



Giambattista Tiepolo
Portrait of an Oriental

Giambattista Tiepolo

(Venice, 1696 – Madrid, 1770)

Head of an Oriental Gentleman with a Moustache and Turban

Oil on canvas, 43.5 x 35.5 cm

Provenance:

Rasini Collection, Milan

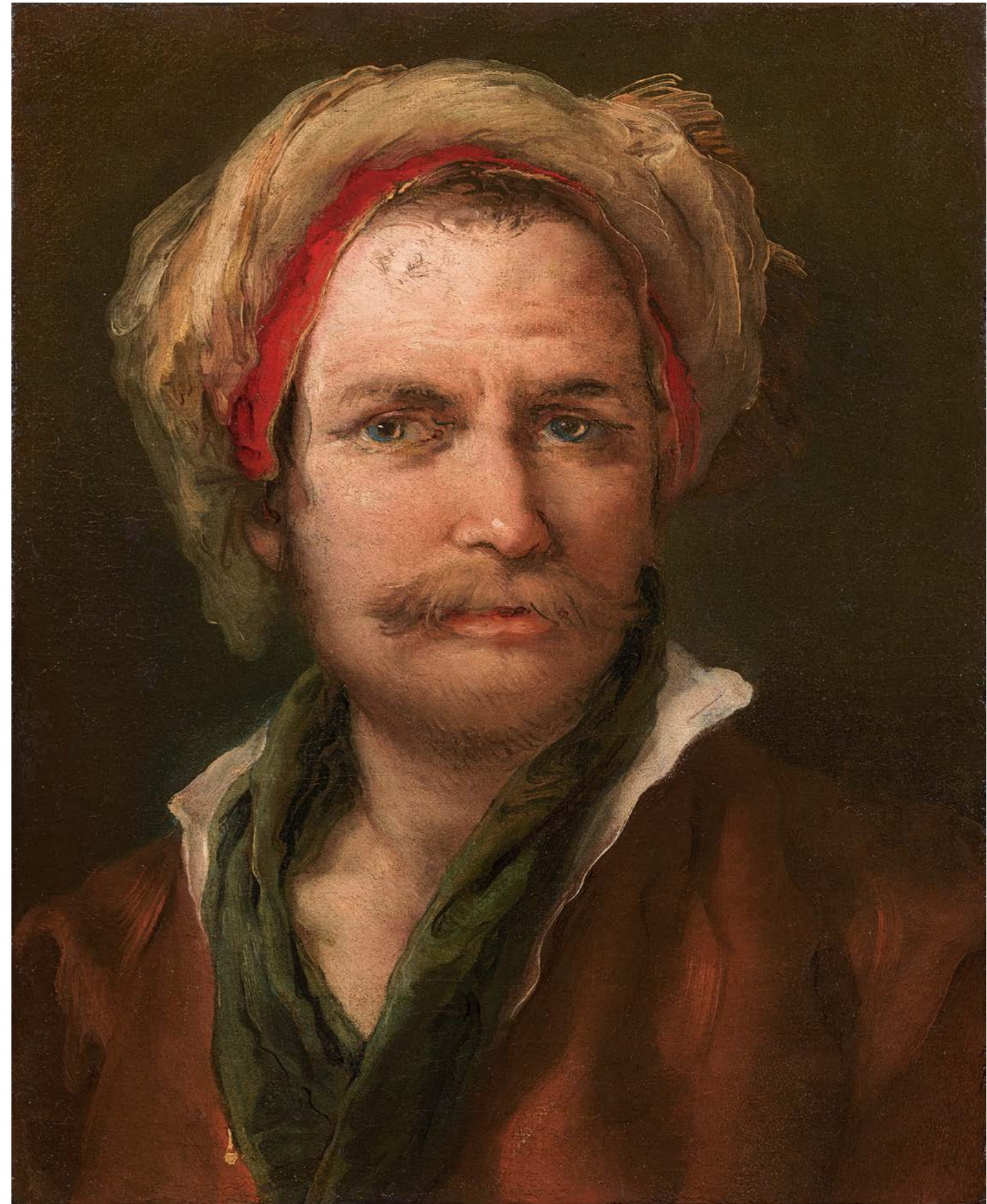
Exhibited:

Rome, Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne, December 1941, *Mostra di pittura veneziana del Settecento*, cat. 37; Venice, Palazzo dei Giardini, Ca'Rezzonico, Scuola Grande di San Rocco, June - October 1951, *Mostra del Tiepolo*, cat. 74.

Literature:

A. Morandotti, *Mostra di Pittura Veneziana del Settecento*, catalogue of the exhibition in Rome, 1941, Rome 1941, p. 42, fig. 37; G. Lorenzetti (ed.), *Mostra del Tiepolo*, catalogue of the exhibition in Venice, 1951, Venice 1951, pp. 99-100, 74;

A. Morassi, *G.B. Tiepolo*, London 1955, p. 147, cat. 38; A. Morassi, *A Complete Catalogue of the Paintings of G.B. Tiepolo*, London 1962, p. 28; A. Pallucchini, *L'opera completa di Giambattista Tiepolo*, Milan 1968, cat. 225; G. Knox, *Domenico Tiepolo. Raccolta di teste*, II, Milan 1970, cat. 3; A. Rizzi, *L'opera grafica dei Tiepolo*, Milan 1971, p. 378, cat. 194; D. Succi (ed), *I Tiepolo. Virtuosismo e ironia*, Turin 1988, p. 219; M. Gemin, F. Pedrocco, *Giambattista Tiepolo. I dipinti. Opera completa*, Venice 1993, p. 437, cat. 30; F. Pedrocco, *Giambattista Tiepolo*, Milan 2002, p. 291, cat. 233.

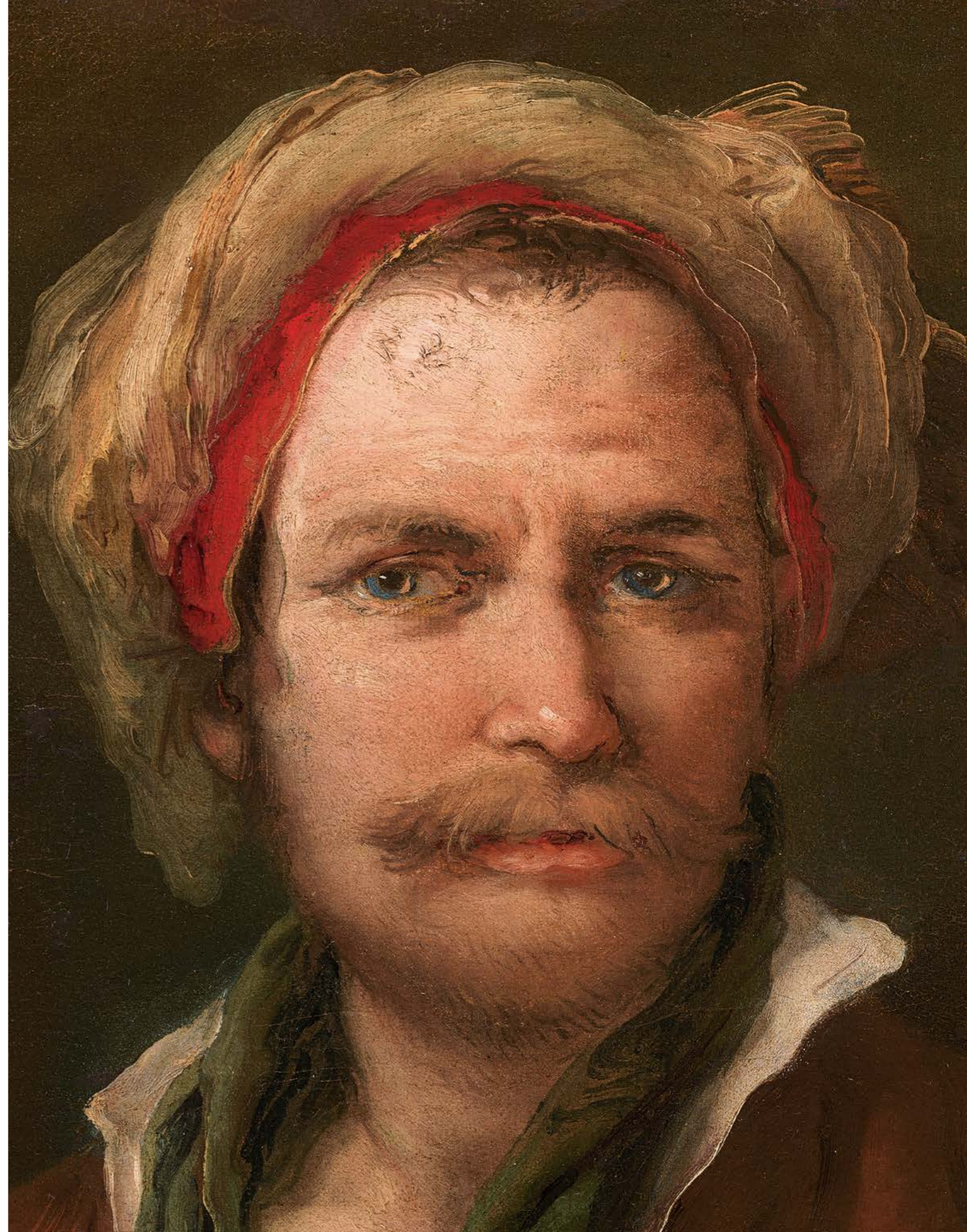


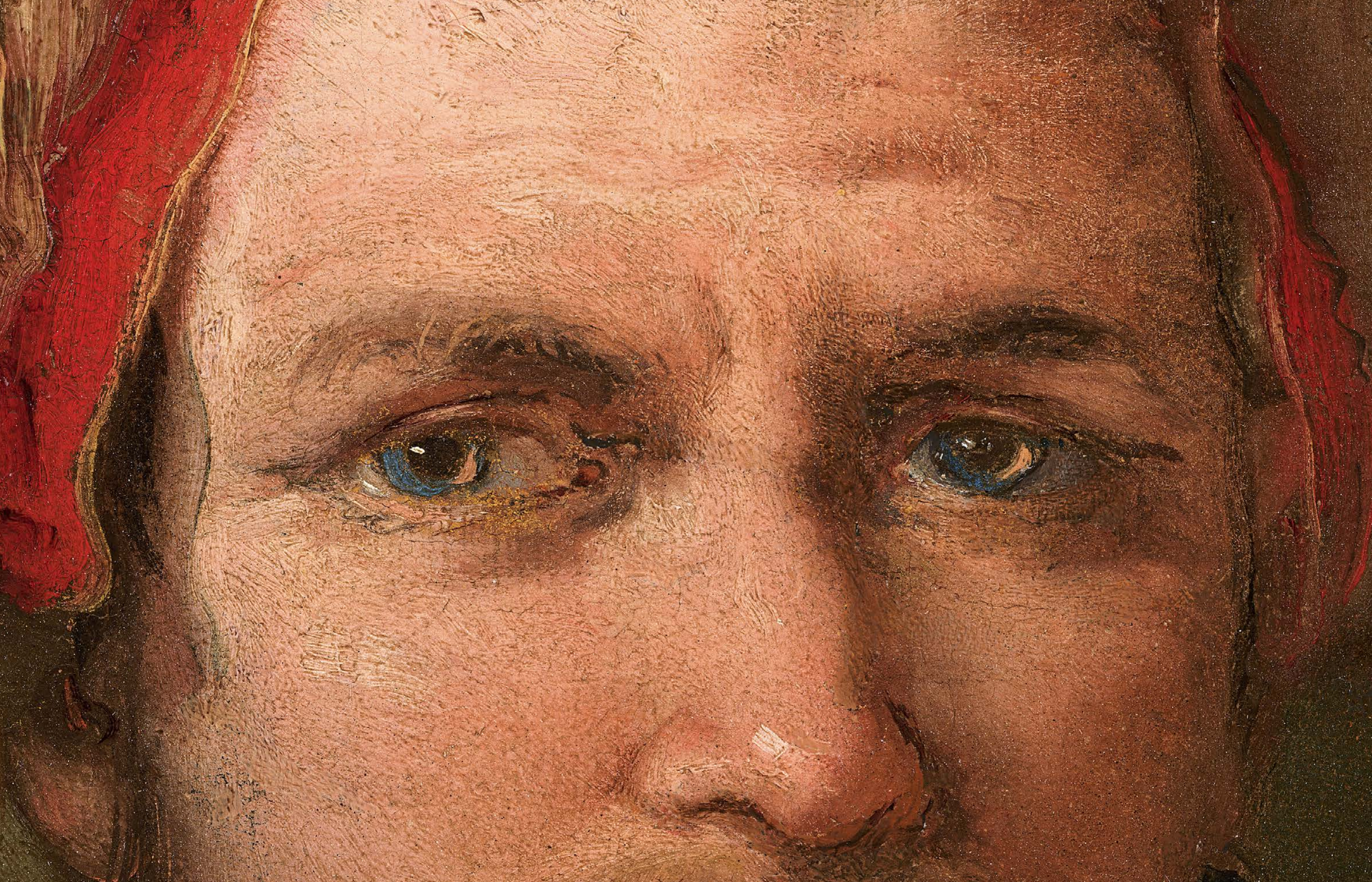
The Rasini Portrait of an Oriental by Giambattista Tiepolo

Despite Giambattista Tiepolo having painted only a very small number of portraits in the course of his career, he nevertheless showed an intense interest in the human head, primarily resorting to drawings and small-format paintings to develop the subject.

Paintings like this offer us an authentic picture of life in Venice as it really was. In the 18th century, aristocrats would mingle with the common people, attend festivities and frequent the city's taverns. It may seem incredible today but back then the port of Venice was frequented by interesting people: not sailors or aristocrats on holiday – though they, too, deserve our attention – but men sporting patriarchal beards with penetrating black eyes, wearing silk kaftans and turbans.

Such remote expressiveness cannot have helped but take on board the reflection of a repertoire which, while seemingly minor, was in actual fact extremely widespread: the so-called *Character Heads* by Giambattista that did not seek to capture the pure impartiality of reality, but rather its limit as it could have been perceived by 18th century figuration, in other words in its variety and, to some degree, its fatuousness. A few brush strokes, as though they were a few words, and lo and behold, an ordinary man, though his clothing would have us believe he is exotic, takes shape before our eyes.







This specific repertoire was neither compact nor brief in the master's thinking, indeed it continued in the lives of his sons Giandomenico and Lorenzo who experimented with etchings, their work displaying torment and fragility, a taste for light or tenuous, dissolving forms.

The story of these *Heads* came to light about fifty years ago thanks to the work of Aldo Rizzi and George Knox. It was the year of the Tiepolo celebrations in Udine (1970–1971), when the public was acquainted with a small book containing two series of prints by Giandomenico Tiepolo entitled *Raccolte di Teste*. It fell to the American scholar to define their role and their broader cultural significance.

As Knox reminds us, the Fogg Art Museum holds the complete documentation of 106 studies of heads in pen-and-wash by Giambattista Tiepolo, none of which can be linked to any of his large decorative cycles.

Morassi informs us that Tiepolo «painted the series of numerous *Heads* in the years that marked the fullness of his artistic maturity, after 1750, with the intention of putting together a repertoire of characteristic types, just as Piazzetta had done before him with his “Heads” subsequently engraved by Pitteri».

When Giambattista died in 1770, his son Domenico dedicated two series of etchings to his father on his return from Madrid. Known as the *Raccolta di Teste*, the two series were published between 1770 and 1774. The frontispiece in the *Raccolta* reads: «*Raccolta/ di Teste N. 30/ dipinte/ dal Sig. Gio. Batta. Tiepolo/ Pittore Veneto/ al Servizio di S.M.C. [Sua Maestà Cattolica]/ morto in Madrid/ l'anno 1770./ Incise/ da Gio. Domenico suo Figlio/ divise in due libri.*»



Fig. 1: Portrait of Giambattista Tiepolo, etching by Alessandro Longhi



Fig. 2: Giandomenico Tiepolo, *Head of an Oriental Gentleman with a Moustache and Turban*, etching from the *Raccolta di Teste*

In the first edition of the *Catalogo*, at the start of the *Libro Secondo*, we find the engraving of the oriental gentleman with a moustache and turban based on the painting by Giambattista Tiepolo, which Anna Pallucchini dated *c.* 1755 and which she considered to be “one of the best examples of this genre”.

It has been rightly suggested that these members of a particular clan – in other words those whom we call *Philosophers* because they are oriental figures captured with stagelike *prestezza*, and yet they come from heaven knows what ancient depths – were suggested by a learned man of letters close to Tiepolo named Francesco Algarotti. While scholars have questioned the contention that every single one of these etchings is based on a painting by Domenico’s father, no doubt has ever been cast in any of the sources that go to make up Giambattista’s bibliography regarding the attribution to him of

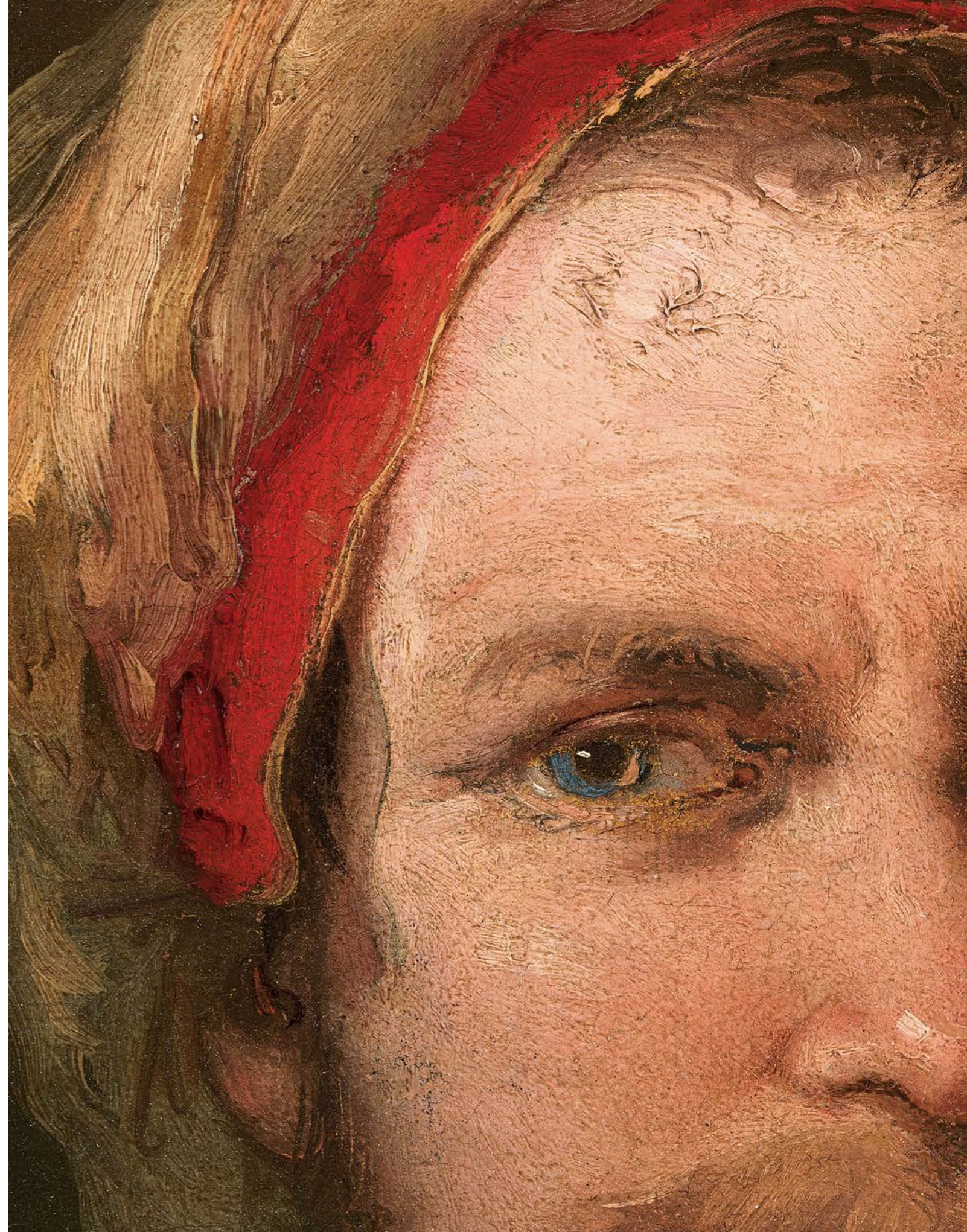




Fig. 3: Giambattista Tiepolo, *Head of an Oriental Old Man*, Prague, National Gallery

the *Head of an Oriental Gentleman with a Moustache and Turban*.

Since Alessandro Morandotti senior's *Mostra di pittura veneziana del Settecento* (Rome, 1941), where our *Head* was on display, no one has ever questioned the fact that the painting is an autograph work by Giambattista, and in fact, it was also displayed in the milestone exhibition on Giambattista Tiepolo held in 1951.

Knox's meticulous analysis led to the delineation of a precise order of execution for Giandomenico's *Heads*, linked to drawings and models painted by Giambattista, which in several cases number up to ten engraved variants.

They are qualified as painting exercises on the theme of *Fantasy Heads*. In the accuracy of his draughtsmanship and sharpness of



Fig. 3: Giambattista Tiepolo, *Head of an Oriental Man*, Greenville, South Carolina, Bob Jones University

character, the artist reinvents the theme of the *Ideal Head* genre, studying the effects of mutual adaptation as a tribute to the 18th century fad for variation.

Bearded old men with gaudy clothing and headgear, testifying to the popular theme introduced by Giambattista Tiepolo's designs, were ready to be turned into etchings by his son Giandomenico between late 1757 and 1748 in a planned set of forty exemplars, and in sixty drawings divided into two volumes in 1774.

The chronology of the *Raccolta di Teste* rests, as is now common knowledge, on documents published by Lina Christina Frerichs, which show that on 29 December 1757 Giandomenico supplied one of the most stringent collectors of his day, a Frenchman named Pierre-Jean Mariette, with "sixteen heads just etched, invented by

his father [...] and there will be forty with the frontispiece”.

We can clearly distinguish the stylistic approach in these exemplars, in which Tiepolo sought dynamism in the furrow of the picturesque tradition, appearing perfectly to reflect the force of his imagination. In other words, these were models designed in the 18th century to embody the delights of the imagination, a unique field of original combinations that steered curious gazes.

One might also detect in them the verve and the spirit of similar designs by Rembrandt.

Moreover, in Tiepolo’s training in draughtsmanship, a crucial role had been played by the engravings of a Genoese artist named Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione, which were published in two series entitled *Le petites tetes d’hommes coiffes a l’Orientale* and *Les grandes tetes d’hommes coiffes à l’Orientale* .

The flowing manner that characterises Tiepolo’s series – of which the moustachioed oriental gentleman is the absolute leading light, having tempered the propensity for *chiaroscuro* in the earliest 18th century examples – combines the simplicity of the characterisation of his figures with the tension of the shining light that accentuates its accessibly lifelike quality.

We are grateful to Fabrizio Magani for the information provided.

