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Body Building:
The Fabrication of the Masculine Body in Renaissance Portraiture

Tatiana C. String

Summary: Artistic representations of the male body in early modern Europe were sites of idea-driven invention and heavily theorized formulations; this was especially true for portraits, which were high-stakes enterprises that took no chances with the articulation and projection of calculated messages. In works of art such as Hans Holbein’s Whitehall depiction of Henry VIII, the male body was arguably a confection of masculinity-bearing parts; in other instances — Bronzino’s portrayals of Cosimo I as Orpheus and Andrea Doria as Neptune/Odysseus — the ideal body, in the form of recognizable, classical sculptures was mapped onto the portrait wholecloth. This article explores the ways in which contemporary discourses of masculinity were central to the bodily configurations, repeated postures, intervisual quotations, and the ‘wearing’ of the classical nude in early modern portraits. Portraits by Bronzino, Antonis Mor, Hans Eworth, and Robert Peake are interrogated for their insistently gendered content and artistic solutions to the representation of the masculine body.

This chapter focuses on the discourses of masculinity and the associated norms and ideals projected in and through early modern portraiture. It argues for the particular explanatory value of gendered readings of Renaissance portraits of men, images intended, to a great extent, to signify qualities of ideal manhood. That is to say, templates were established for the construction of ideal masculine bodies in portraits that deployed established formulae for the representation of men. Portraits were an optimal, or, perhaps the optimal, opportunity to solidify ideas and to fashion something that constantly and continuously performed those ideas. By the sixteenth century, portraits were typically set in long galleries and in other semi-public spaces of houses,
villas, and palaces for other people, especially men, to view and set store by.\(^1\) Of particular relevance here is Bourdieu’s notion of ‘a man among men,’\(^2\) in which a man is constantly viewed against a field of male values and behaviours. Although formulated with respect to twentieth-century conditions, this dictum can arguably be applied to the man-centred culture of Western Europe in the sixteenth century. The adoption, therefore, of the principle of ‘men amongst men’ in the consideration of Renaissance portraiture becomes the driver for observing the self-conscious measuring up of men against other men in the act of having one’s portrait made. The substitutive quality of portraiture — in which portraits were viewed as surrogates for or simulacra of the real thing — literally comes to life in this respect.

In interrogating portraiture in this way, it emerges that masculinity was not, in the early modern period, a static, normative state; it had to be continuously updated, performed, and worked at, as the hundreds of prescriptive conduct books produced in this period emphasize.\(^3\) Portraiture could help in supplying a stand-in for self-conscious men, and their portraits could perform their ideal selves, or one version at least, each and every time they were viewed. However, what becomes clear is that, for a period in which we are often told that individuality and will were supposed to be visible and legible, what we find instead are retreats to ideal types, formulae, and conventional representations and behaviours.\(^4\) In this context, it is helpful to draw explicit attention to the wording of the title of this chapter: specifically, the reference to the ‘fabrication’ of the masculine body. This term is used in order to highlight particular senses of the word that evoke manufacturing, constructing, forming into the shapes required for finished products, and stitching together, along with the related meaning of the invention of a lie, a false

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\(^1\) For a discussion of long galleries in England and their function as ‘art spaces,’ see String, “Concept of Art,” especially 299–302. Here we may also consider the intentions of Paolo Giovio in his mission to create a gallery of portraits of virtuous men for visitors to look at and to be inspired by. For Giovio’s public museum and its aims, see Giovio, Lettore, 92, as cited in Campbell, Renaissance Portraits, 190, n. 111.


\(^3\) Kelso, Doctrine of the English Gentleman, passim.

\(^4\) Although this is not necessarily a live issue and Jakob Burckhardt’s theorization of the rise of the individual has been challenged many times, there are still resonances of this position in studies of early modern portraiture. For an insightful reading of portraits, individuality, and idealization, as well as a thoughtful analysis of Burckhardt’s influence, see Simons, “Portraiture, Portrayal, and Idealization,” especially 263–277. The modernist view of Renaissance portraits as simple reflections of individuals is challenged in Simons’ essay.
A helpful place to begin is with an example that sets in motion a recognition of fabricated bodies and confected portraits. Lorne Campbell has invited his readers to think about what may be termed the ‘fabrication’ of the body with reference to the example of Titian’s *Portrait of Francesco Maria della Rovere* (Figure 1). In his book *Renaissance Portraits*, Campbell placed Titian’s preliminary drawing for the portrait (Figure 2) alongside the finished painting to suggest something of its facture. In addition to illustrating the drawing, Campbell cites the correspondence between Francesco Maria and Titian, in which, Campbell notes, the duke asked for the return of his parade armour, which had been lent to the artist two years earlier in order for Titian to render it in detail, but, equally importantly, so that the duke himself did not have to be present for an extended period during the creation of this portrait. Titian evidently — and this is borne out by the sketch — built up the body from the sketch of a bare-legged, bare-footed studio assistant wearing the armour, not from a lengthy sitting with the duke. The final product, however, reads as if it were Francesco’s body, a fabrication of the hyper-masculine body. And it seems that there are enough instances of this type of practice to see this as one indication of the agency of the artist in the creation of bodies; the artist is not simply one who reproduces mimetically what he sees before him. One should not forget, moreover, that this portrait has the value added


6 Campbell does not go so far as to say that the body has been ‘fabricated,’ but this may be inferred from his discussion of the portrait; *Renaissance Portraits*, 182–183. Campbell cites other instances of what Simons refers to as “in absentia” portraits: 140, 178, 185, 190; see her discussion of this phenomenon in Simons, “Portraiture, Portrayal, and Idealization,” especially 269.

7 Campbell, *Renaissance Portraits*, 190. Elsewhere, Campbell notes that both Titian and Antonis Mor were known to borrow both clothes and jewellery from their sitters in order to work up portraits in their studios; Campbell, “The Making of Portraits,” 427.
of Aretino’s sonnet that celebrates the manly virtues legible “in the breastplate and ready arms” assembled here so effectively by Titian.8

A related type of fabrication is in play with respect to the facture of the iconic portrait of Henry VIII by Hans Holbein the Younger (Figure 3) in the well-known cartoon for the Whitehall mural. This is an assemblage — composed by Holbein — of discrete masculinity-bearing elements that make up this hyper-masculine presentation of the king in 1537 at what must be understood as the zenith of his power.9 But rather than basing the representation of Henry’s body on a single model, commandeering a whole body — as we have just seen with Titian’s portrait — here we have Holbein building Henry’s body part by part, quoting the legs of men in armour or on horseback, forming what we can refer to as the ‘legs astride’ stance; fashioning shoulders that contrast with those of women and that are broad enough to (metaphorically speaking) bear the weight of responsibility and authority; shaping elbows that are crooked to expand, open, and assert the presence of the body (what Joaneath Spicer has referred to as the ‘Renaissance elbow’);10 articulating a beard that conveys the achievement of full manhood and a deliberate show of gender difference, as Will Fisher, Mark Zucker, Mark Albert Johnston, and Patricia Simons have observed;11 and emphasizing a thrusting codpiece so central to the composition that, as a kind of mise-en-abyme, it encapsulates the principal message of the painting, which celebrates the procreative success of the Tudor monarchy. The complexity and artifice of this image demonstrate clearly how dependent Renaissance portraits were on the creative mobilization of gendered ideas by artists such as Holbein. It thus neatly encompasses the issues at stake in this chapter. Holbein’s artistic invention is an idea-driven fabrication of a powerful, masculine man rather than a virtuosic rendering of the specifics of Henry Tudor’s actual body. It is not a question of finding the silhouette of an actual male body underneath: there is no ‘there’ there. This is an artistic confection drawn out by an artist,

8 A translation of Aretino’s sonnet appears in Rogers, “Sonnets on Female Portraits,” 303–304.
9 String, “Projecting Masculinity,” 143–159. While there are few other explicit discussions of masculinity in relation to Henry’s portrait, there are careful readings of the portrait in Walker, Persuasive Fictions, 72–84; Strong, Holbein and Henry VIII; Foister, Holbein and England, 175–196; and Brooke and Crombie, Henry VIII Revealed.
10 Spicer, “Renaissance Elbow.”
a visualizer of ideas, for the sole purpose of communicating those ideas as they relate to the conventions of masculinity amongst elite men in Europe in the 1530s.

In order to pursue this idea further, one may profitably turn to another type of fabricated, artistic invention of the masculine body, this time in which artists built the bodies for Renaissance portraits by mapping recognizable, classical prototypes onto the portrayals of contemporary men. Such is the device, for example, in the representation of a partially nude man in the guise of St. Sebastian, a painting today in the Denver Art Museum (Figure 4). Allegorical portraits of men as St. Sebastian grew in popularity in the mid to late sixteenth century; there are comparable examples by Bernardino Luini (thought to be a portrait of the Sforza duke, Francesco Maria), by Bronzino, and by Andrea del Sarto.12 The Denver painting has an English provenance and there is reason to believe that it depicts an English man from the second half of the sixteenth century. The representation has the qualities of a portrait: it is a half-length image, the body is set close to the front of the picture plane, with a specificity of features — ruddy complexion, a large flattened nose as if it had been broken at some point, and a peak in the hairline. What strengthens the argument that this is a portrait of someone specific is its multiplication in what must have been a tightly controlled workshop. There are, in fact, at least four extant versions of this painting, with examples in Munich, Sheffield, and Cambridge, as well as the Denver picture.13 They have long been attributed to the workshop of Antonis Mor (after a presumed originary portrait painted some time during Mor’s brief period in London in 1554, when he visited England in order to paint Mary Tudor).14

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14 The argument is not entirely convincing and there is still much work to be done on the attribution of these paintings; while the style is somewhat related to Mor’s handling of portraits, the dating is very problematic in sustaining that attribution. The dendrochronology on the Denver painting, which is the only one of the four panel versions to have received some technical analysis, places it no earlier than 1582, well after Mor’s death, so a late workshop copy would be the only possibility here. Early art historical interpretations of the Man as St. Sebastian and its resonance vis-à-vis portraiture appear in Cust,
Margaret Walters has outlined the popularity of the practice of men in sixteenth-century portraits ‘dressing up’ and ‘wearing the nude’ in countless early modern allegorical or crypto-portraits. This important element in the ‘fabrication’ of the masculine body is clearly present in this specific example, but it is also worth pointing out that this painting bears a strong resemblance to a slightly earlier example of a nude allegorical portrait, Bronzino’s portrayal of Andrea Doria as Neptune (Figure 5), or, as has recently been proposed, in a new study of that image, Odysseus.

Joseph Eliav, the author of this new analysis of the Andrea Doria, in his revision of the reading of the iconography of this painting, treats the body as actual rather than idealized when he remarks, “The portrait, painted when Doria was more than seventy years old, shows his age in the torso and in the less than taut belly, as well as in the face and beard. Although mature, the nude body is erect and muscular, reflecting Doria’s vigor at his advanced age.” This description misses the point and reads the body as if there had been

“Notes on Pictures;” and Oldenbourg in his “Niederländer des 16. Jahrhunderts in der Alten Pinakothen,” 161–164, (written shortly after the Munich version of the portrait was acquired by the Alte Pinakothen). The Munich example is also briefly included in Cox-Rearick’s article, cited above. An intriguing fifth version — on canvas — was formerly in the Miles Collection and recently sold at auction in Hamburg.

15 Walters, The Nude Male, 163–167. Larissa Bonfante has described the Greek view of the naked body and the idea of ‘wearing the nude’ as a costume for specific activities and rituals: see her “Nudity as a Costume in Classical Art.” The term ‘cryptoportion’ was coined to describe portraits hidden in multi-figure history paintings, but its meaning has expanded through use to refer to any disguised, embedded, metaphorical portrait. See Ladner, “Anfänge des ‘Kryptoporträts,’” 78–97.

16 Eliav, “Trident and Oar,” 775–820.

17 Eliav, “Trident and Oar,” 793. Eliav explores the ‘actuality’ of Doria’s body here and on 787, where he writes that: “Nudity in a sixteenth-century portrait, such as the unfinished statue of Andrea Doria as Neptune by Baccio Bandinelli in Carrara, does not document the subject’s actual body but rather serves to display an image, not necessarily unbiased, of his character, his status, his valour, and so on. Nudity is a costume, to borrow a metaphor from Larissa Bonfante: just as the subject may be dressed in royal garments to show his grandeur or in armor to show military valour, he may be dressed in nudity to project the desired image of his personality. Doria’s nudity in the portrait shows the body of a mature, even old, man, at his actual age of more than seventy years. The nude is not a study from life; it is obviously idealized to show physical strength, perhaps following an ancient Roman portrait genre, according to Talvacchia’s reading. It is the body of Andrea Doria, not of a mythological god.” Eliav is citing Bonfante, cited here in n. 15, and Talvacchia, “Bronzino’s Corpus.”
a naked sitting and this was the result: a depiction of the seventy-year old Doria’s body. Such an interpretation is a misunderstanding and misreading of what we see. Instead, the typical practice for such representations seems to have been to map a well-known classical sculpture onto the nude portrait. For instance, Bronzino’s own representation of Cosimo I as Orpheus takes the Belvedere Torso — a representation of Hercules — for its body.\(^{18}\) One might also consider in this category the Luini, which applies the Apollo Leikos type to build the body of his Man as St. Sebastian, and Bronzino’s Man as St Sebastian, in which one encounters a further application of the Belvedere Torso.

For the portraits of Andrea Doria and the Denver Man as St. Sebastian, the artists have drawn on the athletic male body of the fifth-century BCE Doryphoros by Polykleitos, derivations of which circulated widely in copies, and, beginning in antiquity, with appropriations such as one finds in the Augustus of the Prima Porta and the many portrayals of Antinous, and again in the Renaissance with works such as Tulio Lombardo’s Adam.\(^{19}\) The underlying structure of the Polykleitan body, with its perfectly balanced contrapposto composition, is the structural basis of these two portraits, informed by a tradition of employing ideal models. And why would Andrea Doria, who had made his name as an active, martial commander of others, not agree to this confection?\(^{20}\) Moreover, although we do not know the identity of the man who has stepped into the guise of St. Sebastian, he, too, must certainly have agreed to the application of the spear-bearer type, not only to signal the ideal masculine body, but also to reinforce the Sebastian arrow-holding motif. Both artists may have arrived at the same result independently, but there is so much in common, compositionally, that it is hard not to conclude that the Man as St. Sebastian has not only adopted the body of Doryphoros, but also the fabricated body of Andrea Doria, from a painting famous enough to permit the possibility of this reference.\(^{21}\) Both the Andrea Doria and the


\(^{19}\) For a useful exploration of a related case study in the Renaissance appropriation of ancient sculpture, see Cafà, “Ancient Sources.” For the broader view of this practice, see Haskell and Penny, Taste and the Antique; and Bober and Rubinstein, Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture.

\(^{20}\) The portrait was, of course, a commission, intended from the outset to join the collection of portraits of illustrious men in Paolo Giovio’s museum.

\(^{21}\) And if not the painting directly, there is the possibility that it could derive from the printed version included in Giovio’s Elogia Vivorum Bellica Illustrium (1575). The Swiss artist Tobias Stimmer was engaged to create drawings for woodcuts of the portraits for the
Man as St Sebastian are sophisticated Renaissance painterly reworkings of the Polykleitan ideal body, which was an appropriate paradigm for the perfect masculine body.

A final example, or set of examples, similarly exposes the underlying, deep structure of the masculine body in male portraits, in which a recognizable pattern was created and sustained to instantly communicate shared ideas about early modern manhood. This fabricated body, one that is shared amongst a very large number of portraits across Europe, is much in evidence in portraits of English men in the last two decades of Elizabeth I’s reign. Portraits of this sort display a remarkable uniformity of stance, setting, and attributes. A good example is the Portrait of a Gentleman (Figure 6), recently attributed to the English painter Robert Peake. The image is characterized by its presentation of the figure in full length, set close to the front of the picture plane in an interior rendered with a high horizon line and a perspectively steep wooden floor onto which are cast pointed, raking shadows of the man’s feet. The man’s left elbow is cocked, while his right arm rests on a nearby console table. The posture is open and the width of the shoulders — accentuated by fashionable shoulder wings — creates a strong triangular emphasis in the upper body. The legs are solidly planted but lengthened to the point of exaggeration. While this is an impressive display of elegant, masculine carriage of the body in and of itself, the emphasis shifts when one places the portrait in visual dialogue with other English portraits from the same date (Figures 7 and 8). Now, rather than individuality, the conformity and uniformity of the depiction are thrown into high relief. Rather than the documentation of a unique encounter, we find, instead, a pattern into which the man is inserted so as to ‘say’ something explicit about his likeness to other men and that he is a ‘man amongst men.’ These three images point towards a formula for the presentation of men (of the portrait commissioning classes) that signals a desire on the part of those depicted to register similarity rather than difference. Likewise, from the perspective of the artists, there is a prioritization of conformity to fashionable and prestigious tropes. The subjects may wear different colours, fabrics, hats, and collars, but the deep structure of these three portraits is a studio template. The pattern suggests a fabrication of the Elogia. If the Portrait of a Man as St. Sebastian is not by Antonis Mor or his immediate circle, then the possibility exists of a derivation from the print rather than the painting.

22 Edward Town proposed this identification during the Interrogating the English Portrait conference held at the North Carolina Museum of Art in September 2016.
body, a body that then inscribes the sitter with commonly held ideas about what it meant to be a man of a certain class in a certain place.

When this portrait formula became established in England (even though one can also find countless examples of its use on the Continent) it seems to have become something of a dominant trend, albeit with some slight variations. The sheer number of extant full-length portraits in stock poses suggests that men knew what they wanted when they chose a portrait painter and that the artist could be counted on to readily reproduce what these men had seen in neighboring houses. A related set of examples, with a slight variation on the theme, may be found in portraits of Elizabeth’s courtiers Sir Anthony Mildmay, Sir John Needham, Robert Devereux, and Sir William Drury dressed in Accession Day armour, complete with lavish tents, lances, and other tournament accoutrements.23

This portrait type itself — the standing, full-length figure with one hand on his hip, the other on a nearby table — derives from early to mid-sixteenth-century portraits of Charles V and Philip II, even though it can be argued that those particular predecessors had long since ceased to be the direct referents for the late Elizabethan trend. Men viewed portraits of other men and, in the spirit of both competition and homosocial belonging, desired to ‘join the club’ and have their portraits made following the blueprint we have just seen. The state portrait, as Marianna Jenkins has labelled it, was enormously popular with the aristocracy across Europe, but in England it also trickled down to the gentry class, as can be seen from examples such as the Peake Portrait of a Gentleman.24 In it one finds a uniformity of pose that communicates a willingness to position oneself within the group rather than stand out from it. Artists, likewise, prospered as portraitists to the extent that they endorsed and perpetuated the norms. The outward appearance speaks of control and regulation of the body on the part of the subject, but this is, of course, a fabrication. It is the artist who provides that permanent state of control. In early modern England and on the Continent, men copied and imitated

24 Jenkins, State Portrait.
other men through the genre of portraiture. This aligns perfectly with the dominant themes emerging in the many hundreds of contemporary conduct books printed in the sixteenth century, which outlined masculine ideals and stressed the adoption of behaviours and fashions of ‘the most,’ signalling the importance of conformity, imitation, and agreed-upon ideals. Adherence to the precepts in these treatises and guides spoke to an appreciation of the notion of ‘men amongst men’: men found there advice that prescribed uniformity, normative behaviors and appearances, scripts, and schemata. David LaGuardia has referred to the reinforcement of masculine norms as an incessant intertextual process; and this process is something arguably reified in the conventional formulaic portraits seen in the above examples.

The early modern artist was well prepared to provide the template for masculine portraits. And while there are endless possible comparisons that might be made about appropriations of portrait types and conventions, the examples explored here go some way to demonstrating the essential quality of conformity amongst men and their portraits as well as about artists’ ability to understand their role in the process of fabricating ideal bodies in order to continuously perform and project masculinity. Portraits helped to produce and perpetuate idealized — fabricated — visions and views of the male body. Portraits are for looking at. They are idealizations in the same way that the ‘portrait’ of ideal gentlemen and courtiers was devised and circulated in instructional manuals; through these portraits and manuals, men could learn to become a ‘man amongst men’ and measure themselves within the constructs of masculinity that governed their class in that time and place.

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25 For an exhaustive list of these conduct books and manuals of behaviour, see Kelso, *Doctrine of the English Gentleman*, 169–277.
27 Fisher, “Staging the Beard,” 232 in which he makes a related point about both portraits and physiognomy books as related to facial hair.
Cited Works


Figure 9.1. Titian, Portrait of Francesco Maria della Rovere (1536–1538). Florence: Gallerie degli Uffizi.
Figure 9.6. Robert Peake the Elder, *Portrait of a Man, probably Sir John Scott* (c. 1600–1605). Oil on panel, 77 3/4 x 38 1/4 in. (197.5 x 97.2 cm), Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James MacLamroc. North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh.
Figure 9.7. Unidentified Artist, Portrait of Sir Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton (c. 1600). Private collection; on loan to the National Portrait Gallery, London.