Is the Lady a Tramp?

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Of the many sixteenth-century Venetian portraits of women that exist today very few of the sitters can be securely identified. The vast majority are listed as "Portrait of a Lady," or by some equally vague rubric. Who are these women? If we can't know their names, what can we know about them? In some instances the answers to these questions lie in the graceful, seemingly innocuous gestures the women make. A particular lift of the hand in religious paintings signifies welcome, but in a portrait, when coupled with a certain directness of gaze, could mean sexual invitation, even if the sitter is decorously attired. Couture and coiffure, accessories and accompaniments, are clues that help distinguish the courtesan from the lady.

This study relies upon contemporary textual evidence to support these new interpretations of the images, and to understand them in their cultural context.