Unfinished Portraits

Lizzie Errington

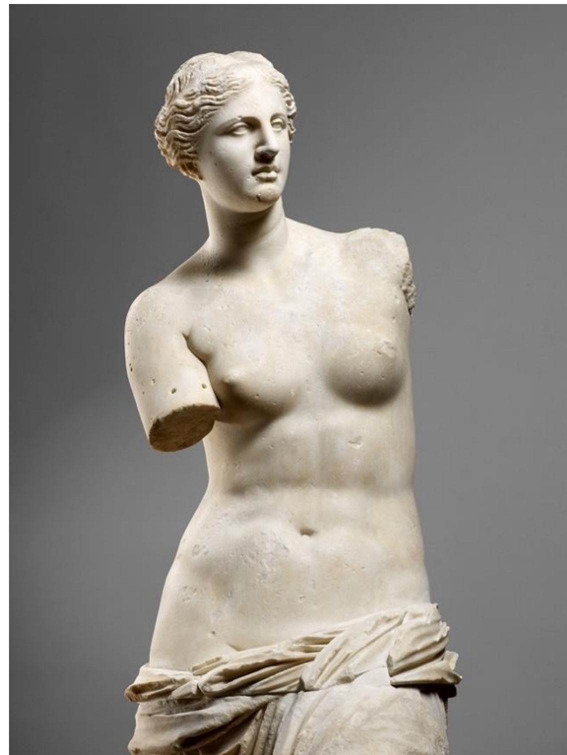
'Unfinished paintings are held in greater esteem than finished works: for in these, the sketch-lines remain and the actual thoughts of the artist are visible.' – Pliny the Elder.[1]

We strive to walk among the thoughts of the artist, to understand the motives and method behind their work. The unfinished work of an artist can reveal these secrets that are conventionally hidden beneath the surface. We are almost invited to look over their shoulder as they lay their final stroke of paint on the canvas. This pivotal moment raises questions that we do not ask ourselves with a completed work. Why is it unfinished? Was it a force outside of the artist or an aesthetic choice? What constitutes a completed artwork? I will be exploring two categories of unfinished portraits, the first being works officially labelled as 'unfinished' and the second is the use of an unfinished look as an aesthetic tool. Whether incomplete by stylistic choice or for reasons outside of the artist's control, the unfinished portrait humanises the artist by recognising the imperfection of reality, and accordingly, the people in these portraits are brought that much closer to us.

When discussing the finish of a portrait, we must consider the traditional conventions that define it. Portraiture has taken many forms throughout the ages as technology and culture have progressed, but certain key characteristics are detectable throughout. Compositionally, many portraits capture the top half of the sitter, usually cutting off their body at the shoulders. This allows the artist to bring the figure closer to the viewer and render their facial features in greater scale. When capturing the sitter's likeness, their most identifiable features are upon the face, and this is where the greatest detail is focussed. Yet as viewers we do not question these torsos that are seemingly floating in space. We have historically been conditioned to accept these partial bodies as complete beings, a frequent example being the sculptural bust. In addition, classical sculpture can be made to look unfinished by time and damage, sometimes missing noses or whole limbs such as *Female Portrait Head,* 140-160 CE which is held in Victoria University's Classics Museum. Famous sculptures such as Alexandros' *Venus de Milo,* 150 BCE (Paris: The Louvre), are recognizable for their incompleteness. It is

[1] Trevor Morgan Murphy, *Pliny the Elder's Natural History the Empire in the Encyclopedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) quoted in *Unfinished Paintings: Narratives of the Non Finito*. David Bomford, (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2015), 8.

their fragmented nature that adds to their stylistic appeal and intrigue into their past. In his book *Unearthing the Past*, Leonard Barkan proposes that contemporary viewers see possibility in incomplete artifacts of the past stating that, “the fragment reveals one of our salient characteristics: the wish to enter historical moments via their breaks or discontinuities.”[2] Through these historical artifacts that were designed as a partial figure, or made so with time, we are predisposed to be drawn and aesthetically appreciative of the fragmented body.

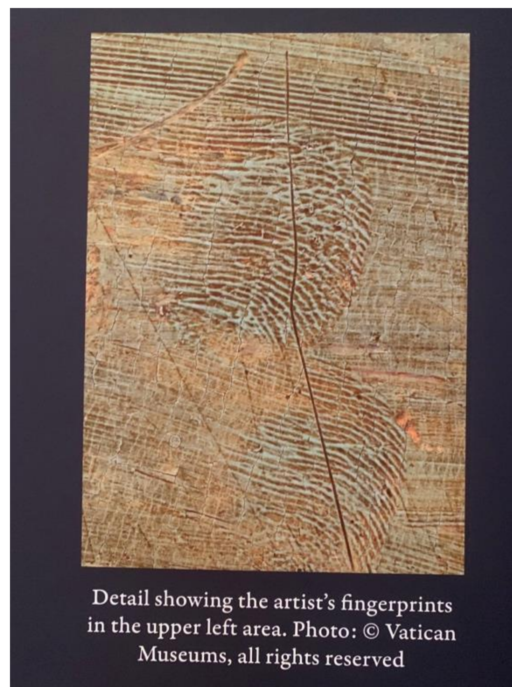


Each unfinished portrait lives a double life; it’s original intention and the reason for its incompletion. A very human answer to an unfinished artwork is the internal battle with procrastination and the pressure of perfectionism. Even the most famous and celebrated artists were susceptible to this ailment of creativity. The Renaissance art historian Giorgio Vasari wrote that Michelangelo's works “were of such a nature that he found it impossible to express such grandiose and awesome conceptions with his hands, and he often abandoned his

[2] Leonard Barkan, *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) quoted in “Before Non Finito: A Rough Aesthetic in Quattrocento Sculpture from Donatello to Michelangelo.” Stephen Mack, Rutgers The State University of New Jersey, School of Graduate Studies, 2021, 182.

works, or rather ruined many of them... for fear that he might seem less than perfect.”[3]

Leonardo Da Vinci’s unfinished projects are just as frequent and beloved as his completed works as they provide insight into his genius. *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness,* 1482 (Vatican City: Musei Vaticani) encapsulates this process. The portrait is a patchwork of stages of completion. There are sections that are mere outlines of form and others that have been more fully rendered. The juxtaposition is most apparent on the right arm of Jerome, which is half completed, simulating the muscles almost growing down his frame before our eyes. Da Vinci held onto the work for a further 37 years until his death in 1519 and conservators have found evidence of his stop-start painting process across this time.[4] The Great Master of Art is brought even closer to the viewer through the revelation of one of the artist’s own fingerprints upon the surface. Researchers found that “Leonardo used his finger to distribute the pigments and to create a soft focus effect in the sky and landscape.”[5] By acknowledging the artist’s hand, attention is diverted from the sitter to the creator, initiating a unique shared viewing experience of both subject and artist.



[3] Lydia Figes, “Unfinished: Why are we Drawn to Imperfection?” accessed 18 August 2021, https://artuk.org/discover/stories/unfinished-why-are-we-drawn-to-imperfection.
[4] Holland Cotter, “What Leonardo da Vinci Couldn’t Finish” accessed 18 August 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/11/arts/design/davinci-saint-jerome-metropolitan-museum.html.
[5] Sarah Cascone. “Leonardo da Vinci’s Greatest Unfinished Painting Literally Has His Fingerprints All Over It—and Now You Can See Them for Yourself” accessed 18 August 2021, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/leonardo-st-jerome-metropolitan-museum-1594957

The process of creating a portrait is an intimate shared experience between the artist and sitter. A traditional portrait painted from life requires multiple sittings with the artist for a number of hours. During these sittings the subject is studied in extreme detail and is placed in a vulnerable position of scrutiny. Leonard Mitchell's portrait of *Mary-Annette Hay*, c.1945 (Wellington: New Zealand Portrait Gallery Te Pūkenga Whakaata) exudes an air of mystery as to why her body has been left as mere outlines. Hay says of the work:

> The current exhibition there [NZPG] features two portraits, not by me, but of me originating back to those Art School years. The portraits are by Leonard Mitchell who was a student and teacher at the same time. One portrait is unfinished. Why? Well thereby hangs a tale![6]

A clue to the works abandonment is hidden within the multiple letters between the two students of art held in Te Papa's archives. While posted in Burnham Military Camp Mitchell wrote to Hay:

> I have for the last four nights dreamed in vivid reality that I was painting a portrait of you. You were seated in a little wood under a tree, you wore a long delicate dress that lingered right down to the flower covered earth...Your eyes and hair were amazingly beautiful, the whole Mary was so gorgeously exquisite that I felt that I shall have to make it an enduring reality… I firmly believe that this dream was sent to me for a reason.[7]

This letter reveals Mitchell's plan for the setting of the work and also included a sketch of the tree mentioned. Their relationship ended while he was completing military training and led to the portrait being left unfinished. It is also of note that Te Papa denied the work for its collections due to it being incomplete in 2008-9 and the work was kindly donated to the NZPG in 2015.

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[6] John Toft, "Mary-Annette Hay, Founding Member" accessed 18 August 2021, https://www.watercolournewzealand.nz/about/history_hay.htm

[7] Leonard Mitchell. *Leonard Mitchell to Mary-Annette Hay*. Letter. From Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, *CA000214/001/0005*, 23rd June 1945.

Personal circumstance can bring a portrait to life but also end it prematurely. This is evident when considering the artistic relationship between Leo Bensemann and Rita Angus. In 1938 Bensemann and his close friend Lawrence Baigent moved into a studio flat together at 97 Cambridge Terrace which was right next door to Rita Angus.[8] This became the catalyst for their collaborative artistic ventures and each of the three painted numerous portraits of each other. Bensemann took great care and skill to produce the pencil drawing *Rita Angus,* 1938 (Christchurch Art Gallery) which begs the question of why the final oil painting *Rita Angus*, 1938-39 (Wellington: Alexander Turnbull Library) was left unfinished. Dr Oliver Stead of the Alexander Turnbull Library provides the explanation of a particularly painful break up.[9] It is speculated that Angus unexpectedly left Christchurch after a love affair ended which left the work suspended in time. Interestingly, the portrait of Angus is on the verso of a portrait that Bensemann completed of Lawrence Baigent 10 years later. This points to his personal attachment to the work and the friendship he had formed with Angus in those days at the Cambridge Terrace flats.

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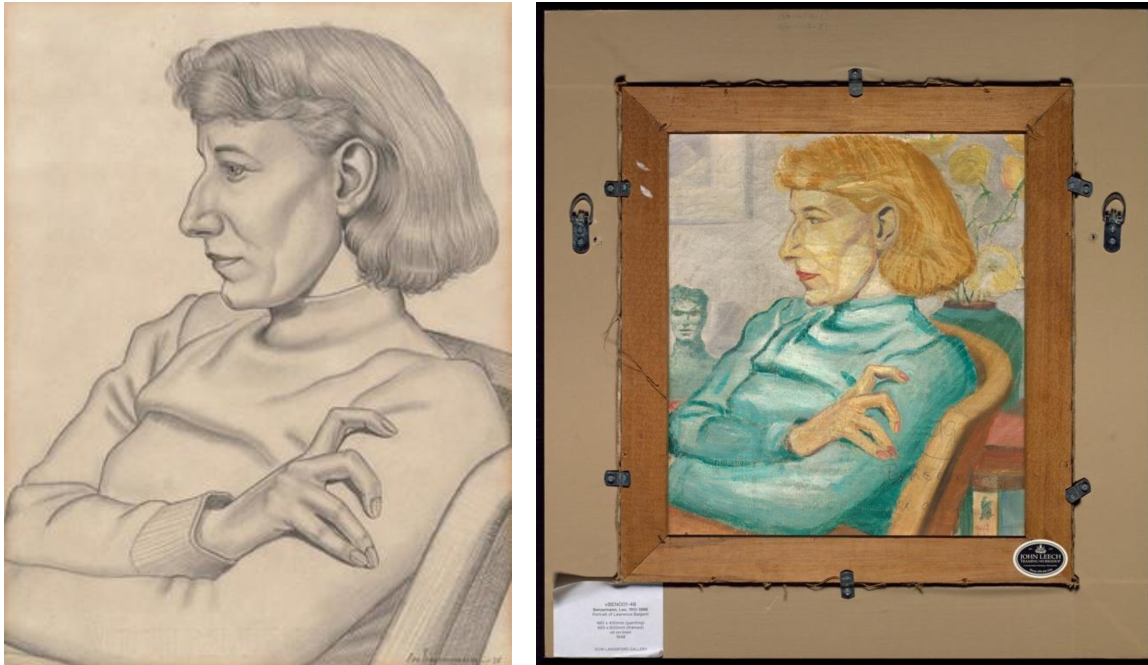
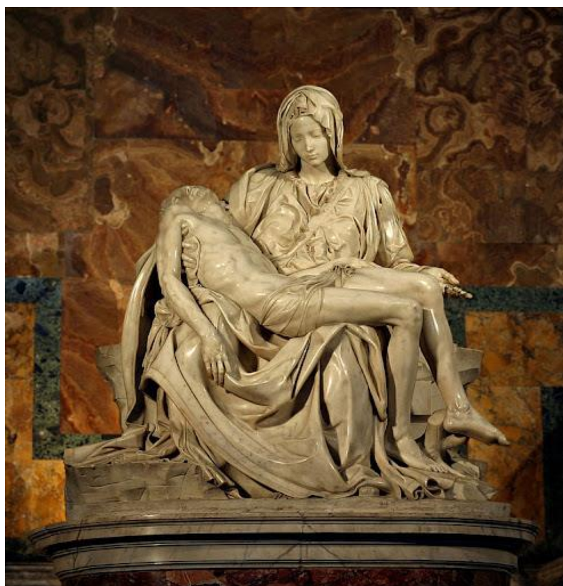
[8] Peter Vangioni, "Rita Angus by Leo Bensemann" accessed 18 Augsut 2021, https://christchurchartgallery.org.nz/blog/collection/2015/05/rita-angus-by-leo-bensemann
[9] Alexander Turnbull Endowment Trust, "Dr Oliver Stead in the Large Format Paintings Store*," Youtube video, 0:45,* posted by "Turnbull Endowment Trust," 1 July 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpcrZDjHnwg



The labelling of an artwork as ‘unfinished’ has its own complexities. Traditionally, the signature of the artist on the work is an indicator of completion. Yet, as far back as Pliny’s *Natural History,* written in 77 ce, the symbolism of the artist’s signature is questioned. Pliny details how ancient artists signed their works in the imperfect tense “faciebat” as a humble sign that the works were not finished or imperfect. Towards the 1500s, artists increasingly used the “imperfect form of facere”, most notably Michelangelo’s *Pietà,* 1498-99 (Vatican City: St. Peter's Basilica).[10] It is the only sculpture in his oeuvre to hold his signature, as it is said that he overheard a viewer misidentify the work as being by another artist.[11] The signature features prominently on the chest of Mary as an abbreviated form of “Michelangelo Buonarroti the Florentine made [this]”. The choice to use “faciebat” within the inscription suggests that it was a way to show that he did not believe the work fulfilled the Renaissance ideals of perfection at the time. We learn from this sculpture that finish is subjective and although to our eye the sculpture is flawless, to its creator it was not complete. Therefore, we cannot rely on the presence or absence of a signature to decide whether a work has been successful.

[10] Paul Barolsky, “Ovid, Michelangelo and the Non Finito.” Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics 24, no. 2 (2016): 142, accessed 18 August 2021, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/arion.24.2.0141
[11] Barolsky, “Ovid, Michelangelo and the Non Finito.”, 142, accessed 18 August 2021, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/arion.24.2.0141



The truly intriguing aspect of an unfinished portrait is the revelation of the artist's personal process to the viewer. As Eric Rothstein explains in his article *"Ideal Presence" and the "Non Finito" in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics,* "To the artist who designs the artifact, it represents a dense web of decisions, but to the viewer, it should seem transparent".[12] This ideology was envisioned by French art critics in the 18th century who strove for art to imitate perfection. The unfinished portrait exposes the creative decisions by the artist as the work is suspended in a permanent state of development and therefore reflects the imperfection of reality.

Such artistic process is captured in a photograph taken by Jean Bertram, *Rita Angus painting Self-portrait,* 1936-1937 (Wellington: Museum of new Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa) as Angus is actively at work on her own *Self-Portrait,* c. 1937 (Dunedin Public Art Gallery). By comparing the photograph of the portrait in progress and the finished work, it is evident where Angus has edited along the way. At some point between finishing the figure and starting the background Angus has altered her hairstyle, flattening out her original waves for a slicked-back look which speaks to the emerging image of the modern woman in the 1930s. It is also evident that she has reduced the creases in her scarf that she holds and works with a gridded guide to structure the background. This photograph is a rare snapshot of the process that led to the completion of an iconic New Zealand portrait.

[12] Eric Rothstein. "'Ideal Presence' and the 'Non Finito' in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 9, no. 3 (1976): 309, accessed 18 August 2021, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2737513

Historically, if we look back to the time of Byzantine icon painters, unfinished works were not tolerated. If an artist were to die during the production of a work, it's imperfection deemed it useless as it did not replicate the sacred examples of religious icons.[13] Therefore, their interrupted works would go on to be completed by others and made unfinished works of the time very rare.

This opinion changed by the 16th century when critics began to see genius in the unfinished works of Renaissance Masters and it consequently became fashionable to leave a work incomplete, birthing the term "non-finito" (literally translating to "not finished").[14] A notable example is Donatello's *Cantoria,* 1433-1439 (Florence: Museo dell'Opera del Duomo), which purposefully used a sketchy style in the rendering of the figures. The positive reception of the sculpture is recorded by three writers of the time, the anonymous author of the *Libro di Antonio Billi*, Giovanni Battista Gelli, and prominent art historian, Giorgio Vasari. The *Billi* author's entry compares Donatello's work to the polished sister-balcony by Luca della Robbia*, Cantoria*, 1431-1436 (Florence: Museo dell'Opera del Duomo): "Written in 1525, this is one of the earliest examples of an author describing an artwork as both unfinished and

[13] Dr. Nico Van Hout, "The Unfinished Painting" accessed 18 August 2021, https://www.codart.nl/feature/curators-project/the-unfinished-painting/
[14] Figes, "Unfinished: Why are we Drawn to Imperfection?"

superior to a completed sculpture."[15] In his famous book, *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects,* Vasari spoke of the *Cantoria* as a sculpture to learn from as "sometimes it is better to leave works as a beautiful sketch (una bella bozza) than to polish them thoroughly".[16]

Titian's (Tiziano Vecellio), *The Flaying of Marsyas,* c.1570 (Czechia: Olomouc Museum of Art) is an early example of experimentation with "non-finito" in painting. The work is completed in two styles; the Marsyas' eye, King Midas'crown and Apollo's wreath are rendered in Titian's signature detail but they are set against a much more painterly backdrop.[17] The sky and vegetation are applied in a loose and almost expressionistic way and by juxtaposing these two styles the objects in detail are brought to the viewer's attention. The fear and pain of Marsyas is conveyed through that single wide eye that jumps from the canvas. This painterly style and it's large scale made it perfect to view from a distance and made way for the unfinished ideals of painting that were to develop in the centuries to come.

[15] Stephen Mack, "Before Non Finito: A Rough Aesthetic in Quattrocento Sculpture from Donatello to Michelangelo". Rutgers The State University of New Jersey, School of Graduate Studies, 2021, 20. Accessed 18 August 2021, https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/before-em-non-finito-rough-aesthetic quattrocento/docview/2513302822/se-2?accountid=14782

[16] Mack, "Before Non Finito: A Rough Aesthetic in Quattrocento Sculpture from Donatello to Michelangelo", 20.

[17] Alastair Sooke, "The Thrilling Beauty of Unfinished Art" accessed 18 August, https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20160321-is-some-art-better-left-unfinished

It was not until the 17th century, through the work of Venetian art critic Marco Boschini, that the role of the painter's physicality to create a work of art was brought to attention. In his book, *La Carta del Navegar Pitoresco* (1660), Boschini saw the brushstroke as a trace of the artist's "kinaesthetic activity" and consequently believed that the artist's identity is exposed through their individual application.[18] This was the beginnings of provenance and the authorship of artworks. This process focussed on works which were gestural rather than life-like imitations as critics concentrated on the physicality of manipulating pigment. This led Venetian critics "to prefer canvases in which form was suggested rather than fully described".[19]

By the 19th century, art conventions were reinvented with the formation of the Impressionist movement in France, whose primary goal was to capture fleeting moments in time. It was no longer desired to replicate a person's appearance true to life but to capture the artist's impression of them. The artist would work quickly in front of their subject to capture the changing effects of natural light that "en plein air" provided. This developed into a greater

[18] Paula Carabell, "Finito and Non-Finito in Titian's Last Paintings," *Anthropology and Aesthetics,* no. 28 (1995): 82, accessed 18 August 2021, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20166931
[19] Carabell, "Finito and Non-Finito in Titian's Last Paintings," 88.

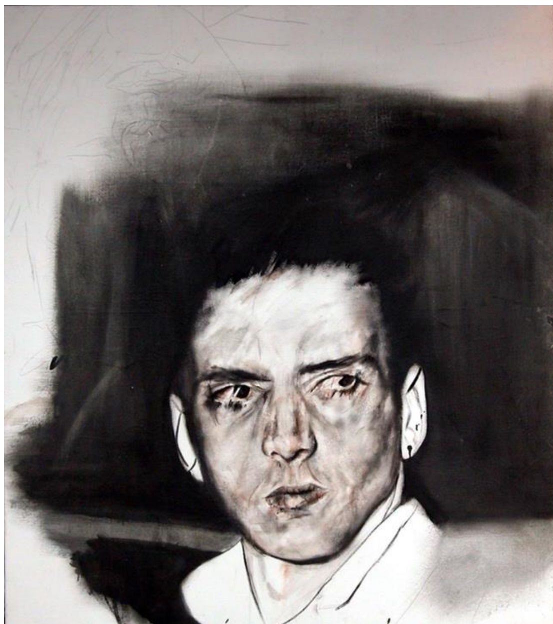
awareness of light and experimentation with colour. Brushwork was rapid and disjointed as the impasto application of paint was left visible.[20] This new style directly opposed the academic highly finished standards that were previously heralded and made way for a new appreciation for unfinishedness. Impressionist artists embraced the physicality of painting, leaving their individual trace on the canvas for all to see. Berthe Morisot's *Self-Portrait*, 1885 (Paris: Musée Marmottan Monet) displays her loose technique as long squiggly brushstrokes emanate from behind her figure, deliberately juxtaposed against the canvas which has been left bare. Her own gestures that created this portrait are replicated in it as a rapid spiral surrounds her paintbrush in the lower left corner. Works such as this redefined what a finished portrait could look like.

Today, many contemporary artists embrace the unfinished aesthetic that has developed over the past 600 years. By purposefully leaving a work that seems unfinished, the artist reveals themselves and their role in the work's production. There is an overwhelming appreciation for the imperfect from the modern audience for these faux- unfinished artworks, as Eva Reifert from the Department of European Paintings at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

[20] Tate Britain, "Art Term: Impressionism" accessed 18 August 2012, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/i/impressionism

states, “we seem increasingly ready to appreciate the unexpected and unresolved, the traces of process in interrupted and unfinished work, to the point where we accept an unfinished work as an entirely satisfying visual experience.”[21]

Ben Webb’s *Study 1999,* 1999 (Auckland: The Wallace Arts Trust) plays into the discourse of whether a sketch is a complete artwork in its own right. Historically, the sketch was by definition considered incomplete. Its sole purpose was as the precursor to a larger, fully realised painting and was not independently recognised as a work of art. Traditional studies are drawn up in a small format as quick sketches to have room to explore ideas for a larger piece. They are intimate experiments that are usually for the artist’s eyes only. The large-scale presence of *Study 1999* flips this convention and demands to be viewed at a distance forcing the viewer to stand back for the sketchy style to have its full effect. Webb has also imitated the blending effect of charcoal in oils and left sketch lines visible to induce the feeling that this work is still in progress. The opinion of the sketch is noted to have changed with its inclusion in the 1830 edition of the *Edinburgh Encyclopaedia* where it is discussed in detail in a celebratory light, even going so far as to place it above the finished painting. The excerpt praises the sketch for its superior power to engage the viewer’s imagination.[22] This is the key to the enjoyment of portraits that look unfinished.



[21]The Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Unfinished Works in European Art, ca. 1500–1900” accessed 18 August 2021, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/unfi/hd_unfi.htm

[22] Wendelin A. Guentner, “British Aesthetic Discourse, 1780-1830: The Sketch, the Non Finito, and the Imagination,” College Art Association 52, no. 2 (1993): 42, accessed 18 August 2021, https://www.jstor.org/stable/777237

The viewer's imagination is notably provoked in Sacha Lees', *Sometimes an Outline Coloured in*, 2019 (Wellington: The New Zealand Portrait Gallery Te Pūkenga Whakaata). Lees expands on the depiction of the artist at work as she seemingly fills in her own image before our eyes. She has purposefully left segments of herself outlined with the background showing through, replicating the look of the truly unfinished *Saint Jerome in the Wilderness.* The stark contrast between the empty space and intense detail of 'completed' areas creates the effect of her face almost protruding from the canvas. Lees' self-scrutinising portrait plays into the fascination of unfinished portraits. She has captured the process of the artist and applied the instinctual desire to fill in the missing pieces of the puzzle with our own mind's eye.

Artistic process and the "non-finito" aesthetic culminate in the portraiture of Pippa Sanderson. Through her series of portraits *Equivalent Exchange,* 2021 (p.c), Sanderson experiments with the question; what constitutes a finished artwork? Contemporary discourse has broken free from historical portraiture conventions and a portrait's aim is no longer to solely capture a person's physical features. Her interest lies in the nuances of watercolour and she explores this through the vessel of portraiture. This experimentation has resulted in multiple versions of the same silhouette completed to different degrees of finish. Every work is carefully calculated and the moment that a portrait is complete is decided solely by the

artist. Some versions have more of a tie-dye effect where the features of the person are merely suggested and others are pushed further with more detail. Due to the properties of the watercolour, varying versions of the same person can differ greatly and pushes the viewer to zone in on their most prominent identifying features.

The modern audience sees possibility in fragmentation and unfinishedness as it reveals the artistic process and leaves room for personal interpretation. The truly interrupted portraits expose the thought behind an artist's vision and leave us with the nagging infinite question of "what if?" What if this portrait was completed? What would it look like? Would there be a new meaning conveyed and would my feelings differ towards it? The unfinished portrait summons a paradox of emotions. Initial intrigue and curiosity into its fruition which transform into anxiety and concern for why it was left incomplete. Many of these unfinished portraits were never meant to be seen by anyone other than the artist. Viewing them feels like a secret being whispered into one's ear and brings us that much closer to the artist behind them. Unfinished portraits, whether by choice or not, hold a deep philosophical existence as they remind us of the intrinsic unfinishedness of life. Contemplating the complex history and creative contemporary application of "non-finito", I believe that Pliny the Elder may have been onto something all those centuries ago when he declared that " unfinished paintings are held in greater esteem than finished works"; an unfinished portrait is all the more evocative.

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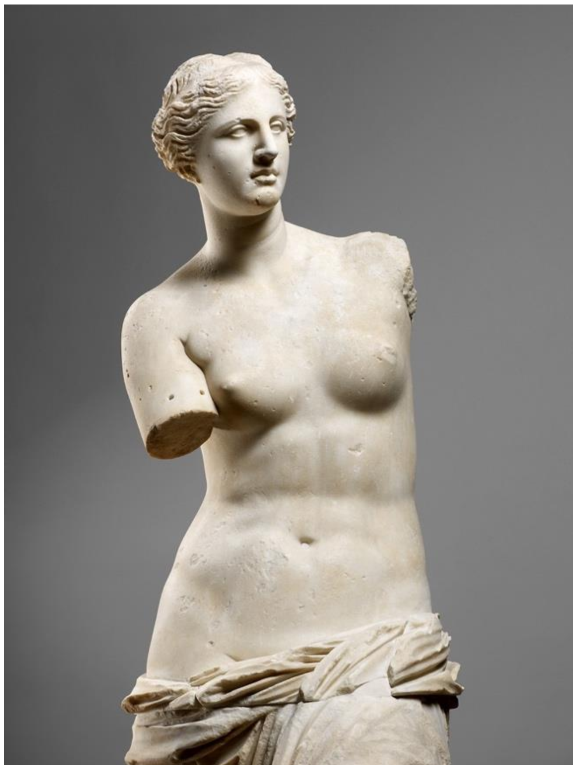

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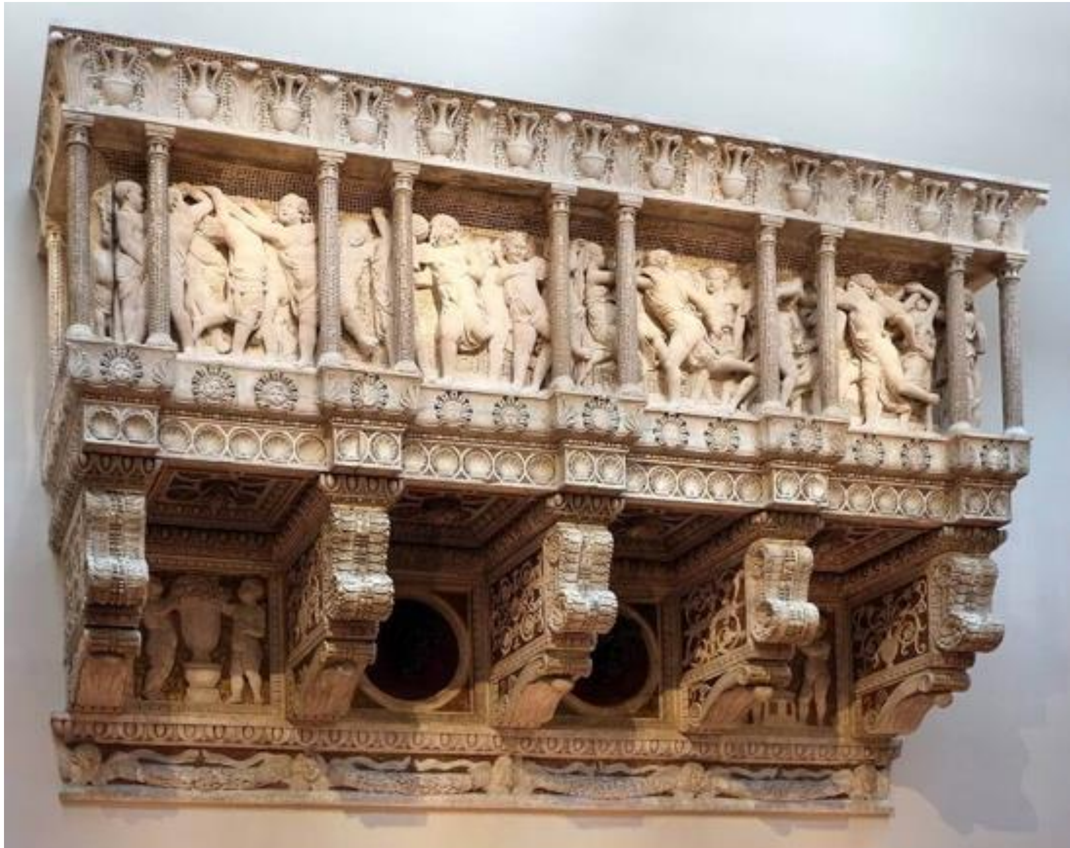

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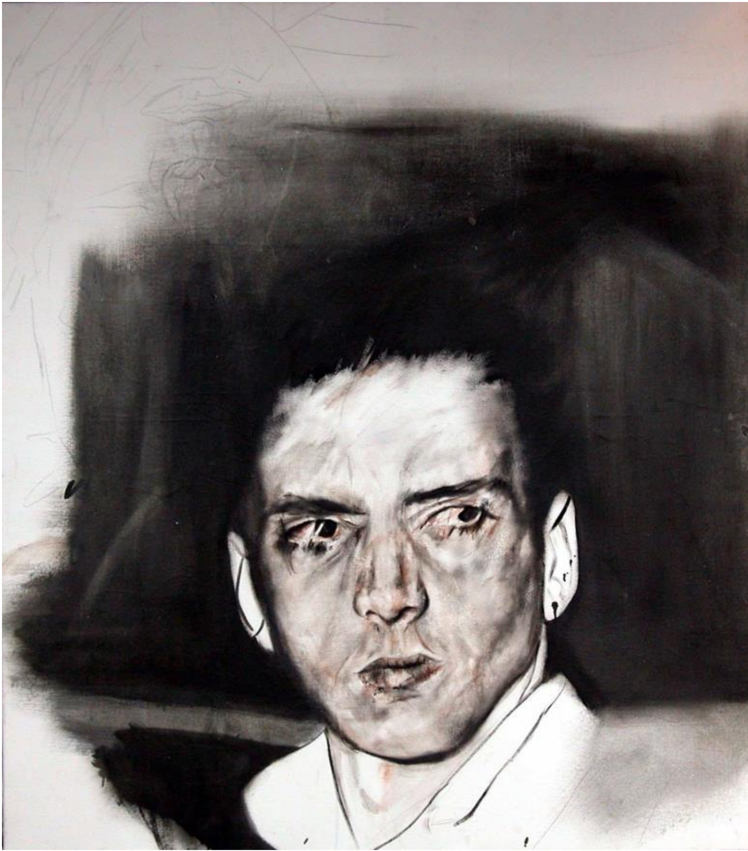

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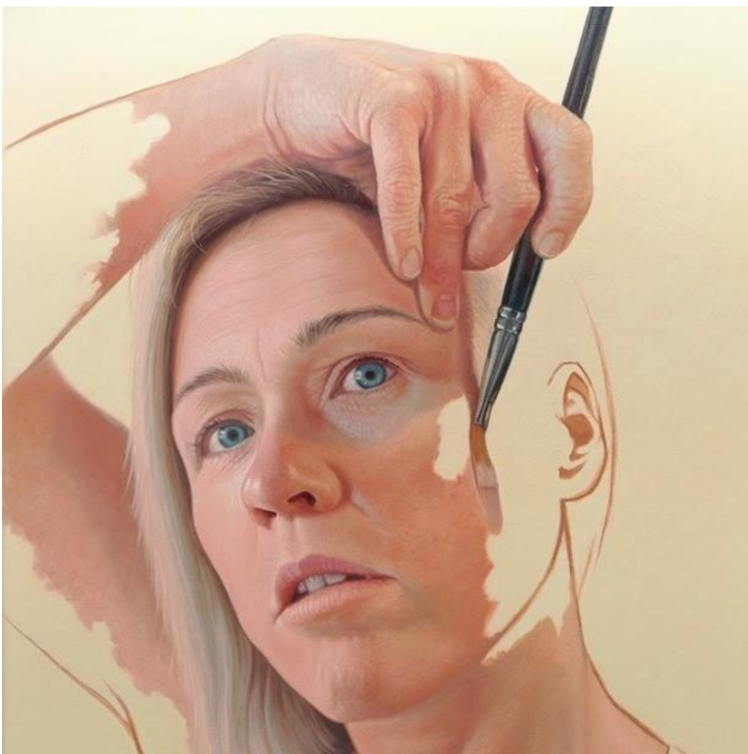

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