

*Sarah Walden*

*Conservator of paintings and conservation consultant  
Restaurateur agréé du Service de la Restauration des Peintures du Louvre  
Fellow of the International Institute of Conservation*

3 August 2015

### Portrait of Benvenuto Cellini.

This painting is in oil on thick paper. This was apparently laid onto linen in the distant past - there is no imprint from a canvas grain. The present backing canvas appears simply to be a support, being scarcely attached apart presumably from around the edges. This canvas is comparatively recent, perhaps from the early to mid twentieth century, with a stretcher made up from parts of a larger old stretcher at the same period. The paper and its underlying backing are largely detached from the canvas behind and loose from the tension of the stretcher and straining wedges in most areas.

The paint surface in the original central area is slightly granular, with distinct oil brushwork visible. There are various hints of pentimenti, for instance in the swirl of brushwork in the left side of the cap by the ear. Films of past varnishes have accreted towards the outer edges with additional layers of past retouching encroaching around the edges on all sides.

The pigment analysis carried out by Mme Brans in France shows that the basic paint structure of the original oil sketch on paper is characteristic of the later sixteenth century, with early pigments including lead tin yellow in the lowest layer, indigo and garance as well as other pigments from the period, including vermilion, in the build up of the original portrait.

The chiaroscuro build up appears distinctly sixteenth century, stemming from Leonardesque depths of glazing as well as Venetian colour, in contrast to the seventeenth century dark grounds of the Caravaggisti, where the half tones of the flesh painting were brushed quite thinly over the dark ground in the shadows, tending to sink and grow more transparent with age, losing subtlety and isolating the highlights.

The underlying condition of the painting seems to suggest that its early history was peaceful with only occasional interventions when it had been framed, almost entirely relating to the edges and their apparently weaker support behind. It is not clear when the curved outline of the

painting was conceived or arose. These areas have become blurred by various adjustments. However there was evidently a distinct oval surround to the portrait at some point in its quite early life.

There are a few signs of minor little old lost flakes, for instance possibly on the chin and in the left side of the red cap, with one or two minuscule chips lost in the cheek, but essentially the central portrait appears extremely well preserved, with a fine craquelure. The only area showing wear from past intervention seems to be in the lower left side of the beard. There has been one small recent loss in the highlight on the forehead. The background on either side of the centre also seems to have remained quite well intact, with the shoulder just visible on the left, whereas in the outer reaches of the background and in the base area it is harder to distinguish the original. Clearly the upper central background has been recently repaired, as have the extreme outer edges on all sides. One brief old crease or slight tear in the paper can be seen at lower left. The line of the oval surround can be seen in the lower right and in some other places.

Under ultra violet light there seems to be two quite broad central verticals descending down to the base from beneath the head, which have been fairly recently cleaned and had some retouching. The head itself has also been quite recently cleaned., with layers of older varnishes elsewhere.

Clearly this penetrating portrait raises questions of attribution, especially since it dates undoubtedly from such an interesting period. Past references of the portrait to Cellini include a scrap of paper attached to the corner of the painting beneath the old frame with the words "Portrait d'Homme, Benvenuto Cellini" probably from the nineteenth century, possibly in two different hands and presuming two possible meanings, whether his identity or his actual authorship, or conceivably both. There is undoubtedly a resemblance to his image at that age. Cellini's connection with painting, as against sculpture, is mainly known for his disparaging comments in the Vita. However of course the relevance of his autobiography at that moment in his life is suggestive, especially since various portraits partly hidden in his sculptural work could suggest a link with a portrait of himself. A portrait was apparently numbered among the belongings listed at his death. The intense, almost steely precision visible in the head might seem to be reflected in aspects of drawings by Cellini. The individuality of late mannerist painting, clearly manifested in this painting, is hard to fit into a particular regional school, conceivably fusing Florentine line with Venetian colour, Roman thought with the court of Fontainebleau, as did the life of Cellini.

*Sarah Walden*