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**THE EMPRESS'S NEW CLOTHES: NORTHERN ITALIAN WIVES AND
THEIR CLASSICAL EXEMPLARS**

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PREFACE

This honors thesis is the culmination of over a year of research and scholarly exploration. The genesis of my project was my junior year abroad in Bologna, Italy, where I was afforded the opportunity to view court art and female portraiture in context in centers of the Central and North Italian Renaissance such as Ferrara and Mantua. As a double Art History and Italian major, I spent most of my classroom time at the University of Bologna in Italian literature courses. The sometimes surprising depictions of female exemplars in Renaissance literature I encountered prompted a fascination with exploring exactly what virtues and expectations were being recommended to their presumed early-modern heirs. I first encountered the remarkable public portrayal of Isabella d'Este, Marchesa of Mantua from the late fifteenth to early sixteenth century, through Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. The explicit literary connections fashioned between Bradamante, the central *guerriera*, or female warrior, of Ariosto's epic, and Isabella d'Este suggested that the value placed on the traits of these virginal and virtuous women might have extended into the visual arts of the period as well.

The essential thematic elements of this thesis originate in my contemplation of a single work, Venetian artist Lorenzo Lotto's double portrait entitled *Master Marsilio and his Wife*. My exploration of the empress and Venus in Northern Italian visual culture follows from Beverly Louise Brown's identification of the Empress Faustina the Elder's visual presence on the pendant worn by the female subject, Faustina Cassotti. Faustina the Elder emerged as a

perfect representative of the longevity of exemplary images of the empress. Essential to the success of my project, the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum holds a number of excellent examples of her imperial propaganda. Faustina the Elder would function as one of the unifying threads in the fabric of my study, helping to thematically link the patronage of two women of divergent social classes. It was the profusion of classically derived images of the empress that appear on objects and paintings related to Northern Italian marriage that shifted my intentions from maintaining a traditional focus on Florentine custom and artistic production to one that introduced the vital importance of interpreting classical exemplars in terms of Northern Italian societal factors.

My projected study of Florentine marriage and artistic production would have concentrated on the marriage ritual itself and the objects employed therein as a re-enactment of scenes of Roman triumph, with the husband cast as the conquering emperor and the wife as the conquered bride. However, I found the designation of the *cassone*, or marriage chest, as a monolithic representative of didactic nuptial themes increasingly problematic. I also observed a marked divergence in the treatment of classical female exemplars as they were appropriated in Florence and its environs and their character in the Northern Italian context. I identified the convergence of the empress and Venus, a conflation established in the classical Roman world, as a theme that was particularly evident and fully articulated in artistic production related to marriage in early sixteenth century Northern Italy. The documented and new interest in this

set of exemplars stood in stark contrast to the traditional compendium of exemplary, self-sacrificial women often utilized in visual didactic programming in central Italy. In realizing this project, I have endeavored to combine sociological, literary, and visual evidence to define the significance of an ideal vision of wifedom that was particular to early sixteenth century Northern Italy. It was only through the convergence of my scholarly experiences both abroad and at Mount Holyoke that I was able to weave these threads together to fashion a study that I hope serves to fill a gap in our understanding of the role of visual culture in the context of marriage in Renaissance Italy.

ABSTRACT

This thesis defines a new vision of the wife that developed in Northern Italy in the sixteenth century. Northern Italian patrons commissioned a range of objects, from domestic wares to paintings, that reinterpret and adapt two classical female figures, Venus and the empress, who served jointly as exemplars for the role of the wife. Although Renaissance brides are most often viewed in relationship to traditional, self-sacrificial exemplars like Lucretia, the prevalence of Venus and the empress in Northern Italian visual culture indicates that patrons were attracted to alternative classical female models. Working in tandem with ancient conceptions of the interrelation between Venus and the empress and the construction of public and domestic roles, these depictions present the bride as a contemporary embodiment of desirable traits: learnedness, stability, and grace.

The opening chapter provides a comprehensive survey of objects with images or attributes of Venus and the empress made for domestic settings and personal adornment. Brides were paired with their exemplars not only through the idealized images intended for their viewing, but also through personal items that allowed them to assume a tangible connection with their models. Decorated girdles, for example, render the Renaissance woman a new iteration of Venus; Venus also appears in the bedchamber, most frequently inside the lids of *cassoni*, the quintessential nuptial item. In *belle donne* majolica dishes, idealized feminine profiles represent the codified images of empresses crafted for ancient Roman imperial portrait coins.

I then consider two divergent case studies of specific women for whom Venus and the empress served as exemplars: Isabella d'Este, the Marchesa of Mantua, considered a prudent and powerful ruler in her own time, and Faustina Cassotti, the wife of a bourgeois merchant's son in Bergamo. Isabella d'Este's use of these exemplars bolstered her public image, as seen in her *studiolo*, redolent with Venus imagery as epitomized in Mantegna's *Parnassus*, and filled with antiquities relating to ancient imperial consorts. Her collection of a wide range of objects related to female imperial image-making, including coins, medals, and a bust of Faustina the Elder, confirms that she was interested in portraying herself as a Renaissance incarnation of this group of classical ideals.

Faustina Cassotti is known only through the two paintings commissioned by her father-in-law in 1523 for installation in the rooms that belonged to her and her husband, including a double portrait of the couple yoked by Cupid by Lorenzo Lotto. We view her solely through the lens of two exemplary doubles, Saint Catherine and the empress Faustina the Elder. These secularized exemplars cast Faustina as a socially elite and dignified woman who contributes positively to her husband's reputation.

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INTRODUCTION

This study addresses the appropriation and reinterpretation of two secular and classical female exemplars, the goddess Venus and the Roman empress, in visual culture intended for the adornment of the body or home of the Northern Italian wife in the first half of the sixteenth century. "Visual culture" is here invoked as an equalizing term that asserts a parity between the so-called "*arte minore*" and the fine arts, challenging a limiting distinction common to studies of the aforementioned objects. The works discussed here were produced between 1490 and 1538, and their classical models originate largely from the Antonine dynasty's reign over the Roman Empire. Although predominant Florentine models must be invoked in order to discuss divergent Northern exemplars, this study focuses specifically on objects and paintings created for patrons in the North, especially within the expansive territory of the Venetian Republic and in autonomous city-states like Mantua.

A wide range of examples of visual culture were vital for the introduction of female exemplars in the marital and religious sphere, including coins, medals, ceramic majolica ware, personal items like cameos and girdles, and paintings meant for installation in the Renaissance couple's home. Venus and the empress, linked through their classical continuity as wifely ideals, served as pervasive references for the building of an elegant, stable, and supportive wifely identity. In contrast to the limiting hierarchy traditionally proposed by Renaissance scholarship in which painting occupies a superior position to that of so-called

"material culture," I argue that these objects together functioned as an integrated program of exemplary influences on the wife.

The first chapter of this study investigates the specific presence of Venus and the empress in Northern Italian objects of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century. These are explicitly associated with marital union and the establishment of a conjugal household and a successful and socially profitable relationship between spouses. The following two chapters are engaged with two specific case studies that demonstrate how the Venus and Empress exemplars were interpreted and utilized for spousal image-making. Varying exemplary qualities were emphasized depending on the social identity of the wife matched with exemplars and the reality of agency in regards to patronage.

The first of these women, Isabella d'Este, was born to the ruling family of Ferrara in 1474. The daughter of Ercole d'Este and Leonora of Naples, her childhood was occupied with instruction in Latin and Greek, along with classical literature and contemporary music. She was reared in one of the most highly cultured courts of the Italian peninsula, exposed to the politics of other cities through travelling with her mother. Her background in ancient literature and history likely ignited her later famous passion for antiquities. When she married the Duke of Mantua, Francesco Gonzaga, in 1490, she became an extremely elite patron with the authority and means to look to models outside of the traditional scope of the traditional canon of "virtuous women" for exemplars. As the consort of the leader of one of Northern Italy's most significant city-states, and of a

politically prominent husband who was often absent on military campaigns, she was required to conceive of herself in a manner that reinforced her authority and allowed her to project an image of strength to the citizens of Mantua.¹ Because Francesco had been appointed a Commander of the armies of the Venetian Republic, Isabella was often left as the sole figurehead and active ruler of their city. She was a skillful employer of images and clever representations that painted her as a reincarnation of reassuring and powerful classical figures, a product of her privileged childhood and the effects of her intellectual thirst.

Stephen J. Campbell has written an essential monograph on the integration of classical figures into Isabella's public and domestic spaces with his *The Cabinet of Eros*.² He discusses at length the unusual case of a *studiolo* dedicated to the scholarly pursuits of a female commissioner, with an eye to the integration of decorative elements and the more elaborate painted cycles completed by the Northern Italian artist Andrea Mantegna and others. I will focus on the connection between Isabella's assumed comparison between herself and the Venus of Mantegna's *Parnassus* and her documented interest in the example of Roman empresses, including Faustina the Elder. My examination of her patronage and collection will also include coins, medals, and cameos, all of which were signs of

¹ On Isabella d'Este's contemporary reception and collecting habits, see Cartwright, *Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua*; Pizzagalli, *La Signora del Rinascimento: Vita e i splendori di Isabella d'Este alla corte di Mantova*; San Juan, "The Court Lady's Dilemma: Isabella d'Este and Art Collecting in the Renaissance." *Oxford Art Journal*, Volume 14, Issue 1, 1991. 67-78; Benetti, Erbesato, et. al, Ed. *La rinascita dell'antico. Mantova quasi Roma. Il gusto per l'antico nella città dei Gonzaga*, in *Mantova, il Museo della Città*.

² Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros: Renaissance Mythological Painting and the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este*.

her immersion in the antique models that contributed to her own crafting of her public persona as a female ruler.

Isabella's patronage, like the accumulation of objects practiced by merchant-class families, united the codified ancient image of the empress with the more malleable and multi-faceted image of Venus. Scholarship regarding the interpretation of the goddess in Renaissance visual culture has frequently run to two extremes. The first, the Neo-Platonic, philosophical scheme promoted by Erwin Panofsky, schematizes Venus into an abstracted figurehead for Celestial and Terrestrial Love. In this definition, Venus is often robbed of the visual and sensual delight she inherently possesses. Recent scholarship concentrated particularly on Northern Italian depictions of Venus have been overwhelmingly concerned with the arousing and quasi-magical powers of fertility Venus would have exerted through her image in the Renaissance bedchamber.

Scholar Rona Goffen hints that Titian twinned the bride and the goddess.³ She, however, retains the basis of Panofsky's allegory, conceding that the composition does present a hierarchy in which the nude Venus is a more exalted expression of love, specifically Celestial Love, comparable to Panofsky's Neo-

³ Goffen's art historical conception of Venus as epitomized in the *Venus of Urbino* is richer and more expansive than Panofsky and Ficino's dichotomy. It is also more precise in its connections to contemporary understanding of the feminine societal identity, offering a symbolic explanation that clears the sexuality of female figures in "nuptial" pictures like this one of the shame of overt display and suggestion. While Goffen can seem to press the issue of female sexual independence and control within marriage to the point of eclipsing her other arguments, she lays the basis for the consideration of Titian's problematic nudes within the context of celebratory and reflective marriage commissions. Her successors, such as David Rosand, would apply to the greater body of Renaissance Italian marriage culture. See Goffen, *Titian's Women*, and Rosand, "So and So Reclining on Her Couch."

Platonic Venus Coelestis.⁴ I propose a reading somewhere between these two interpretive extremes, suggesting that these “Venus portraits” are linked to the idealized portraits featured on Renaissance *bella donna* plates, and perhaps even to ancient models of codified empress portraits. In the case of Isabella d'Este, I apply the goddess's presence to a revival of the allegorical, political, and philosophical relationship between Venus and Mars, and trace the comparison back to the Roman concept of Venus as a facet of the female imperial identity.

I also trace the direct correspondences between a contemporary Bergamask bride, Faustina Cassotti, and her particular namesake, the Empress Faustina the Elder. Although she was likely an unremarkable member of the merchant class of her Northern Italian city, Faustina has been immortalized and exalted through her association with the ancient Faustina the Elder, who both in her own time and in the Renaissance was regarded as a paragon of wifely virtue, and of public grace and strength. Her mutually affectionate and collaborative relationship with her husband, the Emperor Antoninus Pius, I argue, also served as inspiration for the crafting of sixteenth century Northern Italian marital partnerships. Born in 100 CE, she died at the age of 40 in 140 CE, having left her husband and the Roman Empire two sons and two daughters. She was

⁴ Venus and Cupid appear as companions in a vast number of Renaissance mythological and allegorical paintings, including in the *Parnassus* Mantegna painted for Isabella d'Este's *studiolo* and Lotto's *Venus and Cupid*. Neither of these Venuses, in my opinion, fit comfortably into the Neo-Platonic scheme, perhaps because they were in fact created in an environment geographically and ideologically different from that of the Florentine court. Mantegna's Venus, most closely correspondent to the Celestial Venus, was mistaken in her time for the earthly Venus; Lotto's Venus is both erotic and loftily allegorical. On Panofsky's Neo-Platonic readings of Northern Italian Venuses, including the infamous *Venus of Urbino*, see his *Studies in Iconology*.

remembered for her temperance, wisdom, and charity, as well as her physical elegance. Roman women emulated her praise-worthy feminine character, adopting her distinctive hairstyle. She was also known to have been committed to female education: after her death, Antoninus Pius founded “Faustina’s Girls,” a charitable organization for the instruction of girls, in her honor.⁵

Faustina the Elder’s image was more widely distributed and viewed after her death than during her lifetime, a result of a memorial campaign enacted by the grieving Antoninus Pius. He called for the issue of a vast number of coins imprinted with Faustina’s likeness, a standardized, fully recognizable iconic version of the empress’s visage.⁶ The reverses often featured her portrayed as an alter-ego as a female personification of a virtue. Faustina the Elder was also exalted for the divine correspondences assigned to her as the wife of the Emperor, who traditionally was paired with and descended from both the early heroes of Roman history like Aeneas, and, more fundamentally, the god Mars. While Faustina was most often depicted as goddesses closely associated with the home, hearth, and domesticated fecundity, such as Ceres/Demeter, she was also associated with divine forces as diverse as the newly appropriated Egyptian principal goddess Isis and Cybele, a foreign goddess who was frequently worshiped as the “Great Mother.”⁷

⁵ See Birley, *Lives of the Later Caesars*, 102.

⁶ Watson and Bergmann, *The Moon and the Stars: Afterlife of a Roman Empress*, 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

The pairing of Faustina the Elder and her 16th century Italian namesake is articulated in a 1523 double portrait, *Master Marsilio and his Wife*, by Lotto (FIG. 1). Lotto signals Faustina Cassotti's assumption of Faustina the Elder's laudable qualities through allegorical iconography and an appearance of the Empress' image her prominent pendant. Both this painting and a *Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine* were commissioned by the groom's father, Zanin Cassotti, a wealthy cloth merchant, on the occasion of Marsilio's wedding. St. Catherine appears to function as a traditional religious alternative to this secular, pagan exemplar of the empress, but her portrayal transforms her into a contemporary, secularized symbolic companion for the bride.

Lorenzo Lotto spent much of his career settling in cities throughout the Venetian Republic and other sectors of Northern Italy. Although he was born in Venice, he found it impossible to establish the necessary reputation in his hometown, working in the shadow of peers like Giorgione and Titian. He was particularly fortunate in securing lucrative commissions in Bergamo, the furthest outpost of the Terraferma territory of the Venetian Republic, where wealthy merchants were eager for art. Bergamo was involved in several traumatic societal conflicts in the first half of the sixteenth century, in which the city variously became the possession of Milan, France, and even Germany.

Venice officially laid claim to Bergamo in 1513, but instances of conquest and political uncertainty continued into the 1520s. In 1517, the Venetian Republic initiated a campaign for cultural and public rehabilitation, including architectural

projects. Lotto first came to Bergamo at the very dawn of Venetian rule, in 1513, to paint an altarpiece commissioned for the church of Santo Stefano by a Bergamask count. Much of Bergamo's artistic collection was either a plea for protection and an outward show of power or a direct response to a greater availability of funds in the wake of a prosperous period.

Bergamo nurtured strong political and cultural ties to the booming and prominent city of Venice, rendering its social character significantly different from that of Florence and more southerly Italian states. Much scholarly discourse related to Renaissance marriage and visual culture has almost exclusively addressed nuptial practices in Tuscany and isolated the discourse to strict, limiting elements that painted the bride as a near servant of her husband, subject to his will and visibly marked as a possession of his family. Recent scholars of the Venetian tradition such as Rona Goffen and David Rosand⁸ have begun to address the implications of the North/South divide and characterize North Italian interpretations of classical references as divergent from their typically discussed Southerly counterparts. My study argues that the legacy of classical Rome was just as prevalent and rich in the areas surrounding the Venetian republic, but that this production must be examined on its own terms. Although it cannot be officially associated with the Cassotti patronage, I analyze Lotto's *Venus and Cupid*, painted in Bergamo at around the same time as the double portrait, as an indicator of the hypothesis that Venus can be seen as a portrait of the bride in a

⁸ For essential reading on the "Northern Venus," see Goffen, *Titian's Women*; Rosand, David. "So -and -So Reclining on her Couch."

The prominence of the image of the empress and of Venus in the visual culture of early 16th century Northern Italy suggests that patrons were uncovering and reinterpreting alternate female exemplars of antiquity. Broadening the art historical perspective on nuptial visual culture, the first chapter thus examines the allegorical presence of Venus on furniture and decorations intended for the bedchamber, as well as through personal accoutrements that recalled her attributes. Additionally, it interprets the idealized female portraits common to a popular subset of Renaissance majolica ware, called *bella donna* plates, as the product of an initiative to fuse the identities of particular Renaissance women and their illustrious historical predecessors, including empresses.

**DOMESTIC DIVAS: VENUS AND THE EMPRESS IN NUPTIAL AND
HOUSEHOLD OBJECT IN NORTHERN ITALY**

The role of the wife in Northern Italian society was growing increasingly complex and rich by the 16th century. Recent sociological surveys of wills published by James S. Grubb and Stanley Chojnacki⁹ indicate that wives were viewed as valuable assets to the families into which they married, not only through the public unification of two mutually beneficial families, but also as reassuring and beloved partners. The varied coterie of objects surrounding the secular and public enactment of the marriage bond includes a vast cross-section of possible interpretations of mythological and classical parallels. They offer a contrast to the traditional and more frequently addressed feminine themes invoked in objects tied to Florentine marriage customs.

Much scholarly work in the sphere of Renaissance domestic culture has been focused on objects like *cassoni*, marriage chests that served as public visual assurance of the transference of the bride from her house of birth to that of her new husband and then functioned as central furnishing in the couple's bedchamber. These studies, however, stop short of analyzing the continual presence of exemplary female images in the home of the new couple. This chapter surveys the marked influence of Venus and Roman empress exemplars on Northern Italian nuptial and domestic objects, defining the formal and iconographical legacy of their interrelated model. I consider majolica ware,

⁹ See Chojnacki, *Women and Men in Renaissance Venice: Twelve Essays on Patrician Society*; Grubb, *Families of the Renaissance: Private and Public Life in the Veneto*.

personal gear, and marriage chests in concert with the more frequently discussed Venus paintings of the North Italian Renaissance.

The paintings commissioned to decorate the Renaissance conjugal home usually featured traditional and conservative historical themes that scholars have long interpreted as didactic lessons of female submission, humility, and sometimes militant chastity. Less attention has been paid to the range of objects that functioned as wedding gifts or commemorations of the primarily civil partnership of marriage, such as *belle donne* dishes and the feminine accoutrements that were often so intimately connected to the celebration of nuptials.

The symbols and comparisons central to help to delineate desirable wifely traits, primarily linked to classicizing notions of the feminine ideal, and defining the ideal relationship between spouses. I will begin this dialogue with the presentation of a typical didactic theme, the death of Lucretia, and its particular relevance as a didactic source in Florentine and central Italian contexts. I then propose the figures of Venus and the empress as alternatives that enjoyed special relevance and popularity in the North. Finally, I will argue that reproductive, classicizing Renaissance medals and cameos, along with idealized painted portrayals of the bride, were early modern re-workings of the image-making system developed for ancient Roman imperial consorts.

It is only appropriate to begin with one of the most traditional ancient themes for the *cassone*, Lucretia, which stands in stark contrast to the ultimate

exemplar of the empress. Also called a *forziero* in 15th century Florence, as scholar Christelle Baskins asserts, *cassoni* paintings worked with a repertoire of subjects commonly viewed as specific and strict didactic tools for the women.¹⁰ The large wooden chests containing the bride's personal possessions were carried in public marriage processions, marking her change in status from a virgin and member of her father's family to a wife and a legal and social component of her father-in-law's family. They frequently portrayed scenes drawn from ancient sources such as the *Aeneid* or historical battles. The *cassone* is read as a reminder of the wife's duty to submit to the will of her new family in order to maintain their social reputation. Lucretia, a self-sacrificial classical figure that often appeared in Renaissance literary and visual compendia of supremely virtuous women, is emblematic of the traditional desires attached to crafting the bride's role as an ideal wife.

In line with expectations for the teenaged brides who secured advantageous alliances between prominent families in Florence and its environs, Lucretia sacrificed herself in the most explicit and profound manner possible in order to maintain the good name of her husband's family and ensure the auspicious perpetuity of his line. Her story is recounted in the decorations installed on a Sienese *cassone* (FIG. 2), dating to ca. 1465-1475 and recently acquired by the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum. Lucretia proves her wifely worth not through extended adherence to proper behavior for her station, but

¹⁰ See Baskins, *Cassone Painting, Humanism, and Gender in Early Modern Italy*.

through her comportment before her young death. Lucretia is raped by Sextus Tarquinius, the son of the king of Rome, and having been offered the choice of dying, her chastity besmirched by her violator, or becoming Sextus Tarquinius' shamefully claimed property, she pursues a publically impactful destiny. Lucretia commits suicide, destroying this breach of honor along with her self. In the first panel of the Mount Holyoke *cassone*'s continuous narrative, Sextus Tarquinius is apparently in the act of breaching the space of Lucretia's bedchamber, threatening her with death lest she fail to submit. While his servant looks on, he lunges toward Lucretia, who has shot bolt upright in bed in response of his entrance, and is poised to sink the knife he brandishes into her exposed breast.

Sextus Tarquinius, however, will not supply the means of her death. Instead, the next scene shows us Lucretia, penitent before her father. Only if we look closely at this central female figure dressed in modest and sober contemporary dress, can we observe that she is plunging a knife into her chest. This depiction is an anomaly: Lucretia was often depicted either sumptuously dressed or half nude at the moment of her death, her garments slipping tantalizingly even as she looks to a pagan "heaven" for forgiveness and hope. She stands in marked contrast to the lavish portrait depictions of wives later in the Renaissance, unabashedly focused on displaying wealth and finery. What is key here is Lucretia's modesty and submission. The final scene assures us that Lucretia's death will not have been in vain, since her husband, Lucius Tarquinius

Collatinus, is riding off to meet with his fellow righteous Romans, who will conceive of the Roman Republic.

Lucretia was exemplary to Renaissance husbands and parents aiming to mold the bride because her greatest concern was the reputation of her adopted family, that of her husband. Her death also spurred the revolution that gave birth to the Roman Republic and abolished the monarchy, rendering it relevant on a yet larger scale. However, Lucretia was no longer present to participate in the construction of a new society. She had readied the battlefield with her sacrifice, but she was denied the possibility of witnessing either the demise of the man who had ruined her or the changes she helped to enact. Lucretia is selfless and servile: her function as a wife is to facilitate her husband's ambitions, silent, and, eventually, invisible.

That Lucretia's show of virtue and commitment to maintaining the stability of mores even in times of societal upheaval was a lasting model from women is manifest in her many appearances in Medieval and Renaissance culture, including her presence in the section of limbo reserved for "virtuous" pagans in Dante's *Divina Commedia*. Lucretia is the epitome of conservative classical icons drawn from sources that speak of illustrious, historical pagan women, reinforcing the female imperative to adhere to the tenants of modesty and deference in the face of the ordering pillars of their society.

Other female references present a divergent view of prevalent expectations for the behavior of new wives. Venus was one of the most frequently invoked

female exemplars, and her presence was evident everywhere from material objects associated with bridal garb to celebratory customs and paintings destined to join the bride's *cassone* in her bedchamber. References to Venus could be found literally woven into the fabric of the bride's accoutrements, rendering her a visual double or worldly incarnation of the goddess herself. Girdles, like other types of jewelry and personal ornaments, were often commissioned with the intent of bestowing them upon the bride as a portion of her wedding gift. Outfitting the bride with items specific to her new station visibly bound her to her new family and rendered her an appealing and glorified physical extension of the family's prosperity and station. They could be assigned auspicious or magical properties which had their roots in the girdle's association with two of the most essential female exemplars of the Renaissance, Venus and the Virgin Mary. The association between Venus and the girdle originates in its mention in the *Iliad*, where Venus' girdle (perhaps also visible in Lotto's *Venus and Cupid* (FIG. 3) is imbued with the power to render its wearer irresistible.¹¹ This quality would have been considered advantageous in the light of the couple's wedding night and subsequent attempts at conception, an aid for successful intercourse.

The supposed relic of the Virgin's girdle in Prato was said to hold a transferrable power to aid women in difficult childbirth, having touched the belly of the woman of whom Christ himself was born.¹² In practice, the wearing of a

¹¹ Mussacio, Cat. 36 b., *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*.

girdle would have highlighted the fecundity of the Renaissance bride, cinching her waist, and wrapping underneath and accentuating her breasts. Many gift girdles were composed of a fabric of intricate pattern and appliqué elements in silver or gold, giving them a solid value and serving as an expression of the wealth of the groom's family.

Venus was repeatedly invoked as a symbolic but decidedly pagan presence, a complement to the usually purely civil rites that made up the Renaissance "ritual" of marriage. Much scholarly attention has been paid recently to the popularity of resurrecting the practice of Latin *epithalamia*, poems written with the intent of oral presentation and conceived as formal, lyrical send-offs for the bride and groom as the time for them to retire to their bedchambers approached.¹³ *Epithalamia*, which were offered to the wedding party by respected and seasoned orators, often called directly on Venus and asked for her aid in promoting a pleasing and fruitful union between the new couple. The content of the orations could be quite explicit and openly sexual, and in keeping with the inclusion of blessings from pagan deities, sometimes compared the couple to famous men and woman from classical antiquity. Sigismondo Maltesta and his bride, for example, were described as Alexander the Great and the Amazon Thalestris, who were barely able to subdue their erotic longing for one another when they first laid eyes upon each other. Such recollections of the first

¹² See Ante-Nicene Fathers. *The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. 8, 594. This is the original source for the story that the Virgin threw her girdle down to St. Thomas during her Ascension into heaven as tangible proof of the miraculous event.

¹³ See D'Elia, *The Renaissance of Marriage in Fifteenth-Century Italy*.

sign of positive erotic attraction between the new spouses was as common as prodding on the part of the orator that the couple should not waste any more time on festivities, and instead perform their pleasurable duty in the bedroom.¹⁴ Since the ultimate goal of every marriage was the production of healthy children, immediate and repeated sexual union was encouraged.

Images of the goddess complemented her installation, through wedding orations, in the space of the bedroom. This auspicious program was initiated by her inclusion on essential *cassoni* panels. Botticelli's *Venus and Mars* (FIG. 4), now in London's National Gallery, for example, has long been interpreted as one of a group of *spalliere* panel paintings created specifically for the chambers of Giovanni Vespucci, meant to commemorate his wedding to Nanna de' Nerli in 1500.¹⁵ It invokes the ancient tradition of depicting Mars vanquished by the love of Venus, his weapons surrendered to playful *putti* (FIG. 5). Interestingly, this depiction of Venus, in contrast with those executed for the interior of *cassoni* lids, presents her fully clothed in an attitude of relaxed refinement as she watches the exhausted Mars, his limbs splayed carelessly while satyrs attempt to rouse him from his stupor. This painting has often been considered an allegory for the

¹⁴ D'Elia, *The Renaissance of Marriage in Fifteenth-Century Florence*, 102. D'Elia cites Sigismondo Malatesta's wedding oration by the humanist Parleo. "When the queen of the Amazons, Thalestris, saw the regal majesty of Alexander the Great, she at once desired to sleep with him and bear his children. In the same way did Sigismondo react when he saw Isotta's lineage and beauty...He thought that there must be the spirit of kings within her body and something more than human in her mortal person. He burned with an unbelievable fire of love and longed that Isotta might burn with an equal flame so that they might be joined in joyous and perpetual love." Epithalamium #280, fol. 346-r-v.

¹⁵ Bayer, 234.

essential need for balance in any successful nuptial relationship, reminding viewers that the love and stability of the wife must be ready to confront the overzealous machinations of the male. However, the scene may simply celebrate the power of Venus' beauty and its reflection in the Renaissance bride.

Venus here is a Renaissance woman, dressed in a gown which would not be entirely out of place in the Medici court, and her ideal beauty would have served as an inspiration to the new wife viewing the goddess in the bedchamber. Since bedchambers were also the site of small, intimate gatherings between the couple and their close friends and associates, the visible presence of Venus would have reinforced the worthiness and desirability of the bride.

Venus grew became essential to the nuptial and domestic sphere in the North of Italy, where the "genre" of the nude Venus was perfected by Titian and his circle. Doubtlessly the most famous and vehemently debated of this image type is the so-called *Venus of Urbino* (FIG. 6). According to recent interpretations, it was intended either for installation on the side of a *cassone* or to be hung over the couple's bed in the manner of *spallieri* panels. Rona Goffen has claimed that it was commissioned by Guidobaldo II della Rovere for his own marriage to Giulia Varano, and that it was intended as an instructional panel to would teach the bride how to comport herself in sexual relations with her new husband.¹⁶ Accompanying analysis suggests that the maids visible at the background, rummaging through a *cassone*, have not been charged with the task

¹⁶ See Goffen, *Sex, Space, and Social History in Titian's Venus of Urbino*.

of clothing the resplendently nude Venus, but with returning her garments to their place of storage.

The profusion of these erotically stimulating and idealized paintings of women extended throughout the territory of the Venetian empire. Lorenzo Lotto's highly symbolic *Venus and Cupid* is another variation on this theme and has been characterized as a marriage painting. It likely served much the same function as the *Venus of Urbino*, and reflects the playful and joyful attitude toward female sexuality within marriage. The nude in this painting has been connected directly to a bride of the Venetian republic, since she wears a traditional Northern Italian headdress and veil. Here, Venus is a true amalgamation of her usual identity of embodiment of love a mirror for the brides for whom she was meant to serve as a protector and model.

Aside from *cassoni*, majolica is probably the product most associated with Renaissance weddings, through an enthusiastic modern interest in the collection of so-called *coppe amatorie* and *bella donna* dishes. These were as common choices for gifts from grooms to their brides. While, like Venus paintings, they may include classically derived idealized portrayals of their intended recipients, the bride is almost never compared to Venus or any other goddess. Instead, the codified, bust-length images of women painted on this type of majolica are often labeled with classicizing names that may reflect the given names of a particular Renaissance woman or may designate them as the symbolic double of a virtuous classical woman. Ancient Roman empresses were a frequent source of reference.

Here, as well, exists a desire to link the female subject to a classical model with the inclusion of contemporary clothing and accoutrements.

Majolica bears the greatest relationship to both ancient coins featuring female portraits, typically those of empresses, and contemporary Renaissance medals struck to exalt the beauty and virtue of wives. These medals were circulated within the intimate circle of Renaissance brides and the friends and associates of their groom, recalling the distribution of celebratory coins such as those struck upon the death of Faustina the Elder, a visible proclamation of her virtue and status as an exemplary wife.

These associations carried through to the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. They saw a rebirth when artists, artisans, and patrons searched for classical precedents through which to praise virtuous women and celebrate their entry into marriage and the duty of motherhood. Faustina the Elder's double identity as *concordia* would prove especially relevant to Renaissance successors who aimed to foster partnership and stability within their unions, as demonstrated through a 15th century Italian medal that interprets Faustina's image (FIG. 7). The obverse features a profile portrait bust of the empress modeled closely on her Roman identity, while the reverse features an exchange of emotional and physical affection between Faustina and her husband. Scholars Watson and Bergmann emphasize that while the iconographical elements of the medal are familiar and clear in meaning and precedent, the relaxed and intimate quality of the couples'

pose is an altogether modern sentiment.¹⁷ I see a wider application of Roman visual tropes to depictions of Renaissance wives, primarily through the classically derivative *bella donna* plates.

Bergmann also mentions the appropriation of Faustina the Elder's name as a guarantee of character as if it were an explanatory attribute in and of itself. Renaissance scholars likely found the most prominent reference to her character in Machiavelli's treatise on various dynasties in which he crowned Antoninus Pius as one of the five "good emperors."¹⁸ Likewise, Leon Battista Alberti, in his tract on familial structure and maintenance, advocates for the bestowing of illustrious classical names on children so that they might grow up with the weight of the accomplishments of their predecessor and endeavor to match or surpass them.¹⁹ Bergmann highlights the illustration of this practice in their inclusion of a 16th century majolica dish that is often identified, like other *bella donna* dishes, as a gift to the bride on the occasion of her engagement or wedding (FIG. 8). It would later be prominently displayed in her home as a touchstone for the development and maintenance of her wifely virtue. The legend that unfolds behind the demurely lowered head of Faustina the Elder's modern counterpart

¹⁷ Ibid., 13.

¹⁸ Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livy*, Book I, Chapter 10.

¹⁹ Alberti uses the example of Alexander the Great: "Alessandro macedonio, el cui nome già era apresso tutte le nazioni celebratissimo...chiamato a sè un suo macedonio giovanetto a cui era simil nome Alessandro: "E tu, Alessandro,' dice per incenderlo a meritare laude, 'a te sta portare in te virtù pari al nome, quale hai, quanto puoi vedere, non vulgare.' E certo io non dubito ne' buoni ingegni uno leggiadrissimo nome sia non minimo stimolo a fare che desiderino aguagliarsi come al nome, così ancora alla virtù." Alberti, *Libri della Famigli*, 143.

reads “FAUSTINA PULITA E BELLA” recalling the appellations applied to the Empress in her own lifetime and in the memorial works of her husband.

The images of Faustina the Elder analyzed by Watson and Bergmann, designed to form a concrete association between their owner/wearer and the praiseworthy character of Faustina the Elder, stand as clear parallels to the pendant of the empress which Faustina Cassotti, her Renaissance namesake, wears in Lorenzo Lotto’s double marriage portrait of 1523.²⁰ Although Faustina the Elder’s life as a feminine exemplar is a long one, her appearances are much more sparse than those of easy and outwardly pious models like Lucretia. It is only with the dawn of the sixteenth century that patrons begin to consider alternative classical models for display in the domestic sphere.²¹

²⁰ Faustina the Elder’s identity as a “good empress” was preserved in large part through the adaptation of her likeness for objects intended for feminine consumption and display. Watson and Bergmann mention a pair of pendants, separated in their creation and use by perhaps a century, that are intended to signify a parallel between Faustina the Elder and their wearers. The first is a three-inch bust which they argue, based on its codified “Faustina” hairstyle, may be either a small devotional object meant for a domestic shrine or a wearable depiction that may have been added to a necklace. Since it postdates Faustina the Elder’s lifetime, they also suggest that it may be a sculptural likeness not of the empress herself but of a Roman patrician woman who has chosen to emulate Faustina the Elder through the adaptation of her particular coiffure, one of the most distinctive elements of any regulated official image of the imperial consort.²⁰

The second pendant most probably dates from the period between 238 and 244, nearly a century and a half after the death of Faustina the Elder. It is part of a necklace composed of coin pendants that feature traditional profile busts of emperors and their consorts from a swath of time ranging from the reign of Hadrian to Gordian III, and in Watson and Bergmann’s estimations, Faustina the Elder’s image here was used to publically assert allegiance both to the Roman Empire and to the specific exemplary legacy of Faustina the Elder. They liken the wearing of this pendant, perhaps by a woman on fringes of Rome’s conquered land, to examples of Roman citizens in Egypt who were buried with marks of Faustina’s influence like the wearing of her coiffure in funeral portraits or the presence of her familiar visage on other recovered coin necklaces.²⁰

²¹ See Grubb and Chojnacki for relevant socio-historical context.

The final Renaissance counterpart to Faustina mentioned by Watson and Bergmann is Isabella d'Este, who occupied an early modern equivalent of the public role occupied by Roman empresses. The Marchess of Mantua famously purchased a bust of Faustina the Elder from the artist Mantegna, whom she commissioned to paint the extensive pictorial program for her prized *studiolo*, an exchange arranged to help pay off Mantegna's outstanding debts. The ownership of such a bust on the part of the Marchesa is an expression of a personal and political affinity with the imperial figure, whose bust seems to have been installed in a prominent niche within the Palazzo Ducale. By the 16th century rule of Isabella's husband, Francesco Gonzaga, in Mantua, Faustina the Elder had served as an exemplar to a diverse population of women, from ordinary citizens of the Roman empire to one of the most powerful and visible women of the Northern Italian Renaissance.

It is possible to imagine that Isabella d'Este associated herself with own Faustina the Elder in her own state portraits.²² I discuss the parallels between Isabella's heavily idealized and "eternal" portraits, executed near the end of her life, and ancient female imperial image-making. I take a closer look at which of Faustina the Elder's qualities appealed to Isabella d'Este, as the sometimes sole ruler of a major Northern Italian state. I also examine how Isabella's adopted identity as a Renaissance empress influenced her self-presentation portraits, and how it was also tied to her connection with Venus.

²² Ibid., 18.

Much sixteenth century production featuring the portrayal of the empress-referencing artisan goods and celebratory objects was centered in North Central and Northern Italy, concentrated in cities like Faenza and Bologna in the present Emilia-Romagna region and Castel Durante and Urbino in the Marches. Majolica production ranged from *albarelli*, or pharmacy jars, to decorative tiles and plates and other dinner ware glazed with elaborate *istoriato* designs which referred to classical motifs and themes. A body of scholarship has branded these products as wares intended to be used as wedding gifts, presented to the bride by her husband-to-be.²³ There has been some recent discussion in regards to whether *bella donna* plates may have also been displayed in the couple's household after the initial celebration of the wedding, as extrapolated from the discovery of holes drilled into the tops of the objects.²⁴

Bella donna plates are so-called because they uniformly feature a central medallion with a profile view of a single female subject, usually depicted from the bust up and dressed in contemporary Renaissance garb. This formal configuration resembles the codified format of ancient Roman portrait coins. A *bella donna* plate that unites many of their common elements is a large dish featuring a profile view labeled "Orsella" created c. 1500-10 (FIG. 9).²⁵ The nomination of a specific

²³ See Syson, Luke and Dora Thornton. *Objects of Virtue: Art in Renaissance Italy*. and Watson, Wendy M. *Italian Renaissance Majolica from the William A. Clark Collection; Italian Renaissance Ceramics*.

²⁴ See Syson and Thornton.

female figure is nearly universal across the production of this majolica type, and this inclusion of names has been discussed both as the assignation of a real Renaissance identity and as a reference to exemplary female figures, especially those with origins in the classical world.

The “Orsella” plate features several other elements that celebrate a marital match. The medallion at the top of the plate, above the one that includes Orsella’s profile, is a monogram that unites a large “M” with an “E”. At the immediate left and right of the central medallion, painted on the plate’s outer rim, are two depictions of male figures in profile, one wearing a Renaissance cap and doublet, the other dressed in classicized armor. On the lower rim is a medallion containing a landscape surrounding an image of a heart pierced through with an arrow, a common symbol for the accurate strike of Eros. Watson, in her discussion of the plate, suggests that the central female figure’s dress refers to classical precedents, as she wears a length of draped fabric gathered and fastened with a *fibula* over her contemporary Renaissance *camicia*.²⁶

The most prominent scholarly debate surrounding *bella donna* plates is whether they were meant to depict the individual, specific women for whom they were intended, or if they were akin to Venus paintings in conflating minor idiosyncratic elements into an overall broadly idealized manifestation of the female form. *Bella donna* dishes were often labeled with specific names

²⁵ See Watson, 132 and cat. 56.

²⁶ See Watson, 134.

accompanied by laudatory appellations, most commonly “bella”, “pura”, or “divina”, a verbal definition of character with firm origins in the inscriptions lavished on Roman empresses via their representations on coins and medals. Ajmar and Thornton, in their essay on *bella donna* dishes, comment on the formal relationship between contemporary portrait medals, like those of Maddalena di Mantua, the wife of Giovanni Sforza, and classicizing depictions of contemporary women on majolica that make use of profile and the aforementioned inscriptions *alla antica*.²⁷

The presence of a what appears to be an ornamental reproduction of such a coin featuring the likeness of Faustina the Elder around the neck of Faustina Cassotti in her double marriage portrait seems to confirm the longevity of this type of visual model and highlight the continued importance of the empress as a virtuous exemplar into the Renaissance. The aforementioned example of a majolica dish portraying Faustina the Elder (FIG. 8) features a Faustina that is dressed in contemporary clothing, and her flowing hairstyle is similar to the one worn by Isabella d’Este in her portrait medal now in the Kunsthistorisches museum. These loose, waved coiffures resemble nothing so much as the classicizing hairstyles of Botticelli’s nymphs that is so often discussed in Aby Warburg’s seminal writings on their frequent appearances within Renaissance culture, and in any case were intended to recall the pleasing feminine coiffures of antiquity. This dish is now in the collection of the National Gallery of Art in

²⁷ Ibid. 147-8.

Washington, D.C., and is believed to have been made in Deruta, a city in Umbria. The remainder of the plate's decoration consists of a circular border of two twin cornucopias overflowing with fruits and leaves and arabesque floral scrollwork. There are two scroll-shaped labels nestled amongst the floral border of the plate's rim, sitting opposite one another. They seem to read "Timor" and "Domin," thus, presumably, "timor dominum," or fear of God.

This attention to the concept of consorts and the mutual pairing of male and female carried over, full-circle, to majolica production, as well, as evidenced by two majolica dish pairs included in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2008 "Art and Love in Renaissance Italy" exhibition. The first, originating from Castel Durante or Urbino and dated 1524, recycle many of the visual tropes already evident in the Faustina and Orsella plates. The female half of this set depicts a woman in the usual classical profile view, with her hair braided away from her face in the familiar "nymph" coiffure. This woman, designated as "Silvia" by the banner that unfurls behind her head, is dressed in fairly simple contemporary garb, but the apparently fluttering fabric woven into her hair suggests a further tie with classical feminine visual attributes. The continuation of the banner to the right of Silvia's bust designates her as "DIVA," the primary adjective attached to empresses when their image appeared on celebratory portrait coins. Interestingly, what is presumably her husband's majolica double is accompanied only by a similar inscription that bears his name, "Lutio."

As evidenced by the preceding examination of just a few particular objects associated with Italian nuptial culture of the Renaissance, brides were inundated with secularized historical and mythological models in addition to the usual models of female saints. Such emphasis on pagan exemplars of the perfect wife may have seemed more appropriate touchstones in an environment like the North of Italy in the first half of the 16th century, where marital alliances were beginning to be valued on a personal as well as a political level.²⁸

Although we do not know who owned the aforementioned majolica plates and personal objects like girdles, there are known, particular feminine identities that can help us understand how exemplars fit into the lives of North Italian wives. The following two chapters are case studies: the first of Isabella d'Este, a prominent and public woman who at times practiced sole rule in the North Italian city-state of Mantua, and the second of Faustina Cassotti, a woman of the bourgeois class of the Northern Italian city of Bergamo, of whom we know relatively little.

²⁸ See Grubb and Chojnacki.

**THE RENAISSANCE OF THE EMPRESS: ISABELLA D'ESTE AND
"IMPERIAL" IMAGE-MAKING**

As a woman reared at the court of Ferrara and later installed as the female head of the city-state of Mantua, Isabella d'Este was confronted with an immense variety of symbolic female counterparts. She would have been exposed to a wide survey of contemporary and classical literature, ranging from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, written over the course of her lifetime for Cardinal Ippolito d'Este, to the Latin works she took personal pleasure in reading. After her marriage to Francesco Gonzaga, duke of Mantua, she exhibited a voracious appetite for the personal possession of antiquities and styled herself as the female equivalent of learned and erudite leaders like Federico da Montefeltro, the ruler of Urbino, who displayed their education through the physical presence of a *studiolo* in their carefully appointed homes.

Isabella d'Este constructed her public identity through the amassing of objects that were manifestations of Roman female imperial propaganda, and through utilizing their particular formal and iconographical qualities for her own portrayals. Her classicizing campaign includes an interpretation of Faustina the Elder's eternal image, originating from commemorative Roman coins, and an affinity with both Venus, a deity traditionally associated with the empress, and Minerva. Isabella's appropriation of ancient Roman-inspired ideals as the fundamental aspects of her manufactured identity as Marchesa of Mantua

culminate in her late portraits by Titian and Giulio Romano, which replicate the idealized, eternal, and unchangeable ancient images of the empress.

She accumulated an impressive and expansive personal collection of authentic Roman imperial objects, including coins, cameos, and marble busts, all of which had helped to disseminate the eternal public image of the empress. Isabella was one of the most visible and most lauded female figures in the North of Italy during the first half of the sixteenth century, the period in which Marsilio and Faustina Cassotti married and built their household with the help of Zanin, their family's patriarch. As such, she would have served as a contemporary female exemplar through which classical models like Venus and the empress may have been reflected and filtered. She was also a reference point in her own right for fashionable and elegant female accoutrements, as exemplified by her carefully cultivated appearance and the attention to clothing and coiffure in her iconic portraits.

Portraiture, in its many possible Renaissance forms, was one of the most important vehicles for Isabella's assertion of her role as a full and participatory consort of her husband, Francesco Gonzaga. Married at the age of sixteen and transplanted from the prosperous court of Ferrara to the equally prominent court of Mantua, she was confronted with the immediate assumption of an extremely visible role within the court structure. Isabella owed the same wifely duties to her husband as did Faustina Cassotti and every other sixteenth century North Italian

bride, but her spousehood was destined to play itself out before the eyes of her citizens.

Isabella's activity as a patron is most frequently discussed through the lens of her largest and, for a woman of her times, most anomalous, commission, the suite of rooms in Mantua's Palazzo Ducale which are often broadly referenced as her *studiolo*. The creation of private *studioli* within Italian residential complexes was a phenomenon characteristic of the peninsula's array of autonomous city-states. It was, by definition and nature, a space built expressively for the contemplative repose of its patron, with its functions tied inextricably to the intellectual activities that were the mark of an elite male citizen. Under normal circumstances, *studioli* were intended as some of the most private rooms of the patron's residence.

Bedrooms were sometimes utilized as semi-public meeting spaces for guests and were at the very least certainly considered rooms that could function as an arena for social interaction, and which reflected the tastes and concerns of the people who used them as one of their own primary spaces. While *studioli* were tailored to the specifications of patrons, their owners seemed to have viewed them as a hideaway of sorts, in which they were free to pursue their personal scholarship without fear of interruption. The walls were usually decorated with motifs that complemented the collections of books and instruments contained in these erudite enclosures, in some cases, such as that of Federico da Montefeltro's *studiolo* in Urbino, executed entirely through the painstaking method of *intarsia*.

Isabella's brother, Alfonso, who succeeded his father Ercole I d'Este as Duke of Ferrara, also commissioned a *studiolo* at his court. His *camerino*, as it is more commonly called, was actually constructed, having been begun in 1511 and not completed until 1529, to house his collection of paintings with "historical" subject matter. The first painting meant for this breed of personal gallery would turn out to be Bellini's last completed work, *The Feast of the Gods*. The majority of the remaining commissions fell to Titian, considered the successor to his master Bellini. This output was marked by a trilogy of pendant paintings on the theme of love: *The Worship of Venus*, the *Bacchanal of the Andrians*, and *Bacchus and Ariadne*. The program envisioned and brought to fruition between Alfonso d'Este and his chosen artists represents a taste for learned, mythological subjects that would have been familiar to an educated Northern Italian elite audience, but would have inspired introspection and pleasing and fortifying recollection and mental extrapolation.

Studioli had come into being primarily as receptacles for the books that helped Renaissance men to develop their knowledge of the classical world through a course of intellectual self improvement. Some, such as Alfonso's *camerino*, shifted their purpose to function as "library" of images that helped their intended viewer understand the relationship between himself and the ancient issues of philosophy and allegory that were painted on or affixed to the walls around him. Female access to both the texts and images associated with *studioli* was not necessarily problematic, but the *studiolo* was without a doubt a

traditionally male space. Women were considered by and large to be incapable of the serious and strenuous study that was the object of time spent alone in these *gabinetti*, but were usually afforded the opportunity to read light literary constructions in their scant leisure time, as long as their pursuits were unobtrusive.²⁹

Isabella d'Este's presence at the Mantuan court, where she sometimes effectively ruled in her husband's stead, was definitely not a quiet and shrinking one. Isabella was an architect of the character of the Palazzo Ducale. She began formulating her plans for her own *studiolo* in the summer of 1491, only one year after her marriage to twenty-five year old Federico Gonzaga. Isabella had already been granted ownership of a suite of rooms in the ducal palace, including her bedroom, a chapel, an already existing study, and the Camera delle Armi, a room used for guests and receptions. Isabella was also afforded a personal bathroom and a library cabinet. The first projects related to her *studiolo* were comparatively simple affairs when considered alongside the chamber eventually decorated by Mantegna and his students, with ornamentation consisting primarily of Isabella's heraldry and other familial devices, as well as symbols of learning and knowledge.³⁰

²⁹ Stephen Campbell in fact remarks that women were associated with qualities like *voluptas*, *curiositas*, and *otium*, "risks" that were tantamount to "distraction, idleness, and preoccupation with material comfort." Most women, then, were certainly expected to abstain from the sort of reading in which Isabella d'Este was interested, which required preexisting knowledge of classical languages and the mental fortitude necessary to effectively interpret texts. See Campbell, 59-60.

³⁰ See *Ibid.*, 61-2.

Mantegna's mythological cycle was installed in 1497, and the period stretching from this year until 1506 was a time of intense attention to the ancient world and its symbolic offerings for Isabella. It was during these years that she secured the ownership of Mantegna's two contributions to the wall decorations of her *studiolo*, the *Mars and Venus* and *Pallas*, a companion piece by Perugino, and, to name two highlights, a Cupid supposedly by the hand of Praxiteles, and a bust of Faustina the Elder given to her by the aforementioned Mantegna in exchange for her aid in paying off his debts.³¹ The finished product into which Isabella's private space evolved was that of a receptacle for her intellectual interests, especially as they pertained to the classical tradition. She had clearly reared herself on the pleasure of accumulating knowledge about the cultural heritage of the Italian peninsula, and now planned to surround herself with reminders of both the ancient and medieval origins of her lineage and her function within her contemporary society.

Both mythological and imperial imagery are hallmarks of the art which Isabella collected and patronized during her years at the Mantuan court. Isabella was known for possessing a voracious passion for remnants of Italy's classical

³¹ See Ibid, 63-4. Campbell also mentions some of the literary works Isabella ordered for her *studiolo*. She seems to have had a taste for epic and chivalric poetry in the vein of *Orlando Furioso*, the masterpiece composed at her home court in Ferrara. Campbell quotes a letter Isabella wrote to a Venetian bookseller requesting volumes "in prose and in verse, which contain battles, histories, and fables, both ancient and modern, especially about the paladins of France." She furthermore participated in an "epistolary debate with Galeazzo di San Severino regarding the respective merits of the paladins Rinaldo and Orlando," the two principal knights of the tales recounted in the trilogy of Italian works that took up the story of Charlemagne's bravest crusaders against Saracen forces. Campbell further notes that Isabella was a committed and proficient student of Latin, and that she had great interest in the *Aeneid*.

past, and her *studiolo* was decorated with a series of elaborate compositions based on allegorical portrayals of the Greco-Roman gods.³² Isabella d'Este's domestic and public identity was informed and reinforced by ancient precedents and models. Mars and Venus appear in Isabella's *studiolo*, echoes of the mythological guises favored by Roman imperial couples to which she was exposed through Latin texts, and, especially, through the visual culture of ancient Rome. In addition to texts and sculpture, both ancient and contemporary, she was also interested in obtaining ancient medals, building a collection in which classical works and their modern counterparts coexisted in artistic and iconographical harmony.³³

The most famous of the decorations of Isabella's *studiolo* is the so-called *Parnassus* (FIG. 10), a visual compendium of divine relationships and correspondences. Mars and Venus, their arms intertwined, are depicted elevated above a scene of celebration and artistic fruition, accompanied by Cupid. A makeshift couch similar to the temporary cushioning and dividers exhibited in Lotto's *Venus and Cupid* is visible just behind the couple. Mars is fully dressed in his armor and helmet, and Venus is resplendent in unconcealed nudity. In this portrayal, Mars and Venus seem to be equals in their respective powers.

Completed after the Mars and Venus, Mantegna's depiction of another major feminine divinity of the Greco-Roman pantheon, Pallas (FIG. 11), is a

³² See Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros*.

³³ *Ibid.*, 63-4.

scene of her triumph over a confusion of other allegorical figures that have proved difficult to interpret. Pallas, or Minerva, can be considered in the simplest terms possible as an anthropomorphized expression of the triumph of learning, and especially of philosophy. Her strongest associations are with wisdom and with the city of Athens, of which she is the patron, and which was considered in the Renaissance to have stood at the pinnacle of classical civilization, the symbol of a golden age that many Renaissance courts aspired to reproduce and elaborate upon in their own historical reality. Like Venus, she had no father, but the story of her birth is considerably less romanticized and adaptable for visual interpretations than that of her sister goddess. Pallas, despite her gender, often manifests as an essentially masculinized deity.

She emerged fully formed from the head of her father, Jupiter, and is one of the three resolutely virgin goddesses. Furthermore, she dresses in clothing that was utterly unacceptable for female citizens of ancient Greece and Rome, wearing a cuirass, her magical aegis, over her long *chiton*, and, in her Renaissance iterations, the helmet of a Roman centurion. It is essential that we not ignore her role as the goddess of war, considered a logical, ordered foil to Mars' bloodlust and violent desire for conquest. When viewed in these terms, Pallas, too, takes on a mediating function that tempers the passions of Mars, which could often be overzealous and damaging. She is capable of maintaining Mars' dominion in concert with him in a way that is tied to the desire for intellectual clarity. The suggestion of successful implementation of careful plans and the imposition of

order on the part of Pallas (and Isabella) would have rung true for a society that developed in an environment like Italy of the sixteenth century. Tracts on every subject, from rule to war and the workings of the domestic sphere, met with incredible success and eager application.

Perhaps Isabella sought to strike a balance between the two essential halves of her identity as a female ruler through the adaptation of two mythological guises that addressed the qualities that one another lacked. Venus, despite the duality of her personality as expressed through the Platonic and Neo-Platonic idea of the “Celestial Venus” and the “Terrestrial Venus”, could easily devolve into voluptuousness. That quality was perhaps desired in other contexts in which she appeared, like the “bedchamber pictures” by Titian and others, but certainly was not appropriate for a space dedicated to sober and lofty, purely intellectual pursuits. It is clear from the contemporary source quoted by Stephen S. Campbell that the presence of Venus in Isabella’s *studiolo* could be all too easily misunderstood, especially when readings of Parnassus were not executed at a properly erudite and philosophically informed level. Pallas can be interpreted as an addendum to the centrality of Venus and Mars to Mantegna’s Parnassus, addressing potential problems with the unchecked rule of the two deities. In this second work intended for Isabella’s *studiolo*, Pallas literally chases various figures associated with vice out of a secluded space represented by high hedges that open in intervals through a series of arches.

It is impossible to determine what lies beyond them, but Pallas and her attendants occupy a landscape that is open but for an extension of open arching boxwood hedges that separate the scene in the foreground from a wide expanse of fields, hills, and a winding river in the background. The most perplexing occupant of the scene is a woman that bears considerable resemblance to Mantegna's *Parnassus Venus*, adorned with the same jeweled arm band and possessed of the same fair hair. She stands just to the right of center of the composition, and appears to lift her dark green drapery over her head to reveal her face to the two heavily draped female figures who rush towards the opposite end of the picture plane. She also wears a bow strapped to her back, an intriguing detail in the absence of a Cupid figure amongst a swarm of generalized *putti*.

Both these two figures and Pallas gesture towards the three cardinal virtues, Fortitude, Temperance, and Justice, at the upper right of the composition. It is unlikely that this Venereal figure can be associated with Pallas' train, but her position in relationship to the other figures is so ambiguous that her assignation to a particular faction appears impossible. If she is meant to be Venus, then perhaps her centrality defines her role in the interaction between mythological beings Mantegna depicts here. Pallas acts as a second, differently allied mediator, but Venus, the mother of civilization on the Italian peninsula, must maintain her eminent position.

Isabella also cultivated a relationship to a variety other, ancillary female deities and virtues in the very same way that ancient Roman empresses asserted

their exemplary identities. Isabella oversaw the production of classically imitative bronze portrait medals that closely mimicked the composition and symbolic aims of Roman coins, meant as positive propaganda for imperial women and their ruling husbands (see FIG. 12) The obverse of the medal displays a profile view of the Marchesa reminiscent of imperial couples on coins. Her image is clearly labeled as representing "ISABELLA ESTEN MARCH MAN," communicating her full title and identity as a Marchesa of Mantua of Ferrarese origin, a product of the illustrious Este line in her own right. Her hair is pulled into an elegant, loose coiffure at the nape of her neck, a style again reminiscent of Renaissance painters like Botticelli's conception of ancient hairstyles.

The reverse of the coin is even more significant to a discussion of Isabella's employment of mythological comparisons. This side features a full-length female figure in classical drapery, winged and trampling a snake, a spear poised at the ready in her right hand. Above her floats the symbol for Sagittarius, Isabella d'Este's own astrological sign. The comparison between Isabella's portrait image and the figure on the reverse is made explicit already by its ancient precedents, in which empresses were clearly intended to be read in the guise of the female exemplars that visually paralleled their portrait images. The British Museums identifies this female figure as a personification of peace, making it another reference to Isabella's vital role of maintainer of order and as a paragon of good rule in her husband's frequent absences. Furthermore, the Latin legend on this side of the medal reads "on account of high merit," stating Isabella's

exceptional character through words as well as through allegorical images heavily steeped in classical precedents. Isabella would have been quite familiar with these strategies of image building, as she was also an enthusiastic collector of Roman coins, probably some of the most popular and readily accessible antiquities from the point of view of Renaissance collectors.

It is clear from other examples, among which lies the gold, bejeweled medal by Gian Cristoforo Romano now in Vienna (FIG. 13) , that Isabella also employed the Roman custom of creating a codified, regular portrait image to be stamped on all output of coins or medals. She appears again and again wearing her “nymph” coiffure, with a slightly altered decorative chain around her neck and modern or classicized bodice. This medal, likewise, portrays her alternately as Peace, one of the defining elements of an effectively functioning domestic society, even in the face of military conflicts abroad. This certainty would have been especially valuable to the citizens of Mantua, who would have fully understood the real possibility of invasion, conquest, and disorder in the tense political atmosphere nurtured by competitive and often bellicose Italian city-states. Through public definitions of her role within the ruling structure of the Mantuan state, Isabella built up important indications of her suitability for involvement in the maintenance of government. Her efforts no doubt proved beneficial when, in 1509, five years after the production of the Peace portrait medal. Francesco Gonzaga became a prisoner of war in Venice and would not return to his city of rule until 1512.

Gian Cristoforo Romano also executed the portal decorations for Isabella's grotto, including interpretations of virtues, Muses, and goddesses expressed in the form of female personifications that are quite similar to those common to ancient coins and imitative Renaissance medals. Minerva makes a second appearance in the roundels decorating the pathway from Isabella's suite of rooms referred to as the grotto to the *studiolo* proper (FIG. 14) There are no explicit hints of her identity as the goddesses of wisdom. Instead, she is surrounded by attributes connected to her function as a civic goddess concerned with military conflict. Although she is dressed simply in a *chiton*, she wears her helmet, and her full set of armor, markedly reminiscent of Mars' traditional garb, is arranged at the ready over what appears to be a tree, to the left of the goddess. She props up her aegis, in the form of a shield featuring the captured image of Medusa's face, in her left hand. The scene unfolds just outside the walled fortifications of a city, suggesting that Minerva has been posted as a sentinel charged with the protection of the citizens on the other side of the barrier.

Isabella's affinity for the contemplation and adaptation of the image-making of Roman empresses is especially apparent in her collection of a bust of Faustina the Elder. Isabella obtained this bust from Mantegna when he was desperately in need of funds to support himself and his property. Although he was extremely reluctant to part with what was one of his prized possessions, he was also seemingly willing to relinquish his empress to what he believed was an

appropriate home.³⁴ A bust still installed at the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua is believed to be the one that changed hands between Mantegna and Isabella, but the attribution is not certain.

Isabella's accumulation of visual recollections of the figure of the Roman empress is also manifest in her possession of cameos, a collection that links her taste to the possible set of classicizing personable items owned by women like Faustina Cassotti, who may have been aware of the Marchesa's interest in classical women. Although Isabella certainly maintained an image of independent strength, the insertion of herself into a historical analogy that designated her as a successor to ancient imperial consorts necessitated the presence of a male partner. One version of the famed "Gonzaga Cameo" type (FIG. 15) was a part of the illustrious Mantuan Ducal couple's holdings of antiquities, furthering their broad-ranging taste for sophisticated, eloquent expressions of the arts of the classical world. There has been much debate about whether the St. Petersburg cameo illustrated here, or a similar object at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, can be explicitly matched with the one collected by the Gonzagas.

Still, it was said to have been an object of inspiration for several artistic greats even after Isabella and Francesco's lifetime, including Rubens. The date of the cameo, which is now believed to originate from between 18 and 19 CE, as well as the couple depicted, has been heavily debated. The existence of the cameo in the Renaissance era is first recorded in an inventory of Isabella's possessions

³⁴ See Brown, "The Grota of Isabella d'Este," 156.

that dates from 1542, and since this survey was taken after her death in 1539, we can't be sure when or through what agents she acquired the piece. Isabella surely admired the cameo not only for its extraordinary craftsmanship and visceral beauty, but also for its appropriate subject matter, which, despite the specifics, could be adapted to echo her own position at the head of a state.

The cameo's composition is dominated by two heads in profile view, one male and one female. They have alternately been interpreted as divergent sets of Roman couples, or, quite frequently, as Alexander and Olympias.³⁵ The later designation would significantly alter the allegorical significance of the piece to Isabella and her place at the Mantuan court, as Alexander and Olympias were, of course, a mother and son pair. However, in this case, it may still have held a considerable relevance for her, as she served as regent for her son, Federico Gonzaga, who was nineteen years old at the time of his father's death in 1519. The image conveyed by the subjects of the cameo is one of stoic strength, a quality eloquently expressed through the crisp simplicity of the profile view and the fine incising into the shell.

The female bust, wearing a *chiton*, her hair styled in tight, regular curls, and crowned with the laurel leaf that was a potent symbol of eternal glory, is nearly totally obscured by the fore-grounded male figure. The dark layer of the shell has been utilized to describe his attributes, consisting of a helmet and a scaled aegis that have been viewed as specific to Alexander the Great. He also

³⁵ See Palazzo del Te. "Gonzaga Cameo History." Palazzo del Te. <http://www.cammeogonzaga.it/eng/Gonzaga-cameo-hermitage.asp> (accessed April 30, 2010)

wears a laurel leaf crown over his helmet, and his breastplate includes the images of two male deities. The overlapping of the two busts indicates that the cameo was clearly meant as a celebration of a union, one which has most frequently been interpreted as a powerful alliance between husband and wife.

Unsurprisingly, depictions of socially established and powerful Renaissance women like Isabella d'Este, even when they were born in their own right into prominent families, were dependent upon an unmistakable link to their husbands. The Estense line from which Isabella hailed was significantly more prosperous than the maintainers of the Mantuan court. Isabella herself had been raised in an environment bursting with artistic and literary production, much of it addressed to members of her extended family as simultaneous pleas for monetary support and requests for the bestowal of a greater status within the social network of their cities. Isabella d'Este grew to womanhood and to matronhood in concert with the slow and complex completion of what is considered one of the greatest literary epics of the Renaissance, the *Orlando Furioso*. Begun by the writer Ariosto in 1506, sixteen years after Isabella had left her home court of Ferrara at the age of sixteen to wed Francesco Gonzaga. The first version of the work was completed in 1516, although Ariosto would work constantly at the poem and would only produce a definitive published version in 1532, a mere seven years before Isabella's death at the age of sixty-five.

Despite Isabella's physical absence from the Ferrarese court where her brother, Cardinal Ippolito d'Este, now ruled, Ariosto wove Isabella's identity as

an essential component of the grandeur and longevity of the Estense line throughout his work. Aside from receiving laudatory mentions of her own character, in the form of prophecies concerning the future descendants of two of the poems protagonists, Isabella is most directly compared to a single female figure whom Ariosto defines as a forerunner of the female Estense character and the embodiment of the traits they would embody in their future as prominent participators in the crafting of North Italian Renaissance society. Ariosto fashions a tie between Isabella d'Este and her ancestor Bradamante, a female Christian knight who is the sister of Rinaldo, one of the bravest and most celebrated paladins of Charlemagne's troops.³⁶ She falls in love with a Saracen knight, who is actually descended from a Christian father, placing his religious and cultural identity in a state of flux that allows for easy conversion. He will, in fact, be baptized as a Christian following the long battle waged, mostly on the part of Bradamante, to secure his future with his beloved.

Although Bradamante is intended to serve as a definitive and illustrious point of origin for the entire D'Este clan, she can be read as a mirror for Isabella's own virtuous and laudatory actions as a woman with the interests of both her family of origin and that livelihood of her husband's city as her greatest priorities. Isabella served as a model for Bradamante even as Bradamante's extraordinary actions on behalf of her future husband served as inspiration for Isabella. It was essential that she exhibit continued strength in the face of physical separation

³⁶ See Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*.

from Francesco and the political complications of strife between Northern Italian city states that left her the sole custodian of Mantua's fortunes.

The Renaissance trope from which the idea of a character like Bradamante originates is not particular to Ariosto's imagination. She hails from a line of "virtuous" warrior women, or *guerriere*, whose characters balance fierceness in battle and a sense of honor in war to match any of the greatest *cavaliere* with extraordinary beauty and staunch chastity. Women warriors already had a long and established legacy by the Renaissance, manifest in classical mythology and history as strangely and conflictingly appealing yet untouchable women. The best examples of this type are the virgin goddesses of antiquity, especially Diana and Minerva. Their stories are shot through with the failed exploits of men who found their divine beauty and their intact womanhood irresistible and were punished harshly for their presumption and attempts at violation. So iron-clad was their virtue that no man was allowed to glimpse their nude form: Actaeon was transformed into a stag and slaughtered by his own dogs in retaliation when he spied on Diana bathing with her nymphs; Athena smote Teresias for his own glimpse of her nude form. Both Diana and Athena were considered to inhabit a liminal identity between masculine and feminine.

Diana was the twin sister and companion of Apollo, god of the Sun, the polar opposite to her function as goddess of the moon. She was a patroness of the hunt, an intrinsically male activity, and, like Athena, frequently outfitted herself in garb entirely inappropriate for the women of Greece and Rome, including short

tunics that allowed for greater physical freedom than the long *chitons* proscribed for respectable ancient women. Athena was yet more explicitly masculinized, as her conception bypassed the necessity for male/female intercourse and she recognized Zeus as her sole parent. She served as the patron of two markedly male spheres of Greek and Roman culture: the pursuit of philosophical knowledge and excellence in the practice of strategic and civilized war. As the Roman pantheon developed, intermingling indigenous deities with ones adapted from the fully formed ancestral Greek religion, Athena's functions were sometimes assigned to and made more specific by ancillary deities.

Bellona, for example, manifested as a personification of Roman war, a sort of companion to Ares and a visual encapsulation of Rome's strength and virtue. Even these abstracted laudatory traits, which survived to gain relevance in the literary culture that gave rise to Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, were displayed as desirable in the selection of a woman as a consort for an illustrious and ambitious man. The second of *Orlando Furioso*'s prominent female characters, Marfisa, is compared directly to Marfisa when Ruggiero encounters her in battle. Although the two are, in fact, brother and sister, they are unaware of their connection and nurture an intense and somewhat romantic admiration for one another's incredible prowess and skill in battle. Fittingly, Marfisa herself interprets Ruggiero as a double of Mars, alternately viewed as a feminine complement or a consort to Bellona. It is clear that "masculine" traits that marked the presence of virtues normally associated with males in classical literature, especially knowledge of

war and defense, were becoming desirable in a certain set of women intended for heroic men.

It is easy to imagine how Isabella d'Este's life story and the exploits of Bradamante as an errant *guerriera* may have intersected, considering the character of her union with Francesco Gonzaga. Bradamante faces a constant struggle for complete union with Ruggiero, and must personally rescue him from the clutches of the sorceress Alcina, who holds him in her magical thrall on an island meant to be inaccessible to seekers. She faces her task with incredible bravery and an unwavering resolve, eventually reclaiming her beloved. Isabella d'Este faced the real-world mirror image of this plight as she was forced to both seize command of Mantua's armies and maintain the Gonzaga rule of Mantua when Francesco became a prisoner of war in Venice in 1509.

Isabella seems to have accepted her role as a military consort early on in their courtship, as she is said to have admired her husband, who was not regarded as a handsome man, mostly for his bravery and reputation as one of the greatest modern knights of Italy.³⁷ Ariosto clearly renders the unifying qualities of the d'Este line, exalting the family's fortitude, power, and patronage of culture, through a scene in which Bradamante encounters the benign sorceress Melissa and is witness to the conjuring of the future issue of her union with the exalted Ruggiero.

³⁷ See Cartwright, 54.

Melissa begins with the revelation that Ruggiero is a descendant of Hector, the greatest of the Trojan warriors, and proclaims that their line will return Italy to the splendor of its first golden age, the height of the Roman Empire. Bradamante's character is obviously meant to recall the contradictory identity of classical *viragos*, including not only female mythological figures whose virtuous behavior seems more in line with male ideals, but also historical entities who straddled the line between assimilating themselves into a world of masculine designations and demonstrating themselves as undeniably and uniquely feminine. The classical and Renaissance era conception of the Amazon is perhaps the best example of this fascinating dichotomy. Having built a society entirely devoid of men, and often engaging the warriors of the Greek epic age in bloody and brutal battles, they nonetheless frequently appear as objects of desire and titillation for their opponents. The Athenian king Theseus wed the Amazonian queen Hippolyta, who boarded his ship to offer gifts in a non-combative welcoming of his presence. His seizure of Hippolyta as his bride, a display of sheer male will and superiority, however, both claimed male dominion over this previously impenetrable land of women and caused a war between the Athenian men and the Amazons. In a reversal of this scheme, Penthesilea, an Amazon who fought for Troy in the Trojan War, was mortally wounded by Achilles, who had fallen in love with her.

Although Achilles had glimpsed the existence of a true feminine equal in Penthesilea, who might have born his children and rendered him immortal in

more than name alone, he was unable to quell his blood-lust in battle. Amazons are women who act like men but look tantalizingly like women, often depicted as bearing their breasts and exposing their legs in a manner wholly impossible for women who obeyed the mores of classical or Renaissance society. They appeared, not infrequently, on that most quintessential of bridal objects, the *cassone*. Men who had just married, after all, were about to conquer a formerly proud and unassailable virginity. That such figures were so appealing speaks to a societal desire for women who could serve as beneficial foils while also offering the promise of a ready and fecund sexuality.

Minerva, who makes several appearances in the program of Isabella's *studiolo*, however, never became a wife, and never willingly participated in sexual intercourse. The sole story of her relations with male deities involves an attempted rape by Vulcan, the deformed and cuckolded husband of Venus, and culminates in his ejaculation onto Minerva's thigh. The semen, wiped away, instead impregnates the Earth goddesses Gaia. It seems contradictory that a figure like Isabella, for whom the production of heirs was an important facet of her societal role, would choose to cast herself both as the source of all healthy reproduction, Venus, and the sterile and virile Minerva. Minerva possesses no consort, and in fact often holds Mars in disdain, since his patronage of war can be viewed as nurturing widespread brutality and bloodshed. What are we to think of the concept of Isabella's self-portrayals that painted her character as virile and equivalent to that of a goddess who utterly defied gender norms and inhabited an

uncomfortable limbo between respectability and an inappropriate measure of masculine traits?

The question of whether a woman could even be “virtuous” in the manner in which a man could be was an ancient and well-debated question by Isabella’s time. The root of the word “virtue,” after all, is *vir*, the Latin word for man. Women’s only accessible virtue was often considered to be chastity, a jewel obsessively coveted and guarded. However, ancient heroines whose defining characteristic was chastity, such as Lucretia, were praised again and again for their virtuous actions. Rona Goffen takes up this issue with her paper on a Lorenzo Lotto painting originating from the time of Isabella’s reign in Mantua, one that has much in common with Isabella’s state portraits, including her most famous portrayal by Titian (FIG. 16).³⁸ Goffen argues that Lotto portrays this anonymous woman, who identifies herself as the namesake or double of Lucretia through the drawing of the classical heroine she prominently displays in her left hand (FIG. 17). According to Goffen, the subject adopts particularly masculine gestures that reinforce her steadfast commitment to virtue. She compares “Lucretia’s” posture to that of men in portraits, such as Titian’s portrayal of Francesco Maria della Rovere in armor.³⁹ She adopts the term *gagliardo*, a fixture of Renaissance manuals of court behavior, to describe the aggressively splayed

³⁸ See Goffen, *Lotto’s Lucretia*.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 747.

limbs and strong stances of these men, and places it at polar opposites with *leggiadria*, the designation for soft, gradual, feminine movements.

Decisive, emphatic physical movements, then, are not appropriate for proper Renaissance women. They are meant to embody quiet grace and exhibit an incredible sense of serenity, displayed expertly through portrayals akin to Lotto's Venus. The grip Lotto's Lucretia has on her own attribute, the drawing of the ancient Lucretia, is anything but tentative. The force of her hand visibly creases and distorts the paper, while she gestures decisively to the image with her right hand. If this clean, forceful gestural language is foreign to female portraiture, as Goffen claims, and demure femininity is the norm, then where do painted images of Isabella d'Este stand on this spectrum, and what does this designation indicate about her characterization as a female leader? Scholars have written much on the preferred mode of feminine representation in early Renaissance portraiture and the prevalence of compositions that turned the subject away from the viewer. Patricia Simons has recently argued that general claims about the choice of depicting women in profile, especially that the pose was stylistically more desirable or meant as a reference to coin portraiture, cannot be successfully applied to the extant fifteenth-century examples.⁴⁰

Instead, the decision to portray a woman in profile becomes a symptom of the societal prerogative that women should avert their gaze as a mark of their femininity and that their beauty should be freely accessible to male viewers of

⁴⁰ See Simons, "Women In Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture."

their form. Simons even suggests that the frames to which female portraits were restricted were a direct extension of the literal confines to which Renaissance women were subjected, glimpsed only briefly at an open window aside from their presence at monumental social occasions like their own weddings.⁴¹ Portraits would have functioned as a permanent, perfected representation of the subject, and one which would always and continuously be open to scrutiny, based both on beauty and stature and on character as it was manifest in this representational image.

The passage of time and a shift in location partially explains why frontal depictions of women in portraiture were more numerous in the North of Italy and why this type of portrayal extended even to the class of mercantile patrons, including families like the Cassotti. Grubb and Chojnacki, scholars that closely examine the dominant social currents of Northern Italy through public textual sources, observe a societal conception of wives that appears to differ considerably from that of central Italy and especially Tuscany. Women were often wealthy in their own right and considered valuable for more than their surface qualities, via both their tangible assets and their capabilities for supporting the decisions and ambitions of their husbands. Faustina Cassotti, for example, faces outwards in the same manner as does her husband Marsilio, designating them both as full and inextricable members of the familial structure. Frontal views also allowed for a more effective display of material wealth as presented through luxuriant fabrics

⁴¹ Ibid., 7-9.

and jewelry, an important element in constructing permanent visual identities of men and women of largely mercantile families. Faustina Cassotti's identity is clearly inextricable from that of her husband and the identity of the Cassotti family as a larger societal entity, clearly expressed through her literal yoking to Marsilio through the bonds of marriage.

Isabella d'Este's representational images end with the painted portraits she commissioned late in her life. The most well-known is Titian's work presumed to be an image of the Marchesa (FIG. 16), completed around 1534, when Isabella was sixty years old. Paradoxically, the image Titian renders is obviously not one of a woman who was advanced in age and would in fact die within the next four years. Instead, he presents Isabella as a still fresh-faced young woman who displays herself proudly at the height of fashion, her luminous white skin completely unblemished, her cheeks rosy, and her fair curls springy. As is common to patrician and elite Renaissance portraits, Isabella's prestige is manifested through her elaborate and cultivated dress, including an ermine stole and heavily embroidered green silk sleeves. Her coiffure is topped with an elaborate type of *scuffia*, a popular head-covering that also makes a prominent appearance in Lorenzo Lotto's double portrait of Marsilio and Faustina Cassotti. A profusion of rich and elaborate worked fabrics, valuable in their own right, was established as a clear signal of wealth and social prestige. Faustina Cassotti is likely meant to emulate the "fashion plates" of her time, including Isabella d'Este, dressed for eternity in her finest garments. Isabella seems here to have enlisted

Titian's expertise in the creation of an eternal projection of her image, one which was obviously quite heavily idealized. Isabella has opted for the use of a fiction in having her countenance painted as it might have appeared a full thirty years earlier. In this, she is revitalizing a system used to preserve the perfect, symbolic countenances manufactured for ancient Roman empresses, ensuring that she would be remembered as a physically and behaviorally perfect example of womanhood.

Isabella would have been easily capable of affording the exotic and expensive custom-made fabrics that functioned as manifestations of status, and, to some extent, of an elevated cultural knowledge and in integration of tasteful sensibilities into their personal appearance. Although her physical appearance is one that reaches back into her past, she seems here to have adopted the material accoutrements of the contemporary class of young women. Isabella was always considered something of a fashion plate, and her sartorial choices were observed with interest. One of her bolder choices, if the garment was real and not an elaborate, fictive embodiment of Isabella's strong and intriguing choices, is the open-work outer garment of braided knot designs she wears in a second presumed portrait, this one painted by Giulio Romano and dating from 1531 (FIG. 18), when Isabella was already in her late fifties. She appears slightly more aged here, but certainly not in a manner that is anything approaching realistic. It seems that Isabella was most pleased when her images captured the essence of her public persona, representing her personality and position as shrewd, stable, and in touch

with the currents of the times. Just as Faustina the Elder dictated the toilette of elite Roman women with her trend-setting coiffure, Isabella d'Este's singular dress and fine personal objects likely inspired imitation in women like Faustina Cassotti, who wears a similar headdress in Lotto's double portrait (FIG. 1). Even Lotto's St. Catherine, the second half of the Cassotti nuptial patronage, is invested in the cultivation of a distinctive and highly refined sartorial appearance. As trivial as it may seem, fashion served as a highly visible link between Northern Italian wives and their exemplars, and especially between prominent contemporary iterations of the empress figure like Isabella d'Este and bourgeois women.

Isabella d'Este was required to present herself not only as a consort to Francesco Gonzaga, but also as an eminently capable, and perhaps virile, woman in her own right. At the time Titian's portrait was painted, Isabella had already labored to foster an artistic production at her court that maintained a decorous balance between acknowledging her fertility as the guarantor of the continuation of the Gonzaga line and, when required, as a fierce and illustrious warrior for her domain in times of peril. Titian's portrait contains idealization, traditional femininity, and unusual gestures of dominance in equal measure, effectively encapsulating Isabella's projected public character. Her portrayal here incorporates aspects of Northern Italian female portraiture of the sixteenth century that have been introduced elsewhere in this paper, most markedly the inclusion of specific and indicative fabrics and the essential use of gesture as a marker of

status and authority. Her portrait also functions as an idealized view of an individual, despite the fact that it lacks any direct reference to an alternate or twin historical or mythological identity.

Isabella had already asserted her character through the use of mythological and historical lenses, adopting Venus and both the generalized notion of the empress and the specific example of Faustina the Elder as facets of her public and courtly persona. The Titian portrait is specifically occupied with her personal virtues and authority, concerns which were not often relevant to Renaissance wives. In a careful and complete view of Isabella d'Este's manufactured associations with female exemplars, it is apparent that she recognized the efficacy of choosing a network of models that could be invoked in varied domestic and public capacities. Isabella's efforts in twinning herself with mythological and historical women ranged from Venus, the quintessential goddess of civic origins as well as the source of marital fertility, to the *guerriera*, a fearless woman thoroughly trained in war and strategy who mellowed into a protective and exemplary wife. Isabella cultivated a persona that was alternately feminized and masculinized, exploiting the full range of female characteristics expressed through classical models in order to portray herself as a balanced and committed ruler. Faustina Cassotti, instead, inhabited a cultural identity manufactured for her by her symbolic pairing with two historical female exemplars, her namesake Faustina the Elder and the deceptively traditional St. Catherine of Alexandria.

**THE NEW FAUSTINA: THE CASSOTTI FAMILY AND SECULAR
FEMALE EXEMPLARS IN BOURGEOIS PATRONAGE**

Included in the latter group of Lotto's works is his *Master Marsilio and His Wife* (FIG. 1), a small, oil-on-panel completed in 1523. The Cassotti couple, depicted in this work, is of the sort of comfortably bourgeois family that was likely to commission both public and private material displays of their prosperity.

⁴² The group of commissions that included the double portrait originated from the satisfied receipt of a religious work jointly funded by Zanin Cassotti, Marsilio's father, and his brother. Following his pleasure with one of Lotto's signature altar pieces executed for a family chapel in Bergamo's Santa Maria della Grazie, Zanin placed an order for a series of domestic paintings. Both Marsilio and his brother, Giovan Maria, retained their residence in this house in Via Pignolo, and Marsilio would eventually bring his bride to live with him there under the auspices of his father. Civic records and Lotto's receipts tell us that Zanin paid for five paintings in total by the hand of Lotto: two for his own apartment, one for Giovan Maria, and two, that is, the double portrait and a St. Catherine, to be hung in Marsilio's new nuptial quarters within his father's patriarchal *domus*.⁴³

Contemporary records also allow scholars to state with certainty that Marsilio was twenty years old at the time of his marriage, and that he was, in fact,

⁴² Bergamo was restored to the Venetian empire in 1515 after a period of changing hands between the French and Spanish. The stability in business restored by Venice's administration of the city promoted a period of increased artistic patronage. See Humfrey, *Lorenzo Lotto*. 43.

⁴³ See Colalucci, *Bergamo negli anni di Lotto: pittura, guerra, e società*.

the younger of the two Cassotti brothers.⁴⁴ While we have no such certain data concerning his bride Faustina's age, we do know that she hailed from the family of the Assonica, one which possessed considerably more social clout, and perhaps more money, than Marsilio's.⁴⁵ In this light, symbols of alliance between Faustina and Cassotti assume an attractiveness for Zanin, who must have been keen to display this advantageous union through visual boasts like the double portrait, which immortalizes the most securely binding moment of the Renaissance marriage ritual, the *anellamento* or placing of the ring symbolizing marital union and promise on the finger of the bride.

The second painting intended for Marsilio was a version of the mystic marriage of St. Catherine of Alexandria with the infant Christ (FIG.19), a popular devotional subject with clear parallels to both contemporary marriage culture and the establishment of religious paragons against which women were encouraged to measure themselves. This chapter explores the complementary exemplary functions exploited through the twinning of St. Catherine, a subject which carries strong connotations of self-restraint, poise, and strict, complete chastity, with the Empress Faustina the Elder, whose exemplary presence is implied by closely-rendered visual clues in the Cassotti double portrait. I then consider Lorenzo Lotto's *Venus and Cupid* as a theoretical thematic complement to these two

⁴⁴ Ibid., 144.

⁴⁵ See Brown, "The Bride's Jewelry: Lorenzo Lotto's Wedding Portrait of Marsilio and Faustina Cassotti."

works, defining the role of Venus within the structure of 16th century merchant-class North Italian wifhood. What expectations were patriarchs and husbands voicing for young Northern Renaissance brides when they pressed associations with both esteemed women of pagan and classical origin and exalted female saints, and what do these choices of visual subjects say about the interplay of civic and private reputation and the male relationship to feminine virtue?

Marsilio's father was a successful cloth merchant, and thus a purveyor of the sumptuous goods displayed with particular frequency within the marriage ritual. Little information regarding the family has survived aside from a record of the series paintings commissioned from Lotto by Marsilio's father.⁴⁶ Lotto's presentation of the newly secured union between Marsilio and Faustina is unusual in proposing alternative conventions for nuptial art and portraiture in sixteenth-century Italy, and its emphasis on forging a pictorial link between Faustina and her namesake may be influenced by Zanin's decision to buy into her status as a wealthy, sophisticated partner for his son. Here, established visions of wifely identity are discarded in favor of a symbolic system that equates the bride with classical exemplars. Diverging from traditionally expected cultural norms in which the male spouse was viewed as the unquestionably dominant half of the

⁴⁶ Locatelli, *Illustri Bergamaschi*, as quoted in Berenson, *Lorenzo Lotto*, 154, reproduces a bill written by Lotto to a Miser Zanin Casoto, that is, Zanin Cassotti, Marsilio's father, which contains the item, "El quadro di delli retrati, cioè miss. Marsilio et la sposa sua con quel Cupidinetto rispetto al contefar quelli habiti di seta seu ficti e collane...£30." This refers to the Cassotti double portrait and indicates a special emphasis on the inclusion of particular fabrics. Humfrey includes the total contents of the list of paintings executed for Zanin: several Madonnas, a *Pietà*, a *St. Jerome*, and several other portraits which did not survive. *Ibid.*, 53.

equation, Lotto presents a relationship that bares significant resemblance to the rethinking of Northern Italian marital bond explored by art historians and historical sociologists. Faustina's assumed identity feeds into this configuration of female identity within a socially and financially propitious union.

Venice's material prosperity and growing political stability impacted the personal and civic arrangements of its citizens and the citizens of neighboring North Italian centers. The practices of the Veneto and cities that functioned under the governmental machine of Venice, such as, eventually, Bergamo, stood in sharp contrast to the familiar figure cut by Florence's bombastic and highly politically charged marriage customs. While the vast majority of marriages in Renaissance Italy, including that of Marsilio and Faustina Cassotti, were brokered as alliances of suitably compatible families that nurtured upwardly mobile social tendencies, marriages in Northern Italy seem to have become increasingly companionate and emotionally committed, a phenomenon documented by scholars such as Stanley Grubb and James S. Grubb. Chojnacki, especially, underscores the prevalence of genuine affection and personal engagement with wives as evidenced in the common language of contemporary wills.⁴⁷

Faustina Cassotti, who shared a birth name with one of the most continually and unequivocally lauded of the Roman empresses, serves as a convenient container for the values ancient consorts embodied. The figure of Faustina the Elder, paragon of empresses, offered a reference that incorporated

⁴⁷ See Chojnacki.

each of the feminine qualities apparently valued by Northern Italian husbands and their families, from social graces and discretion to physical beauty and poise that implied that she also possessed the divine benefits associated with the various divine guises commonly assumed by the imperial consort.

Images of empresses like Faustina the Elder, however, were unequivocally public by nature. Empresses were exhibited to their public through the utilization of a highly codified and regulated image, imperially approved for wide consumption. Faustina the Elder's likeness, in the form of statues and coinage, appeared in Rome itself and in the far reaches of the empire, and although reproductions were many, there was very little variation. Faustina *became* her image; these imitations became useful icons for her ideal Roman womanhood. Can we call the profile views of Faustina the Elder and the remnants of her religious and domestic statuary portraits? What is a "portrait", and what were its intended functions in the realm of ancient Rome and in Renaissance Italy of centuries later? Was Lotto's Cassotti portrait meant for public consumption, primarily as a display of a recently obtained augmentation to the Cassotti family's social prestige, and if it wasn't, what purpose did it serve within the mostly closed domestic sphere of Zanin's typical patriarchal Renaissance Italy household?

Through the assignation of attributes, props, and gesture, Faustina Cassotti assumes the characteristics of her classical namesake, the Roman empress Faustina the Elder. Faustina Cassotti's imperial alter ego illuminates the larger theme of Italian Renaissance wives' association with the empress of Italy's

Roman past, an expansive comparison that extended to the objects of marital culture and emphasized the conception of wives as supportive partners. Just as ancient Roman women outside the immediate circle of the imperial family could look to widely disseminated images of the empress for codes of behavior and comportment within marriage, so did Italian Renaissance women look to women who publicly associated themselves with classical figures as exemplars of conjugal womanhood, such as Isabella d'Este.

I also analyze the accompanying presence of Lotto's *Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine* in the Cassotti household and discuss how it may have functioned as a work that elaborated the behavioral expectations defined by the double portrait. Although St. Catherine is a typical subject for domestic devotional paintings, she most likely was not a patron saint of the classically moniker-ed Faustina Cassotti, and she is presented in the guise of a contemporary North Italian aristocratic bride in her scene of marriage to the infant Christ. Stripped of her most recognizable iconography and imbued with ideal beauty and grace, she becomes a second secularized female exemplar with her roots in an antique Christian past.

Why is Lotto's portrait of the Cassotti couple so atypical? Lotto scholar Peter Humfrey observes that double portraits, marital or otherwise, were all but unheard of in Renaissance Italy.⁴⁸ The double portrait was one of a variety of

⁴⁸ Lotto's *Master Marsilio and His Wife* is, in fact, one of the few extant double portraits included in the artistic production of Renaissance Italy. While rare Renaissance double portraits do exist, they usually depict either male friendship (i.e. Raphael's *Double Portrait*, 1518-19, Louvre, Paris) or familial male relationships (i.e. Ghirlandaio's *An Old Man and His Grandson*, 1490, Louvre,

typological borrowings from Northern sources that occurred at about this time, also including the later heavily prevalent *pietà* type. Surpassing a pictorial record of their union, Lotto has encapsulated the very moment of the binding of the spouses in their new life together. The artist depicts a symbolic, highly constructed scene located in an indeterminate setting. Faustina and Marsilio are set against a dark background, with a tree barely delineated behind Marsilio's shoulder, suggesting a cursory, imagined wood appropriate for the visitation of a mythological figure like the Cupid present in this composition. Marsilio holds the wedding ring in his left hand while he gently draws his bride's hand toward him with his right. He is about to legally solidify the marriage in accordance with Renaissance custom, reflecting the material reality of early modern Italian nuptial procedures.⁴⁹

Behind Marsilio and Faustina, however, hovers Cupid, proffering several more symbolic binding elements. With his watchful and beneficent gaze fixed on Marsilio's crucial action, Cupid lowers a yoke draped with laurel leaves over the shoulders of the couple. The yoke is an egalitarian charge to the couple in their years together to follow. It is the weight of fidelity, of alliance, and of

Paris). Of the two most well-known conjugal double portraits of the Renaissance, one, Jan van Eyck's so-called *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434, National Gallery, London), is a depiction of an Italian couple executed by a Dutch artist. The Southern equivalent in fame is other is Piero della Francesca's set of pendant portraits of Federico da Montefeltro and his wife, Battista Sforza (c. 1472, Uffizi, Florence). However, Lotto executed both a family group (1547, National Gallery London), and a second marital double portrait (*Family Portrait*, 1523-1524, St. Petersburg, the Hermitage). Humfrey logically posits a Northern source for Lotto's unusual composition, likely Dutch or German prints.

⁴⁹ For an examination of Renaissance wedding rituals and their legal and societal components, see Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*.

responsibility. The laurel is charged with blessings for the *aeternitas* of the Cassotti marriage, that it be stable and lasting.⁵⁰ Laurel, however, is not quite so simple a symbol. In concert with other symbolic elements Lorenzo Lotto so strategically chose, laurel assumes a secondary and more evocative interpretation as the celebratory and honorific gift bestowed upon triumphant Roman emperors. It is only natural that Cupid, or Eros, too, is crowned with laurel. He has triumphed in the service of Love's uniting forces and initiated an advantageous marriage.

The scene is ostensibly contemporary, aside from Cupid's somewhat ambiguous presence. Since Marsilio and Faustina gaze outward at the viewer to display their new matrimony, it is unclear whether they notice Cupid's assertion of their vows. Nonetheless, the classical god charges the couple with responsibilities associated with both ancient and early modern marriages. Likewise, Faustina Cassotti, almost overwhelmed by her voluminous, costly sleeves, a mark of Renaissance displays of wealth, and the fine fabric at her throat, wears a pendant that may or may not belong to her own time. Upon closer inspection, the pendant reveals itself to be a cameo, with a bust of Faustina the Elder in profile, identifiable by her distinctive coiffure, carved in white against a

⁵⁰ See Humfrey, 70. Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, although it was first published in 1593 and postdates the Lotto work discussed here, is a compendium of common tropes related to the portrayal of abstract concepts in Italian painting of the Renaissance and Baroque era. His depiction of *concordia maritalis* prominently features a heavy chain which binds the husband and wife together at the neck. Lotto's use of the yoke and the laurel chain adds symbolic layering to the concept of the tangible, physical bond as symbolism for the invisible strength of the marriage bond.

dark background.⁵¹ The cameo has been set in gold and then attached to Faustina Cassotti's strand of pearls, suggesting that the cameo could also have been worn independently. It is tempting to fabricate a fitting history for this intriguing piece of jewelry, even if this story may have begun only months before the actual nuptials of the Cassotti couple.

It is possible that the cameo was commissioned for the marriage celebrations themselves, an instructive gift from Marsilio Cassotti or his family for his new bride. The Mount Holyoke Art Museum owns a 3rd century BCE Roman cameo featuring a profile portrait of a woman which is quite similar in composition to that worn by Faustina Cassotti, although it was worked well before the lifetime of Faustina the Elder (FIG. 20). The simple gold setting of the Faustina pendant may or may not be ancient, but it certainly seems appropriate to compare the contrast of the white figure on a black field to this corresponding ancient cameo, and to consider the fine linear carving which describes the drapery and hair of the ancient figure to the careful, fine brushstrokes apparent in Lotto's treatment of the Faustina cameo. Expensive gowns and jewelry bestowed upon brides by their new husband's family were meant to serve as a highly visible outward expression of the family's affluence.⁵² If Marsilio really did give

⁵¹ Regarding Faustina the Elder's and other imperial coiffures, Bergmann and Watson quote Apuleius's second-century *Metamorphoses*. "The significance of a woman's coiffure is so great that, no matter how finely attired she may be when she steps out in her gold, robes, jewels, and all her other finery, unless she has embellished her hair she cannot be called well-dressed." (2.9) Although imperial hairstyles were widely emulated by Roman women, coiffures are one of the most reliable identifying features of individual empresses in their public representations. 16.

Faustina the namesake pendant displayed so prominently in the pictorial record of their marriage, this gesture represents the emphatic display of a behavioral model.

Zanin Cassotti, seems, in fact, to have owned two variations on the theme of the Madonna and child: his own lost painting, which is believed to have included three saints flanking the virgin, and the *Mystic Marriage* he ordered for Marsilio's quarters. The choice of the auxiliary saints in Marsilio's painting has been explained by adherence to the protection of local patrons and traditional guardians that were appropriate to location and era. Francesco Colalucci, who prepared an eminently useful survey of art and societal forces in the period of Lorenzo's residence in Bergamo, suggests that Marsilio himself chose the figures included in the painting.⁵³ The six saints that attend echo the configuration of a classic *sacra conversazione* in which the attendants to the virgin have little temporal or thematic relationship to one another, but are presented together to create an ideal image for multi-purpose devotion centered on effective personal

⁵² According to Klapisch-Zuber, they were also intended as an easily readable manifestation of the "branding" of the bride as a new addition to their family, often decorated with monograms and *stemme*. See Klapisch-Zuber, "The Griselda Complex". In *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*.

⁵³ Colalucci, 143. "I sei santi, disposti attorno alla Vergine in modo studiatamente disordinato, sono scelti da Marsilio in base a motivazioni legate al momento, al luogo, e alle devozioni familiari. Antonio abate che legge un volumetto sacro e agita i campanelli per scacciare il maligno è il patrono del borgo in cui abitano i Cassotti, mentre Nicola di Bari, che sbuca dall'ombra per sbirciare nel libro di Antonio, è chiamato in causa quale protettore dei mercanti. Il pericolo della terribile peste che nel 1524 imperversa in Lombardia facendo vittime illustri anche a Bergamo, viene esorcizzato dell'esempio rassicurante di San Sebastiano immune alle frecce...e di Giorgio con la poderosa lancia che serve...ad abbattere il drago...l'esperienza dei quadri per Nicolò Bonghi e Zanin Cassotti aiuta a comprendere come la mistiche nozze di Caterina d'Alessandria propogano nuovamente il tema dell'unione coniugale; in deroga alle norme iconografiche non vediamo però il passaggio dell'anello, la santa dunque non sposa Gesù, ma gli conferma il suo mistico amore col dono di una rosa, simbolo di carità."

intercessors. St. Catherine of Alexandria, in the midst of accepting the sign of her union with the infant Christ, is shown in symmetrical parity with St. Jerome, portrayed with his most recognizable attributes, a book and a lion that rests sedately at his feet. Lotto's compositional choice mirrors the gestures of St. Jerome, who presses his right hand to his tome and gazes in adoration at the face of the Virgin, with those of St. Catherine, who likewise kneels at the feet of Mary and clutches her left hand in her chest, exhibiting a reaction to Christ's offering of the ring that is near a swoon. This twin display of piety and profoundly intimate spiritual communion with the King and Queen of heaven emphasizes the qualities that were praised in both the male and female saints, namely devoted religious philosophy and scholarship and absolute commitment to the divine. Lotto pairs each of the saints with their metaphysical consorts, creating an overarching theme of holy union as expressed through the language of earthly connections between bodies and souls.

Four more saints appear behind the Virgin and child, reflections of contemporary social conditions and needs for divine protection.⁵⁴ Colalucci remarks that both St. George, who stands at the far left, dressed in full armor and brandishing a lance, and St. Sebastian, were invoked against the danger of the plague. St. George's lance is explained as a weapon useful both against the dragon of his legend and against the more amorphous source of the pestilence that had erupted in nearby Lombardy in 1524, the year in which Lotto completed this

⁵⁴ See Colalucci, Francesco. *Bergamo negli anni di Lotto: pittura, guerra, e società*.

painting. St. Sebastian, partially hidden in the shadows and draped in a cloak, his head inclined to better witness the scene between the two central saints and the Virgin and her child, proffers his emblematic arrow, also regarded as a capable symbolic protection against illness, most specifically the plague.

Behind St. Catherine, instead, appear St. Nicholas of Bari and St. Anthony Abbott, slightly more obscure saints who were invoked in the name of the neighborhood in which the Cassotti made their home and of continued prosperity in the Cassotti's particular mercantile trade, respectively.⁵⁵ Of most immediate interest in context with the double portrait of this paintings recipients, however, are the visual parallels drawn between Faustina Cassotti, a contemporary, secular bride, and St. Catherine, who is dressed in the finery of a 16th century Italian bride in defiance of both her historical identity and her designation as the paragon of modesty, a woman who shunned her beauty because it built an earthly obstacle between her soul and the perfect love of the divine.

St. Catherine is also associated with several other symbols which Lotto utilizes to express the essential qualities of a successful marriage. *The Golden Legend*, which dates from nearly three hundred years prior to the lifetimes of the Cassotti but was a common reference work for hagiographies, begins its story of St. Catherine with a fairly unscientific explanation of her name's origin. The first etymological roots are cited as an amalgamation of the Latin words for "total" and "ruin" (*catha* and *ruina*). Jacobus de Voraigne extrapolates to connect these

⁵⁵ Ibid. 54.

descriptive words to St. Catherine's life and saintly function: she obliterates the sinister forces of the Devil, the threat of lust, and the seductions of pride and greed. The second etymology de Voraigue presents is more suggestive of St. Catherine's complex role as a virgin martyr and a celestial spouse. The author states that the name Catherine is simultaneously interchangeable with the Latin word *catenula*, or "chain", as she forged a ladder to Heaven through her good deeds and perfectly pious earthly life.⁵⁶

The chain, according to sources on Renaissance iconology, including Cesare Ripa's oft-utilized sixteenth century *Iconologia*, was also a symbol of conjugal union, a symbolic companion to the yoke and the length of laurel leaves Lotto places in the beneficent hands of the god of love in his portrait of the Cassotti. St. Catherine's most famous attribute, however, is the wheel on which the "king" described by de Voraigue intended that she be martyred as punishment for her denouncement of pagan idols, her engagement of philosophers in battles of the wits from which she emerged miraculously triumphant, and above all, for her successful conversion of the king's consort, the Empress. The orators with whom St. Catherine debates are compelled to embrace Christianity when she convinces them of the truth of God's incarnation in a human body, and submit humbly to a new belief in Christ which results in their martyrdom.

The emperor is apparently so impressed with St. Catherine's prowess, contained in the body of a girl barely past the age of eighteen, that he proclaims

⁵⁶ de Voraigue, *The Golden Legend*, 708-9.

that he will exalt her name as a goddess, saying, “O glorious maiden, take counsel for thy youth, and thou shalt be second only to the queen in my palace; thine image shall stand in the centre of the city, and all shall adore thee as a goddess!”

The highest glory achievable for a Christian woman stands in stark contrast to that projected for women of the Roman Empire. Ordinary woman could never achieve divinity. The best they could hope for was a steady and respectful commemoration of their life and image on the part of their families, while the women of the absolute highest conceivable status, empresses, were afforded the possibility of deification only after their deaths. Faustina the Elder, Faustina Cassotti’s namesake, in fact became a literal goddess after her death through a ceremony staged by her husband, Antoninus Pius, and the erection of a temple in the Roman Forum dedicated to her worship. The emperor’s offer to St. Catherine is a remarkable one indeed, but she staunchly refuses his gestures of praise, with the admonishment that she “has given [herself] as a spouse to Christ. He is my glory, He is my love, He is my life.” In response to her words, the emperor orders that Catherine be exposed and brutally beaten and then imprisoned in a cell for twelve days without food. When the emperor is called elsewhere on state business, his wife is spiritually compelled to visit Catherine in her prison, and is converted through conversation and the sight of the still beautiful and radiant future saint, who is nourished by the love of Christ and the holy sustenance provided by an angel.

His anger provoked, the emperor submits Catherine to be ripped apart by four wheels outfitted with metal spikes, but the device is broken by an angel, “with such violence that four thousand pagans were killed by its collapse”. The empress publically protests her husband’s brutality, and she is killed, but according to Catherine’s final words to her, she, too, through her martyrdom unites with Christ as her “eternal spouse”, even as she forsakes and condemns her mortal partner through her willingness to die in the name of her adopted faith. Catherine’s hagiography is obviously threaded through with themes of mystic communion with Christ as a redeemer, a source of personal strength, and even, in her own words as cited by de Voraigue, a “lover”.⁵⁷

The image of St. Catherine in the Cassotti household, then, in concert with the secular representation of the social and legal contract of marriage, presents a potentially dichotomous set of models for the bride. On one hand, she is clearly expected to fulfill her duties as a secular consort and partner, apparently following the example of Faustina the Elder, a pagan empress who achieved the end of the path to personal divinity rejected by both Catherine and her foil, the consort of her persecutor. On the other, she is confronted with the model of St. Catherine, who rejected this pillar of ancient Roman and Renaissance social obligation for a physical solitude and staunch literal chastity that enabled her to maintain purity in the eyes of God. The presence of Cupid in the Cassotti double portrait seems indicative of a wholly divergent type of love, one inextricably tied to the sexuality

⁵⁷ Ibid., 712-14.

necessary for the conception of children and the maintenance of a marital bond appropriate to Renaissance mores.

Despite this fundamental division with qualities deemed essential for a Renaissance bride, de Vorraine lists several of Catherine's virtues exhibited during her life which seem tailored to serve as examples for their behavior. As a learned woman who also served a function as a patron of scholars, she represents the "three branches of philosophy" as presented in *The Golden Legend*: ethical, economic, and public. Especially applicable to the female half of a sixteenth century couple is the economic, which de Vorraine describes her as having conquered through the successful management of her father's household. Also relevant for comparison with the laudable qualities traditionally assigned to St. Catherine's companion in the Cassotti household, Faustina the Elder, is her mastery of the public branch of philosophy, achieved through her having "prudently" advised the emperor. The praise of these virtues reinforces the desire for a wife who was active in the preservation of family prestige and public manifestation of an orderly and prosperous household.

It is worth considering St. Catherine's most prevalent attributes on a basic, formal basis. In late Medieval and Renaissance portrayals, in altarpieces and private devotional images, St. Catherine is often accompanied by the torturous wheel broken by the angel of God, a reminder of her spiritual strength and her effective ability as an intercessor on the behalf of the patrons who commissioned the painting. In most Renaissance renditions, the celestial marriage of the holy

spouses, Christ and St. Catherine, is sealed with the placing of a ring upon the figure of the saint, with the infant Jesus helped along by his attendant mother, on whose lap he sits. Perhaps this material sign of union was meant to enhance the validity and realness of this marriage, one between the soul and the divine. The circular form is common to both St. Catherine's wheel and the ring that had come to symbolize both the eternity of the earthly connections inherent in marriage and the union of souls. Here, she proffers only a small book, which may be a volume of prayers or a secular volume of philosophy, considering her personal education as related by the *Golden Legend*. The fabric of her clothing is highly emphasized: she wears an exquisite green bodice, and her hair is bound with white ribbon. It is not difficult to imagine that St. Catherine may also have been intended as a second, eternal showcase for Zanin Cassotti's wares. She is also outfitted with the costly precious jewelry typically given to brides on the occasion of their wedding, including pearl earrings and what appears to be a gold pomander that bears an intriguing resemblance to the accoutrements of Lotto's nude Venus (FIG. 3).

This parallel suggests a comparison between the broken circle of all that is linked to the active life on earth and the unbreakable one that represents the vow St. Catherine has made to her true and unchangeable bridegroom, Jesus Christ himself. However, increasingly in sixteenth century renditions, including the Cassotti commission now held at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica in Rome, the ring is omitted in favor of suggestive gesture alone. St. Catherine, resplendent in a yellow silk dress, supplicates at the feet of the holy pair of the Virgin and

child. Swooning, she reaches delicately with her right hand to accept a rose proffered by the infant Christ, although the bloom remains firmly in his grasp and her fingers have yet to alight on the blossom. Lotto here depicts a scene of a union that has yet to be consummated, and instead portrays the fullness of love and devotion that lies between the saint and her beloved. The rose has a long history of iconographical meaning and connection to both the Virgin Mary and other female saints. It was utilized from the medieval period on as a symbol of the holy Mother, reflective of the blossoming of her womanhood in her love for God. Mary, too, is a bride of God, having been chosen as his handmaiden and the mother of his only son, conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit. A rose signified the achievement of a pure and perfect female maturity, coupled with virginity. The rose would remain whole and immaculate in its lush beauty.

In the Lotto painting, then, Christ, with his gift of the rose, seems to designate St. Catherine as a worthy companion for his mother, a woman who reflects the loving humility the Virgin exhibited upon the Angel Gabriel's Annunciation that she would be the mother of God. The painting offers two exemplars in varying grades of superiority: the Virgin is the ultimate woman, but since her heights are attainable by few real women, if any, St. Catherine is presented as an intermediary figure. She confronted the real social issues of her day while remaining true to her faith. She was capable of living in the world while also rejecting the spiritual damage its vices could wreak, and perhaps that was the message intended for Faustina Cassotti. St. Catherine herself is dressed in the lush

clothing expected of higher class North Italian women, but the beautiful objects of this world cannot distract her from the ultimate truths of the spiritual realm.

Lotto's use of the rose becomes even more intriguing when one considers the appearance of the flower in the *Venus and Cupid* dated to around the same time as the *Mystic Marriage*. Roses appear as an accoutrement of the nude goddess, a divinity whose ancillary function to the Renaissance wife stood on the other side of the spectrum from the model of absolute chastity embodied by the Virgin Mary and St. Catherine. Here, two heads of pink roses, cut from their bush, appear as if strewn in celebration of Venus' beauty. Tellingly, perhaps, the blooms are not intact. Not only have the heads been broken from their stems, but loose petals have been scattered over the goddess' bare skin as if to adorn and highlight her nakedness, a marked contrast from the ponderous drapery that clothes Faustina Cassotti and St. Catherine in Lotto's other works discussed here. In what may be an aim at a visual pun, Lotto obscures Venus' genitals with petals, intimating a formal link between the symbolic function of the flower and the source of female sexuality and reproduction. If *Venus and Cupid* is to be considered a marriage picture produced in response to sixteenth century conceptions of female sexuality, it occupies a precise role in relation to the loss of female virginity. Sexual love, at least for the Renaissance merchant and elite classes, and any pleasure it might offer, was absolutely reserved for the confines of a socially productive marriage, in which its primary function was the creation of healthy children that would become an asset to their family.

What sort of chastity can the Virgin Mary and St. Catherine recommending to a Renaissance bride who was preparing to offer herself willingly and appealingly to her spouse, and whose virginity, if she was of a reasonable age, would not last much past after the public celebration of her worldly nuptials? She cannot give herself to God the way they have: the same social and familial obligations that St. Catherine flouted and denounced in order to embrace a higher law preclude them from such impracticalities. This enforcing of chastity through feminine exemplars, although Christianized, is more akin to the demonstration of figures of Roman history like Lucretia as paragons of virtue. Wifely chastity meant allegiance to one's husband, a steadfast show of support, and, most obviously, the evasion of extramarital dalliances that could publically wound the good reputation of the reputable family into which they had married.

Although Lotto's *Venus and Cupid* (FIG. 3) has no connection to Zanin Cassotti's patronage, it was painted for patrons who presumably occupied much the same social space in their North Italian society as did Marsilio and Faustina. It has long been categorized as a "marriage picture" intended for the visual consumption of a newly solidified couple. It was once identified as a gift Lotto offered to his cousin, Mario d'Armano, on the occasion of his own nuptials, but he had already been married for some years by 1540. Andrea Bayer suggests that it may have been produced around the same time as the Cassotti double portrait on the basis of similar style and iconography.⁵⁸ The playful Cupid that

accompanies the nude Venus in this painting is almost identical in appearance to the one that cheekily lowers the laurel-draped yoke over the shoulders of Marsilio and Faustina in the portrait that dates from 1523. She also posits that Venus must be depicted with a presumably idealized portrait head of a North Italian bride, thereby insisting that the work was no doubt commissioned by a husband who saw fit to associate his wife with the divine embodiment of love herself. In Bayer's estimations, the choice of this scene may have been an expression of the taste for allegorical themes of Venus and Cupid in the territories of the Venetian republic.⁵⁹

Venus served as an extremely common and visible exemplar for a range of ancient Roman women, but she was most publically equated with a series of Roman empresses, usually in her capacity as a consort to Mars. In this configuration, both god and goddess were invoked as originators of the city of Rome and of Roman civilization: Mars was the mythical father of Romulus and Remus, the former of which was exalted as the traditional first king of Rome, born by Rhea Silvia, a vestal virgin, and Venus, according to the Aeneid and undoubtedly previous Roman legend, was the mother of Aeneas, the Trojan who founded Rome. Thus, empresses were often conflated with a specific Venus type, the Venus Genetrix that emphasized her role as the origin of the glory of the Roman Empire. An especially well-preserved example of this type is the full-

⁵⁹ Bayer also mentions that a "sposalito d'Amore" was catalogued in the Tassi in Bergamo, the site of the Cassotti double portrait, in the successive century. See Bayer, "Mythologies and Allegories" in *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*. 322-3.

length statue of the Empress Sabina now conserved in the Vatican Museums (FIG. 21). She was also frequently associated with Venus through portrait coins struck during her lifetime, affirming that Venus was a powerful symbol for advancing the recognition of empresses as ideal representatives of Roman womanhood.

Although Venus was given in marriage to Vulcan, the smith god who was considered repulsive and generally dismissed by the other occupants of the Roman pantheon, she maintained an ongoing affair with Mars, her polar opposite. Roman recognition of and praise for their union likely had its origins both in their positions as originators of their society and in the belief that the mediating powers of love and stability, the qualities that Venus embodied, were a healthy check on Mars' voracious vitality. Venus herself served a broad range of functions for ordinary Roman women, offering her protections and blessings not only in the sphere of love and sex, but also offering an example to them for the cultivation of their appearance and comportment.

She existed for her worshippers in a myriad of simultaneous variations, with one prescribed for each specific need of women or the Roman people as a whole. Her role as *Venus Genetrix*, was vital to Roman matrons, as it expressed her identity as the mother of Rome and as an aid to all Roman mothers in the fulfillment of their vital roles in the domestic sphere. Venus was also a touchstone for the other wifely duties expected of Roman women, and imitation of her

supposed practices and rituals were considered a means of approaching her resplendent beauty and rendering oneself more attractive and sexually receptive.⁶⁰

Might this practice of the imitation of Venus on the part of ancient Roman women be relevant in considering the later Renaissance penchant for paintings of the goddess that seem to have been inextricably and explicitly linked to marriage? Most of the most heavily discussed and studied Venus paintings, including those by Titian like the *Venus of Urbino* and his series of paintings featuring the nude goddesses along with a clothed male figure, seem to depict Venus through the utilization of an idealized female figure who almost certainly is not intended to bear any direct facial resemblance to any woman who might have served as at least one half of the intended audience of the painting. Lotto's *Venus and Cupid*, however, has been interpreted as diverging from this representational path, especially in recent scholarship. The face of Venus is deemed too idiosyncratic to be a generalized manifestation of ideal beauty. It is worth noting that the color of Venus' hair is fairly singular, as well, especially in comparison to the uniform blonde tresses of nearly every one of Titian's renditions of the Goddess. The hair of Lotto's Venus, while fair, possesses a distinct auburn cast, and upon close inspection of the artist's brushwork, it is evident that he seems to have built the hue up from a base layer of a fairly deep reddish tone. Judging from Faustina Cassotti's wide-set eyes and somewhat broad nose, Lotto does seem to have been

⁶⁰ Women who worshipped Venus in her incarnation as *Venus Verticordia* ("The Changer of Hearts") imitated Venus' toilette, including wearing myrtle-leaf wreaths in celebration of one of her most beloved plants, and practiced ritualized bathing that allowed them to imagine themselves occupying the same symbolic space as their patroness. See D'Ambra, *Roman Women*, 176.

concerned at least with overall fidelity and accuracy to the individual subjects of his portraits (or in this case, perhaps quasi-portraits). It would not be unacceptable to make a conjecture that Lotto's Venus, too, may refer to a particular bride and her preparation for her wedding night, and that this painting may have been intended for the benefit of a couple not dissimilar to Marsilo and Faustina in geographic location or social stature, if we assume that most of Lotto's private commissions, based on his own records, originated from the North Italian Bourgeoisie.

If Venus has indeed been outfitted here with a heavily idealized portrait head, the North Italian bride conflated with Venus is not so different than the Roman woman who looked to Venus for blessings in marriage and the gift of fecundity. Scholarship has long worked to support the theory that Lotto's *Venus and Cupid* is a "marriage picture" through the recognition of attributes particular to the contemporary social culture occupied by the bride assumedly portrayed here.⁶¹ Most of these discussions are tied to the assumption that the painting was primarily meant to function as a reflection of the first hours of the couple's life together, and that it was most meaningfully connected to the transformation of the bride from virgin to a wife with a concrete sexuality that would flower and offer pleasure within the confines of marriage. Lotto's treatment of Venus here certainly seems to bolster this conjecture. Scholars have also taken up the basic

⁶¹ See Bayer, 323.

identification of Venus' headdress as an iteration of the contemporary tiara of a North Italian bride.⁶²

She possesses as well the traditional attributes of Venus, most obviously the transparent girdle beneath her breasts and the company of Cupid, her son and the literal embodiment of Eros. I read the painting as a whole as a depiction of bridal play-acting, in which the bride, on her wedding night, occupies the auspicious role of Venus. The subject's body is turned outward for display of the beauty of her unclothed form, and her right hand, lingering just below her right breast, seems deliberately placed to emphasize that part of her anatomy most associated with fertility, a gesture which mimics the tropes associated with the classical *Venus genetrix*. Lotto subtly hints, too, at recent, or perhaps ongoing, undress. The white fabric draped over the crook of the bride's right arm suggests that the veil, perhaps both literally and metaphorically, has just fallen to her nakedness. A portion of the same white fabric is still tucked into the girdle below her left breast. Venus/the bride also wears a single pearl earring in her right ear as if she has paused in the removal of her expensive and precious wedding day finery. According to Renaissance Italian marriage customs, jewelry such as this would be worn only on a few additional public occasions or could even be sold, leaving the bride's possession forever.⁶³

⁶² Ibid., 323.

⁶³ For foundational reading on bride-gifts and the dressing and "branding" of the Renaissance bride, see Klapisch-Zuber.

The details of the painting refer to the beauty of the unveiled bride, to which the blushing pink roses strewn at her side and the petals which have been scattered over her most sexual part allude. By the sixteenth century, roses had enjoyed a long history of association not only with the delicate loveliness of women, but also as a visual substitute for the female genitals. Along with gentle references to female sexuality, Lotto offers a cruder view of the consummation of marriage, albeit one still firmly rooted in allegorical visual language. Through a complex system of historically and mythologically charged symbols, Venus' companion Cupid enacts a summary of the generative marital act. Venus, and thus, the bride, extends her left arm to offer a laurel wreath to Cupid, which Cupid grips firmly with his own right hand, an expression of assured aim. In this configuration, the infant Cupid is, in one sense, a stand-in for the groom, who releases an emission into what represents the bride's receptive genitals.

Although the allusion to the sex act is quite obvious, Lotto attaches several additional layers of meaning to the representation. Since Cupid is detached from mundane reality, he is free to exhibit the behavior assigned to him as a figure that promotes union and fertility, unlike ordinary mortals. Still, his power is manifested in the corporeality of an infant, and this incarnation makes him incapable of the more explicit and vulgar capability to ejaculate. Here, as in other Renaissance depictions of *putti*, Cupid's stream of urine replaces the emission of fertilizing sperm, just as the laurel wreath replaces the female component of sexual intercourse.

The theatrical quality of display and gesture further emphasizes the role of *Venus and Cupid* as a pictorial manifestation of the casting of the new bride as a Venus prepped for pleasure and the reception of her consort. While it can certainly be read on a basic level as a traditional depiction of mythological themes, Lotto's setting and props, as in his double portrait of Marsilio and Faustina Cassotti, suggest several alternate considerations. Lotto's imagery quite literally suggests the setting of a scene, implying that this performance of female availability is temporary and "acted", as I would argue, by the bride. Heavy red fabric, draped on the trees behind Venus and Cupid, creates both a backdrop and an enclosed, private space for the protagonists.

Beverly Louise Brown, in her writings on Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* and on Lotto's *Master Marsilio Casotti and His Wife* reminds us that in Venice, and in its incorporated territories, including Bergamo, red was traditionally worn by brides. Aside from the laurel wreath prop which Venus holds, a conch shell hangs suspended over her head, another material reminder of her genitals. The fact that this environment can be broken down and removed from the greater space of the wooded glade in which it has been erected, yet may also be replicated any number of times, references the singularity of the wedding night and yet the continuation of the act which it ushers in. The bride will not always be wearing her jewelry, but in a successful marriage, she will always be Venus in the bedchamber, an alluring and expectant partner who will play her part in the creation of the future generation.

So far, this paper has outlined a map of exemplars to which North Italian Renaissance brides were meant primarily to be occupied with the construction of their own role within the marriage system of their epoch. They were expected to cultivate wifely chastity, and a devotion to their husband that was not eclipsed by their love of God, with St. Catherine as their example. It is also worth noting that St. Catherine was often interpreted by Renaissance painters, including Lotto, as the paragon of beauty and elegance, refuting her own aversion to her elevated social station and the problem of earthly vanity. This “princess saint” may ironically have served an ambiguous function as a subject of devout emulation and as a sort of behavioral model that was meant to encourage grace and a carefully refined attention to dress.

Venus served as an exemplar for the alluring and fruitful sexuality that the bride was expected to exhibit once she has been liberated from her virgin status and initiated into the eroticism of Renaissance marriage. The more expansive symbol available in the Renaissance adoption of the figure of the ancient Roman empress may have offered a means for unifying the desirable qualities contained in those of female saints and the omnipresent Venus. Both Venus and the empress obviously shift an examination of exemplars to a markedly secular field of inquiry, but the appropriation of this trope to exalt wives and assert the status not only of the women themselves but of their new husbands, was fairly common in the years roughly contemporaneous to the production of Lotto’s *Venus and Cupid* and Cassotti commission.

Why were imperial references, in many cases, reserved for the female half of the nuptial couple? Here, as with the Cassotti double portrait, the bride seems to carry the aegis of references to exemplary classical figures, while the husband benefits from his association with a woman who possesses such laudable qualities. This relationship is corroborated by the social facts surrounding the marriage of Faustina and Marsilio Cassotti, since it is believed that the bride was of a markedly more illustrious class than the groom, and her incorporation into the Cassotti family was likely viewed as a social boost that was worthy of boasts in the form of a highly visible artistic record of the matrimony.

An examination of these three prominent examples of these exemplars, one ostensibly wholly religious and two that manifest as quite firmly secular, raises questions about how their intended audiences would have approached these images, and in what social environment they would have done so. The Cassotti double portrait, whose patronage is entirely detached from the will of Faustina Cassotti and her self-perception, was most likely intended to be viewed by Zanin Cassotti's peers, who would have recognized the good and socially profitable match between her and his son. Even so, it is a manifestation of shifting attitudes in regards to wives in the Northern Italy of that period, in which women were increasingly regarded as important and valuable partners.

Zanin Cassotti could scarcely have been more conservative in his choice for what may have been a gift of a private devotional painting for his daughter-in-law, Lotto's iteration of the mystic marriage of St. Catherine. It would have

served as an appropriate marriage gift for a young woman who was being charged with the responsibility of nurturing the sort of wifely charity that was also displayed by other traditional female exemplars like Lucretia. St. Catherine may also have served as a model for feminine comportment, as suggested by the emphasis placed on her beauty and grace even in the face of extreme trial in the most popular source for her hagiography, *The Golden Legend*. Her presence in the Cassotti household along with the portrait that visibly binds her to her husband reminds Faustina that her primary allegiances are twofold: just as she must keep steadfastly by Marsilio's side, she is expected to demonstrate her piety and commitment to God as a commendable Renaissance wife.

The model of the Roman empress, as manifest in Faustina Cassotti's visual associations with her namesake, Faustina the Elder, and in references found throughout the production of material culture related to marriage, serves as the most expansive available exemplar, allowing for the assignation of a wide range of virtues to the bride, including *concordia* and the *aeternitas* of the marriage. Venus is tied to the figure of the empress, as a facet of her sexual and reproductive identity, a guide to and encouragement for the sometimes playful sexuality encouraged within marriage. Although the exemplars defined through the Cassotti nuptial commission present Faustina Cassotti with dynamic and personally powerful female exemplars, her constructed public identity remains in the dominion of a male patron and artist.

CONCLUSION

This paper has set out to define an alternative group of exemplars for Italian Renaissance brides, the most prominent among these being Venus and the empress, and to demonstrate how the appropriation of these classical figures both shaped and arose from societal desires connected to marriage in early sixteenth century Northern Italy. I have consciously separated my approach from the traditional methodology tied to visual culture of the marriage ritual, which often characterizes paintings and objects as strictly and narrowly didactic and furthermore divides the objects in question along the lines of “lesser” material culture and fine art. While the ubiquitous *cassone* undoubtedly occupied an integral post among the visual references married Italian women possessed, they were not the sole, or even necessarily the most important source for feminine models. The works historians often categorize as “marriage pictures,” along with a broad base of material culture such as the *bella donna* plates and medals that functioned to create a comprehensive body of feminine exemplars from which brides were encouraged to draw inspiration. Many of these exemplars stress the importance of feminine virtue and of personal strength and integrity, but they differ in essential ways from the self-sacrificing examples represented by traditional figures like Lucretia.

Social records such as wills that originate from Northern Italy dating from the first half of the 16th century and cited by historical sociologists Grubb and Chojnacki are evidence that interaction between husband and wife and familial

values in that region of the peninsula are not directly comparable to the more frequently cited and analyzed conditions to the south, mainly in centers like Florence and Siena. While brides were often younger than their grooms in cities of the Venetian empire and its environs, they were less frequently barely out of their adolescence, as were many Florentine brides of the elite and merchant classes. There was a more frequent near parity in age between married couples, as in the case of Marsilio and Faustina Cassotti. Although Faustina's age at her marriage, presumed to have been celebrated in or around 1523, the year of Lotto's double portrait, is unknown to us, Bergamask municipal records tell us that Marsilio was a mere twenty years old. It seems logical to assume that Faustina must have been anywhere from around seventeen to twenty years old, establishing a view of a nuptial partnership in which the spouses could readily relate to one another and better collaborate on and plan for the successes that would stem from their union.

In defining the new vision of Northern Italian Renaissance wifehood, this paper extends its scope to an expansive variety of visual culture considered to have been created for the express purpose of the celebration of marriage. Such a holistic approach has only very lately been taken up by art historians, and within the sphere of marriage itself was most recently utilized by the seminal exhibition entitled "Art and Love in Renaissance Italy" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, mounted in the Autumn of 2008. Although the exhibition represented an attempt to unite everyday objects with traditional fine arts, Patricia Simons and Monica

Schmitter, in their review⁶⁴, questioned the decision to divide the objects based on designations of “public” and “private.” I have been sympathetic to their assertion that the Renaissance household was never a wholly private environment. It is important to remember that the joyful, playful sexuality represented by frank and sometimes bawdy depictions of the nude Venus saw itself most frequently expressed in the context of a visual program intended for a married couple.

A multitude of other sources, primary among them Anthony D’Elia,⁶⁵ have defined the connection between the allegorical presence of Venus as a part of the social and secularized marriage ritual through the revitalization of the ancient poetic form of the *epithalamia*, an oration designed specifically to ensure that the couple’s wedding night was auspicious and pleasurable. Other art historians have taken up this theme in the Northern Renaissance artistic production of nuptial objects, going so far as to categorize Venus paintings like the so-called *Venus of Urbino* and Lotto’s *Venus and Cupid* as visual translations of the sentiments and fertility magic enacted by *epithalamia*. Foremost among the proponents of the belief in a literal power of the visual presence of Venus to promote the conception of healthy and beautiful children is Rona Goffen, who also asserts that the figure of Venus was intended to be read as a double for the bride.⁶⁶ I have found this argument especially relevant to my own assertion that

⁶⁴ See Schmitter and Simons, 718-727.

⁶⁵ See D’Elia.

⁶⁶ See Goffen, “Sex, Space, and Social History in Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*.”

female exemplars were meant to function as a mirror of sorts for the bride and wife, reflecting and imparting desired feminine qualities. The bride was challenged to embody the favorable aspects of Venus' amorous and mediating qualities.

The best example of the mutual connection between exemplars is in majolica dishes, portraits, and allegorical paintings that unite the Northern Italian Renaissance concept of the empress and of Venus. This relationship harkens back to Roman custom with its origins in imperial culture and the public exultation of the reigning couple, augmenting their earthly superiority with an implied connection to their divine models. This mode is manifest in both case studies examined in this paper: through the equation of Faustina Cassotti with the empress Faustina the Elder in Lotto's double portrait, and through Isabella d'Este's self-equation with both Faustina the Elder and Venus. Literature on the allegorical roles afforded to Venus especially in Venetian painting of the sixteenth century has been primarily concerned with her identity as a philosophical and neo-Platonic construct. This view, championed by Panofsky's immersion in the Florentine conception of the "twin Venuses", disregards the possible political and socially relevant nature of the goddess. In the context of the construction of the public identity of the Roman imperial couple, Venus was paired with Mars and celebrated as his full and essential consort. This union is based not only on the Platonic notion of Venus' power to mediate Mars' aggression and to ensure peace

and stability, but in the two deities' essential identities as distinct and personified origins of the Roman Empire and of civilization on the Italian peninsula.

As Venus was traditionally the mother of the founder of Rome, Aeneas, and as Mars was the father of Romulus and Remus, their union was essential for the proper function of Roman government. Furthermore, the emperor and empress, who showed themselves to their citizens in the guise of Venus and Mars through coins and statuary, magnified their power and prestige by implying that they were descendants and representatives of their very exemplars.

Unsurprisingly, Roman matrons of elite and wealthy families were assimilated to the goddess upon their deaths, their image preserved as an amalgamation of their own personal idiosyncrasies and the eternality of Venus.

A possible parallel to Northern Italian Venus paintings that may have made reference to the specific brides for which they were commissioned, including Lotto's *Venus and Cupid*, is ancient Roman female sculpture sometimes consisted of an idealized Venus body topped by a an individual portrait head. Venus enjoyed a revival in the visual culture of sixteenth century Northern Italy that explicitly recalled her functions in elevating the status of married women while also serving as a reminder of the public virtues they were meant to cultivate. The appropriation of the figure of Venus for domestic paintings, including a *studiolo* in the case of Isabella d'Este, expressed a desire for a wife that was a true partner, one half of a social relationship that functioned both on a personal level and with wider implications for the social success of the family.

The figure of the empress likewise proposed such a model. The case studies, focused on Faustina Cassotti and Isabella d'Este define the manner in which Northern Italian Renaissance wives functioned as mirrors for their exemplars in a variety of ways, adopting their behavior and often, through their manufactured public images, soliciting explicit comparisons with their models.

Faustina Cassotti is presented as a Renaissance evolution of Faustina the Elder through both the allegorical scene set by Lotto and clear visual references to the empress. Faustina receives the honors of Venus and of the empress. She is accompanied by Cupid, Venus' companion and a literal embodiment of fruitful conjugal love, and, together with Marsilio, her husband and the "emperor" in this equation, receives a laurel chain signifying the eternity of their marriage bond even as the yoke signifies their necessary commitment to one another. That she wears a pendant that echoes the widely diffused portrait coin portrayal of Faustina the Elder further marks Faustina Cassotti's social worthiness and prestige, and ensures that she comprehends the challenges and expectations inherent in this lofty namesake.

As public piety was a pillar of Renaissance social identity, Faustina Cassotti, upon her marriage, was assigned a companion religious exemplar as a complement to her secular model. Along with his commission for the Cassotti double portrait, Zanin Cassotti ordered a *Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine*, a work which together with the double portrait enforces Faustina's double imperative to commit herself not only to her husband, but also to Christ, and to

cultivate an identity as a devoted and pious wife. St. Catherine was an ideal exemplar for a woman of the elite and merchant classes, so too was Faustina Cassotti, since she originated from a family of wealth, and his case retains her outward appearance and status as a princess. Lotto's St. Catherine is clothed in a manner similar to the display of rich and intricate fabrics and jewelry exhibited in contemporary portraits. Faustina Cassotti herself is nearly consumed by the expensive fabric that comprises her garb, and Isabella d'Este seems to have viewed her portraiture as an occasion to flaunt her cutting-edge style and aristocratic taste. While St. Catherine, according to her legend, cast her earthly status and worldly riches vehemently aside after becoming a Christian, Lotto tellingly seems to have ignored this transformation.

Instead, St. Catherine becomes a model of poise, beauty, elegance, and absolute wifely dedication. Lotto's Cassotti St. Catherine, perhaps intended directly as a foil for Faustina Cassotti's empress, appears sumptuously appointed in a yellow silk dress and elaborate jewelry. Nonetheless, she sweetly and willingly submits to her union with the Christ child, reaching out tenderly to accept his offer of a rose as a symbol of the eventual blossoming of their mutual love. Although St. Catherine is an eventual martyr, she exhibits a remarkable sense of resilience and determination in the face of the challenges enumerated by the story of her life, including her first attempted execution on the wheel which would later become her most prevalent attribute. A female saint for whom literacy was essential, she is dedicated to the betterment of the minds of her community,

as a means of bringing them to the realization of the supreme power and providence of God. The fact that St. Catherine was such a common subject of paintings most likely commissioned in a domestic environment and meant for personal contemplation and devotion indicates that intellectual proficiency and independent mental strength and agility were valued and sought after in the character of North Italian brides.

While the *Mystic Marriage* was likely ostensibly offered to Faustina Cassotti as a devotional tool for her bedchamber, it may not have belonged exclusively to her private domestic space, if one indeed existed. I contend that St. Catherine, who here lacks her wheel, her palm of martyrdom, or even her quill, was intended to serve the dual function of acting as a secularized visual model, presented to Faustina Cassotti reborn as a young woman of sixteenth century Northern Italy. Her symbolic marriage to the Christ child can be viewed as a stand-in and a reinforcement of the secular marriage into which Faustina had just entered. We must also consider the likelihood that guests to the Cassotti household would have viewed this painting and associated it with the celebration of the marriage between Faustina and Marsilio, intimately linking Faustina to the modernized portrayal of St. Catherine. Such an association would have both elevated Faustina Cassotti's social image and pressed her conformity to the saint's example through the constant cultivation of a feminine composure and strength that was the outward mark of a successful and desirable wife.

While this study was intended as a broad consideration of the host of alternative classical female exemplars available to artists and their patrons, its scope is limited to the art produced in a specific region, Northern Italy, and at the specific moment of the early sixteenth century. I saw the notion of the bride as a double of both Venus and the empress as especially visible and prevalent in the visual culture that fell under these two organizational categories, but connections between these models and Italian brides are absolutely not isolated in this group of images. Allusions to ancient wedding customs and the appropriation of imperial forms, especially in material culture and the ephemeral constructions related to extremely public and ostentatious Florentine and other central Italian marriages should be further investigated. Although this topic did not allow for extensive discussion of such a thread, the recurring figure of the *guerriera*, who was characterized as a virtuous, virginal, and beautiful warrior, and her transformation into an elegant and ideal wife, should be studied further in the context of the personal metamorphosis that was expected of the teenaged brides of Florence and neighboring city-states.

This paper suggests that North Italian attitudes concerning the relationship between husband and wife had shifted by the early sixteenth century to include the possibility and desire for a truly collaborative domestic life, and that the exemplars chosen for wives reflected this phenomenon. It remains to be determined whether the same set of exemplars was utilized to the south, and

whether their presence in the visual lexicon there had the same relevance as it did in the north.

St. Catherine, in contrast with the Amazonian and somewhat exotic nature and appeal of the *guerriera*, was a familiar visual point of reference for Renaissance women. In the course of research regarding the Lotto St. Catherine, intended for Faustina Cassotti, and the patronage of her case-study counterpart, Isabella d'Este, I uncovered assertions that Isabella had commissioned at least one *sacra conversazione* that included St. Catherine among the ranks of the saints that likely flanked the virgin.⁶⁷ What might St. Catherine have represented for a woman like Isabella d'Este, as opposed to Faustina Cassotti? Isabella d'Este is viewed primarily through the lens of her insatiable attraction to antiquity and the massive commission that was her complex of private rooms, including her *studiolo*, but her commission of religious paintings makes it evident that Isabella may also have turned to more conservative and traditional exemplars, even if they were closely linked to a classical Christian past.

Does there exist an irreconcilable tension between Christian, saintly notions of proper and ideal female behavior and the models offered by secular exemplars like the empress and Venus? Do these models share essential core traits, or must they be viewed as a stratified collection of visual references? This paper can only initiate an inquiry into the nature of alternative female exemplars and begin to contextualize them within the workings of sixteenth century Italian

⁶⁷ See Fletcher, "Isabella d'Este and Giovanni Bellini's 'Presepio', 711.

society. It should serve as an invitation to broaden the scope of art historical inquiry into the visual and material culture so essential to Renaissance marriages, both before and after the ritual itself, and to reconsider the beneficial and illuminating relationships between domestic property and adornment and the fine arts. We must marry the vital contexts of painting, literature, social custom, and the decorative and functional arts and crafts in order to truly begin to understand how wifely identity was constructed.

FIGURES



FIG. 2 *Master Marsilio and his Wife*
Lorenzo Lotto
1523
Museo del Prado, Madrid



FIG. 3 *Cassone (wedding chest) with painted panel showing the Death of Lucretia*
ca. 1465-1475
Mount Holyoke College Art Museum
South Hadley, MA



FIG. 3 *Venus and Cupid*
Lorenzo Lotto
ca. 1520
Metropolitan Museum of Art
New York



FIG. 4
Venus and Mars
Botticelli
1493
National Gallery, London



FIG. 5
Venus and Mars Sarcophagus Relief
2nd Century CE
Vatican Museums, Rome



FIG. 6 *Venus of Urbino*
Titian
1538
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence



FIG. 7, Obverse: *Medal: Faustina the Elder; Antoninus and Faustina*
 Beltrame Belfradelli, Called Il Varro
 Ca. 1450
 Mount Holyoke College Art Museum
 South Hadley, MA



FIG. 10, Reverse: *Medal: Faustina the Elder; Antoninus and Faustina*
 Beltrame Belfradelli, Called Varro
 Ca. 1450
 Mount Holyoke College Art Museum



FIG. 8 *Large dish with border of floral scrollwork and cornucopias; in the center, profile bust of "Faustina"*
Italy, Deruta
16th century
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



FIG. 9 *Dish with a Portrait of Orsella*
Italian (Deruta)
ca. 1500-1510
Philadelphia Museum of Art



FIG. 10 *Parnassus*
Andrea Mantegna
1497
Louvre, Paris



FIG. 11 *Minerva Chasing the Vices from the Garden of Virtue*
 Andrea Mantegna
 1502
 Louvre, Paris



FIG. 12 *Cast Bronze Medal of Isabella d'Este*
 Gian Cristoforo Romano
 1498
 British Museum, London



FIG. 13
 Portrait medal of Isabella d'Este
 Gian Cristoforo Romano
 1495-1498
 Kunsthistorisches Museum. Vienna



FIG. 14
 Tondo Relief of Minerva
 Gian Cristoforo Romano
 Before 1505
 Palazzo Ducale, Mantua



FIG. 15 *Gonzaga Cameo*
Roman, 18-19 CE
Hermitage, St. Petersburg



FIG. 16 *Isabella d'Este*
Titian
1534
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



FIG. 17 *Lady as Lucretia*
Lorenzo Lotto
16th century
National Gallery, London



FIG. 18 *Isabella d'Este*
Giulio Romano
ca. 1531
Royal Collection, UK



FIG. 19 *Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine*
Lorenzo Lotto
1524
Galleria Nazionale dell'Arte Antica, Rome



FIG. 20 Brooch with Cameo
Portrait of a Woman
Roman, 3rd Century BCE
Mount Holyoke College Art Museum
South Hadley, MA



FIG. 21
The Empress Sabina as Venus Genetrix
Roman, 1st century CE
Vatican Museums, Rome

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