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Isabella d'Este:  
Woman in Charge

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Marchesa Isabella d'Este, arguably the most studied woman patron of her time, lived among the masters of European art. During this period she collected not only pieces from her contemporaries, but also antiques from the period that inspired the Renaissance movement. This paper will explore how through Isabella's upbringing and how she represented herself, she was not only able to gain power in spheres that women were usually cut off from, but she surpassed both male family members and other women in the field of art patronage.

Isabella, born in 1474, lived a more privileged life than most other women of the Renaissance. She was the eldest child of Duke Ercole I d'Este and Leonora of Aragon. As a duke's daughter, she received an education in Ferrara among the great humanist scholars, such as Battista Guarino and Mario Equicola.<sup>1</sup> Although other women of her class were educated under their brothers' tutors, Isabella was already impressing her parents' friends by age six with her "rare good sense and quickness."<sup>2</sup> Her father largely inspired her later patronage because of his own involvement in art. According to Clifford M. Brown, "Isabella saw her own father as her main competitor," suggesting that he was the one who taught her about antiquities.<sup>3</sup> He was quite attracted to power, and he showed this off through his public image. Not only did he plan the decorations in his apartments, the *Palazzo di Belriguardo* and the *Palazzo dei Diamanti*, but he also commissioned portraits in the forms of medals, busts, and paintings.<sup>4</sup> Like him, Isabella later focused on the decorations of her private rooms. However, while Isabella commissioned many mythological art pieces, her father was "a pious man...[and] encourage[d] the illumination of devotional books and initiated a vast amount of church building and redecoration."<sup>5</sup> Though Isabella bought a few religious paintings in her

lifetime, she didn't inherit her father's intense religiousness and go so far as to decorate or build a church. Isabella's mother also played a part in Isabella's decorations of her apartments since Leonora occupied similarly ornamented rooms.<sup>6</sup> Her "walls were covered with paintings by the best Flemish and Italian masters," which Isabella would have seen frequently and probably admired as a curious young child.<sup>7</sup> Isabella displays characteristics from both her parents in her later art patronage, but mostly takes after her mother's fondness of European masters around her home.

Isabella's marriage to Francesco II Gonzaga at the age of 16 also helped her to become such a powerful patron. Being of the upper class, Isabella spent much of her time socializing and making connections in order to promote the Este and Gonzaga name. Although she faced setbacks financially, often her personal ties helped her to obtain art. She was especially skilled at "calling upon the generosity of others so that she could make acquisitions without emptying her purse."<sup>8</sup> For example, when the French ransacked Lodovico Sforza's home in 1499, she quickly wrote to one of the traitors, asking for a clavichord that had been in the house.<sup>9</sup> Isabella also knew how to charm her peers so that they would later pay her favors. She frequently sent portraits of herself as presents, such as to Equicola's mistress "in turn for the pains which this beloved friend had taken with her birthday present."<sup>10</sup> Although her income of 8000 to 9000 ducats a year and her allowance from her father was more than enough for the average woman, Isabella often found herself short of money because of her husband's military needs or her avid collecting.<sup>11</sup> Impressive for the time period and her status as a woman, Isabella was able to escape debt because of her prudence and ability to negotiate prices. Not only was Isabella skilled at managing money, she often was "left to hold the reins of the state"

while her husband was away for military affairs.<sup>12</sup> Many women of the time couldn't leave their homes, much less be in charge of a city.

While Isabella dabbled in many types of patronage, she's most famous for the paintings that adorned her *studiolo* and *Grotta*, located in the *Castello di San Giorgio*. Isabella lived in different spaces during her adulthood, but the majority of it was spent in the *Castello* with her husband. However, after his death, she moved to the *Palazzo Ducale* and brought her paintings with her. While the *studiolo* included only nine paintings all specifically commissioned by Isabella, her *Grotta* was a collection room, including antiquities and contemporary literature, portraits, statues, and other varieties of art. These rooms were her sanctuaries, and Isabella dreamed that "the walls should be adorned with paintings giving expression to her ideals of culture and disposing the mind to pure and noble thoughts."<sup>13</sup> This shows the importance of these rooms to Isabella – not only were they a place to entertain her intimates, they also served as a place to escape from the outside world that often butted heads with this strong woman.

It was by "no means the norm of the age that a woman of Isabella d'Este's rank and education required a *studiolo* and a *Grotta*."<sup>14</sup> This is especially unusual when we consider that Isabella "lived among the foxes and the wolves of the Renaissance."<sup>15</sup> Isabella was able to thrive despite the popular views that women should not be allowed in the public sphere because she grew up learning to be as clever and persuasive as the men in her social class. Her husband was also enamored of her from the day they met, and because of this he was probably more easily persuaded to allow her influence to extend outside of their home.<sup>16</sup>

The architectural decorations of these spaces were filled with Gonzaga symbols, such as the symbol of wings attached to a ring in the center of the blue ceiling of the *studiolo*.<sup>17</sup> This promoted her own power through her family and social ties. The walls of her *Grotta* were decorated with engraved musical notes, representing her love for music of course, and the floors were painted with a symbolic “blazing sun, with fiery rays shooting from it” along with Latin words expressing Isabella’s desire for everything.<sup>18</sup> Equiolo expressed that the *Grotta* was “filled with every kind of delight,” showing that even scholarly men of the time respected Isabella’s art collecting and decorations.<sup>19</sup>

Much more impressive than the motifs in her apartments, however, were the seven mythological paintings that hung in the *studiolo*. These pieces by Andrea Mantegna, Lorenzo Costa, Pietro Perugino, and Antonio da Correggio that she commissioned were not originally meant to be a cycle, but as she collected them, they became just that – a story of chastity versus pleasure.

This idea could have been very much inspired by Isabella’s personal life with her husband, who, just a few years into his marriage, met “a certain Theodora, who became his mistress, and by whom he had two daughters.”<sup>20</sup> These events quite possibly motivated Isabella to commission these allegories for her room, which early on was “intended to display...portraits of friends and loved ones.”<sup>21</sup> In Costa’s *Coronation of a Lady*, Isabella is being crowned with a garland by Cupid while surrounded by poets and musicians that are actually portraits of her friends (no doubt to flatter them). According to Egon Verheyen, Isabella’s crowning is a reward and representations of the Virgin Mary are set in the background.<sup>22</sup> This tie to the Madonna shows that Isabella’s reward is for her chastity and her companions that saw this piece surely recognized this connection.

The other pieces in the room, especially Mantegna's *Minerva* and Perugino's *Battle Between Chastity and Love*, which Isabella worked so hard to obtain, strengthen this tie. *Minerva* depicts Minerva as a representation of wisdom trying to ward off the vices, including an especially sensual Venus, in order to free the Mother of Virtue. Perugino's work shows a battle scene of Diana (the goddess of chastity) and Minerva outright fighting Venus and Cupid. Both of these show that in Isabella's world, chastity was the most admired virtue while earthly love was to be condemned by all things good. However, at first this theme seems to actually reinforce the inferiority of women since it agreed with prevalent ideas that impure women should be looked down upon. But, as mentioned previously, Isabella had to conform to these biased views of the Renaissance in order to get ahead. While she probably actually looked down upon the fact that her whole person could be judged by her purity, while her husband's flings went unmentioned, she could gain more power in the eyes of her contemporaries by representing herself as chaste.

Isabella was also very strict about the instructions that she provided artists for her commissions. When "she heard Perugino had represented Venus as a nude figure," she quickly wrote a letter that the whole meaning of the fable would be ruined and that it had to be changed at once.<sup>23</sup> This insistence on having Venus be clothed also shows Isabella's personal objection to the images of women that were nude in order to please the viewer as was true with many of her son's commissions. During the Renaissance, men "painted a naked woman because [they] enjoyed looking at her," but Isabella, being a woman role model, surely wanted her nudes to have meaning behind them rather than to be naked for the viewers' pleasure.<sup>24</sup>

When compared with the art of her husband and her eldest son, Duke Federico II Gonzaga, these works of art clearly depict female power. Francesco and Federico commissioned many typical art pieces of the time. Though Francesco focused on the decoration of his apartments much as his wife did, and they shared a motif of Muses, most of the art in their rooms were complete opposites. While Isabella collected antiquities and her mythological series, Francesco's art included themes of "military conquest...consistent with Francesco's self-promoted condottiere image," portraits of himself and his sons that sent a "strong dynastic message," pictures of "his beautiful horses and his beautiful dogs," and maps of cities.<sup>25</sup> These images all send the message of a strong and powerful man, but unlike Isabella's, his strength is shown through alliances and victories rather than personal traits. While Isabella sends a subtle message of her purity, Francesco shows himself as a symbol of strength in a very frank way. This comparison strengthens Isabella's uniqueness in the art world and because of this, art historians have frequently ignored her husband.<sup>26</sup> Also, Isabella had an "unquenchable desire for antiquities" while her husband showed no interest in this type of collection, although it was an activity more readily associated with the male gender.<sup>27</sup> The fact that Francesco "followed the example of [Isabella's] room," and that it was not the other way around shows of the influence that Isabella had in her time.<sup>28</sup>

While she commissioned the *Triumph of Virtue* and the *Triumph of Vice* by Correggio, reflecting the same theme as the other scenes in her *studiolo*, her husband commissioned the *Triumphs of Caesar*, a series by Mantegna that shows the victorious Julius Caesar returning from his military engagements. Through just this comparison of Triumph paintings we can see what was important to each of these patrons and how their



gender roles were reinforced through these depictions that adorned their private spaces. Isabella's two pieces are almost mythological group portraits, *Triumph of Virtue* showing clothed angels and women happily set against a calming seaside landscape and *Triumph of Vice* depicting women seductively teasing a male god in the center in a forest clearing. On the other hand, Francesco's commissioned cycle is made up of bright colors like gold to make a statement of his wealth even more obvious by using such a fine color.

Isabella's son, Federico, also commissioned mythological images like the ones of his mother's that he grew up with, but his were clearly created by a man while hers celebrate women like Minerva, Mary, and heavenly Venus. Federico's most contrasting commission was a series of four paintings by Correggio titled *The Loves of Jupiter*. The women in these images, Danäe, Io, and Leda, are all nudes enraptured by forms meant to portray Jupiter. These images are more like the typical Renaissance mythological scenes, produced for the viewers' pleasure and sexuality. These women are almost celebrated for being overtly sexual while the ones in Isabella's commissions are shunned. However, in reality, the outcome in Isabella's pieces was much more likely. This difference in preferences can be attributed to the patrons' personal lives as well as their gender. While the Marchesa was hurt by affairs, her son took pleasure in one with Isabella Boschetti, of whom he even commissioned a portrait by Titian.<sup>29</sup> These mistresses could have affected both these viewpoints in art since Isabella looked down on her husband's mistress, and therefore his impurity, while Federico flaunted his mistress and would want reminders of her and her sensuality throughout his house.

Federico also redid his father's former apartments in the *Castello*, covering the walls with soldiers, men slaying a dragon, and an antique city that reflected the art of

manly activities that his father had previously displayed in the space.<sup>30</sup> The ceiling of Federico's *Camera dello Zodiaco* features his own astrology chart with a representation of Hercules that is strikingly similar to this duke in the middle. This room suggests that he was trying to show off his power by symbolizing that "at the moment of Federico II Gonzaga's birth, the heavens [had] proclaimed that he had been born to rule."<sup>31</sup>

This type of authority is much different than the one that Isabella depicted. While she is in control of her self and her body, Federico tries to assert control over all of Mantua with this image. In *Venus and Cupid with a Satyr*, paid for by Federico, and *Mars and Venus* commissioned by Isabella and painted by Mantegna, the portrayals of the goddess of love are drastically different. In Correggio's piece, there are only the three completely nude figures, which allows for much more detail in their bodies, whereas *Mars and Venus* depicts over a dozen people, most of which are clothed. And while Federico's Venus is reclining in a pose that could attract the viewer and also shows her bodily weakness for the satyr, our other Venus stands up straight and proud of her true love for Mars. This further shows the difference between the sensuality that Federico chose to pay for and the images of love that his mother ordered.

Not only can we see Isabella's remarkable amount of power when we compare her to her male family members, it's even more evident compared to other Italian women of the time. In Rosi Gilday's article about the women patrons of Neri di Bicci, who was one of the few artists that kept extensive records of his commissions, there are only 10 women patrons out of 152 total commissions that the artist received. Also, while the men's commissioned works are for a variety of purposes, all of the women's are for religious settings.<sup>32</sup> One can see just how different Isabella was from other woman

patrons through these numbers. Most women were confined to three types of art they could commission: “commemorative structures such as tombs or family chapels; religious complexes such as temples, churches, convents, monasteries, and novitiates; buildings related to the social good or social welfare such as aqueducts, hospitals, orphanages, and schools.”<sup>33</sup> Unlike these women, Isabella was allowed to go outside of her social boundaries and against the idea that women “*had no public persona,*” and commission themes that she drew from literary sources.<sup>34</sup> All ten of these women only paid for one piece of art while Isabella bought hundreds of books, instruments, statues, and paintings. Some of the mentioned women were of the patrician class and would have had money comparable to Isabella’s, yet her love for art and relative freedom in spending her money caused her to make purchases beyond what other women did. Another aspect that is unique to the Marchesa is that she wrote letters and ordered art by herself, while all of Neri’s patrons had males that assisted them in ordering works.

Another way Isabella gained power was through her portraits and depictions of herself. These portraits were given to others as gifts as already mentioned, and she also was depicted in *Coronation of a Lady*. But other than these, she had several portraits commissioned for herself, such as one by Leonardo da Vinci that was never completed although the drawing is in the Louvre today.<sup>35</sup> This portrait, like others of women at the time, is in profile view, which is surprisingly passive for this patron, but through Leonardo’s skills it still shows off the Marchesa’s lively personality in her eyes. Her later portraits by Titian, which she had more control over, are more serious and feature Isabella as a stern woman looking right at the viewer while dressed in a variety of luxuries available. In the first image she takes up the entire picture with her fine red

dress, showing that she can be as large and menacing as any man could be. In the second, she looks even younger than the first and has more delicate, feminine qualities in her dress and body. The fact that she is facing frontward in two of her portraits was identified with power in the time period because it is a much more active stance than a profile view. She is also alone in these images, emphasizing her own power rather than that of her friends or relatives. Isabella is seen in these portraits without symbols or allusions, perhaps because she wanted the focus to be on her rather than the meaning behind the picture. Isabella's representation of herself in reality was also controlled and she often ordered new clothes and jewels for occasions such as festivals. In fact, at Lucrezia Borgia's wedding the Marchesa wore "a black velvet robe trimmed with lynx fur, with a green velvet vest studded over with gold plaques." Guests hailed her as the most beautiful woman at the wedding and one attendee went so far as to say "that if the bride had foreseen this, she would have made her entry by torchlight!"<sup>36</sup>

In conclusion, Isabella's common sense and ability to maintain her place in a society that centered around politics are what led to her being seen as "the noblest and most perfect type of the Italian women of the Renaissance."<sup>37</sup> She was able to get her way using her charm and connections to influence even the most powerful men. Not only did these assets help her succeed in the private sphere of her home, they helped her to amass her impressive collection of art and communicate effectively with artists.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Marshall Beamish, "Ercole I d'Este," in *The Dictionary of Art*, ed. Jane Turner (New York: Grove, 1996), 520.

<sup>2</sup> Julia Cartwright, *Isabella d'Este*, vol. 1, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1905), 4.

- <sup>3</sup> Clifford M. Brown, "A Ferrarese Lady and a Mantuan Marchesa," in *Women and Art in Early Modern Europe: Patrons, Collectors, and Connoisseurs*, ed. Cynthia Lawrence (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 64.
- <sup>4</sup> Clifford M. Brown, "Isabella d'Este," in *The Dictionary of Art*, ed. Jane Turner (New York: Grove, 1996), 520.
- <sup>5</sup> Beamish, "Ercole," 520.
- <sup>6</sup> Molly Bourne, "Renaissance Husbands and Wives as Patrons of Art: The Camerini of Isabella d'Este and Francesco II Gonzaga," in *Beyond Isabella: Secular Women Patrons of Art in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Sheryl E. Reiss and David G. Wilkins (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2001), 96.
- <sup>7</sup> Cartwright, *Isabella*, vol. 1, 12.
- <sup>8</sup> Brown, "Ferrarese Lady," 70.
- <sup>9</sup> Cartwright, *Isabella*, vol. 1, 153.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.
- <sup>14</sup> Brown, "Ferrarese Lady," 63.
- <sup>15</sup> Robert de la Sizeranne, "Isabella d'Este and her Allegories in the Louvre," in *Celebrities of the Italian Renaissance*, trans. Jeffery E. Jeffery (New York: Brentano's, 1926), 155.
- <sup>16</sup> Cartwright, *Isabella*, vol. 1, 6.
- <sup>17</sup> Egon Verheyen, *The Paintings in the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este at Mantua* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), 12.
- <sup>18</sup> Sizeranne, "Allegories," 182.
- <sup>19</sup> S. Kolsky, "An Unnoticed Description of Isabella d'Este's *Grotta*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 52 (1989): 234.
- <sup>20</sup> Sizeranne, "Allegories," 159.
- <sup>21</sup> Verheyen, *Studiolo*, 10.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.
- <sup>23</sup> Cartwright, *Isabella*, vol. 1, 336.
- <sup>24</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (London, Penguin Books, 1972), 51.
- <sup>25</sup> Bourne, "Husbands and Wives," 105-107.
- <sup>26</sup> Clifford M. Brown and Anna Maria Lorenzoni, "'Concludo che non vidi mai la piu bella casa in Italia:' The Frescoed Decorations in Francesco II Gonzaga's Suburban Villa in the Mantuan Countryside at Gonzaga (1491-1496)," *Renaissance Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (1996): 268.
- <sup>27</sup> Brown, "Ferrarese Lady," 55.
- <sup>28</sup> Cartwright, *Isabella*, vol. 1, 289.
- <sup>29</sup> Julia Cartwright, *Isabella d'Este*, vol. 2, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1905), 227.
- <sup>30</sup> Kristen Lippincott and Rodolfo Signorini, "The *Camera dello Zodiaco* of Federico II Gonzaga," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 54 (1991): 246.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

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<sup>32</sup> Rosi Prieto Gilday, “The Women Patrons of Neri di Bicci,” in *Beyond Isabella: Secular Women Patrons of Art in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Sheryl E. Reiss and David G. Wilkins (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2001), 60.

<sup>33</sup> Carolyn Valone, “Matrons and Motives: Why Women Built in Early Modern Rome,” in *Beyond Isabella: Secular Women Patrons of Art in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Sheryl E. Reiss and David G. Wilkins (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2001), 318.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 317

<sup>35</sup> Sizeranne, “Allegories,” 145.

<sup>36</sup> Cartwright, *Isabella*, vol. 1, 202.

<sup>37</sup> Cartwright, *Isabella*, vol. 2, 391.

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