Challenging Women's Agency and Activism in Early Modernity

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Published by Amsterdam University Press

Wiesner-Hanks, Merry.  
Challenging Women's Agency and Activism in Early Modernity.  
Amsterdam University Press, 2021.  
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9. The Agency of Portrayal

The Active Portrait in the Early Modern Period

Saskia Beranek and Sheila ffolliott

Abstract
Portraits of women represent a fruitful avenue from which to approach the study of women’s lives and agencies in the early modern period. When taken seriously as objects which function independently of their sitters or makers, portraits reveal themselves as active, affective components of women’s lives. Portraits negotiate between sitter and viewer but also between viewers in the absence of the sitter in order to create social bonds and cement dynastic claims. Using case studies culled from a range of times and places through the early modern period, we argue for a site-specific, viewer-response based method of examining portraits that foregrounds the cultural work accomplished by the object itself.

Keywords: patronage; identity; viewer; Amalia van Solms; Catherine de’ Medici; Lady Cobham

Early modern portraiture is simultaneously appealing and alienating. On the one hand, a portrait allows a viewer access to the face and identity of a person distant in time and space. For those interested in early modern women, portraits are thus doubly appealing, as they make visible those who have often become invisible in written records. Though women may leave fewer traces in payment books, archives, and treaties, their presence permeates both portraits themselves and the history of their collection and display. On the other hand, every art collection holds countless iterations of

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1 This essay derives from a workshop held at Attending to Early Modern Women 2018; additional contributors to that event included Sandra Friesen, English Instructor, Langara College, Vancouver and Kyungran Park, PhD Candidate, Department of English, University at Buffalo.

Wiesner-Hanks, M.E. (ed.). Challenging Women’s Agency and Activism in Early Modernity. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021

doi: 10.5117/9789463729321_CH09
‘portrait of a woman, sixteenth century, artist unknown’. Lacking the names of artist or sitter, the portrait loses its agency and languishes in the darkened corners of collections and scholarship. And yet it remains an artifact that someone once took great care to commission, to craft, and to view. That portraits of early modern sitters exist in such numbers and yet often remain so silent is itself a compelling paradox. For all that the faces of the past feel immediately present and profoundly human, they remain distant.

Discussions of painted portraits have frequently centered on issues of iconography and likeness, exploring how symbolic and mimetic conventions have been used in the representation of women. Broader studies of patronage have stretched the study of women’s portraits to include hypotheses about the agendas of the female sitter-patron. How did a sitter-patron wish to be perceived? Which aspects of wealth, erudition, or status did the patron wish to foreground? Lacking documentation of artistic commissions in payment books, scholars (including the current authors) have looked to portraits to try to reclaim and reconstitute the artistic activities and agencies of early modern women.

This essay examines how portraits both representing women and owned by women established or challenged identities, activated spaces, circulated in familial and economic networks, and functioned in forging alliances. Networks of portrait collecting and exchange provide a gendered parallel for a more traditional written archive. Our concern is not what a portrait says about the sitter-patron, nor is it about the agency of the sitter, but rather, situated somewhere between the object and the viewer. We suggest that the mobility and display of visual and verbal portraits grant affective agency to the objects themselves in addition to the conventional artistic agency of the patron. We ask a series of questions: In what ways can representations themselves be said to have agency? Since this is dependent on demonstrable viewer response, how can scholars accurately gauge this type of agency, since response is likely to be highly variable and subjective? Even if an early modern viewer commented on their impressions upon seeing a portrait, would they do so in terms that are compatible with our understanding of agency? Do cases where the representations may directly result from the agency of the sitter function differently from those where no such influence can be registered? How do we effectively and responsibly triangulate among patron, producer, and consumer of representations of women? These broad, far-reaching questions are

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impossible to fully address in a short essay, but it is our hope that our reflections on them will suggest new attitudes and methodologies for approaching the studies of women, images, spaces, and the acts of viewing and portraying.

Artists and agency

A common branch of portraiture studies has tended to focus on the role of the portrait in the career or stylistic development of the painter. How did a portrait commission from a specific sitter-patron change the painter's fortunes by connecting her/him to a social network of potential patrons? How does a portrait demonstrate a painter's particular technical accomplishments or develop the genre of portraiture more broadly? Portrait painting was an accepted commercial outlet for the small number of women artists active in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. If something innate to the woman artist could deliver an image more in line with their female subjects' desires than their male counterparts is difficult to ascertain.

Sofonisba Anguissola (c. 1532–1625), from a North Italian noble family, made portraits in her early career and painted several while serving as a lady-in-waiting to Queen Isabel de Valois in Spain. She also made the largest number of self-portraits in the time span between Dürer and Rembrandt, both of whom have been extensively studied for the significance of their contributions in this genre. Hers remain less well examined. Women artists needed to be extremely careful to protect their virtue and reputations while working as professionals. Many of Sofonisba's self-portraits emphasize her virginal status: that in the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna is inscribed *Sophonisba Anguissola Virgo seipsam fecit 1554*. Sofonisba's self-portrait *tour de force*, now in the Siena Pinacoteca, expresses a unique conceit: she depicts her master Bernardino Campi in the act of completing a portrait of her, in which she appears not as a painter, but dressed as a properly modest lady without the accoutrements of the artist. Although some scholars question her authorship, most agree that Sofonisba thus simultaneously displays her virtuosity as a painter while paying homage to her master who represents her as befits her status.

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4 Woodall, *Anthonis Mor*.  
5 Berdini, ‘Women under the Gaze’.  
7 Garrard, ‘Here’s Looking at Me’; Gómez, *Tale of Two Women Painters*, p. 103.
Her contemporary, Lavinia Fontana (1552–1614), supported herself painting portraits of noblewomen in Bologna and also painted two self-portraits that similarly dealt with the plight of the professional woman artist and the problem of representing those conflicting terms. In what may be her presentation piece to be accepted into the Haarlem Guild of St. Luke for painters and gold and silversmiths, Dutch painter Judith Leyster (1609–1660) depicts herself in the act of painting, but in more formal attire than she probably wore in the studio. In a Self-Portrait (London: The Royal Collection Trust), Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1656) adopts the iconographic elements attributed to painting personified, inserting an actual artist, herself, into the typical allegorizing of abstract qualities as female.

The agency of patrons

Patronage studies has been one of the most fruitful avenues for pursuing the topic of early modern elite women and agency. One thread in such studies has been the study of elite portraits and their capacity to assert dynastic power through displays of continuity and kinship. Gender aside, to be in the presence of a state portrait was not that different from being in the presence of the royal body itself. Portraits of monarchs quite literally stood in for the body of the monarch while also generating the aura of authority that monarchy needed to function. This could be stretched back to antiquity, where, famously, the colossal statue of Emperor Constantine oversaw all cases being adjudicated in the Basilica of Maxentius and Constantine. Like an icon, the image of Constantine emphasized the legitimacy of his rule.

So too in the early modern period: in the case of Philip IV, the artist Juan Bautista Maino represents figures kneeling before an image of the King (Recapture of Bahia del Brazil, 1634–1635, Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado). The portrait itself—likely a tapestry—is displayed under the sort of baldachin that we might expect to shelter a throne or the physical body of a monarch. A group of figures kneel before it, some reaching up with

8 Murphy, ‘Lavinia Fontana and Le Dame della Città’.
9 Hofrichter, Judith Leyster.
10 Garrard, ‘Artemisia Gentileschi’s Self-Portrait’.
11 For further reference, see Dunn, ‘Convent Creativity’; Reiss, ‘Beyond Isabella and Beyond’; and McIver, ‘Material Culture’.
12 Campbell Renaissance Portraits; Mann and Syson, The Image of the Individual; Hearn, Dynasties.
13 Woodall, Anthonis Mor, pp. 350–351.
clasped hands, some gesturing to the image of the monarch, but all seemingly acknowledging the extent to which the image made present the absent body of the monarch. The body made present is a powerful type of agency.

With specific regard to women, how did portraits establish or challenge identities, activate spaces, circulate in familial and economic networks, and function in forging alliances? As Joanna Woodall noted: ‘the circulation of portraits could mirror and expand the system of personal patronage whereby power, privilege, and wealth were distributed’. For a specific example, we have only to look at a portrait of Amalia van Solms, Princess of Orange, in her small palace Huis ten Bosch. In the central Oranjezaal, a cruciform room covered with a complex cycle celebrating the legacy of her husband, the Prince of Orange and head of the Dutch armies through the Eighty Years’ War, a large portrait of Amalia accompanied by her daughters by Gerrit van Honthorst (still in situ) hung just to the left of the monumental main canvas of the cycle, a painting which celebrated her deceased husband as a godlike hero. In the portrait, an idealized Amalia is dressed in ermine and pearls, and seated within a triumphal arch. What makes the agency of the portrait even more apparent is that the portrait concealed a door that connected the central hall to Amalia’s apartment. The painted body could quite literally be replaced by the living body of the Princess at any moment.

Portraits then serve not just to stand in for, but actively construct the sitter: the portraits of Elizabeth I, for example, were created and circulated explicitly to negotiate the space between her (feminine) body natural and her (masculine) body politic. The proliferation of portraits under Elizabeth is important, but so too is the agency she exerted over them: images of Elizabeth not made from approved models or departing from approved mandates were collected, burned and outlawed. Similarly, Anne Marie Jordan Gschwend has suggested that Antonis Mor’s portrait of Catherine of Austria was the only portrait Catherine allowed to be copied.

Anecdotes inform us about what women have to say about portraits of themselves and others. Although not as straightforward a concept as the word suggests, texts indicate that likeness was a major concern. A letter

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14 Pearson, Women and Portraits; ffolliott, ‘The Italian “Training” of Catherine de’ Medici’.
15 Woodall, Portraiture, p. 3.
16 Judson and Ekkart, Gerrit van Honthorst, p. 149.
17 De Jonge and Ottenheyim, Unity and Discontinuity, p. 202. See also architect Pieter Post’s plans, where the door is clearly indicated. Rijksmuseum inv. RP-P-AO-32-96-4.
18 ffolliott, ‘Portraying Queens’.
of Isabella d’Este’s laments the scarcity of painters able to ‘counterfeit the natural face.’ Catherine de’ Medici, similarly concerned for quality, wrote her cousin in Rome with a logical proposition: find a painter, have him portray someone I know, and send me the result so I can judge his ability. Simple resemblance was not the only objective: likeness for Isabella also meant linking an individual to a position or status. She requested Titian to paint her. The result, in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, he made by copying a copy of a much earlier portrait. More than an exercise in vanity, control over the image was an essential component of power structures and social status. Elizabeth's state-sponsored clamping down on unlicensed imagery demonstrates that the existence of the wrong kind of portrait would do the wrong work. Elizabeth's political position was precarious enough that it was essential to carefully control what portraits were allowed to do. Her legitimacy was, in some ways, created by the portraits, in perhaps the same way that Louis Marin has argued that portraits of Louis XIV created the absolute monarch of the Sun King.

Portraiture exists within a triangular matrix where at least three different parties can and should be considered. In addition to painter and sitter-patron, the audience receiving the portrait is an essential component. As Ann Jensen Adams has argued,

Portraits are created as cultural objects to have an impact on their viewers [...] in the space between the patron and the artist, the portrait’s human subject, and its assumed viewer, a portrait functions as an interpretive medium, visually organizing the experience and understanding of all parties involved in its production and reception. For each of these individuals, the portrait is a site or transfer point that relates and structures ideas. [...] the portrait participates in setting the terms through which perceptions about the individuals it portrays are produced, the cultural discourses through with they are understood, and the devices and associations of the visual tradition.

20 Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits*, p. 149.
21 *Lettres de Catherine de’ Medicis*, I, p. 109. ‘A monsieur le cardinal strossy, 1557 13 october [...] Aussi regardez d’en trouver ung autre [homme] qui saiche bien paindre au vif et luy ferez faire vostre pourtrait, ou de quelque autre que je cognoisse et le m’envoyez a ce que, si je le trouble bon et bien faict, vous m’envoyez le dict personnage pour qu’il serve par deça, et surtout qu’il soyent des meillieurs et plus excellentz en leur art et metier que l’on pourra recontrer’.
23 Woodall, *Anthonis Mor*, p. 343; see also Marin, *Le Portrait du Roi*.
Further, the viewer most often encounters a portrait in the absence of the sitter. Though the approaches discussed above are essential components in the study of early modern representations of women, these models do not consider that the agendas of the patron may differ radically from the messages received by viewers and how the object itself is an active agent in furthering an agenda. The act of viewing, of constructing images of an individual based in an internal assemblage of art, architecture, correspondence, sculpture, rumor, and gossip, complicates how early modern viewers perceived images of women. Rather than passive reflections of faces, values, and social status, representations of women are images, spaces, and texts which themselves possess cultural agency. Representations of women are engaged not in the reflection of what and who women are but in the active creation of what they might become. Therefore, it is to the portrayals themselves to which we now turn.

The agency of objects

To suggest that images have agency, or at least some sort of active affect, is nothing new. Although portraiture was not his principal focus, David Freedberg has explored the range of different ways that images exuded power. In certain circumstances, as one example below will demonstrate, portraits can assume an almost talismanic significance. As Freedberg noted, ‘the time has come to acknowledge the possibility that our responses to images may be of the same order as our responses to reality’. On the one hand, critics maintain that objects do not and cannot possess agency because they cannot act with an internal, conscious intent. And yet, supporters reply, images exist in the world and work upon it, often separated from the makers and the patrons whose intent is more immediate. Images have always possessed a sort of agency if considered from the perspective of the icon. Icons were appealing because they functioned as direct conduits between the here and now and the divine presence. Icons were bathed, kissed, and swaddled as if they were living presences. Icons and images were also destroyed specifically because they could be viewed as living, active, and in idolatrous competition with the divine. There is no tidy resolution. Art history may have something

to learn from anthropologist Alfred Gell, who notes: ‘I describe artefacts as “social agents” not because I wish to promulgate a form of material-culture mysticism, but only in view of the fact that objectification in artifact form is how social agency manifests and realizes itself, via the proliferation of fragments of “primary” intentional agents in their “secondary” artefactual forms.’ Gell goes on to frame ‘relational agency’, situating artifacts—and agencies—within a network of relationships and transactions. They are sometimes active and sometimes passive within these transactions, but transactional they remain.

That portraits take on such transactional properties in the early modern period, and that they might enact a sort of agency is not merely a twenty-first-century projection. Leon Battista Alberti noted in Book 2 of *On Painting and Sculpture* that ‘Painting contains a divine force which not only makes the absent present, as friendship is said to do, but moreover makes the dead seem almost alive’. It is worth noting that Alberti links the ‘divine force’ to painting, and not to the painter. In Joanna Woodall’s analysis of this text, she comments:

> In identifying the power of friendship with the divine power of naturalistic portraiture to make present someone who is absent in space or time, Alberti acknowledged the desire to overcome difference, separation, and ultimately death that lies at the heart of such work. And the friendship-like force that makes the absent present binds together not only the painting with the absent sitter, but also the beholder who takes pleasure in the perception of ‘life’ in a portrait and the painter who manages to create it.

The portrait makes the sitter present, toying with the beholder just as paintings of fluttering curtains tempt the viewer to reach out and touch the image, to pull the curtain back, in the long tradition of the battle of Zeuxis and Parrhasius. Images provoke the viewer to action.

What Gell and many of the respondents to and critics of his work have been less attentive to are the women-specific implications for the agency of objects. Elsje van Kessel has recently used Gell’s concept of the ‘art nexus’—the ambiguous and complex relationship between the thing

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28 Gell, ‘Things as Social Agents’, p. 339; see also Gell, *Art and Agency*. Critics and proponents of Gell have been prolific, and I would here point to volumes such as Van Eck, Van Gasteel, and van Kessel, *Secret Lives of Art Works*.


30 Woodall, *Anthonis Mor*, p. 16.
represented (prototype), the art object (index), the artist, and the recipient
(whether patron or audience)—to good effect in an early modern context,
and one that has significant implications for the study of the relationship
between women, representation, and agency specifically.\textsuperscript{31} She recounts
the experience of a painted portrait of Bianca Capello arriving in Venice:

In the twenty-first century, we think of paintings as objects quietly hang-
ing on the walls of our homes and offices, waiting patiently for someone
to throw a glance at them […] we hardly consider paintings as active
participants in social events; as persons we can talk to when they come to
visit. In sixteenth-century Venice, however, the situation was altogether
different. In June 1586, a painted portrait of Bianca Capello, daughter
of Venetian patricians and grand duchess of Tuscany, visited the doge.
On a Monday afternoon, the owner of the portrait, a certain Francesco
Bembo, took it to the Doge's Palace to show it to his head of state. All the
way through the palace it went, until it reached the doge's apartments.
Once the portrait of Bianca had arrived, it received lavish praise from all
people present [...]. When Venice's head of state and his guests went to
table, the portrait joined them [...] after the meal the old doge went to rest
and took the portrait with him [...] Later that day, the portrait moved to
another room in the palace, where it received visits by several dignitaries.\textsuperscript{32}

This anecdote, recounted in the letters of Francesco Bembo, demonstrates
an attitude towards the portrait that grants the object itself an agency that
borders on personhood, and in doing so, creates a precedent for other scholars
of early modern portraits to take seriously the affective agency of portrayals.
To step out even further from the object, in an early modern sense, we
might frame Gell's transactional agency as a relationship between parts of
a room, or the context in which an art object is viewed and thereby does its
work. There has been an increased interest in recent scholarship in sites of
display and the ways in which objects work together to create an impres-
sion or message that is more than the sum of its parts. Gail Feigenbaum,
for example, has written about how it was up to an attentive viewer to
weave together components of an ensemble within a domestic space into
a coherent (but ultimately independently created) image of the resident.
She notes that Roman palaces were ‘activated by the moving bodies and the
attention of residents and visitors.’ Further, the palace ‘operated in concert

\textsuperscript{31} Van Kessel, \textit{Lives of Paintings}, p. 21.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p. 11.
to convey multiple artistic, social and political messages that were in no sense random or casual, so that a beholder, while on the move [...] and with his own agenda to pursue, was also required to figure out what was intended by the display [...] the viewer is a collaborator without whom the display is incomplete [...]. Display unfolds in space in such a purposeful narrative of rank, honour, privilege, intimacy. The significance attached to the display of portraits—and the essential component display holds in constructing meaning—can even be found in early modern sources. Spanish writer and humanist Felipe de Guevara, speaking to Philip II of Spain, argued that ‘thus, the covered and hidden paintings are deprived of their value that consists of people’s eyes and judgements that men of good understanding and imagination make, which cannot be done if they are not in places where sometimes they can be seen by many’.34

One reason that this strikes us as so important is because it relocates the source of meaning from fundamentally contained within the painting to the liminal space between object, space, and viewer. The impact of the artwork is not dictatorial, but transactional. Therefore, the spaces in which objects are viewed—and the audiences by whom they were viewed—are essential components for understanding what it is that portraits were able to do, and for whom. In the same way that a colossal image of Constantine may take on specific functions by being viewed in the context of a court of law, so too would portraits in the early modern period take on specific agencies as they were viewed alongside other objects in specific spaces or contexts. That images in general and portraits specifically had the agency to alter the spaces that contained them was indeed clearly understood by the early modern viewer: in a letter to Elizabeth of Bohemia dated 30 March, 1623, Sir Thomas Roe, speaking of portraits of Elizabeth, wrote that ‘your picture here doth conquer hearts; [...] Every day wee honour them, they make my house a Court and my Chamber a presence’.35 The power of portraits to transform the spaces they contain gave particular potency to the creation and maintenance of portrait galleries by elite early modern women.36 Mencía de Mendoza, Marchioness of Zenete and widow of Hendrik III of Nassau, placed such value on her portrait collection that she took 75 paintings,

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34 Quoted and translated in García Perez, ‘Gender, Representation and Power’, p. 181.
35 Letter 295 in Akkerman, Correspondence of Elizabeth Stuart, p. 419. The implications for the power of portraits in the context of the patronage of Elizabeth of Bohemia were explored by Michele Frederik in her talk, “You will think I haue too warring a minde for my sexe”: Elizabeth Stuart and the Necessity of Patronage in Exile, College Art Association, New York, 2019.
36 Beranek, ‘Strategies of Display’.
many portraits, with her on a trip on the occasion of her sister’s wedding in 1533. Following her permanent relocation to Spain, she would also commission a library where she displayed no fewer than 22 portraits. As Noelia García Perez has argued, the selection of the portraits was deliberate, as was their display in a space intended specifically for diplomacy. The portraits emphasize her family line and her legitimacy as sole heir to her second husband. Moreover, displaying the portraits alongside her extensive library further framed particular aspects of the Marchioness’s public image. García Perez further notes that the portrait gallery tradition is one that Mencía adopted from Mary of Hungary, whom she both corresponded with and visited, as well as Mary’s predecessor, Margaret of Austria.

Van Kessel’s anecdote about the portrait of Bianca Capello certainly grants a living presence to the object, and it exerts a pull on those around it. That said, it remains an object at the whims of its (male) owners and viewers. How do such images fare when considered within an explicitly gendered paradigm? As van Kessel argues elsewhere, the portrait continued to act on behalf of the sitter in the sitter’s absence and aided in the construction of ‘Bianca Capello’ as a cultural construct within the collective consciousness of Venice—whether or not that was the intent of the sitter.

Between women: the agency of a miniature

Accounts of a soirée that took place in the Parisian dower house of Catherine de’ Medici in February 1580 provide a detailed glimpse into the significance of a small portrait in diplomatic discourse. Hosted by the Queen Mother, the soirée was specifically, while disingenuously, advertised as being offered simply for her ‘son and his wife’, not for the King (Henri III) and Queen (Louise of Lorraine) of France. Nevertheless, it had an agenda: one item was the ongoing negotiations for the marriage of Elizabeth I with a French prince. Among the guests, therefore, were the English ambassador to France, Sir Henry (Brooke) Cobham (previously posted to Madrid, Vienna, and elsewhere) and his wife, Anne (née Sutton). Anne was the widow of Walter

37 García Perez, ‘Gender, Representation and Power’, p. 185.
38 For the complete inventory of Mencía de Mendoza’s portrait collection in her library, see García Perez, ‘Gender, Representation and Power’, pp. 196–200.
39 Ibid., p. 186; The significance of Mary and Margaret’s portrait galleries has been more extensively explored by Eichberger and Beaven; See also the recent exhibition catalog: Haag, Eichberger, and Jordan-Gschwend, Women and the Art of Power, 2018.
Haddon, who had been attached to the courts of Edward VI and Mary I and was master of requests for Elizabeth I, and was therefore wise to courtly ways.

Remarkably, both Cobhams wrote descriptions of the event that were sent back to London.41 The evening involved welcomes, ascending a staircase, presentation to members of the royal family, dining, visiting diverse rooms, dancing, and watching a masque. Sir Henry’s account prioritized his concern over precedence, while Lady Cobham’s, significantly, focused on the role played by a portrait of Queen Elizabeth I, which presumably she carried on her person. As Lady Cobham’s itinerary differed, in part, from that of her husband, having two reports was essential and indicates, moreover, that what she experienced mattered.42

Several layers of female agency operate here. A woman wrote a letter relating her experience of a house built and decorated according to the wishes of another woman. Lady Cobham focuses in particular on her experience with a portrait of her queen, which she was under orders to present to Queen Mother Catherine de’ Medici. She, not her husband, is the agent who bears the portrait, which has its own power, as it represents her sovereign. Nevertheless, men intervened in the plan. Although Catherine de’ Medici had issued the invitation, she did not in the end attend the party, owing to illness. Lady Cobham eventually found herself talking to Henri III. The king asked her if he could see ‘the Queen’s picture’, about which his chamberlain has informed him. She replied, however, that she ‘had made a vow that the first that should see it should be his mother’. He pressed her, but, holding her ground, she offered that the ‘picture was excellent’ and demurred.

Many scholars have demonstrated how portraits circulated among early modern courts, often in conjunction with marriages. Peter Paul Rubens’s The Presentation of the Portrait (Paris: Louvre), from his cycle of images made for a gallery in Marie de Médicis’ Palais du Luxembourg, magnificently allegorized the effect that the exhibition of portraits of the betrothed was ideally to achieve, although in this case the agents are Hymen and Cupid, not mortal ambassadors. Ambassadorial reports and other texts make clear how portraits serve as catalysts for dialogue or action. Their initial presentation creates an event. Diplomats recorded monarchs and courtiers

42 Whitely, ‘Royal and Ducal Palaces’, p. 52. Christine de Pizan indicated in her life of Charles V of France that in the fifteenth century gatherings in mixed company were not the norm. By the late sixteenth century, the sexes mingled for part of the day.
giving, receiving, examining, and discussing them. These texts inform us that in their absence, portraits are objects of speculation, desire, and negotiation; in their presence, they evoke comment on their quality of execution or on the sitters themselves, often triggered by one viewer’s calling attention to a particular image or detail. Lady Cobham probably carried it on her person. Using the evidence of a number of portraits from this period, a miniature worn or carried could demonstrate paternity, as in the case of Bia de’ Medici, depicting the daughter of Cosimo I (Bronzino, Florence: Uffizi) or loyalty to a male relative, for example Juana de Austria, showing her allegiance to her brother Philip II (Alonso Sánchez Coello, Bilbao: Museo de Bellas Artes). While her letter provides no information about the artist and format, it might have been similar to a miniature by Nicholas Hilliard (Figure 9.1), who had spent time in France.
Figure 9.2: Sofonisba Anguissola, *Isabel de Valois holding a Portrait of Philip II*. Copyright ©Museo Nacional del Prado.
If worn as a locket, the cover must have been closed or the chain sufficiently long so that it could only be seen if the wearer permitted it. If Lady Cobham sported such a locket, it would have been quite deliberately provocative and also indicative of her, and by extension her monarch’s, power, being both evident and hidden. Miniatures were also carried—perhaps Lady Cobham had a pocket? In a portrait by Sofonisba Anguissola, Queen Isabel de Valois holds her husband’s image rather than wears it (Figure 9.2).

After dinner, Lady Cobham continued, ‘the queen called me to her in the presence of the king and desired to see the picture saying that I should not break my vow in showing it to her, because she was queen’. The king, having failed in his quest to obtain the portrait directly, enlists his wife’s cooperation: thus, the transaction remains one amongst women. What does this exchange tell us? In these marriage negotiations, Elizabeth I saw herself dealing with Catherine and not with the prospective bridegroom’s brother. Renata Ago has suggested, with regard to Italian noble families seeking to rise, that actions instigated by women put matters on a less official plane. Because Lady Cobham is the agent, is that what is happening here? A trial balloon? As such, it provides Elizabeth more wiggle room, a strategy she employed constantly at home when dealing with the marriage question.

Determining her best option, Lady Cobham capitulates, saying, ‘Thereupon I showed it to her [Queen Louise], and [as] she was looking at it, the king suddenly took it from her, so that it was well viewed by both’. So, Henri got his way and took over the dialogue. Their next exchange typifies the way in which portraits were discussed in this period. ‘The King said it was an excellent picture; the queen asked me if she were like it. I answered that she was’. As stated earlier, questions of likeness dominate discourse, but portraiture required something more: melding an individual to a position, representing a queen, not just an Elizabeth, and there lies the ever present paradox.

Lady Cobham’s next remark demonstrates how material portraits, moreover, stood in for their subjects: ‘I told them her Majesty had commanded that whenever I came in the presence of them both, I should wish her there’. The portrait itself was talismanic—it was presumed to represent her own agency. After further exchanges about the excellence of both queens, Lady Cobham continued: ‘If the queen, my mistress and your Majesty might meet, it then be truly said that two of the goodliest creatures and greatest queens in the world were together’. Queen Louise protested, saying that ‘as

43 Ago, *Carriere e clientele nella Roma barocca*, pp. 60–64.
appeared by the picture, it might be true of my mistress [i.e. Elizabeth], but not in respect of herself. This solidifies that the portrait must successfully represent a queen, and echoes an earlier exchange between the recently widowed French Queen Mary Stuart and Elizabeth’s ambassador Nicholas Throckmorton in 1560. In discussing a potential exchange of portraits between the two cousin queens, Mary employed similarly deprecating language, declaring her portrait ‘not worth the looking on’.

Both approaches cue the diplomat to make a reassuring complimentary remark. Lady Cobham parried, of course, declaring that Queen Louise ‘much resembled my mistress [...] so the Queen thanked me for the good opinion I had of her’. Here she channels the era’s ideology that women’s appearance, whether in person or as portrayed, projects their inner virtue. Queen Louise then raised the stakes, asking if Lady Cobham could ‘find it in her heart to part with the picture’. Lady Cobham managed to retain it by answering that ‘the greatest comfort which I have, being absent from my mistress, is to behold it’, which resulted in the queen’s giving way, acknowledging the quasi talismanic power of the portrait. What did this verbal, but not material, exchange, accomplish? If the portrait had actually been given, or if the exchange had occurred between men, not women, would it have meant a more serious acknowledgment of betrothal on the part of the bride? Did Lady Cobham’s coyness, aided by her possession of the portrait, reproduce Elizabeth’s way of deferring from a distance? Did Elizabeth plan this negotiation between women to permit a different degree of commitment than if Lady Cobham had presented the portrait directly to the King? Surely the significance would have changed if Sir Henry, the ambassador, had held it.

To return to the fête, Lady Cobham relates that a bit later King Henri III led some ladies to the hôtel’s gallery, where they looked at pictures. This episode does not figure in her husband’s account, so he probably did not accompany them. The gallery she described ran the length of the palace on the entry side. The postmortem inventory listed 39 portraits here—some individual, others double, depicting a total of 51 persons—of the French royal family, its connections by marriage, or would-be alliances.

44 Sir Nicholas Throckmorton had an audience with the recently widowed Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots. Upon hearing comments about Elizabeth from the French Ambassadors just returned from England, Mary said: ‘They all do greatly praise her, and say that she is both a wise and very fair lady; and because the one of us cannot see the other, I will send her my picture, though it be not worth the looking on, because you shall promise me that she shall send me hers’. Throckmorton replied, ‘You may be assured if you send her your picture she will send you hers’. Calendar of State Papers Foreign: Elizabeth, Volume 3, 1560–1561.
Then, as Lady Cobham related, ‘showing the pictures to the ladies, he [the King] called me to him and brought me to those of the King and Queen of Scots, asking if I had seen them. I said I had seen the King but the queen [Mary Stuart] never’. By king, she means Darnley, a regular at Elizabeth’s court before marrying the Scottish queen, after which he bore the kingly courtesy title. But as Mary Stuart was Henri’s former sister-in-law, he knew her likeness well. So why ask the question? Is it simply to make conversation, because Henri presumes that Lady Cobham, as representative of England, may have seen the subjects and could, following convention, comment on the likenesses? Probably he made this choice because, among all the portraits on display, this one provided an indirect means to continue discussion of the betrothal of his younger brother to Elizabeth. James VI and I had been born by this point, and Henri’s directing Lady Cobham’s attention to these portraits highlighted the fact that it as long as Elizabeth bore no children, it was Mary’s lineage that would sit on the throne of England and Scotland. Lady Cobham displayed her diplomatic skills by anticipating where the king was headed and not questioning his calling attention to these two portraits.

Henri next escorts Lady Cobham into an adjoining ‘very gallant chamber, richly hung round, where there stood a sumptuous bed. The King showed me there the picture of his father, which he said was very like him when he lived. I said it seemed by his picture he was a wise and valiant gentleman, which the king said was true’ (Figure 9.3).

This exchange further illustrates the dual nature of portrait discourse in the Renaissance: the image is at once likeness to someone familiar with the person and representative of virtue to someone who was not. This interchange also made indirect reference to the betrothal issue implying that Henri’s brother will resemble their father in wisdom and valor: like father, like son. The king kept moving, forestalling any continuing conversation on these topics.

These examples demonstrate the power of portraits, whether large or small, installed in a carefully orchestrated setting or portable, and therefore functioning as a prop to be manipulated, to inspire action. In addition, however, these cases also demonstrate the ability of the portrait to exert an almost independent agency of their own. In the cases of Bianca Capello, Amalia van Solms, Mencía de Mendoza and Lady Cobham discussed above, the portrait not only represents but also makes present its subject, sometimes in a very real and affective way. Approaching the study of early modern portraits of women with an attention to object agency, site specificity, and audience response expands our understanding of the portrait beyond traditional avenues of portrait analysis through artists’ style and iconography.
Figure 9.3: Circle of François Clouet, Henri II (Paris: Louvre).
Such a method thereby increases the proper context for understanding how portraits of women functioned within the arenas of power in early modern court culture.

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