

*Susan Greenhow reflects on a painting that has a particular personal resonance for her, Moroni's Tailor in the National Gallery, London*

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/giovanni-battista-moroni-the-tailor-il-tagliapanni>

## TWO TAILORS

Arkell Bros., Tailors and Outfitters, at 61 High Street, Banbury was where, probably in the 1950s, I first encountered [Giovanni Battista Moroni](#). Not that I knew the name then, but a framed copy of the artist's most famous portrait, of a sixteenth-century tailor, handsomely clad in a creamy white doublet, cutting shears in hand, was always to be found in this, my father's establishment. 61 High Street was a half-timbered building dating back beyond the time of Moroni; by the early twentieth century it had become a double-fronted shop with stockroom and cutting room behind. If you climbed a sequence of narrow, dark stairs, you reached an attic workshop, airy and well lit, where you would find, sitting cross-legged on a raised platform, three Spanish tailors, exiles from a long-gone war. They would be sewing by hand the garments that my father had cut with shears not so different from those in the portrait.

The copy of Moroni's tailor was provided, I recall, by the trade journal *Tailor and Cutter*, and his image was often to be found proudly displayed in one of the shop windows for all the town to see, propped up amongst the bales of English worsteds and hand-loomed Harris tweeds, the Pringle sweaters and the Daks trousers. He was such a familiar figure

to me that he seemed an adopted member of the family and as such rather taken for granted.

Subsequently, after I embarked on a life away from that small country town, for many years Moroni's tailor disappeared from view but not from my consciousness. Yet it wasn't until 2014 that I came face to face with the actual portrait of my father's fellow craftsman. That year the Royal Academy mounted a major exhibition of the work of Giovanni Battista Moroni, and it was here that I discovered an enormous respect for this principled painter. I admired him particularly because, rather than strike out to Venice where he might have rivalled the greatest artists of his age and won the patronage of the great and the good, over a period of thirty years he chose to depict members of the community of which he was a part: the citizens, minor aristocracy and craftsmen of the city of Bergamo, in the district of his birth. And what penetrating portraits they are! Here are living, thinking, working people who have paused for a moment to be captured in paint to allow future generations to share in their lives. I walked amongst this canvas company as I might in a gala gathering of small city worthies, wanting to stop and chat when I met an inquisitive glance, and I felt drawn to this Renaissance artist as to no other of my acquaintance. These pictures told me that Moroni really understood the fabric of his society, that he cared for his community and

was proud to be a part of it. In its depiction, he bequeathed to succeeding generations a truly revelatory gift.

I returned to 'my' tailor to meet again that enquiring gaze and found that he had somehow become an embodiment of the artist. And there was something more: I realised that the qualities and ideals of this joint persona had been shared by his fellow craftsmen in a small country town in England four centuries later.

**Susan Greenhow**

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