenly and earthly realms. Moroni does away with the barrier and reverses the proportions in order to produce a more inclusive, convincing and therefore effective image, exhorting the viewer to engage in a similar attitude of religious contemplation (further encouraged here by the direct gaze of both the Virgin and Child). The divine character of this almost sculptural yet palpably human group is preserved through the Virgin's halo, whose golden colour is picked out in the hem of her blue cloak and the highlights on her sleeves. Her traditional red and blue dress and idealised appearance contrast with the greater, matter-of-fact naturalism of the donor's face and attire, consisting of a refined white embroidered shirt and sleeveless jerkin in black velvet over a red jacket.

What effect does the ledge on which Lucrezia rests her hands have on the painting?

Why do you think Moroni has cut the figure of the donor and placed him in the foreground close to the picture plane in *Gentleman in Contemplation Before the Madonna and Child*?

Aristocratic Portraits

After his second stay in Trent around 1551, Moroni returned to his home region and settled in Bergamo, where his career and art flourished. He became the favoured portrait painter of the aristocracy of Bergamo and also counted among his patrons noblemen from Brescia and Venice. Like other areas of Lombardy, Bergamo was for a long period at the centre of conflicting Spanish, French and Venetian interests. While it became an important outpost of the Republic of Venice in the early sixteenth century, its proximity to Milan, which formed part of the Holy Roman and Spanish Habsburg empires, meant that many of its local patrician families had pro-imperial and Spanish sympathies. This allegiance was reinforced by the Treaty of Cateau-Cambresis (1559), which signalled the end of the 65-year struggle between France and Spain for the domination of Italy, and left Spain as the leading power there.

Although lacking a court and genuine political power, the citizens of Bergamo nevertheless enjoyed autonomy in government and industry and its aristocracy nurtured links with the empire and the Church. In contrast to other Italian cities, it did not engage in mercantile or banking activities. Bergamo was led by feudal, landed families who pursued military or ecclesiastic careers and read the humanities and law at the universities of Verona and Padua. Fiercely protective of their social class and famed for their bellicose character fostered by a quasi-medieval sense of honour, Bergamo's aristocrats also distinguished themselves by their good deeds and literary interests, and included prominent men and women of letters.

'More remote than Brescia and less battered in the wars of the earlier sixteenth century, Bergamo still looks an impregnable town, jealously preserving its local, often Alpine, traditions, and a reputation for shrewdness and penetration that is not without its relevance to the portraits of Moroni.'
Allan Braham, 1978

Cat. 16 Isotta Brembati and her husband Gian Gerolamo Grumelli belonged to the cultivated and pro-Hispanic circle of Bergamasque patrons who commissioned works from Moroni in the 1550s and 1560s. Their portraits are among the first of a series of splendid likenesses executed by Moroni during this period that masterfully display the sitters' rank, character and the fashions of the time, while also sharing similar compositions and motifs.

Isotta Brembati belonged to an illustrious patrician family of Bergamo. Her uncle Giovan Battista Brembati served as a general for the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and then Philip II, and she held her own in Bergamasque society, not only as a noblewoman but also as a poet. Passionate about literature, she wrote sonnets in Italian, Latin and Spanish and was renowned for her eloquence.

In this portrait (an earlier one had been painted when she was 18), Moroni chose to depict Isotta full-length and enthroned on a Savonarola chair, a format until then used only for emperors and popes by artists such as

Cat. 16
Portrait of Isotta Brembati, *c.* 1553
Oil on canvas, 160 x 115 cm

Fondazione Museo di Palazzo Moroni, Bergamo. Lucretia Moroni Collection
Photo: Fondazione Museo di Palazzo Moroni – Lucretia Moroni Collection
Photography: Marco Mazzoleni

Cat. 17
Portrait of Gian Gerolamo Grumelli (The Man in Pink),
1560

Oil on canvas, 216 x 123 cm

Fondazione Museo di Palazzo Moroni, Bergamo. Lucretia Moroni Collection
Photo: Lucretia Moroni Collection, Fondazione Museo di Palazzo Moroni, Bergamo. Photography: Marco Mazzoleni

Raphael and Titian. Her elevated position is enhanced by the slightly tilted floor and the grand columns of the interior setting in which she is framed. The artist has aptly conveyed her famed regal demeanour and sumptuous clothing – a lavish gown of green velvet, enriched with floral patterns in gold brocade reminiscent of Venetian dress. A stole of marten fur drapes her shoulders and serves to hold the golden chain flowing down her chest. Pearls and pink ribbons hold her sophisticated coiffure in place while other pieces of expensive jewellery and a fashionable ostrich feather fan complete her adornment. Considering her social standing, one might have expected Moroni to idealise Isotta's features as convention generally dictated for this type of portrait. But in characteristic fashion he painted them faithfully, recording their plainness and her slightly oversized head with the smoothness of his brush. This prompted a nineteenth-century German commentator to describe her as 'neither beautiful nor attractive'. Moroni's approach, however, renders Isotta more human, while the seriousness of her expression and direct gaze indicate an individual to be reckoned with.

Cat. 17 Isotta was initially wed to Elio Secco di Aragona di Calcio, but after his death she married the gentleman referred to as 'The Man in Pink' painted by Moroni in 1560. His name was Gian Gerolamo Grumelli and like Isotta's first husband, he was in favour of Spanish hegemony in Italy and partook in Spanish culture. This nobleman, whose family owned property in Albino, Moroni's hometown, played an active role in the public life of Bergamo and seems also to have been interested in the fine arts. Like Isotta, Gian Gerolamo is represented full-length and sideways, but standing, in the more recent tradition of the European state portrait and the more dynamic pose of a man of action. With his hand on his sword, he displays the easy manner of a gentleman and his slightly haughty air denotes his upper-class background. Most striking is his dazzling Spanish-style costume embroidered with silver: a tight-fitting jacket with strategic padding in the abdomen, puffed pantaloons extending as pleated hose, and stockings. Its brilliant effect recalls the Venetians' sensuous approach to colour filtered through Moroni's incisive eye. The costume's pink colour may be linked to Grumelli's coat of arms, a coral branch appended with the motto, 'Far from my tears it reddens and turns to stone'. The setting is typical of many of Moroni's portraits of the 1560s: a weathered, semi-ruined structure partially covered by creeping vegetation and opening on one side onto an atmospheric sky that acts as a picturesque background to the figure, while also carrying symbolic overtones. Another common feature is an inscription in Spanish, which Moroni usually places on the plinth on which the sitter leans or here under the painted bas-relief, representing the biblical story of Elijah and Elisha on the low wall next to Gian Grumelli. Such inscriptions generally consisted of a personal maxim, which further characterised Moroni's

sophisticated sitters. Grumelli's reads 'Better the latter than the former' and is placed just below the biblical story showing the prophet Elijah in Heaven handing his mantle to his disciple Elisha, thereby designating him as his successor in Israel. Immediately below is a fragment of classical statuary apparently fallen from its niche. The motto has therefore been interpreted as an allusion to Grumelli's belief in the superiority of the Christian faith over paganism. This complex allegory denotes the intellectual milieu of Moroni's sitters at the time, in which he too was immersed.

Why do you think Isotta, despite her intellectual renown, is not represented as a woman of letters, holding or surrounded by books, the attributes typically present in representations of men of letters at the time?

Do you think the portraits of Isotta Brembati and her husband Gian Gerolamo Grumelli were conceived as a husband-and-wife pair? Why or why not?

Portraits from Nature

Two major events would affect the patronage of Moroni soon after he painted Gian Gerolamo Grumelli. The first was Venice's decision in 1561 to drastically strengthen the existing fortifications of Bergamo. This strategic endeavour led to the demolition of a large part of the city, including palaces, the reconstruction of which inevitably diverted resources away from art commissions. No less important was the feud that divided the pro-Spanish Brembati family, to which Isotta Grumelli belonged, and the Albani, who were mainly loyal to the Venetian Republic. The enmity of these two leading Bergamasque clans came to a head when Count Achille Brembati was treacherously assassinated just before Mass in Bergamo's main church. The Albani were sent into exile and Venice took this opportunity to expel from the city those noblemen whose political views clashed with the aims of the Republic.

Although Moroni maintained contact with the city, he decided to return to Albino, where he remained until the end of his life. From the comfort of his small town, where his reputation had followed him, he continued to paint elegant aristocratic ladies but in the traditional half or bust-length format. Mainly, however, his patrons were now of more modest extraction than his flamboyant Bergamasque sitters: members of the middle classes, many of whom remain anonymous, and provincial clergymen. Moroni may at first have felt saddened by this turn in his fortune, but the more familiar clientele and the close-up portrayal intrinsic to the bust or half-length format allowed him to develop a more acute awareness of the humanity and psychology of his sitters, and to concentrate on capturing not only their physical features but also their inner life. His portraiture consequently reached new heights.

'Moroni's portraits are so true, so simple, so realistic they instantly make us feel sure that we know the sitters.'
Roberto Longhi, 1953

Cat. 26
Portrait of a Lateran Canon (Basilio Zanchi?), *c.* 1558
Oil on canvas, 58 x 48.7 cm
Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam
Photo: De Agostini Picture Library / M.Carrieri / Bridgeman Images

Cat. 26 Although executed before his return to Albino, Moroni's *Portrait of a Lateran Canon (Basilio Zanchi?)* typifies this development. The immediacy of the likeness is arresting: the cleric appears to have interrupted himself to turn to the viewer, a stratagem increasingly used by Moroni to achieve this effect. Silhouetted against a now characteristic dark grey background – its bareness encouraging concentration on the sitter – the canon gives a tentative smile and slightly weary look with perhaps a note of irony.

The candour of his expression is matched by a wealth of naturalistic details: the stubble on his face, ruddy cheekbones, the patch of shaven head surrounded by new hair growth, the lined forehead, heavy eyelids and softly closed lips. Suffused lighting around the head highlights Moroni's subtle blending of skin tones, accentuating the sitter's apparent good nature. His identity is not entirely certain, but he wears the dress of the Lateran Canons, a cream-coloured cassock and white rochet. Physical similarities with another portrait suggest that he may be Basilio Zanchi, who joined the Order of Canons Regular of the Lateran in 1524. Basilio was also a humanist and enjoyed a successful literary career before working as an auxiliary curator in the Vatican Library. However, his employment ended when he was found to have supported Lutheranism and was sentenced to life imprisonment.

The naturalism of Moroni's portraits may not seem unusual to the modern viewer, but in his time the question of who was worthy of being portrayed and whether portraits should simply be an accurate record of a person's appearance was hotly debated. It is revealing that Titian allegedly remarked to the provincial governors of the Republic of Venice, who were being posted to the city of Bergamo, that they 'should have their portrait painted by Moroni, who would make them from nature'. On the one hand, the Venetian artist appears to commend Moroni's singular talent, while on the other suggests a hierarchy and betrays some condescension. While it was fitting for certain individuals such as Venetian governors to be portrayed in a realistic manner, that was considered inappropriate for popes, doges and emperors – Titian's typical patrons. Titian's comment reflects the widely held opinion among sixteenth-century art historians, theorists and even poets that a degree of idealisation was not only desirable but essential to raise the sitter beyond mere commonality – artists had to prove themselves capable of using their creativity to this effect. Titian, for instance, commonly expanded the outline of his sitters, giving them greater bulk to better convey a sense of their importance. In his portraits of Charles V, he also subtly reduced the monarch's legendary protruding jaw (the equivalent of airbrushing). While it cannot be proved that Moroni did not idealise his noble sitters, it is clear he would have kept such trickery to a minimum. Indeed, he would more likely have agreed with Cardinal Paleotti's view expressed in his *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*, 1582, that a portrait from life 'should not be made either more beautiful or more serious, or be altered in any way from the nature that age has bestowed upon it; thus if there were defects, natural or accidental, that changed his aspect for the worse, these are not to be omitted.' Paleotti would surely have been extremely satisfied with Moroni's honest and penetrating portrayal of Basilio Zanchi. In this context it seems that the artist's truth to nature was as much morally as aesthetically grounded.

'As far as I can judge he is a man of about forty years old; dark in colouring and satisfied with his tranquil life; he has no regrets, and every day writes something, useful to mankind and rivalling the ancient virtues.'
Venetian ambassador (and later cardinal) Bernardo Navagero (1507–1565)

What is your own reading of the Lateran Canon's expression?

Do you think that the realism of the portrait is mediated by the artist's own perception of the model and his own style?

How can one judge whether or not the artist has truthfully depicted the sitter?

Altarpieces

Moroni was an active member of his community in Albino, participated in its local administration and civic affairs, and became involved with the charitable organisation of the Consorzio della Misericordia. From the 1560s, he received a growing number of religious commissions and soon devoted the best part of his time and energy to the design of large altarpieces for parish churches, in anticipation of the apostolic visit of the great Catholic reformer Charles Borromeo in 1575. Two years earlier, Borromeo had convened a session of the Council of Trent, where clerics and artists had come together to devise a suitable religious iconography. Moroni's work in Trent in the 1540s and 1550s during the Council's first two sessions and his subsequent production of sacred works in the spirit of the Counter-Reformation made him the ideal man for the job of replacing old devotional paintings with the new approved imagery. This new imagery aimed to unequivocally reaffirm the theological doctrines disputed by the Protestants but upheld by the Catholic Church. Essentially, whereas the Protestant reformers – led by Martin Luther – believed in salvation through faith alone, Catholics maintained that the performance of good works, the invocation of the Virgin and saints, the purchase of indulgences (the remission of the punishment of sin), and the symbolic reenactment of Christ's sacrifice at the altar during Mass were also instrumental in obtaining God's pardon for one's sins.

Moroni's religious works of this period, which show donors looking at the viewer while pointing to a vision of Christ on the Cross, or a performance of an act of charity, or demonstrating devotion to Mary and the veneration of saints, perfectly embody these religious dogmas. In addition, they are striking in their simplicity, legibility, and decorum, as directed by the Counter-Reformation Church of which Charles Borromeo was a leading figure. Often severely didactic, they were to inspire the faithful to imitate the models represented.

Cat. 32 The artist's *Last Supper*, commissioned in 1565 by the Confraternity of the Holy Sacrament for the church of Santa Maria Assunta and San Giacomo Maggiore in Romano di Lombardia, is a particularly wonderful example of the artist's skill in clearly demonstrating the doctrine of transubstantiation. Catholics assert that during Mass Jesus Christ is again sacrificed so that God can once more save mankind. They believe that during the Sacrament of the Eucharist (or Holy Communion) the bread and wine consecrated by the priest at the altar are miraculously changed into the flesh and blood of Jesus, a process known as transubstantiation. At this moment, God can bestow his grace on the believer as the congregation and priest symbolically eat and drink the flesh and blood of the Saviour. This ritual reflects The Last Supper as described in the Gospels. Moroni's altarpiece follows the moment when, during the last meal he shared with his disciples before his crucifixion, Jesus predicted that one of them would betray him and, pre-empting his sacrifice, he broke the bread and said, 'This is my body which is given for you.' In the painting Moroni has focused on Christ, who looks directly at us while the Apostles calmly listen to and meditate on his words. The Saviour's left hand is open in a gesture of offering that draws our attention to the piece of bread, symbolic of his body, placed prominently on the table. It is as though Christ himself is celebrating a Mass. Moroni has cleverly reinforced this idea by introducing another man immediately behind Saint John who, like Jesus, seems to address us. Significantly, he is dressed as a priest, carries a cruet of wine and has a white stole draped over his shoulder, two items used in Mass. In contrast to the heads of Christ and the Apostles, his head looks more naturalistic, leaving us in no doubt that it is a portrait within a religious painting. It has been suggested that the man was Lattanzio da Lallio, the parish priest. So successful was Moroni's *Last Supper* that it was the most cited and highly praised of his sacred works in the sixteenth century. In the acts of his apostolic visit written in 1575, Carlo Borromeo refers to it as an 'icon which does most honour to its subject'.

Cat. 32
The Last Supper,
1566–69
Oil on canvas, 295 x 195 cm
Church of Santa Maria Assunta e San Giacomo Maggiore Apostolo, Romano di Lombardia
Photo © Marco Mazzoleni

It has been suggested that Moroni's *Last Supper* could also be the depiction of a vision. What do you think has led to this interpretation?

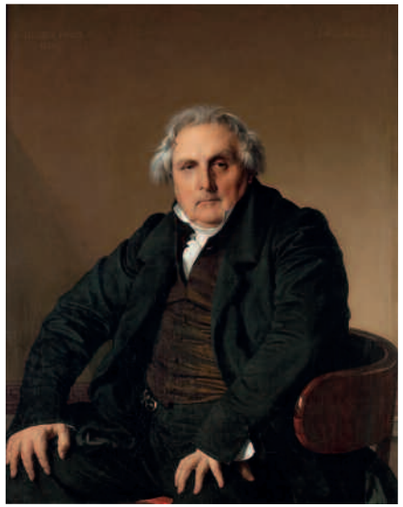
Which other painting in this guide does Moroni's *Last Supper* remind you of in terms of elements of its composition, colours and motifs?

Late Portraits

Moroni's frantic production of altarpieces for the churches in his region during the 1560s and 1570s did not prevent him from making further remarkable achievements in portraiture. The artist's late portraits, many in three-quarter length format, are characterised by a simplicity of setting and sobriety of costume and colour that reveals his mastery in the handling of blacks, whites and greys, their tonal subtlety sometimes brilliantly offset by vibrant areas of red, yellow and orange. To interpret his range of clients, which by this time notably extended to the comfortably off artisan class, Moroni also achieved new depths of psychological penetration. This development is discernible in the greater variety and subtlety of facial

expressions combined with the judicious poses of his sitters.

Cat. 42 Like the painting of aristocratic Isotta Brembati discussed earlier in this guide, the sitter in *Portrait of an Elderly Man* is seated in a Savonarola chair, but the similarities broadly end there. This elderly man wears a sober black costume composed of a workaday hat and matching heavy jacket with a modest fur-lined collar, reflecting his comparatively more humble station in society. (He was long thought to be a notary but recently it has been suggested that he may be the man of letters Pietro Spino). The background has no accoutrements of a furnished room nor aggrandising architectural elements, but simply a grey wall and a generally dark colour scheme, relieved only by the red tassel on the chair and a yellow leather-bound book. Moroni has focused on portraying only the upper body, placing the sitter almost at a right angle and bringing him hard up to the picture plane.



This physical proximity serves to create a powerful degree of intimacy with the viewer, who is caught out by his stern, searching gaze. Have we interrupted the man's reading? The finger holding his place in the book, together with the turn of his head and almost reproachful glance seem to suggest so. 'One wishes one had knocked before entering the room [...]' the art historian Pope-Hennessy mused when seeing a similar picture by Moroni. The more profound sense of personality and engagement with the viewer conveyed by this portrait amply makes up for its studied minimalism and informality. The old man is captured from life. Indeed, since Moroni generally did not make careful preparatory drawings, his painting directly from life enhanced the spontaneity of the image. Furthermore, his textured rendering of the flesh and softer atmospheric handling, attained here through the use of a looser brushstroke, signal a development from Moroni's earlier precise depictions of Isotta Brembati and her husband. For its modernity and the articulate treatment of the hands, the painting can be compared to the *Portrait of Louis-François Bertin*, 1832, by the nineteenth-century French painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867)

Cat. 42
Portrait of an Elderly Man Seated with a Book (Pietro Spino?),
c. 1575–79
Oil on canvas, 98 x 80 cm
Accademia Carrara, Bergamo
Photo: Comune di Bergamo-Accademia Carrara

Fig. 2
Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres
Portrait of Louis-François Bertin,
1832
Oil on canvas, 116 x 95 cm
RF1071
Photo © Musée du Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Angèle Dequier

Cat. 36
Portrait of a Tailor (Il Tagliapanni),
c. 1565–1570
Oil on canvas, 99.5 x 77 cm

The National Gallery, London.
Purchased, 1862
Photo © The National Gallery, London

(**fig.2**), where they take on a new expressive dimension.

Cat.36 That Moroni was ahead of his time is also demonstrated by his *Portrait of a Tailor*, often regarded as his greatest masterpiece. The portrayal of tradesmen at work was a relatively recent development, evidently much to the poet Aretino's (1492–1556) displeasure: 'To your disgrace, oh century, you allow even tailors and butchers to appear in painting, just as they are.' The clothing of Moroni's tailor – slashed red breeches, a cream fitted jacket over a white undershirt with a ruff at the neck and cuffs, and the sort of belt from which a sword could be hung – may today appear to be that of a high-born individual, yet can in fact be found in contemporary prints illustrating the profession. However, in a mid-sixteenth-century painting of the same subject by the Parmese painter Girolamo Bedoli (**fig.3**), the craftsman – or more likely a cloth-trader – is portrayed in a much less genteel and authoritative manner, and would probably not have received the kind of praise the leading Venetian seventeenth-century writer Marco Boschini lavished on Moroni's rendition of his tailor: 'So fine, so well made, that he speaks more eloquently than if he were a lawyer; he has his shears in his hand, and you see him about to cut.' With his head inclined, the tailor not only metaphorically 'speaks' to us but also seems to have temporarily suspended his work to listen, and perhaps even to assess us with his strong gaze. Moroni's decision to portray a man working with his hands with such impressive confidence and dignity, albeit one wealthy enough to be able to commission his own portrait, has no precedent in sixteenth-century Italian art. It both distinguishes his work from a painting of everyday life and, alongside its formal treatment, reveals a modern sensibility.

Fig. 3
Girolamo Bedoli
Portrait of a Tailor,
1540–45
Oil on canvas

Museo di Capodimonte, Naples
Fototeca della Soprintendenza Speciale per il PSAE e per il Polo Museale della Città di Napoli e della Reggia di Caserta

How do the gazes of Moroni's *Elderly Man* and *The Tailor* make you feel? What are they communicating?

Do you think these paintings would have been hung in a private or public space?

Portraits are static images yet artists found various ways to enliven them by, for instance, implying a sense of movement or interruption as in Moroni's *Portrait of an Elderly Man*. How else did Moroni achieve this?

Legacy and Critical Fortune

Moroni holds a special place in the development of Renaissance portraiture. Capturing a likeness had become an essential requirement; as was the need to convey a person's status, place in society, and their values. But a good portraitist was one who could make the subject look alive, could reveal their personality and something of their soul. Through his mastery of tone, effects of colour, controlled handling of light and craftsmanship in the treatment of surfaces and detail, Moroni admirably rendered the physicality of his subjects. Carefully chosen pictorial settings, inscriptions, props, clothing and poses provided further clues to their identity, position, interests and social aspirations. But above all, Moroni with his penetrating eye was able to portray a person's individuality and inner life with extraordinary dexterity and vividness. One of his favourite and highly effective devices was to paint his subjects as if they had been disturbed during some activity and had turned to look at the viewer with a piercing gaze, thereby increasing their presence and directness. Such qualities, together with the democratisation of his range of sitters, were stepping-stones in the development of naturalistic portraiture between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. They prefigure the work of Caravaggio (1571–1610) and Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), while Moroni's late sober palette and austere formats also bring to mind not only works by Ingres, but also by James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) and Edouard Manet (1832–1883). Yet these are the very qualities that have periodically hindered the appreciation of his work and critical fortune. The notion that he was, in certain respects, far ahead of his time has combined with the fact that his sitters were sometimes viewed as 'too uninterestingly themselves', during a period in Italy when painters tended to idealise and aggrandise their sitters and thus create perhaps more immediately visually arresting images. These characteristics have left Moroni somewhat beyond the art-historical canon; when critics have been unable to categorise Moroni, they have lowered their appraisals of him. Yet as this exhibition shows, his great strengths as a painter and innovator are precisely those that place him firmly in the ranks of the sixteenth-century artists of lasting interest and value.

'I think that sometimes a painter is in a manner inspired, and is able to see, through the normal expression of the face, another expression that is equally a part of it […]'
Mary Elizabeth Braddon, 1862

Cat. 26 (detail)
Portrait of a Lateran Canon (Basilio Zanchi?), *c.* 1558

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This guide is given out free to teachers and full-time students with an exhibition ticket and ID at the Learning Desk and is available to other visitors from the RA Shop at a cost of £5.50 (while stocks last).