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'Beauty adorns virtue'

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Title: 'Beauty adorns virtue' . Dress in portraits of women by Leonardo da Vinci

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2. Dress in the portrait of Ginevra de' Benci

In the mid-1470s, when Leonardo da Vinci was still an associate in Verrocchio's workshop, he painted the portrait of Ginevra de' Benci (1457-c. 1520), a Florentine banker's daughter (fig. 1).¹ Ginevra is portrayed in a three-quarter view in front of a juniper bush against a landscape backdrop. The juniper, *ginepro* in Italian, is a clear allusion to her first name.² The reverse of the panel is painted as well and shows a sprig of juniper encircled by a palm leaf and a laurel branch with a scroll reading 'VIRTUTEM FORMA DECORAT' (beauty adorns virtue) (fig. 2). At an unknown date, but certainly before 1780, a substantial portion of the panel was cut off at the bottom. Furthermore a strip of about one centimetre is missing on the right side. Apart from these trimmings and some paint loss in the area of the sitter's nose, it is well preserved for a painting of its age.³ The portrait may originally have included Ginevra's hands. If so, Leonardo was indebted to Verrocchio, as he was the first sculptor to include a sitter's hands in a sculpted bust (fig. 39).⁴

The *Libro di Antonio Billi*, an early sixteenth-century manuscript of artists' biographies, is the earliest source that mentions the painting. Leonardo is praised in rather clichéd phrases for the lifelikeness of the portrait: 'He [Leonardo] painted Ginevra d'Amerigo Bencio with such perfection that it was none other than she'.⁵ The anonymous author remains silent on the portrait's innovative character. Not only is Leonardo's *Ginevra de' Benci* one of the first known Florentine female likenesses in a three-quarter view, the landscape in the background was a new feature in Florentine portraiture as well. Both innovations have received a great deal of attention in the literature and are associated with Flemish portraiture and, in the case of the three-quarter view, sculpture.⁶

Less studied than the portrait formula, but no less groundbreaking in Florentine portraiture, is Ginevra's attire, for she is dressed very modestly, in a plain brown garment, without jewellery. Her breast is covered with a light veil that is partly hidden under a black scarf,

¹ Wilhelm Bode was the first to attribute it to Leonardo on stylistic grounds. He recognized the sitter's costume as Florentine and was therefore able to reject an earlier attribution of the portrait to Leonardo's Milanese pupil Boltraffio. See: Bode 1882, p. 260-261. Bode's attribution has not been doubted since, the only exception being: Carnesecchi 1909, p. 292-293.

² First stated by: Bode 1903, p. 274-276.

³ A 4.4 cm strip was added to the bottom of the panel. This strip is now covered by the rebate of the frame, but is visible on archival photographs of the portrait. An inventory of 1780 contains the oldest record of the painting's measurements, showing that the panel had already been cut down at that time. See: Boskovits and Brown 2003, p. 357. For a more extensive technical description, see: Gibson 1991, p. 161-165 (with ample photographic documentation); Bull 1992, p. 72-76; Walmsley 2013, p. 55-77; Walmsley 2014, p. 56-71.

⁴ Leonardo's study of two hands of a woman, now in the Royal Collection (inv. no. RL 12558), is often associated with the portrait, see: Brown 1998, p. 106. Recently, however, the drawing was convincingly dated to c. 1489-1490, which rules out any connection with Ginevra's portrait. For the new dating, see: London 2011, p. 114. As Garrard has noted, it should be borne in mind that the portrait did not necessarily include hands. She proposes a reconstruction with the sitter behind a parapet, a formula observed in other fifteenth-century portraits, including Leonardo's *Belle Ferronnière* (fig. 4). Garrard 2006, p. 34.

⁵ 'Ritrasse la Ginevra di Amerigho Benci tanto bene finita, che ella propria non era altrimenti.' Fabriczy 1891, p. 331. Translation: Walker 1967, p. 8.

⁶ For a discussion of the impact of Northern portraiture, see the section entitled 'Flemish origins, p. 52-53. The influence of sculpture will be discussed in the section entitled 'Sculpting fashion', p. 54-56.

and on her head she wears a simple linen cap. A gold fringe along the neckline of the dress and a few little golden eyelets to lace up the bodice are the only decoration. This humble dress stands in sharp contrast to the way Leonardo's Florentine contemporaries dressed, or rather dressed up, their sitters. The Pollaiuolo brothers are a case in point. Their portraits from the 1470s show women dressed in garments with sleeves of gold brocade and conspicuous jewellery (figs. 26-27). This chapter seeks an answer to the question why Leonardo portrayed Ginevra so differently. It explores the possible sources for the depiction of plain dress, as well as the meaning of this choice within the Florentine art discourse of the time.⁷

1. The sitter and the patron

Ginevra de' Benci was born into a wealthy family with close connections to the Medici. Her grandfather, Giovanni d'Amerigo de' Benci (1394-1455), served as the general manager of the Medici bank from 1435 until his death and was an important patron of the arts. Ginevra's father, Amerigo di Giovanni de' Benci (after 1431-1468), worked for the Medici bank as well, managing the office in Geneva, and was acquainted with the members of the Neo-Platonist Academy.⁸ As a girl Ginevra spent several years at the convent of Le Murate in Florence as part of her education, before marrying Luigi di Bernardo Niccolini (1442-1505) on 15 January 1474.⁹ Luigi owned a cloth weaving business, which was not very prosperous. However, his family played an important role in Florentine politics and in 1478 Luigi became *gonfaloniere* followed by his appointment as *priore* in 1480.¹⁰

Further records about Ginevra's life are scarce. In a tax declaration of 1480 her husband Luigi complained he had 'more debts than goods' and that his wife had been ill and in need of the care of doctors for a long time already. This statement should probably not be taken at face value, since Niccolini's complaints were certainly aimed at obtaining a tax reduction.¹¹ Furthermore, there is a letter to Ginevra written by an unidentified lute player, signed 'G+H', who lived in Rome at the papal court. This letter informs us that Ginevra was engaged in writing poetry. The lute player wrote that he had told the Roman ladies about the virtues of Florentine women, and especially those of Ginevra herself. In the same letter he begged her to send him a *sestina* she had written, of which he was only able to remember the first line: 'I ask your forgiveness and I am a mountain tiger'.¹² Apart from this single line from a second hand, no poetry by Ginevra is known to have survived.

Although Leonardo's portrait of Ginevra de' Benci is one of the few fifteenth-century female likenesses from Florence with an identified sitter, the identity of the patron and the

⁷ The Metropolitan Museum of Art owns a female portrait, attributed to Lorenzo di Credi (inv. no. 43.86.5), which is sometimes identified as Ginevra as well, on the basis of a sixteenth-century inscription on the reverse. The painting is in a bad state of preservation, the painted surface being severely abraded throughout. The dress has been altered and there are extensive losses of original paint in the clothing and the background. This is why the portrait is not discussed here. For the latest ideas on the dating and attribution, as well as technical research and the identification of the sitter, see: Berlin / New York 2011, p. 162-163, cat. 44, with references to earlier literature.

⁸ Y. Renouard-E. Ragni in: DBI vol. 8 (1966), s.v. 'Benci, Amerigo', p. 182-183; Walker 1967, p. 1-2.

⁹ After her death Ginevra was buried at Le Murate, vested in a nun's habit. On Ginevra's connection with the monastery, see: Holmes 2000, p. 129.

¹⁰ Möller 1937-38, p. 197-198; Walker 1967, p. 2.

¹¹ 'più debito che mobile', Carnesecchi 1909, p. 284. The first to doubt Niccolini's words was Ada Alessandrini in: DBI vol. 8 (1966), s.v. 'Benci, Ginevra', p. 193. Niccolini's quote has often been interpreted literally, see for instance: Walker 1967, p. 2, 6.

¹² 'Chieggio merzede e sono alpestro tygre', 'G+H' to Ginevra de' Benci, Rome, 12-17 August 1490. The letter was first published by: Carnesecchi 1909, p. 293-296; re-published with an English translation in: Walker 1967, app. II, p. 24-27.

occasion of the commission have aroused much debate. The date of the portrait is obviously closely connected to the occasion. Kenneth Clark suggested the portrait was painted to celebrate Ginevra's marriage in 1474, a date that he considered to be consistent with the style of the picture.¹³ This hypothesis has been often repeated and many art historians still adhere to this date on stylistic grounds, in particular because of similarities with the *Annunciation* in the Uffizi (fig. 9).¹⁴ However, it should be borne in mind that the chronology of Leonardo's early work has not been established with certainty. For instance, the proposed dates for the Uffizi *Annunciation* range from c. 1470 to c. 1478.¹⁵ It is therefore impossible to pin down the date of the *Ginevra de' Benci* to one or two years precisely on the basis of stylistic evidence.

A breakthrough came in 1989, when Jennifer Fletcher was able to show that the device on the back of Ginevra's portrait actually belonged to the Venetian humanist Bernardo Bembo (1433-1519) (fig. 2). Bembo served as the Venetian ambassador to Florence in the years 1475-1476 and again from 1478 to 1480. He quickly developed personal contacts with the Medici circle, including intellectuals such as Cristoforo Landini, Alessandro Braccesi and Naldo Naldi. In 1475, following the example of Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici, Bembo adopted the courtly fashion of choosing a platonic beloved, namely the beautiful Ginevra de' Benci. The aforementioned poets Landini, Braccesi and Naldi dedicated one or more poems to the platonic love affair and Ginevra herself was also the subject of two sonnets by Lorenzo de' Medici.¹⁶ Fletcher suggested that Bembo commissioned the portrait during his second Florentine stay, but there seems to be no reason why he could not have ordered it during his first sojourn.¹⁷ He may have met Leonardo in the circle of the Medici, who regularly commissioned works from Verrocchio, or through Ginevra's brother Giovanni.¹⁸ It seems that Leonardo did indeed maintain a friendship with Giovanni, who had presented him with a map of the world and several books. Furthermore, according to Vasari Giovanni's son and heir, Amerigo, owned Leonardo's unfinished *Adoration of the Magi*.¹⁹

Bembo's device, consisting of the laurel and palm wreath with the text 'VIRTUS ET HONOR' (virtue and honour) can be found in several of his manuscripts, including the *Bemicae peregrinae*, and was also used on the tomb of Dante that he commissioned in 1483 (fig. 40).²⁰ An infrared image of the panel, published in 1998, after Fletcher wrote about the portrait in 1989,

¹³ Clark 1939, p. 16. Others who connect the picture with Ginevra's marriage are: Kemp 1981, p. 51; Marani 1999, p. 48.

¹⁴ Brown saw a close stylistic resemblance with the *Annunciation* (Galleria degli Uffizi, inv. no. 1618, dated c. 1473-1475) and argued that the wrinkling of the oil paint, due to Leonardo's lack of experience with the medium, and the dependency on Verrocchio point to a date early in the 1470s, see: Brown 1998, p. 105. Marani put *Ginevra de' Benci* even before the *Annunciation* and the *Madonna of the Carnation*, because he thought the landscape in the portrait lacks the atmospheric quality seen in these religious works, see: Marani 1999, p. 38, 46. Larry Feinberg, on the contrary, recently dated the portrait to c. 1478-1480, claiming there is stylistic evidence, which, however, he fails to specify. Feinberg 2011, p. 105.

¹⁵ For an overview of the proposed dates, see: Zöllner 2003a, p. 216, no. V.

¹⁶ On Bernardo Bembo's Florentine stay, see: Walker 1967, p. 2-5. For the poems, see: Walker 1967, p. 28-38, app. III-V; Naldus 1943, p. 39, no. 121. It not known when the poems were written. On the basis of internal evidence, Walker tends to date them to c. 1478-1480.

¹⁷ Fletcher referred to Heydenreich, who dated the portrait to 1478-1480 on stylistic grounds. However, as stated earlier, dating the painting on the basis of stylistic evidence is problematical.

¹⁸ Fletcher 1989, p. 811-815. For an overview of all manuscripts in Bembo's collection that bear either the motto or the device, or both, see part B of the appendix in: Garrard 2006, p. 55-56.

¹⁹ Cecchi 2003, p. 129-131. For Giovanni's map and book in Leonardo's possession, see: Richter nos. 1416, 1444 and 1454. For the location of the *Adoration of the Magi*, now in the Galleria degli Uffizi, in Vasari's days, see: Vasari 1966-87, vol. 4, p. 24.

²⁰ For an overview of all manuscripts in Bembo's collection that bear either the motto or the device, or both, see: Garrard 2006, app. B, p. 55-56.

revealed an earlier motto under the presently visible 'VIRTUTEM FORMA DECORAT' (beauty adorns virtue), which reads 'VIRTU HONOR' (fig. 41). This confirmed the connection between Bembo and Ginevra's portrait once more.²¹ It is impossible to determine how much time elapsed before the motto was altered, but it is certain that the first motto was a fully-fledged painted version, since the X-radiograph shows the background was painted around the letters.²²

Even though the device on the portrait's reverse unmistakably points to Bembo as the patron, both David Alan Brown and Mary Garrard argued otherwise. Brown proposed the somewhat hybrid solution that the front was ordered by Ginevra's relatives on the occasion of her betrothal in 1473, and the reverse only painted after Bembo's arrival in Florence.²³ He opted for a betrothal rather than a wedding portrait, for according to him in marriage portraiture the bride is usually depicted lavishly dressed in profile view, facing her husband to the left. Since her father had died in 1468, the painting could have been commissioned by Ginevra's brother, Giovanni.²⁴

Mary Garrard rightly commented that it is unlikely that the front and back of the panel were painted at different times.²⁵ The altogether different scenario that she proposed, in which Ginevra herself might have played an active role in the realization of her portrait, seems equally unlikely though. She argues that the device on the reverse is not Bembo's, but Ginevra's own. On the basis of the aforementioned single line of poetry that has come down to us second-hand, Garrard sees Ginevra as a 'poet', whose honour and virtue are symbolized by laurel, a common emblem for poets, and palm. The portrait would have been commissioned around the time of her marriage by one of Ginevra's male relatives, not as a celebration of this marriage, but in honour of her presumed literary capacities. Bembo then would have adopted Ginevra's device, which is confirmed, according to Garrard, by the fact that it appears in his manuscripts only after his stay in Florence.²⁶ This is unlikely however, for Florentine women do not seem to have carried devices of their own, a practice that was limited to women of the court such as Isabella d'Este.²⁷

Reviewing the evidence, it is almost certain that Bernardo Bembo commissioned the portrait of Ginevra de' Benci during one of his Florentine stays. His involvement explains the device on the verso in more than one way. Not only is it likely to be his own, the portrait with a device on its reverse was a well-known type in Venice, whereas there are no precedents in Florence.²⁸ The year in which Ginevra became Bembo's platonic beloved, 1475, sets a clear

²¹ The infrared image was first published in: Brown 1998, p. 119. The image is actually a diagram composed of several infrared reflectograms in which brightness and contrast have been adjusted to enhance the individual letters. See: Walmsley 2013, p. 77.

²² I am grateful to Elizabeth Walmsley for patiently answering all my technical questions about the two motto's via e-mail correspondence on 21 June 2014.

²³ Brown 1998, p. 119. Frank Zöllner reasoned the other way around, hypothesizing Bembo ordered his own portrait from a Venetian artist, which he brought to Florence after completion of the reverse. There he supposedly changed his mind and had Ginevra portrayed instead. Zöllner 2003b, p. 160-161.

²⁴ Brown 1998, p. 105-106.

²⁵ The idea was confirmed to her by the conservator of the National Gallery, David Bull. See: Garrard 2006, p. 28 and esp. p. 48 note 19.

²⁶ Garrard 2006, p. 29-30, 37-38. In an earlier article, written while still under the assumption that the portrait was painted in the late 1470s, the author introduced a similar argument, see: Garrard 1992, p. 59-64.

²⁷ On the devices used by Isabella d'Este, see: Praz 1981, p. 65-66.

²⁸ Parallels can be found especially in the portraits of Jacometto Veneziano. See: Brown 1998, p. 105 and esp. p. 206 note 89. On the relationship between Bernardo Bembo and Jacometto, see: Bolzoni 2010, p. 331.

terminus post quem. Since Bembo could have ordered the portrait during either his first or his second Florentine sojourn, the *Ginevra de' Benci* should be dated to c. 1475-1480.

2.1. Recognizing austerity

Although Ginevra's dress has not yet been studied thoroughly, several scholars have attempted to link her humble attire to a specific period of her life. The dull brown fabric of Ginevra's dress reminded Emil Möller of mourning garb, if it weren't for the gold trimming at the neckline.²⁹ For others, the absence of jewellery and lavish dress was a reason to reject the possibility that the work is a wedding portrait. Garrard thus dated the commission of the painting just before Ginevra's marriage, whereas Zöllner and Feinberg proposed it was painted on the instigation of Bembo several years after the marriage.³⁰ Either way, the argument is difficult to sustain, since luxurious dress and jewellery do not necessarily indicate a marriage, as has been explained in the previous chapter.

More importantly, a closer look at the development of Florentine female portraiture reveals that there was a shift from elaborate dress and jewels towards a general austerity, starting around the time of Ginevra's portrait. As discussed in the previous chapter, up to the 1470s the vast majority of the surviving female portraits show sumptuous costumes that are often made of gold brocaded fabrics or figured velvet, and precious jewels. The profile portraits from the Pollaiuolo workshop painted in the 1470s exemplify this type (figs. 26-27). Some painters, however, portrayed their subjects in a different manner. Leonardo's *Ginevra de' Benci* is one example, the portrait of Lucrezia Tornabuoni, attributed to Ghirlandaio and now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, is another (fig. 42). A third one is Botticelli's *Portrait of a Lady* in the Victoria and Albert Museum, formerly identified as Smeralda Bandinelli, which will be discussed in more detail in the final chapter of this thesis (fig. 43).³¹ All three sitters are portrayed in three-quarter view, without the lavish finery usually seen in female portraiture.

Mary Garrard suggested that Ghirlandaio's portrait of Lucrezia Tornabuoni may have been a precedent for that of Ginevra de' Benci, as both depict an intellectually renowned woman dabbling in poetry in three-quarter view.³² It is impossible though to determine whether Lucrezia's portrait was indeed painted before Ginevra's. Two portraits of Lucrezia Tornabuoni are known through archival references, an exceptional situation for a period in which the identity of sitters was rarely mentioned. The Medici inventory of 1492 lists 'a panel painting with the face of Madonna Lucrezia'. The second portrait can be found in the household inventory of Lucrezia's brother Giovanni Tornabuoni: 'a painting of the head and bust of Mona Lucrezia de' Medici'.³³ Ghirlandaio's panel in Washington is thought to be one of these two portraits, on the

²⁹ Möller 1937-38, p. 185.

³⁰ Garrard 2006, p. 30; Zöllner 2003b, p. 162; Feinberg 2011, p. 105-106. Garrard regards David Alan Brown as the art historian who 'perhaps best expounded the marriage thesis'. Brown, however, explicitly states it is unlikely to be a marriage portrait. He argues it was commissioned by Ginevra's brother Giovanni to celebrate her betrothal. See: Brown 1998, p. 105-106.

³¹ It should be noted that the dress of Botticelli's sitter is not as humble as Ginevra's or Lucrezia's, even though it is often described in the literature as 'simple' or 'meant to be worn at home', see: Washington 2001, p. 172; Schumacher 2009, p. 30. Because of the analogies with the costume depicted in the *Mona Lisa*, this portrait will be more extensively discussed in chapter 5, p. 149-150.

³² Garrard 1992, p. 63.

³³ 'Uno quadro di legname, dipintovi la 'mpromta di madonna Lucrezia', Spallanzani and Gaeta Bertelà 1992, p. 124, fol. 60v. Translation: Stapleford 2013, p. 187; '1° quadretto d'una testa e busto di Mona Luchrezia de' Medici', cited from: Lydecker 1987, p. 63, note 84. Theoretically, both inventories could refer to a portrait of the eldest daughter of Lorenzo de' Medici, Lucrezia (1470-after 1550), but given

basis of an old, but not contemporary inscription on the back of the panel that reads 'LU...TIA TORNABUONI MEDICI' and on the physical resemblance to Lucrezia's likeness in the scene *The Birth of Saint John the Baptist* in the Tornabuoni chapel in the church of Santa Maria Novella.³⁴ On stylistic grounds and on the basis of the age of the sitter – she is shown as an elderly woman – the portrait is tentatively dated around 1475, several years after the death of Lucrezia's husband, Piero de' Medici, in 1469.³⁵

The fact that Lucrezia was a widow at the time she was portrayed may account for her sedate dress and the complete absence of jewellery. Lucrezia wears a dark green overdress, laced up at the front, with black sleeves over a red undergarment and a white *camicia*. The neckline of the dress is edged with silver. A slightly transparent veil, fixed to the bodice with two golden pins, covers her shoulders. On her head she wears a veil with a black band on top of a white cap tied under the chin. Eleonora Luciano regarded this veil as a sign of mourning, comparing it to Ghirlandaio's fresco *The Funeral of Santa Fina* in San Gimignano, where the saint's attendant wears a similar scarf with a black stripe at the funeral, whereas in the scene in which Saint Fina is still alive, this black band is absent (figs. 44-45).³⁶ It was indeed common to wear special veils for mourning. Examples can be found in the list of mourning clothes provided to various members of the Medici household after the death of Cosimo the Elder in 1464, including Lucrezia Tornabuoni herself. Cosimo's wife, Contessina de' Bardi, received 30 *braccia* of brown cloth, eight *veli* (veils) and two *sciugatoi*, pieces of linen that could be worn on the head. Lucrezia Tornabuoni, Cosimo's daughter-in-law, and her daughters and daughters-in-law all received 14 *braccia* of brown cloth, two veils and one *sciugatoio*.³⁷

Lucrezia's staid dress stands in great contrast to her sumptuous wardrobe as recorded in the Medici inventory of 1456, when her husband was still alive (app. 3A). It was common, however, for a widow to dress humbly, as is confirmed by the posthumous inventory of Alessandra Macinighi, who had outlived her husband Matteo Strozzi (1397-1435) by many years when she died in 1471. Alessandra had six black *cioppe*, some of them already worn out, three *gamurre* of grey and black wool, one short, white dress (*gamurrino*), two black mantles, one again being worn out, and eight *camicie*. To cover her head, she had two *berette*, two *cuffie* and five *sciugatoi* at her disposal.³⁸ These garments and accessories are very similar to those worn by Lucrezia in her portrait.

Since the suggested dates of c. 1475 for Lucrezia's portrait and c. 1475-1480 for Ginevra overlap, it is impossible to determine whether one of the two portraits served as an

Lucrezia Tornabuoni's prominence it is generally assumed she is the person depicted. See Eleonora Luciano in: Boskovits and Brown 2003, p. 303.

³⁴ On this identification, the attribution to Ghirlandaio and the condition of the panel, see Eleonora Luciano in: Boskovits and Brown 2003, p. 303-307; Van der Sman 2010a, p. 47-48.

³⁵ Eleonora Luciano in: Boskovits and Brown 2003, p. 306. Only doubted by Jennifer Craven, who thought the portrait was based on Lucrezia's posthumous likeness in the Tornabuoni chapel in Santa Maria Novella, using the same cartoon, see: Craven 1997, p. 302-303, cat. 33. However, there is no evidence to support this claim.

³⁶ Eleonora Luciano in: Boskovits and Brown 2003, p. 306.

³⁷ The complete list is published in: Gori 2001, app. VIII, p. 255-257. The number of *veli* and *sciugatoi* recorded here corresponds exactly to a sumptuary law concerning funerals that was issued almost a decade later, in 1473. This law allowed daughters to receive a length of cloth for a *mantello* and a *cioppa*, two *veli* and one *sciugatoio* after their father's death. Published in: Rainey 1985, app. 12, p. 776.

³⁸ According to Alessandra's last will, part of her clothing was donated to the nuns of Fuligno and Le Murate and the rest divided among family members and servants. A costly liturgical garment made of white damask brocaded with gold and embroidered with the coats of arms of the Strozzi and the Macinighi was given to the church of Santa Maria degli Ughi, next to the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence. Published in: Macinighi Strozzi 1877, p. 610-611.

example for the other. Moreover, Garrard ignored Botticelli's female portrait, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which was also painted in the 1470s. Given the more or less simultaneous dates of the portraits, it seems equally likely that Leonardo, Botticelli and Ghirlandaio drew inspiration from a common source. In the case of Leonardo, there is no doubt that his choice for a three-quarter pose was motivated by Verrocchio's sculpted busts. Botticelli's portrait is often connected to Verrocchio's *Bust of Lady with Flowers* as well (fig. 39).³⁹ Although there is no evidence to suggest that Ghirlandaio was connected to Verrocchio's workshop, it is usually assumed he was influenced by the latter's elegant, sculptural style. Indeed, their styles are so alike that there is even a group of paintings of the Madonna that have been attributed alternately to Verrocchio and Ghirlandaio.⁴⁰ The evidence suggests that the changes that took place in the representation of women in the 1470s were all linked to the Verrocchio workshop.

In the 1480s the number of extant portraits of female sitters in humble dress rapidly increased. Besides Botticelli's famous female portraits dressed 'all' antica', two portraits in strict profile of very austere women from his hand survive, one in the Galleria Palatina and the other in a private collection (figs. 46-47).⁴¹ The sitter of the Galleria Palatina portrait wears a thin black string around her neck, but no pendant is visible. Her *gamurra* is made of a dull brown fabric, similar to the cloth in the portrait of Ginevra. Her white *camicia* peeks out at the elbow, the shoulder and the centre of her bodice. The girl's back, which is partly exposed by the plunging neckline of the *gamurra*, has been modestly covered with a thin veil. Her hair is put up and tightly assembled under a white cap, with a lock of hair nearly escaping as a playful detail. The sitter of the second portrait is dressed in black, has a similar string around the neck and wears a transparent veil over her head.

Several other portraits of female sitters in plain dress dating from the 1480s are from the Ghirlandaio workshop. An unidentified portrait, now in Altenburg, shows a woman in three-quarter view wearing a plain blue *gamurra* without any jewellery (fig. 48). Two other portraits, both attributed to Domenico Ghirlandaio's brother Davide, show sitters that are dressed slightly less plainly. The sitter of the portrait now in the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute wears a bright red dress, adorned with a black belt with a gold buckle. (fig. 49).⁴² The sleeves of her *gamurra* consist of two parts that are laced together just below the elbow. Her chest is covered with a transparent veil and she wears a cross-shaped pendant with three dangling pearls. The other portrait ascribed to Davide is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 50). On the basis of the physical resemblance with one of the daughters of Francesco Sassetti who was portrayed by Ghirlandaio in the family chapel in the church of Santa Trinita, the sitter is sometimes identified as Selvaggia Sassetti (born 1470).⁴³ Wearing a gown that

³⁹ Most recently by Stefan Weppelman in: Berlin / New York 2011, p. 112, cat. 14.

⁴⁰ Verrocchio's influence on Ghirlandaio is discussed by: Cadogan 2000, p. 24-27, see esp. p. 24 for the Madonna's.

⁴¹ The suggested dates for the portrait in the Galleria Palatina in earlier literature range from c. 1475 to c. 1490, but a date of c. 1485 is now generally accepted. See: Paris 2003, p. 128, cat. 12; Casciu, Chiarini and Padovani 2003, vol. 2, p. 92-93, cat. 121; Frankfurt am Main 2009, p. 184-186, cat. 14. The portrait that is now in a private collection is also placed in the 1480s, although there is still some discussion as to whether it should be dated to the first or the second half of the decade. See: Paris 2003, p. 120, cat. 10 (c. 1481-1482); Frankfurt am Main 2009, p. 182, cat. 13 (second half 1480s).

⁴² On the date and attribution, see Simona Di Nepi: London 2008, p. 146.

⁴³ On the attribution to Ghirlandaio and the identification of the sitter as Selvaggia, see Everett Fahy in: Budapest 2009, p. 182, cat. 30. Although Jean Cadogan acknowledged the great resemblance between the sitter of the Metropolitan panel portrait and the girl in the Sassetti chapel fresco, she rightly expressed her reservation regarding an identification based on physical appearance alone, see: Cadogan 2000, p. 279-280.

appears to be made of watered silk, decorated with golden eyelets, and a coral necklace with a sumptuous pendant, this is one of the more richly dressed sitters found in this decade. However, compared to the Pollaiuolo portraits of the 1470s, her attire is still fairly modest, as she is shown wearing only one piece of jewellery and no gold brocaded fabrics. Moreover, her chest is covered with a veil, as befitted a chaste woman, and at her right side a tiny piece of a white apron is visible, again a cheap and simple piece of clothing suitable for a virtuous girl.

Many portraits that were painted in the 1480s lack precious jewellery and patterned fabrics.⁴⁴ In fact, from c. 1480 onwards, female portraits with unadorned dress made of plain fabrics began to make up the vast majority. This trend is only rarely acknowledged in the literature and plain dress in portraiture is often seen as the exception to the rule.⁴⁵ Carol Frick, for instance, regards Botticelli's portrait of an unknown woman in the Galleria Palatina as a rare representation of indoor dress.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the interpretations offered are disparate and unsubstantiated. One proposed explanation is the supposed lower standing of the sitter. An example is the aforementioned portrait of a young woman in the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, ascribed to Davide Ghirlandaio (fig. 49). The sitter has been previously identified either as a member of the Rucellai family or as Giovanna degli Albizzi, wife of Lorenzo Tornabuoni.⁴⁷ Simona Di Nepi dismisses both identifications, because she considers the sitter's dress to be too plain for a girl from an elite family.⁴⁸

Moreover, there is no consensus regarding the identification of the young women depicted in the Sassetti chapel. Francesco Sassetti had no fewer than six daughters. Whereas Fahy identified the girl in question as fifteen-year-old Selvaggia, Rab Hatfield argued she could be her one-year-older sister Lisabetta (born 1469). See: Hatfield 1978, p. 231. Eve Borsook, on the other hand, opted for either Maddalena (born 1474) or Selvaggia, see: Borsook and Offerhaus 1981, p. 38-39.

⁴⁴ The portraits mentioned here are only a selection. Other examples from the Ghirlandaio workshop include, among others, the *Portrait of a Woman* now in the National Gallery in London (inv. no. NG1230) and the *Portrait of Constanza Caetani* in the same museum (inv. no. NG2490). Other painters also portrayed their sitters this way, for instance Lorenzo de Credi (*Portrait of a Woman with Jasmin Flowers*, Forlì, Pinacoteca; *Portrait of a Young Woman*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 43.86.5) and Raffaellino del Garbo (*Portrait of a Woman*, Houston, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. no. 44-554).

⁴⁵ Only two authors explicitly noted this change, the first being Patricia Simons. Although her research on Florentine female profile portraits has been very influential, her observation that female portraits from the 1470s onwards tend to follow male conventions, portraying plainly dressed women that are turned towards the viewer, has not received much attention, nor did she elaborate on it herself. Simons 1988, p. 8; republished: Simons 1992, p. 41. Jennifer Craven noted the shift as well and suggested a relation with Florentine sumptuary law. Craven 1997, p. 183-198.

⁴⁶ Frick 2002, p. 86.

⁴⁷ Wilhelm von Bode identified the sitter as a Rucellai girl in a comment written on the back of a photograph of the painting, dated 4 September 1913. For the photo, which is kept in the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, see: Brown 2001, p. 23, note 29. Louis Gjelly believed the sitter was Giovanna degli Albizzi, because the hairstyle and the jewel with the three pearls are very similar to Giovanna's portrait now in the Thyssen Collection, see: Gjelly 1939, p. 195. Although the relatively plain dress is not a satisfactory argument for dismissing these identifications, there is not enough evidence to securely identify the sitter.

⁴⁸ Simona Di Nepi in: London 2008, p. 146. In his survey of Renaissance portraiture, Lorne Campbell argued similarly that the sitter of a portrait attributed to Pollaiuolo (Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, inv. no. P16w7) 'not being richly dressed, was probably not of very elevated status'. Campbell 1990, p. 88. Quite another matter is that there is reason to treat this specific portrait with suspicion. Not only does it, quite unusually for a fifteenth-century painting, lack a gesso ground, but more importantly it was sold in 1874 by Stefano Bardini, the unscrupulous Florentine art dealer. Current research in Bardini's archives has already revealed that many of his pieces were forgeries or seriously damaged and overly restored fifteenth-century paintings. On the portrait's provenance and state of conservation, see: Wright 2005, p. 523, cat. 53. I thank Lynn Catterson for kindly sharing her view on this portrait with me and her attempt to trace it in the Bardini archive.

Discussing the sobriety of dress in Ginevra de' Benci's portrait, Mary Garrard went so far as to attribute 'proto-feminist' ideas to Ginevra (fig. 1). Arguing that not all women were 'victims', Garrard presents examples of women with a mind of their own. One of them is Laura Cereta (1469-1499), a female humanist from Brescia who actually pursued a scholarly career and promoted women's rights. In one of her letters, published in her *Epistolae familiares* in 1488, these purported feminist thoughts take the form of an attack on women who wear ostentatious dress. Cereta complains that women have too much appetite for display instead of seeking honour.⁴⁹ According to Garrard it is not too far-fetched a hypothesis that Ginevra's choice of humble attire was motivated by the same point of view.⁵⁰

There is, however, no evidence whatsoever that Ginevra held such opinions. Frick has clearly shown that the process of buying and ordering clothes for women was a male business in Florence. Fathers provided their daughters with a wardrobe and husbands did the same for their wives.⁵¹ Moreover, the origin of Cereta's concerns suggests they should not be taken too literally as a reaction to behaviour of real Brescian women. Her letter is profoundly influenced by Juvenal's sixth satire on women, from whom she explicitly borrowed her examples of female dressing up. These include typical ancient Roman ornaments, such as earrings, that were not worn in Italy in the fifteenth century.⁵² Furthermore, in stark contradiction to Cereta's supposed feminist dress principles, in another letter she indulges in the description of an embroidered shawl that she had been working on for months.⁵³ This demonstrates that Cereta's attitude towards dress cannot be caught in a simple definition, let alone an anachronistic one as proposed by Garrard.

According to yet another hypothesis plainly dressed sitters are women who had been married for some time. Andreas Schumacher proposed this idea in connection with the Botticelli portraits mentioned above (figs. 46-47). He argues that these women were not represented as brides, but in their roles as wife and mother.⁵⁴ Alison Wright, however, suggested that Botticelli's 'simplification of dress and presentation', as she calls it, was influenced by religious reforms and social control exercised by preachers, especially Savonarola (1452-1498). This new atmosphere led to stricter regulation of displays of wealth and, Wright argues, a subsequent decline in the quantity of portraits painted, reflected by the relatively small number from the last decade of the century that have survived.⁵⁵ However, Savonarola's influence in Florence was only felt from 1490 onwards, when he was reassigned as lector at San Marco, whereas Botticelli's portraits of austere female sitters date to the mid-1480s. It is also striking to note that Wright does not regard Leonardo's *Ginevra de' Benci* as one of these 'simplified' portraits. She clearly focuses on the setting and the portrait formula, for Ginevra's dress is as simple as that of Botticelli's sitters (fig. 1).

⁴⁹ Laura Cereta to Agostino Emilio, 12 February 1487. The entire letter is published in: Cereta 1997, p. 83-86. Garrard only quotes the paraphrased and summarized version of the letter, published in: Rabil Jr. 1981, p. 82-83, as if it were Cereta's original text.

⁵⁰ Garrard 2006, p. 46.

⁵¹ Frick 2002, p. 78-79.

⁵² On the influence of Juvenal, see: Rabil Jr. 1981, p. 82; Cereta 1997, p. 82-83.

⁵³ On Cereta's ambivalence towards dress and ornament, see: Cereta 1997, p. 12.

⁵⁴ Schumacher also points out that the austere appearance of Botticelli's sitters is in accordance with the stricter Florentine sumptuary law of 1472. Schumacher 2009, p. 29.

⁵⁵ Wright 2000, p. 104. According to Wright, it is no coincidence that Leonardo's important portraits from the 1480s were painted in Milan, where the court culture provided the appropriate background for an ambitious portrayal of women lacking in Florence at that moment. This view, however, does not take into account that Leonardo's portraits are strikingly different from the usual Milanese court portraits, a matter that is discussed in chapter 3.

Given the limited number of surviving portraits, one should be cautious in trying to distinguish trends in female portraiture. The extant portraits may not be reliably representative of the entire output of female portraits in that period. We cannot rule out the possibility that women were portrayed austere dressed before c. 1475 or that more portraits were painted of sumptuously dressed ladies in the 1480s and 1490s. However, the chronological development of the extant Florentine female portraits suggests that the preference for lavish dress gradually faded from c. 1475 onwards. In any case, in the surviving portraits of the last quarter of the fifteenth century the majority of the sitters are wearing rather plain dress. Given these numbers, the absence of finery cannot be considered highly unusual. This means that the search for an answer to the question of why a woman was portrayed in plain dress should not be limited to an examination of the sitter's individual circumstances, such as how long she had been married or her familial status. There appears to have been a break with the pictorial tradition of sumptuously dressed female sitters, the cause of which may well be related to a change in the general view on the appropriate representation of women.

2.2. Ginevra's dress

Before considering various possible sources for this change in artistic representation, it is important to establish what exactly Ginevra is wearing and how these clothes would have been perceived at the time. Ginevra's brown dress is unanimously regarded as a *gamurra* (fig. 1). Her chest is covered with a nearly transparent veil, on top of which she is wearing a folded black band or shawl that has not been properly identified yet.⁵⁶ Ginevra's hair is parted in the middle, put up at the back of her head and covered by a little white bonnet. Abundant tight curls dangle freely on both sides of her face.

The *gamurra*, a relatively cheap undergown, was discussed briefly in the previous chapter. Patrizia Baldi recently conducted extensive archival research on the *gamurra*, which further refined the early twentieth-century conclusions of Polidori Calamandrei.⁵⁷ *Gamurre* were usually made of woollen cloth, *panno di lana*, but other fabrics were used as well, among them linen, *saia* and *ruscia*. Green in a variety of shades was the most popular colour, followed by red and blue. Cheaper colours that also appear regularly are grey and reddish brown or *monachino*, of which Ginevra's *gamurra* is an example. Many of the examples that are recorded in inventories were adorned with multiple eyelets (*maglie* or *magliette*), buttons, ribbons or embroidery. The one worn by Ginevra is only modestly decorated with a narrow gold ribbon along the neckline and a number of golden eyelets with a blue ribbon laced through to close the bodice.⁵⁸

On the basis of the visual evidence of portraiture, Levi Pisetzky assumed that usage of the *gamurre* was becoming more common in the last decades of the fifteenth century and Baldi indeed found more richly ornamented examples towards the middle of the century that were suitable for wearing on their own.⁵⁹ Among the upper class, however, it must have been fairly uncommon for a woman to appear in public wearing nothing more than a *gamurra*. Jane

⁵⁶ The black shawl was certainly planned from the start, for Leonardo applied the brown paint for the *gamurra* only up to the edges of the shawl, leaving the area for the accessory in reserve. Walmsley 2013, p. 64.

⁵⁷ Polidori Calamandrei 1924, p. 36; Baldi 2006, p. 283-298, with documentary appendix on p. 313-349.

⁵⁸ Craven erroneously thought the number of eyelets worn by Ginevra was a violation of the sumptuary law of 1472. Craven 1997, p. 193. However, this law allowed women to wear any number of eyelets, as long as they served a purpose and were not purely decorative: 'Et sia alle donne permesso havere alle loro vesti [...] magle et bottoni solo per affibiare, et ghangheri et punte d'ariento bianco o dorato, o contrafacto, come voranno.' Mazzi 1908b, p. 49, no. 6.

⁵⁹ Levi Pisetzky 1964-69, vol. 2, p. 233; Baldi 2006, p. 298.

Bridgeman characterized the garment as ‘utilitarian’ because of the small amount of fabric – about six or seven *braccia* – required to make one.⁶⁰ In inventories they are often listed together with *cioppe*, ample overgarments that only partly revealed the *gamurra* underneath through slits, mainly at the sleeves.⁶¹ The combination of an undergown and an overgarment was considered far more representative than a *gamurra* alone.

The importance of dressing appropriately was already emphasized by Francesco Barbaro. In his *De re uxoria*, written in 1416 for Lorenzo de’ Medici the Elder on the occasion of his marriage to Ginevra Cavalcanti, he expressed a humanist view on how a woman should dress herself:

Wives ought to care more to avoid censure than to win applause in their splendid style of dress. If they are of noble birth, they should not wear mean and despicable clothes if their wealth permits otherwise. Attention must be given, we believe, to the condition of the matter, the place, the person, and the time; for who cannot, without laughing, look upon a priest who is dressed in a soldier’s mantle or someone else girdled with a statesman’s purple at a literary gathering or wearing a toga at a horse race. Hence, we approve neither someone who is too finely dressed nor someone who is too negligent in her attire, but, rather, we approve someone who has preserved decency in her dress.⁶²

Barbaro propagated a balance between restraint and ostentation, while always considering the appropriateness for the occasion. A *gamurra*, especially a rather plain example as represented in Leonardo’s *Ginevra de’ Benci*, would likely have been considered too plain, unless worn in the privacy of the domestic realm, where no visitors entered. In the *Libri della famiglia*, Alberti expressed a similar view: ‘On great holidays a new garment, on other days clothing that has been worn. Very old clothing is only to be worn inside the house.’⁶³

A century after Alberti, the ideas on dressing appropriately had not changed much. Alessandro Piccolomini published his *Dialogo de la bella creanza de le donne de lo stordito intornato* in 1540. Two women, Raffaella and Margarita, discuss among other matters the kind of dress a woman should wear. Margarita states that a woman should regularly change clothes and follow fashion, whereupon Raffaella adds that women’s dress should be rich and becoming. When Margarita asks her to expound on this richness of dress, Raffaella provides the example of a *gamurra*, or *camorra* as it is spelled here, that is too simple:

Well, I say that the richness of dress consists in taking the utmost care that the materials – woollens, fine silks or other fabrics – are the finest and best that one can find, because dressing in coarse cloths like, for instance, Madonna Lorenza, who had a dress [*camora*] made of cloth that was almost like a friar’s, which is meagre attire.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Bridgeman 1986, p. 301. Bridgeman based the required length of fabric on the amounts specified in the *ricordanze* of the painter Neri di Bicci. See: Bicci 1976, p. 143, 150.

⁶¹ Already stated in Polidori Calamandrei 1924, p. 44 and confirmed by Baldi 2006, p. 301.

⁶² ‘ut magis evitandae ignominiae, quam quaerendae gratiae causa splendoris hujus curam suscipiant. Nam quae clarissimo locae natae sunt, si fortunae suppetent, vili sordidaque veste uti non debent. Ad rei profecto, et loci, et personae, et temporis rationem haec maxime referri judicamus. Quis pontificem sago amictum, vel in litterario auditorio laticlavo succintum, vel in equestri certamine togatum, sine risu videre poterit? Attamen, nec nec nimis exquisitus, nec neglectus admodum vestitus a nobis probabitur, sed qui decorum servaverit.’ Barbaro 1915, p. 77, lines 16-24. Translation: Kohl and Witt 1978, p. 206-207.

⁶³ ‘In dí solenni la vesta nuova, gli altri dí la vesta usata, in casa la vesta più logora’, Alberti 1969b, Book III, p. 247. Translation: Alberti 1969a, p. 194.

⁶⁴ ‘Dico adunque che la ricchezza de le vesti consiste molto in cercar con diligenza che i drappi, panni, saie o altre tele sieno finissime e le migliori che trovar si possi; perché il vestirsi di panni grossi, come fa,

Margarita in turn replies that Lorenza's dress is not almost but exactly as coarse as a friar's tunic. Even though Piccolomini wrote his dialogue more than sixty years after Leonardo painted Ginevra's portrait, Raffaella's opinion about the inappropriateness of a plain, coarse *gamurra* is still relevant.

A rare example, almost contemporary to Ginevra's portrait, of an upper class girl appearing in a *gamurra* is provided by one of Alessandra Macinghi's letters. In 1465 Alessandra wrote from Florence to her son Filippo Strozzi in Naples, who needed a wife. Her son-in-law Marco Parenti had arranged a visit to his trusted friend Francesco Tanagli, whose daughter was a suitable candidate for marriage. Alessandra described the successful visit to Filippo:

He [Francesco] wanted Marco to go with him to his house, and he called the girl down in her *gamurra*, and he [Marco] saw her, and he [Francesco] said that if Caterina or I wanted to see her at any time he would show her to us. Marco says she looks beautiful and that she seemed suitable to him.⁶⁵

By telling Filippo that the girl was wearing a *gamurra*, Alessandra underlines the intimacy of the visit and Francesco's willingness to marry off his daughter, which is further confirmed by the offer to Filippo's sister Caterina and Alessandra herself to pay a visit as well. Moreover, without the concealing layer of an overgarment, Marco certainly could have judged the girl's beauty better.

Ginevra's white cap is as humble as her *gamurra*.⁶⁶ It shows some traces of a pattern formed by two parallel lines with a zigzag line in the middle. Ginevra's chest is covered with a veil, an accessory that is often found in inventories.⁶⁷ For example Bartolomea Dietisalvi and Nannina de' Medici both had several veils (*veletti*) (app. 3B, no. 50; app. 3C, no. 70). The city government attached considerable value to covering the chest. In 1464 women were obliged to wear a *coverviere*, a garment to cover the cleavage that is known as a partlet in English. This could be made of linen, silk, wool, gold or silver brocade, as long as it did not expose the flesh. This even applied to wives of noblemen and doctors, who were exempted from most other stipulations in the 1464 sumptuary law.⁶⁸ As we have seen, many portraits show women wearing a veil or partlet to cover their chests and backs, although there are also sitters who expose their nude skin, for example the two women who were portrayed by the Pollaiuolo brothers (figs. 26-27). Although Ginevra's veil is slightly transparent, the accessory is in accordance with the rest of her modest attire.

The black band around Ginevra's neck is less easy to identify. Two different suggestions have been put forward. According to Garrard, it is a scapular, a piece of cloth that descends to the knees and is worn as part of a monastic habit. Scapulars could be worn by tertiaries who lived outside the convent to express their ties with monastic life. Garrard assumed Ginevra adopted the black scapular that was part of the Benedictine habit of Le Murate just after leaving

poniam caso, madonna Lorenza, che per foggia ha fatto una camorra di panno poco manco che fratesco, si domanda foggia magra.' Di Benedetto 1970, p. 448.

⁶⁵ 'E volle che Marco andassi co lui a casa sua, e chiamò giù la fanciulla en *gamurra*: la vide; e proferseglì che ogni volta ched io la volevo vedere, e così la Caterina, che ce la mosterrebbe. Dice Marco che'ell' ha bella persona, e parveglì che fussi ricipiente fanciulla' Alessandra Macinghi to Filippo Strozzi, Florence, 26 July 1465. Transcription and translation: Macinghi Strozzi 1997, p. 149-151.

⁶⁶ It is sometimes suggested that a cap or bonnet covering the hair is a sign that the woman represented is married, see for instance Paula Nutall on Ghirlandaio's *Portrait of a Woman* (fig. 48) in: Florence 2008, p. 180, cat. 40. However, there is no evidence to support this.

⁶⁷ Erroneously identified as Ginevra's *camicia* by: Möller 1937-38, p. 185.

⁶⁸ Mazzi 1908a, p. 46, nos. 16 and 19.

the convent for marriage.⁶⁹ Feinberg, however, connected the black scarf with the Neo-Platonist Academy. Since Cristoforo Landino is wearing a similar scarf in his portrait in the Tornabuoni chapel frescoes by Ghirlandaio, Feinberg suggested it is a sign of affiliation to the Academy (fig. 51).⁷⁰

Both Garrard and Feinberg were apparently ignorant of a *spalliera* panel painted for the Pucci family by Botticelli on the occasion of Gianozzo di Antonio Pucci's marriage to Lucrezia di Piero Bini. It depicts a wedding banquet (fig. 52). Three of the female guests are wearing scarves similar to Ginevra's (fig. 1). The second woman from the left sitting at the table, sometimes identified as Sibilla Sassetti, is wearing a greenish yellow dress with a brown scarf whose ends are crossed at the chest. It does not run to the ankles like a scapular, but only reaches down to waist level. Her neighbour, the only woman looking the beholder directly in the eyes, has a black scarf and the fifth woman at the table is wearing a dark scarf on top of a blue dress.⁷¹ Clearly, these wedding guests did not put scapulars around their necks, and it is unlikely they are wearing academic stoles.

The narrow scarf could, however, be a *collaretto*, a garment that appears in the sumptuary law of 1464. This law forbade most types of decorations on the *cioppa*, such as embroidery in gold or silver and pearls, but allowed women to have 'at the *collaretto* [neckband] [...] a strip of fabric of any sort or colour, no longer than one *braccia* for a *cioppa*, and it cannot be of gold or silver brocade'.⁷² The Medici inventory of 1492 provides further details on how *collaretti* were worn, mentioning 'twenty-seven *collaretti* for women to wear at the neck, in gauze'. Just as these examples, Ginevra's folded scarf appears to be of a supple fabric as well. More *collaretti* are listed on the next folio of the Medici inventory: 'many ribbons and close-fitting *collaretti*'.⁷³ Besides the Medici inventory many other inventories and trousseaux list *collaretti* as well. For example, Maria di Piero Bini's trousseau included no less than '48 *collaretti da cioppe*'.⁷⁴ In 1472, the sumptuary law explicitly allowed wives and daughters of peasants to wear *collaretti*.⁷⁵ Ginevra's black scarf seems to have been a rather common accessory, owned by many women in large quantities. Again, it is an accessory that is in harmony with the overall austerity of her dress.

Ginevra is dressed modestly. Her garments and accessories were very common, but they were not regarded as appropriate for wearing in public and were therefore meant to be worn only in the privacy of the home. It is unusual to find them in portraiture, since most sitters were dressed in formal and far more expensive attire. The next sections explore the possible origins of this plain dress in portraiture.

⁶⁹ Garrard 2006, p. 43.

⁷⁰ Feinberg 2011, p. 106.

⁷¹ The first man at the table on the right, who might be the father of the bride, wears a similar black band as well (not visible on the depicted detail). The panel is the last of a series of three depicting Bocaccio's story of Nastagio degli Onesti. The other three panels are now in the Museo del Prado in Madrid (inv. nos. 2838, 2839, 2840). On the panels and the identification of the portraits, see: Rubin 2007, p. 252-253, 358-359; Cecchi 2008, p. 202-218.

⁷² 'possino avere al collaretto [...] uno orlo di drappo di qualunque ragione o colore, non passando uno braccia di drappo per cioppa; et non possa essere di broccato d'oro o d'ariento', Mazzi 1908a, p. 46, no. 10.

⁷³ 'Venzette collaretti da tenere le donne al chollo, di velo'; 'Più nastri et chollaretti stretti', Spallanzani and Gaeta Bertelà 1992, p. 64, fols. 34v, 35r. Translation: Stapleford 2013, p. 126.

⁷⁴ The complete trousseau is published by: Biagi 1899, p. 12-17, for the *collaretti* see p. 15.

⁷⁵ Mazzi 1908a, p. 49-50, no. 10.

3.1. Flemish origins

Flemish influence is clearly present in the portrait of Ginevra de' Benci. Ginevra's three-quarter pose and the landscape in the background with its prominently exploited aerial perspective are generally regarded as Flemish in origin. Some art historians have suggested that portraits by Petrus Christus and Hans Memling were potential sources of inspiration for Leonardo.⁷⁶ This raises the question of whether Ginevra's dress can be related to Flemish portraiture as well.

In Italy Flemish portraiture was especially admired for its mimetic qualities.⁷⁷ The first chapter addressed the Netherlandish technique of oil painting as a stimulus for the emergence of a true-to-life depiction of luxury fabrics in Florentine portraiture. Andrea del Verrocchio, Leonardo's tutor, was well aware of these new techniques. Although he never adopted the medium of oil paint and remained faithful to the more traditional technique of tempera painting, his way of imitating gold brocade reveals a profound knowledge of the oil painting technique employed by the Pollaiuolo brothers and Flemish painters. He imitated an important aspect of this technique in *Tobias and the Angel*, in which he used yellow pigments instead of real gold to render the gold brocaded sleeves of Raphael and Tobias (fig. 53).⁷⁸ It has been suggested that Leonardo collaborated with Verrocchio on this altarpiece and was responsible for the Tobias's sleeve, among other things, although there is no evidence to support this thesis.⁷⁹ Verrocchio clearly followed the Flemish taste for a realistic depiction of gold brocaded fabrics. Leonardo may not have adopted this preference in his own work, but in fact he went a step further than his teacher by adopting the oil painting technique, though often combining it with tempera.

In the case of *Ginevra de' Benci* there is no doubt that the Flemish impact reached beyond the oil painting technique. Several authors noted the strong resemblance between Leonardo's *Ginevra* and the *Portrait of a Lady* by Petrus Christus, now in Berlin (fig. 54). Not only do they have the three-quarter pose in common, David Alan Brown and Paula Nuttall even considered some of their features, most notably the eyes, mouth and the expression, to be alike.⁸⁰ Leonardo certainly knew at least one portrait by Christus first-hand, for the Medici inventory lists 'a little panel depicting the head of a French woman, painted in oils, the work of Peter Cresci [Petrus Christus] of Bruges'.⁸¹ The Benci family and Leonardo's tutor Verrocchio both had close connections with the Medici. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that the Berlin portrait is the portrait mentioned in the inventory and most scholars now tend to reject the possibility.⁸²

The other Flemish painter who may have had a profound influence on Ginevra's portrait is Hans Memling. None of his portraits are recorded in Florence, but Leonardo may

⁷⁶ Some authors have also mentioned similarities with Jan van Eyck, see for instance: Marani 1999, p. 38 (technique of highlighting ringlets); Nuttall 2004, p. 289, note 111 (using finger tips to smoothly blend contours). However, there are no known direct documentary links between Leonardo and portraits by Jan van Eyck.

⁷⁷ For a discussion of the Italian appreciation of Flemish portraiture, see: Nuttall 2002, p. 198-211.

⁷⁸ Dunkerton 2011, p. 6, 24. For an analysis of the different techniques Verrocchio used to render gold brocade, see: Dunkerton and Syson 2010, p. 15-19.

⁷⁹ Suggested by: Brown 1998, p. 54; refuted by: Dunkerton 2011, p. 24, 27-28. Marani, on the contrary, ascribed the dog and the fish to Leonardo on stylistic grounds, see: Marani 1999, p. 29-30.

⁸⁰ Kress 1995, vol. 1, p. 276-277; Brown 1998, p. 110; Nuttall 2004, p. 226. Petrus Christus is also mentioned as Leonardo's most important example by: Hills 1980, p. 615; Kemp 1981, p. 49.

⁸¹ 'una tavoletta dipintovi di una una testa di dama franzese cholorito a olio, opera di Pietro Cresci fa Bruggia', Spallanzani and Gaeta Bertelà 1992, p. 52, fol. 28r. Translation: Stapleford 2013, p. 114.

⁸² On the possible identity of the sitter and the lack of evidence linking the portrait with the Medici, see: New York 1994, p. 166-169. Nuttall, however, still believes the Berlin portrait might be the same as the one mentioned in the Medici inventory, because of the strong similarities with *Ginevra de' Benci*, see: Nuttall 2004, p. 107-108. I thank Bernd Lindemann and Stephan Kemperdick for sharing their views on this portrait with me during a visit in to the Gemäldegalerie on 4 July 2013.

have become acquainted with his work through Bernardo Bembo. Before coming to Florence, Bembo had spent several years at the court of Burgundy from 1471 onwards as Venetian ambassador. During this period, he probably met Memling and at any rate acquired a diptych by the master, depicting Saint Veronica on one panel and John the Baptist on the other.⁸³ Bembo may even have commissioned his portrait from Memling. The latter's *Portrait of a Man*, now in Antwerp, has been identified as Bernardo Bembo on account of the laurel sprig in the foreground and the palm tree in the landscape just behind the sitter's left shoulder that together form of his personal emblem (fig. 55). The antique coin with the portrait of the Roman emperor Nero in the sitter's left hand is a fitting attribute for a humanist collector.⁸⁴ It is quite possible that Bembo took the portrait with him to Florence, which then would account for the similarities found in the landscape backgrounds in both portraits, such as a pond with trees on its banks and the distant mountains.⁸⁵

David Alan Brown has pointed out that Ginevra's plain dress is in harmony with the landscape in the background.⁸⁶ With its blue laces, the brown dress echoes the colour scheme of the background. Although the texture of Ginevra's dress, which is rather undefined, lacks those qualities usually associated with Flemish painting, we cannot rule out that Leonardo found inspiration in Flemish portraiture with respect to this aspect too. Paul Hills has noted that Northern figures and their costumes would have been familiar to Florentine painters in a wide range of media, including paintings and tapestries, most of which are now probably lost.⁸⁷ It is significant to note that Flemish sitters were not portrayed wearing gold brocaded fabrics. Nor were Florentine women who had their portrait painted in Flanders wearing local fashion, as for instance Maria Baroncelli in her portrait by Memling (fig. 56). According to dress historian Mireille Madou these portraits are a faithful representation of Flemish civil dress. Gold brocades were exclusively worn at court, whereas rich burghers would dress in woollen cloth with a limited use of plain silk. In Flemish painting, gold brocaded dress is almost completely limited to the highest ranks of clergy, saints and exotic figures.⁸⁸ Leonardo may have preferred plain dress to set off the figure against the landscape background, as is often seen in Flemish portraits.

⁸³ On Bembo's stay in Burgundy, see: Giannetto 1985, p. 125-126. The panel with Saint Veronica is now in the National Gallery, Washington (inv. no. 1952.5.46.a), the panel depicting John the Baptist is in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich (inv. no. 652). The diptych is known through correspondence of Bembo and Isabella d'Este, who borrowed it from him, see: De Vos 1994, p. 205, no. 50. The painting was also mentioned by Marcantonio Michiel in his description of the Venetian art collections, although he erroneously identified the female saint as the Virgin Mary: 'El quadretto in due portelle del Zuan Baptista vestito cum lagnello che siede in un paese da una parte, et la nostra donna cun puttino da l'altra in un altro paese, furona de man de Zuan Memglino, l'anno 1470, in salvo el vero.' Michiel 2000, p. 30-31.

⁸⁴ First suggested by: De Vos 1994, p. 190, no. 42 (as one of more possibilities). The identification of Bembo was elaborated by Hilde Lobelle-Caluwé in: Bruges 1998, vol. 2, p. 17 and is endorsed by Till-Holger Borchert in: Madrid / Bruges / New York 2005, p. 160.

⁸⁵ Kress 1995, vol. 1, p. 277-288; Nuttall 2004, p. 224. Paul Hills also noted a strong resemblance between the device on the back of the Ginevra de' Benci and devices seen on the reverse of Memling's portraits. See: Hills 1980, p. 615.

⁸⁶ Brown 1998, p. 114.

⁸⁷ Hills 1980, p. 609.

⁸⁸ Madou 1994, p. 59. According to Madou, the portrait of Maarten van Nieuwenhove (Bruges, Sint-Janshospitaal, inv. no. OSJ.178.1), who wears a velvet doublet with silk ribbons, is an exception in its richness. Compare also: Herald 1981, p. 96, who notes a difference between Italian painting, where saints are depicted in plain drapery, and Northern painting, where gold brocade is hardly worn, except by saints, royalty and exotic foreigners.

3.2. Sculpting fashion

Besides Flemish paintings, portraits in other mediums may have inspired Leonardo's choice to dress Ginevra austerely. Leonardo's teacher Verrocchio was trained as a goldsmith and working as a painter, but he was primarily active as a sculptor. His sculpting work heavily influenced his painting. The sculptural quality of the figures in Verrocchio's paintings is widely recognized, as is his influence in this respect on Leonardo. Ginevra's portrait is no exception and therefore it is often compared to Verrocchio's *Bust of a Lady with Flowers*, which may have inspired Leonardo to include his sitter's hands (figs. 1, 39). This bust is also regarded as a model that Leonardo could have turned to in his desire to break with the convention of painted profile portraits.⁸⁹

It is particularly revealing to extend the comparison of Ginevra's likeness with these busts to the dress of the sculpted female sitters. Verrocchio's *Lady with Flowers* is dressed as simply as Ginevra, although not in exactly the same garments. She wears a free flowing dress that has been gathered at the neckline. A sash with fringed edges is tied around the waist, pulling the dress down at the back. Verrocchio devoted much attention to the rendering of the pleating of the sash and the fabric of the dress around the arms and the upper body. The girl does not wear any jewels. Her cleavage is covered with a veil, similar to Ginevra's. The sitter's hair is bound in a knot and covered with a small cap.

A second female bust by Verrocchio, now in the Frick Collection, shows a more lavishly dressed sitter (fig. 57). Opinions on the dating of the bust, all based on stylistic grounds, vary from the 1460s to the 1480s. It was rightly noted that the sitter's hairstyle with abundant curls on either side of the head does not appear in portraiture prior to c. 1470 and consequently the bust should not be dated earlier, leaving open the possibility of a date in the 1480s.⁹⁰ The sitter wears a *giornea* closed at the front with an elaborate leaf-shaped clasp. On the sleeves of her undergown a textile pattern is indicated in bas-relief, showing a large thistle with seven seeds at its core. Ulrich Middeldorf has interpreted this motif as the testicles that are part of the Colleoni family device and consequently believed he could confirm an earlier identification of the sitter as Medea Colleoni (d. 1470).⁹¹ However, the shape and number of the seeds do not resemble the Colleoni device at all, which is why the identification is now usually dismissed. To this should be added that the bust dates from after Medea's death.⁹² Not particularly convincing is Alison Luchs's tentative idea that this bust represents Albiera degli Albizzi (1457-1473).⁹³

A third bust, attributed either to Verrocchio or to his circle, shows a young woman dressed in a luxurious *cotta* and is now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington (fig. 58).⁹⁴ Eleonora Luciano noted strong similarities between this bust and the *Portrait of a Lady in Red* in the National Gallery in London (fig. 23). Both women wear a cap of the same shape and a *cotta*

⁸⁹ Brown 1998, p. 109-110; Washington 2001, p. 142.

⁹⁰ For an overview of various opinions on the dating of the bust, see: Butterfield 1997, p. 203 (who dates the bust to the 1460s). Eleonora Luciano commented on the hairstyle and tends to date the bust to the 1480s because the sitter's tight sleeves resemble those of Giovanna degli Albizzi, worn in her posthumous portrait by Ghirlandaio that dates from 1488, the year of Giovanna's death, or after (fig. 61). See: Washington 2001, p. 166.

⁹¹ Middeldorf 1977, p. 10-14.

⁹² For the rejection of this identification, see: Butterfield 1997, p. 203. Only challenged by Francesco Caglioti in: Berlin / New York 2011, p. 110-111, cat. 13, adhering to a date of c. 1465-1466 and arguing that variations in heraldic devices are possible, especially on dress.

⁹³ Alessandro Braccesi dedicated a poem to Albiera's marble bust, in which he praised her beauty and lamented her early death. See: Luchs 2012, p. 75-95. However, the identity of the sitter for this particular bust is uncertain due to a lack of written evidence.

⁹⁴ On the attribution, see Alison Wright in: London 1999, p. 324, cat. 82; Eleonora Luciano in: Washington 2001, p. 169, cat. 24.

with sleeves of a different fabric. In the painted portrait this is easily seen through the difference in colour, as well as the size of the pomegranate pattern, which is notably larger on the sleeves. The sculpted bust shows the same size difference, displaying two smaller, symmetrically placed thistles on the bodice and a larger one on each sleeve.⁹⁵ As the sitters of the New York and the Washington busts are shown in sumptuous fabrics, the absence of jewellery on both busts is all the more striking. Verrocchio was not the only sculptor who omitted jewels and sometimes even luxury fabrics, as for instance in his Bargello bust.

As early as the 1460s, the Florentine sculptor Desiderio da Settignano portrayed his female sitters dressed in plain fabrics, wearing hardly any jewellery. The most famous example is the bust now in the Skulpturensammlung of the Staatliche Museen in Berlin (fig. 59).

Notwithstanding a lack of evidence, the sitter is traditionally identified as Marietta di Lorenzo Strozzi, whose marble bust was praised by Vasari.⁹⁶ Desiderio's sitter wears a *gamurra* with a pleated skirt and a tight-fitting bodice that is laced up at the front. He has carefully observed the wrinkles of the sleeves and even meticulously rendered the small tucks where the sleeve is set into the armhole. The only jewellery adorning the young girl is an unobtrusive *frenello* of tiny pearls worn across her forehead.

Another bust, ascribed to Desiderio da Settignano or his workshop, is now in the Bargello in Florence (fig. 60).⁹⁷ The unidentified sitter is similarly dressed, in a laced up *gamurra* that reveals parts of the wrinkled *camicia* underneath. The sitter's neck and part of her back are exposed by a plunging neckline. Her hair has been bound up with ribbons and the only jewel is a head brooch attached to those ribbons. The fine wrinkles of the linen *camicia* form a marked contrast with the bold pleats of the sleeves and the tightly fitted material of the bodice. In both cases, the sculptor was more concerned with a meticulous rendering of the draping of the various fabrics than of textures and patterns.

It has gone unnoticed so far that the vogue for plainly dressed sitters first took off in sculpted marble busts and painted portraits followed soon afterwards.⁹⁸ In the 1460s and 1470s we encounter both austere and more lavishly dressed sitters in sculpted marble busts. None of the busts shows lavish jewellery, though it would have been appropriate given the social standing of the sitters. In fact, most sitters were portrayed without any jewellery at all, even those wearing sumptuous dress made of patterned fabrics. This may be easily explained by the nature of the different mediums. Carving the pattern of a gold brocaded pile-on-pile or voided velvet is a demanding task, as is a faithful rendering of jewellery, and the effort invested would not add significantly to the aesthetic appeal of the image. On the contrary, the pattern of a fabric

⁹⁵ For some scholars these different motifs were a reason to doubt the status of the bust as a fifteenth-century original. For references, see: Eleonora Luciano in: Washington 2001, p. 169, cat. 24. However, the combination of a bodice and sleeves of contrasting fabrics was characteristic of Florentine Quattrocento fashion.

⁹⁶ The identification of the Berlin bust as Marietta Strozzi was recently upheld by Francesco Caglioti in: Berlin / New York 2011, p. 107-109, cat. 12; Florence / Paris 2013, p. 506, cat. X.17. Coonin objected to this identification and suggested the bust by Desiderio da Settignano now in the Bargello is a more likely candidate (fig. 60), see: Coonin 2009, p. 49. Unlike male busts, female busts lack inscriptions, which makes a sound identification of the sitter impossible.

⁹⁷ For a critical discussion of the attribution, see Marc Bormand in: Paris 2006, p. 146-148.

⁹⁸ In portrait medals, a medium used in Florence for female portraits only from the 1480s onwards, sitters are usually depicted wearing plain dress combined with a necklace with a pendant, such as the portrait medal of Ludovica Tornabuoni (fig. 32). Other examples are the portrait medals of Francesca de' Lapi, Lodovica Morelli, Maria Morelli, Maria de' Mucini, Maria Poliziana, Costantia Oricellar, Camilla Buondelmonti and Giovanna degli Albizzi. See: Hill 1930, nos. 979, 985, 989-9912, 1002, 1011-1012, 1021.

would distract attention from the three-dimensional qualities that are essential to a bust. To the Renaissance sculptor, the main focus was on volume rather than surface details such as textile designs. All busts reveal a great interest in drapery as an effective means of conveying body mass and sometimes even the suggestion of movement. Since Leonardo was trained in a sculptor's workshop, scholars have generally accepted the idea that he adopted the sculptural qualities of Verrocchio's figures, especially in his early works. However, the plain dress and the absence of jewellery in the portrait of Ginevra de' Benci may have their origins in marble busts as well.

4.1. Ginevra's portrait and the *paragone*

The comparison of painting with sculpture as well as with other art forms continued to play an important role throughout Leonardo's career. In his later writings, he would devote much attention to the question which art form was superior over the others, a discussion that is known as the *paragone*, which literally means comparison. The origin of the debate was rooted in antiquity, when painting and sculpture were compared with the literary arts in order to demonstrate the merits of the latter.⁹⁹ Renaissance theorists often referred to this practice. A classical source that was explicitly mentioned by Leon Battista Alberti in his *Treatise on Painting* was the Graeco-Roman writer and rhetorician Lucian of Samosta (c. 120-c. 180), who addressed the issue in his *Eikones*, written in Greek.¹⁰⁰ In this dialogue two men, Lycinus and Polystratus, discuss the beauty of Panthea, the mistress of emperor Verus. Lycinus praises Panthea's physical appearance, comparing it to the images of beautiful women by ancient Greek sculptors, painters and poets. Polystratus, however, argues that Panthea's true beauty is not of a physical but rather a spiritual nature. He convinces his interlocutor that both her inner and her outer beauty are more accurately conveyed in writing than in painting, a medium that could not depict Panthea's character. Only the orator, he claims, can successfully describe both outer and inner beauty. His work is therefore more enduring and more pleasing than the other art forms.

These ideas were echoed in the tradition of vernacular poetry, above all by Petrarch, who devoted two sonnets to Simone Martini's portrait of his beloved Laura (app. 5A and 5B).¹⁰¹ In the first, he addressed the ancient Greek sculptor Polyclitus, who was famous for his selection of the most beautiful body parts of different women in order to create an image of perfect beauty. The poet states that even if Polyclitus were to look for a thousand years, he would never find such beauty as Laura's. Petrarch further exclaimed that Simone must have painted Laura's portrait in heaven, for on earth, where mortality reigns, it would be an impossible achievement. In the second sonnet, he mourns the fact that the portrait is not alive for it lacks speech and mind. As Elizabeth Cropper pointed out in one of her seminal articles on female beauty in Italian Renaissance portraiture, painters and art theorists such as Alberti were profoundly influenced by the ancient *paragone* tradition and tried to disprove the poet's exclusive claim to the conveyance of virtue and beauty.¹⁰²

Leonardo da Vinci is known to be one of the chief fifteenth-century contributors to the *paragone* debate. The first chapter of the *Trattato della pittura* is entirely devoted to it. Contrary to the ancient authors, Leonardo did not only contrasted the visual and literary arts, but also the

⁹⁹ Farago 1992, p. 32-35, with further references.

¹⁰⁰ Alberti 1972, p. 94-95, Book III, 53. Lucian's text is published and translated in: Lucian 1913-67, vol. 4, p. 256-295 (1925). See also: Cropper 1986, p. 175-176.

¹⁰¹ The painter's inability to convey a lady's character and the lifelike portrait lacking voice or breath became true *topoi* in vernacular poetry. On this subject, see: Rogers 1986, p. 291-299. For various Greek epigrams concerning the same issue, see also: Shearman 1995, p. 114.

¹⁰² Cropper 1986, p. 175-182.

different mediums within the visual arts, that is painting and sculpture, and he included music as well. Painting, Leonardo argued, is actually a science, based on linear perspective, and therefore the highest art form. Music, although a 'sister art', is of lesser standing because it is ephemeral. Poetry is also inferior because it consists of mere words, whereas painting is a direct reflection of nature.¹⁰³ Leonardo provided an example: 'Take a poet who describes the beauties of a lady to her lover, and take a painter who figures her, you will see where nature will lead the enamoured judge.'¹⁰⁴ He elaborated on the same argument later on in the text:

And, if the poet says he kindles love in men, this is the principle thing in all species of animals. The painter has the power to do the same, and much more because he puts the actual effigy of the thing loved in front of the lover. Often the lover kisses the effigy and speaks to it, which he would not do if the same beauties were put in front of him by the writer. [The painter] overpowers the imagination of men even more, for he makes them love and fall in love with a painting that does not represent any living woman.¹⁰⁵

Leonardo continues this defence of painting with a story that refers to Ovid's account of the sculptor Pygmalion, who fell in love with a statue he had carved. Leonardo tells of a man who bought one of his paintings depicting a female saint. The man fell in love with it and returned to Leonardo, asking to have the attributes of the saint removed, so that he could freely caress and kiss the image. In the end, he decided to remove the painting from his house to extinguish his ardour. Finally, Leonardo regards painting to be superior to sculpture on the basis of its intellectual merits. The practice of sculpture requires more physical effort and moreover lacks qualities such as the contrast of light and dark, colour and linear perspective.¹⁰⁶

Wendy Steadman Sheard argued that Leonardo became acquainted with these topics in Verrocchio's workshop, and later introduced them in Milan. The fact that Verrocchio was a sculptor as well as a painter would by definition have aroused a discussion on the merits of the two arts.¹⁰⁷ The artist's workshop, however, was not the only place where the *paragone* was debated. The topic was also high on the agenda in the intellectual circle of the Medici. The Neo-Platonist Marsilio Ficino, who was a trusted friend of Bernardo Bembo, wrote about the issue several times.¹⁰⁸ In a letter addressed to Bembo and Lorenzo de' Medici, he argues that the sight of virtue is far more convincing than a description with words, his message being remarkably similar to Leonardo's:

It is pointless for you to praise a maiden to the ears of a young man and describe her in words in order to inflict upon him pangs of love, when you can bring her beautiful form before his eyes. Point, if you can,

¹⁰³ For a summary of Leonardo's arguments, see: Farago 1992, p. 92-94.

¹⁰⁴ 'Tolgassi un poeta che descriva le bellezze d'una donna al suo innamorato, et tolgassi un pittore che la figuri, vedrassi dove la natura volgera più il giudicatore innamorato.' Transcription and translation: Farago 1992, p. 210-211, no. 19, lines 39-42.

¹⁰⁵ 'et se 'l poeta dice di fare accendere gli homini ad amare è cosa principale della spetie di tutti gli animali. Il pittore à potenza di fare il medesimo e tanto più che vi mette inanzi a l'amante la propria effigie della cosa amata. Il quale speso fa con quella bacciandola e parlando con quella, quello che no farebbe con le medesme bellezze postole inanzi dal scrittore. E tanto più supera l'ingegni de li homini, ad amare et innamorarsi di pittura che no rapresenta alcuna donna viva.' Transcription and translation: Farago 1992, p. 230-231, no. 25, lines 18-27. Farago does not translate 'ingegni'. She regards Leonardo's use of the terms 'imaginatione', 'fantasia' and 'ingegno' as almost indistinguishable. See: Farago 1992, p. 213, notes 71 and 72.

¹⁰⁶ See especially: Farago 1992, p. 257-261, chapter 36.

¹⁰⁷ Sheard 1992, p. 79, esp. note 57.

¹⁰⁸ On Bernardo Bembo's circle of Florentine friends and their philosophical discussions, see: Bolzoni 2010, p. 334-344, and esp. p. 334-335 for his relation with Marsilio Ficino.

to her beautiful form; then you have no further need of words. For it is impossible to say how much more easily and powerfully Beauty herself calls forth love than do words. Therefore, if we bring into the view of man the marvellous sight of Virtue herself, there will be no further need of our persuading words: the vision itself will persuade more quickly than can be conceived.¹⁰⁹

Leonardo thus found himself in an environment where the *paragone* must have been lively debated. Not only his teacher, but also his teacher's patrons, the Medici, as well as the most likely patron of Ginevra's portrait, Bernardo Bembo, were involved in the philosophical discussion.

Martin Kemp was the first in 1981 to acknowledge that Leonardo may have had the *paragone* in mind when he was working on the *Ginevra de' Benci*. Kemp suggests that some of Leonardo's later arguments on the superiority of painting over sculpture were 'precociously rehearsed' in the portrait.¹¹⁰ It was Elizabeth Cropper, however, who in 1986 firmly placed Leonardo's portrait in the *paragone* tradition. She pointed out that the juniper (*ginepro*) behind Ginevra's head functions as a pun on her name in the same way Petrarch played with the name Laura and the Italian word for laurel, *lauro*.¹¹¹ More importantly, Cropper also connected the reverse of the portrait with Petrarch's poetry. In the emblem, which had not yet been identified as Bembo's at the time, she recognized the palm and laurel branch that Petrarch describes in a poem. Laura's spirit comes to visit him after her death, carrying a little palm branch and a laurel branch. When the poet asks her what these branches mean, she replies:

Answer yourself, you whose pen so honours one of them. The palm is victory, and I when still young conquered the world and myself; the laurel means triumph, of which I am worthy, thanks to that Lord who gave me strength.¹¹²

Cropper thus interpreted the emblem as a visual means to portray Ginevra's character and virtue that, as the device states, adorned her beauty. According to Cropper, by using a metaphor derived from Petrarch, 'the poet's denial of the validity of painted appearance is refuted through

¹⁰⁹ 'Frustra puellam adolescentis auribus laudas verbisque describis, quo stimulos illi amoris incutias, ubi ipsam pulchrae puellae formam adolescentis oculis queas offerre. Monstra, (si potes) fomosam digito, nihil amplius hic tibi opus est verbis. Dicit enim non potest quando facilius vehementiusque pulchritudo ipsa, quam verba provocet ad amandum. Ergo si mirabilem virtutis ipsius speciem in conspectum hominum proferamus, haud opus erit suasionibus nostris ulterius, ipsamet citius, quam cogitari persuadebit.' From the letter 'Pictura pulchri corporis et pulchre mentis', Marsilio Ficino to Lorenzo de' Medici and Bernardo Bembo. Ficino 1962, vol. 1, Lib. V, p. 207. Translation: Ficino 1988, p. 66. David Alan Brown already noted that this letter can be read as a 'subtext' for Leonardo's *Ginevra de' Benci*. See: Boskovits and Brown 2003, p. 365, note 14.

¹¹⁰ Kemp 1981, p. 49.

¹¹¹ Cropper 1986, p. 183. Mary Garrard objected to this, reasoning that, according to Leonardo's own statement that 'if Petrarch was so fond of bay, it was because it is of a good taste with sausages and thrush: I cannot put any value on their foolery' ('Se 'l Petrarca amò sì forte il lauro, fu perch' egli è buon fralla salsiccia e tor[do]; io nō posso di lor ciencie far tesaurò'), he disliked Petrarchan allegories. Garrard 1992, p. 63. For Leonardo's remark, see: Richter no. 1332. Kemp placed the joke in the context of anti-Petrarchian burlesque. Although this genre satirized the well-known clichés of Petrarchan poetry, its occurrence in Leonardo's writings does not necessarily exclude the possibility of Petrarchan influence on his work. In fact, Kemp argues that the 'poetic impulse' is key to understanding Leonardo's oeuvre. See: Kemp 1985, p. 203-204.

¹¹² 'Tu medesimo ti rispondi, / tu la cui non penna tanto l'una honora: / palma e victoria, et io, giovene anchora, / vinsi il mondo, et me stessa; il lauro segna / triumpho, ond'io son degna, / merce di quel Signor che mi die' forza', Petrarca 1976, p. 558-559, no. 359.

painting itself.¹¹³ Cropper's theory has been reiterated by several art historians, especially by Charles Dempsey, who once more underlined the combination of physical likeness and inner virtue. He discerningly noted that it is not necessarily Ginevra's true character that is conveyed, but the idea of her virtue projected by her courtly lover Bernardo Bembo. This notion was of course firmly rooted in vernacular love poetry.¹¹⁴

Since Bembo's liaison with Ginevra was the subject of several poems, a direct comparison can be made of how Ginevra is represented in her portrait and in the verses that celebrate her beauty and Bembo's love. In the first of four poems dedicated to 'the beautiful lady, Ginevra de' Benci', Alessandro Braccesi immediately sets the tone: 'One who desired to sing the praises of your character and beauty, for which no other lady has been more famous than you, would try to number the sands of the sea and would attempt too vast a task'.¹¹⁵

The theme of beauty of mind is repeated throughout Cristoforo Landino's writings as well. He dedicated six poems to Bembo, in which we find the same opposition of body and soul. In one of the poems he explains that Bembo did not admire Ginevra for her beauty, which would diminish over time, but for her character. This is the kind of love, Landino reminds the reader, that one should aim for:

For any lover who is bound by beauty alone struggles on slippery grounds with unsteady step. But if anyone loves an excellent mind, a keen intelligence, and a heart filled with varied blessings, he follows the beauty which neither old age nor any great disaster from the sky can spoil. Learn, you mortals, that beauty is to be desired for the mind, and not the body, and learn to love its true glory.¹¹⁶

In another poem, he elaborates on the literary dictum that virtue is expressed through beauty:

Bembo's love is such as the divine page of Plato expresses with the eloquence of Socrates. For love, since desire is excited by the beautiful, loves the beautiful and rejoices in images of beauty. But whatever is good is beautiful, everything base is wrong; thus love demands what is good and avoids what is evil. It is with these flames and with such a love that Bembo is on fire and burns, and Ginevra dwells in the midst of his heart. Her figure indeed is beautiful, and her soul too is beautiful within it; you do not see well, Bembo, which of these is superior. Therefore there is no cause for wonder, for both the virtue and the beauty of your lady give you mighty seeds to make your fire grow.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Cropper 1986, p. 187-189.

¹¹⁴ Dempsey 2012, p. 35-41. Other scholars who connected the *Ginevra de' Benci* with the paragone tradition are: Kress 1995, vol. 3, p. 271-273, Weil-Garris Brandt 1998, p. 15-19; Feinberg 2011, p. 107-109.

¹¹⁵ 'Ille sali numerare licet pertentet arenas / Immensumque nimis aggrediatur opus, / Qui morum et formae studeat tibi dicere laudes, / Te quibus haud unquam clarior ulla fuit.' Cited from: Walker 1967, p. 36, no. 1; translation (John F. C. Richards) p. 37.

¹¹⁶ 'Nam quisquis sola forma vincitur amator, / lubricus instabili nititur ille gradu; / si quis at egregiam mentem, si diligit acre / ingenium et variis corda referta bonis, / hic pulchrum sequitur, quod nec vitare vetustas, / ulla nec a caelo magna ruina potest. / Discite mortales animo, non corpore formam / optandam, et verum discite amare decus.' Cited from: Walker 1967, p. 30, no. VI, lines 21-28; translation (John F. C. Richards) p. 34.

¹¹⁷ 'Talis amor Bembi, qualem divina Platonis / pagina Socratis exprimit eloquiis. / Namque amor a pulchro cum sit, perculsa cupido / pulchrum amat at pulchris gaudet imaginibus; / at quodcumque bonum, pulchrum est, turpe omne nefandum: / sic bona deposcit, sic mala vitat amor. / His flammis Bemus talique accensus amore / uritur, et medio corde Ginevra sedet. / Forma quidem pulchra est, animus quoque pulcher in illa : / horum utrum superet, non bene, Bembe, vides. / Ergo nil mirum est, nam maxima semina flammis / virtus et dominae dant tibi forma tuis.' Cited from: Walker 1967, p. 29, no. V, lines 5-16; translation (John F. C. Richards) p. 32-33.

Landino continues to describe Ginevra's beauty in the familiar tropes of Petrarchan love poetry. Ginevra's hair is golden, her face has the colour of white lilies mixed with red roses, and her neck is snow-white. Venus has sprinkled beauty in her eyes and bright red flowers fade next to her red lips. After this lavish praise, however, the poet expresses his inability to convey Ginevra's character with human voice, referring again to the ancient question which art form is capable of conveying inner virtue.

The poetry dedicated to Ginevra clarifies the humanist spirit of Bembo's circle of literary friends and complements the motto on the back of her portrait. The Benci themselves were also part of this learned milieu. Ginevra's father, Amerigo de' Benci, was a collector of ancient Greek and Latin manuscripts and was a patron of writers and philosophers. As a personal friend of Marsilio Ficino, he had presented him with a manuscript of one of Plato's dialogues in 1462. Benci was a prominent member of the Neo-Platonic academy and even received its members in his private *palazzo*. After his death in 1468 his son Giovanni, with whom Leonardo left part of his possessions when he went off to Milan, continued his father's activities.¹¹⁸ Consequently, the young Leonardo was familiar with Neo-Platonic thought, the tradition of vernacular love poetry and the rivalry of the arts, not only through the members of the Academy and their patrons, including the Medici, the Benci and Bernardo Bembo, but also through the Verrocchio workshop.¹¹⁹

4.2. The poetics of plain dress

Since the *paragone* debate is unanimously accepted as the key context of Ginevra's portrait, it is surprising that her restrained attire has never been analysed from this perspective, especially since Leonardo himself devoted a passage to female beauty and dress (app. 1, no. 1):

Do you not see that among human beauties it is a very beautiful face and not rich ornaments that stops passers-by? And this I say to you who adorn your figures with gold or other rich trimmings, do you not see beautiful young people diminish their excellence with excessive ornamentation? Have you never seen women in the hills wrapped in plain and poor cloths possessing greater beauty than those who are adorned?

Here Leonardo strongly objects to the depiction of jewellery and other ornaments in painting.¹²⁰ He continues along the same lines with a discussion on hairstyles (app. 1, no. 1):

Do not paint affected curls or hair-dressings such as are worn by fools fearful that a single, misplaced lock will bring disgrace upon them and that bystanders will be diverted from their own thoughts and talk of nothing else and blame them. Such people have the mirror and comb for their advisors, and the wind that disarranges their carefully dressed hair is their main enemy. Depict hair which an imaginary wind causes to play about youthful faces, and adorn heads you paint with curling locks of various kinds. Do not do like those who plaster hair with glue, making faces appear as if turned to glass, another increased madness for

¹¹⁸ Brown 1998, p. 119-121. On Amerigo de' Benci, see Y. Renouard-E. Ragni in: DBI vol. 8 (1966), s.v. 'Benci, Amerigo', p. 182-183.

¹¹⁹ On the influence of the Neo-Platonists on Leonardo's later writings on, amongst other issues, the *paragone*, compare: Kemp 1985, p. 197-200.

¹²⁰ Dress historians interpret this passage as an advice on how to dress properly. See for instance: Herald 1981, p. 158; Gnignera 2010, p. 195. In my opinion, this is not Leonardo's objective. Instead, he addresses the painter, as becomes especially clear in the second part of this passage, cited below, which contains directions for the painter, such 'do not paint affected curls...' or 'depict hair...'. Leonardo's own dress preferences and his attitude towards dressing ostentatiously in reality will be discussed in chapter 3, in the section entitled 'Leonardo and personal adornment', p. 104-106.

those for whom it is not enough that mariners coming from eastern parts should bring gum arabic to prevent the wind from changing the order of their ringlets, so that they must still keep seeking a remedy.

This part of the *Trattato della pittura* is little-known among art historians and its sources have yet to be traced.¹²¹ Leonardo probably wrote this passage around 1492, when he had already been working in Milan for about a decade.¹²² However, the origin of the ideas presented here is much older and Leonardo had probably already become acquainted with this notion of beauty through the circle of Neo-Platonists when he was still living in Florence.

Recently, Kelly Olson studied the opinions on women's dress and beauty expressed by ancient Roman writers. It is remarkable how similar their ideas are to Leonardo's. To the Romans, Olson summarizes, beauty and ethics were closely linked. It was feared that women had such strong cravings for precious jewellery that they were willing to trade sexual favours for it. Modesty, however, was considered crucial to a woman's beauty. Thus the younger Seneca writes to his mother that one ornament, *pudicitia* (chastity), is her greatest honour. A woman should adorn herself with chastity instead of gold and pearls, which would only distract from her natural beauty. Plutarch, for example, stated that it is not gold, precious stones and scarlet that make a woman beautiful, but dignity, good behaviour and modesty instead.¹²³

Cicero (106 BC-43 BC) is another Roman author who touched upon the subject of female beauty and the absence of ornament. In his book on rhetoric, *Orator*, he distinguishes three styles of speaking in public: plain, highly adorned and a style in between those two. When explaining the first type, he compares its beauty with that of an unadorned woman:

Just as some women are said to be handsomer when unadorned – this very lack of ornament becomes them – so this plain style gives pleasure when unembellished: there is something in both cases which lends greater charm, but without showing itself. Also all noticeable ornament, pearls as it were, will be excluded; not even curling irons will be used; all cosmetics, artificial red and white, will be rejected; only elegance and neatness will remain.¹²⁴

Cicero's argumentation contains noteworthy similarities to Leonardo's text. Not only do both of them argue that absence of ornament can increase a woman's beauty, they both advise avoiding artificial curls as well. Although Leonardo only learned to read Latin at a later age, there are several ways in which he could have familiarized himself with Cicero's ideas. For instance, Bernardo Bembo owned a copy of Cicero's *Orator*.¹²⁵ Cicero was admired by the Florentine humanists as well and Leon Battista Alberti, whose treatise on painting was a source of

¹²¹ An exception is: Syson 2011, p. 29. Syson connects the passage with Vespasiano da Bisticci's story of the Siennese ambassador in Naples, whose extravagant clothes of gold tissue were ruined when all the moderately dressed Neapolitan courtiers deliberately rubbed against him in a small room. To my mind, however, Bisticci and Leonardo had different objectives. Leonardo's remarks concern painting, whereas Bisticci comments on extravagant dress at court, a concern that Leonardo did not share. See also the previous footnote.

¹²² Date suggested by: Pedretti 1964, p. 195.

¹²³ Olson 2008, p. 89-92, with reference to a wide variety of Roman writers on the subject.

¹²⁴ 'Nam ut mulieres pulchriores esse dicuntur nonnullae inornatae quas ad ipsum deceat, sic haec subtilis oratio etiam incompta delectate; fit enim quidam in utroque, quo sit venustius sed non ut appareat. Tum removelibur omnis insignis ornatus quasi margaritum, ne calamistri quidem adhibebuntur. Fucati vero medicamenta candoris et ruboris Omnia repellentur: elegantia modo et munditia remanebit.' Cicero 1939, p. 362-365 (translation: Harry Mortimer Hubbell).

¹²⁵ The manuscript is now in the British Library in London (Add MS 10965). It was probably copied in Florence around 1415-20 and the appearance of a typical *manicula* (pointing hand to indicate a part of the text) in Bembo's style, firmly establishes his ownership. See: Giannetto 1985, p. 419.

inspiration for Leonardo, encouraged painters to learn from the art of rhetoric and poetry: 'Next, it will be of advantage if they [painters] take pleasure in poets and orators, for these have many ornaments in common with the painter.'¹²⁶

Hellmut Wohl has argued that Cicero's concept of beauty was indeed incorporated in art theory by at least one of the Florentine humanists, namely Cristoforo Landino, who had also written poetry dedicated to Bembo and Ginevra. When Landino published his edition of Dante's *Divina Commedia* in 1481, he included a homage to several fifteenth-century Florentine artists in the preface, including Masaccio:

Masaccio was an excellent imitator of nature, with great and comprehensive relief, a good composer and pure without *ornato*, because he devoted himself solely to the imitation of the truth and to the relief of his figures. He was as sure and good a master of perspective as anyone in those times, and worked with great facility.¹²⁷

According to Wohl, the description of Masaccio's style stands out in the art criticism of its day and the phrase 'puro senza ornato' is a direct reference to Cicero's description of the unadorned style.¹²⁸

Alberti was greatly influenced by Cicero as well and the latter's ideas not only permeate the treatise on painting. In his writings on family life, the *Libri della famiglia*, written between 1433 and 1440, we again encounter a notion of female beauty similar to Cicero's.¹²⁹ Alberti composed his four books on the family as a fictional dialogue between several members of the Alberti clan, amongst whom the elderly and mature Giannozzo and the younger Lionardo. When they discuss in the second book why a future wife has to be beautiful, Lionardo expresses the familiar view that inner and outer beauty are inextricably linked. He states: 'It is a well-known saying among poets: "Beautiful character dwells in a beautiful body."¹³⁰ In book three they elaborate on the subject of wearing make-up, after Lionardo remarks that the ancient authors he likes to read instructed their wives not to cover themselves with powders and dyes, so as not to appear less virtuous than they were.¹³¹ Giannozzo thereupon recalls how he reprimanded his own wife when she once wore make-up:

The woman's character is the jewel of her family; the mother's purity has always been a part of the dowry she passes on to her daughters; her purity has always far outweighed her beauty. A beautiful face is praised, but unchaste eyes make it ugly through men's scorn and too often flushed with shame or pale with sorrow and melancholy. A handsome person is pleasing to see, but a shameless gesture or an act of incontinence in an instant renders her appearance vile.¹³²

¹²⁶ 'Proxime non ab re erit se poetis atque rhetoribus delctabuntur.' Alberti 1972, p. 94-95, Book III, 53 (translation: Cecil Grayson).

¹²⁷ 'Fu Masaccio ottimo imitatore di natura, di gran rilievo universale, buono compositore et puro senza ornato, perche solo si decte all'imitatione del vero, et al rilievo delle figure: fu certo et buono prospettivo quanto altro di quegli tempi et di gran faciliti nel fare.' Italian text and translation cited from: Wohl 1993, p. 256.

¹²⁸ For a comparison of Landino's text on Masaccio with other contemporary writings on the same painter and with Cicero, see: Wohl 1993, p. 256-257.

¹²⁹ On the importance of Cicero to Alberti's writings, see: Spencer 1957, p. 34-36.

¹³⁰ 'Notissimo tra i poeti detto: "Gratissima virtù vien d'un bel corpo."' Alberti 1969b, Book II, p. 133. Translation: Alberti 1969a, p. 116.

¹³¹ Make-up is extensively discussed by many ancient authors and its use was often associated with sexual impurity. For an overview, see: Olson 2008, p. 58-68, 80-81.

¹³² 'La onestà della donna sempre fu ornamento della famiglia; la onestà della madre sempre fu parte di dote alle figliuole; la onestà in ciascuna sempre più valse che ogni bellezza. Lodasi il bello viso, ma e'

This chastity, he explained to his wife, should be safeguarded through virtuous behaviour and a modest appearance:

To be praised for your chastity, you must shun every deed that lacks true nobility [...]. You will disdain, first of all, those vanities which some females imagine will please men. All made up and plastered and painted and dressed in lascivious and improper clothing, they suppose they are more attractive to men than when adorned with true simplicity and true virtue. Vain and foolish women are these who imagine that when they appear in make-up and look far from virtuous they will be praised by those who see them. They do not realize that they are provoking disapproval and harming themselves.¹³³

Marani has proposed an altogether different ancient source for Leonardo's preference for plain dress. Although he has not considered Leonardo's own writings on the subject, he did notice that the attire of the *Lady with an Ermine*, identified as Cecilia Gallerani and painted about fifteen years after *Ginevra de' Benci*, is fairly plain, especially in comparison to other Milanese court portraits (fig. 3). Marani suggested Leonardo knew Lucian's *Essay on the House*, in which a decorated ceiling of a hall is compared to a woman who needs but few ornaments to highlight her beauty. The ceiling should not be decorated too lavishly, Lucian states:

but only in such a degree as would suffice a modest and beautiful woman to set off her beauty - a delicate chain round her neck, a light ring on her finger, pendants in her ears, a buckle, a band that confines the luxuriance of her hair and adds as much to her good looks as a purple border adds to a gown. It is courtesans, especially the less attractive of them, who have clothing all purple and necks all gold, trying to secure seductiveness by extravagance and to make up for their lack of beauty by the addition of extraneous charms; they think that their arms will look better when they are bright with gold, and that the unshapeliness of their feet will escape notice in golden sandals, and that their very faces will be lovelier when seen together with something very bright. This is the course they follow; but a modest girl uses only what gold is sufficient and necessary, and would not be ashamed of her beauty, I am sure, if she were to show it unadorned.¹³⁴

disonesti occhi lo fanno lordo di biasimo e spesso troppo acceso di vergogna o pallido di dolore e tristezza d'animo. Piace una signorile persona, ma uno disonesto cenno, uno atto di incontinenza subito la rende vilissima.' Alberti 1969b, Book III, p. 272-273. Translation: Alberti 1969a, p. 215

¹³³ 'Adunque, volendo essere lodata di tua onestà, tu fuggirai ogni atto non lodato [...]. E in prima arai in odio tutte quelle leggerezze colle quali alcune femmine studiano piacere agli uomini, credendosi così lisciate, impiastrate e dipinte, in quelli loro abiti lascivi e inonesti, più essere agli uomini grate che monstrandosi ornate di pura semplicità e vera onestà; ché bene sono stultissime e troppo vane femmine, ove porgendosi lisciate e disoneste credono essere da chi le guata lodate, e non s'aveggono del biasimo loro e del danno.', Alberti 1969b, Book III, p. 273. Translation: Alberti 1969a, p. 215.

¹³⁴ 'ἄλλ' ὅπόσον ἂν καὶ γυναικὶ σώφρωνι καὶ καλῇ ἀρκεσθῇ ἐπισημότερον ἐργάσασθαι τὸ κάλλος, ἢ περὶ τῇ δειρῇ λεπτός τις ὄρμος ἢ περὶ τῷ δακτύλῳ σφενδόνη εὐφορος ἢ ἐν τοῖν ὅτοιιν ἐλλόβια ἢ πόρπη τις ἢ ταινία τὸ ἄφρετον τῆς κόμης συνδέουσα, τοσοῦτον τῇ εὐμορφίᾳ προστιθεῖσα ὅσον τῇ ἐσθῇτι ἢ πορφύρα: αἱ δέ γε ἑταῖραι, καὶ μάλιστα αἱ ἀμορφότεραι αὐτῶν, καὶ τὴν ἐσθῆτα ὅλην πορφυρεῖν καὶ τὴν δειρὴν χρυσεῖν πεποιήνται, τῷ πολυτελεῖ θηρώμεναι τὸ ἐπαγωγὸν καὶ τὸ ἐνδέον τῷ καλῷ προσθέσει τοῦ ἔξωθεν τερπνοῦ παραμυθούμεναι: ἡγοῦνται γὰρ καὶ τὴν ὠλένην αὐταῖς στιλπνοτέραν φανεῖσθαι συναπολάμπουσιν τῷ χρυσεῖ καὶ τοῦ ποδὸς τὸ μὴ εὐπερίγραφον λήσειν ὑπὸ χρυσεῖ σκευάλει καὶ τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτὸ ἐρασμιώτερον γενήσεσθαι τῷ φαεινοτάτῳ συνορώμενον. ἄλλ' ἐκεῖναι μὲν οὕτως: ἡ δέ γε σώφρων χρυσεῖ μὲν τὰ ἀρκοῦντα καὶ μόνον τὰ ἀναγκαῖα προσχρῆται, τὸ δ' αὐτῆς κάλλος οὐκ ἂν αἰσχύνειτο, οἶμαι, καὶ γυμνῇ δεικνύουσα.' Lucian 1913-67, vol. 1 (1913), p. 184-185, no. 7 (translation: A. M. Harmon).

Marani pointed out that Cecilia wears the jewels that Lucian listed, a necklace and a ribbon to gather her hair.¹³⁵ The similarities, however, are not as precise as he suggested, for Cecilia does not wear rings on her fingers or earrings. According to Marani, there are several ways in which Leonardo could have become acquainted with Lucian's *Essay on the House*. He may have been introduced to the text through Alberti, who refers to Lucian in his treatise on painting when he recalls the story of Apelles and Calumny, or through another writer. Leonardo may even have owned a copy of the essay himself. A list that he drew up of the books in his possession still survives and includes a 'Luchano'.¹³⁶

As Alberti remarked in the *Libri della famiglia*, there is more than one Roman author who favoured female beauty without adornment and it is very well possible that Leonardo and the humanists around him were inspired by several ancient texts. There is a second text by Lucian, however, that in any case seems to be a far more likely source than the *Essay on the House* as suggested by Marani. In his *Eikones*, discussed above as a major source for the *paragone* debate, Lucian proposed the same argument. After Lycinus has praised the beauty of the woman he encountered, Polystratus comments that he has praised only her physical appearance and not her character, 'as if one were to admire her clothing rather than her person,' he explains. He continues: 'Perfect beauty, to my mind, is when there is a union of spiritual excellence and physical loveliness.'¹³⁷ He elaborates the argument, stating:

Beauty, then, is not enough unless it is set off with its just enhancements, by which I mean not purple raiment and necklaces, but those I have already mentioned – virtue, self-control, goodness, kindliness, and everything else that is included in the definition of virtue.¹³⁸

According to Lucian, a truly beautiful woman is virtuous and has no need for the further enhancement of superfluous jewellery. The sartorial argument is thus intrinsically part of *paragone* debate from the very start.

Besides in rhetoric and art theory, plain beauty was a theme that appeared in vernacular Italian poetry as well. In *canto XV* of the *Paradiso*, Dante recalls the Florentine customs in the old days, when greed had not yet caught hold of women:

Florence, within the ancient boundary / From which she taketh still her tierce and nones, / Abode in quiet, temperate and chaste. // No golden chain she had, nor coronal, / Nor ladies shod with sandal shoon, nor girdle / That caught the eye more than the person did.¹³⁹

In these lines, Dante not only connected modest dress with virtue, but he also made the statement that Leonardo would use as well in the *Trattato della pittura*: a woman should not wear ornaments that outshine her person.

¹³⁵ Marani 1999, p. 172.

¹³⁶ Marani 1999, p. 172-173, see also p. 203, note 45. The list of Leonardo's books is published in: Reti 1968, p. 81, no. 36.

¹³⁷ ὅτι γὰρ προκεκρισθαι ταῦτα τοῦ σώματος ἐπεὶ ἄλογον ἂν εἴη καὶ γελοῖον, ὥσπερ εἴ τις τὴν ἐσθῆτα πρὸ τοῦ σώματος θαυμάζοι. τὸ δ' ἐντελὲς κάλλος, οἶμαι, τοῦτο ἐστίν, ὁπόταν εἰς τὸ αὐτὸ συνδράμῃ ψυχῆς ἀρετὴ καὶ εὐμορφία σώματος.' Lucian 1913-67, p. 276-277, vol. 4 (1925), no. 11 (translation: A. M. Harmon).

¹³⁸ 'Οὐ τοίνυν ἀπόχρη τὸ κάλλος, εἰ μὴ κεκόσμηται τοῖς δικαίοις κοσμήμασι, λέγω δὴ οὐκ ἐσθῆτι ἀλουργεῖ καὶ ὄρμοις, ἀλλ' οἷς προσεῖπον ἐκεῖνοις, ἀρετῇ καὶ σωφροσύνῃ καὶ ἐπιεικείᾳ καὶ φιλανθρωπίᾳ καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ὅποσα ταύτης ὄρος ἐστίν.' Lucian 1913-67, no. 11, vol. 4 (1925), p. 278-279 (translation: A. M. Harmon).

¹³⁹ 'Fiorenza dentro da la cerchia antica, / ond' ella toglie ancora e terza e nona, / si stava in pace, sobria e pudica. // Non avea catenella, non corona, / non gonne contigiate, non cintura / che fosse a veder più che la persona.' *Paradiso*, XV, 97-102. Translation: Alighieri 1867, p. 541.

Petrarch elaborated on the subject as well. Sonnet 263 in the *Canzoniere* perhaps comes closer to Leonardo's *Ginevra de' Benci* than any other literary source (app. 5C). The poet starts with the exclamation that the 'victorious triumphal tree, the honour of emperors and of poets' has made his days both joyful and sorrowful. The tree is of course the laurel (*lauro*), denoting Petrarch's beloved Laura in the same way as the juniper (*ginepro*) serves as a pun on Ginevra's name. In the second verse the poet addresses Laura directly, stating that she is more honourable than anyone else and therefore immune to the traps of love. The last strophes elaborate on Laura's virtue:

Nobility of blood and the other things / prized among us, pearls and rubies and gold, / like a vile burden, you equally despise. // Your high beauty, which has no equal in the world, / is painful to you except insofar as it seems / to adorn and set off your lovely treasure of chastity.

Petrarch underlines Laura's disapproval of earthly splendour. She looks down on riches such as gems and gold and her own physical beauty is only acceptable to her because it is the outer sign of her inner virtue. Both obverse and reverse of Ginevra's portrait are explained through the sonnet. Like Laura, Ginevra is virtuously dressed without the otherwise prevalent pearls, rubies and gold, while the inscription 'VIRTUTEM FORMA DECORAT' added later to the reverse of the panel is an apt summary of Petrarch's last lines.

Ginevra's plain dress, whether it was Bernardo Bembo or perhaps Leonardo himself who instigated the idea, was motivated by principles of art theory and rooted in ideas on female beauty as expressed by antique writers and Tuscan poets writing in the vernacular. Ginevra's portrait is quintessentially part of the *paragone* debate as it evolved in humanist circles at the time. Her unadorned attire serves to emphasize her beauty and the virtues of her character. Inspired by Dante, Petrarch and harking back to ancient writers, most notably Cicero and Lucian, a new paradigm of representing female beauty in portraiture had emerged.

5. Dress in Florentine portraiture after *Ginevra de' Benci*

This chapter has dealt with the question why Ginevra de' Benci is depicted in plain dress. Flemish portraiture has been explored as a possible source, but a more likely and potent one is sculpture. Leonardo was profoundly influenced by sculpted portrait busts of women, which also often lack ornamented fabrics and jewellery. As a painter he was not only influenced by sculpture, but he even tried to outdo the latter art form. Rivalling the sculptor and the poet, he demonstrated that painting was better equipped to convey both inner and outer beauty than the other arts. It is generally recognized that Ginevra's portrait should be seen in the light of the *paragone* tradition. Since the idea that a plainly dressed woman is more beautiful than one decked out in finery was already present in Lucian's early writings on the *paragone*, and was reiterated in the vernacular poetry of Dante and Petrarch, we should now regard Ginevra's dress as a means to underline both her physical and spiritual beauty.

After c. 1480 female portraits depicting soberly dressed sitters became commonplace in Florence. It is not clear what exactly led to this trend, or whether, for instance, Leonardo's portrait of Ginevra influenced the trend. Jennifer Craven was inclined to relate the change in representational taste to the sumptuary law of 1472. Up until that time lawmakers had granted women more luxury with every new law. In 1472 this increasing leniency came to a sudden halt when a much stricter law was issued. To mention just one of its more stringent articles, all women were forbidden to wear jewellery, pearls and gold or silver ornaments, except for three rings and one brooch. According to Craven, these new sumptuary ethics inspired the new mode

of portraiture in the 1470s and continued to exert their influence throughout the 1480s, when they were reinforced.¹⁴⁰

However, a closer understanding of how sumptuary legislation functioned, makes Craven's suggestion unlikely. It is a known fact that the enforcement of these laws was rarely effective. Moreover, the higher classes, which were the ones who had their portraits painted, were often exempted. In fact, a preliminary chronological consideration of trousseaux suggests an accumulation of wealth resulting in an increase rather than a decrease of the number of garments in general, and luxurious dress in particular in the course of the fifteenth century.¹⁴¹ In the same period dowries were rising as well. In his study on marriage alliances Anthony Molho has described this process as the 'aristocratization' of the Florentine elite, resulting in a more luxurious lifestyle. He regards the sumptuary law of 1472 as a vain attempt of the Florentine legislators to put this development to a stop.¹⁴²

The plain attire with which Florentine women were represented in their portraits in the last quarter of the fifteenth century seems at odds with the actual increase in ownership of luxurious dress. It is striking, however, that all portrait painters who represented their sitters in plain dress, such as Botticelli and Lorenzo di Credi, are in one way or another associated with the Verrocchio studio. A rare exception of a lavishly attired sitter can be found in the oeuvre of Domenico Ghirlandaio. Whereas the other female portraits ascribed to him fit in the austere mode of portraiture, his posthumous portrait of Giovanna degli Albizzi (1468-1488) shows magnificent dress and jewellery and depicts the sitter in profile view (fig. 61). Giovanna married Lorenzo Tornabuoni (1468-1497) in 1486. She bore him a child, Giovannino, in 1487 and died during her second pregnancy in 1488.¹⁴³

Giovanna is portrayed with a *giornea* showing a pointed diamond surrounded by flames, a device of the Tornabuoni family, and a double 'L' on her shoulder, referring to her husband Lorenzo.¹⁴⁴ Some scholars identified the fabric as gold brocade, but Rembrandt Duits suggested

¹⁴⁰ Craven 1997, p. 190-198. On the 1472 sumptuary law and the underlying reasons for the stricter attitude of the *signoria*, see: Rainey 1985, p. 535-560. The law was published by: Mazzi 1908a, p. 48-52.

¹⁴¹ Available inventories of *donora* show that the number of garments steadily increased in the course of the century. Caterina Corsini received two overgarments and one dress for her marriage to Nicholò di Branchazio Rucellai in 1419, just like her sister Tita six years later for her marriage to Bartolomeo di Lucha Rinieri in 1425 (see: Petrucci 1965, p. 109-110, 124). In 1449 five overgarments and one dress are listed in Bartolomea Dietisalvi's trousseau (see app. 3B, nos. 18-23). Ginevra d'Ugolino Martelli's trousseau of 1461 counted four overgarments and three dresses, while her dowry was settled at 1,400 florins (Rinuccini 1840, p. 255). In 1466 Salvestra di Domenico Pagni, whose family was less wealthy, received one overgarment and two dresses (see: Landucci 1985, p. 6). That same year, Nannina de' Medici's exceptionally rich trousseau counted four overgarments and six dresses with a dowry of 2,500 florins (see app. 3C, nos. 2-11). By the 1480s, that number had become the standard, even for girls with smaller dowries. Antonio Gondi, for instance, married off four of his daughters in the 1480s. They all received ten garments made of luxury fabrics such as brocaded damask and *alessandrino* dyed velvet, with a dowry of 1,500 or 1,700 florins (ASF, Carte Gondi, cassetta 271, 44, fols. 67-70, 73-76). Of course this small number of inventories is not a statistically reliable sample. However, other research confirms this trend. On the basis of a larger number of sources, Polidori Calamandrei noted an increase of the number of *camicie* in the fifteenth century, whereas Baldi distinguished a trend of increasingly expensive and luxurious *gamurre* in the first half of the century. See: Polidori Calamandrei 1924, p. 101; Baldi 2006, p. 298.

¹⁴² Molho 1994, p. 299-308.

¹⁴³ On the lives of Giovanna and Lorenzo, see: Van der Sman 2009; summarized in: Van der Sman 2010b, p. 17-30.

¹⁴⁴ Simons 1985, vol. 1, p. 145. In the Tornabuoni chapel Giovanna is portrayed at full length wearing the same garments, showing more devices on the lower part of her *giornea*, including two concentric circles surrounded by sunbeams, a device that is unanimously regarded as the Albizzi coat of arms, and an eagle

is more likely to be voided velvet with a yellow satin ground, since there are no indications of gold thread.¹⁴⁵ However, there is no indication of a velvet pile either, which means the *giornea* might be made of another type of luxury silk fabric, such as yellow and white damask. Whatever the case, if Ghirlandaio depicted an existing garment, it must have been woven especially for the Tornabuoni family, and thus extremely expensive and, above all, rare. Dress that was decorated with devices all over rather than on the sleeves only was exceptional in Florence.¹⁴⁶ Giovanna also wears a conspicuous pendant with a diamond and a ruby mounted in gold with three suspended pearls. A remarkably similar pendant, appraised at 100 florins, is mentioned in a notarial document of 1493 regarding the wedding gifts of Giovanna's sister-in-law Ludovica Tornabuoni.¹⁴⁷ Giovanna's likeness probably shows her wearing this costly Tornabuoni jewel, which was passed on to Ludovica after her death.¹⁴⁸

Like Leonardo's portrait of Ginevra de' Benci, Giovanna's portrait bears an inscription that relates to the sitter's beauty and virtue. A *cartellino* in the niche behind Giovanna reads: 'ARS UTINAM MORES ANIMUMQUE EFFINGERE POSSES / PULCHRIOR IN TERRIS NULLA TABELLA FORET / MCCCCLXXXVIII' (Art, if only you were able to portray character and soul / no painting on earth would be more beautiful / 1488).¹⁴⁹ Reminding the beholder that inner virtue is a woman's true beauty, no matter how pretty she is on the outside, this text is a variation of Ginevra's 'beauty adorns virtue' and stems from the same tradition (fig. 2). But whereas Leonardo used plain dress to underline Ginevra's beauty and to express her virtues, Ghirlandaio used the opposite pictorial, or rather sartorial, strategy. Giovanna's opulent dress and jewels are meant to reflect her status and her beauty as much as her virtue.

Giovanna's portrait is not only exceptional because of the lavishness of its dress, but also because it returns to the formula of the profile portrait that had gone out of use in Florence by that time. The combination of the profile format with lavish dress, decorated with family

that has evoked a wide divergence of interpretations. It has been interpreted as a Medici device (Washington 2001, p. 127), the symbol of the Calimala guild (Schmid 2002, p. 122) and as a recurrence of a pattern used earlier by the Castellani family (Frick 2002, p. 210-214). Giovanna's sister-in-law Ludovica Tornabuoni is depicted in the fresco cycle as well, wearing a *cioppa* of exactly the same fabric (fig. 33).

¹⁴⁵ Duits 2008, p. 182-183.

¹⁴⁶ For Florentine examples of devices on sleeves, see: Welch 2000, p. 104. Garments that were made entirely of textiles decorated with devices were usually limited to a courtly context. An example of two *camore* of gold tissue with a Sforza device for Beatrice and Isabella d'Este is described in chapter 3, p. 85-86.

¹⁴⁷ 'Unaltro pendente chon uno rubino chagnuolo uno punto in mezzo, uno diamante tavola tre perlle fine bianche benfatte anno un pocho e lungho e una unpocho rognosa pesano cho piccuoli doro charati dicaiasette chon uno rovescio, una foglia smaltata, di quarzo e biancho comunis extimationis etpretij florenorum centum largorum', cited from: Van der Sman 2009, p. 196-197, note 15, see also p. 112. The pendant was also mentioned in the will of Giovanni Tornabuoni, Ludovica's father. See: Simons 2011-12, p. 126. The will is published by: Cadogan 2000, p. 369-372.

¹⁴⁸ Gert Jan van der Sman rightly stressed that we are in the dark about whether painters were given the opportunity to portray actual pieces of precious jewellery or whether they depicted variations on standard shapes, possibly from workshops props or design drawings, while it is also possible that both practices were in use. Van der Sman 2010a, p. 53-54. On the use of workshop props, see also chapter 1, p. 33-35.

¹⁴⁹ Translation cited from: DePrano 2008, p. 618-619. The inscription is a minor variation on the last lines of an epigram by Martial, that read: 'ars utinam mores animumque effingere posset / pulchrior in terris nulla tabella foret' (If art were only able to portray character and soul / no painting on earth would be more beautiful). There is some discussion as to who proposed the text, either Ghirlandaio (Shearman 1995, p. 112; followed by David Alan Brown in: Washington 2001, p. 193) or Poliziano, possibly assisted by Lorenzo Tornabuoni (DePrano 2008, p. 632-641; followed by: Marchand 2012, p. 115). The date of 1488 refers to the year of Giovanna's death rather than the year of execution, since the portrait was painted after the completion of her portrait in the fresco cycle in the Tornabuoni chapel in 1489-1490. See: Pope-Hennessy 1966, p. 24.

devices all over, and conspicuous jewellery is in fact typical of court portraiture. Ambrogio de' Predis' profile portrait of Bianca Maria Sforza, clad in dress and jewellery showing Sforza devices, is a case in point (fig. 62).¹⁵⁰ The choice for the profile formula with opulent dress was certainly well reasoned. Gert Jan van der Sman has pointed out that the Tornabuoni deliberately presented themselves as nobility.¹⁵¹ The question to what extent Giovanna's portrait can be interpreted as a visual example of what Molho has labelled the aristocratization of the Florentine elite is beyond the scope of my analysis. Also, more work has yet to be done on Florentine inventories of the final decades of the Quattrocento in order to reveal the actual wealth of women's wardrobes. Dress in Florentine portraiture in the last two decades of the fifteenth century in general and in the portrait of Giovanna degli Albizzi in particular are compelling subjects for further research.

By the time Giovanna was portrayed, Leonardo had already left Florence to seek his fortune in Milan. Under the aegis of the Milanese court he would further develop his theories on the depiction of garments and drapery in painting and at the same time perfect his technical skills to render fabrics and pleats naturalistically. The restorer David Bull rightly characterized the depiction of Ginevra's dress as simple and almost naive. The young Leonardo was not yet capable of creating the sense of a living being inhabiting the dress, nor of a clear distinction between flesh and fabric.¹⁵² The next chapter considers the sartorial choices in Leonardo's Milanese portraits in comparison to those in the work of local portrait painters and examines the development of the depiction of dress within Leonardo's oeuvre.

¹⁵⁰ Dress in Bianca Maria Sforza's portrait is discussed in chapter 3, p. 88-89.

¹⁵¹ Van der Sman 2009, p. 16.

¹⁵² Bull 1992, p. 70. It should be added that the offset of Leonardo's interest in drapery is already apparent in the depiction of the folds of Ginevra's black stole.