Kate Deimling, French to English Translator

Diane Bodart, *The Powers of the Portrait Under the Spanish Habsburgs* (Brepols, forthcoming; French publisher CTHS - INHA)

Translation excerpt

**An Idealized Portrait?**

**The Veil of the Imperial Beard**

Yet the series of Italian portraits of Charles V begins with a counter-example: the particularly unflattering depiction by Sebastiano del Piombo in his drawing commemorating the treaty of Barcelona. Rejecting any concern for concealment, the artist carefully defines the gaping mouth, the protruding lips, and the very protuberant chin, which is perfectly perceptible under the silky beard that delicately clings to the irregular edge of the jaw. The insistence on the physical flaw, which is unusual in the Italian milieu, results in all likelihood from the interpretation of previous transalpine models, but it may also be an obliging response to more personal motivations on the part of the painter and his patron. Sebastiano and Clement VII had both been victims of the sack of Rome. In this drawing, whose pyramidal and specular composition formally constructs the reestablishment of the equilibrium between spiritual and worldly powers, the juxtaposition of the Pope's noble, powerful head and the unstructured, emaciated face of the emperor contributes to establishing papal supremacy. The unsparingly ugly appearance that Sebastiano attributes to Charles V, before the emperor made his triumphant entrance into Bologna and took on his role as defender of Christianity, could express the image of the "barbaric and inhumane" ruler with the "terrifying face" displaying "ferocity and cruelty" as he was characterized at that time by the Italians, who were still in a state of shock from the "countless ravages" committed by his troops.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The case of Sebastiano remained isolated, for Charles V's arrival in Italy would definitively transform the issue of imperial representation on the Peninsula. The artists finally had a chance to see the emperor with their own eyes, and now they tried to win his favor by producing his portrait from life, instead of satisfying the Pope's demands. For the first time, the ruler's prognathism posed a true representational problem and the beard was identified as a possible means of concealment that could cover at least the chin, if not the mouth. In his study for the allegorical portrait of Charles V (New York, the Morgan Library),[[2]](#footnote-2) Parmigianino used a quick stroke to reduce the face to a perfect oval that was embellished below by the relief of a silky beard, thus avoiding any definition of the chin. Succinctly indicating the mouth, he gave it a graceful outline, almost in the shape of a heart, where only the turgescent lower lip implied that the heavier, darker line emphasizing its upper edge suggested a gape. In the definitive painting, insofar as the conserved version allows us to judge, the painter individualized the imperial physiognomy more precisely: the regularity of the oval is broken at the level of the jaw joint by the protuberant chin, which is encircled by a short, thick beard that surrounds the wide, visibly open mouth, leaving a large portion of the skin under the lower lip bare. Although this crown-like beard around the physical flaw increases the contour of the chin, it obscures the exact line of its edge. Moreover, the contrast between the geometrical outline of the dark, meticulously cut beard and the brilliance of the smooth skin that it isolates under the mouth produces an effect of chromatic continuity between this confined area and the crimson tone of the rest of the face, visually reducing the flaw to the clean-shaven part of the chin. By attaching this crown-like beard to the "false" chin, Parmigianino conceals its physical structure without denying its existence.

The application of the beard to the face as an external element is flawed, however, due to its rigidity, for this solution via cladding remains dependent on the bone structure of the physiognomy. By comparison, Titian's treatment of the emperor's features appears much more subtle. In his portrait of *Charles V with a Dog*, the chin is entirely covered by the beard, except for the area around the corners of the mouth. The middle of the chin features downy hair that lets the crimson show through, contributing to an effect of visual continuity with the rest of the face similar to that obtained by Parmigianino, except that this lighter area is noticeably reduced, and its irregular outline is blurred by the progressive thickening of the hair. Due to this variation in the density of the beard, rendered by strokes of color, the outline of the chin is concealed and becomes even more imperceptible because the hair, by its dark color, blends in with the fur worn by the emperor and with the uniformly dark background of the painting. It is difficult to determine whether in this painting Titian depicts the true color of Charles' beard, which is variously described by the sources as brown, red, or blond,[[3]](#footnote-3) or whether he is adjusting it to the chromatic balance of his composition. Seisenegger, in his matching portrait, gives it a lighter shade with blond highlights and, by meticulously tracing the hairs one by one, obtains a remarkably transparent effect that reveals the powerful line of the chin. This failure to understand the painterly possibilities offered by the beard is common to the Northern painters and is a fundamental result of their indifference to the problem of the emperor's prognathism. This indifference appears even more clearly in Amberger's portrait of 1531, where the beard is depicted as merely a few very fine blond hairs scattered over the impressive chin, which they decorate instead of covering. Considering these precise representations in all their details, the mouth painted by Titian seems more half-closed than open and only the protuberance of the lower lip explicitly renders the hereditary trait.

Titian had probably already used the beard's potential for concealment in the lost portrait of *Charles V with Drawn Sword*, as the copy by Rubens suggests. However, the blending of the brush strokes is lost in contemporaneous engraved reproductions, whose technique requires a linear definition that nevertheless makes them all the more instructive for the reconstitution of the painter's work. In his engraving, Agostino Veneziano treats the beard in extremely decorative, almost flamboyant fashion. The hairs are not drawn one by one, but gathered on the cheek in close-knit little clumps or around the mouth and chin in wide, long curls that are dark only around the edges, encircling portions of the area behind them whose brightness suggests blondness. This ornamental beard entirely covers the lower part of the face, without allowing any glimpses of the skin underneath or of the outline of the chin, whose irregularity is thus obscured. Giovanni Britto, in his woodcut from the same model, also pays very meticulous attention to the beard, but gives it a more "realistic" representation, with no decorative effects and with very different results. The hairs are traced one by one with short, interlaced lines on the cheek that become progressively long, parallel, and wavy on the chin, weaving a web of black lines whose density gives the beard a darker shading. This engraver, always attentive to expressing the painted character of his models despite the hardness of the xylographic medium, attempted to render the transparent quality of the downy hair in the middle of the chin under the mouth. To this end, he spread out the lines, letting the underlying crimson appear as white space, but in order to obtain the contrast between the thickening of the hairs on the lower part of the face, he drew the edge of the chin — giving it a perfectly regular shape! However, in the second version of this plate, he had to give up this solution, which illustrated his skill but omitted the imperial flaw, and then drew a fuller beard that covered the area entirely.

The different ways that Agostino Veneziano and Giovanni Britto defined the chin of Charles V resulted from their different interpretations of a painterly effect that was impossible for them to obtain graphically. The concealment or the regularization of the deformity were both corrections that were most likely suggested, and not imposed, by Titian's work itself, due to the painted treatment of the density and the color of the beard that blurred the outline of the face without giving it any precise definition. Thus skillfully concealed by Vecellio's brush, the prognathism was reduced to a chin that was "*un pochetto spinto in fuori*," whose protuberance was evoked only by the partially-open mouth with a protruding lower lip. Rationalized by the beard, whose effectiveness was worthy of the *exempla* of Antigonos' profile or Pericles' helmet, the physical flaw could henceforth fit the expression of the "*certo che di vaghezza*" that Italian observers ascribed to it.[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. See the observations of Cardinal P. Accolti previously cited; Cadenas 1985, p. 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gnann 2007, I, p. 466 no. 720. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Civil 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See the observations of cardinal P. Accolti previously cited; Cadenas 1985, p. 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)