

The Ugly Duchess

I heard of this painting from a book I recently read. This was the main character's favourite painting because it showed how beauty is superficial and somebody still thought that this woman was important enough to paint, despite her unfortunate looks. Following this, I became incredibly intrigued and started to research into the painting.

It is believed that the woman in question was suffering from "Paget's disease", which affects the bones in the body, causing them to become deformed and elongated. Her particular case, resulting in an elongated upper lip, enlarged jawbones and a pushed-up nose, was very rare, and she may even have been quite beautiful before the disease set in.

It is also suggested that the woman was an "elderly temptress"; she is holding a blossoming rosebud in her right hand, which holds many connotations and implies that she was trying to attract a suitor. This theory is reinforced by her exposed breasts and large amount of skin on show. Her clothing and rings suggest a certain level of wealth and elegance, yet her horned headdress connotes the devil, linking back to the idea of her being a temptress.

However, I like to think of the painting in a different way. Roses often symbolise love and beauty, and the small size of the rosebud between her fingers could imply that she does not view these as important (especially since she has potentially lost her own). Alternatively, it could show that beauty is subjective, and she does not need to fit traditional standards to be happy and maintain these traits for herself.

The portrait is also said to be mocking elderly people such as herself that still try to be young through their clothing and behaviour, and the vanity that they hold. Personally, I don't agree with this idea of her, as she is unlikely to hold excessive pride in her appearance due to her deformed features. Furthermore, not being attractive is likely to cause her to see the world in a very different way to somebody beautiful, since the way that she is treated would also be vastly different. I therefore don't think that she would be vain or attempt to fit into beauty standards, as it would be pointless for her to try. I find it much more likely that she would have hidden herself away, and therefore all the more special that somebody took the time to paint her and immortalise her features.

Finally, her "horns" – which I don't believe to be due to her behaviour. The detailed pattern and effort put into the headdress give it a certain power and beauty to contrast the appearance of the woman. As opposed to symbolising her devilish actions or ungodly behaviour, the horned headdress could easily represent how society depicts her. Beauty has always been a highly valued trait amongst women, and somebody with as misshapen of a face as hers may have been branded as all sorts of different names simply due to her appearance. I therefore think of the headdress as a statement – society has given her horns, but she has made them beautiful and is wearing them proudly, for she cannot change her appearance or how they see her.

I think that this is a wonderful painting with all sorts of details that could be interpreted differently beyond the few main ones that I have touched upon. Whether the old woman is in fact the elderly temptress, or if she's the statement against beauty that I like to view her as, I love this painting and the contrast from the stereotypical portraits depicting (often exaggerated) good looks.