

*My love!*

*I am in Berlin and after a long day of reading letters in the archive, I walked over to the Bode Museum, located just a few blocks away. There, I froze in front of a beautiful young man. He reminded me of you and the first time we met—must've been over thirty years ago now.*

*This young man I speak of exists in a picture acquired almost two centuries ago. To find him you first enter the Bode Museum on the ground floor, through the Great Dome, go underneath the stairwell into the exhibition spaces, then through to the Kamecke Room and the Basilica where the display of Italian Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture begins. You must then turn right into room 129, walk through it and turn right again towards room 122, after which is room 121, the last room containing a row of sculpture galleries. There he is, hanging by the window in the far left corner on a red wall, too high for my taste—and as a result, strangely disembodied, to the extent that it is you who appears to me depicted in this three-quarter profile in its rather modest golden frame. Such a handsome man, with shoulder-length dark hair, wearing a black cap, dark brown robe, and high on the neck, I can sense the thin line of a white shirt coming out of your collar. Your face is illuminated by a streetlight and the rest of your body blends into the dark background; you bend your head slightly forward, down, towards me. From where I stand I have to raise my head to meet your beautiful almond eyes, eyes that indicate an amused curiosity—as if you have just been awakened by my approach. Since you seem still undecided whether to reply to my silent question, I wonder: do you want...? For I understand that I am recognized—do you recall?*

*Actually I have been here before in front of this portrait, however for this visit I had done some research, for instance, I know it was made in Florence in about 1495, that it is tempera on poplar panel, and that it was first identified as a painting by a great master of this genre of portraiture, Sandro Botticelli. It was later attributed to one Filippino Lippi, but since the 1950s most experts have believed it to be a work of Lippi's pupil, Raffaellino del Garbo. The young man's identity however, is no longer known—he has turned into one of the anonymous—as we were for each other that night. We dared to come close, even though we lived in fear that the plague would take us. Can you believe, we are still here—so much time has passed! Can you picture me there?*

*You should also know that this museum too has quite a history: inaugurated in 1904 as the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, it later changed its name in honor of its first director, Wilhelm von Bode. He interests me because he was a famous nineteenth-century connoisseur and a scholar of remarkable erudition, working in Berlin's museums for nearly sixty years, and is responsible for some of the most important acquisitions placed in their collections. He also had great influence on museums throughout the Western world for his innovative concept of installing Old Master paintings and sculptures on equal footing in the same gallery. And there I was, in Room 121, staying much longer than planned, in a display mimicking Bode's way of installing, thinking of two men, you and him—also about the art-historical notion of “recognition.” I will explain myself further by telling you a story; in the archive today I read a fascinating letter involving another portrait, that of a young woman. This letter was written to Bode in 1922 by the art dealer Sir Joseph Duveen, who wrote to inform Bode that his American lawyer was coming to Berlin to interrogate him for an upcoming court hearing. Included with the letter was a typewritten document issued by the lawyer's office containing twenty-three questions under the heading, “Hahn vs. Duveen – General line of questions to be addressed to expert witnesses, and suggested answers thereto.” Bode was to become one of these expert witnesses.*

*Yet, the story really begins with an American serviceman, Harry Hahn, returning from France to Kansas after the First World War with his French wife, Andrée, and there attempting to sell an Old Master painting to the Kansas City Museum for \$250,000. Duveen, at that time well known for his connoisseurship, received a telephone call in the middle of the night at his home in London. It was a New York World reporter asking his opinion regarding the picture's authenticity. Without even seeing it, Duveen pronounced that he definitely did not believe that a genuine Leonardo da Vinci could reach America without his knowledge, and insisted that it must be a copy. After this judgement was published the sale process halted, and the Hahns, in their frustration and anger, decided to sue Duveen for slander.*

*Are you able to follow me? I'll take you back to the lawyer's questionnaire that I found in the archive today. Most of the questions dealt with the expert witness' experience and qualification to recognize a genuine Leonardo from a fake—after all, this is a question addressing the very heart of the case. Is it, as the owners claim, a work from the Master's own hand or a minor unknown artist's copy painted much later? Then the lawyer refers to two (likely black and white) photographs, one showing the newlyweds' painting and one of Leonardo's La Belle Ferronnière: “We show you a photographic copy of the painting involved in this suit. Based on your experience can you state whether such painting, of which a photograph is here shown, is the work of Leonardo? If you can state so, what is your opinion?” After this follows a game of recognition by comparison structured around questions including whether it is true that by comparing the two women's appearance and physiognomy in each photograph, and in some detail—even “the lack of light in the eyes” and “the ‘feel’ of the body”—one can establish the origin of the portrait.*

*So how was the court case resolved? Well, Duveen engaged not only Bode, but also ensured that a whole group of art experts were by his side. It was even arranged—at Duveen's expense—for the two pictures to be examined side by side at the Louvre. His lawyer could then successfully show that all experts agreed: the Hahns' picture was a copy. However the opposing lawyer could argue that the attribution of the Louvre picture was under discussion by the same experts used by Duveen and therefore it could be possible that this unanimous recognition of the Hahns' painting as a copy would be altered in the future. The end result was a hung jury with no resolution to the matter. Finally Duveen decided to settle the dispute outside of court and paid the Hahns \$60,000 in damages. The picture then disappeared from public view until 2010, when it emerged for sale at a Sotheby's auction in New York, and was sold for over \$1.5 million dollars; it is now recognized as the work of a follower of Leonardo.*

*As I stood there in front of this young man at the Bode Museum, examining the picture closely, thinking of you—and also how in Bode's time, photographs were used in this way as evidence, to recognize a fake painting from an original—I felt that I was being observed by someone, from behind. I turned and noticed a man looking at us. He pulled out his iPhone and took a photo. We started to talk about you and I realized after a while that he was flirting—can you believe it? It was almost 8 pm, approaching closing time, and I told him that Bode opposed keeping the museum open during evening hours because he thought the only visitors likely to come would be lovers looking for a warm and undisturbed place for their rendezvous.*

*A guard patted me on the shoulder and said that now the museum was to close—we left the gallery together.*