The faces of the dead go on living

Robin Richmond reviews *Renaissance Faces: Van Eyck to Titian* at the National Gallery

It was the playwright Colin Welland who once described a roomful of Rembrandt portraits as "a roomful of holes". Looking at a great portrait does feel like falling deep into the chasm of another person's consciousness. It can be disconcerting, diverting, enchanting, and uncomfortable. This mixed salad of Northern and Southern European Renaissance portraits is all of the above.

Seeing the Annie Liebowitz photographs next door at the National Portrait gallery the day after this show made me think more about portraiture and quite convinced me that the time element inherent in the sitter being painted or sculpted does something unique – what even the very best photography cannot do. The *gestalt* of a portrait photograph, seized out of a continuum of time, tells us many things about the subject and photographer. It is, however, but one discreet moment – sometimes literally in a flash – and this show demonstrates that painting can do so much more.

Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1527?–1593)
The Emperor Rudolph II as Vertumnus
about 1590 © Skoklosters Castle (11615)
Photo Samuel Uhrdin

So time present and time past collide in the 21st century in a series of rooms in a basement on Trafalgar Square. The human gaze, immortalised in art, enables "the faces of the dead (to) go on living for a very long time", as Alberti, the 15th century chronicler, avows of his contemporaries. The man on the 19 bus on the way home from the National who screamed racist obscenities at a young woman (until he was mercifully stopped by us citizens) was a dead ringer for Andrea Solario's 1495 *Man with a Pink*, mouth grim and set, eyes dangerous and hostile.

The thrilling, newly–discovered Pontormo, *Portrait of Carlo Neroni*, was not unlike our hapless 19 bus driver, turning away from the confrontation, devoutly wishing he were somewhere else. Lorenzo Lotto's 1527 portrait of the Venetian connoisseur Andrea Odoni from the Queen's collection, could be a portrait of the late Gianni Versace – another voracious collector, if not exactly connoisseur, of antiquities.

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Piero di Cosimo
Giuliano and Francesco Giamberti da Sangallo architect and musician, about 1485
© Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Raphael's 1516 double portrait of the two friends Andrea Navagero and Agostino Beazzano, painted in the home of Pietro Bembo, Raphael's patron, in Padova, has the element of emotional clairvoyance. Bound in time, it predicts the future. The palpable disjunction in the double portrait – one sitter in blowsy, silken finery looking out of the picture in brazen arrogance; the other in sober simplicity, his head modestly tilted, foretells a problem. The two friends were to argue badly many years later.

The show divides itself up into seven categories; (Remembering; Identity, Attributes, Allegory; Courtship and friendship; Families; Love and Beauty; Drawings and Portraits of Rulers) and thus we are treated to a very wide and heterogeneous representation of these themes in each room. If there is a criticism of this show, which looks at both Northern and Southern European art and the cultural exchange between countries and their "schools", it is perhaps that there is no very strong narrative thread. The choice of artists thus seems somewhat expedient at times and even arbitrary, with a heavy use of the National's own collection. But nevertheless, the individual revelations make it more than worthwhile.

And there are many discoveries. Among them, the Sienese painter Domenico Beccafumi's incredibly expressionistic, modern-looking portrait of *A Bearded Man in Profile* (1527-8) might have been painted by Gustave Courbet on a very good day. It is surprisingly loose and free. The joy of seeing Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Old Man and his Grandson* from the Louvre (1490), re-united with its preparatory drawing now in Stockholm, is a juxtaposition that most curators die for and enriches the experience of looking at a much-loved and well- known painting. The drawing, probably done "from life" in front of the old man's corpse, and the posthumous painting of the imagined life of the man with his beloved grandchild, is a treat indeed.

Ghirlandaio, Michelangelo's mentor in youth, is a painter of enormous tenderness, even as he paints a literal "warts and all" portrait. The Rhinophyma, which disfigured the old man's face in a wild outbreak of knobby growths, gives the portrait an emotional depth and empathy that has no voyeurism in it.

Another happy reunion is that of the National Gallery's own Jan Van Eyck self-portrait, stern and achingly serious under his crazy red turban paired now for the first time with his later painting of his dauntingly severe wife Margaret, from the Groening museum in Bruges. This painting was later secured by the painter's guild in Bruges with five locks, the key to each kept by a different official – a reminder to us about where value truly resides in our sad, bad and mad times.

Renaissance Faces: Van Eyck to Titian is at the **National Gallery**, London, until 18 January.