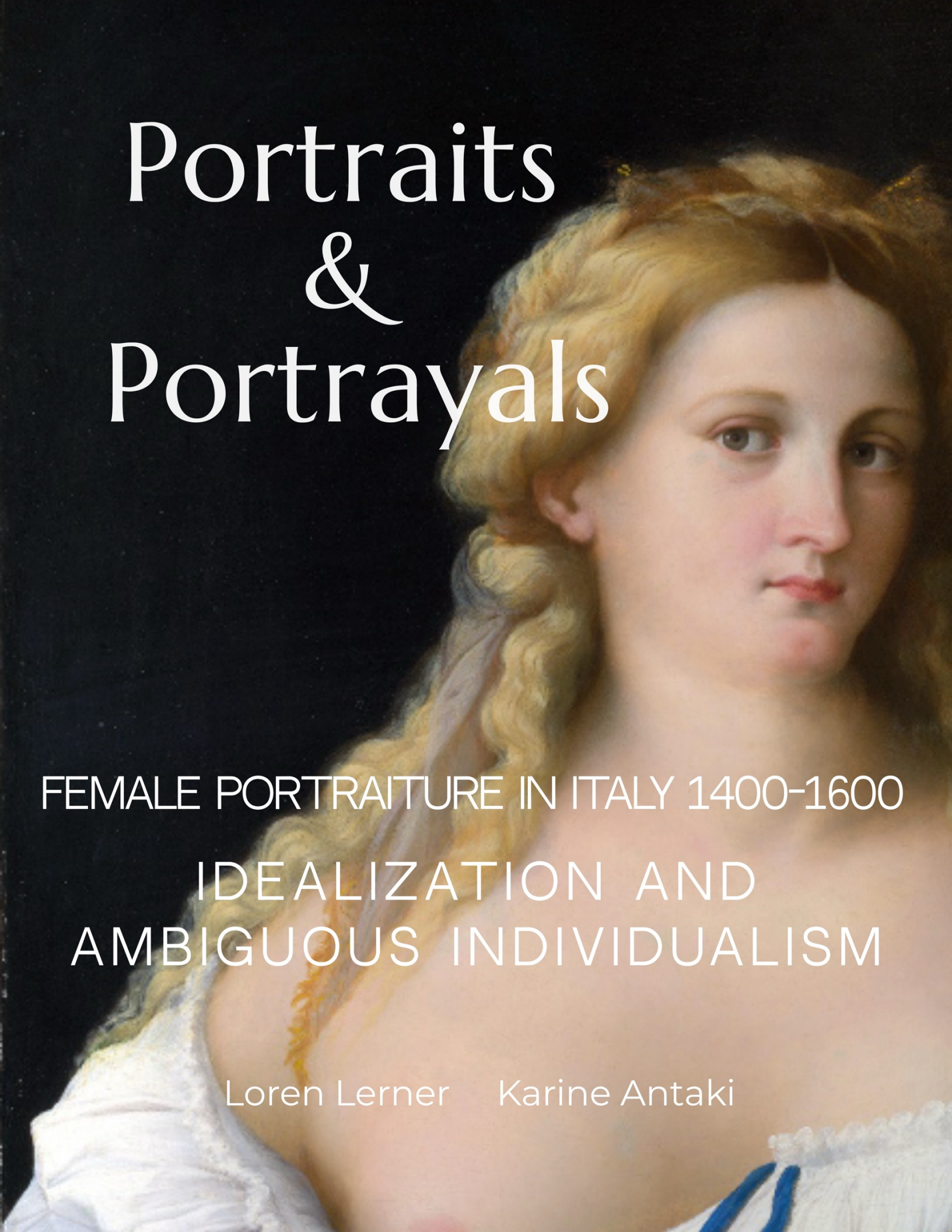


Portraits & Portrayals

A classical painting of a woman with long, wavy blonde hair, wearing a white dress with a blue sash, looking slightly to the right. The background is dark.

FEMALE PORTRAITURE IN ITALY 1400-1600

IDEALIZATION AND
AMBIGUOUS INDIVIDUALISM

Loren Lerner Karine Antaki

Portraits & Portrayals

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INDIVIDUALISM

Loren Lerner
Karine Antaki

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Cover Image: Palma Vecchio, *A Blonde Woman*, detail, c. 1520

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FEMALE PORTRAITURE IN ITALY 1400-1600: IDEALIZATION AND AMBIGUOUS INDIVIDUALISM

INTRODUCTION

Female Portraiture in Italy 1400-1600: Idealization and Ambiguous Individualism is one of a series of art history eBooks titled *Portraits and Portrayals*, which investigates a broad array of subjects, issues, and themes related to individual representation. These encompass likeness and authenticity, memory and remembrance, identity and self-presentation, evolving standards of beauty, propaganda, and portrayals of individuals and groups in relation to class, race, sexuality, and gender. Concentrating on depictions of people in Western art from the fifteenth to the twenty-first century, the series examines artists' works within the context of shifting socio-political trends and cultural influences. The mediums include paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, photographs, and caricatures. The information is derived from numerous scholarly sources, including journal articles, books, exhibition catalogues, and online resources. The publication emphasizes visual content, prioritizing numerous public-domain artworks over extensive textual explanation, thereby making the e-book particularly suitable for developing skills in analyzing, interpreting, and contextualizing these works.

Portraiture is the artistic discipline and tradition dedicated to creating portraits that capture a subject's likeness. Conversely, portrayal refers to how a subject is depicted, represented, or interpreted in a specific artwork. Although the term portraiture encompasses a broad spectrum, portrayal delineates the artistic decisions made within a single work. Both portraits and portrayals are grounded in the principles of representational (figurative) art and focus on individuals and groups. As interconnected modalities, both are influenced by the

artist's sensibility and understanding, aiming to encapsulate and convey human identity.

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PROFILES AND PRECEDENTS

Portraiture as a distinct genre emerged in Renaissance Italy in the second quarter of the fifteenth century. Before that, Italian painting was almost exclusively tied to the Catholic Church. Altarpieces and frescoes focused strictly on religious narratives, primarily centred on the Virgin Mary, Jesus and Christian saints.

The emergence of Renaissance portraiture was profoundly influenced by humanism and the revival of classical learning, which emphasized individual potential and civic virtue. This mindset shifted the artistic emphasis from religious themes to genuine portrayals of individuals and their unique characteristics. Simultaneously, renewed interest in Greco-Roman ideals of balance, proportion, and harmony in art inspired the pursuit of an idealized concept of beauty, regarded as a perfection attainable through the synthesis of the real and the sublime.

The relationship between art and beauty was articulated early in the Renaissance by Leon Battista Alberti in his 1435 treatise, *De Pictura*, which played a pivotal role in reestablishing a connection between beauty and the figurative arts. According to Alberti, ideal beauty must transcend mere physical appearance, encompassing God's rational order in the universe, manifested through perfect harmony, proportion, and number (*concinntas*). These elements integrate seamlessly, symbolizing divine intellect and inspiring virtuous conduct. He maintained that genuine beauty in art—be it in painting or architecture—stems from mirroring this divinely orchestrated harmony, thereby elevating art to a near-sacred status by linking humanity to the universal good.

The notion that Renaissance art represented a progression from the Dark Ages to an enlightened revival of the Classical era was championed by Giorgio Vasari, who established the initial Academy of Art in Florence. His influential publication, *Lives of the Most Eminent Sculptors, Painters, and Architects* (1550), substantially contributed to the study of classical artworks. In his treatise, he articulated that an

artist “who has not drawn much nor studied the choicest ancient and modern works cannot...improve the things that he studies from life, giving them the grace and perfection in which art goes beyond the scope of nature.”

Early Renaissance portraiture was the domain of the privileged classes: at first, rulers, the nobility, high-ranking clergy, and military figures; subsequently, scholars, artists, and poets. When portraits expanded to encompass a broader social spectrum, male subjects predominated until approximately the middle of the century.



Portrait of Mark Antony, 38 BCE, 0.8 x 0.8 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art.
[View Source](#)

Ancient Roman coins greatly influenced Renaissance profile portraits. Serving as accessible, tangible connections to classical antiquity, original Roman *nummi* and medallions inspired artists to revive the austere, authoritative, and idealized profile style. This allowed rulers and humanist scholars to identify with and evoke Rome's glory.

Beyond their role as currency, these Roman coins functioned as miniature propaganda devices, representing authority and sovereignty. Roman consuls and emperors used coins to promote their image and reinforce their legitimacy across the empire. Marc Antony was a relative and supporter of Julius Caesar, and he served as one of his generals during the conquest of Gaul and Caesar's civil war. As a Roman politician and general, he played a critical role in transforming the Roman Republic from a constitutional republic into the autocratic Roman Empire.



Portrait of Lucilla. 164-169 CE. Bronze. [View Source](#)

The *Portrait of Lucilla* coin was minted to honour Lucilla—daughter of Marcus Aurelius and Faustina Junior. Issued at the Rome mint under the authority of Marcus Aurelius, it commemorates Lucilla's marriage to Lucius Verus and her elevation to the rank of Augusta, the highest and most prestigious female title, serving as the feminine counterpart to Augustus, the ultimate sovereign and emperor.

On the reverse, the goddess Venus is depicted holding a Victory figure—a winged goddess—and a sceptre, the staff symbolizing divine authority and sovereignty. The winged goddess signifies triumph, military achievement, and divine favor, particularly in relation to Roman victories over the Parthian Empire. This imagery served as imperial propaganda to bolster the legitimacy of the ruling dynasty.



Pisanello, *Leonello d'Este*, 1444. Cast bronze, 0.5 x 0.5 in. Victoria and Albert Museum. [View Source](#)

Double-sided portrait medals gained prominence during the Renaissance, predominantly depicting members of the social, intellectual, and political elite. These medals, commissioned to signal status and secure lasting fame, portrayed princes, popes, affluent merchants, the nobility, and distinguished humanist scholars. Usually presented as gifts or keepsakes, medals illustrating women were exceedingly rare.

Antonio Pisano (Pisanello), an esteemed artist and medallist, set the standard for the portrait medal by producing several pieces for the d'Este family, including the double-sided bronze coin of Leonello. One side depicts the patron's regal likeness while the opposite side features a singing lion, serving as a punning reference to his name, Leonello, which signifies 'little lion,' and also alludes to his early-life bravery as a trained soldier.



Pisanello, *Leonello d'Este*, 1441. Tempera on panel, 29.5 x 19.7 cm.
Accademia Carrara. [View Source](#)

Pisanello's panel painting of Leonello d'Este is inspired by his coin, both exemplifying reverence for the cultured prince who presided over a court renowned for its vibrant intellectual environment. The artwork introduces elements of the early portrait genre. Leonello is portrayed

in profile, from the head to the upper torso, facing to the right. Although an evident effort is made to present a realistic likeness, the portrait remains both idealized and personalized. The flattering depiction of Leonello's aquiline nose, smooth complexion, blue eyes, and styled blond hair conveys a sense of noble composure. The golden curls resemble a mane, once again subtly alluding to the "little lion."

With his chest slightly angled towards the viewer, Leonello's upright stance not only suggests a righteous character but also highlights the symbolic elements of his costume. The richly brocaded jacket, adorned with military-style buttons, conveys bravery and pride, while the fine detail of his coat against the delicate floral background evokes refinement and grace. Pisanello fully captures the era's masculine ideal through his portrait of this military captain.

Beyond the philosophical underpinnings of early Renaissance portraiture, commissioned likenesses fulfilled various social and practical functions. Often, they were used as memorial artifacts, as Heather Graham explains in "Pisanello, *Leonello d'Este*" (*Smarthistory*, December 8, 2022).

Patrons were conscious of the power of portraiture to preserve memory, an idea articulated by Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise, *On Painting* (1435-6 *Book II. 25*): 'Painting contains a divine force which not only makes men present, as friendship is said to do, but moreover makes the dead seem almost alive... Even after many centuries, they are recognized with great pleasure and with great admiration for the painter...the face of a man who is already dead certainly lives a long life through painting.'

Aristocrats such as Leonello d'Este not only valued a portrait's ability to preserve their likenesses for future generations but also regarded it as an element of social exchange, presented as a gift on important occasions, such as betrothals or diplomatic ceremonies.

FEMALE PORTRAITS AND THE FEMININE IDEAL

Female subjects began to be depicted with a frequency comparable to that of men in the 1440s; however, the genders were generally represented at different stages of life. In contrast to portraits of men, which were usually commissioned after the subject had achieved political and economic maturity, extant likenesses of women indicate that women were almost exclusively portrayed in youth.



Filippo Lippi, *Portrait of a Lady*, c. 1445. Paint on poplar panel, 49.5 x 32.9 cm. Gemäldegalerie, Berlin. [View Source](#)

Filippo Lippi's *Portrait of a Lady* is among the earliest surviving independent female portraits in Florence. It presents a profile view of

a young lady standing in an intimate interior. Its formal quietude and restraint speak to the subject's refined status within early Renaissance society. It was likely crafted as a marital tribute and successfully harmonizes the woman's opulent attire with an aura of virtue and feminine modesty. Lippi's adeptness with the tempera technique enables the depiction of smooth skin, sparkling jewels, and translucent veils, thereby augmenting the portrait's elegant and almost spiritual essence. Despite its constrained composition, the portrait effectively conveys psychological depth through its meticulous attention to detail.

Renaissance portraits of young ladies were often linked to marriage obligations. They depicted the feminine ideal as aligned with familial wealth, political alliances and female duty, thereby emphasizing physical beauty within societal expectations.

Dale Kent writes in "Women in Renaissance Florence" (*Virtue and Beauty: Leonardo's Ginevra de' Benci and Renaissance Portraits of Women*, edited by David Alan Brown, National Gallery of Art, 2001, 25-48):

The obligations of marriage, in accordance with familial and Christian expectations, were outlined in popular literature—stories, poems, sermons, and works directed specifically toward women. Manuals on marriage, household management, and the raising of children were dedicated in the fifteenth century by the Dominicans Giovanni Dominici and Archbishop, later saint, Antoninus, to the women of the Medici, Alberti, Salviati, and Tornabuoni families; in 1502, Caterina Bongianni had a copy of Fra Bartolommeo's text on marriage in her trousseau.

From the Church's point of view, the duties of a husband were to instruct, correct, cohabit, and support; his wife was to respect, serve, obey, and if necessary, admonish. Their reciprocal obligations were affection, fidelity, honour, and the marital debt. While wifely admonitions were to be pleasant—she might cajole him into better behavior—if she would

not listen to reason, he might resort to "blows, or a real beating and thrashing."

Once she had been removed to her new family, a stranger within its ranks, a wife's identity derived entirely from that of her husband, whose interests she was expected to put before those of father, brothers, or even children.

The walls of the family palace circumscribed her movements. A treatise on marriage of 1520 called *The Nuptial Forest*, evoking the medieval image of woods as dark and perilous places in which one might easily lose one's way, quoted a popular saying deriding women seen in places outside the home: "Women are saints in church, demons in the house, owls at the window, magpies at the door, and goats in the garden."

Within her home, the physical conditions of a woman's life were determined by the constant demands of childbirth. An endless cycle of pregnancies was interrupted only by periods of lactation, and for wealthy women who were expected to employ wet nurses rather than suckling children themselves, not even this offered respite. High fertility was in the interests of the male lineage, and given the extremely high rate of mortality (approximately half of all children born died before the age of two, and half of those who survived their first two years were dead before they reached sixteen), women bore the brunt of the need to produce male heirs.

...

The Florentine merchant Gregorio Dati recorded in his diary his marriages to four wives, with details of the dowries they brought him, the birth of twenty-six children, the deaths of all but eight by the end of the diary, and the deaths of his first three wives, one after a miscarriage, another after the difficult birth of her

eighth child, and the third in childbirth. It should be noted that his businesslike attitude toward marriage and procreation did not preclude personal affection. Describing the death of his third wife, Ginevra, who bore him eleven children in fifteen years, after "lengthy suffering which she faced with remarkable strength and patience," he observed that "her loss has sorely tried me." He chronicled the passing of the children whom God "had lent us," expressing love and grief.

Within the painful realism of this context, female portraiture sought to shape and communicate gender norms of femininity while depicting a woman's likeness, refined to meet standards of idealized perfection. Traits such as a high, rounded forehead, plucked eyebrows, golden hair, fair skin, rosy cheeks, ruby lips, white teeth, dark eyes, and elegant hands—considered the most desirable elements of female beauty—were often incorporated into portraits of women, alongside individual differences.



Pisanello, *Ginevra d'Este*, c. 1434–35. Tempera on panel, 43 x 30 cm. Louvre Museum. [View Source](#)

Pisanello's portrait of Ginevra d'Este, sister of Leonello, was commissioned to commemorate her marriage to Sigismondo Malatesta, the ruler of Rimini, and to symbolize the families' political

alliance. Not only does it illustrate the influence of classical art on Renaissance portraiture, but it also, in its intricate detail, depicts contemporary taste and fashion, which played a key role in shaping ideas about female beauty.

Ginevra displays the long blonde hair, pale complexion, and rosy cheeks of Renaissance high fashion. The curve of her profile is gracefully yet sharply defined, with her locks pulled back to emphasize a shapely forehead and an expanse of porcelain-white skin. The young princess stands against a backdrop of foliage, butterflies, and flowers. The butterfly appears to be a *Vanessa atalanta*, characterized by its black wings, red bands, and white spots. Positioned near her brow, the butterfly symbolizes her pure soul.

Frank Zöllner considers the symbolic meaning of the butterfly in “The ‘Motions of the Mind’ in Renaissance Portraits: The Spiritual Dimension of Portraiture” (*Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 68, no. 1 (2005): 23–40).

The butterfly was generally understood as a sign for the ever-regenerating powers of nature, as well as the longing of the soul - imprisoned in its earthly body - to return to its creator and thus to overcome death. Just as the butterfly always seeks the light, the soul aspires to the divine light of salvation. This topos is conveniently summarized by Leonardo da Vinci in one of his beautiful aphorisms, which reads: “Now you see that hope and the desire for repatriation and returning to our first state of chaos is similar to the urge which drives the butterflies into the light, and that man who with continual longing and full of joy looks always forward to the new spring, always to the new summer, always to new months and new years, deeming that the things he longs for are ever too late in coming - he does not realize that he is longing for his own destruction. But this desire is the very quintessence, the spirit of the elements, which, finding itself imprisoned by the soul, is ever longing to return from the human body to its giver.”

Ginevra's true physical features may have been idealized, but the beautification also aimed to reflect her social status. It reminds us that beyond striving for realism in individual likenesses, the new portrait genre was deeply tied to cultural context and used visual symbols to convey meaning within a broader framework.

In 1867, in his book *History of the Renaissance*, Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt described the era in comparison to the Middle Ages as follows:

Thus, what the word Renaissance really means is new birth to liberty—the spirit of humanity recovering consciousness and the power of self-determination, recognizing the beauty of the outer world and of the body through art, liberating the reason in science and the conscience in religion, restoring culture to the intelligence, and establishing the principle of political freedom.

This idea of liberty and self-awareness, as described by Burckhardt and linked to Renaissance revolutionary notions of selfhood, expressed itself differently across genders. For women, identity was inexorably attached to social status. Female identity, intertwined with family and community, was more a public concept than a personal one. As a result, the way a woman was depicted in a portrait reflected the public image of an identity shaped by the period's societal ideals.

This should not imply that women lacked value in their roles as wives and mothers. Rather, among the nobility, women played a key role in forming important social and political alliances for their families. The way a woman was defined and depicted was essential not only to her personal identity but also to the broader social structure.

The male-dominated rhetoric of the intellectual elite shaped the cultural standards by which women were raised and judged as daughters and wives. In 1416, the Venetian humanist Francesco Barbaro wrote *On Wifely Duties* to commemorate the marriage of Lorenzo de' Medici the Elder, his friend and peer. Drawing on ideas

from ancient philosophers, his treatise served as a guide to finding the ideal woman for the fifteenth century.

Barbaro's views suggested that a wife's true wealth was not in the monetary assets she would bring to a marriage, but her human worth—her capacity to conceive, give birth to, and raise noble children. He emphasized the importance of marriage to the stability of aristocratic ruling families in his native Venice, in particular, and to that of Italian city-states more broadly.

Barbaro's focus on virtue did not negate the significance of visible wealth. The practice of a husband bejewelling his young brides continued to serve two purposes: to display status and honour. In "A Profile Portrait of a Renaissance Woman in the National Gallery of Victoria" (*Art Journal* June 19, 2014, online)

Simons explains,

Expensive jewellery was very much a man's to bestow, in a patrilineal society where women had little income or inheritance of their own to disperse. Usually, jewellery was given by the husband (or father) at the time of a marriage. Advising her son about the adornment of a potential bride in 1465, Alessandra Strozzi wrote, "She must have beautiful jewels, for just as you have won honour in many things, you cannot fall short in this."

While Barbaro discusses adornment as a positive aspect, his analogy likens it to the "golden facade" of a palace, which symbolizes the husband's human and financial wealth rather than a superficial attempt to impress others. He asserted that wives "should not be confined to their bedrooms like prisoners; instead, they should be allowed to go out, as this privilege serves as evidence of their virtue."

Portraits acted as displays of desirability, visualizing a woman's virtue and propriety. As Ludovico Gonzaga observed in 1475, a well-crafted portrait reflected a suitable image of stature and "grace," while also ensuring the recognisability of the lady and, more importantly, the family—both of which were vital to Renaissance social constructs such

as marriages. Family unions among upper-class fifteenth-century Italians were primarily lineage-based, driven more by political interests than by personal affection, and the recognition and promotion of familial status were key components of portrait commissions.



Sandro Botticelli, *Portrait of a Young Woman*, c. 1485. Tempera on wood, 61 x 40.5 cm. Pitti Palace. [View Source](#)

In Florentine society, women managed the domestic sphere, while men typically handled public affairs. Beyond indicating social rank and marital status, clothing signified gender role differences and was highlighted in images. For example, the elaborate public attire of upper-class women, featuring vividly coloured fabrics and stunning jewels, was complemented by an indoor wardrobe that, in its simplicity and practicality, suggested a lady's domestic role.

In Botticelli's *Portrait of a Young Woman*, the subject's features are simplified to highlight her silhouette, neck, and face shape. The young woman is modestly dressed and stands within a quiet, confined interior. Behind her, the frame of a door or window serves as both a literal and a figurative barrier between home and the wider world. While Renaissance wives did enjoy social life and dressed for public occasions, here the subject wears typical daywear suited to domestic tasks. Her plain clothing and tied-up hairstyle suggest that she is married. Despite its simplicity, her well-crafted dress signifies that she was part of the upper class.

In "Portrait of a Young Woman" (*Smarthistory*, October 9, 2019), Lane Eagles describes how the garment details indicate that the woman is upper-class, an assumption reinforced by the fact that her family was wealthy enough to commission a portrait from a sought-after painter.

While the dress in *Portrait of a Young Woman* is unassuming, it is not cheap. The overgown—the outermost dress layer—is tailored from a plain brown material, possibly cotton. Using a heartier textile assured the gown would last for years of indoor wear. This dress was designed for supervising the home, including tasks like instructing servants and overseeing deliveries. It was meant to be moved in. The figure's waist is encased in deep pleats. Her skirts push forward, and are so full with extra fabric that she has shoved her hands into their depths via pockets. Her brown locks are swept up in a simple cotton cap.

Clues confirming the figure's high status embellish the plain outfit. A black ribbon necklace, possibly ending in an unseen cross pendant (a popular accessory at the time), hangs from her neck. This woman wears at least one undergown, which can be seen peeking from the edges of her neckline beneath the frontal laces. The undergarment has also been pulled out from the sleeve gaps at the arm seam and elbow. A sheer lace partlet modestly covers her shoulders, and a translucent material, possibly silk or more lace, completes the bonnet to shield her hair, a symbol of wifely rejection of vanity.

It is believed that the portrait depicts Clarice Orsini, a member of the Roman Orsini family, who married into the powerful Medici family at the age of nineteen, in June 1469. This marriage to Florence's Lorenzo the Magnificent de Medici was politically motivated to help establish the two families' planned dominance of Tuscany. As Eagles describes, "If the figure in *Portrait of a Young Woman* is indeed Clarice Orsini, Botticelli, as a Medici court painter, was tasked with creating a humble portrait of Lorenzo de'Medici's virtuous wife, assuming appropriate, indoor female gentility."

Portrait of a Young Woman exemplifies norms in fifteenth-century Italian society that were widespread across social strata, encompassing codified dress and comportment.

For instance, social etiquette dictated that an honourable woman should refrain from direct eye contact with men to avoid temptation or being tempted herself. The 15th-century Franciscan preacher San Bernardino advised women to "bury their eyes" as a gesture of modesty and obedience, a perspective that was echoed in contemporary accounts. When the poet Veronica Gambara openly gazed at her object of "desire," her descriptions did not refer to a man but to "hills," "waters," and a "gracious site." "Desire is pent except for you alone," she articulated to her "best places."

The embodiment of virtuous character in female portraiture was visually conveyed through a reserved, upright posture. The profile

pose, with eyes turned away from the viewer, highlighted a woman's decorative appearance and aligned with societal expectations of modesty and moral integrity.



Piero del Pollaiuolo, *Portrait of a Young Woman*, c. 1470, Oil and tempera on panel, 45.5 cm. x 32.7 cm. Museo Poldi Pezzoli. [View Source](#)

According to Patricia Simons in her essay "Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture" (*History Workshop* no. 28 (1988): 4-30), the combination of the subject's averted eyes and her desexualized depiction from the waist up enabled male viewers to observe her features without fear of rejection or seduction.

Dale Kent explores female destiny and the dowry system in "Women in Renaissance Florence" (*Virtue and Beauty: Leonardo's Ginevra de' Benci and Renaissance Portraits of Women*, edited by David Alan Brown, National Gallery of Art, 2001, 25-48). She writes,

As Francesco Bábaro stressed in his famous treatise concerning wives presented to Cosimo de' Medici's brother Lorenzo when he married Ginevra Cavalcanti, the first duty of a man was to marry and increase his family. A woman's primary function was to serve as the vessel by which the lineage was maintained. A woman's secondary function was as the means of attaching to the lineage by marriage allies from other Florentine families with desirable attributes—wealth, nobility, and political influence ...The dowry was the major component of the marriage exchange, but in Florence it was augmented with gifts from the bride's kin and counter-gifts from her husband and his family. The expenses of contracting an honourable union were considerable on both sides. Patrician men postponed marriage until their early thirties, waiting, perhaps, to accumulate a respectable fortune. Young women were usually betrothed between twelve and eighteen, to ensure that they came to the wedding bed as virgin.

Since garments played a vital role in evaluating a lady's character, artists consistently emphasized both the attire and the woman herself, who was also perceived as property. For married women, the opulence of clothing and jewelry symbolized social status, wealth, the husband's rank, and personal honour. Jewels and gowns, part of a dowry or wedding gifts, were intended to reflect social status and authority. In Pollaiuolo's *Portrait of a Young Woman*, the meticulous

attention to detail in the exquisite gems is captivating. This is unsurprising, as the brothers Piero and Antonio del Pollaiuolo applied their specialized expertise in goldsmithing to create some of the most distinguished bejewelled portraits of women in fifteenth-century Florence.

The scrutiny of a young woman on the occasion of her marriage extended beyond her inherited property and inherent propriety; her physical features and personal character were assets that mattered to prospective husbands and their families. Through their small size and intricate detail, female portraits invited close inspection, framing the woman as an object of display. Beauty, as the humanist author Leon Battista Alberti argued, was a moral and utilitarian concept, not merely an aesthetic or sentimental one, and portraiture sought ways to illustrate this. “Beauty in a woman,” he wrote, “must be judged not only by the charm and refinement of her face ... In a bride ... a man must first seek beauty of mind, that is, good conduct and virtue.”

As previously mentioned, in addition to beauty and virtue, when evaluating potential wives, a groom’s family carefully considered kinship ties and the economic value of the prospective bride. Alberti advised that a future groom should approach marriage prudently: “Before acquiring property, wise heads of families like to look it over several times before signing a contract.”



Alesso Baldovinetti, *Portrait of a Lady*, c. 1465. Oil and tempera on panel, 24.7 x 15.9 in. National Gallery. [View Source](#)

In Baldovinetti's *Portrait of a Lady*, the decorous approach to the image of the lady was code for her decorum. Her features—pale skin, blonde hair, and rosy lips—align with the era's idealized standards and

are depicted with care, and the ornaments she wears are treated with equal attention. Her distinctive profile is an extension of her intricately styled hair and the pearl-decorated headband, which symbolizes purity and indicates marriability.

The elegant jewellery, including a black forehead band and a necklace of dark orange beads with a pearl pendant, along with the intricately designed sleeve of her gown, suggests the portrait was meant for a significant ceremony, probably a wedding. This is emphasized by the sleeve motif, a design of three palm leaves tied with two feathers, believed to represent the coat of arms of the Galli family of Urbino. In such portraits, the detachable sleeve, crafted from rich fabrics and often adorned with intricate embroidery, was typically a focal point, as sleeves were regarded as a distinctive feature of a gown.

Notably, women were only permitted to wear their bridal clothing and jewelry briefly after their marriage. Sumptuary laws were enacted in Renaissance Italy to regulate ostentatious, public displays of wealth. These laws primarily targeted women's clothing, including restrictions on the length or type of fabric permitted in women's dresses. Occasionally, men would sell their wives' bridal attire or jewelry a few years after the wedding due to these laws. Leah Clark in "Alesso Baldovinetti, Portrait of a Lady" (online) cites a law from 1472 that attempted to curb ostentation or conspicuous consumption as follows,

Women may wear necklaces, veils, and two brooches - one for the head and one for the shoulder. And these above-mentioned things they may wear for three years from the day that they went to marriage. Thus also for those who have already gone to marriage, as for those who will go. And after the said three years, they may wear the necklace alone, and only one brooch for another three years. And after that, it is entirely forbidden them to bear any of the above said things.

Although laws of this kind were issued irregularly in the Middle Ages, during the Renaissance, they became part of a systematic effort to regulate both luxury and morality. Authorities feared that extravagant

spending on clothing could be better allocated elsewhere. This resulted in bans on excessive fabric use for very long trains and oversized sleeves, as well as restrictions on costly fabrics and decorations such as pearls, precious stones, and fur. Additionally, there was concern that the high cost of women's clothing might discourage men from marrying.

In regulating public dress, the laws favoured the upper class. The selection of fabrics such as damask, cloth of gold, and those decorated with precious embroidery and gemstones carried significant meaning within the Renaissance culture of display. In 1450, Venetian women petitioned the Pope to exempt them from a decree prohibiting the wearing of jewellery to honour their families and enhance their beauty. Nicolosa Sanuti also protested against laws issued by Cardinal Bessarion in Bologna in 1453, arguing that they prevented women from displaying their social status. She stated, "Ornaments and apparel... are our insignia of worth."

COMPANION PORTRAITS

Representations of women were primarily concerned with articulating inner virtue and outer beauty. With the advent of the double portrait, the focus on inherent female goodness shifted to a woman's social role in relation to a man, notably her husband or husband-to-be. Girls who were unattractive, infirm, deformed, or surplus daughters from families burdened by the costs of significant dowries most often entered convents either by choice or necessity and were defined by their marriage to Christ.



Fra Filippo Lippi, *Portrait of a Woman with a Man at a Casement*, c. 1440. Tempera on wood, 25.2 x 16.5 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art. [View Source](#)

Woman with a Man at Casement, attributed to Filippo Lippi, represents the earliest surviving double portrait from the Italian Renaissance.

Although the man and woman are positioned in profile facing each other, there is no eye contact. The presence of an embroidered coat of arms on the windowsill beneath the man's gesturing hand indicates a union of lineage. This coat of arms is associated with the Scolari family. The couple likely depicts Lorenzo di Ranieri Scolari and Angiola di Bernardo Sapiti, who married around 1439-1440 and had their first child in 1444. The painting commemorates their union. The elaborate jewelry, the embroidered *lealta* (faithfulness) on her sleeve, and the Scolari coat of arms point to a matrimonial celebration.

The richly attired woman dominates the painting. She is centrally located within the narrow space of her home, while the man is at the window casement, peering into the domestic sphere. Despite the open landscape visible through the window behind her, a sense of claustrophobia pervades the scene.

As Dale Kent writes in "Women in Renaissance Florence," women mainly engaged with the public sphere as church-goers. The sermon was almost the only sanctioned occasion for female public appearances, and their behaviour, dress and demeanour were closely observed. Church law decreed that "a woman ought to cover her head since she is not the image of God. She ought to wear this sign so that she may be shown to be subordinate, and because error was started through a woman." The dangers posed by women being in public were articulated by Saint Antoninus, archbishop of Florence in the mid-fifteenth century, who warned against excessive churchgoing by women. Many moralists feared, in the words of one, that "A woman goes to see sermons / Often only to show herself.... Therefore, if you don't go for God alone / It is far better to stay at home."

Churchgoing as a social event, as Kent explains: "both men and women took the opportunity in church to admire the latest fashions in dress. Mothers went to church to observe their sons' prospective brides." She writes,

Alessandra Strozzi spoke of "going Sunday morning to the Ave Maria in Santa Reparata (the cathedral) for the first Mass, as I had done a few mornings of the feast period in order to see the Adimari girl.... I

found the Tanagli girl there... she seemed to me to have a beautiful body, and well made: she is big, like Cateriña [her own daughter], or larger; good flesh, but not of that white type..."

In *Portrait of a Woman with a Man at a Casement*, Angiola appears as a wedded and well-attired young woman. Her French-fashion-inspired red, fur-lined overdress is worn over a dark gown with embroidered sleeves studded with pearls. Her headdress reveals only a few strands of hair, emphasizing her high, domed forehead. Since unbound hair had erotic connotations, concealing it was a matter of propriety. Angiola's hair is dyed blonde, a cultural ideal that was popular until around 1490. She wears a string of pearls around her neck, a brooch on her shoulder, and another on her headdress. Her hands are clasped in front of her waist, adorned with rings. Embroidered in gold and pearls, on the cuff of her gown is a single word: "loyalty," a declaration of her wifely duty and virtue.

Joanna Woods-Marsden, in "Portrait of the Lady, 1430-1520" (*Virtue and Beauty: Leonardo's Ginevra de' Benci and Renaissance Portraits of Women*, edited by David Allan Brown, 63-88, National Gallery of Washington, 2001) explores the significance of Angiola's jewels:

Many patricians invested in jewels as a form of liquid capital—forty three percent of Luigi Martelli's movable wealth, for instance, was concentrated in gems—and the flaunting of jewels was another public expression of the exchange of material goods that took place at marriage. The jewels adorning the bride were read as visible proof of the size of her dowry. Angiola wears perhaps an equally magnificent shoulder brooch of a diamond surrounded by pearls, as well as a prominent ruby and pearl head brooch (*brocchetta di testa*). Pearls were by far the costliest gems for the quattrocento Florentine, and their reiterated use in this portrait—pearl necklace, hundreds of seed pearls decorating the headdress and the chivalric motto LE ALTA (loyalty) on the sleeve, the pearl-edged close-fitting cap (*cuffia*) that conceals both hair and ears—

amounts to an unmistakable pictorial statement of the wealth and splendor of the Sapiti-Scolari alliance, and hence the social standing of both families.

Beyond their monetary and ornamental significance, the gems worn were interpreted allegorically. As a well-known symbol of purity associated with the Virgin, costly pearls were the attributes of brides as well as saints. Along with emeralds, rubies were the gems most frequently given to brides, as they were thought to benefit the wearer by promoting bodily strength and prosperity and by negating lust and tristesse."

In "Costume in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Portraits of Women," Roberta Orsi Landini and Mary Westerman Bulgarella (*Virtue and Beauty: Leonardo's Ginevra de' Benci and Renaissance Portraits of Women*, National Gallery of Washington, 2001) provide a contextual interpretation of the jewelry worn by a married woman.

Wearing pearls and rings with precious stones testified to the marital status of the young women portrayed. In Florence, the gifting of rings was more than a formal declaration of marriage; it was a wedding ceremony, even if privately celebrated, in which the agreement between the two families was legally sanctioned, and the dowry price and payment terms were established. During this period the groom had time to prepare the elaborate new garments, headdresses, and suitable jewels. After the bride's father finished paying the dowry, the public wedding took place and the bride was taken to the husband's home with great celebration and fanfare. She could receive more rings from the female members of her new family. Rings, belts, necklaces, or other circular objects were reminders to the new bride of her position and duties within the new family's circle and marked her as one of them. The jewels, which always remained the husband's possession, could be worn by the new bride only for a few years, after which they could be used as gifts to other brides in a

continuous exchange that solidified the family ties. Rings are not the only objects denoting a bride in the portraits: head brooches or the precious necklace pendants had the same function. The jewels, which denote honour, are proof of the union and the public manifestation of the exchange of property between families.

Lippi's *Portrait of a Woman with a Man at a Casement* clearly elucidates the contrasts between the detailed rendering of the lady and the treatment of the man on the left, who is depicted only partially and appears positioned farther into the background of the composition. We observe only his facial profile, topped by a vivid red hat, with his hands resting on the interior windowsill. The right hand exhibits an ancient, iconic gesture imbued with erotic and protective connotations. In his article "Protecting Fertility in Fra Filippo Lippi's *Portrait of a Woman with a Man at a Casement*" (*Metropolitan Museum Journal* 51 (2016): 64–83), J. Russell Sale explains,

The male subject's right hand does present a discreet version of the ancient *mano cornuta*, or horned-hand gesture, with the index and little fingers extended and the middle and ring fingers bent down. The fingers of the left hand are posed in a similar fashion, but with the thumb showing and the tips of the middle and ring fingers resting on the heraldic shield. Still widely used today as a symbol with multiple meanings, the *mano cornuta*, a discreetly phallic gesture, dates from ancient times, as attested by its appearance in Greek, Etruscan, and Roman art.



Cover of a funerary urn depicting a married couple. Etruscan, early 1st century BCE. Terracotta, 41 x 83 cm. Museo Etrusco Guarnacci. [View Source](#)

A notable example of the *mano cornuta* is found in a stately portrayal of a recumbent elderly couple on the lid of an Etruscan terracotta sarcophagus—a prevalent motif in ancient Italian and Mediterranean art.



The Hand of God Blessing the Offerings of Abel and Melchisedec, detail, 6th century. Mosaic. Basilica of San Vitale, Ravenna. [View Source](#)

The belief in the horned-hand gesture's power to ward off evil and enhance well-being led to its use as a symbol of blessing and protection in Byzantine religious rituals and art influenced by Byzantine traditions, as seen in *The Hand of God Blessing the Offerings of Abel and Melchisedec*.



Lippo Memmi, *Saint John the Baptist*, c. 1325. Tempera on panel, framed, 99.1 x 48.3 cm. National Gallery of Art. [View Source](#)

In many works, Saint John the Baptist uses the manu cornuta as he points to Christ and highlights the words “Ecce Agnus Dei” (Behold the Lamb of God) written on his scroll.



Filippo Lippi, *The Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin*, detail, c. 1467–69. Fresco, Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, Spoleto. [View Source](#)

During the Renaissance, the gesture was most commonly observed in religious contexts. For example, it appears in Fra Filippo Lippi's self-portrait in the *Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin*. It demonstrates the artist's familiarity with the *mano cornuta* and the contemporary belief in its power to ward off harmful forces. Sale describes the self-portrait as follows,

The artist's image there functions as both a visible signature and a kind of donor portrait, indicating his pride of authorship. ... He grasps his Carmelite habit

with his right hand, making a *mano cornuta* gesture aimed downward, like a suspended amulet, and points to it with his left index finger so that no viewer misses it.

The horned hand gesture in *Portrait of a Woman with a Man at Casement* represents the earliest known secular depiction of the *mano cornuta* in the early modern period. The marital setting suggests that Lippi acknowledged its dual protective and erotic connotations.



Piero della Francesca, *Diptych of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza*, c. 1473-75. Oil on wood, 19 x 13 x 2 in. Uffizi Gallery. [View Source](#)

One of the most renowned double portraits of the Italian Renaissance is Piero della Francesca's *Diptych of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza*. It depicts the Duke of Urbino, Federico da Montefeltro, alongside his wife, Battista Sforza.

In contrast to *Portrait of a Woman with a Man at Casement*, the man and woman face one another directly. Each is given their own panel. Each is given equal stature.



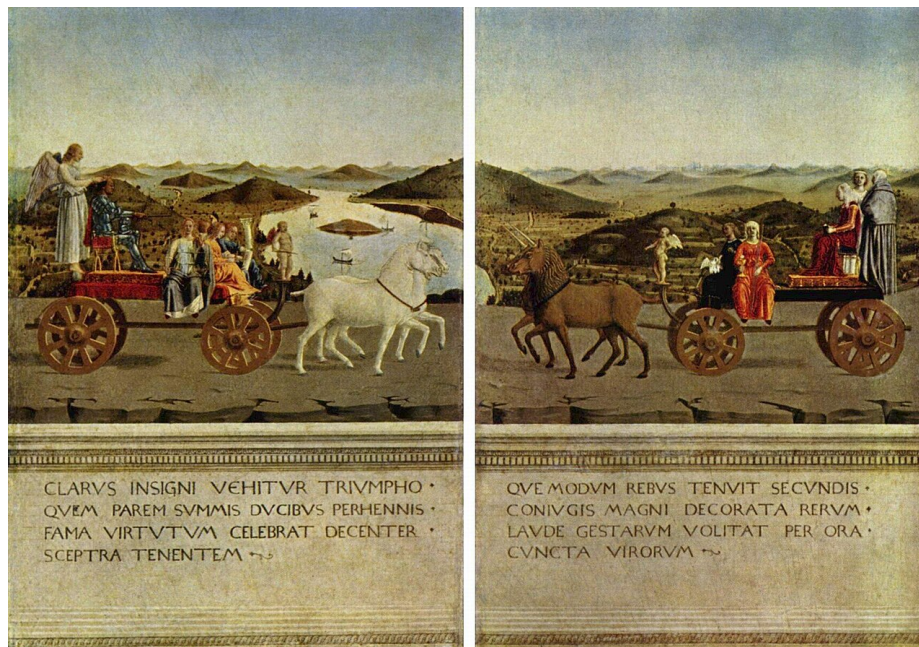
Piero della Francesca, *Diptych of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza*, c. 1473-75. Oil on wood, 19 x 13 x 2 in. Uffizi Gallery. [View Source](#)

The diptych of *Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza* is unusual, as the format was more commonly associated with altarpieces than portraits. The profile depiction echoes the format of Roman coinage. The Uffizi Gallery, where the work is held, describes the work as follows,

In the tradition of the fourteenth century, inspired by ancient coin designs, the two figures are shown in profile. This angle ensured a good likeness and faithful representation of facial details without allowing their sentiments to show through: indeed, the Duke and Duchess of Urbino appear unaffected by turmoil and emotions. The couple is facing each other. The spatial element is suggested by the light and the continuity of the rolling landscape in the background, representing the Marches over which they ruled. Piero della Francesca painted the landscape background to depict the couple as landowners and rulers of the Urbino region. Their

posture and profile view appear to heighten their status and aloofness; as they face each other, they can seem to be watching from above. The chromatic contrast between the bronze skin tones used for Federico and the pale tones of Battista Sforza is striking; her pale pallor ... not only respects the aesthetic conventions which were fashionable during the Renaissance but could also allude to her untimely death in 1472.

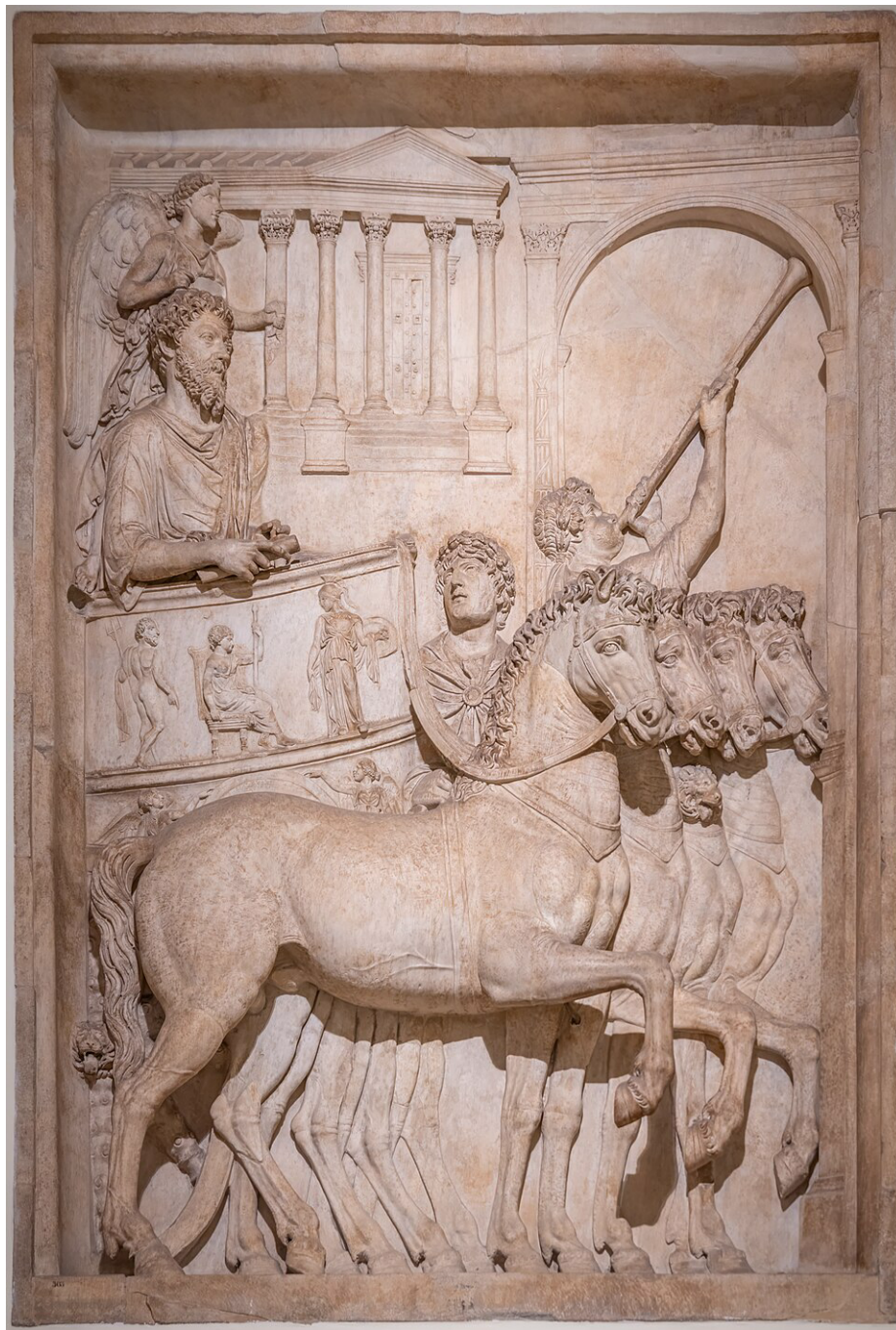
Painted posthumously, twelve years after her marriage, Battista Sforza's portrait was based on a death mask. Piero's design principle is grounded in the circle: the concentric blonde hair around her ear, the "ponytail" secured by a circular ruby-and-emerald brooch, the head brooch that forms a miniature crown looming over the Montefeltro territory, the opulent gemmed collar bordered by large round pearls, and the pearl necklace supporting a circular ruby pendant.



Piero della Francesca, *Portrait of the Dukes of Urbino: Allegorical Triumph of Battista Sforza*, c. 1473-75. Oil on wood, 19 x 13 x 2 in. Uffizi Gallery.

[View Source](#)

On the backs of both panels is an illustration of the "Trionfi" of the Count and Countess, depicting triumphal chariots on rocky ledges against a panoramic landscape. This imagery serves as an allegory for the virtues of the aristocratic couple. Battista is praised as an exemplary wife, celebrated for virtues that embody the ideals of the Renaissance woman. The inscription refers to her in the past tense: "She who kept her modesty in favourable circumstances flies on the mouths of all men, adorned with the praise of her great husband's exploits."



Roman Triumph of Marcus Aurelius, 177-180 CE. Capitoline Museums. [View Source](#)

Inspired by Roman triumphal processions, the images depict chariots decorated with Latin inscriptions that connect the sitters to cardinal

and theological virtues. The portraits highlight the moral qualities of the individuals within the context of their official marital relationship.

Federico is depicted crowned by Fortune, wearing armour, and accompanied by virtues appropriate for a soldier and ruler—Justice, Prudence, Fortitude, and Temperance. Battista Sforza is shown on her chariot, pulled by two unicorns—mythical creatures that legend says can only be tamed by a chaste woman. She is dressed in red, reading a small book, likely a devotional one, with allegorical virtues nearby. Charity and Faith are positioned at the front of the chariot, while Hope is tucked behind them. Chastity and Modesty are placed behind the Countess.

Portraits like these were created for semi-private settings in an aristocratic palace or a wealthy merchant's townhouse. Whether openly displayed on a wall, more often concealed behind a shutter or veil, or stored in a chest protected by a case or bag for special occasions, these portraits were meant for a select group of viewers, including family, friends, and guests.

FEMALE DONOR PORTRAITS

Portraits from the Italian Quattrocento were influenced not only by the philosophical and stylistic elements of Hellenistic coinage but also by the longstanding tradition of the donor portrait, which honoured patrons of devotional artworks by depicting their likeness within a religious narrative work. Personal portraits were often placed alongside divine figures, indicating reverence and commemorating their generous gifts and virtuous deeds.



Piero della Francesca, *Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta Praying in Front of St. Sigismundo*, 1451. Fresco. Tempio Malatestiano, Rimini. [View Source](#)

The stylistic realism and commemorative purpose of donor portraits, along with the use of profile views inspired by ancient coins to better convey likeness within the composition, established a precedent that influenced the development of secular profile portraiture.



Piero della Francesca, attributed, *Portrait of Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta*, c. 1451. Oil and tempera on panel, 44.5 cm x 34.5 cm. [View](#)
[Source](#)

An example of a donor portrait echoed in a painted likeness appears in Piero della Francesca's depictions of Sigismondo Malatesta, a nobleman from the House of Malatesta who governed Rimini and Fano from 1432 to 1463. Known as a bold military leader, he

commanded Venetian forces in the 1465 campaign against the Ottoman Empire and was also a poet and patron of the arts.

When the Gothic church of Tempio Malatestiano, a memorial church in Rimini, was being renovated to adopt a more classical style in line with the fashionable aspirations of the Malatesta family, Piero della Francesca painted the fresco of *Sigismondo Malatesta Kneeling Before St. Sigismondo*, his patron saint (later removed and transferred onto canvas). He also created a portrait panel of Sigismondo.

The inclusion of portraits of female donors was first discussed by Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise *On Painting*, which examined the enduring tradition dating back to the 11th century of embedding portraits of benefactors and citizens within religious narratives. While he considered the possibility of including women, it was still within the context of their societal roles and conduct.

For example, Renaissance female donor portraits frequently portrayed women in devotional or bridal contexts, adorned with elaborate jewelry and garments to signify their affluence and social status. These portraits usually emphasize Renaissance standards of beauty, including pale skin and light hair, often depicting women in profile or three-quarter view. This is exemplified in artworks where the donor is incorporated into the primary scene, such as kneeling beside sacred figures or observing within the composition.

The decoration of the apse at the Dominican Church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, commissioned by Giovanni Tornabuoni in 1485 and completed between 1486 and 1490, serves as a notable example. Tornabuoni, one of Florence's wealthiest and most influential individuals, maintained close connections with the Medici family through marriage, commerce, and political alliance. The contractual agreement for the chapel explains Tornabuoni's motivations for the commission: "as an act of piety and love of God, to the exaltation of his house and family and the enhancement of the said church and chapel."



Tornabuoni fresco cycle. Santa Maria Novella, Florence. [View Source](#)

The construction of these chapels enabled families to convert private fortunes into publicly accessible sacred spaces that exemplified their social standing. Additionally, they established connections between elite families and the ecclesiastical social network by providing financial support in exchange for spiritual privileges. Such chapels served as private mausoleums for the affluent, with the elite often

buried beneath flooring in crypts. These structures were dedicated to patron saints and adorned with elaborate artworks, including altarpieces, frescoes, and sculptures, to elevate their sanctity and social prestige. Families conducted funeral services and significant ceremonies, such as weddings, and financed perpetual or ongoing masses for their deceased loved ones.



Domenico Ghirlandaio, *The Visitation*, c. 1485–90. Fresco. Cappella Maggiore, Santa Maria Novella, Florence. [View Source](#)

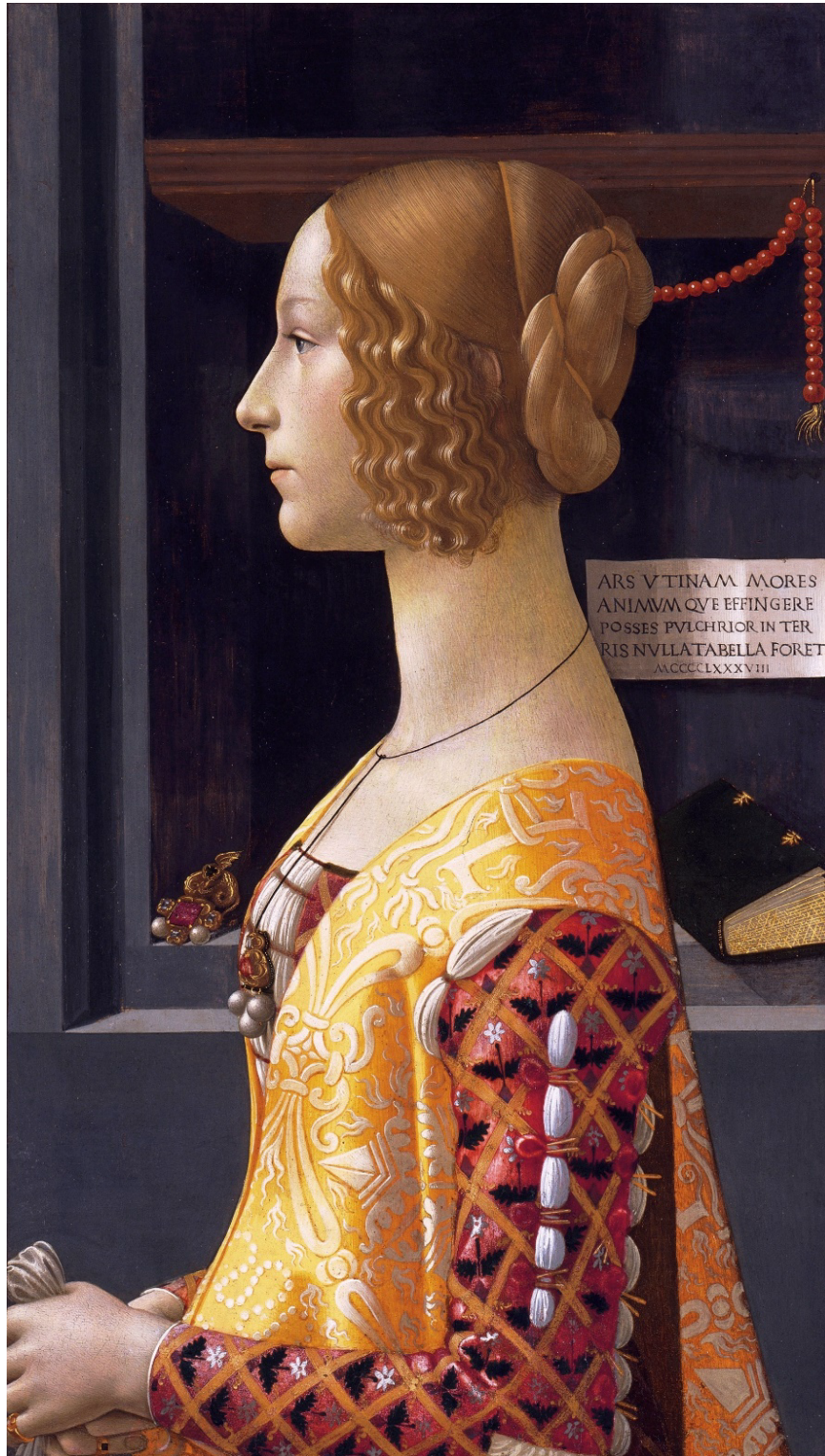
The Dominican Church of Santa Maria Novella features fresco cycles on the side walls of the apse depicting portraits of the Tornabuoni dynasty, its relatives, allies, and clients who act as witnesses to divine stories. For example, *The Visitation* depicts the Virgin's life with a likeness of a female family member of the Tornabuoni present to witness the encounter between Mary and Saint Elizabeth. The painting captures the moment when these two holy women rejoice in each other's pregnancies.

To the right, a young woman depicted in profile approaches, accompanied by two other women—one young and one older—both of whom turn their heads slightly towards the viewer. This figure has been identified as Giovanna degli Albizzi, wife of Lorenzo and mother

of Giovanni Tornabuoni's sole son. The trio of women, exhibiting a serious and formal demeanour, stands against a cityscape background, with their arms folded and hands clasped at their waists. Giovanna delicately holds a handkerchief, and her gold brocade dress features traditional heraldic symbols, including the Tornabuoni diamond, doves, and sunbursts. An "L" for Lorenzo is elegantly embroidered on her shoulder. Her small head, with blond hair tied back in a knot and cascading into curls at her cheeks, rests on a column-like neck. The heavy fabric of her gown falls gracefully to the ground as she walks, maintaining a proper gaze ahead.

Her composed demeanour appropriately reflects her gender and status, embodying ideals of beauty and decorum and thereby establishing her as an icon of female perfection. Her image aligns with Renaissance conventions, echoing Dante's description of Beatrice in *Vita Nuova* (1292-1294):

Her beauty was wonderful...she was of an attractive and ideal height; the tone of her skin, white but not pale, fresh but not glowing; her demeanour was grace but not proud, sweet and pleasing, without frivolity or feat. Her eyes were lively, and her gaze restrained, without a trace of pride or meanness; her body was so well proportioned that among other women, she appeared dignified...in walking and in dancing...and in all her moments, she was elegant and attractive; her hands were the most beautiful that Nature could create. She dressed in those fashions which suited a noble and gentle lady...



Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni*, 1488. Tempera on panel, 30 x 19 in. Thyssen-Bornemisza. [View Source](#)

Dante's ode to beauty can easily be applied to the posthumous portrait of Giovanna, which her husband commissioned Ghirlandaio to paint. Giovanna died in childbirth at age 20, two years after marrying Lorenzo Tornabuoni in 1486.

The painting depicts the young noblewoman as devout, with Lorenzo's initial, "L," once again inscribed on her shoulder. Giovanna has the same poised demeanour as in the *Visitation* fresco. She wears the same hairstyle and gold brocade gown, and her image is cropped below the waist. The strict profile view, set within a niche and surrounded by symbolic objects, further suggests her virtue. A prayer book, a string of coral beads, and a gold-and-pearl pendant reinforce her qualities of conduct and character.



The Hours of Isabella d'Este, Rite of Rome, in Latin, c. 1490. Opulently illuminated manuscript on parchment, Florence. [View Source](#)

The prayer book is a book of hours, as explained by Craig Kallendorf in "Humanism, Painting, and the Book as Physical Object in Renaissance Culture" (*Book History* 23 (2020): 1-39). It served as an indication of the subject's social class and standing: possession of such a book signified literacy, which distinguished its owner as a member of the social elite. Centred on the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the book contained prayers intended to be recited throughout

the day, along with a small collection of other commonly referenced religious texts.

The book symbolizes piety rather than scholarship and was among the most frequently depicted books in Renaissance paintings of women. The primary market for these books was wealthy women who could read them and elevate their social status by having them illuminated by the period's most skilled artists—artists who also produced panel paintings.

The Latin inscription on the cartellino hanging in a niche in the background reads: "ARS UTINAM MORES ANIMUMQUE EFFINGERE POSSES PULCHRIOR IN TERRIS NULLA TABELLA FORET MCCCCCLXXXVIII". It translates to: "Art, would that you could represent character and mind! There would be no more beautiful painting on earth 1488." Its source is a variation of a Latin epigram by the Roman poet Martial (Book 10, epigram 32, 95 or 96 CE). It serves to honour the sitter, implying that although the artist could depict her physical beauty, her virtuous character and soul remained beyond full portrayal.

Maria De Prano explains in "At Home with the Dead: The Posthumous Remembrance of Women in the Domestic Interior in Renaissance Florence." (*Source: Notes in the History of Art* 29, no. 4 (2010): 21–28):

By accentuating the beauty of her character and soul, the epigram compliments her attainment of the prescribed virtues for a patrician woman in Florentine society. In its wistful tone and concern for her soul, underlined by the year of her death placed below, it also functions as a funerary inscription. Ghirlandaio's illusionistic placement of the parchment containing the poem in such proximity to her body transforms it from a motto to a lament.

The portrait not only highlights her beauty and virtue in life but also, through her perfect stillness, emphasizes her lasting significance within the Tornabuoni family, symbolizing the continuation of the family name to future generations.



Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Birth of the Virgin*, c. 1485-90. Fresco, 24.4 x 14.9 in. Santa Maria Novella, Florence. [View Source](#)

Giovanna appears once again in Ghirlandaio's cycles of life in the *Birth of the Virgin* in the apse of Santa Maria Novella, which depicts a religious-historical scene set in a contemporary Florentine bedroom. Here, several female members of the Tornabuoni family are represented, led by Giovanna Tornabuoni, who is dressed in garments similar to those in her portrait and died while the work was still in progress.



Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Birth of St. John the Baptist*, c. 1485-90. Fresco, 24.4 x 14.9 in. Santa Maria Novella, Florence. [View Source](#)

In the third cycle, *Birth of St. John the Baptist*, there is a clear contrast between the portraits of the donors and the attendant figures, as seen in their stances, attire, and expressions. The patrons and their entourage are depicted wearing similar garments and with idealized facial features that conform to standards of beauty. Each figure appears self-contained and exhibits a composed demeanour, lacking active gestures; in contrast, the other figures are lively and active: a woman holding a baby smiles expressively, while another, pouring water from a pitcher, moves forward, her clothing fluttering and revealing her ankles. An attendant swiftly moves through the door on the right, balancing a tray of fruit overhead. Her light attire accentuates her figure, and a loose strand of hair, along with a veil, underscores the moment's urgency.

Clearly, the formality seen in the portrayals of the donor family and entourage reflected manners of conduct and an awareness of social hierarchy, further emphasizing that social status shaped the stylistic depiction of women. Here, their appearance, behaviour, and the beauty and luxury of their clothing distinctly identify them as members of the privileged class. One can almost perceive them as a single

entity, even though one of them is identifiable as the patron's sister. That said, the young woman at the forefront is the most memorable, despite her anonymity. Her stance deviates from the usual profile view; as she turns her head slightly toward the spectator's space, she demonstrates engagement with the viewer and thus holds centre stage.



View of the Sassetti Chapel, 1483-85. Fresco. Santa Trinita, Florence. [View Source](#)



Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Resurrection of the Notary's Son*. Life of Saint Francisella Sassetti, 1482-85. Fresco. Sassetti Chapel. [View Source](#)



Domenico Ghirlandaio, Sassetti Chapel, *Resurrection of the Notary's Son*, detail, 1479-85. Santa Trinita, Florence. [View Source](#)

In Ghirlandaio's frescoes for the Sassetti Chapel in the Basilica of Santa Trinita, the female gaze is more pronounced. The fresco depicts prayers for the salvation of Francesco and Nera's family, which includes ten sons and daughters. Each figure depicts a different scene

from the life of Francesco Sassetti's patron saint, St. Francis of Assisi. The five daughters are positioned among a crowd during the 'Miracle of the Roman Notary's Son'. The women shown in profile are presented as prominent figures, removed from worldly concerns. They appear passive, looking away and modestly averted. In this setting, they symbolize chastity, if not outright virginity. However, one daughter stands apart, the youngest, Lena, who looks out from the fresco into the world,

THE OUTWARD GAZE

By the late fifteenth century, portraits of women began to adopt the newer conventions already used in male portraiture. The three-quarter view, which involved a more direct engagement with the viewer, allowed images of women to move beyond the constraints of the profile format and embrace a wider variety of subjects.



Leonardo da Vinci, *Ginevra de' Benci*, c. 1474-78. Oil on panel, 15.2 x 14.4 in. National Gallery of Art. [View Source](#)

The portrait of Ginevra da Benci was likely painted in the late 1470s. It is one of only four portraits of women that Leonardo da Vinci created during his lifetime, including the *Lady with an Ermine*, *Portrait of an Unknown Woman*, or *La belle feronnière*, and *Mona Lisa*.

Ginerva was the 16-year-old daughter of a wealthy Florentine banker, celebrated for her intelligence and education, as well as for her poetry and conversational skills. The portrait commemorates her marriage to Florentine merchant Luigi di Bernardo Niccolini in 1474. Ginerva was admired for her beauty, wit, and virtue, gaining a scholarly circle of admirers, including Lorenzo de' Medici. A juniper bush (ginepro)

surrounds her, symbolizing chastity and playing on her name. Her expression is serious, reserved, and somewhat distant, with a contemplative, introspective gaze. This portrait is regarded as one of Leonardo's earliest important oil paintings, demonstrating the initial use of sfumato and chiaroscuro to achieve realistic skin tones and depth.

Ginevra de Benci is depicted in a three-quarter profile, looking outward towards the viewer. The painting is among the earliest female portraits to break away from the traditional profile stance. While full-face portraits of people occasionally appeared in Northern European art of the 15th century, this marked a notable shift in the portrayal of women in Italy. Furthermore, Ginevra is shown outdoors, a radical departure in the 15th century, when women were usually portrayed indoors, with the outside world visible only through open windows.

VIRTVTEM FORMA DECORAT, "Beauty Adorns Virtue," is inscribed on the reverse of the portrait. In "Portrait of the Lady, 1430-1520" Joanna Woods-Marsden notes, "Virtue was translated above all as chastity, but it also included the qualities of obedience, modesty, and silence that would ensure sexual innocence before marriage—a 'dowry of virtue,' as one contemporary put it. Because the female role was strictly procreative, only virginity before marriage and fidelity after it could guarantee the purity of the husband's lineage, to convey these qualities to the world, the lady had to demonstrate her "grave demeanor and self-restraint," in Leon Battista Alberti's words, through consistently dignified comportment and measured movements."

This painting is often referred to as "the earliest of all psychological portraits," adding a layer of mystery and uniqueness to the depiction of human personality. The ability to create subtlety and depth comes from Leonardo's use of oil paints and his hand-blending technique, which produced smooth transitions. We are guided through the emotions stirred by the detailed presentation of various textures—such as skin, juniper, cloth, and veil—each reflecting light differently. Leonardo also introduces a sense of depth in the landscape background, drawing us in further. This portrait exemplifies Leonardo's

quest for artists to "translate between nature and art" and to explore the origins of natural phenomena, as he described in his writings.

Some scholars suggest that Leonardo's painting served as an honourific portrait of Ginevra da Benci, depicting her as a Florentine aristocrat and poet, and celebrating both her physical beauty and her intellectual virtues. Her beauty amplifies her virtue, aligning with traditional notions of female chastity, while also being nuanced by the masculine connotations of the word "virtù," associated with cultural pursuits. Prominent women in culture were sometimes celebrated during the Renaissance for their "manly virtues."

Interpretations of the portrait vary. It has often been regarded as a marriage portrait, as in 1474, she married Luigi Niccolini. The juniper bush behind the sitter's head appears repeatedly as a symbol, representing the name Ginevra, because "ginepro" is Italian for juniper. The inscription on the back, "she adorns her virtue with beauty," is often interpreted as referencing the qualities associated with the sitter's role as a bride. However, Ginevra was not an ordinary Renaissance wife; she belonged to the wealthy and educated Benci family, which wielded far more cultural influence than her husband did. Ginevra's grandfather was the general manager of the Medici bank and an art patron, while her father was a friend and supporter of the Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino.

Another interpretation suggests that Bernardo Bembo, a member of the Medici circle, may have commissioned the portrait. Indeed, the celebrated beauty was admired and praised by poets, aligning with a poetic tradition in which an ideal female beauty inspires the poet's passion, virtue, and artistic development.

Leonardo maintained a personal connection with the Benci family; he was a close friend of Ginevra's brother, Giovanni, to whom she bequeathed her estate, indicating their strong familial bond. Early scholars have proposed that Leonardo created this portrait as a token of appreciation for his residence at the Benci Palace between approximately 1474 and 1478.

Notably, the portrait omits traditional decorative elements like jewellery and luxurious fabrics that typically signify status. Leonardo's focus on naturalism, achieved by reflecting light off her skin to capture a more lifelike effect, helped portray Ginevra as a real person. Nonetheless, even if Quattrocento viewers considered this image "real," it still reflects conventional practices. Despite the more intimate three-quarter pose, the portrait is static, and Ginevra's eyes avoid direct engagement with the viewer.



Leonardo da Vinci, *Lady with an Ermine*, 1489-91. Oil on panel, 21 x 15 in. Czartoryski Museum, Krakow. [View Source](#)

Lady with an Ermine presents a different view of womanhood, one that goes beyond her physical and moral traits to suggest her inner life and intellect.

The Duke of Milan commissioned the portrait of Cecilia Gallerani, Ludovico Sforza's 17-year-old mistress, shortly after Leonardo was

appointed the official court painter. The painting would become one of the earliest modern portraits in Western European art to expand the genre's traditions.

Leonardo employed innovative techniques to convey the sitter's dynamic presence, rather than the stiff, idealized profile typical of the 15th century. Here, the three-quarter pose introduces a sense of movement and psychological depth, effectively capturing the young woman's active engagement with her environment. Cecilia's body and head are oriented in opposite directions, while she holds the ermine's body with an elegantly exaggerated hand.

Leonardo pays close attention to the eyes, whose lustre and depth are augmented by the application of oil as a medium. Particular focus is devoted to the gaze's direction, which appears steadfastly fixed on a presence beyond the frame. This implies a moment of reflection or suggests that the sitter is responding to an entity just outside the picture plane, potentially her lover, Ludovico Sforza. The illumination from the right accentuates her subtle torsion. Cecilia's posture inclines towards the viewer, while her head pivots away, balanced across her shoulders. Her pupils are directed to the right, mirroring her head's movement. Her gaze is reciprocated by the attentive ermine; their eyes are nearly perfectly aligned.

This depiction of motion, encompassing both body and mind, aligned with Leonardo's aim to capture a person's inner thoughts and character, presenting subjects as complex individuals rather than mere objects of beauty. Cecilia Gallerani was well-versed in literature, composing verses in Latin and Italian, and was frequently referred to as a "great light of the Italian language," a muse, and a scholarly woman, being compared to the Ancient Greek poetess Sappho.

The ermine she holds suggests numerous interpretations: it serves as an emblem of Ludovico, symbolizes purity, and acts as a pun on her name, which derives from *galē*, the Greek word for weasel. Painted puns were commonly based on the names of women, particularly mistresses, in court culture.

Timothy McCall writes in “The Girl as Mistress in Renaissance Italy: Gender and Power in Leonardo da Vinci’s portrait of Cecilia Gallerani” (*Gender & History* 37 (2025): 50–71):

Leonardo showcases artifice and elegant design through Cecilia’s elongated hand stroking the animal. Her hand curves subtly, parallel to the ermine’s body. Though Leonardo emphasizes Cecilia’s hand, the artist barely evokes her breasts, modelled through a bit of shadow. This may, of course, indicate the girl’s immaturity. Just above, Cecilia’s gleaming skin sets off her possibly perfumed agate beads. The black jet beads equally set off her flesh. This wiry, sinewy hand demands the beholder’s attention. Leonardo juxtaposes the hand’s fair skin with white fur and shimmering silk. He accentuates, even revels in, their sensual surfaces and tactility. Cecilia’s delicate fingers gently caressing the creature arouse a sumptuous and gratifying sense of touch for both male and female viewers. These intensely physical phenomena would have been familiar to the portrait’s original audience, the aristocratic men and women who wore ermine not just for warmth, but, crucially, to display wealth, along with an ideally pure and noble whiteness. Through ermine fur, these men and women experienced their privilege tactilely and materially; they no doubt recognized these pleasures and sensations in Leonardo’s painting.



Francesco Rosselli, attributed, *The Triumph of Chastity*, c. 1480–90. From a series of six engravings illustrating Francesco Petrarch's poem, *Triumphs*, 1340–1374. [View Source](#)

The ermine was also a popular motif representing chastity and marital fidelity in Renaissance Italy, popularized by the scholar and poet Petrarch in his poem *Triumphs*.

In the *Triumph of Chastity*, the entourage of Chastity carries a flag bearing the image of an ermine as its standard. The ermine depicted in the engraving was often used in bridal imagery. It was considered an emblem of purity and even chastity, as it was believed to fear soiling its white fur, so much so that it would die if it did.

Bernardo Bellincioni, the Florentine poet connected to the Sforza court, penned the following prose about *Lady with an Ermine*.

Nature is envious of the powers of the painter, but the Poet says that Nature should thank Ludivico il Moro and the mind and hand of Leonardo for showing, even when Cecilia will not be alive anymore, what nature and art are, the sun seems a dark shadow in comparison to Cecilia's beautiful eyes, and she appears to listen without speaking.

The poem articulates that Cecilia's beautiful eyes make the sun seem but a dark shadow, and posits that Nature envies Leonardo's artistic prowess. Leonardo renders Cecilia to "appear to listen and not to speak." He insightfully captures its immediacy and the gentle yet unmistakable movement of Cecilia.

Leonardo's portrait exemplifies poetic expression and artistic innovation. The artist, well-versed in the poetic traditions of *Dolce stil Nuovo*—a refined poetic style from 13th and 14th century Italy—as well as contemporary poetic genres, asserted that painting has a superior ability to evoke emotional responses in viewers, stating, "... if the poet claims that he can inflame men to love...the painter has the power to do the same, and indeed more so, for he places before the lover's eyes the very image of the beloved object, which the lover often engages with, embracing and conversing with it." According to Leonardo, lyrical praise of the beloved naturally extended to the painted image, enhancing its role as an object of love in its own right.



Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of an Unknown Woman*, or wrongly titled, *La Belle Ferronnière*, c. 1490. Oil on panel, 63x45 cm. Louvre Museum. [View Source](#)

In *Portrait of a Woman*, the sitter wears a traditional Spanish costume with a beaded necklace. She gazes into the viewer's world from the

dark background of her space. The parapet behind her conceals the lower part of her figure and adds depth to the image. The subject's realism is suggested by her head's movement, which turns to the left as she looks out, and by her direct stare, which insists on engagement.

The self-possessed sitter in *Portrait of an Unknown Woman* may be either the wife or daughter of an ironmonger (*ferroonnier*). The portrait is thought to allude to a mistress of Francis I of France, who was married to Le Ferron. According to legend, the husband deliberately infected himself with syphilis and transmitted it to the king via his wife.

More recently, the sitter has been tentatively identified as Lucretia Crivelli. She was a lady-in-waiting to Beatrice d'Este, the wife of the Duke of Milan, Ludovico Sforza. Although she was married to a courtier, she started an affair with Ludovico around 1495. Following Beatrice's death in January 1497, Lucrezia gave birth to his son, Gian Paolo.

Lucretia Crivelli was a mistress, better known as a courtesan. In "Visibilis et Invisibilis: The Mistress in Italian Renaissance Court Society" (*Renaissance Quarterly* 47 no. 4 (1994): 770–792), Helen S. Ettlinger examines the limited knowledge available about mistresses and courtesans in the Renaissance. The author focuses on Italian despots from around 1350 to 1485, mainly at the courts of Milan, Ferrara, and Rimini. It was during this period, and at these courts, that the princely mistress reached the height of her importance in Italian history. Ettlinger discusses the fate of their illegitimate offspring in the age of the so-called "golden bastards."

Her bastards were routinely incorporated into the household of the prince and even recognized as legal heirs, on occasion supplanting siblings born in wedlock. More commonly, the sons became important military personages, supporting or opposing their families, and the daughters entered into the social mainstream playing the traditional role of pawns in family marriage strategies. But the large number of princely bastards with different mothers and the limited choices even for legitimate

children required an alternative hierarchy to accommodate all. What resulted was a structure wherein some bastards were more equal than others, their status directly derive from the social status of their mothers. The crucial role played by maternity in determining a bastard's place in Renaissance court society has significant ramifications, not least of which is how much noble families stood to gain social status, power, and property by allowing their women to bear the bastards of their prince. Such a strategy was a gamble. Princes did not limit their extramarital activities to noble women, unmarried women, or one woman at a time. Even a primary mistress, that is, the woman who was openly recognized as what could be called the prince's alternative wife, could find herself supplanted at any time. Nonetheless, many of these liaisons were stable and long-lasting, and contemporary observers had no doubt about who was the *primafavorita*. For the period under investigation these known "favorites" do in fact have a fairly consistent profile. They came from noble families, usually from the towns which the prince ruled. Concubina, the preferred term to describe these women, seems to have been descriptive rather than pejorative.

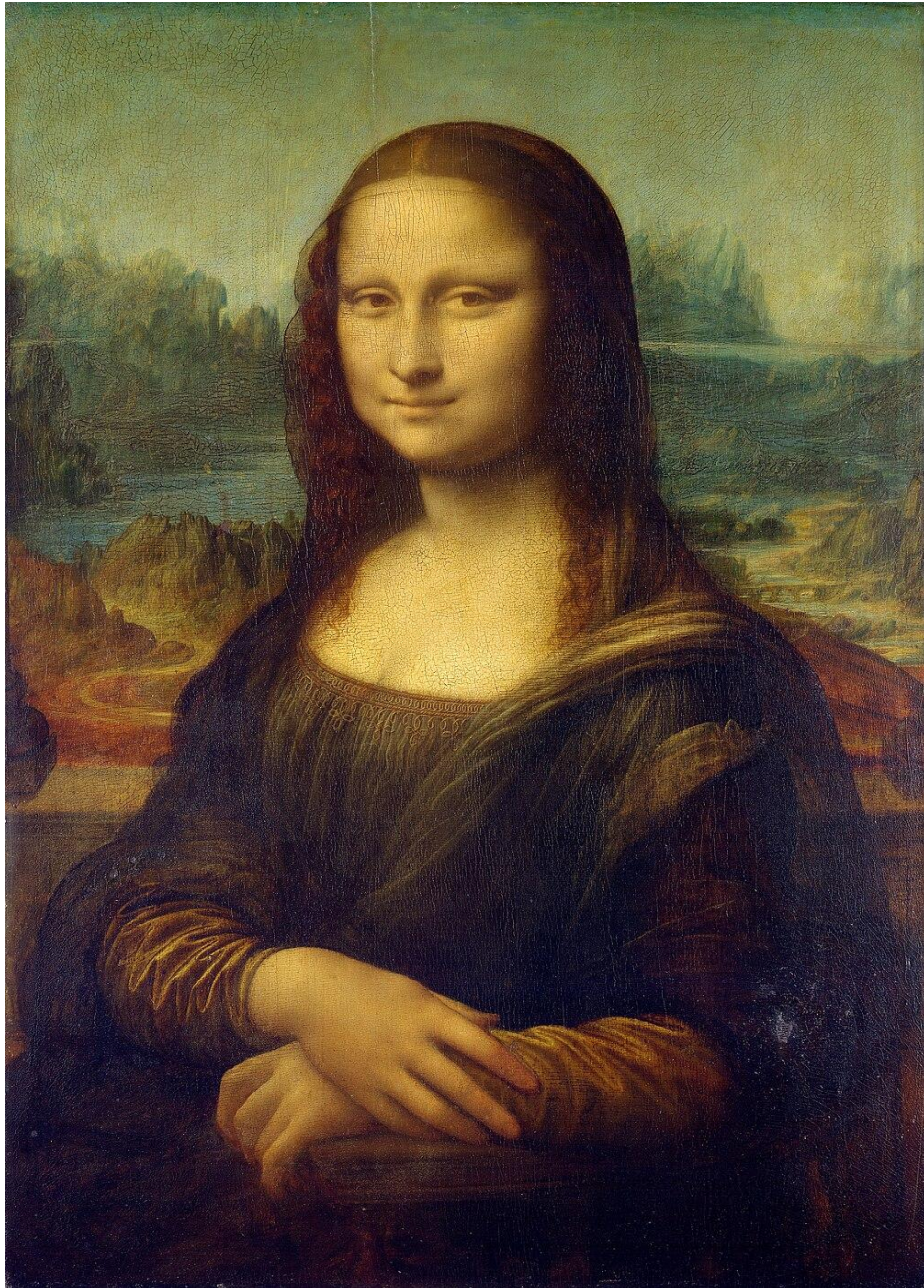
The mistresses of Renaissance princes played significant roles in the political and social spheres of fifteenth-century Italy. Women were often encouraged to have extramarital affairs with a prince, sometimes with family approval, and faced no severe consequences.



Isotta degli Atti, *Mistress 1446, then Wife after 1453, of Sigismondo Malatesta* [obverse]. 1446. Bronze, overall diameter, 8.39 cm. National Gallery of Art. [View Source](#)

Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, ruler of Rimini, fell in love with 10-year-old Isotta degli Atti at age 26. At the time, he was married to his second wife, Polissena Sforza, and had a mistress, Vanetta Toschi. Vanetta had two children: Roberto in 1442 and Contessina in 1445. Roberto died shortly after birth and was honourably buried in the Malatesta church, sharing a sarcophagus with Sigismondo's predecessor. After his death, 13-year-old Isotta took the place of Vanetta Toschi as a courtesan. Later, Isotta married Sigismondo and led Rimini during his excommunications from 1460 to 1462, owing to his relentless political ambitions, military insubordination, and intense rivalry with Frederico da Montefeltro, and again from 1468 to 1469, when their son was still a minor. Polissena, Vanetta, and Isotta demonstrate how the notions of honour and legitimacy exhibited flexibility during the Italian Renaissance. Both Vanetta and Isotta engaged in illicit relationships with their families' approval.

ENIGMATIC BEAUTY



Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, c. 1503-1506. Oil on panel, 30 x 21 in. Louvre Museum. [View Source](#)

No other female portrait from the Renaissance period combines extraordinary realism with an air of mystery in the manner of

Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. She is as immediately recognizable as she is enigmatic, embodying the idealized attributes and ambiguous persona of Renaissance femininity through her depiction. The identity of the sitter, along with the circumstances surrounding her portrayal, continues to fascinate viewers centuries after her creation.

The ambiguity surrounding the *Mona Lisa* arises from conflicting historical documentation, the artist's own secrecy, and a range of interpretations concerning its significance. While it is widely conjectured that the portrait depicts Lisa Gherardini, wife of the silk merchant Francesco del Giocondo, her exact relationship to a man—whether mistress or wife—remains unverified. As a result, the *Mona Lisa* emerges as an image that combines portraiture with deeper philosophical ideas.

With the *Mona Lisa*, Leonardo created the penultimate psychological portrait. The oil painting shows a young woman gazing directly out at the artist and the viewer. She is depicted from the waist up, seated in a three-quarter pose inside a loggia. One hand is clasped over the other. The sitter's absence of eyebrows highlights her broad forehead, complemented by full cheeks. Her shoulder-length hair is concealed beneath a translucent veil, and she wears a plain dark dress. A heavily pleated mantle drapes over her left shoulder, and the neckline hints at her breasts. She wears no jewellery. Behind her is a blurry, dreamlike landscape featuring rocky formations, mountain peaks, and valleys. To the left is a lake and a winding path; to the right, a bridge crosses a river.

Yet, while we understand the pictorial components, the artwork evokes an aura of mystery and an illusory sense of time and distance. Leonardo's utilization of the *sfumato* technique—derived from the Italian term "*sfumare*," meaning "to tone down" or "evaporate like smoke"—was instrumental to the atmospheric effects. Subtle shading and dark glazes transition seamlessly from light to dark areas, adding to a sense of a transitory reality, like smoke "losing itself in the air."

Sfumato was especially effective in depicting facial features with high realism and capturing subtleties of expression. Leonardo's delicate

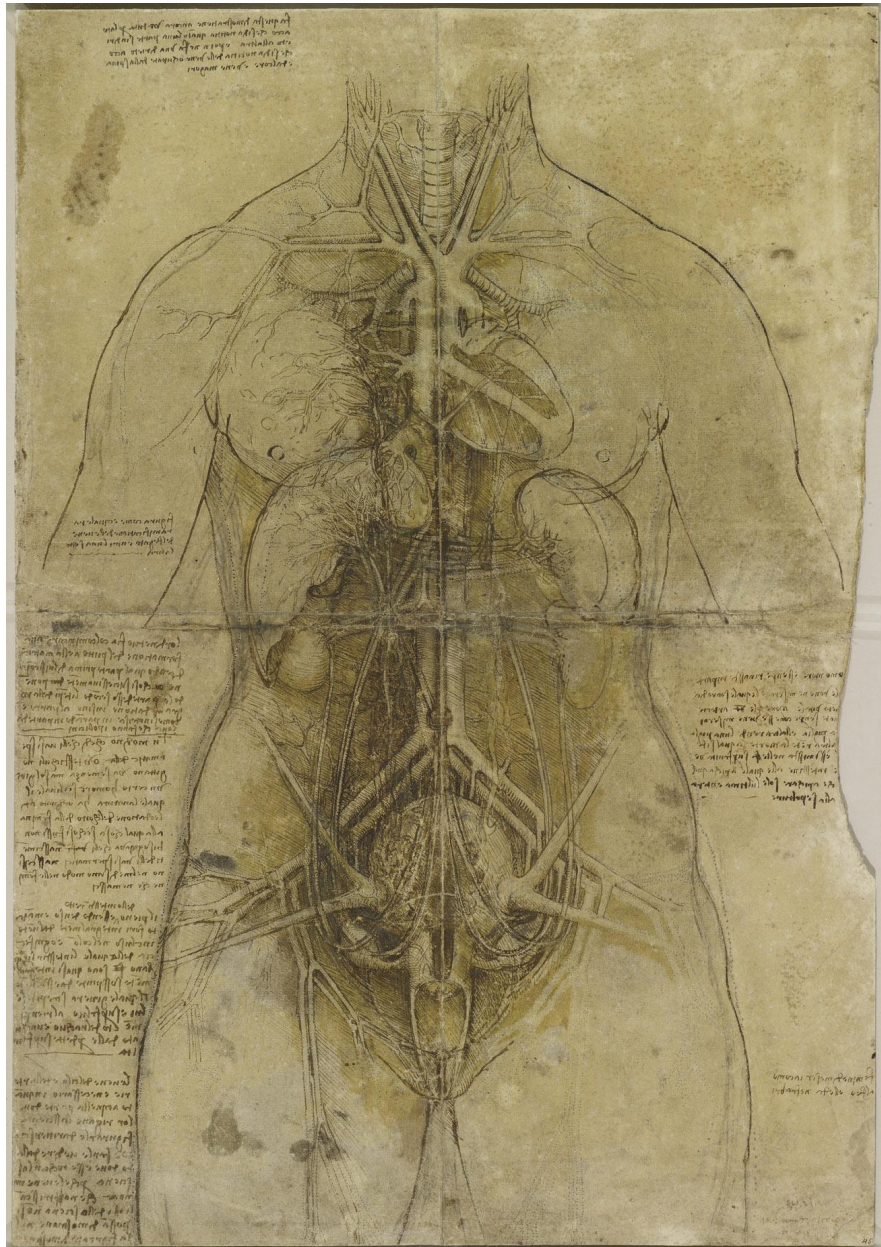
tonal transitions accentuate these emotional nuances, particularly around the corners of the eyes and mouth, producing “grace and beauty” and an intriguingly elusive impression.

Writers and scholars from Vasari to Walter Pater to this day have aimed to articulate in words the mystery of the *Mona Lisa* and her beguiling smile. In 1550, in his biography of Leonardo, Vasari provided the first account of the painting, then in the possession of King Francesco of France at Fontainebleau. While his account was not wholly accurate, he described the portrait with enthusiasm:

Looking at this face, anyone who wanted to know how nature can be imitated by art would understand immediately, for even tiny details were reproduced with artistic subtlety. The eyes were sparkling and moist as they always are in real life. Around them are reddish specks and hairs that could only be depicted with immense subtlety. The brows could not be more natural; the hair grows thickly in one place and lightly in another, following the skin's pores; the nose and its beautiful pinkish and tender nostrils seem alive. The mouth united to the flesh-coloured tints of the face by the red of the parting lips, which seemed to be real flesh and not painted. Examining the hollow of the throat very intensively, you can feel its pulsation. All will acknowledge that the execution of this painting is enough to make the strongest artist tremble with fear. He also used an ingenious expedient: while he was painting Monna Lisa, a very beautiful woman, he had her constantly entertained by singers, musicians, and jesters so that she would be merry and not look melancholic as portraits often do. As a result, in this painting of Leonardo's, there was a smile so enchanting that it was more divine than human, and those who saw it marvelled to find it so similar to that of the living original.

The *Mona Lisa* creates a link between the cosmos and humanity; both are shown as fluid and captured in art, yet suggest their evolution beyond the frame. This is conveyed through soft lighting and visual

echoes, like the hilly curves and flowing folds. There is a connection between the flowing movements and dynamic processes in the landscape and the rippling, cascading patterns of her clothing and hair. This can be compared to Leonardo's analogy between blood circulation within the human body and a river on Earth. He clearly described the Earth as a "living body."



Leonardo da Vinci, *The Cardiovascular System and Principal Organs of the Woman (the "Great Lady")*, 1509-10. Ink, charcoal, sanguine, and wash on paper, 18.7 x 13 in. Royal Collection Trust. [View Source](#)

Around 1509-10, Leonardo obtained a copy of Galen's *De Usu Partium*. Galen, a Greek physician and philosopher from the second century, greatly influenced medical theory and emphasized that direct anatomical study through animal dissection was essential for medical progress and the advancement of surgical techniques.

During the early stages of his career, Leonardo also conducted anatomical studies of animals to expand his knowledge. His first human dissection, a leg, was in the 1480s, and by the 1500s, his reputation grew, enabling him to gain permission to dissect cadavers in hospitals and medical schools.



Leonardo da Vinci, *Hemisected Man and Woman in Coition*, 1492. Drawing. Royal Collection Trust. [View Source](#)

Leonardo's *Anatomical Structures in Transparency* illustrates his understanding of the human body's internal functions. In an annotation on the sheet, he disputes the Aristotelian view that the "spermatic vessels" in a woman do not produce natural semen, noting that these vessels "derive in the same way in the female as in the male." He maintained that the mother provides the fetus with life, sustenance, and soul (anima), challenging the prevailing Aristotelian view that women, considered to lack a soul, were merely incubators for pregnancy. He proposed that the womb's function is generative rather than solely nutritive, suggesting it possesses an active creative force.



Leonardo da Vinci, *A Fetus in the Womb; sketches and notes on reproduction*, c. 1511. Pen, ink and red chalk on paper, 11.9 x 8.6 in. Royal Collection Trust. [View Source](#)

Leonardo's drawing, *A Fetus in the Womb*, may have lacked a human model and may contain inaccuracies, but it effectively depicts

gestation and birth. He described the fetus's emergence from the womb through images resembling a nut breaking free from its shell.

This precision in enquiry was equally applied to Leonardo's study of facial movement. He believed that accurately capturing movement was a vital visual cue of otherwise hidden mental states. Precision ensured that the viewer recognized the emotion being portrayed, allowing the painting to evoke an appropriate response.

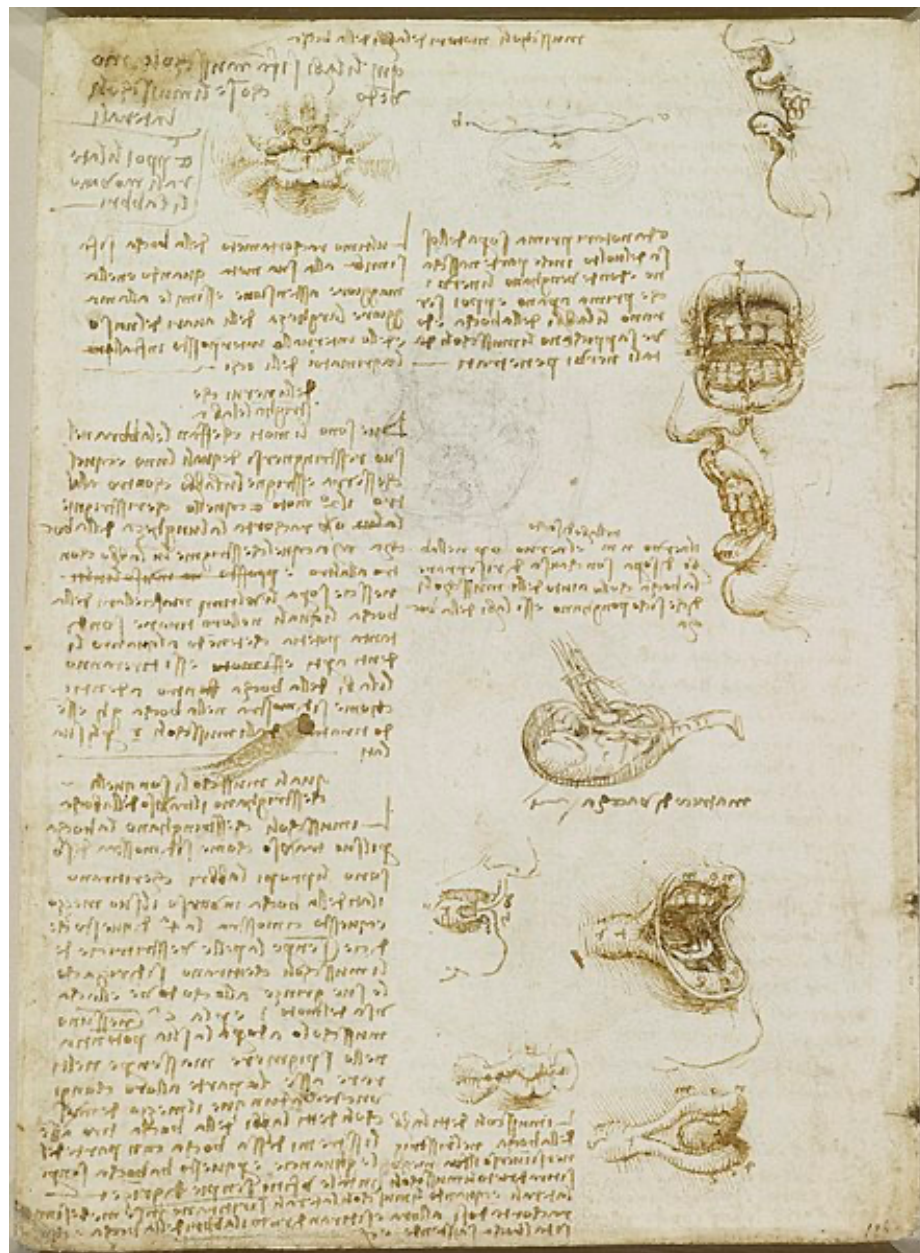
Theresa Flanigan, in "Mona Lisa's Smile: Interpreting Emotion in Renaissance Female Portraits" (*Studies in Iconography* 40 (2019): 183–230), expands on this idea, underscoring that understanding the historical significance of Mona Lisa's smile requires examining Renaissance terminology. Interestingly, the word "smile" (*sorriso*) does not appear in early sources about the *Mona Lisa*. Giorgio Vasari, for example, employs "ghigno" (meaning grin) to describe her joyful expression (*allegro*). Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo later describes her as having a "mouth in the act of laughing" (*bocca in atto di ridere*). This illustrates how the term "ridere" was commonly associated with smiles during that era.

Renaissance writings on art, Flanigan explains, often focused on socially constructed "emotional expression." This topic was a key focus in Renaissance theoretical discussions about art. She writes,

In his early fifteenth-century treatise *On Painting* (1435–1436), Leon Battista Alberti argues that the most praiseworthy painter is capable of provoking viewer response to painted representations of certain emotional states, referred to in this period as "affections," "passions," or "movements of the soul." Specifically, Alberti claims that a successful painting "will move the soul of the beholder when each man painted there clearly shows the movement of his own soul." These movements of the soul, he claims, include "grief, joy and fear, and other similar ones [affections]." Paintings, according to Alberti, should be performative objects aimed at moving their viewer to experience an emotional response.

Leonardo's writings about art reveal the influence of Alberti's earlier theories. In his notebooks (often referred to as his own treatise *On Painting*) Leonardo similarly states that "the [painted figure] is most praiseworthy which best expresses through its actions the passions of his soul [*la passione dell'animo suo*]."

Leonardo's meticulous studies of facial-expression anatomy are evident in his notebooks and in the detailed drawings of the muscles in the lips. He indicates that these muscles are more numerous in humans than in other animals and are essential for producing the sounds of the letters b, f, m, and p, as well as for whistling, laughing, and weeping.

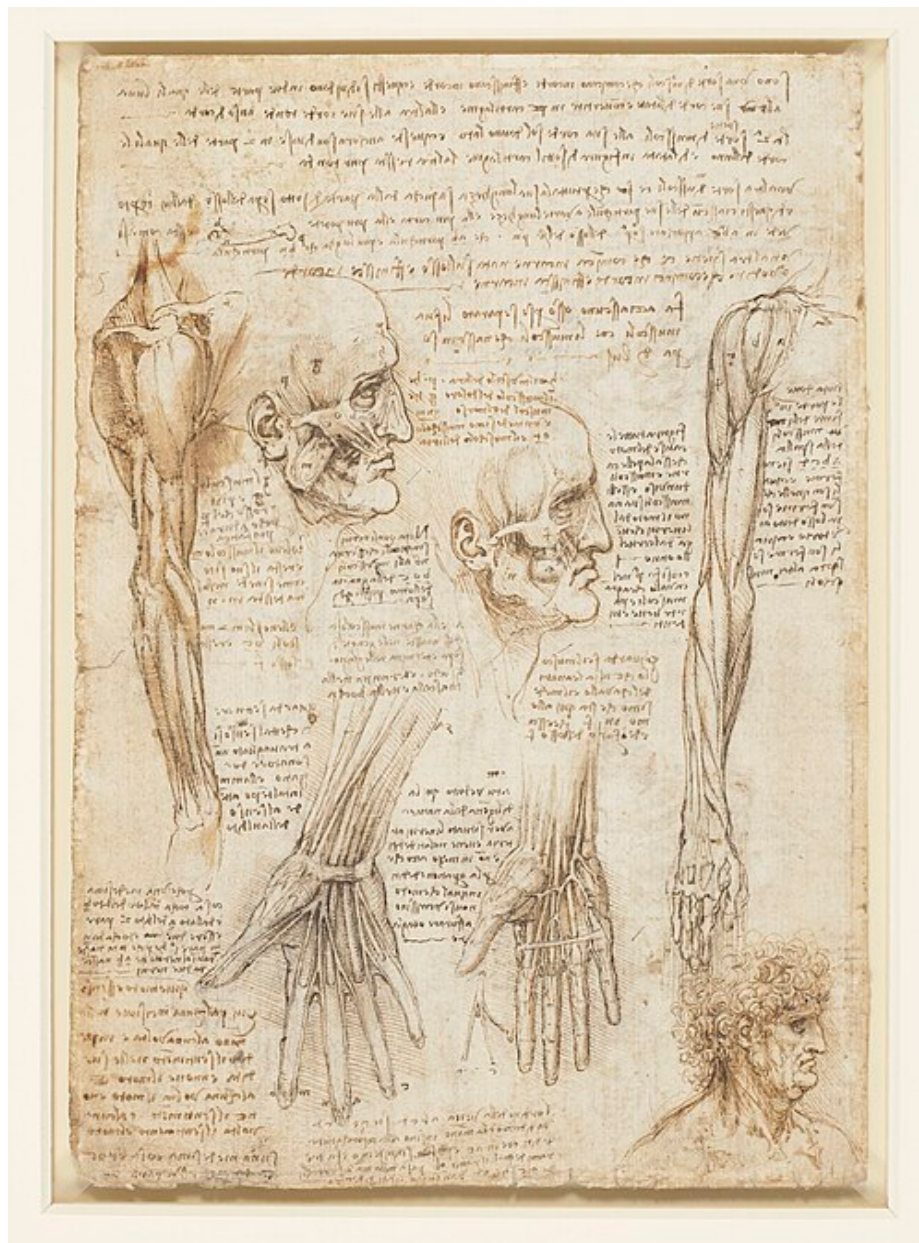


Leonardo da Vinci, Anatomy of the Mouth, c. 1504-1508. Pen and ink on paper. RCIN 919055 verso. Photo: Royal Collection Trust / Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2018). [View Source](#)

Flanigan explains that Leonardo was notably engaged in studying the muscular movements of the lips that produce laughter, stating,

The muscles which constrict the mouth diminishing its length are in the lips themselves, or rather are the

actual muscles which they themselves close. It is true that a muscle displaces the lip downward away from the other muscles united to it, of which one pair are those [risorius] which stretch it out and prepare for laughter.' These scientific descriptions are accompanied by a series of anatomical drawings that explore the visual appearance of various movements of the mouth itself, such as when the lips are pursed, when they are stretched (see the central drawing at the top of the page, which is similar to Mona Lisa's smile), when they are pulled back to reveal the teeth, when they are wide open, and when they are closed tightly. Leonardo's notes and illustrations reveal his close study of the muscular movements of the mouth and lips that constitute the smile and other types of facial expression.



Leonardo da Vinci, Drawings of Muscles in the Face and Arm, and Nerves and Veins of the Hand, c. 1510–1511. Pen and brown ink on paper. Royal Collection Trust. [View Source](#)

Leonardo also made anatomical studies of the muscles in the cheek that, when flexed, cause the mouth to move into a smile or a frown. In fact, modern scientists have identified two primary muscles that are essential to a smile. The first is the

zygomatic major muscle, which runs above the mouth along the cheekbone (or zygomatic bone), and is capable of raising the corners of the lips (this appears in Leonardo's drawing at the letter "o"). The second is the orbicularis oculi muscle, which is capable of raising the cheek and causing wrinkles beneath the eye. Leonardo suggests that the cheek muscle can cause the eye to wrinkle, but does not accurately depict the orbicularis muscle, which surrounds the eye. However, shadowed wrinkles, which we now attribute to the orbicularis oculi muscle, do appear below *Mona Lisa's* puffed lower eyelids, resulting in what today would be considered a natural or 'Duchenne' smile. ... This series of subtle and coordinated movements is what makes Mona Lisa's facial expression appear so life-like and revolutionary in the history of Italian Renaissance female portraiture.



Raphael, *La Muta*, c. 16th century. Oil on panel. 25.6 x 18.8 in. Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino. [View Source](#)



Raphael, *La Gravidia*, 1505-06. Oil on panel, 25.9 x 20.4 in. Palazzo Pitti.
[View Source](#)

During its epoch, the *Mona Lisa* was a stylistic development of influence. Leonardo's innovative techniques established a new standard for portraiture, and he received acclaim from his contemporaries, including Raphael. Raphael's female portraits frequently feature the same three-quarter pose and utilize a pyramidal composition to anchor the figure within the artwork.

Examples such as *La Gravidia* and *La Muta* feature figures positioned diagonally relative to the picture plane, thereby creating a sense of spatial depth against a dark background. Their hands extend toward the observer, implying a shared spatial relationship. Both portraits depict women who directly meet the viewer's gaze, signifying their awareness of being watched and their reciprocal recognition of the viewer.

Nevertheless, the distinctions between these artworks and the *Mona Lisa* are as significant as their commonalities. Raphael meticulously emphasizes details such as jewelry and attire in his portraiture. This emphasis on intricate details contrasts with Leonardo's emphasis on surfaces and lighting within a natural setting.

Furthermore, Raphael's portraits primarily depict his sitters as social subjects, integrating realistic individual characteristics with an idealized aesthetic to craft a representation of the individual within a specific conception of femininity.

In "Reading a Raphael Through Dress Pregnancy, Gender, and Display in *La Donna Gravidia*" (*Dress* 51 no. 2 (2025): 153–171), Lane Eagles contends that Raphael used clothing and accessories in his portraiture to present the sitter as the ideal wife and mother, thereby showcasing "early modern gendered expectations concerning fertility, conception, gestation, confinement, childbirth, and motherhood all in one carefully constructed outfit."

In "Of Her Dress and Fecundity in Renaissance Painting" (PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 2019), Lane Eagles focuses on two subjects: *La Gravidia's* fashionable dress and her pregnancy.

Donna Gravidia's attire signifies her high social status, as do the rings, gold bands, and chain she wears, which Raphael carefully documents. Her hair is pinned up and covered with a hairnet woven with gold threads, indicating her married status and wealth. Eagles notes that her snood is particularly ostentatious.

The gown features a shiny gold bodice and wide red damask sleeves, secured at the shoulders with slender bows. The sleeves' striking hue

was achieved with vermilion and red lake pigments, creating a carmine colouration unique in Raphael's depictions of women's dress. To produce a fabric dye of such intensity, countless cochineal insects had to be crushed. The lace-trimmed partlet, which covers her exposed shoulders, is made of sheer, veil-like material imported into Florentine fashion circles from Bolognese workshops. A fine white *camicia* is pulled from the gaps in her sleeves, offering yet another chance to display the wealth of the sitter's family.

The young woman wears three rings, each featuring a broad gold band and a single gemstone that symbolizes distinct virtues: a sapphire or possibly an emerald, believed to safeguard chastity and prevent miscarriages; and a ruby signifying physical resilience, morality, and fertility. Eagles observes that rubies were frequently bestowed upon brides in recognition of their qualities, which include enhancing physical strength, prosperity, and the capacity to suppress lust and melancholy. "Collectively, these gemstones create a magical aura of strength, health, and chastity around the wearer," she writes.

Furthermore, she describes the significance of depicting a pregnant woman this way:

Depicting a patrician woman arrested in late-term pregnancy, and posing the sitter so that her gestation is centralized via gesture and position is a singular oddity within Italian Renaissance portraiture...The death toll was estimated to be between seventy-five and eighty percent of the total population during the epidemic of 1348. In this context, early modern society was obsessed with pregnancy, and life revolved around the birth of children.

Donna Gravida chose a significant moment during her pregnancy to sit for Raphael. In the medieval and early modern eras, fetuses were regarded as having personhood only after they commenced independent movement, a stage referred to as "quickening," which generally took place around six months into the third trimester. Here, "her fetus has

quickened, and received individuality in accordance with Renaissance obstetrics and theology. Her hand gestures to a living, autonomous human. Gravida's baby has a soul."

MONA LISA IN MODERN TIMES

Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* is one of the most recognized paintings worldwide and has become a prominent symbol in popular culture. Its consistent presence in aesthetic discussions since the 19th century highlights its enduring significance. By the mid-1800s, Leonardo had become an established icon in broader British culture. Walter Pater, an English critic, essayist, and humanist, wrote an essay titled "Mona Lisa," which was published in his 1893 book *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. Pater's interpretation of the *Mona Lisa* was especially impactful, portraying her as a timeless symbol of human experience and an ideal icon for a new aesthetic.

Preoccupation with *Mona Lisa's* enigmatic smile dates back to Vasari's writings. However, Pater highlights her power in relation to the natural world. The evocative landscape and Mona's otherworldliness, however, symbolize a scientific return to nature, rather than just a mythic one. The flowing landscape and rivers behind her echo the curves of her hair, veil, and clothing, illustrating how nature is intertwined with her being and her deep, ancient, human complexity. The fantastical scenery of rocks, rivers, and mountains acts as more than a mere backdrop; it also symbolizes the flux of time. As Pater famously wrote, she "is older than the rocks among which she sits; like a vampire, she has died many times and learned the secrets of the grave." His portrayal of a female archetype references the 19th-century femme fatale, linking ancient women to geological time. After Pater's essay was published, countless interpretations of *Mona Lisa* emerged, further elevating her fame in literary circles.

In 1936, W.B. Yeats, an Irish poet, dramatist, and writer, included a segment of Pater's celebrated prose on the *Mona Lisa* as free verse in

the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, which he was then compiling. The passage that Yeats quoted is as follows,

She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants, and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes.

Interestingly, although the reference is explicit, Yeats never mentioned the *Mona Lisa* in his poetry. His idealized lady, Maud Gonne, inspired many of his poems and reflections on womanhood.

The French novelist Gustave Flaubert's *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*," published around the same time, employs analogous language to evoke the enduring motif of a beautiful woman who brings catastrophe to men. His protagonist, Helen, who endeavours to tempt St. Anthony, is depicted as the Helen of the Trojans; "she has been Lucretia, the patrician raped by kings; she has been Delilah, who cut Samson's hair. She has prostituted herself to every nation. She has sung at every crossroads. She has kissed every face."

This theme serves as a key link between Gothic novels of the late 18th century, the French Romantics, British and French Symbolism, the Pre-Raphaelite movement, and the emergence of modernism.

In 1890, Oscar Wilde's *The Critic as Artist*, a fictional dialogue, explored the creative role of a skilled critic armed with "mighty and majestic prose." Wilde, an Irish poet and playwright, wondered,

Who cared whether Pater had put something Leonardo had never dreamed of into the portrait of Monna Lisa? The painter may have been merely the slave of an archaic smile, as some have fancied. Still, whenever I pass into the cool galleries of the Palace of the Louvre and stand before that strange figure

'set in its marble chair in that cirque of fantastic rocks, as in some faint light under the sea,' I murmur to myself, 'She is older than the rocks among which she sits.' And I say to my friend, "The presence that thus so strangely rises beside the waters is expressive of what, in the ways of a thousand years, man had come to desire..." and he answers me, "Hers is the head upon which all the ends of the world have come, and the eyelids are a little weary."

Wilde addressed the artwork as a starting point for "a new creation."

In 1916, the Irish novelist, poet, and literary critic James Joyce wrote in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "She seemed like one whose magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird... Her bosom was soft, slight, and as gentle as the breast of some dark-plumaged dove."

In 1958, during a lecture at Yale University, the English physician Kenneth D. Keele identified unmistakable signs indicating that a woman in the portrait was at an advanced stage of pregnancy. He interpreted this as a symbol of Genesis: "God the Mother... enclosed within the body of the earth." To support this retrospective diagnosis, Keele argued: "She sits well back in the chair, with her back supported . . . She has turned slightly to the right, with what seems to be a heavy, slow movement. [She has] matronly outlines that would not be expected in a 24-year-old Florentine model, and there is a heavy, vertical falling of the dress into her lap, suggesting pregnancy."

In 1973, art historian Kenneth Clark launched a series on portraiture in *Burlington Magazine* with an essay on the *Mona Lisa*. He observed that the woman's face and the landscape background connect her femininity with nature's creative and destructive forces. He believed the enigmatic image resonated intermittently with the subconscious. In his analysis, Clark linked the peculiar androgyny found in Leonardo da Vinci's art with a homosexual tendency. He proposed that the androgyny of the *Mona Lisa* may not arise from Leonardo's alienation from women but rather from his psychic integration, crafting an image of a woman, or "Woman," with whom he could imaginatively identify.

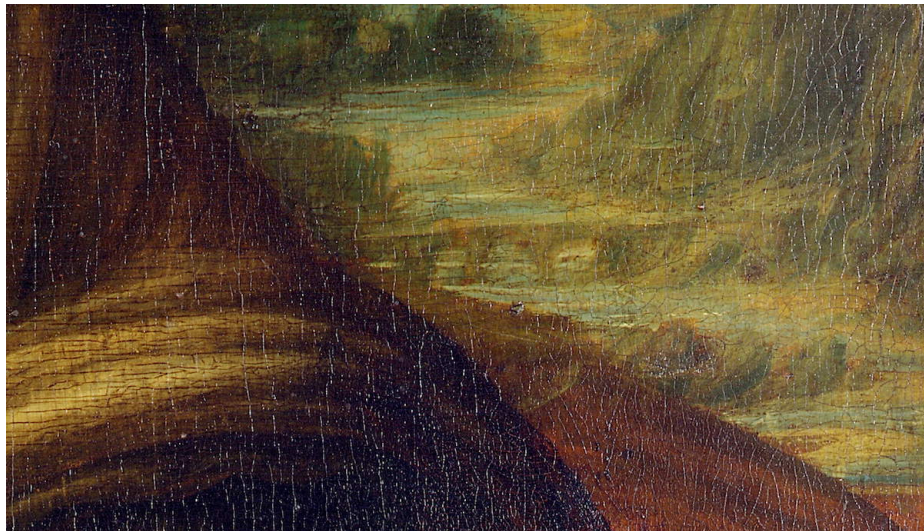
Clark also proposed that Leonardo's open-mindedness towards femininity, both in living women and in the female aspects of himself, his anima, allowed him to develop a new understanding of art. Leonardo recognized and symbolized a realm of female power that most men of his time could only face indirectly, often through a repressive approach that portrayed women as inferior beings.

In 1988, art historian David Rosand connected the *Mona Lisa* to the Renaissance idea of the portrait as a symbol of victory over mortality and death. Emphasizing Leonardo's concern with transience and the effects of time—"O Time, who consumes all things!"—Rosand quotes the artist's belief in art's advantage over destructive nature. "O marvelous science [i.e., painting], which can preserve alive the transient beauty of mortals and endow it with a permanence greater than the works of nature; for these are subject to continual changes of time, which lead them to inevitable old age."

According to Rosand, the *Mona Lisa* embodies dialectical tension between the fluid, ever-changing landscape, subject to endless deformation by water—an agent of time and both the generative and destructive forces of life—and the contrasting image of perfect human beauty—a figure who, in life, would undergo the same transformations over time but who, as a creation of art, will live forever. In Rosand's view, the beautiful woman is not identified with the forces of nature herself, but rather as a product of them, subject to their ravages; symbolically, she is allied with art as the image of perfection and a permanent substitute for transitory life. "O marvelous science (i.e., painting), which can preserve alive the transient beauty of mortals and endow it with a permanence greater than the works of nature, for these are subject to the continual changes of time, which lead them to inevitable old age."



Lecco, on the shores of Lake Como. [View Source](#)



Lecco, on the shores of Lake Como, detail. [View Source](#)

In 2024, Ann Pizzorusso, an Italian geologist and art historian, claimed that the background of the *Mona Lisa* features the city of Lecco along Lake Como in northern Italy. Leonardo would have incorporated his geological knowledge into his work, and this is substantiated by Pizzorusso's view that "Geologists don't look at paintings and art historians don't look at geology" Art historians said Leonardo always used his imagination, but you can give this picture to any geologist in the world, and they'll say what I'm saying about Lecco. Even a non-geologist can now see the similarities."

Pizzorusso visited Lecco, following the path of Leonardo's footsteps, as she explained in an interview with Dalya Alberge in the article "Mystery of where *Mona Lisa* was painted" (online), "We know from his notebooks that he spent a lot of time exploring the Lecco area and the territory further north." She further noted that the rocks in Lecco are limestone and that Leonardo depicted his rocks in a grey-white colour – "which is perfect, because that's the type of rock that's there". She added that, unlike Lecco, neither Bobbio nor Arezzo has a lake: "So we have really perfect evidence at Lecco."

Mona Lisa's anonymity during her lifetime stands in stark contrast to the widespread fame and recognition she continues to enjoy, yet we still know little about her. Millions visit the Musée du Louvre in Paris each year to pay homage to her in her concrete case protected by two sheets of bulletproof, triple-laminated glass separated by 25 centimetres, never getting close enough to see her truly. "The process, writes Clark in *Burlington Magazine* is akin to an odd and most unsatisfactory secular pilgrimage."

This raises the recurring question of why. The fame of masterpieces may arise from a complex, historically influenced series of events and the involvement of various historical agents, including people, institutions, and processes.

By the 19th century, the *Mona Lisa* was already a key part of an artistic canon created by a cultural elite. Additionally, several 19th-century painters made copies of Leonardo's work, further embedding it into the literary imagination of that time.

In the 20th century, what was once valued only by a select few became accessible to millions due to the rise of mass media, including magazines, cinema, radio, and television, as well as the growth of the advertising industry. As a product of high culture, it was acquired by the King of France and displayed in the Louvre, the world's most renowned museum, in Paris, one of the world's great cities, thereby cementing its place in popular culture.

The fascination with a revered painting was dramatically amplified by its 1911 theft by Vincenzo Peruggia, a thirty-year-old Italian painter and

decorator at the Louvre. Its disappearance triggered a global media frenzy, with headlines spreading across continents. This extensive coverage introduced the image of the *Mona Lisa* to millions who had never seen or heard of it before. The Louvre temporarily shut down in mourning and reopened to gatherings of Parisians sharing their grief in the space where the painting had once been displayed. Raphael's portrait of Baldassare Castiglione was temporarily placed in the *Mona Lisa*'s spot, with signs stating, "Stolen on August 22, 1911."



Yves Polli, *Arrival of the Mona Lisa in Milan*, 1913. Postcard. [View Source](#)

In December 1913, Perrugino approached an art dealer in Florence, claiming he was a patriot returning a work he believed Napoleon had stolen. The dealer and the director of the Uffizi Gallery confirmed the painting's authenticity and alerted the police. The *Mona Lisa*'s recovery sparked a patriotic frenzy in Italy and was greeted by ecstatic, massive crowds. The sensational recovery turned the respected artwork into a global icon.



Unveiling of the Mona Lisa. President Kennedy, Madame Malraux, French Minister of Cultural Affairs Andre Malraux, Mrs. Kennedy, Vice President Johnson. National Gallery of Art, January 8, 1963. [View Source](#)

In 1961, First Lady Jackie Kennedy successfully persuaded French culture minister André Malraux to allow the United States to display the painting during an official visit to Washington, the following year. Despite protests in France regarding the safety of the artwork, the loan was formally arranged. The operation demanded the highest level of security, employing motorcades and specialized crating. Within the United States, the painting was transported to its destination in an ambulance equipped with custom springs, protected by armed escort agents, and the Lincoln and Baltimore Harbours were closed to traffic. In the United States, the *Mona Lisa* attracted over 1.6 million visitors during its tour of Washington and New York City.

THE EROTIC IDEAL

Female imagery during the Renaissance could be inherently ambiguous, often collapsing the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Definitions of the Renaissance ideal did not negate the suspended duality between spiritual purity and earthly eroticism; in fact, the projection of a dual nature of submissive modesty and profound sensual agency ultimately defined the Renaissance ideal.

Botticelli's series of portrait-like images in the late 1400s illustrates the beginnings of this engagement with a female duality that challenges easy classification. The series focuses on the same female sitter and follows portrait conventions, depicting a single bust-length figure in profile against a plain, coloured background or window. However, the woman has decorated, loose, flowing hair and wears a somewhat classical dress; she appears more like a general type—such as a nymph or goddess—rather than a specific person.

These images show Simonetta Cattaneo Vespucci, a Genoese woman married to Marco Vespucci of Florence. Known as *la Bella Simonetta*, she was celebrated for her remarkable beauty and considered a "Petrarchan mistress"—an elegant, virtuous, and elusive upper-class woman admired from afar, reminiscent of Petrarch's love for Laura. Through the Vespucci family, she drew the attention of Sandro Botticelli and other prominent Florence painters. Her death at twenty-two reportedly grieved the entire city, with thousands following her open coffin to her burial site. Some speculate Botticelli also loved her, supported by his request to be buried at her feet in the Church of Ognissanti—her parish church in Florence, a wish granted around 1510 when he died, about 34 years later.



Sandro Botticelli or Botticelli workshop, *Idealized Portrait of a Lady* (*Portrait of Simonetta Vespucci as Nymph*), c. 1480-1485. Tempera, poplar wood, mixed technique and banana, 81.3 x 54 cm. Städel Museum. [View Source](#)

Botticelli's Idealized *Portrait of a Lady*, the first of several paintings portraying Simonetta Vespucci as a nymph, is a notably enlarged panel that exclusively centers on the female sitter. The woman is depicted in profile, with her bust slightly turned to reveal a three-quarter view, showcasing a cameo medallion encircling her neck. This medallion is a mirror image of 'Nero's Seal,' an ancient carnelian ring that was once owned by Lorenzo de' Medici, symbolizing the triumph of Apollo over a chained Marsyas, thus representing the victory of divine authority.

Simonetta's facial profile, rendered in delicate side view against a plain, dark background, accentuates her pallid complexion, elaborate hairstyle, and intricate jewelry—emblems of beauty and aristocratic virtue. Her reddish-blond hair, long, narrow nose, and refined features are enhanced by the light white robe and the pearls, ribbons, and gold jewelry she wears. Her hair is styled in braids interwoven with black ribbons and numerous pearls.



Botticelli workshop, *Portrait of a Young Woman (Simonetta Vespucci?)*, after 1480. Oil on panel, 47,5 x 35 cm. Staatliche Museen. [View Source](#)

This second painting from Botticelli's workshop depicts Simonetta in a small, bust-length profile view by a window, with the blue sky visible through the opening, accentuating her exquisite complexion, further enhanced by the vibrant red dress she wears. Once more, her serene

and graceful expression highlights her charming features, while her meticulously braided hair, adorned with pearls, contributes to her overall elegance.



Botticelli workshop, *Portrait of a Woman (Simonetta Vespucci?)*, c. 1490. National Gallery. [View Source](#)



Botticelli workshop, *Allegorical Figure*, c. 1490. National Gallery, London.
[View Source](#)

Contrasting the physical allure of the recto portrait, an allegorical scene is depicted on the reverse side, presumably conveying the notion that the sitter is virtuous and thus immortal. The forested

background represents earthly life, whereas the foreground, featuring a winged figure holding an armillary sphere—which symbolizes hope and eternity—and a clump of moss signifying rebirth, signifies an ascent to heaven.

As Monika A. Schmitter advances in "Botticelli's Images of Simonetta Vespucci: Between Portrait and Ideal" (*Rutgers Art Review* 15 (1995): 33-53), while the use of the portrait format suggests a real, rather than an ideal, person—other attributes signify that the woman is not a real sitter, but a nymph or goddess from another, imaginary world. Furthermore, the woman portrayed is rendered as sexually provocative because the arrangement of her hair transgresses social norms and portrait conventions. Loose hair was considered improper because it was sexually alluring. She writes,

By far the most striking aspect of the images, by comparison with standard portraits, is the depiction of the hair. ... Since social convention did not allow married women to wear their hair loose, it would have been inappropriate for them to have been depicted that way in a standard portrait. In all three images the woman is shown with an elaborate combination of braided hair, loose hair, and hair decorated with pearls and ribbons... These complex, partly loose, partly ornamented hairstyles have more in common with Botticelli's depictions of imaginary women, especially those in his mythological scenes, than they do with his portraits. Women with such hairstyles belong to an imaginary realm removed from everyday social conventions. Their presence is also more erotically charged.

...

In the Medici circle, vernacular poets such as Lorenzo de' Medici, Angelo Poliziano, and the Pulci brothers transformed Simonetta into a cultural icon, mythologizing her as the epitome of Renaissance beauty, grace, and virtue. She was frequently depicted as a 'living Venus' or a chaste, angelic

nymph whose beauty brought harmony to Florence. Angelo Poliziano, in his 'Stanze per la giostra,' idealized Simonetta as a white doe that becomes a nymph. He celebrated her Ligurian origins, describing her as born 'like Venus' among the waves to 'angry Neptune,' and saw her as the muse for Giuliano de' Medici's chivalry. After her death, Lorenzo de' Medici wrote several sonnets mourning her, including one where he compared her soul to a bright star rising to heaven, calling her 'O clear star that with your rays / takes away the light from the nearby stars.' He marveled that she was praised by men without jealousy and by women without envy. Girolamo Benivieni contributed to her spiritualized image, aligning her with the Platonic vision of divine beauty made tangible on earth. Luigi Pulci's poetry expressed the collective mourning and admiration for her, elevating her as a muse. Bernardo Pulci composed elegies emphasizing life's fleeting nature and the enduring legacy of her grace and virtue: Nymph, whom in the earth a cold stone covers,/Beneficent star now received into heaven,/When your light is more discovered,/Return to see my wayward country.

Similar to the poetry, the paintings of Simonetta equally celebrated the divine virtues and extraordinary physical charms of a woman who existed in real life, rather than an idealized figure—someone whose portrait might be immortalized. However, the dichotomy introduced by her nymph or goddess-like features elevates the Florentine woman beyond her earthly context. Both the portrait-like images and the poetry concerning Simonetta merge "real" and "ideal," or "portrait" and "nymph." Concurrently, they intertwine chastity with eroticism. The woman is depicted in near profile, gazing away from, or seemingly avoiding, the viewer's gaze; she exhibits appropriate modesty. Nonetheless, her exotic hairstyle and prominent breasts eroticize her form, enticing the male observer. There is no contradiction between her chastity and her sexual appeal.



Giorgione, *Portrait of a Young Bride (Laura)*, 1506. Oil on canvas transferred from panel, 41 cm × 33.5 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum. [View Source](#)

The same could be said of Giorgione's *Portrait of a Young Bride (Laura)*, another alluring woman depicted with dark hair, dressed in a red cloak trimmed with fur, slightly open to reveal her right breast. This ambiguous gesture may suggest either covering or exposing her body. She wears a delicate white veil over her hair and left shoulder and holds a laurel branch, which can symbolize virtue or introduce an erotic element. A single strand of hair falling over her face further

intensifies the sense of eroticism. Giorgione employs muted colours and the sfumato technique, inspired by Leonardo, to gently soften the woman's facial contours, creating a mood of mystery and intimacy. Yet she gazes away, with her calm yet intense expression suggesting her attention is directed elsewhere.

In both Giorgione's and Botticelli's paintings, sensuality is tempered and rendered deliberately ambivalent. Opinions vary on whether the Giorgione painting is a marriage portrait, especially since its companion is missing, or if the depicted woman is a courtesan, given her semi-naked stance and the sensuality of the breast resting in her fur mantle.

In the Renaissance, nudity could be indicative of both chastity and wantonness, and as such, the woman's partial undress could symbolize alluring sensuality and eroticism, fertility, or serve as a visual expression of the chastity and voluptuousness believed necessary for a successful marriage. The laurel that frames the woman seems to refer to Petrarch, but it could also be the laurel of the modest and faithful wife. The presence of a red robe lined with fox fur in an inventory of Giorgione's possessions hints that this might be the actual garment shown in the painting, increasing the likelihood that the woman was a model and possibly a prostitute. However, her scarf is white, symbolizing chastity, rather than yellow, which was commonly associated with prostitutes.

As with Simonetta, the image's allure depends on these ambiguities, in which the woman's gesture implies that the visual moment is fleeting and may not endure, while her unwavering gaze resists engaging with the viewer.

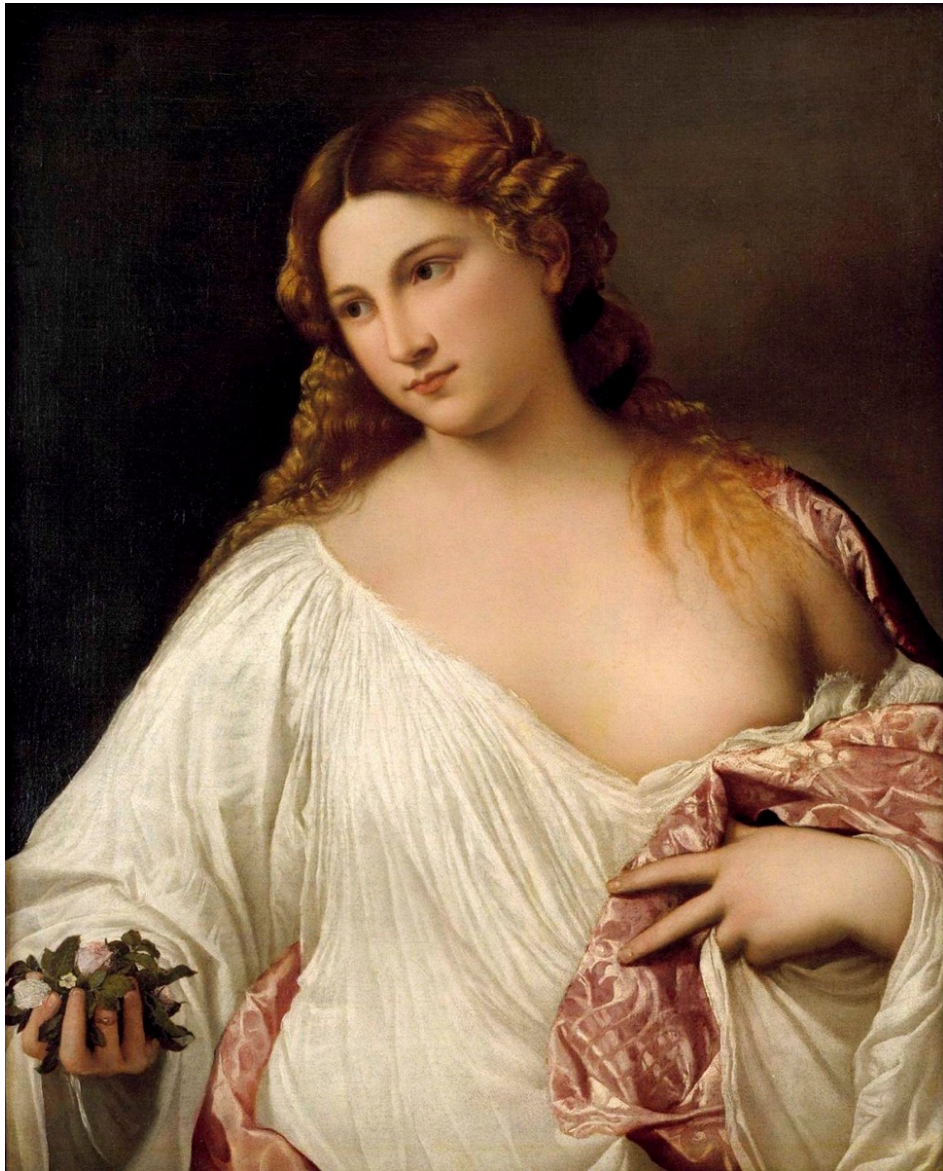
Anne Christine Junkerman, in "The Lady and the Laurel: Gender and Meaning in Giorgione's 'Laura'" (*Oxford Art Journal* 16, no. 1, 1993: 49-58), writes:

The tensions Giorgione calls into play here closely parallel the issues that resonated around the courtesan as she overstepped the boundaries of women's normative behaviour. But gesture, costume,

and laurel are the professional attributes here, not simply the naked breast. The concerns the courtesan raised were not primarily motivated by sexual morality - prostitution per se was a well-established fact of life in Renaissance Venice. Hostility directed against the courtesan tended instead to centre on her apparent autonomy, her independence from men as she took her own lodging, established an independent public role and voice, and engaged in a particularly threatening exercise of social mobility and social indeterminacy. It is important to recall that this painting in 1506 is contemporary with the very first indications of a courtesan culture in Venice.

As such, Giorgione's *Laura* "is not simply an illustration of a courtesan, but a response to the developing phenomenon of the courtesan and a parallel exploration of the unrecognized middle ground between polar opposites, between lady and whore, that the courtesan had just begun to map out for herself."

Rudolf Schier, in a more recent article, "Identifying Giorgione's Laura" (*Italian Studies* 69 (1): 24-40), contradicts Junkerman's analysis, stating that evidence, including an inscription and archival documents, suggests that the sitter is Laura Donà, born between 1485 and 1492, who married Nicolò Contarini in 1506. He contextualizes the painting within the development of Venetian portraiture in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, when inner identity and character, rather than mere physical likeness, became important. This shift, called *imitare* (artistic intervention), marked a move away from simple mechanical reproduction (*ritrarre*). Giorgione was a key figure in this movement, infusing his works with allegorical meaning. His painting *Laura* exemplifies this shift, leaving the interpretation of the subject's identity open. Laura could be a courtesan, Petrarch's beloved, an idealized woman, or a wife.



Titian, *Flora*, c. 1515. Oil on canvas, 79.7 cm x 63.5 cm. Uffizi Gallery. [View Source](#)

Titian's *Flora* exemplifies the "Beauty" genre, which emerged in Venice in the late fifteenth century. Frequently referred to as *belle donne* or '*belle veneziane*', this genre featured idealized, half-length portraits of aesthetically pleasing women. Coined by later collectors, it evolved from accurate portraiture of specific individuals to creating poetic, sensualized representations of female beauty, often characterized by golden hair, pallid skin, and elaborate attire.

The women are generally positioned close to the picture plane, often behind a stone parapet, creating a direct and intimate connection with viewers. Highlighting *morbido* (softness), the paintings depict subjects in luxurious costumes, elaborate hairstyles, and sometimes with partially exposed breasts. While these women are frequently linked to courtesans—highly educated and influential prostitutes in Venice—recent research indicates many instead symbolize poetic, idealized images of brides, newlyweds, or personifications of beauty.

Flora portrays a young woman with fair skin and hair, dressed in a sheer white camicia, a typical Renaissance undergarment. The dress covers her arms and torso but slips from her left shoulder, revealing most of her left breast. A loosely draped rose-colored damask fabric hangs over her shoulder and waist, an unusual detail considering her partial nudity. Her half-undone hairstyle, with loose golden hair over her shoulders, suggests an intimate setting, but Titian provides no specific context. The background is a simple blend of brown tones, with no clear environment to define her identity. Her gestures and the few accessories, including a small bouquet in her right hand, suggest she is Flora, the Roman goddess of flowers and spring. However, the modern gold ring on her middle finger contradicts this, as Flora is usually depicted fully immersed in nature, without material adornments.

The painting prompts reflection on identity and perception. Is the artist portraying a particular individual, or highlighting the idealized notion of beauty? The application of glazes adds a tangible texture that captivates viewers and evokes desire. Her delicate gestures suggest consciousness of her movements and hint at richer mythological meanings.

The depiction might be linked to nymphs, who often revealed one breast by adjusting their garments. The flowers represent the goddess Flora, the patroness of spring and courtesans, suggesting that the artwork may depict a courtesan in a mythological context.

Cathy Santore, in “*Like a Nymph*” (*Source: Notes in the History of Art* 27, no. 4 (2008): 20–26), explores the connection between courtesans and nymphs. She writes:

On May 15, the Consiglio dei Dieci, Venice’s governing council, expressed concern that courtesans and prostitutes were dressing like nymphs to attract young men. Their *camicia alla ninfa*, which exposed the arms and lower legs, appealed to patrons by evoking classical antiquity. Courtesans embraced this nymph-like association and were often hired for such roles in spectacles. For example, the diarist Sanuto noted that during the 1530 carnival in Venice, a pageant featured five nymphs who were famous courtesan dancers from Ferrara. Given their revealing costumes, courtesans were the obvious choice for these performances.

Why such willing participation in this charade? By affiliating themselves with antiquity, the courtesan and her clients sought approbation and enhancement of their esteem. The all’antica alliance extended to the nymphs of mythology as well as to the hetaerae of the real world. Ancient literature abounds with details of the exploits and honours of the hetaerae. Armed with antique sanction, the Renaissance courtesan could be counted among the elite. Some of these women sought the all’antica identification by assuming ancient Roman names.

The Renaissance undergarment known as the *camicia* allowed the arms and a portion of the lower leg to be visible. The cornica served as nymph attire in art and theatre, resembling the crinkled, gauzy textures depicted on Greek vases and in classical sculpture. Courtesans and prostitutes adopted this body-revealing costume to attract young men, as well as to evoke the fantasy associated with classical antiquity.

Fiora A. Bassanese expands on the role of the courtesans in “Private Lives and Public Lies: Texts by Courtesans of the Italian Renaissance” (*Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 30, no. 3 (1988): 295–319).

Courtesans emerged as significant figures, acting as entertainers and hostesses, sometimes as prostitutes. They crafted their identities to fit societal norms, and some gained recognition through their literary works. Despite a male-dominated culture, courtesans expressed themselves through letters and poetry, often appealing to their male admirers. However, their creativity was limited by societal conventions, resulting in many works being lost, as they were typically created for specific occasions.

Bassanese notes that the ‘honest courtesan’ archetype developed as these women gained entry into male intellectual circles. Unlike gentlewomen, they were not restricted by chastity, which increased their appeal. They often wore noble clothing and used titles to conceal their origins. Trained from a young age by ambitious mothers, courtesans told a story of self-made women rising from modest backgrounds, although only a few achieved lasting success and recognition. The line between respected courtesans and marginalized prostitutes was often unclear, making it difficult to maintain the status of *honest*. While thousands of prostitutes inhabited cities like Rome and Venice, only a few hundred were considered respectable.

What accounts for the prevalent occurrence of courtesans and prostitutes? In Rome, the city was governed by clergy known for their sexual activity, including cardinals, bishops, and even the Pope. Officially, Rome’s clergy was expected to remain celibate. Most understood this to mean they could not marry. However, their chastity was seldom maintained. In Venice, increasing dowry expenses and a decline in trade wealth had long led Venetian men to adopt lifelong bachelorhood. The restriction of marriages to prevent the division of family estates into new branches led men to seek alternative forms of companionship—such as concubines, courtesans, and street prostitutes—which constituted the primary categories of female “professionals” available in Venice.

At the same time, the combination of high marital dowry rates and a tradition of patrilineal inheritance created a surplus of single girls in aristocratic families, who were compelled by their families, *per vim et metum* (by force and fear), to become nuns. The rationale for monastic confinement was simple—the fewer the heirs, the greater the chance the family could provide substantial dowries for one or two daughters and, in this way, arrange marriages with men who had social, political, and economic power. Florence maintained an approximate population of 60,000 throughout much of the 16th century. It is estimated that roughly one in twenty women lived in convents, amounting to about 1,500 nuns. In fact, over 25% of women from elite families entered religious institutions. In Venice, fifty convents accommodated the city's excess of young noblewomen, who faced limited prospects for marriage due to the scarcity of eligible men.

Additionally, young women often pursued a religious vocation to transcend the traditional roles of wife and mother. Saint Veronica Giuliani, an Italian Capuchin Poor Clare nun and one of the most eminent mystics in Catholic history, recorded her First Communion in her diary on February 2, 1670: "When I took the Holy Host, I felt such a heat that flared up inside me, especially my heart was burning... I felt that the Lord had truly come to me, and with my whole heart I told Him, "My God, it is now time to take complete possession of me. I give myself only to You, and it is only You I want." She sincerely implored her father not to arrange a marriage for her. After considerable resistance, he consented to let her become a nun, and she was canonized as a saint in 1839.



Titian, *Woman with a Mirror*, c. 1515. Oil on canvas, 96 x 76 cm. Louvre Museum. [View Source](#)

In 16th-century Italy, high-ranking courtesans called *cortigiane oneste* (honest courtesans) were cultured, educated, and wealthy companions of the elite. Unlike common prostitutes, they were trained in arts and literature, served as influencers, and maintained independent, luxurious households. Venice was a center for this culture, with a 16th-century catalogue—the *Catalogo de tutte le principal et più honourate cortigiane di Venetia* (Catalogue of all the

principal and most honoured courtesans of Venice)—listing the city's 212 most respected courtesans. Venetian authorities, who legalized and taxed prostitution, documented 11,164 courtesans in Venice in 1509, within a total population of approximately 170,000 to 200,000. The city distinguished between the low-level *cortigiane di lume* (courtesans of the light) and the elite *cortigiane oneste*.

Thomas Coryat, an Englishman who journeyed to Venice in 1608 to survey its legendary sights and women, wrote of the honest courtesan:

Moreover shee will endeavour to enchaunt thee partly with her melodious notes that shee warbles out upon her lute, which shee fingers with as laudable a stroke as many men that are excellent professors in the noble science of musicke; and partly with that heart-tempting harmony of her voice. Also thou wilt finde the Venetian Courtezan (if she be a selected woman indeede) a good Rhetorician, and a most elegant discourses so that if shee annot move thee with all these foresaid delights, shee will assay thy constancy with her Rhetoricall tongue. (Thomas Coryat, *Coryat's Crudities*, Scholar Press, 1978)

Coryat also describes some of the “palaces” of these courtesans:

And indeede such is the variety of the delicious objects they minister to their lovers, that they want nothing tending to delight. For when you come into one of their Palaces (as indeed few of the principallest of them live in very magnificent and portly buildings fit for the entertainment of a great Prince) you seeme to enter into the Paradise of Venus. For theirfairest roomes are most glorious and glittering to behold. The walles round being adorned with most sumptuous tapistry and gilt leather.

In Francesco Pona's novella, *La Lucerna* (1625), he writes about the sense of freedom experienced by courtesans.

Freedom is the most precious gem a courtesan possesses and contains within itself everything she

desires. Given the privilege, even infamy seems honourable to her. Since she is not subject to the tyranny of husbands or parents, she can deliver herself to her lovers without fear of being killed for reasons of honour. In this way she is free to express natural appetites and feminine lasciviousness.

Titian's *Woman with a Mirror*, Raphael's *La Fornarina*, and Palma Vecchio's *A Blonde Woman* are other renowned examples of the "Beauty" genre that are frequently interpreted as a fusion of idealized beauties and depictions of courtesans of elite lovers.

Titian's *Woman with a Mirror* depicts a woman with wavy blonde hair and a fair complexion, captured in a private moment as she gazes at her reflection with admiration. She embodies the Venetian ideals of beauty and sensuality. The composition is tightly focused, featuring a man in a red doublet holding a large, flat mirror, with a convex mirror in the background, creating a multifaceted perspective.

The scene explores the *vanitas* theme—comparing youthful beauty with mortality—through mirrors and a perfume bottle. The intimate setting, bare shoulders, and loose hair contribute to an erotically charged ambiance associated with "expert lovers" or high-status courtesans. The man in the shadows, holding the mirrors, is variously interpreted as her lover or a servant, thereby enhancing the scene's intrigue.



Raphael, *La Fornarina*, c. 1519-1520. Oil on panel, 85 x 60 cm. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini. [View Source](#)

In Raphael's *La Fornarina*, a partially nude woman with a delicate veil covers her lower abdomen and partially hides her left breast. She wears a blue and yellow turban on her dark hair, while a thicker red cloth drapes over her legs and genitals. The woman has smooth skin,

well-balanced features, and a gentle pink hue in her cheeks. The painting also features an armband engraved with the artist's signature, "Raphael Vrbinas."



The Capitoline Venus. 100-150 CE. 193 cm. Copy of an original by Praxiteles, 4th century BCE. Capitoline Museums, Rome. [View Source](#)

La Fornarina's stance resembles the *Venus pudica* pose. Inspired by ancient sculptures of Venus, the pose typically shows the goddess nude, covering her breasts and genitals with a hand or a light cloth. Raphael heightens the provocative effect by enlarging her breasts, accentuating her nipples, and giving her a flirtatious yet bashful expression directed at the viewer.



Palma Vecchio, *A Blonde Woman*, c. 1520. Oil on panel, 77.5 x 64.1 cm. National Gallery. [View Source](#)

Palma Vecchio's *A Blonde Woman* has a sidelong glance that creates a personally engaging and seductive connection with the male viewer. Her white chemise slips off her shoulder, revealing her breast as she holds a bouquet of wildflowers.

The flowers she holds are a posy of primroses, buttercups, and forget-me-nots, which are believed to signify spring, fertility, or to be a poetic reference to the goddess Flora. The painting features rich, warm colors, with her golden hair contrasting against a dark green mantle and a loose white chemise.

Varying textures—such as soft furs, jewels, and linens in Titian; sheer, diaphanous white linen or silk in Raphael; or elaborate, patterned, quilted, and crumpled satins and brocades in Palma Vecchio—generate visual interest and demonstrate the artists' skill in rendering mimetic details. More critically, these textures contrast with and emphasize the flowing hair, exposed shoulders, and bosoms. Alongside contrasts of light and dark, they help structure the composition by guiding the viewer's gaze toward the smooth, luminous, and tranquil skin, which contrasts with textured surfaces. The movement of the eyes and the placement of the hands also direct attention to the uncovered areas, thereby establishing a connection between the painted woman and the (male) viewer, implying she is intentionally revealing herself for his pleasure.



Giovanni Cariani, *Courtesans and Gentleman (Seven Members of the Albani Family)*, 1519. Oil on canvas, 117 x 117 cm. Private collection. [View Source](#)

In contrast to these idealized courtesans, Giovanni Cariani's painting deliberately depicts courtesans in a realistic, earthy style, diverging from idealized beauty. At one time titled *Seven Members of the Albani Family*, it was initially thought to have hung in the Albani family palace in Bergamo, depicting a group portrait of family members. Francesco Albani, a notable noble, was a major patron of Cariani. Today, scholars believe the scene actually depicts a genre setting with courtesans and their male admirers. A girl holding a mirror and touching her hair hints that the painting is a brothel scene. The squirrel on the table, lacking deeper symbolism, is just the courtesan's pet, reflecting Venetian courtesans' love for animals. The mirror and animal, symbols of the courtesan, are prominently displayed. The girl's thin *camicia* fabric

reveals her nipples, and the woman with the fan has similarly exposed herself. The older woman in shadow behind them is likely the Madame.

The painting provides the most detailed portrayal of Venetian courtesan culture from the early 1500s. It features in meticulous and rich details, an idealized domestic scene of a group of courtesans. These women, considered a form of professional royalty, could afford to present themselves in the luxurious manner described by Cariani.

Chriscinda Claire Henry provides a detailed description of the painting in "Buffoons, Rustics, and Courtesans: Low Painting and Entertainment Culture in Renaissance Venice" (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 2009):

In a compressed envelope of space, Cariani's courtesans assemble in an elaborately choreographed syntax of counter-poised poses, gestures, and gazes. They direct their performance of seduction at both their painted admirers and their viewing audience through direct eye contact, the revelation of shoulders, breasts, and arms, and suggestive postures such as turning the face back over the shoulder or reclining the upper body. To heighten the effect, the painting presents a catalogue of material wealth, lavish taste, and sexual gestures and symbols. ... Most strikingly, a thread of burnished gold weaves through the picture in an almost liquid shimmer, from the richly braided *scuffia* (a soft cap or bonnet) of the courtesan at far left – a stand-in for the elaborately crimped, curled, and braided hair (not all real) of the other courtesans – to her sizable gold chain and bead-and-scallop belt. It continues through the fine chain holding the filmy white *camicia* (chemise) of the central courtesan in place on her chest, to her braided belt and the threaded trim of her blue scarf. Gold picks up again in the frame of the hand-mirror held by the courtesan in white, the page's audacious double-hoop earring, and the trim on his blouse, scarf, and beret. It follows across to the beret and hat badge of

the teenage boy to his right, and finishes in the piping of the pink hair band worn by the courtesan in white at lower right.”



Titian, *La Bella*, 1536. Oil on canvas, 39 x 30 in. Palazzo Pitti. [View Source](#)

Private collections of paintings depicting beautiful women gained popularity in Venice during the 16th century, influenced by the

Venetian School and artists such as Titian, Giorgione, and Palma Vecchio. The practice of collecting highly idealized and often sensual images of "beautiful women" (or *belle donne*) in private homes became especially prominent during this period.

Titian's portraits frequently amalgamate the qualities of an idealized, anonymous "beauty" with those of a distinguishable individual. This is evident in paintings like *La Bella*, where the sitter's identity is less significant than her embodiment of feminine beauty, luxurious clothing, and confident charm. Often seen as a portrait of noble beauty, it was commissioned by the Duke of Urbino, who referred to it as "that portrait of a woman in the blue gown," suggesting that the term "portrait" represented ideals of female beauty rather than a specific likeness.

Michelle Rosshandler, in "A Historiography of Idealized Portraits of Women in Renaissance Italy: The Idea of Beauty in Titian's *La Bella*" (MA thesis, McGill University, 2004), presents writings by three art historians who expound on the ideals of Renaissance female beauty.

Elizabeth Cropper explains in "The Beauty of Woman: Problems in the Rhetoric of Renaissance Portraiture" (*in Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Maureen Quilligan, Margaret W. Ferguson, and Nancy J. Vickers, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), which depicts a beautiful woman and also celebrates the beauty of painting. She explains that the "critical interpretation of many of these images of women becomes possible only when it is recognized that they belong to a special class of paintings existing in relation to a particular set of expectations on the part of the beholder and painter."

Patricia Simons explores the interaction between art and society in "Portraiture, Portrayal, and Idealization: Ambiguous Individualism in Representations of Renaissance Women" (*in Language and Images of Renaissance Italy*, ed. Alison Brown. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). She emphasizes that: "Portraits can function more as cultural statements than expressions of private identities; they can be seen as ideological tools rather than simply aesthetic objects conveying truth."

Essentially, Renaissance portraits of women are not merely passive representations. Instead, Simons suggests that these images function as dynamic systems of representation, presenting different perspectives by fostering a dialogue between art and society. Her analysis of *La Bella* emphasizes her concept of the veiled body, which implies that “a [Renaissance] woman’s body exists in the paradoxical space of desire and repression.” She argues that the main sign on a Renaissance woman’s body is “chastity reinforced by her beauty, imbued by containment and respectability”. She identifies two display types: the dressed woman in modest attire and the undressed woman veiled through poetic ornamentation.

Rona Goffen builds on Cropper’s statement that Titian’s *La Bella* is a demonstration of the beauty of painting in “Ladies & Other Beautiful Women” (Goffen, *Titian’s Women*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). She explains that the beautiful model’s identity was unimportant, and that her anonymity contributed to *La Bella’s* allure. In this regard, she states that “Bella’s beauty does not lessen her morality. Instead, her beauty, like her dress, is a key part of the painting; a beautiful woman and attire create a beautiful image - but that doesn’t mean she’s a courtesan.” This aligns with Renaissance views that a woman’s appearance reflects virtue. Goffen also notes that: “model and subject matter are not interchangeable in meaning or identity.” It’s wrong to equate *La Bella’s* model with the subject, since the artwork’s meaning relies on the model’s anonymity. “In reality, the model, possibly a woman of questionable reputation, might have been a prostitute, given artistic practices and Titian’s use of prostitutes as models. But prostitutes aren’t necessarily bacchantes, nor does using one for *La Bella* make her a whore.”

The ideal female beauty, explored by these three art historians, is defined by *La Bella’s* portrait. *La Bella* has nearly pearlescent skin, with delicate touches of red on the cheeks and lips. Her eyes are large, dark, and vibrant, enhanced by long, slender lashes, creating a captivating, intelligent gaze. The forehead is high and pale, conforming to a classic Renaissance beauty standard. The jawline is aesthetically pleasing, almost forming a perfect oval shape, leading to a rounded chin. Her expression is serene, confident, and sophisticated,

conveying both inner beauty and high social standing. Titian has created an image embodying the apex of Renaissance feminine beauty—an ideal rather than a specific individual—demonstrating grace, status, and subtle allure through soft features, radiant skin, and a direct, engaging gaze that diverges from tradition.

La Bella's luxurious, intricately detailed damask gown, with its vibrant hue and intricate detailing, and the precious gemstones she wears, signify wealth and an elevated social status. The exquisitely tailored dress features slashed sleeves that reveal glimpses of a white undergarment, a fashionable detail of the period. The dress is adorned with subtle yet rich gold embroidery and bows, emphasizing its opulence. It has a low-cut neckline that balances sensuality with decorum, complemented by a sable or marten fur (referred to as a zibellino) draped artfully over her arm. Prominent earrings featuring large rubies and pearls further accentuate her luxurious appearance. A long, delicate gold chain, also symbolic of wealth, is draped around her neck. Her honey-coloured hair is styled in elaborate knots and braids, adorned with pearls or gold accents.

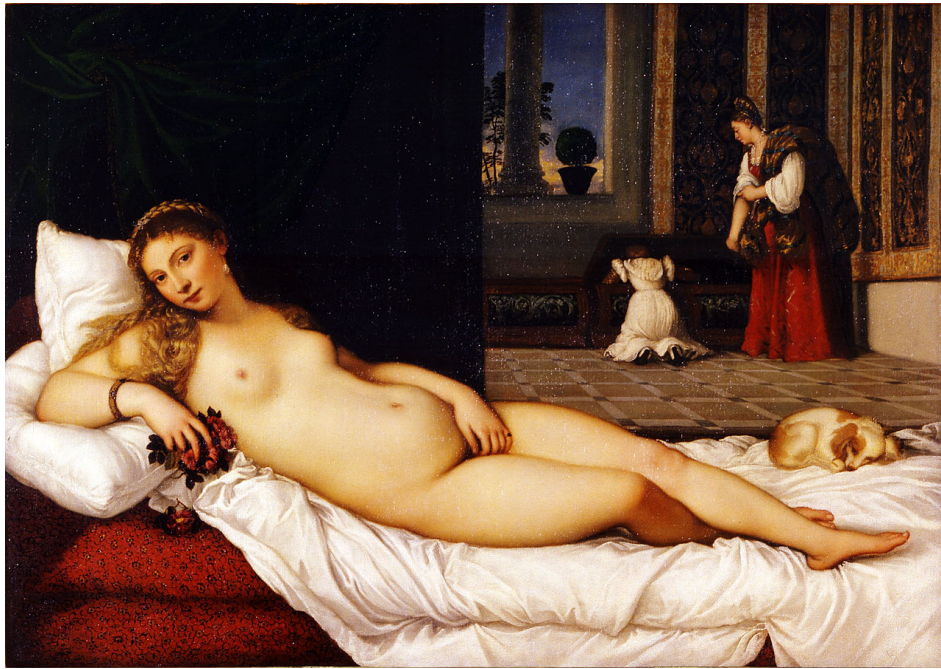
The idea of *La Bella* as an anonymous model appears in the literature of the time, especially in the vernacular poems that begin with specific women and evolve into broader aesthetic ideals. This concept reflects the context of the court of Urbino, as shown in Baldassare Castiglione's *The Courtier*.

Castiglione, the son of a noble courtier serving the Gonzaga family, received a humanist education in Milan. After his father's death, he became Count of Casatico and served as a courtier and diplomat. In 1504, he joined the court of the Duke of Urbino, where he composed poetry and plays. Published in 1528, shortly before his death, *The Courtier* presents discussions among court members about the ideal Renaissance gentleman and introduces Castiglione's concept of the ideal woman, emphasizing a transition from particular beauty to universal beauty. He writes,

Since I may fashion this Lady as I wish, not only am I
unwilling to have her practice such vigorous and

rugged manly exercises, but I would have her practice even those that are becoming to women, circumspectly and with that gentle daintiness which we have said befits her. Thus, in dancing, I would not see her use too active and violent movements, nor in singing or playing those abrupt and oft-repeated diminutions which show more skill than sweetness; likewise, the musical instruments that she uses ought, in my opinion, to be appropriate to this intent. Imagine how unlovely it would be to see a woman play drums, fifes or trumpets, or other like instruments; and this because their harshness hides and destroys that mild gentleness which so much adorns every act a woman does. Therefore, when she starts to dance or make music of any kind, she ought to bring herself to it by letting herself be urged a little, and with a touch of shyness which shall show that noble shame which is the opposite of effrontery.

Moreover, she ought to adapt her dress to this intent, and so to clothe herself that she may not seem vain or frivolous. But since women may and ought to take more care for beauty than men, — and there are diverse sorts of beauty — this Lady ought to have the good sense to discern what those garments are that enhance her grace and are most appropriate to the exercises wherein she purposes to engage at the time, and to wear them. And if she is conscious of possessing a bright and cheerful beauty, she ought to set it off with movements, words, and dress all tending towards the cheerful; so too, another, who feels that her style is gentle and serious, ought to accompany it with fashions of that sort, to enhance that which is the gift of nature. Thus, if she is a little more stout or thin than the medium, or fair or dark, let her seek help from dress, but as covertly as possible; and while keeping herself dainty and neat, let her always seem to give no thought or heed to it.



Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, c. 1534. Oil on canvas, 119.2 x 165.5 cm. Uffizi Gallery. [View Source](#)

La Bella and the *Venus of Urbino* were both commissioned by Guidobaldo II della Rovere, the Duke of Urbino. Guidobaldo commissioned *La Bella* as a portrait and acquired the Venus shortly afterward, serving as an allegory of marriage, marital duty, and eroticism. The two paintings of the same model are widely regarded by art historians as complementary, illustrating the duality of the Renaissance ideal woman as both a clothed, virtuous portrait and a nude, eroticized allegorical figure.

The Venus of Urbino is portrayed in an elegant, classical interior. In the background, two maidservants are visible: one kneels beside a decorated chest, searching its contents, while the other stands nearby, carrying a wedding dress on her shoulder. The reclining nude rests her hand and part of her torso on two pillows, lying on shiny satin. She adopts the Venus *pudica* pose inspired by classical Venus sculptures, but applied to a reclining rather than standing figure. Her left hand covers her groin, and her right holds a bouquet of red roses, symbolizing love and pleasure. Her exposed breasts highlight her youthful beauty, with smooth, radiant skin representing divine

perfection. Her rounded abdomen suggests fertility and femininity. This depiction of eroticism aims to evoke conjugal love, emphasized by details like the sleeping dog beside her and the myrtle pot on the windowsill. The dog symbolizes fidelity, and the myrtle, linked to Venus, signifies faithfulness in love. The actions of the maidservants also link to marriage, celebrating love and sensuality in this context.

Numerous Italian literary works from the sixteenth century accentuated the sensual qualities of nude beauty, advocating for natural allure and establishing ideals for fair skin and specific proportions, frequently appealing to the male gaze. These texts posited that the unclothed woman was a "natural" symbol of perfection, often portraying her as a "Venus" or a "nymph," thereby contributing to a shift in the artistic and literary perception of her from a medieval emblem of sin to a Renaissance representation of aesthetic pleasure.

Pietro Aretino was a prominent and controversial Italian Renaissance author, satirist, poet, and playwright. In his dialogues, *Ragionamenti* (1534–1536), he examines the lives of women in 16th-century Italy through a candid and unapologetic perspective. Composed in a provocative, often humorous, and explicit manner, the works feature a seasoned prostitute named Nanna who instructs a younger woman, Pippa, on the stark realities and essential strategies for navigating society, assessing the roles of wife, nun, and courtesan.

Aretino's work is marked by intense, vivid, and highly sensual descriptions that centre on the body's physical allure. These descriptions often evoke classical imagery of beauty, such as ivory, to convey the softness and texture of the skin. This imagery underscores a delicate yet vibrant quality of the female form, setting a high bar for physical beauty within the dialogues. Aretino often contrasts the natural attractiveness of the nude female body with the artificiality of clothing, makeup, and the social conventions of the time. The raw, unadorned body is framed as a source of power and natural attraction. At the same time, the restrictive clothing often worn by elite women is presented as a fraudulent or constraining "artifice". The sensual focus is not merely for titillation; it serves as a satire of the

period's moral and social corruption. By focusing on the body, Aretino addressed the hypocrisy of influential men and the societal standards prevailing in Rome and Italy.

Agnolo Firenzuola was an Italian writer and poet, best known for his secular works, despite having been a Vallombrosan monk. In his 1541 work, *Dialogo della bellezza delle donne*, he discusses the concept of "virtuous nakedness" as a means of shifting the soul's focus from physical, earthly beauty to divine beauty. Firenzuola advocated for natural beauty over ornamentation, asserting that true beauty resides in the "naked" body provided by God, and he often condemns excess cosmetics or clothing that hide authentic anatomy. He articulates the criteria for natural ideal beauty as follows:

The woman's body is compared to a vase, describing how a woman with "fleshy hips," like an elegant vase, does not need clothes or accessories (such as a belt) to enhance her form. He emphasizes the vital importance of thick yet fine, long, and curly hair, with blonde shades ranging from gold and honey to bright sunshine. The white brow should be twice as wide as it is high, gently curved and free of lines. Eyebrows should be dark, fine as silk, with perfect arches tapering toward the ends. While Firenzuola notes the historical preference for black eyes, he first favours blue and then dark chestnut irises with large, curved whites. Flushed cheeks should rise to protect the eyes, while remaining ivory-white and less shiny than the brow. The nose should be properly proportioned, slightly pointed but not turned up, avoiding a prideful look. The mouth should be small, neither angular nor flat, with fairly equal lips meeting at an obtuse angle in profile, more so than where the lower lip joins the chin. A woman's modest, rare smile was considered the peak of beauty, elevating her to the divine. The neck should be long, slender, rounded, and ivory-white, with soft, full shoulders and arms like vase handles—fleshy yet strong, soft and resilient, with white hands and curved palms. Fingers should be long, slender, tapering, with a gap between the

index finger and thumb, and pinkish tips. Firenzuola says breasts should swell outward and upward without underlying bone. The leg should be long and slender, with oval, fleshy shins, not bony. The foot is as vital as the face; a perfect one is slender, small, white like alabaster, with a high arched instep.

Federico Luigini, an Italian scholar and author of the treatise *Il libro della bella donna* (1554), shared Firenzuola's system of cataloguing certain features necessary for beauty, such as fair skin, dark eyes, and blonde hair, while emphasizing that true beauty is a divine endowment that elevates the soul. He analyzed the paradox inherent in depicting idealized naked beauty while maintaining artistic, moral, and social standards, arguing that beauty "is not situated in the real social world but in that of the imagination of the male fantasist." In the concluding discussion of Part II, regarding whether a woman is most beautiful when adorned or unadorned, he references the opinions of Ariosto, Plutarch, and Apuleius, who favour the nude form. The argument is reinforced by the example of Phryne, a famous 4th-century BCE Athenian courtesan who was acquitted of a capital charge of impiety (asebeia). Accused of dishonouring the Eleusinian Mysteries and acting as a mock-priestess, she was acquitted after her defender, Hypereides, dramatically exposed her breast to the jury, arguing her divine beauty deserved mercy, not death.

STEALING BEAUTY

Many members of the nobility, such as Isabella d'Este, sought to exercise control over the likenesses being created from their features. For example, d'Este rejected mimetic representation when it was applied too overtly to her portrayals.

Isabella was born in 1474 as the eldest daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Ferrara in north-central Italy. She was raised in a refined family in Ferrara, receiving a strong education and engaging with many leading scholars and artists of her era. At sixteen, she married Francesco Gonzaga, the ruler of neighbouring Mantua. As Marchesa

of Mantua, she became renowned for her leadership in fashion and taste and for her strong support of artists, musicians, poets, and scholars, presenting a venerable image of a noblewoman. She earned widespread admiration, with poet Ariosto describing her as "the liberal and magnanimous Isabella." Isabella served as regent of Mantua during her husband Francesco II Gonzaga's absences and throughout Federico's childhood.



Titian, *Portrait of Isabella d'Este (Isabella in Black)*, c. 1536. Oil on canvas, 102.4 cm x 64.7 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum. [View Source](#)

Titian exemplifies this tendency toward controlled enhancement in his portrayal of *Isabella d'Este*, in which the sitter is transformed into the epitome of beauty.

Heather Graham in "Titian, *Isabella d'Este (Isabella in Black)* (*Smarthistory*, December 8, 2022) characterizes Titian's portrait of Isabella d'Este as an "evocation of beauty." The work depicts a young woman dressed in opulent textiles, with a flawless complexion, rosy cheeks, and golden-hued hair gracefully styled around her face, crowned with an ornate *zazara*. A substantial pearl hangs from her ear, reflecting the gentle light. Isabella's blue eyes look intently at the observer, and her smooth skin evokes a sensual reaction.

However, as Graham explains, the image is deceptive, created when Isabella was in her sixties. Furthermore, that beauty may never have been hers. Isabella herself remarked: "The portrait by Titian's hands is of such a pleasing type that we doubt that we were ever, at the age that he represents, of such beauty that is contained in it."

Although Isabella understood this image as her own portrait, Titian's flattering portrayal is a fantasy. This model of beauty is a carefully constructed conceit reflecting Isabella's ideal self—how she wanted to be seen or remembered by others—rather than her physical reality.

Yassana C. Croizat explains in "'Living Dolls': François I^{er} Dresses His Women" (*Renaissance Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2007): 94–130) that Isabella was a fashion arbiter. This was seen as a sign of leadership, making it an important trait for women in influential positions to develop. Bona Sforza, Queen of Poland, called her "the source and origin of all the loveliest fashions in Italy." Even ladies-in-waiting at Charles V's court admired her style and requested fashion dolls to copy her look. While these requests flattered the marchesa, she was selective about sharing her beauty tips.



Example of an early modern doll, c. 1600. Livrustkammaren. Owned by Christina of Holstein-Gottorp or Catherine of Sweden. [View Source](#)

Isabella's elegance was such that the King of France requested that she send him a doll dressed in her favourite fashions so that he could have them copied for his court. A letter written by Federico Gonzaga in 1515 reveals that François I^{er} requested a fashion doll from Isabella d'Este "As proof of Isabella's international reputation as an authority

on such matters.” Dated November 19, 1515, it states: ‘My Illustrious and Exalted Lady, Most Revered Mother and Lady, Monsignor de Moretta has told me that the King wishes My Lady to send him a doll dressed in the fashions that suit you of shirts, sleeves, undergarments, outer garments, dresses, headdresses, and hairstyles that you wear; sending various headdress styles would better satisfy his Majesty, for he intends to have some of these garments made to give to the women in France. Therefore, would you be so kind as to send this as soon as possible?’”

In her response, Isabella warned François that he would learn nothing new from the doll she would send him: “To satisfy the wish of His Most Christian Majesty, we will gladly have a doll made and dressed in all the fashions we wear on our body and on our head, although his Majesty will not see anything new, for the styles we wear are equally worn in Milan by the Milanese ladies.” Considering her tendency to craft new fashions, especially intricate headdresses, Isabella’s seemingly humble response was likely intended to safeguard her signature style.

Clearly, Isabella prioritized self-presentation, resulting in her being depicted more frequently than any of her male or female contemporaries.



Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of Isabella d'Este*, c. 1499-50. Chalk on paper, 24 x 18.3 in. Louvre Museum. [View Source](#)

“A successful portrait,” Graham explains, “was thought to be one that presented the sitter’s individual essence, their unique qualities of temperament and character, as well as their physical appearance. Other extant portraits of Isabella d’Este, including a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci, make it clear that Titian’s vision is just that—an apparition, an invention. Titian’s portrait is more mask than reflection.”



Peter Paul Rubens, copy after Titian, *Isabella d'Este in Red*, 1605. Oil on canvas, 102 cm x 81 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum. [View Source](#)

To expand on her findings, Graham offers another portrait of Isabella by Titian, known only through a copy by Peter Paul Rubens, which displayed similar idealized beauty:

The bulk of Isabella's body (at the time she was obese and double-chinned) is presented grandly, her corpulence celebrated in the rich red velvet of her gown. The youth depicted in both works also accords with the ideals of Renaissance women: a woman's primary role was procreation. As the consort of a ruler, Isabella was the guarantor of her husband's lineage; her children were the promise of continuity. Showcasing herself in the flush of fertile youth emphasized her role as the mother of the Gonzaga heirs.

Isabella was not unique in her desire for beautification. Joanna Woods-Marsden in "Ritratto al Naturale: Questions of Realism and Idealism in Early Renaissance Portraits" (*Art Journal* 46, no. 3 (1987): 209-216) notes that in the Renaissance, "sitters habitually gave instructions to be *ritratto al naturale*, "portrayed as if from nature or life, and the resulting portrait was routinely characterized as a "true likeness (*una vera effigie*). These "true likenesses from life, however, were acceptable to most Italian sitters only when shown in an idealized guise."



Andrea Mantegna, *Mars and Venus (or Parnassus)*, 1497. Tempera and gold on canvas, 159 cm x 192 cm. Louvre Museum. [View Source](#)

The outspoken and cultured Isabella expressed her individuality and strength of character through her support of the arts. She collected an impressive array of both ancient and modern works that could compete with those of her male counterparts. She also set up a private studio and a grotta (a small natural or artificial cave) to display her paintings, setting herself apart from her contemporaries by emphasizing the cultural heritage of ancient Greek and Roman antiquities rather than religious art. Her curated collection included gems, cameos, coins, sculptures, and classical texts. She owned a statue of Cupid by Praxiteles, alongside a modern reproduction by Michelangelo. The walls of her private chambers were decorated with images of Olympian gods and nude figures—subjects typically associated with male patrons.

Isabella's support for the visual arts has focused on the renowned series of paintings commissioned for her studiolo in her private apartment. Between 1497 and around 1500, she negotiated with many

leading artists of the time, aided by advisers and agents. During this period, she acquired works by prominent artists such as Mantegna, Perugino, Lorenzo Costa, and Correggio. Isabella maintained remarkable control over the themes and visual elements, consulting court scholar Paride da Ceresara to invent subjects and issue detailed instructions for each artist's task. The first piece installed, Mantegna's *Parnassus* from 1497, embodies her scholarly-artistic identity, presenting and justifying her persona.

The traditional view of Andrea Mantegna's painting originates from a late 15th-century poem by Battista Fiera. This poem describes the artwork as depicting Mount Parnassus and presents an allegory in which Isabella is Venus and Francesco II Gonzaga is Mars. Venus signifies Isabella's charm and virtue, while Mars represents Francesco, a condottiero (warrior), suggesting that their marriage symbolizes a balanced union of Love and War.

Mantegna portrays the adulterous couple, Venus and Mars, not as immoral entities but as noble figures presiding over Mount Parnassus. Vulcan, the husband of Venus, is depicted as an enraged, irrational blacksmith within his grotto, symbolizing chaotic or baser power, while Anteros (divine love) or Apollo directs their triumph. The scene takes place on Mount Parnassus, with Apollo playing the lyre for the dancing Muses, suggesting that the Mantua court is a hub of culture and the arts. The inclusion of Mercury and Pegasus, linked to the Muses' spring, further ties the scene to the realm of artistic inspiration. The painting illustrates Renaissance humanist values by contrasting earthly, jealous love (Vulcan) with enlightened, divine love (Anteros, Venus/Mars). The details—such as the vine of grapes (alluding to a fable of jealousy and caution) and the rocky, metallic landscape (depicting Vulcan's forge)—emphasize the tension between the serene harmony of the gods above and the irrational jealousy below.

Another interpretation, Tim Shephard suggests in "Constructing Isabella d'Este's Musical Decorum in the Visual Sphere" (*Renaissance Studies* 25, no. 5 (2011): 684–706), is that the scene focuses on the Muses rather than the story of Mars and Venus. The Muses serve as the painting's focal point, with the story of Mars and Venus acting as

their song, sung above them. This arrangement aligns well with the Muses, who, as Hesiod and other ancient writers describe, were known to sing of the gods and inspire mortal poets to recount their mythologies. Essentially, the painting's subject is the idea of song itself, reflecting Isabella's fame as a musician and singer.

Whilst a degree of musical accomplishment was relatively common among Italian noblewomen, Isabella's interests went beyond the conventional (as her contemporaries frequently acknowledged). She was well trained as a singer, benefiting from the tuition of her father's chapelmaster, Johannes Martini. She was proficient in several stringed instruments associated with elite entertainment, including the lute and lira da braccio. Like many at the Italian courts, she particularly valued the practice of singing verse to the accompaniment of a lute or lira, and contemporaries praised her for her skill in so doing. In a letter written to her in 1502 by Bernardo Accolti (l'Unico Aretino), himself a famous musician, Isabella is complimented for both her taste and her practical accomplishments in this vein:

'Where do music, song, liberality, plays and Tuscan compositions (which perhaps you cannot judge) flourish with wondrous novelty in a woman of such nobility and intelligence, [such] that [she] not only can judge those things but also perfectly compose and perfectly recite to viola or lute?'



Sebastiano del Piombo, *Vittoria Colonna*, c. 1520 – 1525. Oil on wood panel, 960 x 725 mm. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya. [View Source](#)

Isabella was one of many accomplished noblewomen. During the Italian Renaissance, city-states saw major societal shifts, especially affecting women and their traditional roles. Elite courtly women received intensive humanistic education from tutors who taught Latin, Greek, history, and literature. They learned to read, write, sing, play musical instruments, compose letters, discuss politics, and engage in

literary debates to boost their families' status. Women experienced their own unique Renaissance, forging new societal roles and earning respect among their humanist peers.

Vittoria Colonna was another important female figure, a well-educated, influential woman born into the noble Roman Colonna family. She married Fernando Francesco d'Avalos in 1509, who died in 1525 from wounds sustained at the Battle of Pavia. The childless Marchioness of Pescara engaged with intellectual circles in Ischia and Naples, while fulfilling the expected duties of a wife to a military hero and feudal lord. She undertook journeys to the north, specifically to Arpino, Marino, and possibly Rome, to represent her family. Her correspondence indicates that she acted as governor of at least one Colonna fortress and petitioned her husband's debtors for settlement. Furthermore, Colonna corresponded with Emperor Charles V on behalf of her husband, apparently to encourage the Emperor to grant him rewards. Additional letters from circa 1526 to 1534 suggest that Vittoria Colonna actively participated in court life and developed an interest in architectural and charitable initiatives. Within this aristocratic society, several distinguished women were recognized for their views on Catholic reform and their involvement in charitable endeavours.

In Sebastiano del Piombo's portrait, widely recognized as Vittoria Colonna, she is depicted pointing to a page in a book, emphasizing her status as an educated and literary individual. Her gentle gesture toward her chest with her index finger signifies a deep intellectual and spiritual nature rather than sensual love, in accordance with the decorum of that period. The portrait presents her in a contemplative stance, with books symbolizing her erudition. This artwork is a significant piece, representing the intellectual liberty and cultural influence of women during the Italian Renaissance.

Stylistically, Del Piombo's painting exemplifies High Renaissance portraiture, fusing Venetian colour with Roman sculptural form. Conceptually, it underscores Renaissance ideals of beauty, intellect, and spiritual depth.

Lara Michelacci in “The Paradox of Shape: On the Representation of Women in the Sixteenth Century” (*Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 46, no. 3/4 (2023): 241–64) writes about Paolo Giovio, an Italian physician, historian, biographer, and prelate who supported Clement VII during the sack of Rome in 1527 and from 1526 to 1528, stayed on Ischia as a guest of Vittoria Colonna. Upon receiving her invitation, the historian began drafting his three-volume work, *Dialogus de viris et foeminis aetate nostra florentibus*, which he likely finished by 1529. This work addressed key issues of the Italian Renaissance amid the widespread devastation caused by the Sack: the military weakness of the Italian states, a crisis in Italian literature, and the delicate balance of power among the governing authorities of the city-states, compared with earlier periods.

Michelacci focuses in the third part on “female figures, who, amid societal upheaval, were called upon to take on roles of power, governance, and patronage at court. ... In the third *Dialogus*, the narrative tension is constructed to exalt the figure of Vittoria Colonna, who stands out against the backdrop of the other 100 Italian women described in the book. This attention to a single figure is by no means an exception in Giovio’s method because it is precisely through some of these characters, who seem to constitute a chapter in themselves, that the history of a whole era is constructed.”

Here are some excerpts from Giovio *Dialogus* quoted by Michelacci in her article:

[...] cast out of the citadel, I came to Ischia—and to Vittoria Colonna. She is a woman both outstanding in beauty and purity and worthiest by far of the kind of praise normally reserved for men. I was aware that she was endowed with such magnanimity and virtue that she considers nothing finer than to rescue those cast out by shipwreck and by the savage waves of a hostile storm and not allow them to be drowned by any wrong of Fortune and, once they have been saved, kindly and generously restore them to health, especially those who have derived some

commendation and praise from the excellent study of literature.

At the beginning of the *Dialogus*, Giovo wonders how it might be possible to describe Vittoria:

But what fine tools, like those of the highest kind of sculpture, will allow us to render the true likeness, image, and character of our Vittoria Colonna? What choice and suitable colours of eloquence will enable us to relate the likeness of her mind to the special qualities of all her virtues, which belong to her like natural birthmarks? How, indeed, when all her limbs, precisely perfected by nature, match her singular grace, and it appears that in her the very qualities of a most illustrious mind are assembled with a certain indescribable harmony to complete the appearance of true virtue?

Additionally, Giovo comments on the women of his age:

For as I've said, in these times, which, although miserable, are nonetheless learned, women outstanding in nobility and beauty are gifted with the great light of genius and adorned most splendidly with every elegance of character. And this is unlike our grandmothers and great-grandmothers, who placed all the virtues of the female sex just in fertility alone, when they were unrefined in all social interactions, awkward in speech and manners, entirely ignorant of learned writings, and indeed nearly ridiculous at home and in public life on account of an inadequate mind.

And even dares to say:

I have undertaken—as boldly as I can but not without shame—to treat a topic previously ignored but by no means far from the truth, namely, the nobility and pre-eminence of the female sex. I confess that more than once, within myself, my boldness has struggled

with my sense of shame. On the one hand, I thought it the height of ambition and boldness to seek to enumerate in a discourse the innumerable merits of women, their virtue, and their complete superiority. On the other hand, to accord women pre-eminence over men seemed the height of shame, almost the sign of an emasculated spirit.

Vittoria was the first woman to have a volume of poetry printed under her own name in her lifetime and is considered one of the canonical figures of Italian literature.

Shannon McHugh writes in “The Mythical, Powerful Vittoria Colonna” (Isabella Stewart Gardner, November 30, 2021, online) that after her husband’s death, she wrote several poems featuring figures from the Ovidian myth.

In one madrigal (A2:52), she pledges not to allow her eyes to settle on any new object of desire, thus ‘escaping Actaeon’s error’ (*fuggendo d’Atteon l’errore*) when he spied Diana. In the opening line of another poem (A1:25), Colonna recalls the myths of both Europa and Danaë (as well as Leda): “If as gold, as a swan, or as a bull, high Jupiter / was transformed ...” (*Se in oro, in cigno, in tauro il sommo Giove / converso fu ...*). In this sonnet, Colonna challenges Love to transport her to heaven, claiming that such a celestial reunion with her husband would be a ‘greater miracle’ (*maggior miracolo*) than Jupiter’s metamorphic conquests on earth.

Colonna’s widowhood poems, or “rime vedovili,” initially brought her fame. However, about ten years after her husband’s death, she shifted her focus to spiritual themes. As an active participant in Italy’s religious Reform movement during the 1530s and 40s, she maintained the same structure and vocabulary in her new religious poetry as in her love poems, which were inspired by Petrarch’s renowned amorous verse. But instead of love, she directed her poetry toward or about Christ, Mary, God, and other religious figures. These poems were remarkably

skilled and emotional, inspiring a new genre of religious poetry that was widely imitated in the subsequent decades.

Father of heaven! if by thy mercy's grace is a prime example of this new form of poetry:

Father of heaven! if by thy mercy's grace
A living branch I am of that true vine.
Which spreads o'er all, — and would we did resign
Ourselves entire by faith to its embrace!—
In me much drooping, Lord, thine eye will trace,
Caused by the shade of these rank leaves of mine,
Unless in season, thou dost refine
The humor gross, and quicken its dull pace.
So cleanse me, that, abiding e'er with thee,
I feed me hourly with the heavenly dew,
And with my falling tears refresh the root.
Thou saidst, and thou art truth, thou 'dst with me be:
Then willing come, that I may bear much fruit,
And worthy of the stock on which it grew.

The poem concentrates on the metaphor of the soul as a branch of the "true vine," inspired by John 15:1-5 and Catholic Reform-era concerns with spiritual cleansing and personal union with Christ. The tone is humble and penitential, emphasizing reliance on divine grace for spiritual renewal rather than human effort, thus indicating a transition from humanist independence to grace-centred humility characteristic of post-Tridentine Catholic writings. Uncommonly for its period, the poem explicitly affirms a woman's direct spiritual authority through an intimate address to God, thereby distinguishing it from male-led devotional texts and subtly challenging clerical mediation.



Michelangelo, *Portrait of Vittoria Colonna*, 1540-1550. Chalk on paper, 33 x 19 cm. British Museum. [View Source](#)

This devotional and poetic fervour captured Michelangelo's interest. He exchanged letters, poems, and drawings with Colonna, maintaining a profound, platonic friendship from their meeting in the late 1530s until she died in 1547.

Michelangelo's *Portrait of Vittoria* is a roughly drawn portrait characterized by expressive yet controlled lines that accentuate the

subject's contemplative visage, prioritizing psychological depth over idealized beauty. It indicates that their intellectual relationship was marked by spiritual discussions and mutual regard, with Colonna sharing her poetry and Michelangelo dedicating several sonnets to her. He famously described Vittoria as "a man within a woman, or rather a god speaking through her mouth," illustrating his profound respect for her spiritual insight, poetic talent, and impact on his art during their close friendship. Michelangelo saw her as his muse and was present at her deathbed, writing that upon her passing, "Nature, that never made so fair a face, / Remained ashamed, and tears were in all eyes."

PORTRAITS OF FEMALE AGENCY

During the Renaissance period, women's self-perception experienced a significant transformation, notwithstanding the limited advancements in their social standing. This shift was rooted in their spiritual experiences and reached its peak in the awareness expressed by the era's first feminists—the women who pioneered an intelligent new path.

Catherine King's "Looking a Sight: Sixteenth-Century Portraits of Woman Artists" (*Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte* 58, no. 3 (1995): 381–406) may serve as an introduction to the self-conscious pursuit of their craft by two prominent women painters active during the Renaissance, Sofonisba Anguissola and Lavinia Fontana. Born two decades apart, they exemplify, through the legacies of their work and their individual biographies, their unique paths toward professional advancement and their insightful quest for "new ways." This is particularly evident in the portraits they each created of their contemporaries, especially their portrayals of female subjects.

The prevalence of portraits of female subjects in the Renaissance is markedly lower in works created by female artists. This limitation is primarily due to the restricted number of women practicing as artists during that era, a phenomenon inherently connected to broader societal inequalities. This gender-based hierarchy, rooted in the belief

that women were inferior to men, influenced the entire cultural domain, with its values impeding the progress of female artists as both participants and professionals. Society obstructed their access to apprenticeships and academic training, while cultural biases dismissed their endeavors. Despite the assertion by nineteenth-century historian Jacob Burckhardt that "...women stood on perfectly equal footing with men" during this unprecedented period of civic and cultural renaissance, the reality was otherwise. Although elite women wielded some influence within the patriarchal social structure through patronage, scholarship, and politics, the majority of women remained confined to domestic roles and were legally subordinate to men.

Art and literature not only reflected this culture of difference but also played a role in shaping and reinforcing gender stereotypes. While a slight shift in attitude towards women and their artistic abilities appeared around the mid-sixteenth century—marking a period when women's perception of their creativity and potential grew—women who successfully pursued a path as artists did so under specific circumstances. Some benefited from convent life to develop their skills.



Plautilla Nelli, *Our Lady of Sorrows*, 1550s. Oil on panel, 71 x 57 cm. Museum of the Last Supper of Andrea del Sarto. [View Source](#)

Plautilla Nelli, for example, often called the "first Florentine paintress," learned her craft as a nun, painted extensively, and managed a profitable convent studio. Others, such as Sofonisba Anguissola, were born into a culture of nobility that encouraged humanist education, or, like Lavinia Fontana, came from artistic families and thus benefited from tutelage by fathers or brothers.

This section explores the contributions of Sofonisba Anguissola and Lavinia Fontana, each of whom has left a body of work that not only emphasizes the importance of portraiture as a Renaissance innovation but also demonstrates the genre's diversity from a female perspective. Both artists produced portraits of women and men, as well as narrative works and self-portraits, shedding light on their artistic practices and professional objectives. Their female subjects were depicted with insight and dignity, highlighting these women's lived experiences, aspirations, and achievements with remarkable clarity and originality.

It is important to acknowledge that the gender roles depicted in Renaissance portraiture primarily reflected societal ideas and ideals rather than the fullness of individuals' lived experiences. Further, portraiture itself constituted a visual construct that significantly shaped gender identity—that is, the social roles that women and men assumed, based on the personal and collective notions of male or female identity implied. The social signifiers evident in cultural production, from posture to clothing to setting, influenced and continue to shape perceptual analysis. In the analysis of Renaissance-era female portraiture, notable dissonances are evident between visual representations by male artists and those by female artists of female sitters, which must significantly inform our understanding of female identity at the time.

Male artists frequently emphasized idealized beauty, wealth, and virtues such as modesty, aligning with societal expectations. Conversely, female artists created more intricate representations, highlighting intelligence, agency, and professional competence—such as holding artistic instruments—and occasionally contesting the male gaze by depicting themselves or other women as active and capable individuals.

Sofonisba Anguissola was among the earliest documented female artists to establish an international reputation. In 1674, the historian Raffaele Soprani described her as “*la più illustre Pittrice d'Europa*”: the most glorious woman painter in Europe. She specialized in portraiture of the nobility, created group portraits of family and friends, and

produced self-portraits. The eldest of seven children born to Annibale Anguissola, a minor noble from the northern Italian city of Cremona, and Bianca Ponzone, Sofonisba and her siblings (six of whom were girls) received a good education and, alongside her sisters Elena, Ana Maria, Europa, and Lucia, Sofonisba was supported in her interest in drawing and painting.

At fourteen, she and Elena studied painting with the Cremonese artist Bernardino Campi. They resided with him and his wife from 1546 to 1549, but were excluded from joining the male students in the studio. Later, Sofonisba studied disegno (drawing) with Bernardino Gatti, but, again, as a woman, could not gain an apprenticeship in his workshop.



Sofonisba Anguissola, *Asdrubale* (the younger brother of Sofonisba), *Bitten by a Crawfish*, c. 1554. Black chalk and charcoal on brown paper, 322 x 375 mm. Museo di Capodimonte. [View Source](#)

Sofonisba's father's support was instrumental in the successful advancement of her craft. He facilitated opportunities by sending her

works to prospective patrons and buyers. He encouraged a meeting with Michelangelo, reportedly sharing her sketch of laughing girls.

When Michelangelo replied that “the image of a crying boy would have been better,” Anguissola sent him a drawing of *Boy Bitten by a Crayfish*. A note from her father, Amilcare, to Michelangelo in 1577, expressing gratitude for his “honourable and thoughtful affection” toward Sofonisba, indicates that he admired her work and provided her with guidance. He wrote, “We are much obliged to have perceived the honourable and affable affection that you have and show for Sofonisba; I speak of my daughter, the one whom I caused to begin to practice the most honourable virtue of painting... I beg of you that since, by your innate courtesy and goodness, you deigned by your advice in the past to introduce her (to art), that you will condescend sometime in the future to guide her again.” (quoted in Charles de Tolnay, “Sofonisba Anguissola and her Relations with Michelangelo,” *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 4 (1941): 115–119).

Despite being barred from formally studying anatomy or painting nude subjects, which limited her ability to create popular religious and historical compositions, Anguissola quickly gained recognition in Italy. She developed a distinctive style as a portrait artist, gaining early attention for her innovative and informal group and family portraits, including depictions of children characterized by freshness and meticulous observation. In 1559, she was invited to join the Spanish court as a lady-in-waiting and tutor to Queen Elizabeth of Valois. Subsequently, she was appointed the official court painter to King Philip II, refining her style to produce more formal portraits in accordance with the court’s restrained aesthetics. Following the Queen’s death, Anguissola relocated to Sicily, and subsequently to Pisa and Genoa, where she continued to paint into old age.

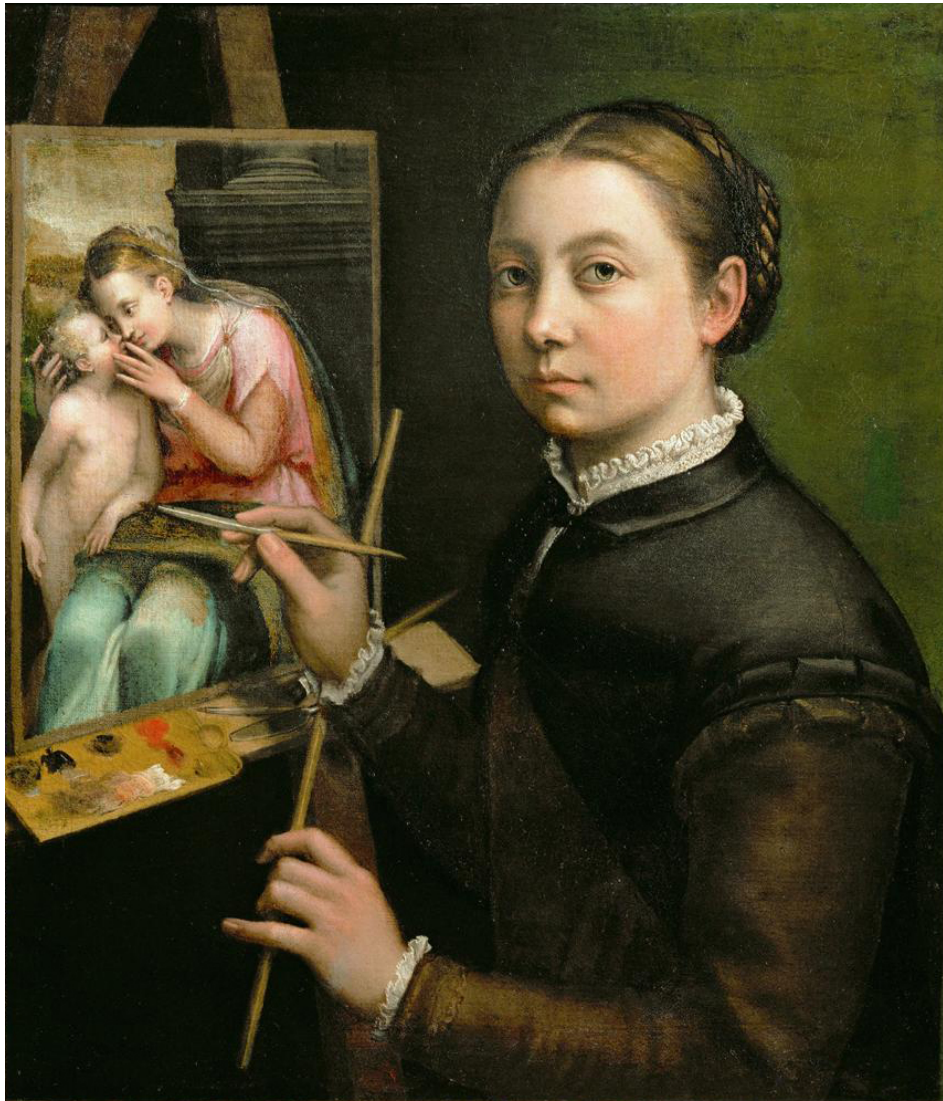


Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1556. Varnished watercolour on parchment, 8.3 x 6.4 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The medallion is inscribed in Latin: "The maiden Sofonisba Anguissola, depicted by her own hand, from a mirror, at Cremona." [View Source](#)

Anguissola created at least twelve self-portraits over her career, which was uncommon for artists of her era. This miniature self-portrait on vellum, made around 1556, is an early example of a self-likeness, likely made as a gift for a patron in Italy or Spain, possibly to introduce herself to potential clients. The monogram of her father's name on the

shield she holds, which, interestingly, is larger than her visible figure, points to her noble Carthaginian heritage. The surrounding inscription highlights her virtue by describing her as a virgin and notes that Sofonisba made the image herself using a mirror (*ipsius manu ex speculo depictam*).

Lauren Kilroy-Ewbank's article on "Sofonisba Anguissola" (*Smarthistory*, May 3, 2016, online) analyzes Anguissola's self-portraits and cites Giorgio Vasari's praise of her talent. Vasari remarked that Sofonisba "laboured at the difficulties of design with greater study and better grace than any other woman of our time, and she has not only succeeded in drawing, colouring, and copying from nature, and in making excellent copies of works by other hands but has also executed by herself alone some very choice and beautiful works of painting," demonstrating his high regard for her.



Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait at the Easel*, 1556. Oil on canvas, 66 x 57 cm. Lańcut Castle. [View Source](#)

Self-Portrait at the Easel, painted the same year as her miniature self-portrait, shows her at work at her easel. Kilroy-Ewbank notes,

Sofonisba shows herself in the act of painting, applying mixed pigments to a canvas that depicts the Virgin and Christ Child tenderly kissing. She gazes outward—as if we have just interrupted her in mid-stroke. Her expression is calm and reserved. A maulstick (a common device used to support the

artist's hand) held in her left hand supports her right hand as she touches the brush to the canvas.

The garment Sofonisba wears is dark and simple—possibly to suggest modesty and virtue, but also to perhaps suggest a work ‘uniform’. Her understated dress, subdued demeanour, and the accoutrements displayed align with a court lady’s desirable traits, her poise, accomplishments, and education.

The portrayal of the *Madonna and Child* in the image on the easel contrasts with the naturalistic style Sofonisba employed in her own representation. She alters their realism by elongating the figures and situates them in a luminous classical landscape, thereby accentuating their artifice and the sublime sweetness of Mary cradling the Christ child.

The agency Anguissola ascribes to herself in this self-portrait underscores her challenge to societal norms. By portraying herself as the Virgin’s artist, she invokes the legend of St. Luke, who was believed to have received a divine vision to paint Mary’s likeness. The inclusion of a religious scene may also have been strategic in another way: it demonstrated her artistic versatility beyond portraiture, helping her secure religious commissions. This focus on devotional subjects also suggests her self-view as a devout person dedicated to the church and her family.

Ultimately, by blending her self-portrait with the painting’s religious imagery, Anguissola affirmed her role as an artist, suggesting divine approval of her work and challenging objections to her identity as a female painter.



Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait*, 1554. Oil on poplar wood, 19.5 x 12.5 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. [View Source](#)

Some of Sofonisba Anguissola's self-portraits, such as this one, in which she holds a book, include inscriptions. Here, the inscription reads *Sophonisba Angusola virgo se ipsam fecit 1554* (The virgin Sofonisba Anguissola made this herself in 1554) to emphasize her chastity. The

book's small size suggests it may be a devotional text or a collection of love sonnets similar to Petrarch's, which would have been appropriate reading material for a woman of her status.



Sofonisba Anguissola, *The Chess Game* (*Portrait of the Artist's Sisters Playing Chess*), 1555. Oil on canvas. 72 x 97 cm. National Museum in Poznań. [View Source](#)

Sofonisba's immediate environment inspired her early paintings, and family members and their interactions were her primary models. *The Chess Game* depicts three of her sisters—Lucia, Europa, and Minerva—playing a game while their governess looks on. Lucia (left) holds the queen, indicating her near victory; Minerva (center) looks surprised; Europa (right) smiles as she watches.

The table before them is covered with an exotic cloth, and the scene is set against a backdrop of ornamental trees and a mountainous landscape. The superbly detailed rendition of the varied fabrics and accessories, the meticulous attention to skin tone and texture, and the adept depiction of different postures speak of the skill of a well-

practiced artist. The vibrant painting captures each figure's likeness and personality, as well as the overall group dynamic, demonstrating the artist's familiarity with the characters and their individual quirks.

In *The Chess Game*, Lucia is the only one making direct eye contact with the viewer. She holds the queen in her left hand, indicating her victory. Minerva, younger, sits opposite her with her hand raised and mouth slightly open, as if about to ask a question. Europa, the youngest, smiles with her eyes fixed on Minerva. The eye contact among the sisters creates a lively, communicative scene that highlights their personalities and bond. Anguissola masterfully captures different ages, and fleeting expressions. Seen as a feminist statement, the painting emphasizes women's intellectual abilities and offers insight into the Anguissola family's artistic environment, preserving the sisters' dynamic interaction.

The family portrait holds significant importance as it combines elements of storytelling, psychological depth, and genre scenes, thereby challenging contemporary perceptions of female subjects by depicting them engaged in an intellectual activity traditionally associated with men. Frederika H. Jacobs observes in "Woman's Capacity to Create: The Unusual Case of Sofonisba Anguissola" (*Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1994): 74–101): "Sofonisba imbued her domestic scenes with layered meaning, depicting them from the perspective of an engaged participant and portraying events with authenticity and intelligence."

During the Italian Renaissance, chess was regarded as a male pursuit. Men were frequently depicted with the game to emphasize their combat prowess. It was predominantly played by educated noblemen and served as a cultural alternative to gambling, gaining popularity because it required an understanding of rules and tactics rather than relying on luck. Anguissola's portrayal of her sisters playing a strategic game of chess signified a paradigm shift.

Vasari admired Sofonisba, whom he described as "most excellent in painting," and praised this painting in his writing, "I must relate that I saw this year in the house of her father at Cremona, in a picture

executed with great diligence by her hand, portraits of her three sisters in the act of playing chess, and with them an old woman of the household, all done with such care and such spirit, that they have all the appearance of life, and are wanting nothing save speech.”



Sofonisba Anguissola, *Infanta Catalina Micaela with a Marmoset*, c. 1573, oil on canvas, 56.2 x 47 cm. Private collection. [View Source](#)

The informality and vitality of Sofonisba’s domestic scenes were tempered as she assumed the (informal) role of court painter to King Philip of Spain. Upon her arrival in Madrid in 1559, she provided

instruction in drawing and painting to Queen Elisabeth of Valois, who was fourteen years old, and their relationship was notably close. Soon after, Sofonisba began to garner acclaim at court for her beauty, talent, manners, and dancing. Despite the many social obligations, ranging from masked balls to hunting excursions, she continued to paint portraits while in Madrid. These works are characterized by their minimalism and elegance, setting them apart from the innovative style typical of her early years in Cremona.

When Elisabeth died in childbirth at 22, Sofonisba took on the role of caregiver to the Infanta Catalina Micaela and her sister, the Infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia.

Sofonisba painted *Infanta Catalina Micaela with a Marmoset* when the young girl was approximately six years old. She is shown holding her favourite pet, a long-tailed marmoset from Brazil. The painting is a key example of the artist's subdued expressionism in court paintings. Here, the canvas is sparse, with pictorial content deliberately minimized. Catalina and the little monkey sit together, quietly observing us from their dignified position in the dark. The Infanta is dressed in a black gown with a stiff, white lace collar encircling her head. Her dark hair stands out against her porcelain skin, styled into an elegant bow-shaped braid adorned by a single white daffodil. Her jewelry is minimal, only faintly perceptible. While still a child, the young princess's mature expression is a conscious stylistic choice by Anguissola to imbue her with the dignity befitting her high status.

This minimalist style recurs in other royal court paintings, including portraits of Isabella Clara Eugenia, King Philip II, and Queen Anne of Austria (Philip's wife following Isabel's death).



Sofonisba Anguissola, Paintings of the royal family. Left: *Infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia*, c. 1573. Oil on canvas, 56 x 47 cm. Torino, Galleria Sabauda, Musei Reali di Torino. Centre: *Queen Anne of Austria*, c. 1573. Oil on canvas, 86 x 67.5 cm. Museo del Prado. Right: *King Philip II*, c. 1573. Oil on canvas, 88 x 72 cm. Museo del Prado. [View Source](#)

The subdued backgrounds and analogous colour palettes suggest that these works were created as a family group intended for collective display. Given that these pieces were created shortly before Sofonisba departed from the Spanish court, some scholars theorize that she produced the set as a farewell gesture.



Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1610. Oil on canvas. Gottfried Keller Collection, Bern. [View Source](#)

Sofonisba Anguissola continued to make portraits into her old age. An expressively subtle, yet commanding self-likeness from 1610 depicts her at 78, seated with a book and paper, dressed in modest black attire reminiscent of the 'uniform' of her earlier self-images. Although she is wrinkled and her hair is thin and gray, her direct gaze outward speaks of intentionality, connectivity, and an acknowledgment of the dignity

of maturation. The portrait is a powerful tribute to aging, wisdom, and enduring dignity, her lined face and wise eyes rejecting youthful beauty in favour of an honest depiction of life's journey. This portrait serves as a compelling testament to her self-confidence and her aspiration to be remembered, reflecting her enduring intellectual pursuits and esteemed role as an artist.

Through her later works, Sofonisba advanced the discourse around female portraiture, transcending the common emphasis on youth and beauty. Instead, regardless of age, physique, or status, the artist imparted significant value to the female subject. When she died in 1625 at 93, her second husband, Orazio Lomellino, inscribed her tomb with the words: "To Sofonisba, my wife, who is recorded among the illustrious women of the world, outstanding in portraying the images of man."

Lavinia Fontana's path to professional success differed from Anguissola's. The daughter of the leading Bolognese fresco painter Prospero Fontana, Lavinia did not benefit from her noble lineage, but she was well-educated. Her mother, Antonia di Bartolomeo de Bonardis, hailed from an established Bolognese family of printers and publishers, and Prospero's circle of artists and intellectuals was a frequent presence at their residence. In his 1568 edition of the *Lives of the Artists*, Vasari identified the Fontana family among the educated elite of the progressive city of Bologna, where women had studied at university since the 13th century, and taught and published scholarly texts. Lavinia herself was educated; university records indicate that she was made a *dottoressa* (doctor of letters). Despite living in a city renowned for its exceptional patriotic pride in the achievements of its female residents, Fontana was prevented from joining the academy founded by the Carracci family in the 1580s because of its emphasis on drawing from the nude male model.



Lavinia Fontana, *Self-Portrait at the Spinnet*, 1577. Oil on canvas, 27 x 24 cm. Accademia Nazionale di San Luc. [View Source](#)

Lavinia Fontana's *Self-Portrait at the Spinnet* exemplifies early female self-promotion. Created shortly before her wedding, the work serves as a visual résumé for her future husband and in-laws. The portrait underscores her musical and artistic abilities, her humanist education, her virtuous character, and her elevated social standing.

Letha Ch'ien provides this analysis in "Lavinia Fontana, *Self-Portrait at the Spinnet*" (*Smarthistory*, October 10, 2025, online):

The self-portrait gives several indications that it is meant for a betrothal. Lavinia wears a red love knot

above her ear, and a second is placed on the spinet. Her red-and-white garments may refer to the Petrarchan colors of love. The literary allusion would have only emphasized Lavinia's erudition. Contemporary authors, including Francesco Barbaro, Alessandro Piccolomini, and Baldassare Castiglione, recommended that women be literate and knowledgeable about music and art since a good wife should be a good friend, i.e., someone interesting.

...

Severo Zappi had been advised that marrying his son to Lavinia would be advantageous, given the young lady's future earning potential. Perhaps it was Prospero Fontana's advanced age that led the elder Zappi to sign a marriage contract so disadvantageous to his son. They may have expected Prospero, then aged 65, to expire shortly, passing rights to Lavinia's earnings to Gian Paolo. The contract also required the couple to reside in the Fontana home and established Prospero as Lavinia's guardian, entitled to all of her earnings. Gian Paolo only became Lavinia's legal guardian after Prospero died, 20 years later.

Though modest in scale (the easier for Severo Zappi to carry home to Imola), *Self-Portrait at the Spinet* is high on ambition. While Lavinia designed the painting to secure a marriage contract, she also used the opportunity to showcase her knowledge of artistic developments in 16th-century Italy and her own painterly prowess.

The painting showcases Lavinia's ability to use perspective to create a sense of three-dimensional space. It was an important skill for an early modern professional artist. The musical instrument is convincingly foreshortened, and its orthogonal line

directs the viewer's eye to the easel standing in a second room.

...

The Latin inscription in the upper left corner establishes Lavinia's virginity, essential to her marriageability, and, importantly, her authorship. The inscription *Lavinia Virgo Prosperi Fontane/Filia Ex Speculo Imaginem/Oris Sui Expressit Anno/MDLXXVII* translates as "Lavinia Virgin, daughter of Prospero Fontana, depicted herself from the image in a mirror, year 1577." One might read Lavinia's half-twisted position as gazing upon herself in a mirror, though her hands remain occupied playing. The easel painted next to her head is empty. Has the artist made a clever pun that the painting missing on the easel is the one we now behold?

The marriage gambit worked... By 1589, Lavinia Fontana ran her own bottega producing large religious paintings, mythological scenes, and portraits. She worked regularly in Florence and Rome. There is no record of her husband's profession over the course of his life, but his presence and legally favored gender facilitated Lavinia's career. It was she who earned the family income, and consequently, she returned to work soon after each of her eleven pregnancies. Documentation attests that Lavinia produced over 100 paintings during her career.

Self-Portrait at the Spinet now hangs in Rome at the Accademia Nazionale di San Luca, the professional artists' society approved by papal brief in 1577, the same year Lavinia made the painting. She was the first woman to be inducted into their membership years later.

Fontana became the first professional female artist in Europe to work within the same sphere as her male counterparts, that is, outside a

court or convent with a predetermined clientele, and to run her own studio. Her husband managed her workshop and their household of eleven children, only three of whom outlived Lavinia.

That Fontana successfully monetized her craft is widely acknowledged; she was the family's primary earner. As an only child, she inherited the family business, supporting her aging parents, her husband, and their eleven children, three of whom she taught to paint. Carlo Cesare Malvasia, one of her biographers, noted that Fontana's fees were comparable to those of Anthony Van Dyck and Justus Sustermans. This is considerable given her ambition and achievement. Those male contemporaries who were her equivalents did not face the challenge of working while pregnant, as Fontana did between 1578 and 1595, a significant period in her professional career.

Caroline Murphy in "Lavinia Fontana and Le dame della città: Understanding Female Artistic Patronage in Late Sixteenth-century Bologna" (*Renaissance Studies* 10 (1996): 190-208) discusses the context and circumstances that enabled female patronage in the arts, particularly in Bologna and in relation to Fontana. She states,

The circumstances under which women could act as patrons of paintings, and their motivations for doing so during the Renaissance, are much more complex than those for men. Issues such as personal and financial freedom always play a role in determining what a woman can and cannot do with her time and money. In Bologna, during this period, it was probably easier for women of a certain class to enjoy the privilege of commissioning and purchasing works of art than in earlier times. There was a bishop who had strong convictions about both the need for the wealthy to purchase religious pictures for the benefit of those who could not afford them and the need for well-to-do women with time and money to put them to good use. Moreover, Lavinia Fontana's presence in Bologna appears to have had an extremely positive effect on female patronage. Respected by the town's bishop as an artist, her background, marriage, and

education enhanced her position as a fashionable artist. In an environment where there was an emphasis on female sociability among the upper classes, one can more easily understand Malvasia's commentary when he remarked that these women 'competed' with each other for his services.

Fontana maintained an active social presence, participating in dances, picnics, and ceremonial events, thereby increasing her visibility and promoting her career. These "elite cliques" became her primary clientele, and she was sought after by the wives, daughters, and widows of the Bolognese nobility.



Lavinia Fontana, *Marriage Portrait of a Bolognese Noblewoman (Livia de' Medici Bandini?)*, c. 1589. Oil on canvas, 45 1/4 x 35 1/4 in. National Museum of Women in the Arts. [View Source](#)

Fontana sought to balance the Renaissance ideal of beauty with a realistic depiction of her sitters' looks, wealth, and social status. Her sitters came to expect flattering portrayals that depicted not only their physical appearance but also their intelligence, spirit, and virtue.

A noblewoman could expect the following qualities by Fontana: she would appear lively and intelligent, with skin, clear eyes, delicate features, and beautiful hands with fingers. Fontana would also be guaranteed to pay meticulous attention to the sheen of her silk clothes and details of the laces, as well as the rendering of her jewels.

Marriage Portrait of a Bolognese Noblewoman (possibly Livia de' Medici Bandini) illustrates Fontana's ability to render strong likenesses of her subjects' personae, while also depicting in detail the exquisiteness of their attire and accessories. Her ability to capture the viewer's attention through the figure's intricate clothing is heightened by the surrounding dark expanse. Recent scholarship identifies the painting as a marriage portrait. Studies of account books and family diaries from this period show that the clothing and jewels depicted here correspond to the typical items of a high-born bride's trousseau. In 16th-century Bologna, brides wore red dresses, while the dog represented loyalty in marriage. The pelt of a marten—an elegant, mink-like creature—whose head and paws are intricately adorned with jewels, hangs from her waist, further exemplifying the bride's affluence. Kat Zagaria Buckley explains in "Lavinia Fontana: Immortalizing Morality Critical Perspectives in Fashion," (October 7, 2015, online).

While the young woman's identity is unknown, her gown showcases Bologna's noble fashion at its finest. Red was the color of choice for an Italian Renaissance wedding gown. Her overdress is embossed in red velvet. Although there is lace in many of the other portraits that Fontana painted, there is none in this one, as it was not a typical corredo item. This may be due to the aforementioned fact that Bologna was a center of silk production, but not of lace. Caroline Murphy speculates that, "Bolognese men providing clothes for a bride may have deliberately avoided purchasing lace out of a sense of civic particularism, or simply as a result of custom." The jar around the noblewoman's waist likely held a perfume to ward off fleas. Even her dog, a cane bolognesi, exemplifies

fashion, as it was a trend among the wealthy in Bologna to own this breed.



Lavinia Fontana, *Lucia Bonasoni Garzoni*, c. 1590. Oil on canvas, 113.5 × 87.5 cm. National Gallery of Art. [View Source](#)

Fontana's painting of Lucia Bonasoni Garzoni honours the talents and interconnected histories of two creative women: the artist Lavinia Fontana and her subject, lute player and singer Lucia Bonasoni

Garzoni. Both Fontana and Garzoni resided in Bologna during the latter half of the 16th century and achieved notable success as artists of their era.

Garzoni is depicted with an upturned lute, sheet music for lute and soprano, and a book, symbolizing her artistic and intellectual pursuits. She is adorned in an exquisite gown featuring intricate embroidery, a delicate lace ruff, gold chains, pearl jewelry, and a distinctive brooch shaped like a small dog, symbolizing marital fidelity.



Lavinia Fontana, *Portrait of Costanza Alidosi*, c. 1595. Oil on canvas, 62 x 47 3/8 in. National Museum of Women in the Arts. [View Source](#)

Both portraits by Fontana, *Lucia Bonasoni Garzoni*, and *Portrait of Costanza Alidosi* underscore the prominence of high-status women and demonstrate the artist's exceptional skill in depicting luxurious fabrics, jewelry, and intimate details. Although both paintings highlight wealth, social standing, and intellect, they subtly differ in emphasis: Garzoni's portrait emphasizes artistic talent and camaraderie,

whereas Alidosi's portrait conveys a sense of strict, authoritative leadership.

In *Portrait of Costanza Alidosi*, she is dressed in a lavish, dark gown embellished with intricate white lace, demonstrating Fontana's expertise in portraying sumptuous fabrics and ornamentation. A small dog resting on her lap signifies marital fidelity, a recurring theme in Renaissance portraiture. Adjacent to her, a table holds a vase of flowers and jewelry, further signifying her aristocratic lifestyle. Fontana employs perspective techniques to create a convincing spatial environment and meticulously focuses on the textures of silk, lace, and jewels, characteristic of her work with the Bolognese nobility.

The painting employs dramatic contrast by setting Costanza's face against dark backgrounds and sumptuous fabrics, accentuating the luminosity of her skin and directing the viewer's attention to her facial features. She appears composed and contemplative, embodying dignity, autonomy, and authority—attributes befitting a noblewoman of high status. Her facial features are rendered with exquisite detail, emphasizing delicate skin, expressive eyes that engage the viewer, and a serene mouth. The face is elegantly framed by luxurious elements, such as a fine lace collar, that highlight its pallor and beauty, reinforcing her social standing. The portrait's portrayal of her visage transcends mere likeness; it serves as a declaration of power and independence, exemplifying Costanza's command and authority as a noblewoman.

What is striking about Fontana's portraits is the humanity they depict. While her portraits were sensitive to the *vanitas* of her sitters, there was no concerted attempt at standardized idealization. When beauty was present, she amplified it; when it was absent, she suggested it. But always, her focus on authenticity and the felt experience of her sitter, their individualism, remained paramount.

Portrayals of women during the Italian Renaissance predominantly depicted elite women, such as wives, courtesans, and unnamed figures embodying the ideal of beauty. Paintings of this nature are particularly notable given the high prevalence of illness and mortality during this

period. Venice frequently experienced outbreaks of the plague, notably in 1478, 1527, and from mid-1575 to 1577; throughout Italy, at least half of the population succumbed to the disease. The epidemic from mid-1575 to late 1577 resulted in the deaths of 50,726 individuals in Venice, accounting for approximately 30% of the city's population at the time. Several eminent artists succumbed to the plague, including Giorgione in 1510 and Titian in 1576, both of whom were residents of Venice.

It can be argued that the pandemic, along with the Church's inability to halt the plague, prompted a shift toward humanism, greater realism, and new artistic themes that merged profound Christian faith with secular, classical influences. While many responded with intense piety and repentance, viewing the plague as divine punishment, the trauma fostered a 'living in the moment' mentality. This shift enabled artists to emphasize earthly human experiences rather than focusing solely on religious art.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The legacy of Renaissance portraits of women encompasses more than straightforward depictions of individuals. These portraits convey intricate notions of identity, integrating personal and political elements, as well as themes of dynastic power, economics, love, piety, and the present, future, and the eternal. By the late fifteenth century, side-profile portraits had become prevalent, emphasizing detachment and aloofness. These works were frequently commissioned by husbands to commemorate marriages, underscoring the bride's domesticity, piety, and chastity. In this context, the woman's depiction was revisionist, intended to promote the political and historical narratives associated with her husband's or father's lineage.

As such, these Renaissance portraits of women mainly functioned as tools of patriarchy, idealizing their subjects to emphasize masculine honour, family heritage, and societal virtues. Instead of depicting realistic likenesses, artists relied on rigid conventions, luxurious clothing, and highly symbolic backgrounds to portray women as

passive, beautiful, and submissive, serving as objects of display. The portraits signalled the sitter's inner virtue by conforming to contemporary beauty standards. They also acted as curated representations of a family's wealth and social status by showcasing jewels and luxurious brocades in the painted portrait.

These depictions mainly celebrated women as wives entrusted with preserving bloodlines and safeguarding inheritance, rather than acknowledging them as autonomous individuals. Given that women often led secluded lives with minimal public engagement, portraiture served as a means of providing them with a societal presence while adhering to the strict modesty regulations imposed on unmarried or aristocratic women.

As social mores gradually evolved, so too did standardized depictions alter. In the 15th century, portraits typically featured a strict profile view, deliberately avoiding eye contact with the viewer. By the 16th century, artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael, inspired by Leonardo, adopted a three-quarter pose that allowed women to look directly at the viewer. The introduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* marked a groundbreaking shift in female portraiture, with women more often depicted engaging viewers directly, moving away from the detached posture of previous styles.

Ideals of beauty also evolved over time, introducing facets of female allure beyond the virtuous woman. Artists began to move away from traditional decorum to explore feminine sexuality, offering intimate insights into the private lives of Renaissance women that contradicted the taboos of public discourse. These portraits functioned as private visual expressions of female desire, fertility, and intimacy. Representations of a *belle donne* and scenes of women engaged in toileting offered insights into a private space where female authority and sexuality were esteemed within exclusive domestic settings.

The rise of women as artists in the mid-sixteenth century expanded the scope of female portraiture, establishing it as a fundamental aspect of women's artistic endeavours. Sofonisba Anguissola and Lavinia Fontana challenged societal norms through their work, which

was characterized by a more personal, realistic, and psychologically nuanced approach. Their portrayals depicted women not merely as decorative or domestic figures but as intelligent, capable, and vibrant individuals within society.

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