PLATE 1 — Portrait group, formerly attributed to an Italian 15th century artist. National Gallery, London. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees.

DATING A FORGERY

by

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THE 1951 catalogue of the Early Italian Schools in the National Gallery in London contains the following entry: "3831. PORTRAIT GROUP. Wood, 16 x 14⅛ (0.406 x 0.365). This picture appears to be modern; there is some evidence, not altogether convincing that it is by Icilio Federico Joni."

The history of the entry of this small painting (Plate 1) into the National Gallery collection is immaterial here, but it is, perhaps, worth mentioning an article on it in the *Burlington Magazine* of 1924, in which it is discussed as an old picture, belonging, from the style of the painting and the costumes, to the second half of the fifteenth century and depicting, in all probability, members of the Montefeltro family.

Like most competent fakes, the *Portrait Group* no doubt looked much more convincing in 1924, when it was more or less recently painted, than it does now when, with the passing of time, its costumes, at least, begin to reveal a strong flavor of the early twentieth century. But leaving aside, for the moment, these fascinating glimpses of twentieth-century fashion which can be seen though what purports to be the dress of the Italian renaissance, the twentieth-century artist's interpretation of this fifteenth century Italian dress can profitably be discussed for the light it throws on the methods and unconscious mistakes of a skillful forger.

The sitters in the *Portrait Group* appear to be a man of middle age, a boy of about ten years old, and a little girl of about six. At first sight, their clothes seem to have been painted with considerable confidence, but on more careful examination it becomes clear that not one of the pitfalls that await the forger has been avoided. The clothes are, at least in several important details, impossible in construction and inconsistent in date; they are, in fact, misunderstood representations of clothes, reminiscent of, if not actually copied from, a number of existing paintings.

From the point of view of construction it is clear that the dress of the middle-aged man could not have been drawn by an artist who had worn similar clothes. He wears a sleeveless over-gown of golden-yellow brocade, with a light design in pale brown, and under this a red tunic with sleeves slashed open to show the shirt beneath; some of the side of the tunic shows

PLATE 2 — Vittore Carpaccio, Legend of St. Ursula series, "The reception of the ambassadors", detail. Accademia, Venice. Reproduced by permission.

through the deep arm-hole of the golden over-gown. This arm-hole and the folds that surround it are painted unintelligently. Not only does the edge of the arm-hole itself behave like no known textile, but two inexplicable folds or 'pockets', of stuff appear near it at points where there is no available material to crumple into such folds. The construction of the red sleeve is equally unconvincing. From the point of view of practical tailoring it is impossible; moreover, it is historically inaccurate. Above the elbow is a series of horizontal folds, which, if the arm were dropped, would sag into bulky festoons. Such folds could not exist in view of the sleeve's almost smooth edge—again a contradiction of all the possibilities of tailoring. The whole sleeve is an attempt at depicting a fashion which was popular in the 1490's (Plate 2), but the incorrectness of its detail shows that its function has been misunderstood. Sleeves of this kind were laced together at the wrist, along the upper arm, and across the horizontal slit which served to give 'elbow-room'. The lacing, drawn together through eyelet-holes along the edges of the sleeve could be tightened until, almost closed, it would look neat and taut, or, loosened, would be cool and comfortable. The sleeve in the *Portrait Group* is manifestly too small ever to close, even at the wrist, and it is, furthermore, held together by two permanently attached straps, which have no prototypes in fifteenth century costume. There do appear to be two eyelet-holes on one edge of the horizontal slit, but none to correspond on the other edge. The whole purpose of the sleeve, which in any case is both too narrow and too 'full', is defeated by the introduction of these permanent straps in the place of the adjustable lacing invariably worn in sleeves of this type.

As for what I have referred to as the golden-yellow gown worn by this man, there is no evidence that it is a gown at all. It could well be a stiff, wide tunic ending somewhere about the knee, except that its general character suggests that the spectator should complete it by imagining that it not only reaches the ground, but that it trails in a train behind. A closed gown of this kind was not a part of the masculine dress of the Italian fifteenth century and this particular garment derives, I believe, from a vague memory of the dress of the court ladies in Piero della Francesca's frescoes in Arezzo with their necklines that plunge downwards at the back. This echo from Piero is further emphasized by the soft cap set far back on the head to reveal a little of the retreating hair of a man going bald at the temples. Italian men did not wear their caps on the backs of their heads, but the headdresses of Piero's court ladies, set far back to show their shaved foreheads, were worn at just this angle. It is this unconscious reference to

PLATE 3 — Carlo Crivelli, Annunciation, detail. National Gallery, London. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees.

a recognizable and authentic feminine fashion of the 1450's that gives what is clearly a male portrait an uncomfortably womanish look.

The cap of the boy, pulled well down on the forehead, is more appropriate to the fashions of the early 1490's, which must be regarded as the date aimed at by the painter of the *Portrait Group*. This cap has prototypes in late fifteenth century portraits, though the black braid trimming belongs, rather, to the taste of the early twentieth century.

The arrangement of the hair and the angle at which the hat or headdress is worn are features which are always extremely sensitive to changes of fashion, perhaps because they frame the face, the focal point of the human being. Our own contemporaries can invariably be placed and 'dated' by the way they do their hair and wear their hats. Some may cling to the fashion of their youth or early middle-age, but none depart from the fashions of their own life-time unless they are mentally deranged. At no period during the putative life-time of the middle-aged man in the *Portrait Group* (say from 1445 to 1495) were men's caps worn on the back of the head, and it is this angle of the cap and its disparity with that of the cap of the boy that would most immediately arouse the suspicions of the student of historical dress.

The bonnet of the little girl in the background is an equally interesting example of the painter's lack of first-hand experience of the dress he is trying to depict. This kind of bonnet is familiar to us in the Crivelli Annunciation in the London National Gallery, where it is worn by a fetching little child who peeps round the corner of a door at the top of a flight of steps (Plate 3). It probably comes as a surprise to a twentieth-century spectator to discover that this child is not a girl but a boy. His clothes may correspond roughly to the dress of a little girl of today, but in the fifteenth century no little girl would wear either a knee-length dress or an open-sided tunic, both of which, in the Crivelli painting, are juvenile versions of the normal adult male fashion of the time. A similar bonnet and a rather similar open-sided tunic, in a painting by Carpaccio in Frankfurt (Plate 4), are worn by the Infant Christ. There is no doubt, however, that the painter of the *Portrait Group* intended the child who wears the bonnet to be a little girl.

The technical faults of tailoring and the misrepresentations of Italian fashions of the 1490's discussed above may be apparent only to a student of costume, but there is another anachronism in the clothes of the *Portrait Group* that must be recognizable to everyone who is familiar with the early twentieth century's taste in decorative design. The checker-pattern that

PLATE 4 — Vittore Carpaccio, Madonna and Child with St. John. Städelsches Kunst-Institut, Frankfurt-am-Main. Reproduced by permission.

trims the cap of the man would not be acceptable to an Italian of the 1490's, though a somewhat similar design is occasionally found in the 16th century, but it is a motif which became extremely popular between the late 1890's and 1914, by which time it had found its way into fashionable dress and commercial art. As a decorative motif it owed its revival to a taste for Byzantine architecture and decoration which appeared almost simultaneously with l'Art Nouveau, but which, unlike l'Art Nouveau, became a part of the vocabulary of the 'Jugendstil'. In the decorations of buildings such as the Glasgow School of Art by Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Palais Stoclet in Brussels it plays an important part: it can be found, sometimes in a rather more complicated form, in, for example, the paintings of Klimt in the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century (Plate 5), and Leon Bakst used it to give authenticity to the Greek costumes he designed for *l'Après Midi d'un Faune*, one of the Russian ballets which was greeted with delirious enthusiasm in Paris in 1912, after which Bakst was asked to design a set of gowns for the Haute Coûture.

These, made up in the work-rooms of Paquin, were launched in the spring of 1913: the *Gazette du Bon Ton* commented, in April of that year, as follows: ". . . Dans les salons et les ateliers d'artistes, dans les maisons de thé et les théâtres, dans les halls des grands hôtels et des paquebots transatlantiques, dans les wagons des trains de luxe, partout, en ce moment, partout l'on ne parle que des robes dessinées par Bakst, réalisées par Mme Paquin et M. Joire . . ."

Bakst drew upon the stage clothes of his Greek ballets for inspiration: his gowns were given Greek names and all of them included some checker-pattern decoration. The gown *Aglaé* was complete with a cap which very closely resembles the middle-aged man's cap in the *Portrait Group* and like it is edged with a border of checker-pattern (Plate 6). Caps of this shape were a part of the general fashion of that year and there is no doubt at all that the cap in the *Portrait Group* derives from a brief fashion of 1913 seen through the eyes of Bakst, though it would, of course, be absurd to suggest that the painter of the *Portrait Group* was directly influenced by the collection of gowns designed by Leon Bakst in 1913 for the Paris Haute Couture. This little group of exotic gowns made a wide stir. Redrawn by fashion artists of the day, they were reproduced in magazines (not all of them devoted exclusively to fashion) in London and, no doubt, in Italy as well as elsewhere, and it would be strange if some of the details and accessories which contributed to those *ensembles* did not very quickly find their

PLATE 5 — Gustav Klimt, Portrait of Fritza Riedler, 1906. Vienna Osterreichische Galerie. Reproduced by permission. The sitter is painted in a typical Jugendstil interior. The spacing of the decoration on the walls, the accented trimming on the dress, the placing of the figure in the composition and its clear-cut silhouette, are all characteristic of this rival to l'Art Nouveau.

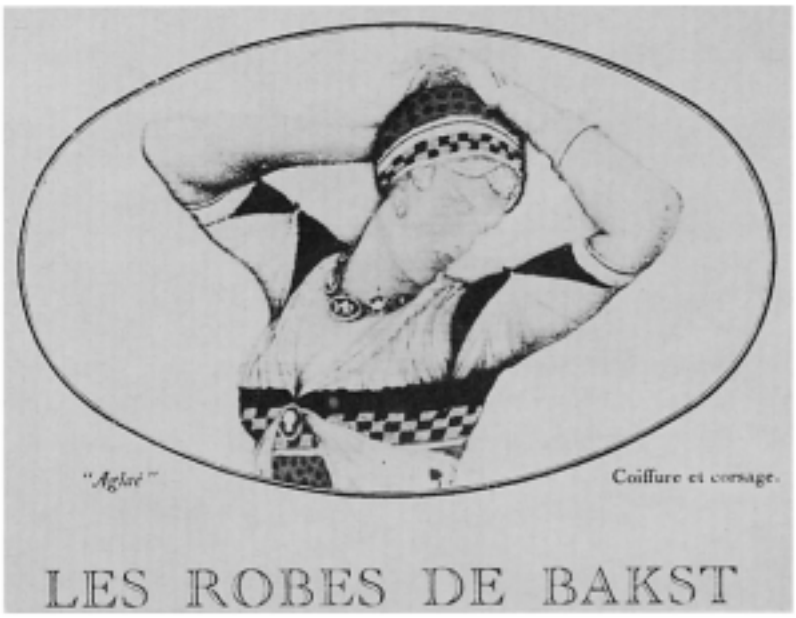

PLATE 6 — (Above) "Aglae", after a design by Leon Bakst. From the *Gazette du Bon Ton,* Paris, 1913.

PLATE 7 — (Below) Advertisement from the *Gazette du Bon Ton,* Paris, April, 1913.

PLATE 8 — (Above) From the *Gazette du Bon Ton,* Paris, April, 1913.
PLATE 9 — (Below) "Dione", after a design by Leon Bakst. From the *Journal des Dames,* Paris, May, 1913.

way, through the medium of mass-produced copies, into fashionable stores all over the world (Plates 7 and 8).

By 1913 the checker-pattern and other features borrowed from Jugendstil had become fashionable clichés and once the '1913-ism' of the *Portrait Group* has become apparent, other details of the dress and in, I think, the system of composition of the picture, can be found to support this date. The gloves of the man, for example, are also a part of the fashion of that year. The *Journal des Dames* in May 1913 stresses the importance of gloves and continues: '. . . Les gants . . . doivent être longs et rigoureusement de peau . . . on tâchera à les laisser tirebouchonner négligement sur les bras. C'est a cette négligence apprêtée que l'on reconnait depuis quelques jours, une élégante réelement au fait de la dernière mode . . .' (Plate 8). The careless elegance of the gloved hand resting on the window-frame in the *Portrait Group* belongs to this fashion (gloves of the 1490's ended at the wrist); so does the spacing of the trimming on the boy's cap, a stylistic detail difficult to analyse, but quite recognisable; and so does the patterned brocade of which the back of the man's cap is made. Here the pattern, unlike that of his gown, is not painstakingly worked out, but only roughly suggested, and, for that reason, once he had ceased to be pedantically conscientious, the painter unconsciously invented a pattern that has the unmistakeable look of the years round about 1913.

It is at this point, I think, that the placing on the wall of the coat-of-arms (raised over a gesso ground), the crisp handling of the distant view through the window and the presentation of the three figures, ranged in absolute profile, begin too to take their places as a part of the legacy left behind by Jugendstil. The present article is not concerned with this aspect of the painting, but it is an aspect which would make the picture look far more attractive to the eyes of 1924 than of today. In the early 'twenties, both Jugendstil and the fashions in dress that eventually emerged from it had ceased to be modish, but had not begun to look 'dated' as they do today. From the evidence of costume, the *Portrait Group* was painted in the middle of the second decade of the twentieth century; in 1923, the year when the National Gallery acquired the picture as an old master, it would look more acceptable than at any other time. Today it cannot fail to arouse immediate suspicion: the interesting fact is that it can now be dated as a forgery.