

# DIGITAL AGNES

Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University  
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## Interpreting historical portraits

*Agnes Learns*

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### SPEAKERS

Sarah Tomkins

### KEYWORDS

Agnes Learns, Grade 9–12, School Resource, Historical Art, Portraiture, Painting

### FEATURED WORKS

Unknown artist, *Portrait of a Woman*, around 1625, oil on canvas. Gift of Isabel Bader, 2021

### TRANSCRIPT

**Sarah Tomkins:** The study of art history isn't like the *Da Vinci Code*. We art historians are rarely dashing around solving dangerous mysteries and using clues to uncover century-old secrets. But that doesn't mean that art history is dry or boring at all. Rather, it's a way that we use clues and information to uncover truths about people who lived before us. Many of us think that portraits might be the driest genre of all. "Who cares about a portrait of someone dead for 500 years?" we might ask ourselves. But portraits are often where the juiciest tidbits of information can be revealed, as long as you know where to look for them. Today, we're going to be looking at this Dutch *Portrait of a Woman*, done around 1625. The artist and woman are no longer known, but using clues that we see in her clothing and accessories we might figure out who she could be, and why this portrait exists.

Let's look through some of these clues together. First, let's consider that portraits weren't for everyone, you could only get one done if you were wealthy. Even then, they were often only done for special occasions. The first thing that stands out to me is her outfit. It might seem outrageous now, but it's quite high fashion for the time! Her collar is very expensive. Those lace scallops are likely from Venice, in a region called Burano. The thin, translucent material could not be purchased or made in her Dutch region and is instead probably from very far away, likely India. Many Dutch women at the time were wearing much softer collars, but hers might stand upright to show off these expensive materials. This collar is called a Medici collar. Her gown is referred to as a round gown, rather than an open-fronted gown, which was reserved for married women. At the time, married and unmarried women dressed quite differently to show the world their status. The bright beads on her dress are made from coral, a material harvested in the Mediterranean, and typically worn by younger women and children, signs of both fertility, and warding off diseases. Her jewelry has very expensive gold and gems, materials that likely would have come from the continent of Africa, perhaps one of the areas the Dutch were occupying.

Now we can use our art historian skills to find out the meaning of this work. This woman's clothing and jewelry are being used to emphasize the wealth of her family, her fashionable figure and her youth. This leads us to think that this is a betrothal portrait. Nobility often married other nobility, sometimes outside of their own country and government. These were betrothals where those being arranged often didn't even get to see what the other looked like! Portraits were a great tool to send abroad and use as a picture to assure your betrothed that you were not, in fact, old, scarred or undesirable. In a period of disease and royal lineages, this was a concern.

Here, our portrait artist is showing off this woman's best traits: her youth, her fertility, her style and her riches, making sure her beloved could perceive her in the most desirable light. Today we have learned how art historians use context and clues to understand the meaning and purpose of paintings, and how the wealthy might choose how to represent themselves in these works. They are somewhat of a photoshopped selfie of 400 years ago, a snapshot into what we might have understood to be our best features.