

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*, an attractive, youthful, noblewoman, painted against a stark background, stares calmly out at the viewer. This bust-length portrait tells the viewer that we are looking at a lady of some standing. Her magnificently opulent collar dominates the painting due, not only to its size, but also because of the elaborate lace detailing. The spider's web of intricate swirls and patterns are loosely painted in white and grey. The delicate brushwork helps to create the fragile nature of lace.

The noblewoman's face is an idealised one, soft and without blemish. The muted red of her lips and cheeks bring touches of 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 left ear hangs a large pearl earring.

The portrait has been painted for the most part in a restricted and subdued 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.

This portrait is dominated by the statement of sophistication and class, which is made by the exquisite collar, elegant headdress and carefully coiffured hair, and this focus on the elaborate costume of the sitter is very much a feature of the portraiture of the period. For example Santi di



Florentine School, *A Portrait of a Noblewoman with a Lace Collar* (Detail)



Santi di Tito, *Portrait of Maria de' Medici*, c.1601, Palazzo Pitti, Florence (Figure 1) (Detail)

Tito's (1536-1602) *Portrait of Maria de' Medici* is a brilliant depiction of sumptuous materials and textures (fig. 1). The style and fashions evident in de' Medici's head and shoulders are comparable to those that are such a crucial part of *A Portrait of a Noblewoman with a Lace Collar*. Both figures have finely painted, intricately patterned and almost transparent collars. Like the woman in the present work, de' Medici has a similarly pale complexion, animated by the red hue of her cheeks and lips. Both women have thick hair which is tightly pulled back and styled in a manner according to contemporary fashion. De' Medici's headdress is more elaborate than the one in the present work, but they are both made up of similar jewellery, which is echoed by the single pearl earrings both women wear. As daughter to the Grand Duke of Tuscany, de' Medici would have been at the forefront of Florentine fashionable society and clearly this is the sort of status which would have been suggested to a contemporary viewer of *A Portrait of a Noblewoman with a Lace Collar*. For an artist this type of costume and style obviously provided an appealing challenge due to the variety of materials, so that the delicacy of the lace is contrasted with the glint of light off jewellery.

