

## VIRTUE & BEAUTY

### The Renaissance Image of the Ideal Woman

by Mary O'Neill, *Smithsonian*, September, 2001



**The symmetrical composition of the painting on the reverse of the portrait commissioned by Ginevra's platonic love, Bernardo Bembo, was key to determining its original width. Ginevra's arms and torso were filled in by computer and her hands were adapted from a drawing by Leonardo thought to be a study for this portrait.**

WHEN THE BEGUILING, YOUNG GINEVRA DE' BENCI APPEARED BEFORE HIM IN ALL her aristocratic finery in her family's Florentine palazzo circa 1475, Bernardo Bembo, the Venetian ambassador to Florence, was instantly smitten. Though Ginevra was recently wed, and Bembo more than twice her age and also married, he launched a determined campaign to win her affection. He evidently succeeded, since Ginevra's "crimson lips," "snow-white brow" and, above all, her chastity were celebrated in nearly a dozen poems addressed to Bembo and Ginevra by writers in the Medici circle. One gentlemanly poet, Cristoforo Landino, wrote of them:

He saw her, and the flame burst into the heart within him, and a dreadful trembling passed through his bones. For her face resembled what we often see when white lilies are tuned with red roses.... If you look at Ginevra's neck, you will rightly be able to scorn white snow.

From Bembo himself one line of lyric testimony endures. In his likely commission for the painting for the reverse of Ginevra's portrait (opposite), the inscription trumpets: "Beauty Adorns Virtue." Bembo perhaps never suspected that the painting would outshine his love. Nor could he have forecast that the artist, a neophyte named Leonardo da Vinci, would use this portrait of Ginevra de' Benci as a springboard to some of the greatest achievements in the history of art.



**In order to reproduce the original effect of Leonardo's masterful portrait of Ginevra de' Benci, which had been cut down sometime before 1780 because of damage, experts at the National Gallery of Art reconstructed the work digitally.**

One of the crown jewels of the permanent collection at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. and the only painting by Leonardo in the Western hemisphere, Ginevra's portrait is the centerpiece of a new exhibition at the gallery. "Virtue and Beauty: Leonardo's Ginevra de' Benci and Renaissance Portraits of Women" focuses on the phenomenal development of female portraiture in Florence from 1440 to 1540. A cross between the real and the ideal, these works are visual representations of long-established notions of feminine beauty, propagated in the literature of the time. The exhibition includes paintings, sculpture, medals and drawings by Florentine artists, as well as influential parallel works from Northern Europe that demonstrate important developments in technique and composition.

Leonardo apparently complied with Bembo's conception for the back panel of his portrait of Ginevra de' Benci. The artist had used juniper—*ginepro* in Italian—on the front panel as a pun on Ginevra's name. Bembo, it seems, wanted to continue that play on the reverse by having a juniper sprig entwined with a wreath of laurel and palm, his own personal emblem. The word for "beauty" is artfully wrapped around the juniper, and an infrared examination has revealed another motto, *Virus et Honor*—Bembo's own—underneath the present one. He thus succeeded in symbolically linking himself to his love for all eternity.

In fact, Bembo and Ginevra's love affair probably existed only on a symbolic level. Under the influence of the Medici dynasty, presided over by Cosimo and later by his grandson Lorenzo the Magnificent, upper-class Florentines practiced an intricate and chaste courtship ritual with women of high rank. Though patrician men married—and kept mistresses—they reserved the art of the romantic pursuit for unattainable women, typically the wives of other gentlemen. He might have claimed to be love struck, but it is likely that Bembo dispassionately selected Ginevra as his *innamorata* to fulfill this

convention. His attention was probably the bright spot in her existence. Her marriage to Luigi Niccolini, whose fortunes soon waned, produced no children--a discredit to Ginevra, who was in fragile health for much of her long life.

**Painted by Ercole de' Roberti c. 1475, these companion portraits depict Giovanni II Bentivoglio, ruler of Bologna from 1462 to 1506, and his wife, Ginevra Sforza Bentivoglio. The curtained backdrops symbolize rulership and frame views of the pair's territories. Ginevra's decorative portrayal, pale skin and blonde hair denote her beauty and rank.**



None of the participants expected these affairs to be consummated; indeed, the woman's incorruptible purity was the foundation of the gentleman's desire. The intricacies of the chase were well understood by all the parties, and its chief device was lyric poetry—particularly in the style of Petrarch. The Italian poet's obsession with his unattainable Laura served as the model for Renaissance lovers, and not just because of the popularity of his verses, which were written in the Italian vernacular. Petrarch was the champion, a century before the Medici, of a revived interest in the glory days of Greece and Rome. His advocacy of the "new



learning"—an emphasis on studying the classics and adhering to ancient ideals—was eagerly adopted by the Medici, Tuscany's most powerful family. Lorenzo de' Medici surrounded himself with scholars, writers, architects, philosophers and artists who integrated these ideas into a prosperous Florentine republic.

Central to this courtly concept of ideal love was the determination by the Florentine humanist Marsilio Ficino, a writer revered and supposed by the Medici, that beauty was the physical evidence of spiritual virtue. A beautiful woman would be modest, graceful, humble, obedient and pious, but she would also possess something indefinable that brought those attributes together. Agnolo Firenzuola another Florentine writer, would later delineate the physical characteristics that were sure signs of a virtuous character. The forehead should be twice as wide as it was high. (Women plucked their hairlines to achieve smoothness and proportion.) Arched brows, chestnut eyes, golden curls and a pointed (but not upturned) nose were necessary, and ears should be pale pink like roses, except at the edges, which should be the transparent red of a pomegranate seed. High, ivory cheeks should frame a small mouth, which might only occasionally reveal the woman's most potent feature--a smile that would transport the recipient to paradise. Not to be outdone, one poet declared his lover's smile would reveal six paradises. According to this canon of beauty, however, paradise would vanish if the lady showed more than six teeth.

The Medici circle set out to capture these qualities in an ideal woman by commemorating her in verse. As artists naturally began to translate these quakes visually, they faced a particular challenge in making women who were unattractive fit the formula for a virtuous appearance.

The homage accorded Renaissance women in poetry and art stood in stark contrast to their daily experience and position in society. Respectable women left their homes only to attend mass or family events. Conversing with men was considered immodest, and one writer cautioned young women against falling in love with the men they would marry. According to Ficino, "Women should be used like chamber pots: hidden away once a man has pissed in them." While Italian men were free to cultivate intellectual and cultural perfection, the peak experience for a woman was a strategic marriage to a man selected by her father or brothers. Under the dowry system, the family protected a young lady's chastity at all costs, since an advantageous marriage contract hinged on her purity. Once the men brokered that deal, the lady was expected to fulfill her true destiny: bearing as many children (especially sons) as possible to sustain the lineage. Of particular importance in the face of the still-lingering plague, this assignment was fraught with danger, as many young women died in childbirth. The best that could be said about a woman during the Renaissance was not that she had a striking personality or possessed extraordinary qualities but that she conformed to the prescribed model of gentility and thus reflected well on her family. Even Lorenzo de' Medici's own sister, Nannina, was subject to the demands of family, state, church and merchant society. "Don't be born a woman if you want your own way," she once complained.



**Botticelli's idealized, golden beauty is thought to represent Simonetta Vespucci, the platonic love of Giuliano de' Medici, also memorialized by Botticelli.**



Portraits of women flourished in Florence because of the central importance of the marriage ritual and also because the city proved to be fertile ground for creative innovation. Florentines devoted themselves to a thriving international economy and to the world of ideas. Petrarch was part of a literary triumvirate, along with Dante and Boccaccio, that set a very high standard for Florentine intellectual life. It is estimated that by the 14th century as much as one-third of the male population was literate—an extraordinary rate during that time—and citizens were expected to participate actively in civic affairs. The urban bourgeoisie not only patronized the arts but also practiced them. Lorenzo de' Medici, one of the chief connoisseurs of the arts in all of Italy, wrote lyric poetry and treatises along side Ficino and other scholars. By the 15th century, Florence's primacy as the center of creative and intellectual activity throughout Southern Europe was well established.

On January 29, 1475, at the height of the city's golden age, a jousting tournament (*giostra*) was organized by the Medici, and won by Lorenzo's brother Giuliano, as part of the celebration of an alliance with Venice and Milan. A lavish display of Medici wealth and power, the event was dedicated to Giuliano's platonic love, Simonetta Vespucci. Simonetta is thought to be the subject of a portrait (far left) attributed to Sandro Botticelli, whose painting of Giuliano (right) is also included in the National Gallery exhibition. The lady is arrayed as a mythological figure, and her attributes—partly braided golden hair, creamy skin and arched eyebrows—are similar to those of Petrarch's Laura. Her hair is adorned with a beautiful net of pearls, called a *vespaio*, or wasp's nest, possibly a pun on Simonetta's surname. A certain Petrarchan sonnet seems to be the lyric parallel to or possible inspiration for the painting, though it was written in the previous century:

*Breeze that surrounds those blond and curling locks, that makes them move and which is moved by them in softness, and that scatters the sweet gold, then gathers it in lovely knots recurving, you linger in the eyes whence wasps of love sting me....*

Simonetta died one year after the Giostra of Giuliano, as the joust was known, at age 23. Her early death only increased the adulation of her admirers. Botticelli's idealized portrait was painted c. 1480/1485, at least four years after her death. The same posthumous idealization characterizes his portrait of Giuliano, who was murdered by political enemies of his family at Easter Sunday mass in 1478. A charismatic 25-year-old, Giuliano was mourned as a martyr across Florence. His

lowered eyelids support the theory that Botticelli's painting was completed from a death mask or drawing, and the turtledove in the lower left-hand corner signifies mourning but could also indicate fidelity to a lost love, possibly Simonetta.

Simonetta's representation as a nymph or goddess indicates the artist's emphasis on a poetic ideal of beauty rather than actual appearance. Such portraits are not psychological in the modern sense of revealing personal thoughts and feelings; rather they show the sitters in their public role as upper-class women. Although their real features were depicted, the sitters were shown as their families wanted them to be seen—as emblems of honor. Nevertheless, 15th-century artists took important steps toward authentic characterization.

The first step was prompted by a tacit challenge. Florentine painters began to consider how they could depict the inner beauty expressed so effusively by the literati. A *paragone*, or rivalry, developed between writers and painters as each aimed to immortalize Florentine women. Writers and scholars in the Medici circle doubted painting's ability to depict ideal beauty. They contended that only poetry could adequately describe the capacity of a woman's smile to transform the world. This attitude was subtly reinforced in Florentine society in the second half of the 15th century. Scholars, architects and writers received civic recognition, such as tax-exempt status or other distinctions, while most artists labored without support or renown. The Medici lodged Ficino in a country house but didn't pay promised fees to Andrea del Verrocchio, a favored sculptor.

**Perhaps the most admired of all the Florentine portraits of women, Ghirlandaio's luminous Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni, was painted after her tragic, early death.**

In one of the key works in the exhibition, Domenico Ghirlandaio asserts his view on the rivalry between artists and literati. The inscription that appears just behind the sitter in his portrait of Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni (right) translates to: "Art, would that you could represent character and mind. There would be no more beautiful painting on earth." While Ghirlandaio seems to be commenting on the limits of his profession, the painting may actually bely a touch of sarcasm in the inscription. Using the restrictive profile pose, Ghirlandaio succeeds in portraying the lady's moral character. The book and beads (likely a prayer book and rosary) are indications of her piety, and the surrounding tomblike structure seems to be illuminated as much by Giovanna's inner beauty as by any outside source. Her radiance in this dark chamber is purposeful, since Ghirlandaio completed the painting shortly after Giovanna's death in childbirth at age 19. Ten years later, the painting still hung in her husband's bedroom, serving to bring his beloved back to life.



No artist was more preoccupied with expressing intangible attributes—the "motions of the mind," as he called them—than Leonardo. He wanted to capture Ginevra's beauty and virtue in paint, not words. "Certainly one of Leonardo's major goals was to raise visual art to the level of poetry," says David Alan Brown, curator of Italian Renaissance painting at the National Gallery of Art. To this end, Leonardo broke with a long tradition of profile portraiture by boldly portraying his sitter in a three-quarter view. It has been said that modern portraiture begins with the connective gaze, and Ginevra looks out at us. While the profile pose symbolized rectitude and moral strength—an unmarried woman would not look at a man directly—the three-quarter pose disclosed the sitter's face, hinting at her psyche. The sitter thus gained a vitality that is absent in the modestly averted profile. The exhibition tracks the evolution in female portraiture from the profile to the three-quarter view, from a strictly idealized to a more expressive depiction, which began with Leonardo's innovation. Inspired, perhaps, by a bust sculpted by his teacher Verrocchio entitled *Lady with a Bunch of Flowers*, Leonardo also, it is presumed, used hands to express character in his *Ginevra de' Benci*. For the first time in 500 years, these two works, both created in Verrocchio's studio, are reunited in the National Gallery exhibition. Verrocchio's bust extends below the standard head-and-shoulders format to include delicate fingers gracefully clasping a small bouquet. Leonardo apparently reprised the device in his portrait of Ginevra, gaining expressive force through the elegance of her hands and the symbolism of the flowers. White flowers represent chastity, the single most important attribute for aristocratic ladies.

Ginevra wears a covering over her shoulders, as required by law and enforced by notaries called the Officials of the Women. A woman's access to the outdoors was restricted—hence the very pale skin depicted in these portraits.

Long before the National Gallery of Art acquired the work from the royal family of Liechtenstein in 1967, Ginevra's hands had been cut from the painting. Sometime before 1780, when the recorded measurements match the current size, it is thought that nearly eight inches were cut from the bottom of the portrait and half an inch from the side, probably because of fire or water damage. The wreath on the reverse is therefore truncated and off-center, and Ginevra's torso and hands are missing.

Brown has taken great pains to reproduce the effect of the original design. The exhibition includes a Leonardo drawing, *Study of Hands*, believed to be the artist's sketch of the hands for Ginevra's portrait. This drawing was used by Brown and the National Gallery's Department of Imaging and Visual Services to suggest the missing portion of the painting in a digital reconstruction (p. 62). Advances in conservation work and digital imaging provide an unprecedented insight into Leonardo's creative process. The symmetrical composition on the reverse was a logical starting point for the technicians. With the juniper twig as the central axis, the technicians were able to "restore" the missing side digitally. After scanning Leonardo's drawing, the hands and flower were superimposed on an image of Ginevra, and details were added to her costume to achieve a computer-generated approximation of the original. Brown believes Leonardo would have approved of his efforts: "For Leonardo, hands were a central means of expression. Look at *The Last Supper*, with the apostles gesturing. For him, hands were as important as the face to create expression, and that element was missing from Ginevra. That's what we were trying to bring back to the painting."



A 1991 cleaning also revealed the delicacy of Leonardo's execution. According to David Bull, senior consultant to the National Gallery of Art and head of the conservation team in 1991, "The sky became more blue, and we were able to see greater clarity in the juniper bush, which was just a blot before. Ginevra became more pale, so that her flesh seems to glow." The cleaning also revealed Leonardo's fingerprints in the paint. By blurring the wet paint with his fingertips, he achieved a more atmospheric effect—a technique that prefigures modern art. "He softens the transition between one passage and another, and he makes the medium do something new," says Bull.

As for Ginevra herself, one line of her poetry survives: "I ask your forgiveness and I am a mountain tiger," she wrote, perhaps in a fit of pique over Bembo's departure from Florence. As for Leonardo's portrait of her, she may have been somewhat bewildered by it. Not only was she posed facing the viewer and placed in an outdoor setting, she was presented in dreary household attire. Leonardo wanted to depict Ginevra as unified with nature, so he used earth tones and just a touch of blue for her dress. Ginevra probably expected to be portrayed in the Florentine fashion of the day, as seen in portraits by Fra Filippo Lippi and Ghirlandaio. A hub of capitalism, Florence was a society that encouraged ostentation. Extravagant deep-blue and red fabrics, richly embroidered dresses, jeweled belts, fur, necklaces with pearls and gems set in gold, sleeves Mashed to reveal diaphanous chemises—such opulence could only reflect well on the family of the sitter. Women carried patrician honor on their backs, particularly during their most important public presentation—their wedding. The amount spent on a bride's apparel could constitute 40 percent of the family's wealth. Because they were used to "mark" the woman, these dresses and jewels remained the property of her husband, who might later repossess them.

**By the early 16th century, the style for female portraiture had evolved to include the frontal view, used here in Agnolo Bronzino's c. 1540 *A Young Woman and Her Son*.**

The rich textures of the ladies' costumes, as well as their hair and skin, were perfect counterparts to the technical advances in art sweeping Florence. With the development of oil painting earlier in the 15th century, Florentine artists were able to create a more tactile depiction of reality. The rich textures of the ladies' costumes, as well as their hair and skin, were perfect counterparts to the technical advances in art sweeping Florence. With the development of oil painting earlier in the 15th century, Florentine artists were able to create a more tactile depiction of reality.

The pigment floats in glazes of oil, and light reflects from those colors to give the image a certain depth and brilliance. Leonardo was one of the first to master this technique in Florence. As with the three-quarter pose, he was inspired by examples from Northern Europe, which he would have seen in the homes of his sophisticated patrons. Members of the patrician class, including the Medici, greatly admired Flemish painters like Rogier van der Weyden and Petrus Christus. The exhibition includes works by these Northern artists, such as Van der Weyden's *Portrait of a Lady* (right), which subtly forecasts an emphasis on the sitter's inner life. The lady seems barely able to breathe under the tight belt. With her taut fingers, sensuous mouth and furtive glance, it appears her rigid control will not last much longer.

Leonardo succeeded in silencing those scholars and writers who doubted painting's power to express the "motions of the mind" or the grace of a woman's smile. Some 30 years after capturing Ginevra's inner beauty, he communicated the interior world of Mona Lisa with an unforgettable image. Just as Petrarch insisted, a woman's smile held the power to transform the world.

**Works by Northern masters, such as Rogier van der Weyden's *Portrait of a Lady*, c. 1460, with its more intimate three-quarter pose, greatly influenced Renaissance portraiture.**



By Mary O'Neill

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