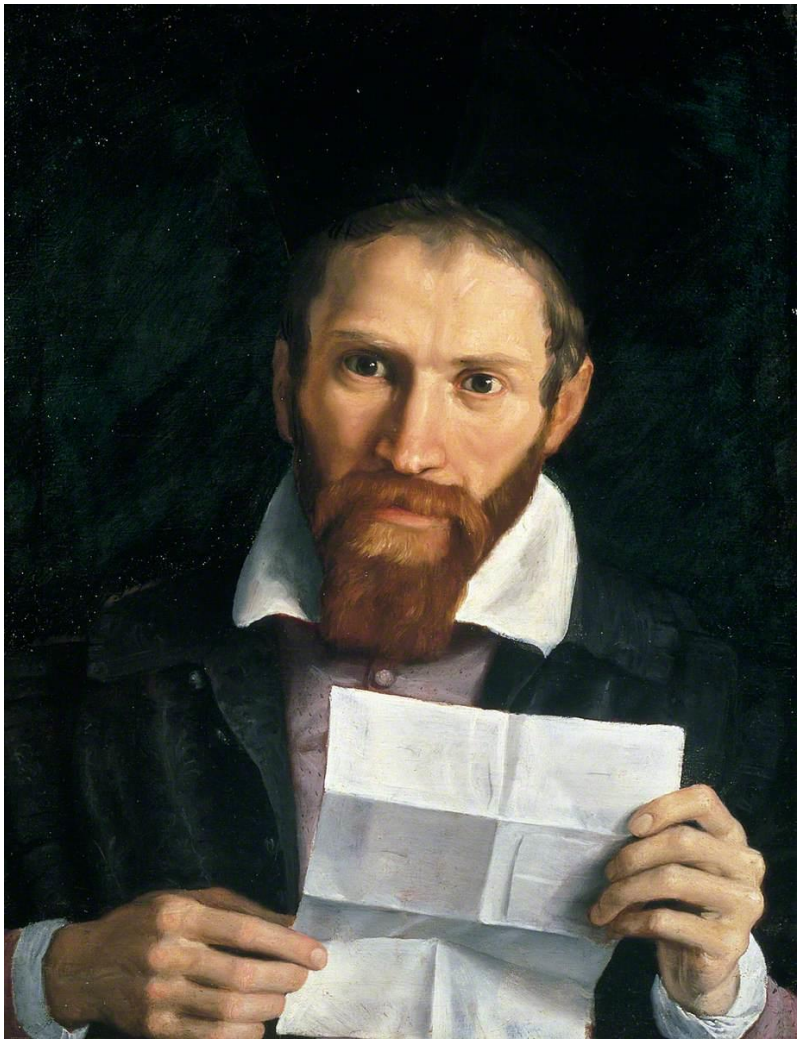
OCCASIONAL ESSAY 1
The Portrait of Monsignor Agucchi in York Art Gallery and the Question of Portraiture

This painting, despite its small size and restricted colour range, makes a strong and immediate impact. It shows a man, of indeterminate age (anything from his 30s to 50s) wearing a biretta, a square cap worn by Catholic priests. It is a face that shows intelligence, the face of an intellectual. And the sitter holds a piece of writing, whether his own or another's, perhaps a letter or document. The effect is as if the man has been interrupted, and is meeting someone's gaze. Evidently this is an informal, private portrait.



This is undoubtedly one of the most important paintings in the collection of York Art Gallery. It is a sign of this that during the Gallery's major refurbishment and consequent closure it was on show in the National Gallery in London. For a brief period it had been in the possession of Kenneth Clark, for a period Director of the National Gallery, later Lord Clark, who knew a good picture when he saw one. It has been frequently borrowed, for example for the important Domenichino exhibition in 1996 in Rome (Domenichino may the painter of the portrait, see below). It was well-enough known in its own day for several engraved versions to be made. In 1973 it was insured for £75,000, but in 2000 for £2 million! The work is generally in good condition, though there is some darkening and sinking of the background; when it was conserved a layer of thick varnish was removed.

How does this important work come to be in York?

The sitter, as we have seen a Catholic priest, had no direct heirs, but the painting remained in the family until 1937 when it was sold at Christie's in London. Subsequently it was bought by Francis (F. D.) Lycett Green, nephew of the man who restored and gave to the National Trust the Treasurer's House in York. It was gifted to York in 1955, when Hans Hess was Curator at the Gallery, along with another 135 paintings. Lycett Green's collection was originally destined for Wakefield, and later for the National Gallery of South Africa in Cape Town. Fortunately for us Lycett Green quarrelled with the curator there, and eventually chose York instead. His gift changed York Art Gallery from an interesting local gallery to one of national importance. Lycett Green was a wealthy man, but he was no plutocrat, and he bought several paintings each year; in general he chose works by less famous artists and smaller pictures, often of the baroque period, which was then comparatively unfashionable (from his Eton days Lycett Green was a close friend of Osbert Sitwell, an enthusiast for baroque art and architecture, like his brother Sacheverell who published books on the subject). In this he may be compared to the great collector Denis Mahon who gifted 57 baroque paintings to various location in the UK and Europe in the 1990s.

Who is the painting by?

The Gallery label assigns the work to Domenichino, Little Domenico, the name given to Domenico Zamperi (1581-1641) because of his size, an attribution that remains indeed the current

consensus. However, the YMT website entry gives it to Annibale Carracci, Domenichino's master (1560-1609). For most of its history the work was thought to be by Domenichino, but in the 1990s it was attributed instead to Annibale largely on stylistic grounds. Certainly the free and energetic brushwork is more typical of Annibale than of the much smoother Domenichino. (Only Domenichino's 'Portrait of a Young Man' in Uffizi seems to me in any way comparable in terms of style. Interestingly this may be of Francesco Angeloni, an art-collector and friend of Agucchi, who owned a copy of our picture). Agucchi's age in the painting is relevant here; if he is more than 39, Annibale, who died in 1609, cannot be the artist.

This uncertainty reminds us of our comparative ignorance and that questions of attribution, particularly with older paintings, are often more difficult than the confident style of museum labels might suggest. We might recall how many paintings believed to be by Rembrandt have been de-attributed over recent years, in some cases only to be re-attributed again. An extreme case is Giorgione; he is to a degree a virtual painter, in that no painting can be assigned to him with absolute certainty; indeed no painting has been assigned to him continuously and universally from his own day down to ours. There is documentary evidence in some cases, of course, but connecting documents to artworks is often no straightforward business (a painting by Giorgione mentioned in an old inventory has been widely identified as the one we know as *La Tempesta*, but we cannot be certain from the description that it is the same work). The matter is complicated by the condition of old paintings, the fact that many of them have been repainted and restored, often badly, many times, or damaged, or altered in some way, or that colours have faded or changed. It is not certain whether the figure of St George and the dragon in the background was part of the original work we know as Giorgione's *Tramonto* in the National Gallery in London or the creation of an imaginative restorer. In his essay 'The School of Giorgione' (1877), included in later editions of his best-known work *The Renaissance*, the great Victorian critic Walter Pater reflects with much subtlety on the implication of these matters; he would undoubtedly have relished the irony of the fact that his one touchstone of authenticity, the *Concert* in the Pitti Pace in Florence, has since been reassigned from Giorgione to Titian! Pleasingly some galleries are now being more upfront about such things. The National Gallery has recently been frank that one of its most beloved works, Goya's *Doña Isabel*

de Porcel, may not in fact be by the master, or even of Spanish origin, and invited us to consider the matter for ourselves (in some ways the technique looks French and perhaps from later in the 19th century). For this issue see the National Gallery press release.

Whether by Domenichino or Annibale Carrracci the portrait of Agucchi is certainly a work of Bolognese School, which produced a series of celebrated masters in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Its members included the three Carracci (Annibale, his brother Agostino, and their cousin Ludovico), Guercino (1591-1666), and Guido Reni (1575-1642). The Bolognese School was held in the highest regard by connoisseurs and collectors from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries. Reni, for example, was known as 'the Divine Guido', and his painting of a balletic Archangel Michael in Santa Maria della Concezione, was one of the must-see sights of Rome, though now comparatively rarely visited.

Subsequently the school fell from grace. The Bolognese masters, a 'feeble and fallen school', in the view of that great and influential art critic John Ruskin, were stigmatized by him for 'insincerity'; Reni in particular was for Ruskin quite simply a 'bad master'. The Pre-Raphaelites also expressed strong antipathy for the painters of this period, the successors of Raphael. Dante Gabriel Rossetti has a sonnet on the subject:

Last Visit to the Louvre

The Cry of the P.R.B., After a Careful Examination of the
Canvases of Rubens, Correggio, *et hoc genus omne*

Non noi pittori! God of Nature's truth,
If these, not we! Be it not said, when one
Of us goes hence: 'As these did, he hath done;
His feet sought out their footprints from his youth.'
Because, dear God! the flesh Thou madest smooth
These carked and fretted, that it seemed to run
With ulcers; and the daylight of thy sun
They parcelled into blots and glares, uncouth
With stagnant grouts of paint. Men say that these
Had further sight than man's, but that God saw
Their works were good. God that didst
know them foul!
In such a blindness, blinder than the owl,

Leave us! Our sight can reach unto thy seas
And hills: and 'tis enough for tears of awe.

George Eliot, whose tastes were always up-to-the-minute, shared this distaste for Reni, and in chapter 60 of *Middlemarch* satirizes him through an ignorant provincial auctioneer who refers to him ‘the celebrated Guydo, the greatest painter in the world’. However on her own visit to Rome in 1860 she carefully studied a painting, then universally attributed to Reni, supposedly of the wronged Beatrice Cenci; today both the subject and the attribution are disputed by many. The Bolognese painters have attracted more admirers in recent years, including Denis Mahon, but their popularity has nonetheless been completely eclipsed by the current enthusiasm for Caravaggio (1571-1610), whose status rose dramatically from the mid 20th century, and who is today one of the most highly esteemed European painters of all time, exhibitions of whose work attracts huge crowds. We may contrast the view of the great French painter Nicholas Poussin who, according to a friend, said of Caravaggio that he had come into the world ‘in order to destroy painting’. Ruskin also didn’t like Caravaggio, finding in him only ‘the horror and ugliness and filthiness of sin’.

This should encourage us to reflect on changes in reputation and the vagaries of aesthetic preferences: what we call ‘our’ taste often may just comprise the prejudices of the age in which we happen to live. Many previously admired paintings that are now dismissed perhaps are not really being looked at closely and with proper attention at all. In general I would advocate in such matters the virtue of pluralism and what can be called ‘the principle of charity’. If people in the past or present whose judgement in general you have no reason to disrespect value a particular work of art, we should start at least by assuming that their evaluation is worth serious consideration. And it is possible after all to admire both Guido Reni and Caravaggio. The most important thing is to look closely and carefully, and try to set aside for the moment what you thought you knew, your stock unreflective predetermined response.

Who was the sitter?
Monsignor Giovanni Battista Agucchi (1570-1632) was a cleric of some standing and considerable interest. He was a sort of papal fixer; in 1621 he was appointed Secretary to Pope Gregory XV and

in 1623 Papal Nuncio to Venice. His brother was a Cardinal. He was also the author of an important 'treatise on painting', the *Trattato della pittura*, published posthumously in 1646 (there is an English translation by Denis Mahon). Agucchi was closely associated with the Bolognese School; he gave the last rites to Annibale, and Domenichino lived in his house for a period. He favoured a version of classicism, recommended the art of Raphael and Michelangelo, and strongly disliked both mannerism and the extreme realism of Caravaggio. He may have advised Annibale Carracci on the grand ceiling depicting 'the Loves of the Gods' in the Palazzo Farnese in Rome, where the second act of Puccini's *Tosca* is set. This masterpiece of Bolognese art is still too little-known because the palace is now the French Embassy and difficult to access.

What makes a great portrait?

Some would say that the self-same things that make any painting great make a portrait so. So in this case we have bravura painting, both white on white, and black on black, traditionally a virtuoso display of artistry. The rendering of the eyes and flesh is superb, the control of dark and light tones exemplary. There are formal qualities that give satisfaction, for example the sense of geometry (triangle and rectangle). But is this analysis too formalistic? And what about the work's status as a likeness? Some people think of personality primarily in terms of interiority, Introspection, and inwardness. This links naturally with Freud's examination of the unconscious, which has been so influential for our thinking. Rembrandt's self-portraits or the portraits of the American artist Thomas Eakins, where the sitters seem to brood on deeply personal feelings, fit well with this conception. Such portraits suggest hidden depths and psychological profundity, and in these cases we sometimes talk of 'painting the soul'. But sociability is an equally important constituent of personality; the current lockdown reminds us, forcibly, that we are primarily social animals. William James, the brother of the novelist Henry James, in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), concentrates not on interiority but on the social self, what might be termed the material self (how we dress and so forth), how we present ourselves to others, as the prime constituents of personality. James writes:

Properly speaking, a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him…. But as the individuals who carry the images fall naturally into classes, we may practically say that

he has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of people about whose opinion he cares.
Sargent is one portrait painter who depicts, with astonishing force, the social self, in a period of unusual flux and dynamism. Portraiture of this type can become complicit with the process of image-making by the rich and powerful. Thus van Dyck became *inter alia* a sort of spin-doctor to the English aristocracy and to Charles I (compare his magisterial portraits of Charles with the sensitive but less dazzling portrayals by Daniel Mytens and Gerrit van Horthorst). But the more psychological approach can also flatter the sitter's ego, if in rather a different way. Neither approach should be regarded as necessarily superior to the other. Both are needed for our full understanding of personhood.

Much twentieth-century art criticism separates the matter of capturing a likeness from the question of aesthetic quality. For example, the philosopher and aesthetician R. G. Collingwood in his *Principles of Art* (1938) writes: 'A representation may be a work of art; but what makes it a representation is one thing, what makes it a work of art is another'. The painter Walter Sickert in an essay on Sargent (1910) comments adversely on what he calls the necessary 'compromise between what the painter would like to do and what his employer would put up with', as though that vitiated the artistic integrity of portraiture. But to my thinking a great portrait creates and makes real for us the sense of an encounter with a specific individual: in a sort of miracle, a lifeless medium, pigment on a flat surface, conjures up a human presence in a compelling way. Of course we are unable to know whether the likeness is a 'convincing' one, or one that would have struck the sitter's friends and acquaintance as being so. But there is the sense - the illusion if you like - of the powerful projection of the sitter's presence and character. Thus the painter John Collier, in *The Art of Portrait Painting* (1905), writes of the projection of a 'speaking likeness' that communicates the sitter's vitality. It is in that respect that Titian, Rembrandt, Rubens, van Dyck, Reynolds, Lawrence, Sargent, Eakins are all great portraitists, though of very different types. By contrast, to my thinking Cézanne, though indubitably a very great painter, is perhaps not a great portrait painter. We may perhaps say that he paints people as though they were apples, creating something that is formally satisfying rather than staging this encounter between the viewer and another human being. Even Allan Ramsay's wonderful portrait of Jean Abercrombie in York Art Gallery may impress as a painting more than as a portrait.

The colouring is absolutely exquisite, the rendering of the dress and of the woman's skin is of superb quality, but do we experience that unique encounter? But certainly, in the case of the Agucchi, what makes the painting a great portrait is precisely what makes it a great work of art.

Charles Martindale
May 2020