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# The Portraiture of Women During the Italian Renaissance

Rachel D. Masters

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The University of Southern Mississippi

The Portraiture of Women During the Italian Renaissance

by

Rachel D. Masters

A Thesis

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Approved by

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Dr. Jill Chancey, Professor of Art History  
Department of Art and Design

---

Dr. Jeanne Gillespie, Acting Chair  
Department of Art and Design

---

Dr. David R. Davies, Dean  
Honors College

## **Abstract**

From research, it is clear that gender is one of the greatest influences on Italian Renaissance portraiture. Gender affects multiple aspects of portraiture including its function, position of sitter, emphasis of costume, and the degree to which a sitter is idealized. Until recent years, art historians performed little research on the subject of women as seen in Italian Renaissance paintings. In the 1970s, scholars began to assess the representation of women from this time period using Renaissance treatises, recorded debates, and paintings.

This study of the portraiture of women during the Italian Renaissance seeks to interpret the function of portraiture, the developments of the practice, and the idealization and profile position of the sitter as they relate to the status of women in Italian Renaissance society. Data to conduct this study were collected using literature by art historians on the subject and by analyzing artwork on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the exhibition “The Renaissance Portrait: From Donatello to Bellini” (December 21, 2011–March 18, 2012). Writings attributed to authors of Renaissance Italy were also evaluated in order to parallel the portrayal of women in Italian Renaissance portraiture to the social status and expectations of women in an Italian Renaissance society.

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## Introduction

Lorenzo the Magnificent described the ideal beauty of the Italian Renaissance as a woman “of an attractive and ideal height; the tone of her skin, white but not pale, fresh but not glowing; her demeanor was grave but not proud, sweet and pleasing, without frivolity or fear. Her eyes were lively and her gaze restrained, without trace of pride or meanness; her body was so well proportioned, that among other women she appeared dignified...in walking and dancing...and in all her movements 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...” Although the word “portrait” in Italian, *ritratto*, is translated “copy,” the artist often sought only to copy the beautiful aspects of nature and flatter the subject.<sup>1</sup> The physical attributes described by Lorenzo may be seen repeatedly in the idealized portraits of women from the Italian Renaissance, especially during the Quattrocento.<sup>2</sup>

Approximately forty panel portraits of women painted in profile exist from Quattrocento (fifteenth-century) Tuscany. The profile portrait style is thought to have begun between 1425 and 1450 with portraits of male sitters.<sup>3</sup> Further study of female portraiture of the Italian Renaissance is needed because most existing portraits from the

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<sup>1</sup> Christiansen, Keith, Stefan Weppelmann, and Patricia Lee Rubin. "Understanding Renaissance Portraiture." In *The Renaissance Portrait: From Donatello to Bellini*, by Keith Christiansen, Stefan Weppelmann and Patricia Lee Rubin, 4. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Tinagli, Paola. "Profile Portraits in the Quattrocento: Virtue and Status." In *Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, and Identity*, by Paola Tinagli, 48. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Simons, Patricia. "Women in Frames, the Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture." *History Workshop Journal*, 1988: 4.

Italian Renaissance depict men. Due to the small pool of female portraits from the time period to study, the specific topic of women in Italian Renaissance portraiture has been overlooked or quickly dismissed by many scholars.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the theories of scholars who have previously chosen to research the topic differ—perhaps because of personal gender bias.<sup>5</sup> Art historians who have studied the available portraits of women from the Italian Renaissance commonly disagree on multiple aspects of the artwork, including function, the extent to which sitters were idealized, and the psychological implications connected to the profile view of the female sitter.

Based on preliminary research, a lack of understanding of the subject of women in Italian Renaissance portraiture exists. Subtopics needing further explanation include the function of portraiture, the compositional and technical developments during the time period, and the psychological reasoning behind the idealized portrayal of female sitters including the use of the profile position of women within the format. This study of women in Italian Renaissance portraiture will contribute to the knowledge of women in Italian Renaissance portraiture and discuss the differing theories of male and female art historians who have previously studied the subject. Research was conducted qualitatively by reading publications discussing the portrayal of women in Italian Renaissance portraiture and examining relevant examples from the time period at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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<sup>4</sup> Simons, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Simons, 5.



## Discussion

### Overview of the Italian Renaissance

The Italian Renaissance marked the beginning of a widespread Renaissance throughout Europe. The movement developed in response to the Medieval period during the 14<sup>th</sup> century and lasted until the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The achievements of the Italian Renaissance involve advances in literature, philosophy, science, architecture, music and art. New developments specific to the fine arts include the replacement of egg-based tempera painting on wood panel by oil painting, executed on canvas at an easel. In addition to painting, the drawing in chalk, ink, and pastel, the medal, the print, and the small statue in marble and bronze quickly attained an elevated status during the period.<sup>6</sup> Artists of the Renaissance employed devices such as chiaroscuro (light/dark contrast) and orthogonal projection (lines that appear to recede into space) to create the illusion of three-dimensionality and perspective, hallmarks of Italian Renaissance art.<sup>7</sup>

Renaissance art was “made to order.” As a result of the commission process, artists often adjusted composition and style to comply with the requests of his patron. These requests could regulate function, shape (for insertion into a specific location), materials, subject matter, time allowed for completion, and final quality of work produced. The artists of the time period worked inside a traditional workshop system. During the learning process, pupils worked in association with a master, completing tasks involved in the making of Renaissance art. The apprentice imitated the work of the

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<sup>6</sup> Cole, Bruce. *Italian Art 1250-1550: The Relation of Renaissance Art to Life and Society*, by Bruce Cole, 20. New York: Harper & Row, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Campbell, Stephen, and Michael Cole. *Italian Renaissance Art*, by Stephen Campbell, Michael Cole, 13. Thames & Hudson, 2012.

master during the learning process, and the best students were those who most quickly learned the lessons taught by the master. While the master obtained the commissions, negotiated the terms, and designed the compositions, helpers and apprentices aided in execution, especially in a large work. Based on the procedure of learning through imitation, the hand of multiple artists meshed seamlessly as they worked together to complete commissions.<sup>8</sup>

### **Portraiture of the Italian Renaissance**

A portrait generally represents an individual; however, it can depict the likeness of the sitter with realistic facial features or it may describe the subject's social position or character. Specific factors affecting portraiture include the balance between true likeness of the sitter versus generality or idealization, the decision to depict physical or internal aspects of the sitter including the soul, character, or virtues, and lastly, the negotiations between the artist, sitter, and patron.<sup>9</sup>

Artists of the Italian Renaissance memorialized subjects in multiple mediums including fresco, marble and bronze sculpture, metal work (medals or coinage) and oil and tempera painting.<sup>10</sup> In portraits of the preceding Medieval period, the subjects of portraiture appear linear, stiff, and lifeless; however, as the Renaissance developed, "life" was breathed into portraiture, and facial elements became useful parts rather than linear

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<sup>8</sup> Cole, 21.

<sup>9</sup> West, Shearer. "What is a Portrait?" In *Portraiture*, by Shearer West, 21. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Grassi, Marco. "Faces of the Renaissance." *Art and Architecture Complete*, 2011: 28.

marks on a flattened facial plane.<sup>11</sup> At the time of the Italian Renaissance, profile was the usual format of a portrait. This tradition alludes to Roman coinage and brings the focus of the viewer to the physical beauty of the sitter rather than the subject's emotion or personality.<sup>12</sup>

### **Effect of Gender on Italian Renaissance Portraiture**

According to Shearer West, gender is of utmost importance when analyzing Italian Renaissance portraiture. She claims that in order to sufficiently study the portraits of the Italian Renaissance, all portraits must be evaluated—portraits of women and men by both women and men. This method is necessary because throughout history, portraitists have focused on the social role, physical attributes, and character of the sitter. Each of these areas is directly affected by the gender politics of the time.<sup>13</sup>

Men of the Italian Renaissance viewed women as a tool to display wealth and lineage. They generally considered women to be weak, foolish, sensual, and untrustworthy. With the emergence of Neoplatonism and the teachings of the humanist scholar Marsilio Ficino, who said, “women should be used like chamber pots: hidden away once a man has pissed in them” these opinions of women only grew stronger.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Pope-Hennessy, John. "The Motions of the Mind." In *The Portrait in the Renaissance*, by John Pope-Hennessy, 101. London: Phaidon, 1966.

<sup>12</sup> West, Shearer. "Gender and Portraiture." In *Portraiture*, by Shearer West, 150. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> West, 148.

<sup>14</sup> Kent, Dale. "Women in Renaissance Florence." In *Virtue and Beauty: Leonardo's Ginerva De' Benci and Renaissance Portraits of Women*, by David Allen Brown, 27. Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2001.

The limited value of women in Italian Renaissance society depended on their role as wife and mother—the instrument through which families could create alliances and lineage continued with the birth of male heirs.<sup>15</sup> During this time, women died regularly in childbirth or shortly thereafter. Due to the short lifespan of females, men often married several women during their adult life.<sup>16</sup> During the Italian Renaissance, men, church regulations, and laws of the government controlled the lives of women.<sup>17</sup> The laws spoke of the need

to restrain the barbarous and irrepressible bestiality of women who, not mindful of the weakness of their nature, forgetting that they are subject to their husbands, and transforming their perverse sense into a reprobate and diabolical nature, force their husbands with their honeyed poison to submit to them. These women have forgotten that it is their duty to bear the children sired by their husbands and, like little sacks, to hold the natural seed which their husbands implant in them, so that children will be born...in marriage; they were not made to spend money on silver, gold, clothing and gems. For did not God Himself, the master of nature, say this?<sup>18</sup>

Because of the parameters placed on the lives of women, they were forced to conform to the expectations of both family and other members of Italian society.<sup>19</sup> Expectations of women, specifically courtiers, are recorded within Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (1528). Castiglione's manuscript documents the conversations of guests at the

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<sup>15</sup> Tinagli, 67.

<sup>16</sup> Kent, 28.

<sup>17</sup> Kent, 30.

<sup>18</sup> Kent, 30.

<sup>19</sup> Kent, 30.

Palace of Urbino on four evenings during March of 1507. During one evening's discussion Giuliano de' Medici (referred to as "the Magnifico" within the text) describes necessary attributes of women, saying:

I hold that a woman should in no way resemble a man as regards her ways, manners, words, gestures, and bearing. Thus just as it is very fitting that a man should display a certain robust and sturdy manliness, so it is well for a woman to have a certain soft and delicate tenderness, with an air of feminine sweetness in her every movement, which, in her going and staying and whatsoever she does, always makes her appear a woman, without any resemblance to a man...for I consider that many virtues of the mind are as necessary to a woman as to a man; as it is to be of good family; to shun affectation: to be naturally graceful; to be well mannered, clever and prudent; to be neither proud, envious or evil-tongued, nor vain, contentious or clumsy; to know how to gain and keep the favour of her mistress and of everyone else; to perform well and gracefully the sports suitable for women.<sup>20</sup>

Within the same conversation Pallavicino Gaspare, a young misogynist from Lombardy, states:

I do say that very learned men have written that since Nature always plans and aims at absolute perfection she would, if possible, constantly bring forth men; and when a woman is born this is a mistake or defect, and contrary to Nature's wishes. This is also the case when someone is born blind, or lame, or with some other defect, as again with trees, when so many fruits fail to ripen. Nevertheless, since the blame for the defects of women must be attributed to Nature, who has made them what they are, we ought not to despise them or to fail to give them the respect which is their due. But to esteem them to be more than they are seems to me to be manifestly wrong.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Castiglione, Baldassare. "The Third Book of the Courtier." In *The Book of the Courtier*, by Baldassare Castiglione, translated by George Bull, 211. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967.

<sup>21</sup> Castiglione, 217.

## Female Artists and Patrons in Italian Renaissance Society

Overcoming substantial obstacles, several women became patrons of art and artists during the Italian Renaissance. The paintings commissioned by women were usually religious and therefore acceptably “feminine.”<sup>22</sup> The adversity faced by female artists included acquiring the necessary skills without completing an apprenticeship. Because apprenticeships were inappropriate for women, female artists were usually trained by their fathers.<sup>23</sup> In addition to demise of apprenticeships, women were forbidden to draw from the nude model. As a result of this restriction, women often concentrated on the painting of portraiture and devotional panels.<sup>24</sup> Successful female artists of the Italian Renaissance include Sofonisba Anguissola, Lavinia Fontana, Catharina Van Hemessen, Fede Galizia, Barbara Longhi, Plautilla Nelli, and Properzia de’Rossi.<sup>25</sup> According to Linda Nochlin in her essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists*,

It was indeed institutionally made impossible for women to achieve artistic excellence, or success, on the same footing as men, no matter what the potency of their so-called talent, or genius...and while great achievement is rare and difficult at best, it is still rarer and more difficult if, while you work, you must at the same time wrestle with inner demons of self-doubt and guilt and outer monsters of ridicule or patronizing

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<sup>22</sup> Tinagli, Paola. "Introduction." In *Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, and Identity*, by Paola Tinagli, 11. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997.

<sup>23</sup> Tinagli, 12.

<sup>24</sup> Borzello, Frances. "Out of the Shadows." In *A World of Our Own: Women as Artists Since the Renaissance*, by Frances Borzello, 15. New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 2000.

<sup>25</sup> Borzello, 16, 17.

encouragement, neither of which have any specific connection with the quality of the work as such.<sup>26</sup>

### **Function of Italian Renaissance Portraiture**

Gender, along with social status, directly affected the functions of portraits. Examples of the much-debated functions of portraits include memorializing or commemorating subjects and events, decorating courtly halls, serving as tokens of alliance, friendship, or esteem, and influencing political or marriage agreements.<sup>27</sup>

Portraits of men generally emphasized their social, political, or professional role. These portraits were often stereotypically masculine.<sup>28</sup> Specifically, the function of portraits of male leaders was centered on politics. Their idealized portraits often served as ambassadors and surrogates during their absence and reinforced foreign policies.<sup>29</sup>

Portraits *Leonello d' Este* (Figure 1) and *Giuliano de' Medici* (Figure 2) exemplify the standard male portrait of the Renaissance. Pisanello has idealized Leonello d' Este by de-accentuating his long nose, sloping forehead and heavy jaw. Instead, he has created an air of nobility by emphasizing Leonello d' Este's blue eyes and blond hair fashioned in the French style.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, Giuliano de' Medici has been portrayed by Sandro Botticelli as

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<sup>26</sup> Nochlin, Linda. "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" In *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*, by Linda Nochlin, 176. New York: Harper and Row, 1988.

<sup>28</sup> West, 158.

<sup>29</sup> Woods-Marsden, Joanna. "'Ritratto Al Naturale': Questions of Realism and Idealism in Early Renaissance Portraits." *Art Journal*, 1987: 213.

<sup>30</sup> Christiansen, Weppelmann, and Rubin, 174.

an ideal leader—robust and confident with strong facial features, a muscular torso, and a well-mannered expression.<sup>31</sup>

The multiple functions of female portraiture include commemorative works, donor portraits, and images of ideal beauty. When used as a commemorative portrait, lineage and wealth were of utmost importance to convey.<sup>32</sup> Paola Tinagli states that women were painted upon their betrothal or in honor of marriage. This claim is supported by the age, costume (including both clothing and jewelry), and bound hair of the female sitters portrayed.<sup>33</sup> Other than at the time of marriage, women were rarely seen on display; however, publicity was necessary to legitimize marriage during this time period and men wished to display wealth and prestige.<sup>34</sup> Many portraits of women were also completed posthumously to commemorate the life of the deceased.<sup>35</sup> Women are also seen in religious paintings as donors. In Northern Italian courts, donors were portrayed in finery to publicly advertise their wealth. In other courts of Italy, including Florence, this practice was frowned upon, and female donors were pictured in dark attire with heads covered in white cloth.<sup>36</sup> These societal preferences are demonstrated by *The Visitation* (Figure 3) by Domenic Ghirlandaio and the *Portinari Altarpiece* (Figure 4) by Flemish artist Hugo van der Goes.

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<sup>31</sup> Christiansen, Weppelmann, and Rubin, 205.

<sup>32</sup> Tinagli, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Simons, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Simons, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Tinagli, 49.

<sup>36</sup> Tinagli, 63.



## Position of Sitter in Italian Renaissance Portraiture

During the Italian Renaissance, specifically the Quattrocento, women were portrayed in profile. Leonardo da Vinci once discussed the process of painting in profile:

How to make a portrait in profile after seeing the subject only once: You must commit to memory the variations of the four different features in the profile, which would be the nose, the mouth, the chin, and the forehead. Let us speak first of noses, of which there are three kinds....

Several differing theories by art historians exist that address the purpose of the profile pose of the subject. Many scholars argue that the profile portrait developed in response to ancient coinage and religious donor portraits of earlier centuries.<sup>37</sup> Patricia Simons argues in her essay “Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture” that the decision to portray female figures in profile stemmed from psychological decisions.<sup>38</sup> She states that women were painted in profile to appear chaste and display modesty. The female profile tended to be rendered with an elongated neck, unsubstantial body, and flattened facial features. The averted eyes and lack of genital region allowed male viewers to avoid the fear of rejection or seduction while viewing her features unchallenged.<sup>39</sup> Simons explains within her essay:

The language of the eye could be a sensual and hence feared, even repressed one. The passionless, chaste state of a woman in profile is the product of this burden. The de-eroticized portrayal of women in profile meant female eyes no longer threaten the seeing man with castration. Her eyes cannot ward off his, nor send ‘arrows’ to the lover’s heart. Castration anxieties are also displaced by fetishisation, by the way in which a

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<sup>37</sup> Christiansen, Weppelmann, and Rubin, 13.

<sup>38</sup> Simons, 5.

<sup>39</sup> Simons, 12.

women's neck, eye and other features are rendered safe commodities through fragmentation and distancing, excessive idealization.<sup>40</sup>

Another art historian, David Alan Brown, argues that feminist interpretations of portraiture like those of Patricia Simons are flawed. He points out that men as well as women were portrayed in profile during the early Italian Renaissance and the audience viewing portraits was not strictly male. It must be noted, however, that although both men and women viewed portraits, men generally commissioned the portraits. Brown claims that portraits were not commissioned to denigrate the subject but rather to honor and commemorate them.<sup>41</sup>

Whether chosen to recall the traditional profile of rulers on ancient coinage or to create a vision of modesty out of the image of generally untrusted women, the profile succeeded in emphasizing the flowing contours and costly garments of the sitter in a nonthreatening format.<sup>42</sup>

### **Costume in Italian Renaissance Portraiture**

The wardrobe of the sitter could convey meaning to the viewer as the richness of garments and jewels proclaimed social and financial status.<sup>43</sup> Costume also often marked

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<sup>40</sup> Simons, 22.

<sup>41</sup> Brown, David Alan. "Introduction." In *Virtue and Beauty: Leonardo's *Ginerva De' Benci* and Renaissance Portraits of Women*, by David Alan Brown, 20. Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2001.

<sup>42</sup> Brown, 14.

<sup>43</sup> Tinagli, 50.

parental and marital identity (sometimes with the inclusion of heraldic devices).<sup>44</sup>

Because costume and jewelry conveyed such a mass of information, artists often focused as much on the wardrobe as the woman, who was considered to be a piece of property herself.<sup>45</sup> *Portrait of a Woman and a Man at a Casement* (Figure 5) provides an example of exquisite costume depicted in portraits of the Renaissance. *Portrait of a Woman and Man at a Casement* is the earliest surviving double portrait, the first portrait to depict a female in a hypothetical interior, and the first known portrait to include a landscape background. Within the portrait a coat of arms is visible and the female sitter wears costly jewels and garments. On the sleeve of her fur-lined sleeve the motto *lealtà* (loyalty) is embroidered with gold thread and seed pearls. Based upon the costume of the woman depicted and the coat of arms, scholars assume *Portrait of a Woman and Man at a Casement* was executed by Fra Filippo Lippi to commemorate the marriage of the couple.<sup>46</sup>

### **Idealized Beauty in Italian Renaissance Portraiture**

The women pictured in the profile portraits of the Italian Renaissance were not portrayed as individuals but as ideal women who shared similar facial features with the sitter. Examples of desired physical traits include a high, round forehead, plucked eyebrows, blond hair, fair skin, rosy cheeks, ruby lips, white teeth, dark eyes, and

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<sup>44</sup> Simons, 10.

<sup>45</sup> Simons, 15.

<sup>46</sup> Christiansen, Weppelmann, and Rubin, 96.

graceful hands.<sup>47</sup> Three portraits all entitled *Portrait of a Lady* (Figures 6, 7, and 8) by the brothers Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo depict idealized Renaissance women. Although the three portraits memorialize three individual women, the images differ only slightly. In addition to equal proportion and perfect symmetry, the sitters of unknown identity possess the blond hair, high forehead, ruby lips, and fair skin of the ideal Italian beauty.<sup>48</sup> One Renaissance author, Firenzuola, famously related the proportions of the ideal woman to those of an antique vase.<sup>49</sup> In her essay “On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, Petrarchismo, and the Vernacular Style,” Cropper states:

According to Firenzuola the vase...with its long neck rising delicately from its shoulders, is like a woman with a long slender neck and wide, graceful shoulders. The next vase has sides that swell out around a sturdy neck making it appear more slender, and this resembles the ideal, fleshy-hipped woman, who needs no belt to set off her slender midriff. In contrast to the first, the third vase is like a skinny angular woman, whereas the fourth, unlike the second, recalls those over-endowed women who are simply blocked out by a mallet without being finished by the chisel and the rasp.<sup>50</sup>

Characterization of the sitter was shown through the placement of the single visible eye, tilt of the head, and the relation of the neck to the shoulders. Hairstyles, veils, and headdresses also affected the silhouette of the profile.<sup>51</sup> With one of the most intricate

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<sup>47</sup> Rogers, Mary. "The Decorum of Women's Beauty: Trissino, Firenzuola, Luigini and the Representation of Women in Sixteenth-century Painting." *Renaissance Studies*, 1988: 47.

<sup>48</sup> Christiansen, Weppelmann, and Rubin, 101.

<sup>49</sup> Cropper, Elizabeth. "On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, Petrarchismo, and the Vernacular Style." *Art Bulletin*, 1976: 374.

<sup>50</sup> Cropper, 377.

<sup>51</sup> Tinagli, 50.

silhouettes of any surviving Renaissance portrait *Ideal Portrait of a Lady* (“*Simonetta Vespucci*”) (Figure 9) provides an additional example of idealization in Italian Renaissance portraiture. The portrait is loosely based on Simonetta Cattaneo Vespucci, the beloved of Giuliano de’ Medici and wife of Marco Vespucci. Following an early death, the beauty of Simonetta Cattaneo Vespucci grew to legendary proportions and is visually celebrated by Sandro Botticelli in *Ideal Portrait of a Lady* (“*Simonetta Vespucci*”). The figure is depicted in profile with elaborately braided hair intertwined with pearls and a feathered agrafe atop her head. According to scholars, the hairstyle is fantastical, as women of Florence wore their hair pulled back rather than partially loose, and beaded ornaments would have been illegal according to sumptuary laws.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to physical beauty, women of the time were expected to uphold high moral standards. The virtuous qualities patrons and artists wished to portray include but are not limited to modesty, humility, piety, constancy, charity, obedience, and chastity. The Italian phrase *virtutem forma decorat*, or “beauty adorns virtue,” expresses the common belief of the Italian Renaissance society members that ideal moral characteristics must be present for women to possess physical beauty, thus outward appearance was a reflection of inner beauty.<sup>53</sup>

According to scholars including Elizabeth Cropper, the idea of ideal beauty was unified during the Italian Renaissance because all members of society were aware of and accepted a consistent list of “beautiful” qualities. The accepted characteristics remained

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<sup>52</sup> Christiansen, Weppelmann, and Rubin, 121.

<sup>53</sup> Brown, 13.

constant for years and were passed down through both literature and the visual language of art.<sup>54</sup> Another art historian, Mary Rogers, stated that physical traits found in idealized portraits of women directly parallel the descriptions found in the writings of Renaissance writers, including Trissino, Firenzuola, and Liugini. Despite corresponding characteristics in both mediums, Rogers argues that painting was not influenced by Renaissance writings but rather authors and artists simply complied with the accepted ideal that existed during the period.<sup>55</sup>

### **Final Developments of the Italian Renaissance**

In the later years of the Italian Renaissance (after approximately 1480), the profile portrait lost popularity and sitters (including female sitters) were portrayed in a three-quarters or frontal view.<sup>56</sup> With this development, artists began to show emotion and personality in portraiture. Leonardo da Vinci mastered the technique of showing emotion in the eyes of the sitter by using oil paint to soften facial features and to model the form with light patterns.<sup>57</sup> The oil-based paint adopted by Italian Renaissance painters circa 1562 (borrowed from the Flemish) allowed them to emphasize the luster, texture, and surface qualities of the eyes, skin, and hair.<sup>58</sup> When executing *Lady with an Ermine*

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<sup>54</sup> Cropper, 385.

<sup>55</sup> Rogers, 73.

<sup>56</sup> Tinagli, Paola. "Portraits 1480-1560: Beauty and Power." In *Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, and Identity*, by Paola Tinagli, 84. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997.

<sup>57</sup> Pope-Hennessy, 101, 104.

<sup>58</sup> Tinagli, 91.

(Figure 10) Leonardo da Vinci used groundbreaking techniques and the new oil medium. Cecilia Gallerani, the subject of the portrait, sits twisted with her face in a three-quarter view. Leonardo uses highlights and shadow to emphasize important elements of the portrait including the long, graceful hand stroking the ermine, the animal's fur, and the young woman's face.<sup>59</sup> Despite the many developments in portraiture following the Quattrocento, women continued to be idealized. In Venice, a great number of portraits show women portrayed exclusively for their beauty. According to scholars, the oftentimes partially undressed women portrayed in these portraits were likely imagined or idealized beyond recognition.<sup>60</sup> According to Shearer West in *Portraiture*, "It is also worth noting that ideal beauty combined with erotic allure in many of these portraits, which has led to some historians to claim that they are representations of courtesans."<sup>61</sup>

Although the Renaissance developed into the Baroque period in approximately 1600, its influence is apparent in artwork of the following periods. One Italian Renaissance development, the custom of portrait painting, led to its widespread practice.<sup>62</sup> Perhaps of even greater importance, portraits of the Italian Renaissance have given scholars a glimpse into the past. By looking specifically at the portraits of female sitters, valuable information concerning Italian society and the roles of women may be gathered. With vital examples of portraiture coupled with literature dating to the Italian

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<sup>59</sup> Christiansen, Weppelmann, and Rubin, 70.

<sup>60</sup> Tinagli, 99.

<sup>61</sup> West, 150.

<sup>62</sup> West, Shearer. "Introduction." In *Portraiture*, by Shearer West, 17. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004

Renaissance, scholars have made strides in understanding Italian society during the Renaissance for “poetry stammers and eloquence grows dumb, unless art serve as interpreter.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Cropper, 394.



## **Conclusion**

Based on conducted research, evidence points to the conclusion that the portrayal of women in Quattrocento portraits directly correlates to the role of women in the Italian Renaissance society. As previously stated, the analyzed portraits, specifically the portraits depicting women in profile, are commemorative works and idealize sitters beyond recognition. Idealized aspects of female sitters include blonde hair, fair skin, rosy cheeks, high forehead, elongated neck, and ruby lips. The modification of physical features flatter the sitter based on the common Renaissance belief that outward appearance reflected inner beauty. In addition, the idealization of the sitter flattered her male counterpart (father, husband, or betrothed) by depicting the sitter clothed in costly garments and displaying obvious virtue. The vision of virtuousness, specifically modesty, humility, piety, obedience, and chastity, was achieved by depicting the beautiful sitter in profile with an averted gaze.

In reference to the profile positioning of the female sitter, the majority of literature suggests that the decision was not intended to enslave or insult the female population. As pointed out by Patricia Simons, the lack of eye contact and genital region do invite unchallenged scrutiny; however, the profile positioning of the sitter in Italian Renaissance portraiture appears to be a natural response to both ancient coinage and donor portraits as seen in earlier periods. The many profile portraits of male sitters painted during the fifteenth-century strengthen this argument.

In conclusion, all aspects of Italian Renaissance portraiture including costume, idealization, and profile positioning of the sitter work to emphasize the social role of women as they existed during the Italian Renaissance.





Figure 1

Pisanello, *Leonello de' Este*, 1444 (?)

Tempera on panel

Accademia Carrara, Comune di Bergamo

[http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7bD71E0EDA-B10D-4524-9704-62A170349D21%7d&oid=110005919&pg=2&rpp=60&pos=99&ft=\\*](http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7bD71E0EDA-B10D-4524-9704-62A170349D21%7d&oid=110005919&pg=2&rpp=60&pos=99&ft=*)



Figure 2

Sandro Botticelli, *Giuliano de' Medici*, 1478

Tempera on wood

Accademia Carrara, Comune di Bergamo

[http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7bD71E0EDA-B10D-4524-9704-62A170349D21%7d&oid=110005918&pg=2&rpp=60&pos=98&ft=\\*](http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7bD71E0EDA-B10D-4524-9704-62A170349D21%7d&oid=110005918&pg=2&rpp=60&pos=98&ft=*)





Figure 3  
Domenico Ghirlandaio, Detail of *The Visitation*, 1486-1490  
Fresco  
Santa Maria Novella, Florence  
<http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/g/ghirland/domenico/6tornab/62tornab/2visita.html>



Figure 4  
Hugo van der Goes, Detail of *Portinari Altarpiece*, 1473-1478  
Oil on wood  
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence  
<http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?html/g/goes/portinar/index.html>



Figure 5

Fra Filippo Lippi, *Portrait of a Woman and a Man at a Casement*, 1440-1444

Tempera on wood

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

[http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7bD71E0EDA-B10D-4524-9704-62A170349D21%7d&oid=110001340&pg=1&rpp=60&pos=1&ft=\\*](http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7bD71E0EDA-B10D-4524-9704-62A170349D21%7d&oid=110001340&pg=1&rpp=60&pos=1&ft=*)



Figure 6

Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo, *Portrait of a Lady*, 1460-1465

Tempera and oil on panel

Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan

<http://www.museopoldipezzoli.it/en/node/876>



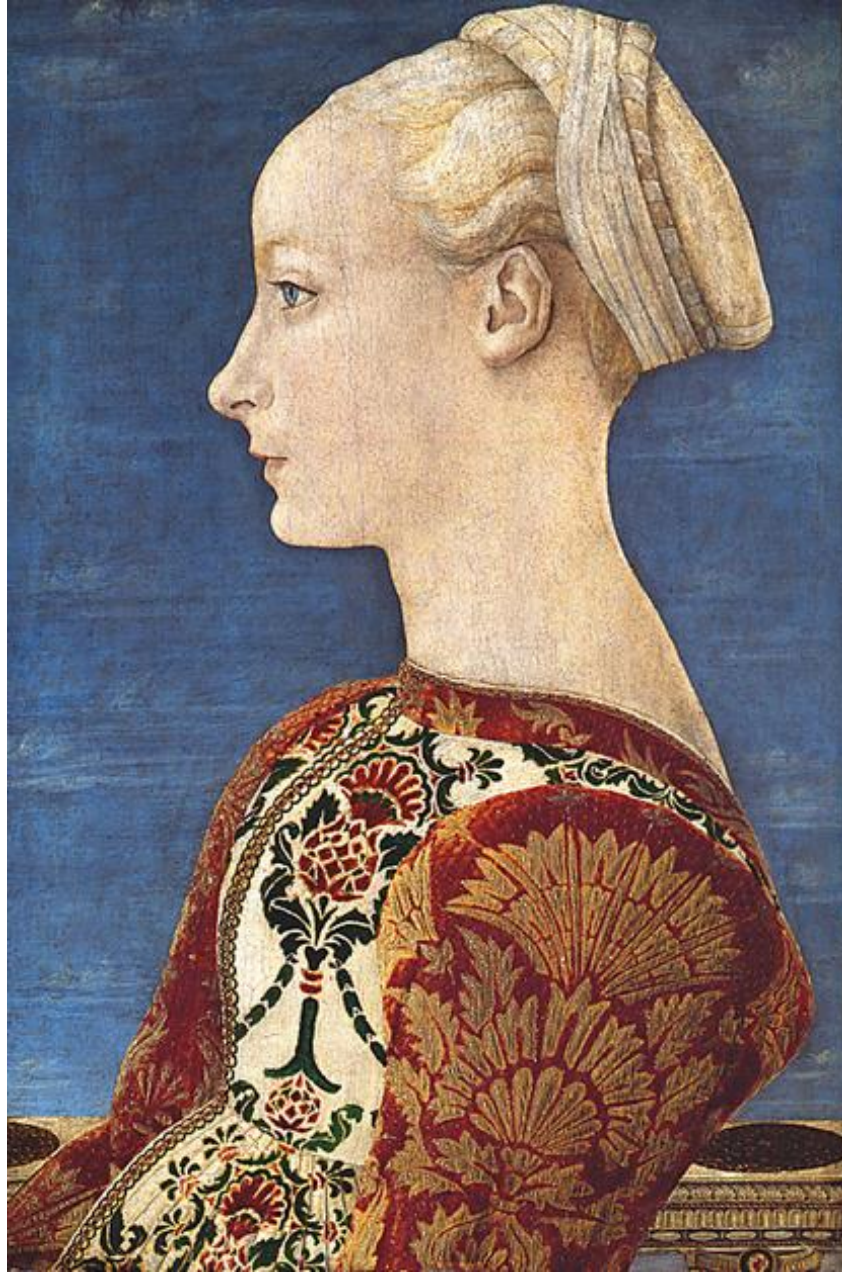


Figure 7

Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo, *Portrait of a Lady*, 1460-1465

Oil and tempera on poplar panel

Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

[http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7bD71E0EDA-B10D-4524-9704-62A170349D21%7d&oid=110005803&pg=1&rpp=60&pos=42&ft=\\*](http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7bD71E0EDA-B10D-4524-9704-62A170349D21%7d&oid=110005803&pg=1&rpp=60&pos=42&ft=*)



Figure 8

Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo, *Portrait of a Lady*, 1470-1475

Tempera on wood

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

[http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7bD71E0EDA-B10D-4524-9704-62A170349D21%7d&oid=110001770&pg=1&rpp=60&pos=20&ft=\\*](http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7bD71E0EDA-B10D-4524-9704-62A170349D21%7d&oid=110001770&pg=1&rpp=60&pos=20&ft=*)





Figure 9

Sandro Botticelli, *Ideal Portrait of a Lady* ("Simonetta Vespucci"), 1475-1480

Tempera on poplar

Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main

[http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7bD71E0EDA-B10D-4524-9704-62A170349D21%7d&oid=110005706&pg=1&rpp=60&pos=27&ft=\\*](http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7bD71E0EDA-B10D-4524-9704-62A170349D21%7d&oid=110005706&pg=1&rpp=60&pos=27&ft=*)



Figure 10

Leonardo da Vinci, *Lady with an Ermine*, 1489-1490

Oil on wood panel

Czartoryski Museum, Kraków

<http://www.muzeum-czartoryskich.krakow.pl/pl/eksploruj/trasy-tematyczne/1/80.html>



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