

# A Venerable Mystery: Strozzi's Head of an Old Woman



*Head of an Old Woman*, Bernardo Strozzi, 1620s, oil on canvas, 48.3 x 38.8 cm. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

## Transcript

Hello and welcome to this week's Tuesday Talk, part of a series of podcasts given by staff and students at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, art gallery and concert hall on the University of Birmingham's Edgbaston Campus. My name is Becca Randle, Learning & Engagement Coordinator at the Barber. Today I'm going to be talking about a striking painting in the collection and one of my favourites, *Head of an Old Woman* by the Italian artist Bernardo Strozzi (1581-1644).

Depictions of women in historic art collections often conform to a type and, in my view, are not always the most inspiring role models. This portrait, however, is beautifully soulful and, for me, full of mystery. Strozzi's *Head of an Old Woman* is a portrait of an elderly lady. Her heavy red eyelids penetrate the viewer, her sunken cheekbones are prominent, and her wiry grey hair is brushed back. Intense light shines on her face silhouetting her against a dark background making for an arresting image. She wears a modest dark brown shawl a white cotton dress, and a delicate gold chain, just visible. Touches of ochre suggest the light catching the folds of her clothing. She looks out at us with a directness and candour yet with a tender and soft expression. She is elderly but not necessarily vulnerable. Her face is unapologetically realistic, and definition is added through the use of *chiaroscuro*, an effect of contrasted light and shadow. She certainly evokes a compassionate response from the viewer.

Strozzi was born to poor parents in 1581 in Genoa; he remained there until moving permanently to Venice in 1631. He studied briefly with the artist Cesare Corte before being sent by his mother to train with Pietro Sorri, a Siennese painter who worked in Genoa from 1595-97. He was influenced by the work of Tuscan and Milanese artists painting in Genoa at the time. From these artists Strozzi adopted techniques such as the use of brown varnish to deepen shadows and enhance and soften areas of light, which may have been used in the Barber's work. In the 1620s, Strozzi's style became more naturalistic, influenced heavily by Caravaggio. He may have seen works by Caravaggio on a visit to Rome in 1615, or paintings by the master's followers who worked in Genoa. In the same period, Rubens, who visited Genoa, also influenced Strozzi's use of colour. Strozzi was both prolific and successful and today is considered one of the leading Genoese painters of the seventeenth century, his style bold and distinctive. The style of this portrait however is unusual within his work, leading me to wonder, who was she and why did Strozzi paint her?

Strozzi did paint portraits and other figures, but very few subjects were elderly. Apart from images of saints, he depicted the wealthy gentlemen or ladies who were his patrons. In these commissioned portraits, sitters' rich attire reference their high status, in contrast to our sitter, who represents the ordinary person in society, dressed modestly. So it's almost certainly not a commissioned portrait. Paintings such as this were often called character studies, painted by artists from a model as exercises in representing character or expression. These studies would

then be re-employed in large paintings depicting religious or mythological scenes or history paintings. Most of Strozzi's paintings were of such scenes, featuring multiple figures.

I did find one similar example, in 1628-30, Strozzi painted the *Portrait of a Young Woman with a Pearl Earring*, now in a private collection. Although not an elderly woman, the sitter glares out of the frame, meeting the viewer with a similar intensity to the Barber's picture, and is enveloped by the characteristic darkness. Considered to have been painted from life, when this work was for sale at Sotheby's in 2014, the catalogue entry explained that this portrait is an indication of a lesser-known type of work that Strozzi 'must have done but which rarely seems to have survived'.

We do see an elderly lady in *Old Woman in the Mirror* of 1615, in the Pushkin Museum, Moscow. However, she appears very different from the Barber's portrait, ravaged by old age with breasts exposed, almost grotesque. This character appears in the background of other paintings by Strozzi, such as *The Healing of Tobit*, Cleveland art Museum and *The Alms of Saint Lorenzo*, in the Hermitage, Saint Petersburg. This elderly woman is nothing like the respectfully depicted and tender woman we see in the Barber's portrait. So, if she wasn't a character study for a larger painting, and she didn't commission this portrait then who was she? Could his sensitivity and courteous depiction indicate that she was someone Strozzi knew personally?

After training to be a painter, Strozzi became a Capuchin monk in a monastery at San Barnaba, Genoa. He joined the order as a novice in 1599 and in 1600 became a Brother. He was known as il Cappuccino. Here, he made devotional paintings, particularly of Saint Francis. These works are described as having had shadowy backgrounds and featuring saints in the foreground that 'make a strong and emotional appeal' to the viewer. Perhaps Strozzi's artistic engagement with and depiction of, the emotion of saints, had an impact upon how he would approach later works of seemingly more ordinary people, such as in our portrait. In 1609/10, Strozzi was given permission to leave the monastery to support his ailing and widowed mother and unmarried sister. He resumed painting full time whilst supporting his family with the money he made from his commissions. After 20 years of his care in Genoa, Strozzi's mother died in 1630. Subsequently Strozzi was obligated to return to the monastery, but he refused. His only options were imprisonment or to flee. Strozzi, rumoured to have been in disguise, escaped to Venice. Over the years, he was granted protection there, where he excelled professionally. He painted local nobles in a style influenced by the luminosity of Veronese. He was later joined by his newly married sister and her husband. Strozzi died in Venice in 1644 after becoming a much-celebrated artist.

The Barber's *Head of an Old Woman* was painted in the years in Strozzi's life when he was close to his elderly mother. Is it possible that this unusual portrait, full of tenderness and warmth, could have been of her? Perhaps Strozzi had intended to create a character study by having his

mother sit for him, but his own vision of who she was shone through. Or, perhaps this was a personal piece? I can imagine them sitting together, reunited at the end of her life, while he painted her in candlelight. We can't know if this nostalgic scene ever happened. Still, the resolve in this woman's eyes, despite the darkness enveloping her, has always stuck with me in this picture that so powerfully conveys the dignity of old age.

Thank you very much for listening and thank you to Jack Davies for composing and playing the guitar music that introduces and ends these weekly talks. There will be another talk next week by one of my colleagues, so please do come back then if you would like to hear more.

## **Further Reading**

**The Healing of Tobit**, about 1625. The Cleveland Museum of Art

**Old Woman at the Mirror**, about 1615. Pushkin Museum, Moscow

Rosand, David, and Ellen Rosand. “Barbara Di Santa Sofia” and “Il Prete Genovese”: On the Identity of a Portrait by Bernardo Strozzi.’ *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 63, no. 2, 1981, pp. 249–58.

JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/3050115](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3050115)

Chong, Alan. ‘Bernardo Strozzi: “The Healing of Tobit.”’ *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, vol. 80, no. 4, 1993, pp. 154–57. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/25161405](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25161405)

Banta, Andaleeb Badiee. ‘Trials and Tribulations: New Documentary Evidence for Bernardo Strozzi in Genoa.’ *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 151, no. 1270, 2009, pp. 14–18.

JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/40480016](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40480016).

## **Speaker Info**

Becca Randle joined the Barber Institute of Fine Arts as Learning and Engagement Coordinator in 2016. She works on a variety of projects including contributing to the teaching of modules for University of Birmingham undergraduate courses, the production of learning resources, workshops and public events. She programmes and delivers the Barber's young people's programme, the Barber Collective and coordinates volunteers, guides and freelance artist educators.

Having recently completed a postgraduate degree in Museum and Gallery Education at University College London, Becca's research interests include the pedagogical and social function of the museum and art gallery. Particularly, foregrounding hidden histories such as colonial legacies in collections through creative collaborative working practices.

Becca is also a West Midlands Area Representative for Engage, the National Association of Gallery Education. Prior to the Barber, Becca worked at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, as well as in community arts and alternative educational provision for young people.

## **Music**

Music composed and performed by Jack Davies.