

S P H I N X F I N E A R T



Florentine School, Seventeenth Century

A Portrait of a Noblewoman with a Lace Collar

oil on canvas
42 x 32.3 cm (16½ x 12¾ in)

In *A Portrait of a Noblewoman with a Lace Collar*, a middle-aged woman, painted against a stark background, stares calmly out at the viewer. This bust-length portrait tells the viewer that we are looking at a noblewoman of some standing. Her magnificently opulent collar dominates the painting due, not only to its size, but also because of the magnificent lace detailing. The spider's web of intricate swirls and patterns are loosely painted in white and grey. The looseness of the brushwork helps to create a sense of the transparency and delicacy of the layers of lace.

The noblewoman's face is an idealised one, without blemish and perfectly smooth. The muted red of her lips and cheeks bring a little colour to her pale complexion. She looks directly out at the viewer, not aggressively but certainly with the understated authority and confidence of an important woman. In her carefully styled auburn hair is a star shaped brooch and two other pieces of jewellery and from her ear hangs a large pearl earring.

The portrait has mostly been painted in a restricted and muted palette of greens, browns and reds. This, together with the lack of strong, precise line, unifies the whole work and blurs the boundaries between the different parts of the painting, a technique which is especially effective in capturing the layers of the collar.

Carlo Dolci was probably the leading exponent of portrait painting in Florence during the seventeenth century. If we look at his portrait of [*Sir John Finch*](#) there are interesting comparisons to be drawn between it and *A Portrait of a Noblewoman with a Lace Collar*. In 1665 Finch had been made English Ambassador at the court of the Grand Duke of Tuscany and Dolci represents him as such, placing in his hand an Italian document addressed to the Grand Duke. The most noticeable similarity between the two works is the way that Dolci has also used a restricted and muted palette. This helps create a similar effect of the figure blending into the background. There is also a comparable interest in the delicate detailing of Finch's cravat, and in the treatment of the noblewoman's lace collar. However, whereas the detailing in *A Portrait of a Noblewoman with a Lace Collar* is painted with quick, loose brushstrokes, Dolci's approach is more deliberate in style. Neither portrait is overly opulent, rather the sitters' standing is suggested through elements such as elegant clothing, the lady's jewellery, or Finch's letter, which act as indicators of who they are, and both portraits share the same themes of subtle but undoubted elegance and unified colour.