

ARTH 220 – Fall 2025

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Metropolitan Museum Assignment

**REQUIRED Question 1**

**In 1-2 paragraphs, compare how the paint “sits” on the surface of each. Cite at least 2-3 specific paintings. Can you see brushstrokes? Can you see the texture of the support? What impact does the support have on the appearance of the painting?**



In *Carlo Rimbotti* by Francesco Salviati, the oil paint behaves differently than it does on the other supports in Gallery 640 because the portrait is painted on a wood panel. The surface appears smooth and firm. The wood absorbs paint evenly, so the strokes lie close to the surface, creating an overall refinement and stability. In the picture I took of the back, you can actually see the grain of the plank. Salviati creates fine lines around the sitter’s facial hair and subtle shadows around the nose and eyes without the paint sinking or feathering. There is very little surface texture visible, the effect is a calm, measured portrait whose precision matches Rimbotti’s serious, almost intellectual presence.



In *Ingres as a Young Man*, the paint “sits” very differently because it is applied to canvas. I can see the woven texture of the canvas below the paint, especially in the dark areas of his coat and background. Even in the photos I took, the faint grid of the canvas weave slightly interrupts the smoothness of the pigments. I think that because canvas is flexible and not rigid like wood, it gives the paint a softer quality. The brushstrokes here are smoother and more blended than in Salviati’s portrait, yet they never achieve the glassy perfection of a copper support. The chiaroscuro in the young man’s face, especially around his eyes and neck, feel more hazy because the paint sits atop a textured, absorbent fabric. He feels close, warm, and present, as if the softness of the support brings him a little more to life.



Carlo Cignani's *Charity*, painted on copper, behaves in an entirely different way than the previous paintings because copper provides a non-absorbent, almost mirror-smooth surface, and the paint responds by resting on top in a thin, luminous layer. This helps the artist achieve an enamel-like finish, where the brushstrokes become nearly invisible. In my photos, I can see how the highlights on the figures' skin glow more sharply than on either wood or canvas, almost as if lit from within. The colors appear richer and deeper because light reflects off the metal beneath the paint. Nothing sinks into the support the way paint sinks into wood or canvas; instead, it glides across the surface. The result is a kind of visual luxury, a shimmering, precious-object quality that makes the painting stand apart in the gallery.

## REQUIRED Question 2

Look at each portrait in the room. Then, in 1-2 paragraphs, make a case for one as the best portrait in the room.



Among all the portraits in Gallery 602, the one that stood out as the strongest for me was Pier del Pollaiuolo's *Portrait of a Woman*. What makes it so compelling to me is the delicate balance between idealization and individuality: she is presented in the strict Florentine profile format, yet her features are so particular such as the slight bump on her nose, a slight overbite that accentuates her upper lip, her heavy eyelids, and her tiny ears, that she feels unmistakably like a real person (to me she actually kind of looks like this actress named Romola Garai). She is defined almost entirely through the elegance of her silhouette and the exquisite details of her hair, jewelry, and clothing. The fine tempera lines in her hair and the precise rendering of the pearl and ruby necklace and her garments all demonstrate Pollaiuolo's technical refinement, and they also speak to her social identity. The background is a flat, unmodulated blue, which keeps our focus entirely on her profile, with the faint glow of her cheek, the careful structure of her hairstyle. She feels simultaneously idealized and distinctly "herself," making this portrait one of the most memorable in this room.

### **REQUIRED Question 3**

**Think of a gallery as a visual argument, or a persuasive essay. Curators add wall text to explain their “thesis,” and then they support the thesis with the works shown in the gallery. On the long block of Introductory wall text, “Sacred Images and the Viewer” it reads: “Around 1500, religious painting in Italy underwent a major shift.” Then the wall text lists several changes, such as**

- (1) a move toward single, large paintings rather than polyptychs (many smaller paintings combined),**
- (2) compositions that connect to viewers and reach beyond the border of the painting,**
- (3) sacred figures are transformed into “grand entities.”**

**Bold statements like these require support. How do the paintings in this gallery provide that support? In 1-2 paragraphs, for each of the three points listed above, choose at least one painting that supports the point. Describe how your chosen works demonstrate the ca. 1500 shift the curators describe.**

I think that Bugiardini’s *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints* is an ideal example of the major shift of Italian religious paintings because it embodies all three claims. First, the painting demonstrates the move away from polyptychs into single, unified large panels. Here, Bugiardini brings them all into one continuous architectural space, painted on a single wooden support. The entire composition creates one grand visual argument, without narrative fragments. The architectural setting behind the Madonna (the columns, arches, and throne) reinforces this unity, functioning like a stage that gathers every figure into a single cohesive world. This format reflects the Renaissance desire for harmony and oneness, rather than medieval compartmentalization.

Second, the painting reflects the shift toward compositions that connect to the viewer and reach beyond the border. Although the figures sit in a stable pyramidal structure, their scale and presence create a sense that they occupy the same spatial world as the viewer. Bugiardini uses linear perspective in the tiles and architectural elements, which pull the eye back into the space and make the saints feel physically present rather than symbolic or distant. The Madonna’s

throne is oriented directly toward us, and the saints flank her in a way that opens the composition outward, almost inviting the viewer into their company. The carefully rendered steps and the strong verticals of the architecture act like a bridge between sacred space and the viewer's space.

Finally, the painting exemplifies the transformation of sacred figures into “grand entities.” The Madonna sits high on an elaborate throne, and her body has the solid, sculptural presence associated with classical ideals. The saints on either side, Mary Magdalen and John the Baptist, are similarly idealized, tall, harmonious, and dignified. They occupy their space with a commanding presence that asserts their spiritual authority.

### OPTIONAL Question 1



**Before you leave Gallery 601, find the *Madonna and Child* by Paolo di Giovanni Fei (41.190.13). It's on the same wall as the entry doors. You'll know you've found the right one when you see a baby nursing from what looks like a balloon attached to Mary's shoulder. (There are theological reasons.) They are both staring at you and it all feels awkward. Make it more awkward and take a picture on your phone. In a paragraph, compare the photo on your phone to the painting in real life.**

When I compare the photo on my phone to the actual painting in Gallery 601, the difference is almost startling. On my Android screen, Fei's *Madonna and Child* looks flatter, brighter, and strangely harsher, the gold ground appears like a smooth, uniform yellow, and the awkward nursing gesture becomes almost cartoonish, rather than a physical object meant for

devotion. The scale is impossible to feel from my photos. Standing in front of the painting, the surface becomes alive with shifting light. As I move, reflections of light reveal tiny patterns of punchwork and the soft red bole glowing beneath the gold. The medallion holding Mary's robe and the jewels in the frame shine in a way my phone could never capture. The photo makes them appear so flat and dull, but in person they sparkle like little windows of colored light. Seeing the painting respond to the changing light in the gallery made me feel the devotional function of the object. It wasn't meant to be viewed once or quickly, but to be contemplated and returned to.

#### **OPTIONAL Question 4**

**Find Petrus Christus's *Portrait of a Carthusian Monk* (49.7.19). When textbooks and critics write about this painting, they discuss the 'birth of the individual' in Western Art. What do they mean? How does this painting show an individual person in a way that's new in the Renaissance? Why is this individuality possible or desirable for Petrus Christus ca. 1450?**



Standing in front of Petrus Christus's *Portrait of a Carthusian*, I began to understand why it is often cited as marking the "birth of the individual" in Western art. I feel like it truly tries to capture an individual person rather than a type. The museum label notes that Christus places the monk "in the corner of a warmly illuminated room," which makes him appear present and

grounded, not symbolic or distant. His features are so carefully rendered that he seems lost in his own thoughts, gazing into something beyond us. I especially loved the tiny fly painted on the illusionistic frame, which both shows off Christus's realism and quietly bridges the space between our world and that of the Carthusian monk's. It feels like the fly belongs in our space, which makes the monk feel closer too. Flies can also hint at mortality, something a Carthusian monk might meditate on every day, so even that tiny detail deepens the sense of individuality. Instead of flattening him into a religious symbol, Christus gives us a man with a private inner life, a moment that truly signals the "birth of the individual" in Renaissance art.