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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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4. Dressing and portraying Isabella d'Este

Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua, has been thoroughly studied as a collector and patron of the arts.¹ She employed the finest painters of her day, including Bellini, Mantegna and Perugino, to decorate her *studiolo* and she was an avid collector of antiquities. She also asked Leonardo to paint her likeness but though Leonardo drew a preparatory cartoon when he was in Mantua in 1499, now in the Louvre, he would never complete a portrait (fig. 5).

Although Isabella is as well known for her love of fashion as her patronage, little has been written about the dress she wears in this cartoon. Like most of Leonardo's female sitters, Isabella is portrayed without any jewellery. The only art historian to elaborate on this subject was Attilio Schiaparelli in 1921. Going against the *communis opinio*, he posited that the sitter could not be identified as Isabella d'Este. He considered the complete lack of ornamentation to be inappropriate for a marchioness and therefore believed the sitter to be someone of lesser status than Isabella.² However, the sitter is now unanimously identified as Isabella d'Este.³

The importance of splendour was discussed at length in the previous chapter. Remarkably, Isabella is portrayed even more plainly than Cecilia Gallerani and the sitter of the *Belle Ferronnière*, both of whom are shown wearing at least a necklace (figs. 3-4). The high degree of finish of Isabella's cartoon suggests it was completed and the absence of jewellery is intentional. This raises the question who took the lead when decisions were made on the dress shown in the portrait. In an article on Leonardo's portrait of Cecilia Gallerani and the cartoon of Isabella, David Alan Brown put it simply: 'In one respect, the sitter's involvement was automatic: like Cecilia Gallerani, she [Isabella d'Este] chose to be portrayed in the latest fashion [...]'.⁴ However, there are no contemporary sources on either of these portraits that provide straightforward confirmation of this statement and it seems unlikely that it was Isabella's idea to pose for Leonardo without jewellery.

The previous chapter concentrated on ceremonial court dress and its depiction in portraiture, both by Leonardo and by other court artists. In this chapter, the focus shifts from painter to patron, in a broader sense of the term, that is, Isabella d'Este as a patron of portraits and of fashion. Isabella's correspondence with her agents and members of other courts in Italy and beyond was carefully kept in the archives in Mantua and provides a pivotal source of information on her commissions of portraits and dress.⁵ This enables us to reconstruct her attitude towards dress and jewellery as well as her relationship with artists in general and Leonardo in particular. Much work has already been done in both fields. Early in the twentieth century, Alessandro Luzio assembled the archival references on Isabella's dress as well as her

¹ See especially: Campbell 2004, with extensive bibliography.

² Schiaparelli 1921, p. 157.

³ Most recently: Ames-Lewis 2012, p. 119-125 and Paris 2012, p. 232, cat. 76. Syson noticed a physical resemblance between the cartoon and the marriage medal of Isabella and Francesco Gonzaga, presumably one of the few reliable likenesses of Isabella, see: Syson 1997, p. 283.

⁴ Brown 1990, p. 57.

⁵ Unlike other women, Isabella kept her own *copialettere*, which was usually a male practice. The Mantuan archivist and historian Alessandro Luzio (1857-1946) published large parts of this material. On Luzio's approach and the subsequent historiography of the research on Isabella d'Este, see: Kolsky 1984, p. 47-49.

portraits and made a preliminary overview of the surviving paintings.⁶ Francis Ames-Lewis recently published a monograph on Isabella's relationship with Leonardo, and Evelyn Welch has studied how Isabella purchased her finery.⁷ This is the first time, however, that both fields of painting and applied arts have been analysed in relation to each other, in order to determine why a courtly patron would have agreed to be portrayed in relatively plain dress.

1. The commission

Isabella was already familiar with Leonardo's paintings before he visited Mantua. She had seen his work during her visits to her sister Beatrice in Milan and was certainly familiar with the portrait of Cecilia Gallerani, now known as the *Lady with an Ermine* (fig. 3).⁸ In an often-cited letter, written in Mantua on 26 April 1498, she asked Cecilia Gallerani to send her the picture, because she wanted to compare it with some portraits by Bellini:

Having seen today some fine portraits by the hand of Giovanni Bellini, we thought of the works of Leonardo and we wished we could compare them with these paintings, and as we remember that he painted your likeness, we beg you to be so good as to send us your portrait by this messenger whom we have dispatched on horseback, so that we may not only be able to compare the works of the two masters but also may have the pleasure of seeing your face again. As soon as we have made the comparison, [the portrait] will be returned to you [...].⁹

Cecilia replied three days later:

I have read your Highness's letter, and since you wish to see my portrait I am sending it; I would send it with greater pleasure if it were more like me. But your Highness must not think that this is due to any defect in the master himself, for in truth I believe there is no painter equal to him, but only because the portrait was painted when I was very young. I have since then changed altogether, so much so that if you saw the picture and me together no one would imagine it could be meant for me.¹⁰

Isabella appears to have returned the portrait to Cecilia about a month later. A short letter of thanks from Cecilia to Isabella, dated 18 May 1498, survives.¹¹ Although it is not known which portraits by Bellini Isabella was referring to, nor what the outcome of the comparison was,

⁶ On Isabella's dress, see: Luzio and Renier 1896c, p. 441-469. For the portraits, see: Luzio 1900a, p. 344-359, 427-442, republished in revised form in: Luzio 1913, p. 183-238.

⁷ Ames-Lewis 2012; Welch 2005, p. 245-273.

⁸ It is not certain whether Isabella saw *The Last Supper* during her visit to Beatrice in 1495, since work was still in progress. *The Virgin of the Rocks* and other works executed for Ludovico and his circle were accessible to Isabella. See: Ames-Lewis 2012, p. 35.

⁹ 'Essendone hoggi accaduto vedere certi belli retratti de man de Zoanne Bellino siamo venute in ragionamento de le opere de Leonardo cum desiderio de vederle al parangone di queste havemo, et ricordandone che 'l v'ha retracta voi dal naturale vi pregamo che per il presente cavallaro, quale mandiamo a posta per questo, ne vogliati mandare esso vostro retracto, perchè ultra che 'l ne satisfarà al parangone vederemo anche volentieri il vostro volto et subito facta la comparatione vi lo rimetteremo [...]' Isabella d'Este to Cecilia Gallerani, Mantua, 26 April 1498. Luzio 1888a, p. 45. Translation cited from: Shell and Sironi 1992, p. 49.

¹⁰ 'Ho visto quanto la Signoria Vostra mi ha scripto circa al haver caro de vedere il ritratto mio; qual mando a quella, et più volentiera lo mandarla quanto asomigliasse a me; et non creda già la Signoria Vostra ch'el proceda per difecto del Maestro, et invero credo non se trova a lui uno paro, ma solo è per esser fatto esso ritratto in una età si imperfecta, et io poi ho cambiato tutta quella effigie; talmente che vedere epso et me tutto insieme non è alcuno che lo giudica essere fatto per me.' Cecilia Gallerani to Isabella d'Este, Milan, 29 April 1498. Luzio 1888b, p. 181. Translation cited from: Shell and Sironi 1992, p. 49-50.

¹¹ Published in: Ames-Lewis 2012, p. 224-225, with references to previous publications.

Leonardo's portrait of Cecilia must have pleased her, since she made every effort to persuade Leonardo to paint her likeness as well.

Political circumstances in 1499 provided an opportunity for Isabella to realise her intent. In 1498 the king of France, Charles VIII (r. 1483-1498), was succeeded by Louis XII (r. 1498-1515), who immediately laid claim to the Duchy of Milan. Left without allies, Ludovico Sforza fled Milan on 2 September 1499, four days before French troops entered the city. No longer employed in court service, Leonardo decided to leave. On 14 December he deposited 600 gold florins in his Florentine bank account and must have left Milan shortly after. He went to Venice, stopping along the way to visit the court of Francesco Gonzaga and Isabella d'Este in Mantua, where he probably arrived in late December 1499.¹²

In Mantua, Leonardo made at least two portrait drawings of Isabella. He took one of them with him to Venice, where he showed it to Lorenzo da Pavia, an instrument maker who regularly worked for Isabella. On 13 March 1500, Lorenzo sent Isabella a lute with an accompanying letter in which he refers to the portrait drawing: 'Leonardo da Vinci is in Venice and has shown me a portrait of Your Ladyship that is very lifelike. It is very well done, it could not possibly be better.'¹³ Leonardo left another drawing in Mantua, as can be concluded from a letter from Isabella to her agent Fra Pietro da Novelara, written in March 1501. She asks Pietro to find out if Leonardo is in Florence and, if so, to urge him to paint something for her *studiolo*. She then explains that her husband has given away Leonardo's drawing and that she would like to have another: 'And then you should ask him if he would send me another sketch of my portrait, for his Excellency my husband has given away the one he left for me here'.¹⁴

One of these two drawings must have been the cartoon that is now in the collection of the Louvre (fig. 5).¹⁵ The drawing shows Isabella's upper body in a three-quarter pose and her head in profile view. Both David Alan Brown and Francis Ames-Lewis have noted the resemblance to Isabella's portrait medal that was made by Gian Cristoforo Romano in 1498 (fig. 96). Isabella was extremely satisfied with this medal and distributed it among her friends for many years. She kept a luxury version in her *grotta*, executed in gold with a frame decorated with her name in diamonds (fig. 97). Isabella presumably wanted her portrait by Leonardo to have an 'all'antica' appearance, reflecting the dignity of antique coins, and may have asked Leonardo to use her medallion portrait as an example.¹⁶

There is a drawn copy of Leonardo's portrait in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (fig. 98). Francis Ames-Lewis believes that this version is a contemporary workshop copy and

¹² Pietro Marani in: DBI vol. 64 (2005), s.v. 'Leonardo da Vinci', p. 448. On the fall of Ludovico, see: Gino Benzoni in: DBI, vol. 66 (2007), s.v. 'Ludovico (Ludovico Maria) Sforza, detto il Moro, duca di Milano', p. 441-442.

¹³ '...E là a Venecia Lionardo Vinci, el quale m'a mostrato uno retrato de la S.a V.a che è molto naturale a quella. Sta tanto bene fato, non è possibile melio.' Beltrami 1919, p. 63 doc. 103; Brown 1982, p. 51 doc. 29.

¹⁴ 'A presso lo pregerà ad volerne mandare un altro schizzo del retratto nostro, peroché lo illustrissimo signore nostro consorte ha donato via quello ch'el ce lasso qua.' Isabella d'Este to Pietro da Novelara, Mantua, 27 March 1501. Ames-Lewis 2012, p. 227-228. Isabella may have meant a copy of the original drawing, but Brown suggests Leonardo made several drawings and sketches, which means he could provide her with another original. See: Brown 1990, p. 54. On the possible existence of a third drawing, see also Ames-Lewis 2012, p. 117-118, who assumes only two originals were in circulation.

¹⁵ First stated by: Yriarte 1888, p. 130-131.

¹⁶ Brown also mentions a second possible visual source: Isabella possessed a cast of a bronze statuette after the *Apollo Belvedere*, by a sculptor named Antico. From the main view point, Apollo's body is shown in a frontal view and the head faces right, exactly like Isabella in her portrait. Brown 1990, p. 58-60; Ames-Lewis 2012, p. 135.

therefore the second drawing mentioned in the correspondence.¹⁷ Françoise Viatte, on the other hand, acknowledges the close relationship between the two drawings, but regards it as a later, sixteenth-century copy after Leonardo.¹⁸ This seems more likely, since Carmen Bambach pointed out that the pricked outlines are very neat and regular, which is unlike Leonardo. He used to prick the physiognomic details carefully, but only roughly indicated the outlines of dress and drapery, just like Verrocchio as it happens. Moreover, the pieces of paper glued to the back of the sheet during a later restoration have been pricked as well. This shows the drawing must have been pricked and copied at a later date.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the drawing in the Ashmolean Museum is a welcome addition, for the Louvre sheet has suffered severe water damage and has been cut down at the bottom. The Ashmolean copy shows that Isabella's hands were originally resting on a parapet and she was pointing with her right index finger at a book in front of her.

2.1. 'The source and origin of all the pretty fashions in Italy'

Leonardo portrayed Isabella in a dress that is cut according to the latest fashion (fig. 5). The bodice of her *camora* (dress) is decorated with strips in a contrasting colour, as is the *camicia* that is visible at her cleavage. The sleeves of Isabella's dress are ample and her *camicia* puffs up through slits at the shoulders. In the Ashmolean drawing, bows have been added at the shoulder (fig. 98). Although hardly discernible in the Louvre sheet these days, several sixteenth-century copies, one of which is in the British Museum, show that her head is covered with a light veil with a crimped edge (fig. 99).²⁰ In the original cartoon, the *lenza* that keeps this veil in place is indicated as a bright line around the head (fig. 5).

A *camora* that is decorated in a very similar way as in the cartoon is described in a letter from Isabella to her chamberlain Alberto da Bologna. In early December 1492, Isabella was staying with her mother in Ferrara. She needed more dresses and had requested Alberto to send her a new *camora*. When he did not reply quickly enough to her liking, she sent him a punchy letter:

It seems to me that you not only lost your memory because of everything you say you are doing there, but also that the evil that has turned upon you took away your brain or robbed you of your eyes so that you cannot read. And therefore we carefully repeat what we want, now that we know that you cannot understand the text without explanation. Take from the wardrobe the piece of fabric of wide strips in dark grey and murrey satin that we have had made in Venice, and have a *camora* cut from it with strips on the chest in the French way, also at the sleeves, and have it decorated with black velvet, and have black ribbons put on it that are as long as the ones we attached to the *camora* of black velvet.²¹

¹⁷ Ames-Lewis 2012, p. 118, 126-130.

¹⁸ Viatte in: Paris 2003, p. 186.

¹⁹ Bambach 1999, p. 111-112. Ames-Lewis noticed that the holes in the restored parts are slightly bigger than elsewhere on the sheet. He thinks that these parts were pricked a second time, with a bigger needle, after restoration.

²⁰ Observation of Viatte 1999, p. 6. Compare Welch 2008, p. 247, who inaccurately states that Isabella's hair is uncovered. The British Museum drawing belongs to a group of four portrait drawings of Isabella d'Este in red chalk. Two are now in the Graphische Sammlung in Munich and the fourth is in the Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi (inv. no.419E).

²¹ 'Me pare che non solamente habbi perso la memoria per la cascata che dici facesti qua, ma che el male che hai adosso te abbia anche privo di cervello o che ti abbi cavato li occhi, che non possi legere. Et però havemo voluto replicarti minutamene quello che volemo, dopo che cognossemo che non intendi il testo senza commento. Togli fora de salvarobba el cavezo de raso berettino et morello da le liste larghe che facessimo fare a Venetia, et in esso fa tagliare una camora che abbia le bande al pecto a la francese, fodrate de veluto negro et cusi alle maneghe, facendola ornare pur de veluto negro, et gli farai mettere le stringhe negre che siano longhe como furono quelle che nui aconzassimo a la camora de veluto negro.' Isabella

In a second letter, written on 13 December, after having received the desired *camora*, Isabella reassured her agent that she had only been joking. Apart from the fact that these letters provide us with rare insights into the way Isabella dealt with her agents, they also give a rather detailed description of the type of dress she is wearing in her portrait by Leonardo (fig. 5). In the portrait her dress is decorated with bold stripes on the bodice, has ribbons attached and is in the French style.

By 1500, the Spanish style had gradually disappeared in Northern Italy and given way to a new fashion that was more French in orientation.²² One of the main changes was the form of the sleeves, which had been tight fitting in the 1490s. The queen of France, Anne of Brittany, was already wearing dresses with wider sleeves at that time. In the royal accounts of 1492, which list the purchases of lengths of velvet and satin for the queen's gowns, there are multiple mentions of dresses 'with big, wide sleeves'.²³ A miniature from an Ovid manuscript shows Anne wearing this exact style (figs. 84). At the start of sixteenth century sleeves in northern Italy began to increase in volume as well, as is recorded in the *Portrait of a Woman* by Bernardino de' Conti and Boltraffio's *Portrait of a Lady in Grey*, both dated around 1500 (figs. 72, 87).

In the Louvre cartoon, Isabella's *camora* is cut according to latest fashion with wide sleeves 'à la francese'. To be dressed in the height of fashion was an absolute necessity for Isabella, since enormous value was attached to wearing the right clothes for the right occasion among the members of the Italian courts. Although Castiglione does not provide any literal prescription for a court lady's wardrobe, in his *Libro del cortegiano* he describes the kind of dress the ideal court lady wears and the attitude she should have towards her clothing:

Moreover, she must make her dress conform to this intent [shyness and a noble shame], and must clothe herself in such a way as not to appear vain and frivolous. But since women are not only permitted but bound to care more about beauty than men – and there are several sorts of beauty – this Lady must have the good judgement which are the garments that enhance her grace and are most appropriate to the exercises in which she intends to engage at a given time, and choose these. And when she knows that hers is a bright and cheerful beauty, she must enhance it with movements, words and dress that tend to the cheerful; just as another who senses that her own style is the gentle and grave ought to accompany it with like manners, in order to increase what is a gift of nature. Thus if she is a little stouter or thinner than normal, or fair or dark, let her help herself in her dress, but in as hidden a way as possible; and all the while she keeps herself dainty and clean, let her appear to have no care or concern for this.²⁴

d'Este to Alberto da Bologna, Ferrara, early December 1492. Luzio and Renier 1896c, p. 454. For Isabella's whereabouts, see: Cartwright 1903, vol. 1, p. 65. Note that Cartwright places this letter too early in the chronology, suggesting that it was written in Milan in September 1492.

²² As noted in the previous chapter, there are sources suggesting that French styles were already being worn at the northern Italian courts in the early 1490s. See chapter 3, p. 95-97. This letter from Isabella to Alberto da Bologna, dated 1492, is yet another indication.

²³ 'a grans manches larges', published in: Le Roux de Lincy 1860, vol. 4, p. 90-92, nos. 2, 4, 8.

²⁴ 'Deve ancor accommodar gli abiti a questa intenzione e vestirsi di sorte, che non paia vana e leggera. Ma perché alle donne è licito e debito aver più cura della bellezza che agli omini e diverse sorti sono di bellezza, deve questa donna aver iudicio di conoscer quai sono quegli abiti che le accrescon grazia e più accomodati a quelli esercizi ch'ella intende di fare in quel punto, e di quelli servirsi; e conoscendo in sé una bellezza vaga ed allegra, deve aiutarla coi movimenti, con le parole e con gli abiti, che tutti tendano allo allegro; così come un'altra, che si senta aver maniera mansueta e grave, deve ancor accompagnarla con modi di quella sorte, per accrescer quello che è dono della natura. Così, essendo un poco più grassa o più magra del ragionevole, o bianca o bruna, aiutarsi con gli abiti, ma dissimulatamente più che sia possibile; e tenendosi delicata e polita, mostrar sempre di non mettersi studio o diligenza alcuna.' Castiglione 1972, p. 215-216, Book III, 8. Translation: Castiglione 2002, p. 154.

According to Castiglione a true court lady had to possess a natural ability to adorn herself in such a way as to highlight her own personal qualities without being excessive or showing any effort.

Though it was Isabella's sister-in-law Elisabetta Gonzaga (1471-1525) who, as one of the main female characters in the *Libro del cortegiano*, was presented by Castiglione as a role model for any lady, in real life it was Isabella who set the tone for court fashions. She was famous, not only in Italy but throughout Europe, for knowing how to dress properly and, above all, fashionably. Even the king of France, François I (r. 1515-1547), asked Isabella to send him a fashion doll, dressed exactly the way she was so that he could clothe the ladies of his court in the same way.²⁵ Time and again Isabella received letters from other noblewomen wishing to wear fashions she had invented. In 1506, for instance, the Marchioness of Cotrona, Eleonora del Balzo-Orsini, asked for one of Isabella's *camore* as an example for her daughter, whereupon Isabella sent the dress and a letter with instructions to the Gonzaga ambassador in Rome:

Your chancellor told me on behalf of the Marchioness of Cotrona that she wishes to have one of my *camore* to show to her daughter, who will serve the queen of Aragon. We have one of yellow velvet with strips of silver tissue and lined with blue silk for the chancellor that you can present to him in our name.²⁶

Another request was made in 1523 by the queen of Poland, Bona Sforza (1494-1557), who exchanged gifts with Isabella. After receiving some gold and silver hairnets from Mantua, Bona sent Isabella several pieces of fur with an accompanying letter to thank her:

Via the nephew of the Royal barber we have had a letter from Your Ladyship and six silk and gold hairnets in the latest fashion [...] we pray your Ladyship to let us know when some new style of binding the head arises and to send us one that is pretty and pleases you and therefore cannot displease us, for we are sure you never miss anything as Your Ladyship is the source and origin of all the pretty fashions in Italy.²⁷

Isabella even supervised the production of new garments for other women. In 1533 she sent a letter to Caterina Cibo Varano (1501-1557), duchess of Camerino, about certain dresses she was having made for her and Renée of France (1510-1574). Renée, daughter of Louis XII of France and Anne of Brittany, had married Isabella's nephew Ercole II d'Este in 1528 and

²⁵ 'una puva vestita a la fogia che va lei di camisa, di maniche, de veste di sotto e di sopra et de abiliamenti et aconciatura de testa et de li capilli [...], perché S. M.tà designa far fare alcuni di quelli habiti per donare a donnein Franza.', Federigo Gonzaga to Isabella d'Este on behalf of Francis I, 15 November 1515. Luzio and Renier 1896c, p. 466. For an analysis of this request from a gender perspective, see: Croizat 2007, p. 94-130.

²⁶ 'Il vostro cancelliere me ha dicto da parte de la sig.a Marchesa di Cotrona che la desideria avere una de le nostre camore per monstra per sua figliola, che viene cum la regina de Aragona; avemone facto dare una al dicto cancelliere de veluto leonato listata de tela de arzento et fodrata de cendale alexandrino, qual gli fareti presentare da nostra parte.', Isabella d'Este to Fioramonte Brognolo, Mantua, 12 October 1506. Luzio and Renier 1896c, p. 454-455.

²⁷ 'Per il nepote del barbiere regio habbemo a questi di passati una lettera de Vostra Signoria et per essa sei scuffiotti de seta et de oro de nova foggia [...] per tanto pregamo Vostra Signoria se contenta quando qualche nova foggia di abendare la testali occorerà, che semo certissimo non mancarne mai per essere Vostra Signoria fonte et origine de tucte le belle foggie d'Italia, de mandarne qualche una bella et che li piaccia, che a noi similmente non potrà dispiacere.' Bona Sforza to Isabella d'Este, Cracow, 15 June 1523. Luzio and Renier 1896d, p. 267.

became duchess of Ferrara in 1534. Isabella ensured Caterina that this task was in good hands with her:

I want you to know that the work on the garments has started, and I hope that they will turn out well, both because my wish to see them in all their beauty is infinite and because there are persons in this city who have a knowledge of embroidery like nowhere else in Italy, so the exquisite Lady of Orléans [Renée of France] and Your Excellency will be satisfied.²⁸

She finished the letter with the promise that the masters would finish the garments with the greatest speed one could imagine. Requests like these to use Isabella's dresses as an example or to have her order new dresses show Isabella's great reputation as an inventor of new fashions.

The vast correspondence between Isabella and her agents reveals how she made sure she was continuously supplied with the best fabrics and latest novelties. In a letter written in July 1490, she instructed Girolamo Zigliolo to buy eight *braccia* of the best crimson satin he could find and to search in Venice for the best *zibellini* (sable) to line a *sbernia* (cloak), of which he had to buy eighty skins, and one with the skull still inside to wear in her hands, even if he had to search all over town for it.²⁹ He probably had to do exactly that, as *zibellini*, the pelts of a furred animal, most often sable and worn as an accessory, were a rather new fashion at the end of the fifteenth century.³⁰

When ordering the *zibellini*, Isabella informed her agent she did not mind the cost as long as the fur was beautiful. A year later, in 1491, when Zigliolo was about to leave to France, Isabella again sent him a shopping list along with a hundred ducats, telling him:

I wish you to understand that you are not to return the money if any of it is left, after buying the things that I want, but are to spend it in buying some gold chain or anything else that is new and elegant. And if more is required, spend that too, for I had rather be in your debt so long as you bring me the latest novelties.³¹

Even though Isabella often experienced financial hardship, money was evidently not an issue here.³² She lists everything Zigliolo was to look out for: engraved amethysts, rosaries of black amber and gold, blue cloth to make a *camora* and black cloth for a *sbernia* that was so beautiful it would be incomparable to anything else in the world and might cost up to ten ducats a *braccia*, if

²⁸ 'Voglio che sappi già essersi dato principio a lavorar le vesti, et spero che habbino tutte a riuscir tali et perchè il desiderio che tengo di vederle di tutta bellezza è infinito et perchè in questa cittade sono persone che in recamare hanno quella scientia che habbino altri in Italia, che la p.ta M.ma di Orliens et V.S. rimaranno satisfatte.' Isabella d'Este to Caterina Cibo Varano, Mantua, 19 August 1533. Luzio and Renier 1896c, p. 465-466.

²⁹ Published by: Luzio and Renier 1896c, p. 455.

³⁰ Sherill 2006, p. 121-122.

³¹ 'protestandove che non habiati a retornare alcuno indreto, perchè comparate queste cose, s'el ve restasse denari in mane, spendeteli in qualche cadenella o cosa gallante et nova, et in quello vui giudicareteli ce habia a gustare. Et se questi denari non bastaranno, meteteli de li vostri, che subito ve li restuiremo et saremo più contenta che esser vostra debitrice che creditrice, purchè ne portati diverse gallanterie, ma in specie questo sone le cose che volemo.' Isabella d'Este to Girolamo Zigliolo, April 1491. Luzio and Renier 1896c, p. 453. Translation cited from: Cartwright 1903, vol. 1, p. 72.

³² Isabella often had difficulty paying for all her expenses. For instance Antonio Salimbeni, a Mantuan living in Venice, requested Isabella to send him some money, because 'ogni zorno ho questi mercadanti a le spalle et io le do buone parole, sperando che V. Ex.gli faccia provisione.' Antonio Salimbeni to Isabella d'Este, Venice, 18 October 1494. Luzio and Renier 1896b, p. 310. On Isabella's financial situation, see further: Welch 2005, p. 253-258.

it was of excellent quality. She finishes her letter by instructing him to ‘dig up something very elegant from under the earth, you could not do anything more wanted’.³³ To another agent, Giorgio Brognolo, she wrote:

We wish to have six to eight *braccia* of Rhenish linen that is so fine and beautiful that it is beyond comparison, because we already have a good quantity of the ordinary type. We wish you to search all of the warehouses in Venice to find the most beautiful and have it shown to your wife who will understand these things better than you. If you cannot find this amount of excellent material, send out a remnant of two or three *braccia* and do not spare any expense because even if it costs a ducat a *braccia*, we do not care.³⁴

Again and again Isabella asked her agents to look out for fashion novelties and to find her the best quality furs and fabrics, at any expense. The rivalry between Isabella and Beatrice over the embroiderer Jorba is also revealing. Jorba had previously served their mother Eleanor at the court of Ferrara and was considered not only a skilled craftsman but also an important advisor for embroidery patterns. After their mother’s death, Isabella tried to obtain Jorba’s services by offering him an annual salary of 200 ducats, a considerable sum at the time. However, Jorba eventually chose Beatrice over her.³⁵ Isabella may not have succeeded in employing Jorba, but she usually received whatever she wanted and made every possible effort to know and possess the latest fashion.

Isabella also made sure she kept abreast of other women’s dress. When in 1501 a group of courtiers from Ferrara left for Rome to attend the wedding of Lucrezia Borgia (1480-1519) with Isabella’s brother Alfonso d’Este (1476-1534), she asked one of the dignitaries, only known by his alias ‘El Prete’ (The Priest), to inform her about Lucrezia’s dress and habits. El Prete promised to fulfil his task carefully and wrote in his first letter to Isabella: ‘I will follow her Excellency Lady Lucrezia like a shadow does the body, and be sure that I will know what her footprint looks like and where I cannot draw from the eyes, I will go with my nose’.³⁶ After this first letter, he regularly sent descriptions of Lucrezia’s dress and manners. Isabella’s brother Ferrante served as a second informant, as can be concluded from a letter Isabella sent him to thank him for his efforts:

I could not be more satisfied than I am with the description of the various and diverse garments of the illustrious Lady our sister-in-law that Your Excellency minutely wrote for me yesterday. Therefore I thank

³³ ‘Cavar de sotto terra qualche cosetta galantissima, che non ce potresti fare cosa più grata.’ Luzio and Renier 1896c, p. 453.

³⁴ ‘Desideramo havere sei o octo braza de tela de renso che sia tanto fina et tanto bella che non habia parangone perché de la comune havemo in quantità. Volemo che faciati cercare tutti li fonteche de Venezia per trovare la più bella et la faciati vedere a vostra moglie che se ne intenderà meglio de vui. Quando non se ne trovasse tanta in excellentia, se gli fusse qualche cavezetto avanzato de due o tre braza, mandatinela et non et non guardati a costo perché sebene costasse uno ducato al brazo, non se ne curaremo.’ Isabella d’Este to Giorgio Brognolo, 5 August, 1496. Zaffanella 2000, p. 72. Translation cited with minor adaptations from: Welch 2005, p. 262-263.

³⁵ The name Jorba can also be found in the documents spelled as Jurba or Giurba. For the references to the letters concerning Jorba, see: Venturi 1885, p. 253-254; Ferrari 2008, p. 46.

³⁶ ‘Io seguirò la ex. M.na Lucrezia come fa il corpo l’ombra, e siate certo che io vi saperò dire quanta stampa forma il suo pede in terra e dove li occhi non poterranno atingere io andarò col naso.’ El Prete to Isabella d’Este, Ferrara, 12 October 1501, Luzio 1914, p. 535.

you immensely, and I beg you to persevere in your task in case the exquisite Lady varies her garments and dresses.³⁷

Lucrezia Borgia was certainly not the only woman Isabella spied on. Although she remained in close contact with her sister Beatrice after marriage and exchanged dress designs and accessories with her, Isabella regularly had people reporting from Milan what her sister was wearing on various occasions. After all, her sister had a great reputation for fashion, being posthumously described as ‘inventor of new dresses’, and had much more money at her disposal.³⁸ A faithful informer of Isabella’s was the Ferrarese courtier Bernardo Prosperi, whose report on the rivalry between Beatrice and mother Eleanor in dressing up their ladies on the occasion of a state visit to Venice in 1493 is cited in the previous chapter.³⁹ Isabella even asked her husband Francesco Gonzaga to satisfy her hunger for news about her sister’s attire, although he did not consider himself the appropriate messenger for these subjects. During the same stay in Venice he described the ceremony that surrounded the visit and concluded his letter to Isabella with a short description of the appearance of her mother, sister and sister-in-law Anna: ‘Of the ornaments the Ill. Lady Duchess [Eleanor], the Duchess of Bari [Beatrice] and Lady Anna had, we do not write anything else other than that they were all bedecked with very precious jewels, because it is beyond our profession.’⁴⁰

Isabella and Beatrice were both deeply concerned with their dress. Throughout her lifetime, Isabella carefully maintained her image as the ‘origin of fashions’ through a broad network of family members and agents who supplied her with the latest fashion novelties and information on dress worn elsewhere. She spent large amounts of money on dress without hesitation. Gian Giorgio Trissino, who extolled Isabella’s virtues in his *Ritratti*, published in 1524, stated that no other than Isabella knew how to spend her money on ‘praiseworthy matters’ such that it resulted in the virtue of *liberalità*, or generosity. He continued:

one can get a clear sense of her generosity from her splendid dress, the magnificent decoration of her house and the beautiful, delightful and almost divine artefacts, with some wonderful small rooms full of rare books, very beautiful paintings, marvellous antique sculpture, and modern as well that is just as good, cameos, *intagli*, medals and superior gems. And hence many other precious things and they are so rare in such abundance that they arouse immense pleasure and no little surprise at the same time for the viewers.⁴¹

³⁷ ‘Io non poria restar meglio satisfacta de quello che facio per il scriver che la S.V. me ha facto minutamente ne le sue del ultimo dil passato et secundo de questo de li vari et diversi habiti di quella ill.ma M.a nostra comune cognata. Siché la ringratio sumamente, et pregola ad persverare questo diligente suo officio in lo avvenire, secundo che la giornata la p.ta M.a varierà in vestimenti et habiti.’ Isabella d’Este to Ferrante d’Este, Mantua, 14 January 1502. Luzio and Renier 1896c, p. 463-464.

³⁸ Beatrice was described as ‘novarum vestium inventrix’ by a Milanese chronicler after her death in 1497, cited from: Luzio and Renier 1890a, p. 88.

³⁹ See chapter 3, p. 79.

⁴⁰ ‘De li ornamenti che le Ill.me Madama Duchessa, Madonna Duchessa de Bari et M.a Anna haveano, essendo fori della nostra professione, non scrivimo altro, se non che erano tutte piene de pretiosissime zoje.’ Francesco Gonzaga to Isabella d’Este, Venice 27 May 1493. Luzio and Renier 1890b, p. 378. Even though Francesco was apparently not very interested in dress, Isabella did not hesitate to describe the appearance of the various gentlemen and ladies during the wedding celebrations of Lucrezia Borgia in several letters she wrote to her husband in January and February 1502. The letters are published by: Arco 1845, p. 300-309.

⁴¹ ‘le cose lodevoli’; ‘questa sua liberalità si può chiaramente comprendere da le splendide sue vestimenta, da i paramenti di casa magnifici, e da le fabbriche belle, dilettevoli, e quasi divine, con alcuni dolcissimi camerini pieni di rarissimi libri, di picture bellissime, di antique sculture meravigliose, e di moderne, che si avvicinanano a quelle, di Camei, di tagli, di Medaglie, e di gemme eletissime. Et insomma di tante altre cose

Interestingly, Trissino regards Isabella's dress and her collection of art objects and antiquities as objects of equal status. Both serve the same purpose: they are an outward sign of Isabella's inner virtues.

2.2. Jewellery and honour

Isabella's letters testify to the importance of jewellery as well as her role as a leader in fashion. Jewellery was less subject to change than clothes and other accessories like fans or gloves were, and served as an important conveyor of dynastic honour. Isabella must have possessed a fine collection. In 1542, after the death of Isabella's son Federigo, who left an underage heir, the notary Edoardo Stivini drew up an inventory of Isabella's *grotta* and *studiolo*. First of all he recorded the jewellery of Isabella's daughter-in-law, duchess Margherita Paleologa (1510-1566), which probably included all the pieces that had originally belonged to Isabella.⁴² It is an impressive list of twenty-five precious pieces, including a necklace with a hundred large pearls and a hundred small pearls, a balas ruby and a pearl the size of a hazelnut, a selection of thirty-two diamonds of various sizes and a head ornament shaped like a laurel leaf with eighty rubies.

For many years, however, Isabella was unable to wear most of her jewels. Her husband Francesco Gonzaga repeatedly suffered from a lack of money and in 1494 he needed a sum for a campaign to have his younger brother Sigismondo (1469-1425) elected as cardinal. On Francesco's request, Isabella agreed to pawn part of the jewellery she had brought into the marriage. Staying in Urbino for a visit to her sister-in-law Elisabetta Gonzaga, she sent Alberto da Bologna to Mantua with the key to the jewels. In an accompanying letter to Francesco, she explained she was offering her jewellery 'for the honour of Your Excellency and of the house'.⁴³ The following year, more of Isabella's jewels were pledged. The pawn contract was set to expire in 1496 so Isabella asked her father for help to get her jewellery back on 3 July of that year.⁴⁴ The attempt was in vain and a week later she turned to her husband, finishing her letter with the request:

I pray you, please do all you can in order not to enter another pawn contract so that we can have the jewels now, both to keep them from danger of being lost and so that I can wear them in my youth, when they are most suitable. For if they were to be pawned for several more years now, I would not be able to make the best use of them, nor could I wear them to my honour.⁴⁵

The initial reason for pawning her jewels in 1494, bestowing honour on the house of Gonzaga, had become the very reason to reclaim them two years later. Isabella's plea to Francesco was unsuccessful and on 20 August 1496 Francesco asked her to pawn her remaining jewellery too. Isabella replied:

pretiose, e rare abondevoli sono, che ad un tempo diletto grandissimo, e non piccola meraviglia porgono a i riguardanti.' Hirdt 1981, p. 26-27. See also: Rogers 1988, p. 58.

⁴² Vienna 1994, p. 263. For a transcription of the jewellery section of the inventory, see: p. 282-283.

⁴³ 'per honore de la S.V. et de la casa'. Isabella d'Este to Francesco Gonzaga, Urbino, 24 April 1494. The complete letter is published in: Luzio and Renier 1896b, p. 314.

⁴⁴ Luzio and Renier 1896b, p. 315.

⁴⁵ 'Ben la prego voglia fare ogni cosa perché non se ne faci altro contracto acio se possino havere adesso, sì per non metterle a periculo de perderle, como per portare in questa mia juvenile età ne la quale se conveneno, che quando se impegnassino anchora per qualche anni io poi ne poteria cavare poco constructo, né me ne poteria honorare.' Isabella d'Este to Francesco Gonzaga, Mantua, 11 July 1496. Shemek 2005, p. 129-131.

I am of course always ready to obey Your Excellency's command in everything, but perhaps you have forgotten that my jewels are at present in pawn at Venice, not only those which you gave me, but those which I brought when I came to Mantua as a bride or have bought myself since my marriage. I say this, not because I want to make any difference between what is yours and what is mine, but to ensure you are aware that I have only four jewels left in the house along with the large balas ruby which you gave me when my first child was born, my large diamond, my *favorito*, and the last one which you recently gave me. If I pledge these, I shall be left entirely without jewels and shall be obliged to wear black, because to appear in coloured silks and brocades without jewels would be ridiculous. Your Excellency will understand that I only say this out of regard for your honour and mine: and that is why I ask and beg you to agree I do not rob myself of these few. If you nonetheless want to have jewellery pledged, I will give you my *camora* embroidered with jewels, for I had rather be without that than without jewels.⁴⁶

In this letter Isabella makes it very clear what her jewellery means, not only to her personally, but also in the broader context of the court environment. She could do without sumptuous dress and shows her willingness to cooperate by offering her precious embroidered *camora*, but it would simply be impossible to maintain her status and above all her honour as a marchioness without the few jewels she had left. Moreover, it would affect not only her own status, but that of her husband too.

Isabella alluded to the same sentiments on an earlier occasion. In July 1492 Ludovico Sforza had invited her to Milan. Isabella's father, Ercole d'Este, was going as well and Francesco thought it would be a good idea for his wife to join his company. Isabella, though, wanted more time to prepare herself and wrote to her husband that she truly wanted to go to Milan if this was his wish, but that it was absolutely impossible to leave straight away because he still had to choose which courtiers should be in her entourage. 'However,' she finished her letter, 'if it appears otherwise to Your Excellency I will go whenever you like, because if I were to go all alone, wearing a *camicia*, it would be fine with me because I would be obeying Your Excellency'.⁴⁷ Of course it would have been out of the question for a marchioness to go on a state visit without retinue and wearing nothing but a simple shirt. By exaggerating the situation, Isabella smartly pointed out the importance of decorum to her husband.

Apparently Isabella's plea was successful, for in the next weeks a series of letters followed with orders to various courtiers to start preparations for the journey, thus ensuring that Isabella and her company had more to wear than just a *camicia*. On 2 August Isabella wrote to the Ferrarese courtier Brandelisio Trotto:

⁴⁶ 'Io sono sempre disposta ad obedire la Signoria Vostra in omne cosa, ma perchè forse la non se ricorda che sono in pigno tutte le altre a Venetia, m'è parso significarli che gli sono non solum quelle che me ha dato Vostra Signoria, ma anche quelle ch'io portai a marito et ho comprato io doppo. Il che non dico perchè facia differentia da le sue e le mie, ma perchè la intendi el tutto, per modo ch'io non ho in casa se non quarto zoglieli et el balasso che Vostra Excellentia comparatte quando io era de parto de la prima putta, lo diamante grande, el favorito, et quello che ultimamente la me dette, che quando se impognassero questi io restaria in tutto priva de zoglie da poter portare et me seria forza ridurmi a vestire de Negro, perchè vestendo de colore et de brocato una mia para senza zoglie seria calleffata. La Excellentia Vostra può molto ben pensare ch'io non facio questo discorso se non per honore suo et mio: et però la pregoet supplico voglia essere contenta che non me spoglia de queste poche; perchè quando pur la voglia che se impignano zoglie più presto io gli darò la mia camora recamata de zoglie, perchè manco male serrà stare senza essa che senza gioielli.' Isabella d'Este to Francesco Gonzaga, Mantua, 27 August 1496. Luzio and Renier 1896b, p. 315-316. Translation partially cited from: Welch 2005, p. 257.

⁴⁷ 'Tutavia parendo altramente a la S.V. andarò quando a lei piacerà, perchè se andassi ben sola e in camisa me pareria andare bene obedendo la S.V.' Isabella d'Este to Francesco Gonzaga, Ferrara, 25 July 1492. Luzio and Renier 1890b, p. 348.

Because we have to go to Milan in the middle of this month, we would like our necklace to be carried out a hundred times. We beg you and urge you [...] to finish it without failure in time [...] because we want the few persons that we bring to appear as honourable as possible with the necklaces.⁴⁸

The same day Isabella excuses herself with the Venetian nobleman Taddeo Contarini, whom she still owes money for a certain piece of jewellery. She explains that she cannot pay him back yet, 'because the journey to Milan that we will undertake has been an important occasion to make new purchases'.⁴⁹ When the party left around mid-August, Isabella realised she forgot to take one of her headdresses with her. To a courtier who stayed behind in Mantua she wrote: 'With the enclosed key we want you to unlock the black chest that is in our room and take from it the headdress with our feather of jewels and send it to us with a horseman by return of post'.⁵⁰

Isabella's correspondence surrounding the departure for Milan and the letters exchanged with her husband on the pledged jewellery provide exceptional insight into Isabella's personal involvement with her jewellery. She is keenly aware of the occasion she has to dress for and the honour of her family. Isabella's ideas on how to dress properly are reflected in Renaissance conduct literature. By studying fifteenth and sixteenth-century writings on dress, Bridgeman showed appropriateness was considered far more important than beauty.⁵¹ She cites Piccolomini, who in his *Istituzion morale* (1542) wrote:

it would be ugly and distasteful for a nobleman's wife to appear publicly wearing garments suitable for a duchess or a queen – in brocades or cloth of gold, ornamented and embroidered with pearls, gems, or other decoration inappropriate to her rank. For, as beauty in all things results from a due proportion between the elements themselves and between them and the whole, lack of proportion and an ill-conceived relationship between elements results in ugliness. Dress unsuited to the wearer creates a discord that is not just unattractive, but irksome and distasteful to all who see it. A lady therefore has to dress and adorn herself according to the dictates of rank and wealth.⁵²

Beauty was clearly not intrinsic to a garment but depended on the social status of the wearer. Like the noblewoman in Piccolomini's example, who would be ugly in gold brocade and jewellery because it did not fit her rank, as a marchioness Isabella would be ugly without this finery.

⁴⁸ 'Havendo nui ad andare a Milano a mezo questo mese, voressimo però ch'el fusse compita la collana nostra de cento volte: pregamovi e stringemovi [...] che la sia senza falo finita a tempo [...] perchè desideramo che quelle poche persone che conuremo vengano honorevole maxime de collane.' Isabella d'Este to Brandelasio Trotto, Mantua, 2 August 1492. Luzio and Renier 1890b, p. 349.

⁴⁹ 'però che la andata che habiamo ad fare verso Milano n'è stata grande casone de spese.' Isabella d'Este to Taddeo Contarini, Mantua, 2 August 1492. Luzio and Renier 1890b, p. 349.

⁵⁰ 'Volgiamo che tu deschiave cum questa chiave inclusa el forcero negro, che è ne la nostra camera, et toglì el capello cum la nostra penna de le zoglie et ce lo mandi per un cavallaro a posta volando.' Isabella d'Este to Francesco Cusastro, Pizzighettone, 13 August 1492. Luzio and Renier 1890b, p. 349.

⁵¹ Bridgeman 1998, p. 44. On dress in conduct literature also see Currie 2000, p. 157-177, who focuses especially on the court of Florence during the reign of Cosimo I (1537-1569).

⁵² 'se la donna fusse a nobil gentiluomo congiunta in consorte, brutissima cosa e odiosa saria di veder ch'ella con vesti apparisse fuori più a Duchessa o a Regina che a gran gentildonna sì convenienti, come sarebbe vestendo brocati e tele d'oro, di perle e di gemme ricamate e fregiate, e simili altri ornamenti alla sua condizion disdicevoli. Perciochè, sì come la bellezza in tute le cose consiste nella proporzione della parti tra loro col tutto loro, così la bruttezza dalla disproporzione dipende e mal comportamento di dette parti. Onde ogni volta che, non proporzionando le vesti con chi le porta, faranno una certa disagguaglianza di parti, sarà forza che talc osa non sol non apparisca dilettevole, ma noiosa incomportabile universalmente a chiunque la vede.' Alessandro Piccolomini, *Istituzion morale*, 1542. Cited from: Bridgeman 1998, p. 45.

This view on dress embellished with jewellery, expressed by Isabella in her letters only three years before Leonardo drew her portrait and repeated in etiquette books throughout the sixteenth century, makes one wonder even more why she was depicted by him without any jewellery. Although the cut of Isabella's dress and her hairstyle in Leonardo's cartoon are consistent with the fashions of the day, the absence of jewellery is clearly very unusual for a lady of her standing and in daily life might have been considered inappropriate for a marchioness. The general assumption that it was Isabella who chose to be portrayed in the latest fashion seems, therefore, to be both incorrect – for the latest court fashion would have included jewellery – and questionable because it is unlikely that Isabella, who was so aware of her appearance, would have deliberately omitted her jewellery.⁵³

3.1. Isabella's 'living likeness'

Isabella was as critical a patron when it came to portraiture as she was a consumer of textiles and accessories. The above-cited passage from Castiglione's *Libro del cortegiano* shows that beauty was seen as an indispensable virtue of the court lady. At the same time patrons desired to be portrayed from life, 'ritratto al naturale'. In an important article on idealism and naturalism in Renaissance portraits, Joanna Woods-Marsden pointed out that in reality a 'lifelike' portrait had to be idealized to some degree, if not completely, to suit the sitter's wishes.⁵⁴ Alberti had already expressed this view in his treatise on painting:

Apelles painted the portrait of Antigonus only from the side of his face away from his bad eye. They say Pericles had a rather long, misshapen head, and so he used to have his portrait done by painters and sculptors, not like other people with head bare, but wearing his helmet. Plutarch tells how the ancient painters, when painting kings who had some physical defect, did not wish this to appear to have been overlooked, but they corrected it as far as possible while still maintaining the likeness.⁵⁵

As several authors have pointed out, for Isabella idealized beauty and a lifelike portrait were difficult to reconcile. Although most contemporary writers describe Isabella as a physical beauty, there are also sources that indicate otherwise. In a satirical prevision for the year 1534, in which Pietro Aretino made fun of astrological predictions, he announced that Isabella, a sixty-year-old widow at that time, would bear another child in winter. He described her as 'the monstrous marchioness of Mantua, who had teeth of ebony and eyelashes of ivory, dishonestly ugly and embellished to an astonishingly dishonest degree'.⁵⁶ This description may well be an exaggeration, but Isabella's corpulence is a subject that comes up repeatedly in her own letters. For instance in 1509 Isabella's husband, Francesco Gonzaga, sent her some partridges and alluded to her body weight in the accompanying letter. Isabella replied: 'I hope that this heat will

⁵³ Expressed by: Viatte 1999, p. 32 and Brown 1990, p. 57.

⁵⁴ Woods-Marsden 1987, p. 209-216.

⁵⁵ 'Apelles Antigoni imaginem ea tantum parte vultus pingebat qua oculi vitium non aderat. Periclem referunt habuisse caput oblongum et deforme; idcirco a pictoribus et sculptoribus, non ut caeteros inoperto capite, sed casside vestito eum formari solitum. Tum antiquos pictores refert Plutarchus solitos in pingendis regibus, si quid vitii aderat formae, non id praetermissum videri velle, sed quam maxime possent, servata similitudine, emendabant.' Alberti 1972, p. 78-81, Book II, 40.

⁵⁶ 'la mostruosa Marchesana de Mantova la quale a i denti de hebano e le ciglia de avorio, dishonestamente brutta et arcidishonestamente imbellettata'. Aretino's complete text was published by Luzio, see: Luzio 1900b, p. 9. Translation cited from: Brown 2011, p. 47. On the wedding medal with a double portrait of Isabella and her husband Francesco Gonzaga, one of the few lifelike images showing her with a double chin, see: Syson 1997, p. 241.

help me to lose weight with common sense, but if I had had the fears and the worries that Your Excellency has had because of these French cowards I would not have grown so fat'.⁵⁷

The wedding medal with a double portrait of Isabella and Francesco, made in 1490, shows her with a double chin (fig. 100).⁵⁸ Isabella's reaction to this medal is not known, but there are several other portraits that she disapproved of, officially because she thought they were not good likenesses, but in reality they were probably too lifelike for her taste. In 1493, for instance, she had agreed to exchange portraits with Isabella del Balzo (1465-1533), the future queen of Naples. In a letter written in January to Jacopo d'Atri, Francesco Gonzaga's secretary and envoy in Naples, she confirmed that she would pose for a portrait: 'To satisfy the illustrious Lady the Countess of Cerra [Isabella del Balzo], whom we love dearly, we have ordered our portrait on panel by the hand of Andrea Mantegna'.⁵⁹ By April Isabella d'Este had already received a portrait on paper and one in wax of the countess. D'Atri had told Isabella that one of the portraits did not resemble the Countess perfectly, and Isabella wrote her that she would 'often look at it correcting the defects of the artist with the help of the information from Margherita, Jacopo and others who have seen you, so that we may not be deceived in our concept of you'.⁶⁰ In her next letter, she explained that she was unable to present the countess with a portrait of herself in return:

We are very sorry that we cannot send you our portrait at the moment, because the painter has done it so badly, that it does not resemble us in the least; we have sent for a painter from outside Mantua who is reputed to be good at counterfeiting from life.⁶¹

David Alan Brown noted that Mantegna, who was famous for his naturalistic portraits, had probably depicted Isabella far too realistically.⁶² Isabella was not alone in her judgement of Mantegna. Lodovico Gonzaga (1412-1478), grandfather of Isabella's husband Francesco, had personally appointed Mantegna as his court painter, even though he did not think highly of him as a portrait painter. In a letter, he wrote: 'It is true that Andrea is a good master in other things, but in portraiture he could have more grace and he does not do so well'.⁶³ In the same letter, Lodovico described how Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Duke of Milan, was not satisfied either and even burned sheets with his portrait by Mantegna.

⁵⁷ 'spero che questo caldo me aiuterà a smagrar da bon senno, ma se io havesse havuto de le fantasie et affanni che ha havuto V.S. da questi poltroni de francesi forsi che non seria così grassa'. Isabella d'Este to Francesco Gonzaga, 22 June 1509. Luzio 1900a, p. 438.

⁵⁸ According to Syson, the wedding medal is one of the few, if not the only, truly lifelike images of Isabella. Syson 1997, p. 241.

⁵⁹ 'Per satisfare a la ill.ma M.na Contessa de la Cerra, quale amamo cordialmente havemo ordinato de esser retrata in tavola per mane de Andrea Mantinea.' Isabella d'Este to Jacopo d'Atri, January 1493. Luzio 1900a, p. 347.

⁶⁰ '...spesso lo consideriamo supplendo cum la infomacione de Margarita, Jaocomo et alti che hanno veduto la S.V. al defecto del pictore per modo de niente restamo ingannate del concepto nostro.' Isabella d'Este to Isabella del Balzo, Mantua, 3 April 1493. Luzio 1900a, p. 347. Translation cited from: Land 1994, p. 115. It is unknown which Margherita Isabella was referring to.

⁶¹ 'Dolne summamente che non gli potiamo mandare al presente el nostro retracto, perchè el Pictore me ha tanto mal facta che non ha alcuna de le nostre simiglie: havemo mandato per uno forestere, qual ha fama de contrafare bene el naturale.' Isabella d'Este to Isabella del Balzo, 20 April 1493. Luzio 1900a, p. 347. Translation partially cited from: Brown 2011, p. 45. On Isabella del Balzo, see: Salvatore Fodale in: DBI vol. 62 (2004), s.v. 'Isabella del Balzo, regina di Napoli', p. 623-625.

⁶² Brown 1990, p. 54.

⁶³ 'È vero che Andrea è bon maestro in le altre cose, ma nel retrare poria havere più gratia e non fa cussi bene.' Lodovico Gonzaga to Zaccaria Saggi, Mantua, 30 November 1475. Cited from: Woods-Marsden 1987, p. 210.

The painter from outside the city who received the commission for another portrait to be sent to Isabella del Balzo was Giovanni Santi. When the portrait was finished Isabella once again reported that it was not a good likeness, but she sent it to Isabella del Balzo anyway:

To satisfy Your Ladyship's wish, not because my likeness is of such beauty that it deserves to be painted every time, I send you [...] the panel portrait by the hand of Giovanni Santi, painter of the illustrious duchess of Urbino, of whom they say he works well from nature, although, as has been reported to me, it could resemble me more.⁶⁴

Five years later, in 1498, Isabella had her portrait painted again, at the request of Isabella of Aragon. This time Isabella called upon a painter from Parma, Gianfrancesco Maineri. He arrived in Mantua in November 1498 and in March 1499 the portrait was finished. Isabella then sent the portrait to Milan, where Ludovico Sforza was to judge whether it could be presented to Isabella of Aragon. Isabella wrote somewhat ironically to Ludovico:

I am afraid to create annoyance not only to Your Lordship but to all Italy by sending my portraits every time, and although I do not like to do it, they are so often requested and sought after by those who ask me, that I cannot refuse. The illustrious Lady Duchess Isabella [of Aragon] has asked me again if I would send her one of my portraits in colour. Even though again I think it is not very like me, for it is a bit fatter than I am, I gave it to Negro, my equerry, with the order first to talk to Your Excellency and if the portrait satisfies you, you can present it to the exquisite Lady the Duchess on my behalf, and if not, he will do what you order him.⁶⁵

Isabella was obviously not satisfied with the way the painter had represented her and complained about her body size, a problem that regularly bothered her as we have seen. Ludovico, though, was less critical of the painter's achievements and answered:

Negro has presented me with the letter from Your Ladyship with your portrait, which pleases us because it seems to me it resembles you quite well; it is true that it makes you look somewhat fatter than Your Ladyship is, unless you have grown fatter since the last time we saw you.⁶⁶

When the Bolognese painter Francesco Francia portrayed Isabella more than a decade later, in 1511, likeness was an issue again. Isabella's half-sister Lucrezia d'Este (c. 1477-?), wife of Annibale Bentivoglio of Bologna (1469-1550), had persuaded Isabella to hire Francia and

⁶⁴ 'Per satisfare el desiderio de V. S., non perchè la effigie mia sia de tal beleza che la meriti andare in volta depincta, gli mando [...] el retracto in tavola facto per mano de Zohan de Sancte pictor de la Ill.ma Duchessa di Urbino, qual dicono far bene dal naturale, etiam che questo, secundo m'è referto, se me puoteria più assimigliare.' Isabella d'Este to Isabella del Balzo, 13 January 1494. Luzio 1900a, p. 347.

⁶⁵ 'Dubito venire in fastidio non solum a la S.V. ma ad tutta Italia cum mandare questi miei retracti in volta, et benchè malvolentieri il faccia, nondimeno essendone cum tanta instancia recircata da chi me puo comandare, non posso negarli. La Ill. M.a Duchessa Isabella de novo me ha facto pregare che voglia mandare uno di miei retracti coloriti. Ritrovandomi questo anchor non mi sia molto simile, per essere un poco più grasso che non sono io, lo ho consignato al Negro mio M.ro de stalla, cum ordine che prima ne parli a la Cel.ne V. et quando la se contenti lo presenti a la p.ta M.a Duchessa da mia parte, quando non, faccia quanto la gli comandarà.' Isabella d'Este to Ludovico Sforza, Mantua, 13 March 1499. Luzio 1900a, p. 351.

⁶⁶ 'Dal Negro ne è stato presentato la lettera de la S.V. col ritracto suo la imagine del qualene e piaciuta parendone assai simile a lei; è vero che è alquanto demonstrativa de più grasseza che non ha la S.V. excepto se non la è facta più grassa dopoi che noi la vidimo.' Ludovico Sforza to Isabella d'Este, Milan, 21 March 1499. Luzio 1900a, p. 351.

kept her informed about the progress of the picture.⁶⁷ In her first letter, dated 13 July 1511, she informs Isabella that the painter has been provided with her portrait to serve as an example for a first drawing that he will make as soon as possible.⁶⁸ At the end of the month, Lucrezia writes a second letter, explaining that Francia is not satisfied with the result so far and refuses to show her the drawing. Only when the likeness really resembles Isabella, will Lucrezia be allowed to see it, 'because', she writes: 'I have engraved on my soul the living likeness of Your Highness and will know if he deceives me because I can describe all of your true outlines, and I will write to you my opinion'.⁶⁹ By the end of August the portrait was finished, but unfortunately Lucrezia thought it was not like her at all. She reported her findings to Isabella on 7 September: 'I will tell the truth without holding anything back. I did not think it bore any similarity to you, because it was too severe and too thin'. She advised Isabella, 'for your honour and my satisfaction', to have the painter come over to Mantua and pose for him.⁷⁰ Isabella refused, but Lucrezia was able to report a few weeks later that 'if it is true what the tutor of my children has told me [...], the portrait that he [Francia] made resembles the other of Your Excellency quite well'.⁷¹ She added that it would be even better after she had been able to comment on it.

By the end of October the portrait was finished and indeed Lucrezia enthusiastically wrote:

when you compare it to the first [Isabella's likeness that served as an example], it is as lifelike as that one, but with much more perfect virtuosity. In our city all those who know Your Excellency, on seeing this portrait, are in agreement in affirming that it is the living image of you.⁷²

Isabella's reactions, on the other hand, are somewhat mixed. To Francia she wrote: 'you have made us far more beautiful by your art than nature ever made us, so we thank you with all our heart'.⁷³ A letter from Lucrezia to Isabella, however, reveals that Isabella was not completely satisfied and had requested the colour of her eyes be changed. Lucrezia strongly advised against

⁶⁷ Francesco Francia was no stranger to Isabella, since he had already portrayed her son Federigo in 1510, a painting that is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (inv. no. 14.40.638). On this portrait, see most recently: Berlin / New York 2011, p. 241-244, no. 93, with further references.

⁶⁸ Hickson stated that the portrait sent to Francia was the likeness by Lorenzo Costa, documented to have been painted in 1508. Hickson 2009, p. 295. However, none of the letters concerning the Francia commission mention a portrait by Costa. Moreover, Isabella refused to have Francia come over to Mantua, because she did not want to offend Costa, her official court painter at that moment. For this letter, see: Luzio 1913, p. 209-210.

⁶⁹ 'per havere in lo animo scolpita la imagine viva de V. Ex., credo se non me ingano gli saprò dimostrare tuti gli suoi veraci lineamenti', Lucrezia d'Este to Isabella d'Este, Bologna, 31 July 1511. Luzio 1900a, p. 427.

⁷⁰ 'Dirò il vero senza assentione, non mi pareva havere con essa similitudine alcuna, mostrando più saturna, più scarna'; 'per l'honor suo et contento mio' Lucrezia d'Este to Isabella d'Este, Bologna, 7 September 1511. Luzio 1900a, p. 427-428.

⁷¹ 'se vero è quel me ha referto il preceptore de miei filij [...] simigliandosi assai bene lo retracto che ha facto con quel altro de V.Ex.' Lucrezia d'Este to Isabella d'Este, Bologna, 26 September 1511. Luzio 1900a, p. 328. According to Luzio, the mentioned tutor may have been Guido Postuma, who knew Isabella well.

⁷² 'quando il vederà al paragone de quel primo non mancho natural che quello ma de artificio assai più perfecto. In questa nostra citate tuti quelli che conoscono V. Ex. vedendo questo ritratto tuti consentienti insieme affirmanoche gli par vedere la viva imagine di quell.' Lucrezia d'Este to Isabella d'Este, Bologna, 25 October 1511. Luzio 1900a, p. 429. Translation partially cited from: Hickson 2009, p. 297.

⁷³ 'avendoni vui cum l'arte vostra facta assai più bella che non ni ha facto natura, ringratiamovine quanto più potemo.' Isabella d'Este to Francesco Francia, Mantua, 25 November 1511. Luzio 1900a, p. 429. Translation: Hickson 2009, p. 297, with minor adaptations by the author.

it, because a change in eye colour would make the painting lose its grace, the painter would have to adjust the shadows to the new colour of the eyes and he would have to varnish the panel again.⁷⁴ Isabella apparently agreed and the portrait remained in Mantua, where she gave it away to an acquaintance.⁷⁵ Isabella's reaction beautifully illustrates the antithetical characteristics sought after in a portrait: likeness and idealization. These opposing qualities made Isabella a critical patron, although she does not appear to have been more critical than her contemporaries were concerning their own portraits.

3.2. The function of court portraiture

The many likenesses of Isabella made during her lifetime cover a wide range of occasions for portrait commissions in a courtly context. One of Isabella's first portraits must have been painted when she was only six years old. In the spring of 1480 the engagement between Isabella and Francesco was settled and shortly after the Mantuan ambassador in Ferrara, Beltramo Cusato, sent Isabella's portrait to Mantua: 'By this horseman I send the portrait of Lady Isabella, so that Your Excellency and Lord Francesco can see her likeness, but the most admirable are her intellect and intelligence.'⁷⁶ The portrait was probably painted by the Ferrarese court painter Cosmè Tura, for he received a payment of 4 *fiorini* on 30 May 1480 for the painting of 'the head of Lady Isabella'.⁷⁷ Unfortunately, the portrait did not survive. Marriage or engagement portraits were very common at the Italian courts. Very often future spouses did not meet before marriage and painted portraits were the only means by which they were able to obtain a visual impression of each other. An example is the betrothal portrait of Bianca Maria Sforza, which was probably meant for her future husband Maximilian I (fig. 62).⁷⁸

In a well-known passage in *De pictura*, Alberti describes the principal power of portraits, and even painting in general, as follows:

Painting possesses a truly divine power in that it does not only make the absent present, as they say of friendship, but it also represents the dead to the living many centuries later [...] Through painting, the faces of the dead go on living for a very long time.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ The letter is dated 9 December 1511 and is published in Luzio 1900a, p. 429. Norman Land noted Lucrezia's arguments show a striking knowledge of visual arts, with which she was probably provided by the painter himself, and that, even though the painting may not have been a perfect likeness, its aesthetic qualities were very much appreciated. Land 1994, p. 115-116.

⁷⁵ Emilio Negro and Nicosetta Roio consider a portrait in a private collection to be the portrait by Francia, see: Negro and Roio 1998, p. 196-198. As Hickson pointed out, there is not much evidence to support this claim nor is there any physical resemblance with other portraits of Isabella. Moreover, the cut of the sitter's dress with tight-fitting sleeves that have two puffs at the upper arm suggests a date around 1530 or even later rather than 1511. Lorenzo Lotto's *Portrait of a Woman Inspired by Lucretia* in the National Gallery in London (inv. no. NG4256), dated to c. 1530-1532, shows a sitter wearing a similar style. For a discussion of her dress, see: Penny 2004, p. 78.

⁷⁶ 'Per questo cavalaro mando madonna Isabella ritratta, acìo che V.S. e D. Francesco possa vedere la effigie sua: ma più è il mirabile intellecto et inzegno suo.' Beltramo Cusato to Federico I Gonzaga, Ferrara, 17 April 1480. Luzio 1908, p. 45.

⁷⁷ 'la testa de madonna Isabella', Luzio 1900a, p. 346.

⁷⁸ Many other examples are known through archival sources. Cosmè Tura, for instance, is documented to have also painted three portraits of Isabella's brother Alfonso for his finance, Anna Sforza. Brown 2011, p. 38.

⁷⁹ 'Nam habet ea quidem in se vim admodum divinam non modo ut quod de amicitia dicunt, absentes pictura praesentes esse faciat, verum etiam defunctos longa post saecula viventibus exhibeat [...] Itaque vultus defunctorum per picturam quodammodo vitam praelongam degunt.' Alberti 1972, p. 60-61, Book II, 25.

Indeed, the portraits of their late parents were very dear to Isabella and her brother Alfonso. Alfonso asked to borrow these portraits from Isabella for a short period of time. On 23 March 1528 Isabella sent the portraits to Girolamo Zigliolo, a courtier in Ferrara. In his reply of 9 April, Zigliolo explained it had taken somewhat longer to return them, because ‘the Duke, Your Excellency’s brother, told me that he wanted to look at them for another breath and also because I myself could not get enough of seeing them whenever time permitted’.⁸⁰ Five days later, Isabella confirmed she had received the portraits, which pleased her very much, and she assured Zigliolo that they would be ‘placed among the most precious things we have in this world’.⁸¹

The vast majority of Isabella’s own portraits, however, were meant to be sent to family members or to friends at other courts while she was still alive. It was very common for court members to exchange portraits ‘to make the absent present’, as Alberti put it. When Francesco Gonzaga was kept hostage by the Venetians in 1509, a copy of a portrait of Isabella by Lorenzo Costa was sent to him in his Venetian prison at his request. Both the original and its copy are presumably lost. The original portrait, painted in 1508, was one of the few that pleased Isabella and it was regularly shown to visitors in Mantua. In November 1508 it was even sent to Ferrara, because Isabella’s relatives were eager to admire it as well.⁸²

One of the rare portraits made in the 1490s that did please Isabella was the portrait medal made by Gian Cristoforo Romano (fig. 96).⁸³ Over a period of at least nine years she gave away many copies of the medal to friends and allies. A letter of Jacopo d’Atri from Naples to Isabella illustrates some of the reactions to the likeness:

Gian Cristoforo Romano, your faithful servant, is here and he gave me a medal of Your Ladyship that is a thousand times beautiful, like you are yourself. He told me he has shown it as a divine object to all the Queens, who all marvelled at it [...] ⁸⁴

One of the ladies stated that, besides exceptional beauty, ‘the likeness indicated great intelligence’, as she had already heard having been told about Isabella when she was in France.⁸⁵ The ladies looked at the medal for a long time, praising the likeness as well as Isabella herself. One of them even wanted to kiss the medal.

The portrait medal was not the only portrait that was widely distributed. Many friends and relatives asked Isabella for her painted or sculpted portrait as well. As discussed above,

⁸⁰ ‘Duca fratello di V. Ex. mi havea detto volerli vedere un’altra fiata et anche perchè non mi poteva satiare de vederli quando el tempo me ne dava commodità.’ Girolamo Zigliolo to Isabella d’Este, Ferrara, 9 April 1528. Luzio 1913, p. 187, note 1.

⁸¹ ‘saranno collocati con le più preciose cose che habbiamo al mondo’, Isabella to Girolamo Zigliolo, Mantua, 14 April 1528. Luzio 1913, p. 187, note 1.

⁸² Luzio 1900a, p. 355, 359. Costa’s *Portrait of a Lady with a Lapdog*, now in the Royal Collection (inv. no. 405762), has been identified as the portrait of Isabella d’Este by Luzio 1913, p. 208-209 and Cust 1914, p. 289. This identification is no longer upheld, because the painting belongs stylistically to Costa’s earlier, Bolognese period and is dated to c. 1500-1505. Moreover, the sitter’s dress has been dated to the late 1490s by Stella Mary Newton and to c. 1500 by Jane Bridgeman, which is too early to correspond with the portrait of Isabella painted in 1508. See: Whitaker and Clayton 2007, p. 120.

⁸³ Syson 1997, p. 286, 292.

⁸⁴ ‘Ioan Christopharo Romano vostro servitore di cuore, è qui et me ha facto degno de una medaglia de vostra signoria che è mille volte bella como voi medesima. Me dice haverla mostrata, come cosa divina ad tutte queste Regine, quele tutte cum maraveglia la riguardava [...]’ Jacopo d’Atri to Isabella d’Este, Naples, October 1507. Syson 1997, p. 287.

⁸⁵ ‘che leffigia indicava un grande inzegno’, idem. Syson justly points out that the lady is referring to Isabella’s *inzegno*, not that of the sculptor. Syson 1997, p. 287-288.

Isabella exchanged portraits with Isabella del Balzo and her niece Isabella of Aragon. Isabella's sister-in-law, Lucrezia Borgia, asked for her likeness as well and she immediately suggested an accomplished sculptor who could make the portrait:

When the sculptor Gian Giacomo arrived from Rome he showed his work. He brought some fine portraits and he made some others here that are perfect, [...] and because I would really like to have a portrait of your Excellency I beg you, if it is no trouble, to agree to be portrayed by the mentioned [sculptor], which would make me exceptionally grateful.⁸⁶

Isabella had received a similar request from her brother Ippolito d'Este in December 1494, when a correspondent from Ferrara wrote her that her brother would undergo the boredom of posing for her, which 'he did not want to do for any of your brothers'. The letter continues: 'He then wants to send the master to you in order to portray Your Excellency [...] He asks you to agree because he wants to keep you [your portrait] in a place suitable for a sacred object at the head of his bed.'⁸⁷ This letter is very interesting, for it is not just another example of an exchange of portraits. It also reveals something about the use of Isabella's portrait: it was intended to be hung above her brother's bed, a place that is described as appropriate for 'sacred objects'. Isabella's friend Margherita Cantelmo described one of Isabella's portraits in rather the same way. She took the portrait with her on a trip and discussed it with her host. She wrote about the conversation to Isabella: 'I spoke of my Signora, whose sacred and beloved portrait we have sometimes contemplated. How blessed is that portraitist Maestro Francesco, who has served me so well!'⁸⁸

A far less reverent use of one of Isabella's portraits is described in a letter by Beatrice de' Contrari, one of Isabella's former ladies-in-waiting in Ferrara. She wrote to Isabella about the portrait: 'When I go to table I have it put on a lectern in front of me, so that, whenever I see it, it seems to me that I am sitting at the table together with Your Ladyship.'⁸⁹ This interaction with portraits was by no means exceptional. Sally Hickson has made an analysis of what she defines as 'the staged viewings' of Isabella's portrait, painted by Francesco Francia in 1511. Shortly after the portrait was finished, Isabella decided to give it away to Gian Francesco

⁸⁶ 'Essendo venuto da Roma Zo. Jacomo scultore exhibitore di questa et portato seco alcuni boni retrati et fatone anche qui certi altri in perfectione [...] et desiderando grademente io havere la effigie de V. Ex. prego quella quando noli sia incomodo voglia essere contenta lassarsi ritrare dal dicto che me ne farà singularissima gratia.' Lucrezia Borgia to Isabella d'Este, Ferrara, 14 May 1502. Luzio 1900a, p. 354. It is unknown who the sculptor Gian Giacomo was, but he does not seem have been very reliable in the end. A year after Lucrezia's request, she turned to Isabella again, asking for the sculptor to be imprisoned because he fled Ferrara after stealing a ruby and a diamond.

⁸⁷ 'non avea voluti far per nisuno de soi fratelli [...] Vole poi mandar la el maeastro che retragi V.S. pregando quela se digni essere contenta perchè il vi vorà tenir in loco di cosa sancta al capo del suo lecto' Taddeo di Lardi in the name of Ippolito d'Este to Isabella d'Este, 21 December 1494. Luzio 1900a, p. 347.

⁸⁸ 'quand'io parlava della Mia Signora, della quale contemplavamo qualche volta el piasoso et caro retraction. Che sia benedecto quel maestro Francesco retractore che me ha cosi ben servita!' Margherita Cantelmo to Isabella d'Este, Mortara, 1 June 1505. Hickson 2012, p. 55. Hickson identifies the painter as Francesco Bonsignori. She regards Cantelmo's reaction to Isabella's portraits as an 'appropriately feminine response to female portraiture'. The afore-mentioned letter containing Ippolito's request for one of Isabella's portraits refers to the painting in a similar way, calling it 'sacred'. This contradicts Hickson's gender-related vision. On responses to portraits, including some of the cited examples involving Isabella d'Este, compare also: Woods-Marsden 2013, p. 152-158.

⁸⁹ 'come vado a tavola lo fazio ponere suso una cadrega per scontro a me, che vedendolo me pare pur essere a tavola cum V.S.' Beatrice de' Contrari to Isabella d'Este, Ferrara 10 April 1495. Luzio 1900a, p. 346-347.

Zaninello, a minor poet and collector in Ferrara, as a reciprocal gift after he had presented her with an illuminated manuscript of sonnets by Il Pistoia.⁹⁰ The idea for the present came from Battista Stabellino, one of Isabella's correspondences from the Ferrarese elite, who had asked Isabella's close friend Margherita Cantelmo in Mantua to persuade her.⁹¹ In March 1512 Stabellino presented the portrait to Zaninello, who was very pleased with it. Stabellino described:

Such celebrations and happiness I have never seen anywhere, and he has begun to invite people to dine in order to show them this portrait. Two days from now he intends to invite eight or ten people for precisely this purpose and he told me to say nothing because he wishes it to be a surprise [...]⁹²

In his next letter to Cantelmo, Stabellino reported that Zaninello had already hosted three dinner parties 'in order to show the beautiful portrait your Illustrious Lady as a surprise' and that he planned to organize even more dinners like these.⁹³

According to Hickson, these viewings of Isabella's portrait should be placed in a courtly context, comparable to the one described in Castiglione's *Libro del cortegiano*. This is a world where word plays and courtly games are very important. Gian Giorgio Trissino's *Ritratti* belong to the same milieu. Written in 1514 and published ten years later in 1524, Trissino composed his *Ritratti* as a dialogue between Pietro Bembo and a certain Macro Vicenzio. Vicenzio starts by describing a beautiful woman he saw in Ferrara. After a generic description of her rose lips, ebony brows and pearl white skin, he goes on to describe her dress:

She, Macro said, had her hair spread over her head in such a way that it ran off her lovely and delicate shoulders; and its was gathered in a hairnet of auburn silk, which had been worked with such skilful craftsmanship that to me the knots seemed to be of the finest gold; and through the knots of this hairnet, which was rather large, you could see her locks of hair shining almost like sunbeams that sparkled everywhere. In the middle of her forehead, where the hair is parted, she had a very beautiful and glowing ruby, from which a shiny and large pearl was dangling; and around her neck she had a string of very large and splendid pearls, which hung down from one side and the other of her chest almost to her belt; she wore a beautiful and rich dress of black velvet, loaded with very well placed gold buckles, and everything she had on her was so admirably decorated that it seemed as if the artisans had wanted to compete with nature itself.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ On Zaninello, see Hickson 2009, p. 298.

⁹¹ Letter of Battista Stabellino to Margherita Cantelmo, Ferrara, 26 December 1511. Published in Hickson 2009, p. 307.

⁹² 'Et ne fa tanta festa et tanta alegreza che non sa dove se sia, ha cominciato a convidar persone suoi (?) a manzare per mostrarli questo retratto, et domatina fa convido a octo o diece pur per questo effecto et dice a mi ch'io non dica niente ch'el vuol mostrargelo all'improviso [...]' Battista Stabellino to Margherita Cantelmo, Ferrara, 21 March 1512. The entire letter is published in: Hickson 2009, p. 307-308.

⁹³ 'per mostrare all'improvisa il bel retratto de' la vostra Ill.ma Madama', Battista Stabellino to Margherita Cantelmo, Ferrara, 2 April 1512. The entire letter is published in: Hickson 2009, p. 308-309.

⁹⁴ 'Ella, disse Macro, aveva i capegli in capo diffusi, in guisa, che sopra i candidi, e dillicati humeri ricadeano; e questi tutti erano raccolti da una rete di seta di color tanè, con maestrevole artificio lavorata, i groppi de la quale mi pareano essere di finississimo oro; e fra meço le maglie di questa rete, le quali erano alquanto larghette, vi si vedeano scintillare i capegli, i quali, quasi raggi del Sole, che uscisseno, risplendevano dognintomo. Ne la sommità poi de la fronte, dove questi in due parti si divideno, vi aveva un bellissimo, e fiammeggiante rubino, dal quale una lucidissima e grossa perla pendeva; et al collo aveva un filo di grossissime, equali, e splendidissime perle, il quale da l'una, e da l'altra parte del petto scendendo quasi fin a la cintola n'aggiungea; ma indosso aveva una bella, e ricca robba di velluto nero, carica di alcune fibie d'oro, tanto ben poste, e tanto ogni cosa, che aveva dintorno, era mirabilmente

Bembo recognizes Isabella d'Este from this description. Hickson compares this game of identifying the person portrayed in words to Zaninello's staging of Isabella's painted portrait at his dinner parties. In both cases the audience was encouraged to discuss the subject portrayed after identification much in the same way as the Neapolitan court ladies praised Isabella's portrait medal, or the way in which Isabella wrote to the Countess of Acerra, whose portrait she would supplement with d'Atri's descriptions.⁹⁵ Hence, Isabella's portraits were part of a lively discourse, which covered not only her idealized physical likeness, but her character and virtues as well.

4. Dress in portraits

It is interesting to note that the descriptive part of Trissino's literary portrait of Isabella puts great emphasis on her dress, which apparently sufficed to identify her. This description seems to have been influential. Katharina Andres noted a striking similarity between the ornaments described here and the jewellery Isabella wears in two copies after a now lost portrait by Titian, the *Isabella in Red*.⁹⁶ The original portrait was probably painted between 1527 and 1530, when Titian was working for Isabella's son Federigo.⁹⁷ One of the copies, usually dated to the sixteenth century, is only known from black-and-white photographs and its present whereabouts are unknown (fig. 101). The second copy was made by Rubens, most likely in 1600 or 1601, and is now part of the collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (fig. 102).⁹⁸ Isabella wears a deep-red gown with sleeves that are puffed at the upper arm and tight-fitting around the underarm. Her accessories in particular are comparable to those described by Trissino. Isabella's hairnet is decorated with a brooch in which a large ruby catches the eye, with a pear-shaped pearl attached to it. She wears a string of pearls that according to the description almost reaches down to her golden girdle.

Andres suggested that Titian used the *Ritratti* as an example for his portrait. This seems plausible, for Isabella disliked posing and her refusals to sit for portraits from the early sixteenth century onwards are numerous.⁹⁹ She did not pose either for the second portrait by Titian, which still survives and is now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna as well (fig. 103). It can be concluded from her correspondence that Isabella borrowed the Francia portrait from Zaninello's heirs and sent it to Titian in 1534. He finished the portrait in 1536 and Isabella was delighted with the result, acknowledging in a letter to the Mantuan ambassador in Venice: 'The portrait by Titian's hand is so pleasing a type that we doubt that at the age he represents us we ever had the beauty it contains.'¹⁰⁰

lavorata, che pareva gli artefici, per omar costei, haver voluto con la natura istessa contendere.' Hirdt 1981, p. 23.

⁹⁵ Hickson 2009, p. 300-305.

⁹⁶ Andres 1999, p. 256.

⁹⁷ Isabella certainly did not know Titian before 1519 and his first documented commission from the marchioness dates from 1530. See: Luzio 1900a, p. 431.

⁹⁸ For the dating of the Rubens copy and references to further literature on both portraits, see: Wood 2010, p. 246-249.

⁹⁹ Isabella's refusal to pose for Francia has already been mentioned. Another example is her refusal to send her portrait to the French court in 1516. The Mantuan ambassador in Paris, Jacopo d'Atri, had asked Isabella to do so, but Isabella replied that she did not have the patience to sit for a painter: 'Quanto sia per mandarvi il ritratto nostro, questo non potemo ne volemo fare, si perchè non ni havemo alcuni ne volemo più quella di star paziente a farni ritrare', Isabella d'Este to Jacopo d'Atri, Mantua, 28 February 1516. Luzio 1913, p. 216-217.

¹⁰⁰ 'Il ritratto nostro di man di Titiano ne piace di sorte che dubitiamo di non esser stata in quell'etade che'egli rappresenta di quella beltà che in sè contiene.' Isabella d'Este to Benedetto Agnello, Mantua, 29

Titian represented Isabella as a young girl, wearing a headdress that was considered to be one of Isabella's own inventions. The *capigliara* or *zazara* consisted of a hairnet decorated with false hair and silk.¹⁰¹ A letter to Isabella from Eleonora Ruscha, Countess of Correggio, refers to the headdress and is yet another example of a lady's request to wear a fashion ascribed to Isabella:

Finding myself in Locarno, I heard that some noblewomen in Milan were wearing a new type of silk *zazare*, a notable invention of Your Ladyship's. And since I now find myself almost without a hat, with great desire I beg you to consider me worthy of one.¹⁰²

Titian's portrait shows Isabella with a bulbous *capigliara*, decorated with a large brooch with eight pearls surrounding a gem in the centre. Blue sleeves embroidered with the *fantasie dei vinci* motif appear from under a black overgown, which inspired the portrait's current title, *Isabella in Black*.¹⁰³ Other fashionable accessories are the pearl earrings and a fur piece across the shoulder. Like Trissino in his literary portrait, Titian put a great deal of emphasis on Isabella's dress and especially her jewellery, which reflect her status as well as her beauty and virtues.

Although there is a complete lack of sources on the dress in Isabella's lost early portraits, two of Isabella's letters regarding other portrait commissions clearly indicate that she was very well aware of the dress worn by a sitter. In 1494 she wrote to Ferrara with instructions regarding two portraits she wanted to have painted, one of her brother and one of her father:

make clear to master Ercole [de' Roberti] the painter that we do not care whether he sends the portrait of Lord Alfonso our brother until his hair is grown; but we do want him to send us immediately the portrait of the illustrious Lord our father in colourful dress and the cap he normally wears on his head.¹⁰⁴

Eight years later, Isabella wished to have another portrait of her father painted. Because he had died in 1505, it had to be based on an earlier painting. However, Isabella wanted the clothing to be updated to around the time of her father's death and wrote to her correspondent, Girolamo Zigliolo, in Ferrara, asking him to send the garments that her painter in Mantua would need:

We have a portrait of the illustrious Lord, our late father, very like and good, but with an old-fashioned hat and doublet like they used to wear. We wish to have another from this, but with a hat and doublet like

May 1536. Luzio 1900a, p. 432. Translation cited from: Brown 2011, p. 47. For the earlier letters regarding the portrait by Francia, see: Luzio 1900a, p. 432 as well.

¹⁰¹ On this headdress, see: Levi Pisetzky 1964-69, vol. 3, p. 90.

¹⁰² 'Ritrovandomi a Locharno, ho presentito essere stà portato a Milano da certe zentildonne una nova fogia de zazare de seta provenute da notabile inventione de la prefata V.S.; et per ritrovarmi al presente quasi senza capelli, cum sumo desiderio prego quella me voglia fare essere degna de una.' Eleonora Ruscha to Isabella d'Este, Locarno 1509. Luzio and Renier 1896a, p. 667.

¹⁰³ Goffen 1997, p. 87 states the *fantasie dei vinci* on their own provide sufficient evidence to identify the sitter as Isabella d'Este. Although it was originally designed for Isabella by Niccolò da Correggio, the motif was worn from the outset by other ladies, including Isabella's sister Beatrice. Moreover, the interlace pattern became very popular in the course of the sixteenth century and also appears in Titian's portraits of Emilia and Irene di Spilimbergo (Washington, National Gallery of Art, inv. nos. 1942.9.82 and 1942.9.83).

¹⁰⁴ 'fate intendere a m.ro Hercule pictore che non se curamo chel ce mandi retracto el S. Don Alphonso nostro fratello finchè non gli sia cresciuto li capelli; ma voressimo bene chel ce mandasse subito el retracto de l'ill.o S.r nostro patre de vestito de colore col suo capello in testo como solea andare.' Isabella to Ippolita Tassoni, 16 May 1494. Luzio 1913, p. 187, note 1.

those that he wore around the time of his death; therefore we ask you to send us his doublets and hat, which we will return to you immediately after the painter has seen them.¹⁰⁵

These letters are two of the few sources on the choice for dress in a portrait around 1500. Both show Isabella's decisive role; she decided which garments should be represented and gave the painter access to them. This reflects common practice. Earlier in the fifteenth century, Galeazzo Maria Sforza, the Duke of Milan, prescribed exactly what he and his wife should be wearing in their portraits, which were to be painted in a chapel in Milan cathedral. Having seen the design he wrote to the painter: 'Master Benedetto, we have seen the drawing that you sent us and, so that you know what you should do considering our dress, we tell you to dress us in gold brocade, both my most illustrious wife and us, and me in a short garment'.¹⁰⁶

Another source, a poem by Vespasiano Strozzi, dedicated to the Ferrarese court painter Cosmè Tura, highlights the role of the sitter. The poet describes the delay caused by a hesitating sitter who could not decide what clothes to wear when having her portrait painted (app. 5F):

But while she debates on what season suits such serious / Business, and what clothes to wear, a year disappears. / Spring is praised, indeed, but summer's called more suitable, / Now autumn pleases and now winter is endorsed. / Now, wrapped up, she wants her hair painted with some covering, / Now again she yearns for her tresses to be bare. / And while the silly girl shifts the day and different forms of dress, / She drags out what she wants in delays forever.¹⁰⁷

Tura, the poem tells, was unable to start working because the sitter could not decide what to wear. All these examples clearly show the decisive role of the patron or sitter and suggest that it would have been unusual for the painter to have a voice in this matter.

Isabella herself seems to have considered her portraits to be a reliable source for her dress and hairstyle. Romano's portrait medal shows her in profile, wearing a necklace and her hair up in a knot, with some loose locks flowing freely, a hairstyle that was very unusual for a lady (fig. 96). Syson called it a 'vision of the antique'. Similarities to the likeness of the first Roman empress, Augustus' wife Livia, on antique coins have also been noted, especially in the way a lock of hair is braided alongside the ear (fig. 104).¹⁰⁸ A letter from her sister-in-law

¹⁰⁵ 'havemo uno retracto de la fe. me. delo Ill. o S. nostro patre, molto simile et buono, ma cum una beretta et zupone antiqui de quelli che se solevano usare. Voressimo farne cavare un altro da questo cum una beretta et zupone de quelli chel portava al tempo chel moritte; però vi pregamo vogliati mandarci uno de quelli suoi zuponi et beretta, che subito visto che li haverà il dipinctore ve li remettero.' Isabella to Girolamo Zigliolo, Mantua, 29 April 1512. Luzio 1913, p. 187, note 1. Translation partially cited from: Campbell 1990, p. 215.

¹⁰⁶ 'Magistro Benedicto, havemo visto el disegno che tu ne hay mandato, et per che sapij quello che haveray ad fare circha al vestire nostro, te dicemo che ne vestise doro de imbrocato, così la nostra illutrissima consorte come nuy, facendo ad noy uno vestito curto.' Galeazzo Maria Sforza to Benedetto Ferrini, 8 November 1471. Syson 1996, p. 302.

¹⁰⁷ 'Sed dum consultat, que tantis commoda rebus / Tempora, quos habitus induat, annus abit. / Ver modo laudatur, modo dicitur aptior estas, / Nunc placet autumnus, nuncq̃ probatur hyems. / Nunc cupit externis pingi velata capillos / Cultibus, & nuda nunc libet ese coma. / Dumq̃ diem, & varios alternat inepta paratus, / Quod cupit, in longas protrahit usque moras.' Strozzi 1530, p. 155. Translation: Gilbert 1980, p. 187-188.

¹⁰⁸ On the improbability of this hairstyle, see: Welch 2008, p. 245-246. For the comparison with the antique, see: Syson 1997, p. 285 and Andres 1999, p. 260-262. Beverly Louise Brown, however, correctly brought up the fact that Isabella's hairdo is far more flamboyant than Livia's, see: Brown 2011, p. 46. The marriage medal of Maximilian I and Mary of Burgundy (1457-1482), designed by Giovanni Filangieri Candida in or shortly after 1477, shows Mary with a more similar loose knot (fig. 105). Maximilian kept distributing it long after her death. It is important to examine whether this could have been an inspiration

Elisabetta Gonzaga to the Roman courtier Vincenzo Calmeta after the wedding of Lucrezia Borgia and Alfonso d'Este in 1502 informs us that this was not simply a matter of being portrayed *all'antica*, but rather that Isabella wore her hair coiffed this way during the wedding celebrations:

The Lady Marchioness [Isabella d'Este] who was responsible for the hairstyles and ornaments says that Piceno [Benedetto da Cingoli] should not marvel that the Romans were so pleased by the way she put up her hair because if they had paid as close attention to the front of medals as they did to their reverses, then they would not have praised her hairstyle so lavishly [. . .] You show such admiration for our new hair fashions and for the way we are dressed differently from the others, that if with your subtle ingenuity you had considered it closely before you had seen it introduced you would not have been so surprised [...]¹⁰⁹

In this letter Elisabetta emphasizes that even if the Romans had never seen Isabella before, they could have known about her new hairstyle and her dress from her portrait. This suggests a very close tie between dress in portraiture and Isabella's apparel at court, including the notion of status expressed through sumptuous clothing and the latest court fashions. Titian's portrait of *Isabella in Black* and Rubens's copy of *Isabella in Red* conform to this idea. On the other hand, Leonardo's cartoon, which depicts Isabella without any jewellery, is of a completely different nature. This plain representation is not found in any other portrait of Isabella.

It is fair to assume that the cartoon provides an accurate image of the envisaged result. In preparatory studies, it was common to include jewels and other accessories since they were an essential part of the court lady's wardrobe. For instance, a drawing by Bernardo Luini that has been identified as a study for the portrait of Ippolita Sforza (1481-c. 1520), wife of Alessandro Bentivoglio, in a fresco cycle in the church of San Maurizio in Milan shows the sitter with a long necklace of beads or pearls, a fan and the *capigliara* invented by Isabella (fig. 106).¹¹⁰ The lack of jewellery in the Louvre cartoon appears to have been a deliberate choice, for the drawing's highly finished state suggests it was completed and no further additions were to be made.

Besides Leonardo's portrait of Isabella d'Este, I have come across only two other examples of court ladies portrayed in plain dress in the first half of the sixteenth century. In 1549 Eleanor of Toledo (1522-1562), Duchess of Florence and wife of Cosimo I de' Medici, through Cosimo's secretary Lorenzo Pagni, gave the following orders concerning a portrait Bronzino was to paint for her:

Their Excellencies [Cosimo I de' Medici and Eleanor of Toledo] say that they are satisfied for the convenience of Bronzino and in order to hasten the completion of the portraits which the most Reverend

for Isabella. For this portrait medal and further references, see: Bern / Bruges / Vienna 2009, p. 224-225, 227, cat. 53i.

¹⁰⁹ 'La Sra Marchesa, a chi tocca la parte delli acconzamenti del capo, dice che 'l Piceno non si doveva maravigliare che li romani fussero tanto satisfatti de li ligamenti de li capelli suoi, perchè se havessero posto quella accurata diligentia in considerare el diritto de le medalie, che hanno facto de li riversi, non haveriano tanto laudato l'acconziatura de testa sua [...] Voi mostrate tanta admiratione de le nove foggie de cappelli et del garbo diverso dalli altri, che se col vostro subtile ingegno ben l'havesti considerate iudicaresti che ad antevuto fine fossero state introducte...' Elisabetta Gonzaga to Vincenzo Calmeta, Mantua, 1 May 1502. Luzio and Renier 1893, p. 118-119. Translation: Welch 2008, p. 245.

¹¹⁰ For Luini's drawing, see: New York 2003, p. 663-666, cat. 131; Venice / Vienna 2004, p. 138. Examples are limited because very few cartoons have survived. Further evidence can be found in underdrawings, revealed through infrared reflectography. One of the few female portraits that have been examined is the portrait of Giovanna degli Albizzi (fig. 61). The underdrawing does indeed include jewellery. For the results of this technical analysis, see: Sedano Espín 2010, p. 234-239.

Monsignor of Arras desires of them, that the clothing of the Duchess [Eleanor of Toledo] should not be made of gold brocade with loops, but of some other figured textile that would give a beautiful effect.¹¹¹

Eleanor decided to be portrayed in a less expensive but nonetheless decorative fabric for the sake of speed only. In a following letter the secretary discusses sending Eleanor's garments of choice - a *robba* (formal overgown) of red satin - and those of her son Francesco to Bronzino.¹¹²

The second example is the extant portrait of Giulia Varano (1523-1547), Duchess of Urbino, executed by Titian in 1547 (fig. 107). Giulia does actually wear a lot of jewellery in this portrait, but the fabric is less ornate than she would have usually worn. According to Aretino, the portrait was painted after an oral description by her husband. Although it was apparently not necessary for the duchess to pose for her portrait, Titian minutely prescribed the kind of dress that should be sent from Urbino to Venice in order to complete the portrait. Unfortunately, Giulia Varano did not possess a garment like the one Titian requested, but something similar was sent to the ambassador of Urbino in Venice with an accompanying letter:

We send you an undergown of her Ladyship the Duchess, which you in your turn can give to Titian, to whom you can say he would have been provided with one of greater importance had he not asked for crimson or pink velvet. Since her Ladyship does not have such a dress, she thinks this one of damask in the same colour will be according to your intention.¹¹³

The letters from Florence and Urbino show two different motives for portraying a sitter in less sumptuous dress than social standards would normally require. Eleanor of Toledo was pragmatic; her portrait had to be finished as soon as possible and a highly ornamented textile like gold brocade would have taken the painter too long to render. In the case of Giulia Varano, it was not her but the painter who made the choice. Why Titian preferred crimson velvet over a more 'important' textile, as Giulia Varano's courtier put it, remains a mystery, but he might have had artistic considerations and Giulia, or more likely her husband who commissioned the portrait, went along with it.

It seems to have been rather unusual for court ladies to be portrayed in less sumptuous garments than they would have worn for public occasions. Even though Giulia Varano is not depicted wearing gold brocade, she is shown with several pieces of jewellery. The formality of the profile view and the total lack of court jewellery in Leonardo's portrait of Isabella d'Este constitute a contradiction that Isabella must certainly have been aware of. Could it have been Leonardo who came up with this idea and, like Titian, prescribed a certain type of dress? If so,

¹¹¹ 'Queste Ecc.tie [Cosimo I de' Medici and Eleonora de Toledo] si contentano per commodità del Bronzino et per più celere speditione de' ritratti che desidera di loro Mons.re R.mo d'Aras [Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle] che il vestimento della Duchessa [Eleonora de Toledo] non si facci di broccato riccio, ma di qualche altro drappo ornato che faccj bella mostra.' Secretary Lorenzo Pagni to maggiordomo Pierfrancesco Riccio, 21 December 1549. ASF, Mediceo del Principato, 1175, 4, f.43. Accessible online through the Medici Archive Project's $\beta\alpha$ database: <http://bia.medici.org/DocSources/src/docbase/ShareDocument.do?entryId=523> [accessed 2 October 2013]. Translation cited from: Monnas 2009, p. 192.

¹¹² Monnas 2009, p. 190-192. Eleanor's most famous portrait by Bronzino, now in the Uffizi (inv. no. 748), shows her wearing a sumptuous gold brocade dress with velvet pile. A copy is in the Wallace Collection in London (inv. no. P555). On Eleonora's dress, see: Niccoli and Orsi Landini 2005, p. 23-45, esp. p. 25 for the dress and its fabric in the Uffizi portrait.

¹¹³ 'Si manda a V.S. una sottana di la S.ra Duchessa, accio che per sua parte la dia a Titiano, al quale potrà dire, che si saria data una di più importanza, se egli non hauesse adimandata una di uelluto cremisi o di rosato, de'quali non hauendo S.E. ha pensato, che questa di damasco del medesimo colore sia secondo il suo intento'. Paolo Maria to Gian Giacomo Leonardi, 8 February 1547. Campbell 1990, p. 145, 259.

why did Isabella agree to his suggestion? In order to answer that question, it is important to take a closer look at the relationship between patron and painter.

5. 'Leonardo the painter who is our friend'

Isabella is known to have been a critical, demanding and at times downright difficult patron. She hardly ever granted painters the liberty to pursue their own artistic ideas. For instance, she tried to convince Bellini to deliver her a painting for her *studiolo* but he refused because she would not allow him to paint his own invention. She finally won over Perugino instead. With the contract, he received a detailed drawing by Isabella, defining the position and movements of every figure that was to be included in the story. Glasser considers the finished painting 'not one of Perugino's most inspired works, perhaps because the too exact written specifications really left no room at all for creative imagination.'¹¹⁴

Artists who worked slowly could not count on her mercy either. To the painter Gianluca Liombeni, who was decorating her *studiolo*, she wrote:

Since we have learnt by experience that you are as slow in finishing your work as you are in everything else, we send this to remind you that for once you must change your nature, and that if our *studiolo* is not finished on our return, we intend to put you into the dungeon of the *castello*. And this, we assure you, is no jest on our part.¹¹⁵

Liombeni was not the only artist Isabella threatened with imprisonment. The Mola brothers, who made marquetry for her, were told they could expect to be thrown in jail as well if they failed to finish their work in time.¹¹⁶ Isabella also asked her brother Alfonso d'Este to lock up the goldsmith Ercole Fedeli in the dungeon of the *castello* of Ferrara, because he had kept her waiting on a pair of silver bracelets for four years.¹¹⁷ Isabella even wanted to summon the renowned painter Bellini to court to retrieve the twenty-five ducats she had paid him, because he did not finish his work quickly enough. In the end, however, Isabella was prevented from doing so by her agent, who realised she did not have a case.¹¹⁸

Jennifer Fletcher has noted that Isabella's relationship with Leonardo da Vinci seems to have been incomparable to those she had with other artists. Although he never finished anything for the *marchesa*, she never threatened him, but rather kept sending kind letters. She even described him as 'Leonardo the painter [...] who is our friend' in her correspondence.¹¹⁹ For a long time, Isabella tried to persuade Leonardo to complete her portrait or to paint her

¹¹⁴ Glasser 1977, p. 113-114.

¹¹⁵ 'Havendo nui facto exeperientia che cussi sei longo a finire un'opera como sei de persona, te recordamo che'l te bisogna a questa volta mutare natura, perchè se non haverai finito el studiolo al retorno nostro te faremo mettere in presone in lo battiponte del Castello et non serrà zanza.' Isabella d'Este to Gianluca Liombeni, 6 November 1491. Luzio 1887, p. 17; Campbell 2004, p. 61. Translation: Cartwright 1903, vol. 1, p. 88-89.

¹¹⁶ Isabella wrote: 'ma intendemo non vi seti mossi de la ostinata pigricia o deliberatione vostra ne pur mai vi seti dignati di responderni. Ho meritaresti altra admonitione che de una subita presonia: ma voressimo pur vincere lasinata vostra cum la Clemencia nostra, la quale in fine se convertera in severita. Pero che se per tutto Augusto non seranno finiti li quadri vi facino stentare in uno sfundo di Torre: ne vi valeranno scuse che ben spaino como toleti lavorerij da altri.' Isabella d'Este to the Mola brothers, 4 July 1506. Campbell 2004, p. 320, note 19.

¹¹⁷ Fletcher 1981, p. 51; Cartwright 1903, vol. 1, p. 73.

¹¹⁸ Brown 1982, p. 151-152.

¹¹⁹ Fletcher 1981, p. 51. The letter concerns the acquisition of a pair of vases that first had to be judged by someone competent 'come seria Leonardo dipintore quale staseva a Milano che è nostro amico', Isabella d'Este to Francesco Malatesta, Mantua 3 May 1502. Luzio 1888a, p. 46.

something else for her *studiolo* and retained her affectionate tone over the years. In April 1501 her Florentine agent Fra Pietro da Novellara warned her that ‘Leonardo’s life is changeable and greatly unsettled, because he seems to live from day to day’. He then describes the only work Leonardo had undertaken so far in Florence, which was the cartoon of Saint Anne. He concludes his letter with the disappointing observation that Leonardo was concentrating on his studies in geometry, ‘having entirely lost patience with the paintbrush’.¹²⁰ In July that same year Isabella made a second attempt to obtain the portrait with the help of another agent, Manfredo de Manfredis. Even though De Manfredis wrote to inform her that ‘he [Leonardo] had begun to do what your Excellency wished of him’, this attempt proved unsuccessful too.¹²¹

Three years later, in 1504, the portrait was still not finished and Isabella wisely adjusted her wishes. She sent a letter to another agent, Agnolo Tovaglia, asking him to deliver the enclosed letter to Leonardo. After she had urged Tovaglia to see after Perugino’s needs, who was finally working on a *historia* she wanted, she explained:

Desiring next above all to have something by Leonardo da Vinci, whom I know to be an excellent painter both by reputation and first hand, I have asked in the enclosed whether he might make me a figure of a young Christ at twelve years of age.¹²²

In the letter directly addressed to Leonardo she wrote:

Having learned that you are staying in Florence, I entertain the hope that what I have so much desired, that is to have something by your hand, might be realised. When you were in these parts, and did my likeness in charcoal, you promised me you would portray me once more in colours. But because this would be almost impossible, since you are unable to move here, I beg you to fulfil your obligation to me by substituting for my portrait another figure that would be even more pleasing to me; that is to say to carry out for me a young Christ of about twelve years old [...] done with that sweetness and gentleness which is the particular excellence of your art. If you please me in my great desire, know that apart from the payment which you yourself will determine, I will be so indebted that I should not think of anything else but gratifying you, and from now on I am ready to be at your service.¹²³

¹²⁰ ‘la vita di Leonardo è varia et indeterminata forte, sicché pare vivere a gornata’; ‘Dà opra forte ad la geometria, impacientissimo al penello’. Fra Pietro Novellara to Isabella d’Este, Florence, 3 April 1501. Ames-Lewis 2012, p. 228-229. For this letter, see also: Paris 2012, p. 77-78, cat. 17 (with photo of the original document).

¹²¹ ‘che epsa havea dato principio ad fare quello che desiderava epsa vostra signoria da lui’. Manfredo de Manfredis to Isabella d’Este, Florence, 31 July 1501. Ames-Lewis 2012, p. 231.

¹²² ‘Apresso, desiderando nui summamente haver qualche cosa de Leonardo Vincio, il quale et per fama et per presentia conoscemo per excellentissimo pictore, gli scrivemo per l’alligata che’l vogli farmi una figura de uno Christo giovinetto de anni dodece.’ Isabella d’Este to Agnolo Tovaglia, Mantua, 14 May 1504. Ames-Lewis 2012, p. 234-235.

¹²³ ‘Intendo che seti fermato in Fiorenza siamo intrate in speranza de poter consequire quel che tanto havemo desiderato de havere qualche cosa de vostra mano; quando fusti in questa terra et che ne retrasti de carbonio ne promettesti farne ogni mo una volta di colore. Ma perche questo saria quasi impossibile non havendo voi comodita di trasferirui in qua vi pregamo che volendo satisfare a lobllo de la fede che haveti cum noi voliate convertire el retratto nostro in un altra figura che ne sara anchor piu grata cioe farni un Christo giovenetto de anni circa duodeciche, [...] cum quella dolceza et suavita de aiere che haveti per arte peculiare in excellentia. Se serrimo da voi compiaciute de quest nostro summo desiderio, sapiati che, ultra che el pagamento che vui medemo voretivi restarimo talemnte obligate che non pensarimo in altro ch’a in farvi cosa grata, et ex nunc ne offerimo ad ogni commodo et piacer nostro.’ Isabella d’Este to Leonardo da Vinci, Mantua 14 May 1504. Ames-Lewis 2012, p. 235-236.

Isabella's attitude towards Leonardo is striking. She plays a rhetorical game in which it is not the painter who is supposed to be at her service, but rather she at his. Leonardo can name his price and any convenience he needs will be taken care of. This letter is not only an example of the exceptionally accommodating way Isabella approached Leonardo. Her request to convert her portrait into a picture of a young Christ shows just how important it was to Isabella to own a painting by Leonardo, even if it was not the painted portrait she had originally requested. The reason for this change in subject – the impossibility of posing for her likeness – is remarkable as well. Portraits were usually not painted from life, but based upon a drawing that could be made in one sitting, as Leonardo had already done in Mantua.¹²⁴ It was a tactful way of acknowledging that Leonardo simply refused to paint her likeness. Trying to seduce him to paint something else was the only thing Isabella could do.

Tovaglia's reply was telling. He promised to encourage both Perugino and Leonardo to speed up their work. He was not very hopeful, however, and suspected that the two painters: 'will vie with one another in slowness. I do not know in this respect which of the two will outdo the other, but I feel sure that it will be Leonardo who wins'.¹²⁵ In spite of his earlier commitment to Isabella's wishes, Leonardo did not start working on the picture and in October 1504 Isabella once more tried to persuade Leonardo, recalling her request in a letter Tovaglia was to present to him:

Some months ago I wrote to you that I wanted to have a young Christ of about twelve years old by your hand. [...], owing to the many commissioned works that you have in your hand I fear you have not remembered mine; therefore I decided to write these few lines begging you – when you have had enough of the Florentine history – to begin this small figure as a diversion, for it would be pleasing to me and useful to you. Be well.¹²⁶

Francis Ames-Lewis is right to characterize Isabella's attitude towards Leonardo in this correspondence as 'tolerant almost to the point of indulgence'. It is strikingly different from the tone with which she addressed painters like Perugino or Bellini, even though Leonardo was just as slow, or even slower, in delivering what she wanted.¹²⁷ It had become a matter of prestige for Isabella to own a work by Leonardo's hand.

Isabella undertook a final attempt in late spring 1506, turning to Leonardo's uncle, Alessandro Amadori. He ensured Isabella that he was 'at all times the agent of your Excellency with Leonardo da Vinci my nephew' and that Leonardo would start working soon.¹²⁸ Isabella gratefully replied: 'I appreciate the skill with which you deal with Leonardo da Vinci to induce

¹²⁴ Ames-Lewis 2012, p. 101. On drawings and cartoons for portraits, see: Bambach 1999, p. 106

¹²⁵ 'tamen me dubito forte non habbino ad fare insieme ad ghara de tarditate. Non so chi in questo supererà l'uno l'altro, tengho per certo Lionardo habbi a essere vincitore.' Agnolo Tovaglia to Isabella d'Este, Florence, 27 May 1504. Ames-Lewis 2012, p. 236.

¹²⁶ 'Le mesi passati ve scrivessimo che desideravimo havere uno Christo giovane de anni circa duodeci de mane vostra; [...], ma per le molte allegate opere ch haveti a le mani dubitamo non vi raccordati de la nostra: perhò n'è parso farvi questi pochi versi, pregandovi che, quando seti fastidito de la histoia fiorentina, vogliati per recreatione mettervi a fare questa figuretta, che ce fareti cosa gratissima, et a vui utile. Benevalete.' Isabella d'Este to Leonardo da Vinci, Mantua, 31 October 1504. Ames-Lewis 2012, p. 238.

¹²⁷ Ames-Lewis 2012, p. 36.

¹²⁸ 'ogni hora procuratore di vostra excellentia con Lionardo da Vinci, mio nipote', Alessandro Amadori to Isabella d'Este, Florence, 3 May 1506. Ames-Lewis 2012, p. 238-239.

him to satisfy me regarding those figures I asked him for'.¹²⁹ Like all previous efforts, Amadori's intervention proved unsuccessful. Isabella had done her utmost, pressing four different agents over a period of six years to persuade Leonardo, all to no avail. Isabella never received the desired portrait 'in colour', nor the painting of the young Christ.

As badly as Isabella treated her other portraitists, either by criticizing their depictions of her likeness or simply rejecting them, she acclaimed Leonardo's sketches, even though he portrayed her without the jewellery she valued so much. Given the importance of a lady's finery, Isabella herself would have never thought of omitting it from her portrait. It was clearly Leonardo who had made the choices regarding dress and jewellery in his portraits. Had it been any other painter, Isabella would probably have rejected such a design. No other painter or sculptor ever depicted her in this highly unusual way.¹³⁰ Such was his position that Leonardo was granted a degree of artistic freedom – even by one of the most demanding patrons – that was incomparable to that given any other painter of his time. This allowed him to pursue his own ideas on dress and beauty in portraiture. In her letter to Isabella, written in April 1498, Cecilia Gallerani expressed the idea that there was no painter to be found who could match Leonardo. Being portrayed by a master of his stature, even in plain dress, bestowed more honour on Isabella than any jewellery ever could.

¹²⁹ 'né manco ce piace la dextresa che usati cum Leonardo Vincio per disponerlo ad satisfarmi di quelle figure che gli havimo rechieste', Isabella d'Este to Alessandro Amadori, Mantua, 12 May 1506. Ames-Lewis 2012, p. 239-240.

¹³⁰ The Kimbell Art Museum has a terra cotta bust that is sometimes identified as Isabella d'Este on the basis of similarities with Leonardo's portrait cartoon (Fort Worth, Kimbell Art Museum, inv. no. AP 2004.01). Although this sitter appears not to have been wearing jewellery, the overall appearance of the sitter's dress must have been far more luxurious. Traces of polychromy show the bust was originally coloured and may have included painted jewellery. At the shoulders, holes have been made in the clay in order to decorate the sleeves with real ribbons. On the identification and state of the bust, see: Radcliffe, Baker and Mack-Gérard 1992, p. 68-73; Potts 2005, p. 41.

