



Rogier van der Weyden  
*Portrait of a Lady*  
c. 1460, oil on panel

This painting is an outstanding example of the abstract elegance characteristic of Rogier's late portraits. Although the identity of the sitter is unknown, her air of self-conscious dignity suggests that she is a member of the nobility. Her costume and severely plucked eyebrows and hairline are typical of those favored by highly placed ladies of the Burgundian court.

The stylish costume does not distract attention from the sitter. The dress, with its dark bands of fur, almost merges with the background. The spreading headdress frames and focuses attention upon her face. Light falls with exquisite beauty along the creases of the sheer veiling over her head, and gentle shadows mark her fine bone structure. In contrast to the sparseness of execution in most of the painting, the gold filigree of her belt buckle is rendered with meticulous precision. The scarlet belt serves as a foil to set off her delicately clasped hands.

Rogier excelled as a portrait painter because he so vividly presented the character of the persons he portrayed. The downcast eyes, the firmly set lips, and the tense fingers reflect this woman's mental concentration. Rogier juxtaposed the strong sensation of the sitter's acute mental activity to his rigid control of the composition and the formality of her costume and pose, presenting the viewer with an image of passionate austerity.