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How to Be a Perfect Woman: The Evolution of Italian Renaissance Female Portraiture and Decorum

Yiyuan Xue

St. Stephen's Episcopal School, Aurora, CO, USA

ABSTRACT

Renaissance portraiture represents more than the sitters alone. These images portray complex conceptualizations of identities, layered amalgams of the personal and political; dynastic and economic; amorous and pious; and present, future, and eternal. In the late fifteenth century, side profile portraits were the norm, characterized by the superiority of aloofness and nonchalance. Typically commissioned by husbands to celebrate marriages, these portraits memorialize the brides' domesticity, piety, and above all, chastity. With Leonardo da Vinci's groundbreaking *Mona Lisa* of ca. 1503 came the revolutionary change in female portrait composition, widely imitated by masters of the time. Females portrayed after this transition engaged the viewers directly, deviating from the previous detachment. These portraits are focused on harmony, with the prevalence of triangular formations along with scenic backdrops. The early sixteenth century saw another shift in female portrait ideals: artists were no longer constrained by traditional female decorum, but rather focused on exploring feminine sexuality. *Belle Donne* paintings and various counterparts grant viewers intimate insights into the lives of Renaissance women, whose sexuality was celebrated in the private sphere but remained taboo in public. Eventually, as more female art patrons rose to power in the mid-sixteenth century, the practice of female portraiture ceased to be dominated by male patriarchy, becoming rather a part of the female sphere. In this paper, I explored the evolution of female portraiture in chronological order, tracing the shift in feminine decorum along the way, ending with a survey of the connection between the art world and the literary realm.

Introduction

Renaissance portraits represent more than the sitters alone as they portray conceptualizations of complex identities, "layered amalgam[s] of the personal and political; dynastic and economic; amorous and pious; and present, future, and eternal."[1] In the late fifteenth century, side profile portraits were the norm, as the lack of direct contact with beholders grants the sitters, who were often women of aristocratic class, the superiority of aloofness and nonchalance. Often commissioned by the husbands to celebrate marriages, these portraits memorialize the brides' domesticity, piety, and above all, chastity. Rosary beads, prayer books, and various inscriptions emphasizing honorary qualities, are commonplace elements. With Leonardo da Vinci's groundbreaking *Mona Lisa* of ca. 1503 came the revolutionary change in female portrait composition, widely imitated by masters of the time (figure 1). Females portrayed after this transition engaged the viewers directly, deviating from the previous detachment. These particular portraits are focused on harmony in combination with the prevalence of triangular formations along with scenic backdrops.

[1] Patricia Simons, "Giovanna and Ginevra: Portraits for the Tournabuoni Family by Ghirlandaio and Botticelli", *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 14/15 (2011): 105.

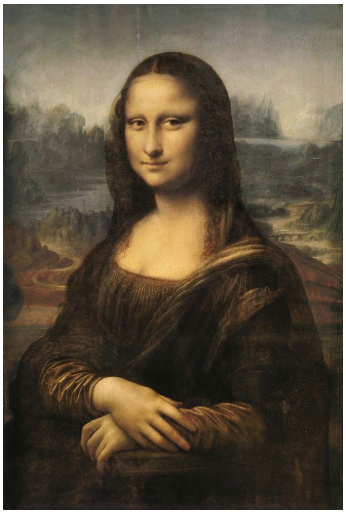

Figure 1. Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, ca. 1503, Louvre, Paris

The early sixteenth century saw a shift in female portrait ideals: artists were no longer constrained by traditional female decorum, but rather focused on exploring feminine sexuality. *Belle Donne* (beautiful ladies) paintings and various counterparts grant viewers intimate insights into the lives of Renaissance women, whose sexuality was celebrated in the private sphere but remained taboo in public. Eventually, as more female art patrons rose to power in the mid-sixteenth century, the practice of female portraiture ceased to be dominated by male patriarchy, becoming rather a part of the female sphere. In this paper, I will explore the evolution of female portraiture in chronological order, tracing the shift in feminine decorum along the way. At last, I will survey the connection between the art world and the literary realm, which shares a mutual set of cultural, moral, and social values.

Early Renaissance Portraits

An exceptional yet unique example of a traditional early Renaissance portrait is the *Portrait of a Woman With a Man at a Casement* of ca. 1440 by Fra Filippo Lippi (figure 2).

Figure 2. Fra Filippo Lippi, *Portrait of a Woman with a Man at a Casement*, ca. 1440, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Painted in the 1440s, the double portrait was created several years after the marriage of the two figures, Lorenzo de Ranieri Scolari of the Florentine Scolari family, and his wife, Angiola de Bernardo Sarpiti. As Keith Christiansen described in 2004, the painting is "the first surviving Italian portrait with an interior setting, the first Italian portrait with a landscape background, and the first double portrait in Italian art".[2] The bride, who is the focus of the portrait, is wearing a luxurious overdress (*cioppa*) of expensive, heavy red wool with baglike sleeves (*gozzi*) cut to show her underdress (*gamurra*) of deep green velvet brocade. The look was finished off with a saddle shaped headdress (*sella*) set upon a feather cap adorned with pearls.[3] Near the lower left corner, letters embroidered with gold and pearls spell out the word *LEALT[A],* meaning loyalty. Popular in early Renaissance portraits, this exquisite embroidery on her attire replaces the role of inscriptions seen in many other portraits, discussed below. However, they serve the same purpose, to remind the viewer the qualities of Renaissance beauties that are not skin deep, rather of virtue and morality. Many elements of the portrait are fairly traditional and usual, including the side profile pose that enshrines the women in their own virtue through their lack of direct contact with the viewers. The married sitter also wears a veil over her hair, as young Italian women only wore their hair down to announce marital availability.[4] However, the inclusion of a male figure, possibly the groom, whose upper body lurks through the side window and stands very near to the female sitter, marks one of many unique characteristics of this work by the Florentine master.

An essential purpose of Renaissance portraits was to convey distance between the sitter and viewers despite depicting intimate details, and this particular double portrait very much breaks this tradition. Furthermore, a secondary window, behind the sitter, renders a pictorial frame through which a beautiful landscape permeates the room, the naturalness of which is emphasized by a rather arbitrary cropping of Angiola's headdress.[5] Using landscape as a backdrop didn't become a common practice until after the creation of Leonardo's famous *Mona Lisa*, so this bold approach, almost six decades prior, highlights the ingeniousness of Filippo Lippi as well as the portrait's groundbreaking nature. Lastly, this was one of the earliest examples of blatant disregard for the sumptuary law at the time, which forbade a woman of aristocratic class from wearing such lavish apparel as Angiola in the portrait.[6] Many other examples would be evident throughout the fifteenth century, most prevalent during the late Renaissance period.

One of the most important marital portraits of the early Renaissance, the *Diptych of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza* of ca. 1473 by Piero della Francesca, showcases the most traditional composition of a marital portrait: analysis yields signs of various societal norms prevalent among the aristocratic class (figure 3).

[2] Metmuseum.org, accessed August 19, 2022, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436896.

[3] Andrea Bayer and Sarah Cartwright, *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009), 255.

[4] "'Beauty Adorns Virtue': Italian Renaissance Fashion," Fashion History Timeline, January 16, 2018, https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/beauty-adorns-virtue-italian-renaissance-fashion/.

[5] Barnaby Nygren, "'We First Pretend to Stand at a Certain Window': Window as ... - JSTOR," accessed August 19, 2022, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23207958, 16-20.

[6] Bayer and Cartwright, *Art and Love*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 256.

Figure 3. Piero della Francesca, *Diptych of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza*, ca. 1467-72, Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Often mistitled *The Duke and Duchess of Urbino*, the double portrait presents Federico da Montefeltro, who was given the title of Duke after the portrait was painted, and his wife Battista Sforza, who died in 1472. The portraits are reminiscent of classical portrait medals from Greco-Roman antiquity and delineate the two figures with great solemnity: their busts are in the foreground, with a panoramic landscape of Urbino in the background emphasizing the majesty of the court. Battista, on the left, is richly dressed in ornate jewels, her forehead excessively high adhering to the beauty standard of the day. [7] Her skin tone, extraordinarily pale, might be the result of the artist working from a death mask, a popular practice while painting a sitter postmortem. [8] However, even when Battista was alive, one might speculate her appearance to resemble that of the portrait—pale skin, golden locks, and ruby lips—since those were then deemed the beauty ideals. On the back of the double portrait, Della Francesca depicts two separate yet harmonious scenes of both figures on a wagon travelling in the countryside below Urbino. Federico's wagon was guided by a team of white horses — a symbol of a victorious commander. He is also accompanied by four allegorical figures representing the cardinal values of the Catholic faith: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance — all especially relevant to leadership.[9] The

[7] "Portraits of the Dukes of Urbino by Piero Della Francesca at Uffizi in Florence," Visit Uffizi, accessed August 19, 2022, https://www.visituffizi.org/artworks/portraits-of-the-duke-and-duchess-of-urbino-by-piero-della-francesca/.

[8] Marilyn Lavin *Piero della Francesca*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1992, 112-4.

[9] Michelle Kamhi, "The Uffizi Diptych by Piero Della Francesca: Its Form, Iconography, and Purpose," n.d., p. 12.

Latin inscription that runs beneath the composition underneath the painting furthers Della Francesca's depiction of Federico's bravery and greatness. Battista, on the other hand, is guided by a team of unicorns, a symbol of chastity.[10] Her allegorical figures represent Faith, Hope, and Love; her inscription reads:[11]

She who retained modesty in good fortune, now flies through all the mouths of men, adorned with the praise of her great husband's deeds.

Instead of praising her individual qualities as Della Francesca did with her husband, Battista would only be known in "all mouths of men" as a subordinate to her husband's glory. The attribute of domesticity and loyalty prevails across early Renaissance female portraits. To expand this aspect further, one might wonder if Battista's obedience to her husband also represented the citizens of Urbino's political obedience to him. Connections between family and political submissions were common in relation to marriages, just as how matrimony often serves as a political symbol of peace and prosperity. It wasn't an accident that the cityscape happened to be in the background of Battista's portrait.

Contrary to the popular belief that the *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci singlehandedly revolutionized the art of female portraiture in Italy, his earlier works present evidence leading up to the shift, including changes in composition, objects depicted, and color. Painted in the early 1470s, the *Portrait of Ginevra de 'Benci* of ca. 1474, was completed in the artist's early 20s (figure 4).

Figure 4. Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci*, ca. 1474-78, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

The portrait, commissioned as a result of her marriage, depicts the young Ginevra, about 16 years old, standing before a beautiful landscape[12]. This marks one of the first examples of a female portrait where the

[10] Michelle Kamhi, *The Uffizi Diptych*, p. 14.

[11] Gilbert Creighton, *Change in Piero della Francesca*. J. J. Augustin. Institute of Fine Arts. p. 96.

[12] Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2011), 451-2.

sitter directly engages the viewer, and the first to include the sitter's hands, though that part of the painting was cut off due to lack of preservation efforts.[13] Nonetheless, the remaining part of the portrait poses a stark contrast against many other portraits at the time, marked by their signature side profile. The painting further challenges the norms of female portraiture through its lack of ornate jewels despite the sitter's aristocratic status: Ginevra was also dressed rather plainly, in a simple orange gown. Her depicted facial features, however, does abide to the beauty standard, most prominently her curls framing her face and a tightly slicked back bun, a hairstyle very prevalent at the time.[14] This artwork also exemplifies Leonardo's signature techniques of *chiaroscuro* (light and shadow) and *sfumato* (smoky), though not as prominent as those in *Mona Lisa*.

In comparison to the portrait of Ginevra, the *Portrait of Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni* of ca. 1488, created by Domenico Ghirlandaio a decade later, takes on a much more traditional composition seem among female portraits in the late 14th century (figure 5).

Figure 5. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni*, ca. 1488, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

The commission was a result of the marriage between the two powerful Florentine family, the Tornabuonis and the Albizzis.[15] As a daughter and a wife, Giovanna was confined to the strict etiquettes of the upper-class lady and she certainly excelled the expectation. In fact, she was so idealized to the extent of becoming an "icon" among the young Florentine girls.[16] In the portrait, her side profile is delineated, a popular composition

[13] Hartt and Wilkins, *History of Italian*, Prentice Hall, 453.

[14] "'Beauty Adorns Virtue': Italian Renaissance Fashion," Fashion History Timeline, January 16, 2018.

[15] Domenico Ghirlandaio, "Portrait of Giovanna Degli Albizzi Tornabuoni," Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, accessed August 19, 2022, https://www.museothyssen.org/en/collection/artists/ghirlandaio-domenico/portrait-giovanna-degli-albizzi-tornabuoni.

[16] Web gallery of art, searchable fine arts image database, accessed August 19, 2022, https://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?%2Fhtml%2Fg%2Fghirland%2Fdomenico%2F.

in late 14th century possibly derived from the propriety that females were not allowed to interact with others without being provoked first, hence the aloofness of this particular composition. Dressed in a luxurious, fitted silk garment, the beautiful blonde woman stands out against the dark backdrop. Her hairstyle was similar to that of Ginevra's mentioned above, highlighting her keen sense of fashion. The precious ruby and pearl necklace hanging from her neck reminds the viewers of her status as an aristocrat, posing a stark contrast against the unembellished Ginevra of similar status. The backdrop of this particular artwork deserves much analysis as one rarely comes across such detailed depictions: a string of rosary beads, a prayer book, and an inscription of text; all three items remind the viewers of Giovanna's piety and morality, qualities seen just as important as a woman's beauty. The epigram states:[17]

Ars utinam mores animumque effigere posses pulchrior in terris nulla tabella foret. (Art, if only you could portray mores and spirit, there would be no more beautiful picture on earth).

The epigram, derived from the Roman poet Martial, showcases the beauty and moral standards at the time. The notion is furthered by the inclusion of the string of rosary beads and the prayer book, both emphasizing the quality of piety valued in a wife.

Mona Lisa and the Transition in Composition

The legendary *Mona Lisa*, created by Leonardo da Vinci in 1503, signified a revolution in female portraiture with its novel composition and color. The sitter, before a backdrop of a meandering river accompanied by mountains and trees, directly engages viewers with a calm smile on her face. Lady Lisa (*Mona* = "My Lady") engages her beholders with confidence and pleasure, an unusual behavior for women in her time. She is the one initiating the conversation with her beholders, an action against typical court decorum. Though her identity is still debated, it is of no doubt that she is a member of the upper class.[18] However, no sign of lavish adornments is found, a striking contrast with other portraits of women in her class. Taken together with the *Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci*, perhaps Leonardo wanted to emphasize the quality of his sitters' individualities rather than being byproducts of their husbands and families' social status. The *Mona Lisa* has evoked a myriad of scholarship and literature. So instead of further studying this painting, an analysis of portraits influenced by it would be more appropriate.

Inspired by the *Mona Lisa*, the *Portrait of Maddalena Doni* of ca. 1505 by Raphael Sanzio truly solidified the revolution of female portraits in the Italian Renaissance through its groundbreaking composition and color (figure 6).

[17] Maria DePrano, "'No Painting on Earth Would Be More Beautiful': An Analysis of Giovanna ...," accessed August 19, 2022, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24417321, 618-9.

[18] She is often identified as Lisa di Antonio Maria Gherardini, who was the wife of the Florentine nobleman Francesco del Giocondo

Figure 6. Raphael Sanzio, *Portrait of Maddalena Doni*, ca. 1506, Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Commissioned by her husband, Angelo Doni, in celebration of their marriage, the fifteen-year-old bride sits against a stunning backdrop of clear blue sky and mountainous trees on a grassy slope.[19] Like its inspiration, Maddalena's head and shoulders form a perfect triangle, a symbol of harmony. However, deviating from Leonardo's signature *sfumato* techniques, Raphael employed a bright and vivid color palette, a personal style of the artist. That being said, Maddalena wears a lavish bright orange dress with blue embroidered sleeves, with a transparent veil covering her shoulders — slightly revealing yet still adhering to formality. Her jewels do not strike as the most ornate, despite the inclusion of a giant pearl and precious gems, possibly highlighting her modesty. The young girl directly stares at the viewers, void of expression, unlike Lady Lisa's famous, mysterious smile. Cool and detached by nature, Raphael seems to be extremely interested in capturing the internal characters of his sitters, hence Maddalena's blank expression.[20] It should be noted, though, that he did not dwell on the individual idiosyncrasies like Netherlandish realists but rather drew from his understanding of the forces of their personalities.[21] Raphael was also successful at addressing aspects of Renaissance ideals: the portrait was simple, graceful and harmonious. Indeed, the yellow-green and light blue from the landscape complements Maddalena's fair skin, copper-red dress, and navy sleeves. Taken with the other half of the commission, the *Portrait of Angelo Doni*, the diptych poses a stark contrast in comparison to the *Diptych of Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza* discussed above, in which the couple is displayed in side profiles. This particular shift in composition, three decades later, marks the most dramatic change in Renaissance portraits. The Doni couple showed not as much solemnity but qualities rather true to each's individuality. Their direct engagement draws viewers in closer, while still retaining the sought-after distantness through their lack of facial expressions. In contrast with Battista's paper-pale skin, Maddalena looks more alive, with rosy cheeks and a healthy blush to her pale skin. Her hair was let down, though not a symbol of marriage availability but rather of the changing social limitations surrounding women's appearances.

[19] L D Ettlinger, "Raphael's Early Patrons - Jstor.org," accessed August 19, 2022, https://www.jstor.org/stable/42617994, 87.
[20] Hartt and Wilkins, *History of Italian*, Prentice Hall, 483.

[21] Hartt and Wilkins, *History of Italian*, Prentice Hall, 484.

Belle Donne

A decade later, around the 1510s, came the iconic yet controversial portraits of the *belle donne,* an amalgamation of male desire coupled with unrealistic romanticization of their sitters that changed the practice of female portraiture once again: its depiction no longer conformed to the decorum of the aristocratic class seen in the late fifteenth century. From coyly seductive to explicitly erotic, though these paintings depicted beautiful women in different settings and poses, they all essentially circled back to this standard: skin smooth and pale as porcelain, soft ruby lips, and wavy, golden locks. The sitters' identities, which often remain unclear, spark controversy till this day: could they simply be educated, well-spoken courtesans that the Venetian upper-class favored, or were they young brides whose erotic allures along with their virtues were intended to be celebrated?[22] Titian, Palma il Vecchio (Palma "the Elder"), and their followers were avid painters of this particular genre with one woman who was featured in a number of their *belle donne* paintings: Violante. Rumors have it that she was the daughter of Palma the Elder with whom Titian was fervently in love.[23] However, scholars can confirm that she is indeed the muse of Titian's paintings, *Violante* of ca. 1510 and *Flora* of ca. 1515 (figure 7, 8).

Figure 7. Titian, *Violante*, ca. 1510, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Figure 8. Titian, *Flora*, ca. 1515, Uffizi Gallery, Florence

[22] Bastian Eclercy and Hans Aurenhammer, *Titian and the Renaissance in Venice* (London: Prestel, 2019), 126.

[23] Palma Vecchio, J. Burger, and S. R. K., "Violante," *The American Art Review* 1, no. 5 (1880): p. 191.

In *Violante*, the sitter wears loosely fitted clothing that reveals her round shoulders and chest as her milky white skin captures the focus of the viewers. Though her attire was rather traditional, with baglike sleeves and a fitted bodice, her gaze is hauntingly enigmatic and self-absorbed, at once critically observant and alluring. Titian takes a bold step further in the painting *Flora*, in which he paints the beauty in frontal view with her head slightly tilted to the left. She wears a flowy white dress, with one side fallen off her shoulder, barely covering her bosom. In her right hand she holds flowers, fabric in her other. Her golden locks are loosely tied at the back of her head, revealing large areas of her ivory skin. The portrait's physiological intimacy perhaps violates the decorum of portraiture, which often depicts aristocratic women with a focus on gems, dress, and other emblems of rank.[24]

Despite the immediacy of the representation, Violante in *Flora* could be seen almost as an inhabitant of the mythological realm. Indeed, her white dress resembles that seen on many holy figures, including Mary the Madonna. The color white also emphasizes, once again, the purity that was valued in women. Yet despite her fantasy-like appearance, her gaze reminds the viewers of her existence, that she is attainable in the real world. Perhaps that is the purpose of *belle donne* paintings, as they are not a portrait of an individual but rather a representation of a particular social class. In fact, even at this extent of eroticism, *Flora* still precludes a moral content to be gained. The violet, held in her right hand, signals female virtue: in the pictures of the Virgin Mary, violets stood for modesty and humility. The shift from the *Portrait of Maddalena Doni* to these portraits of Violante is evident: both women are portrayed drastically differently despite both attending to the same beauty standards and possibly the same male-dominated audiences.

There were many more *belle donne* portraits created by masters during early sixteenth-century. *La Fornarina* of ca. 1518 by Raphael Sanzio, however, is most unique, for its virtuoso depiction of a nude sitter and the sheer material she holds (figure 9).

Figure 9: Raphael Sanzio, *La Fornarina*, ca. 1518-20, National Gallery of Ancient Art, Barberini Palace

The sitter avoids the viewer's glance, and her eyes move to the left, possibly to convey her shyness despite the bold erotica. Her bosom is revealed, though her right-hand half covers her left breast. The woman

[24] Brian D. Steele, "In the Flower of Their Youth: 'Portraits' of Venetian Beauties Ca. 1500," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 28, no. 2 (1997): p. 481, https://doi.org/10.2307/2543455, 481-502.

is seen with an amused smile, and definitely does not seem bothered by someone painting her nude body. A transparent veil covers her abdomen followed by a thick red cloth over her genitalia and thighs. A delicate, velvety turban veils her hair, possibly not out of modesty but as an accessory. No signs of ornate jewels can be spotted. However, her bracelet on her upper arm includes the name of the famous painter: RAPHAEL VRBINAS.[25] Usually, embroidered letters on garments speak more about the sitters themselves, seen in the *Portrait of a Woman With a Man at a Casement*, but in this case, it is an amalgam of the painter's devotion and dominance, as this is Raphael's last signature and his only one on a female portrait.[26] Though the sitter's identity continues to be argued till this day – some say she is Raphael's lover while other argue she is the lover of Lorenzo de 'Medici – the painting was most likely Raphael's own reimagination of a *belle donne* portrait.[27] Unlike other *belle donne* portraits in which the sitter's identity plays a menial role in delivering the purpose of conveying female beauty, *La Fornarina's* identity matters just as much to the beholder as to the painter. Contrary to the popular argument that Raphael's signature objectifies the sitter, his personal touch brings life to the otherwise plain *belle donne* image. Raphael's decision to sign the portrait indicates personal significance of this picture, as painters were usually only tasked with the mission of depicting, rather than bestowing meaning. In *La Fornarina*, Raphael revolutionized the role of painter in the process of creation as well as public perception of *belle donne* paintings: it is no longer only a repetitive delineation of beautiful women; rather, he encourages the beholders to speculate on the women's individualities.

The era of *belle donne* portraits poses a stark contrast in comparison to early Renaissance portraits, even after Leonardo's revolutionary approach. The spatial position that the artist adopts in relation to the sitter convey intimacy: he is close to her, looking down at her body, and the response she grants him indicates she is aware of, and not unhappy at, being the object of his gaze.

Marriage, Mythology, and Sexuality

Arguably one of the most important paintings of the Italian Renaissance, Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* of ca. 1514 marked the apex of Renaissance marital portraiture with its thought-provoking take on the nature of matrimony reflected through its unusual composition (figure 10).

[25] "Special Loan: Raphael's Fornarina," The Frick Collection, accessed August 19, 2022, https://www.frick.org/exhibitions/past/2005/special-loan-raphaels-fornarina.

[26] Rona Goffen, "Raphael's Designer Labels: From the Virgin Mary to La Fornarina," *Artibus Et Historiae* 24, no. 48 (2003): p. 123, https://doi.org/10.2307/1483734, 123-42.

[27] Carlos Hugo Espinel, "The Portrait of Breast Cancer and Raphael's La Fornarina," *The Lancet* 360, no. 9350 (2002): pp. 2061-2063, https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(02)11997-0.

Figure 10. Titian, *Sacred and Profane Love*, ca. 1514, Borghese Gallery and Museum, Rome

On the surface level, the painting seems to contain two competing yet related beauties, one clothed in a satin white gown, the other nude though partially covered in a thick red fabric. The stylistic choices made by Titian convey an idyllic and poetic representation of love, characterized by its outstanding red, white, and flesh tones as well as the centered young boy, representing Cupid.[28] In the backdrop, an expansive scenery of a fortified city presents itself, with teams of white horses and travelers signifying the city's glory. At first glance, the painting lacks the essential elements of a traditional marital portrait: the groom. However, upon further investigation, various elements attributed to the bride's family elucidates the marital aspect. The coat of arms at the center of the fountain has been attributed to the groom, Niccolò Aurelio, a secretary to the Venetian Council of Ten[29], while a second family crest on the silver bowl, identified by Alice Wethey, belongs to Laura's father.[30] Interestingly, unlike other brides discussed above, Laura was a widow and the daughter of an accused rebel at the time, reasons why she was deemed most inappropriate as a bride to a young man with a bright future.[31]

This put her in an ambiguous position: who can attest to the virtue of an orphaned widow? That is exactly the question that Titian explored. Certainly, the nude figure was not modelled on the bride, as that would be deemed unacceptable in Renaissance society. Furthermore, the nude is seen as superior to the clothed bride, marked by their juxtaposition. Therefore, the inclusion of an idealized nude figure only speaks to Titian's purposeful exploration of female sexuality and its relation to holy matrimony. The artist realizes the fundamental dichotomy of female ideals, as understood by the painting's beholders: for a woman to fulfill her role as a *mater familia*s, she must possess both purity and sexuality.[32] The paradox is superbly depicted in Titian's imagery. First, the marriage must be given legitimacy by publicity, characterized by the bride's direct interaction with the beholder: she accepts the societal preconditions that matrimony is founded upon. However, the extoled image of a perfect marriage is only completed with the very private act of sexual consummation, hence the nude's superiority as she stands above the clothed woman. The divine figure looks back at the bride, her past self, and with her illuminating lamp, she exalts sensual love sanctified by procreation.[33] The two stages of matrimony are embodied in two incarnations of the same woman.

Sacred and Profane Love's connection to classical mythology further contributes to the reimagination of female sexuality. Usually, a woman's individuality is defined by her familial role: first as a daughter, then a wife, lastly a widow. By depicting two separate aspects of the bride, Titian frees "his woman" from traditional constraints by suggesting the multifaceted nature of feminine individuality. Furthermore, the painting alludes to Plato's "two Aphrodites:" Celestial and Vulgar.[34] Numerous depictions of the goddess Venus and other imagined mythical women were often made for the male gaze, for male pleasure. Titian's inclusion of a mythical

[28] Bayer and Cartwright, *Art and Love*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 240.

[29] Hartt and Wilkins, *History of Italian*, Prentice Hall, 602.

[30] Rona Goffen, "Titian's Sacred and Profane Love: Individuality and Sexuality in a Renaissance Marriage Picture," JSTOR (National Gallery of Art), accessed August 19, 2022, https://www.jstor.org/stable/42621881, 123.

[31] Rona Goffen, *Titian's Sacred and*, National Gallery of Art, 128.

[32] Bayer and Cartwright, *Art and Love*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 242.
[33] Rona Goffen, *Titian's Sacred and*, National Gallery of Art, 125.

[34] Clark Kenneth, "35.2," in *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), 71.

figure, possibly the goddess Venus, in a marital portrait revolutionized the tradition. It is the perfect embodiment of Francesco Luisini's ideals, discussed below.

Humanist Ideas and Their Influence

A famous humanist during the Italian Renaissance, Luisini repeatedly articulated his opinions on female ideals through numerous prose and poems. He uninhibitedly discussed all parts of the female body, demonstrating his ideal that a woman is most lovely when unadorned.[35] Luisini painted a word portrait with his lines, which could be a generalized rendering of a nymph or goddess, who possesses soft golden locks, small rosy mouth, gently rounded stomach, soft thighs, and small feet.[36] His ideals are perfectly embodied by the nude figure seen in Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love*. *La Fornarina* could also be seen as a personification of Luisini's ideals, with her sensual gaze and bold nudity. Indeed, rather than aristocratic aloofness, found in the *Portrait of Ginevra de'Benci*, Luisini concludes that the lady's eyes should suggest a sympathetic response to viewers.

However, not all *belle donne* portraits represent Luisini's ideals; in fact, most comply with Agnolo Firenzuola's picture-perfect woman. Firenzuola promotes the ideal that only the parts of women's bodies customarily on display can possess perfect beauty -- the area that is from the bosom to the face, together with the hands.[37] Taking somewhat of a middle ground between Luisini and First Name Trissino, discussed below, Firenzuola draws inspirations from his social world, which is sophisticated and relaxed but not libertine, and where masculine erotic impulses are ultimately bridled by social constraints. His word portrait stands midway between propriety and license, in a way that satisfies the interests of both genders: perhaps a recognizable but idealized individual, fully dressed thus suitable for public display, but painted in a way that stimulates further exchanges between the beholder and sitter. His ideals essentially summarize the *belle donne* era, with notable portraits such as Titian's *Violante* and *Flora.*

Last but not least, Gian Giorgio Trissino's ideals could be traced all the way back to early Renaissance portraits. The most conservative and decorous of the three, Trissino expresses his ideas in his book, *Ritratti.* An idealized Isabella D'Este, a famous female patron of the art at the time, was described as she is going to church, fully and sumptuously dressed and bejeweled, an open prayer book in her hand, accompanied by a great retinue: Isabella is an aristocratic spectacle as she could be admired by a general audience.[38] The scene might sound familiar. Indeed, it is portrayed perfectly in Ghirlandaio's *Portrait of Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni.* Early Renaissance portraits mostly follow these ideals, with the inclusion of objects that reflect on the sitter's piety and social status.

Indeed, the evolution of female portraiture is reflected through the shift in humanist ideas, from Trissino to Firenzuola to Luisini. That is not to say that they directly influenced particular painters of their time; rather, they share sets of aesthetic, social, and moral ideas as part of the collective culture of their era. From the traditional side-profile portraits of the early Renaissance, to the bold, nudity-centered marital portrait painted by Titian, Renaissance female portraiture has seen great progress throughout the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Needless to say, this also symbolizes a shift in female decorum as represented in a mutual set of moral

[35] Mary Rogers, "The Decorum of Women's Beauty: Trissino, Firenzuola, Luigini ... - JSTOR," accessed August 19, 2022, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24409910, 50.

[36] Mary Rogers, T*he Decorum of,* JSTOR, 50.

[37] Mary Rogers, T*he Decorum of,* JSTOR, 53.
[38] Giovanni Giorgio TRISSINO, *I Ritratti Del Trissino.* (Rutilio Calvo: Roma, 1531).

ideas these paintings portray. The rise of female patrons, most notably Isabella D'Este and Constanza Alidosi along with the increasing public celebration of female sexuality, generates striking contrasts with female decorum widely accepted in the late fifteenth century, in which women could not even speak when not provoked. Sure, economic prosperity in the greater region of Italy did contribute to this change, but most importantly, it was the cultural shift propelled by various artists and humanists that underlyingly catalyzed this drastic change in societal norms.

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