

A 'Turkish Slave' or Poet? Visitors to Frick Can Decide

BY JENNIFER CLARK

MOVE OVER, "Girl With a Pearl Earring." There's a new mystery lady in town. The "Turkish Slave," by Italian master portraitist Parmigianino, goes on view at New York's Frick Collection starting Tuesday.

While "Turkish Slave" isn't as famous as the Johannes Vermeer masterpiece that drew record-breaking crowds to the Frick late last year, Parmigianino's 16th-century mystery woman may have become more intriguing, due to a fresh interpretation of her identity put forth by the exhibition's curator.

The portrait—on loan from the Galleria Nazionale in Parma, Italy—will make its U.S. debut at the Frick's show, "The Poetry of Parmigianino's 'Schiava Turca,'" until July 20, before traveling to San Francisco's Legion of Honor fine arts museum.

"Girl With a Pearl Earring," showing an unknown young woman, drew some 235,000 people when it was shown at the Frick last year, sending membership soaring.

The Frick is hoping that "Slave" will also pull in people who aren't regular visitors. The painting is an icon in Parmigianino's hometown of Parma, fascinating viewers for centuries because of the magnetism with which the painter endows his subject and the lingering mystery of her true identity, art experts say. Together with "Slave" the Frick is showing the artist's "Portrait of a Man" from 1527-31, on loan from a private collection.

Like the Mona Lisa, the "Turkish Slave" looks di-

rectly at the viewer from across the centuries. But unlike Leonardo da Vinci's enigmatic lady, this young woman's gaze leaves little to the imagination.

Some people would have called it a "come hither" look," said David Ekserdjian, author of the book "Parmigianino" and professor of art history at the University of Leicester.

Born in Parma in 1503 and nicknamed after his native city, Francesco Mazzola was born into the generation of painters that followed Renaissance titans Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael. But he veered away from their classicism to establish a fresh approach later dubbed Mannerism, from the Italian *di maniera*, or style.

Two painter uncles raised Parmigianino, who was orphaned at the age of 2. Parmigianino demonstrated precocious skills in helping them complete their commissions. He moved to Rome in 1524, where he presented his "Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror." This striking "selfie" won him immediate attention for its clever use of optical illusion as well as his startling youth, earning him the moniker "Raphael Reborn." Portraiture soon became his signature work.

Painted sometime after 1531, the "Turkish Slave" was registered for the first time in 1675-1676 in the inventory of Cardinal Leopoldo de' Medici as a "portrait of a young woman with a turban on her head." The turban, along with gold chains embellishing her sleeve, suggested a woman in captivity, but her identity puzzled experts for centuries. For instance, many art historians have argued that her headdress is actually a straw hat called a "balzo," a head covering then common for Italian noblewomen.

"She is neither Turkish nor a slave," said Mariella Utili, who runs Parma's Galleria Nazionale.

Art historians also point to the small image of Pegasus, the winged horse of Greek myth, adorning the sitter's "turban" as a key. Given the sitter's active pose, the link between Pegasus as a symbol of the imagination, and the popularity of female poets in Renaissance Italy, Aimee Ng, who is curating the Frick show, argues the sitter was a poet or was being depicted as one.

"The Pegasus on her head shows it is striking poetic inspiration right then and there," Ms. Ng said.

Others suggest the woman is a member of the Baiardo family, important patrons of Parmigianino.

But the question is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. "Unless you regard these works as crossword-puzzle clues that have to have an answer, there is something attractive about not knowing," said Mr. Ekserdjian.



Galleria Nazionale di Parma/Scala/Art Resource, NY

WHAT'S MY LINE?

Parmigianino's 'Turkish Slave' will be in New York.