

Barbara Lydecker Crane

Marie de Valengin

*Portrait of a Lady, c. 1460, by Rogier van der Weyden
(c.1400-1464); Brussels, Belgium*

Something brewed beneath her cool remove
when she sat down and held her body still
as I began to paint. “Père won’t approve,”
she murmured, tightly clasping hands. “What will
my father do? I want to be a nun.”
With that, she dipped her head as if in prayer.
Her père, the Duke of Burgundy, isn’t one
to pass the chance for an amorous affair.
Outside of marriage he has sired plenty;
Marie is one. At court he’s schooled her well
and cossets her with jewels. But now, at twenty,
she fears her future as a demoiselle —
a cunning figure paired with charming face.
I’ve seen her dodge her father’s fond embrace.

Rivals

Self-Portrait, 1506, by Raphael (1483-1520); Urbino, Italy

I hope my languid eyes will draw your gaze
to my simple composition of chestnut, umber,
and black; against the dark my pale flesh plays
in subtle shadows. There's nothing to encumber
or embellish my likeness or my skill.
I'm only twenty-three, and have already
been awarded large commissions that fill
my pockets. And to fill my bed, a steady
stream of women. I'm nearly sure I've more
of them than he, whose name I will not say.
How well he sculpts and paints, I can't ignore —
so well, I wish he'd fade away today.
David, a marvel, lives and breathes in stone —
as I do here in paint. We stand alone.

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Imagining Caleb

Portrait of Caleb Cheeshahtaumuck, 2010,
by Stephen E. Coit (b.1948), Cambridge, MA, U.S.

Precious few at Harvard looked like him,
with skin nut-brown, hair poker-straight and black.
I paint this Wampanoag stern and grim
but proud in his academic gown. At his back,
a map of Martha's Vineyard he likely drew,
his island home. He must have felt defined
by autumn harvest feasts, by hunts on snowshoes,
by April herring, by summer berry wine.
Did Caleb plan that someday he'd return
and, like his father, be a chief? Would one
so learned, schooled in church and classics, earn
respect or scorn in the tribe where he'd begun?
He never knew. He took a room near here
and perished of TB within the year.