



Portrait of a Woman, said to be of Simonetta Vespucci by Piero di Cosimo (c.1490) 57x42 cms. Condé Museum in Château de Chantilly, France. Google Art Project. Public Domain.

UNFREEZING TIME

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Conceived as a commemorative panel for private contemplation, this unsettling portrait has been converted into a commercial product that is on permanent display all over the world. Reproduced as prints, beach towels, coffee mugs and wall tiles, it is even marketed on the dial of a clock – an appropriate fate for an image that seems timeless yet is also a reminder of human mortality.

The original version hangs in an elegant château in Chantilly, but was painted in Florence by Piero di Cosimo, one of Renaissance Italy's most enigmatic artists. Although mocked by his contemporaries as an eccentric recluse, he was widely acclaimed for his portraits and became idolized by the Surrealist movement during the 1930s. Piero's paintings appear naturalistic, yet they often depict mythological scenes, and are imbued with concealed symbolism. Of all his works, this

is the most famous yet also the most puzzling. The stark contrast between the ethereal blond woman and the dark, undulating snake that encircles her neck has captivated viewers for over five hundred years. Nevertheless, the sitter's identity and the picture's encoded messages are still keenly debated.

Giorgio Vasari, the famous Italian art connoisseur and biographer, praised it as 'a very beautiful head of Cleopatra, with an asp wound round her neck.' He had leapt to this conclusion too easily: while a black snake is an omen of death, this one shows no intention of biting the woman's breast. Further confounding his iconographical expertise, there is another reason to doubt Vasari's judgement: the inscription across the bottom, which for some reason he overlooked. Painted to resemble engraved capitals, it stems from the tradition of Roman funerary sculpture and suggests immortality in the afterlife. According to this mock-carving, the young woman is SIMONETTA IANUENSIS VESPUCCI – but this is no straightforward portrait.

One clue lies in the word IANUENSIS, which carries a double meaning. Superficially, it refers to Genoa, where the real Simonetta Vespucci grew up. In a strategic alliance between two noble families, when she was sixteen she married the Florentine Marco Vespucci, a cousin of Amerigo Vespucci, the navigator who gave his name to America. Her maiden name of Cattaneo is referred to by her necklace – *catena* is Italian for chain. Renowned for her beauty, she is often said to have been Sandro Botticelli's favourite model.

Simonetta Vespucci was also regarded as the platonic mistress of Giuliano de' Medici, the younger brother of Lorenzo. He once rode into a spectacular jousting tournament carrying a large banner immortalising her as Pallas Athene, the Greek god of wisdom. Women given this role performed as muses rather than sexual partners, so that portraits did not necessarily provide an exact likeness, but were instead designed to preserve their memory. Following the latest aristocratic fashion for a married woman, her forehead has been shaved, while her long blond hair has been plaited into an elaborate coiffure decorated with expensive jewels and a net of giant pearls called a *vespaio* (like a wasp), an allusion to her married name, Vespucci.

Simonetta Vespucci was only twenty-three when she died from consumption on Easter Sunday 1476. As part of a massive public funeral, mourners traversed the city carrying her body in an open coffin; subsequently, several poets wrote lyrical verses hymning her beauty and purity. Her father-in-law gave all her dresses and other portraits to Giuliano de' Medici, but he died precisely two years later, a portentous interval that symbolically sealed their platonic union.

As if art could defeat death, Piero's portrait outlives her brief human incarnation. Only fourteen when she died, he could hardly have painted a true likeness. This panel may have been commissioned by Lorenzo de' Medici as a resurrection of her memory when her niece got married. Rather than representing a living, vibrant woman, this Simonetta is an idealised marmoreal vision, portrayed in sharp profile like a head on a commemorative coin or medal. Her early death is presaged by the dark clouds lowering in the sky behind her and the withered tree at the left-hand edge.

As well as signifying Genoa, Vespucci's middle name of IANUENSIS points to further ways in which this picture is suffused with references to time and commemoration. The neat pun alludes to Janus, the two-faced God associated with the month of January who marks new beginnings but also looks back towards the past. The years roll continuously by, just as the symbolic snake looped through the woman's chain writhes endlessly around her neck; this ancient symbol is known as an ouroboros from the Greek for tail-devouring. Ambiguously, snakes herald death, but also embody renewal because they shed their skin.

Many aeons ago, Janus reigned with Saturn over the region that later became the city of Rome. Mythologically, this was a Golden Age of peace and abundance, celebrated every December during Saturnalia, the most important Roman festival. In a bizarre etymological confusion, because Saturn was known in Greek as Kronos he became conflated with Chronos, the god of time. For around two thousand years, Saturn has also been associated with the circular sign of a serpent or a dragon biting its own tail. Dating back to the ancient Egyptians, by the Renaissance the oroboros had become a well-established alchemical and artistic symbol representing eternal renewal, the cycle of life, death and rebirth.

Perpetually hovering between the real and the imagined, this cryptic young woman has been frozen in time but endures eternally. As Petrarch wrote about Laura, his own unattainable, imaginary ideal. 'Death itself seemed beautiful in her lovely face.'

Main sources and further reading

Dennis Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo: Visions Beautiful and Strange* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 48–75.

Norbert Schneider, *The Art of the Portrait: Masterpieces of European Portrait-Painting, 1420–1670* (Cologne: Taschen, 1994), pp. 62–3.

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