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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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## 6. Conclusion

Leonardo's portraits of women stand out for the sitters' plain dress. Over the course of the twentieth century, scholars occasionally took note of the lack of ornament but the subject was never an object of study in its own right. The different and diverging interpretations of the sitters' dress – especially in *Mona Lisa* but also in *Ginevra de' Benci* – were never assessed either. It was high time Leonardo's female portraits were examined in the context of dress history. This perspective has yielded significant new insights into these much-studied portraits.

Leonardo's extant female portraits proved highly suitable for examination from the perspective of dress history. Although there are but a handful, they are fairly evenly spread over time so that each of them functions as a benchmark. Leonardo painted Ginevra de' Benci's portrait early in his career between 1475 and 1480 (figs. 1-2). The Milanese portraits of Cecilia Gallerani and the *Belle Ferronnière* were done about ten years later, in the early 1490s (figs. 3-4). Yet another decade later, he drew a cartoon for a portrait of Isabella d'Este (fig. 5). A few years later, he started work on *Mona Lisa*, but since the major changes in her dress date from his second Milanese sojourn, from 1508 to 1513, it represents the last phase of his career (fig. 6). The development of Leonardo's treatment of dress could thus be beautifully traced.

The sheer diversity and scope of the source material for each portrait called for a different perspective in each chapter. After the introduction to dress in Florentine portraiture up to c. 1475 in the first chapter, the second chapter on Ginevra de' Benci's portrait dealt with art theory and the origins of the notion that austerity contributes to a woman's beauty. From Ginevra, a Florentine sitter of the upper middle class, focus shifted in the third and fourth chapters to the aristocracy of the northern Italian courts. The importance of extravagant court dress was discussed in the third chapter. The fourth chapter explored the relationship between painter and patron and its influence on the final result. Finally, the chapter on *Mona Lisa* returned to Florence and concentrated on workshop practice in relation to art theory.

### 1. Fashion

Late fifteenth-century Florentine and Milanese fashion is a recurrent theme in this thesis. My comparison of dress in Leonardo's portraits to sartorial conventions in the social contexts of the Florentine republic and the courts of Milan and Mantua as well as to dress conventions in portraiture resulted in the reconstruction of the meaning of the sitter's garments, for instance Ginevra's *gamurra*. Other previously unknown garments could be identified, such as Ginevra's black shawl, and two portraits dated more precisely on the basis of dress. In the case of the portrait of Cecilia Gallerani, I was able to confirm the previously suggested date of c. 1489-1490. Similarly, the date of c. 1493-1494 for *La Belle Ferronnière* proposed by Luke Syson on stylistic grounds is confirmed by her dress. This early date implies that the sitter is most likely Beatrice d'Este.

Above all, this exercise has made clear to what extent Leonardo adhered to contemporary fashion, including its written and unwritten rules, and more importantly how he deviated from it. Leonardo omitted conspicuous fashions, such as gold brocaded fabrics, jewellery and other ornaments, from all his portraits of women. While in his grotesque heads he deployed old-fashioned dress to enhance the effect of ugliness, in his female portraits he carefully avoided depicting the excesses of fashion. His first portrait shows Ginevra de' Benci in

contemporary yet plain garments, a *gamurra* and a linen cap (fig. 1). Because of the simplicity of her utilitarian dress, the portrait lacks the eye-catching features of fashion in the 1470s, such as multi-coloured fabrics and hair ornaments. The later portraits, the *Lady with an Ermine*, the *Belle Ferronnière* and the cartoon representing Isabella d'Este, show fundamental adjustments to the lavish court dress worn in Milan and Mantua (figs. 3-5). Leonardo consistently avoided conspicuous jewellery and stiff gold brocades and toned down sartorial extremes. In *Mona Lisa* he took it a step further by hiding the contemporary dress under a partly transparent garment, reminiscent of classical drapery (fig. 6). It turns out that specific details of this garment and the sitter's hairstyle are not related to contemporary fashion, but can be traced back to pictorial motifs that Leonardo and his teacher Verrocchio had developed earlier.

In addition to the different fashions of various Italian city-states, I also touched upon foreign dress. The presence of Spanish styles in Northern Italy in the late fifteenth century is generally recognized, but my research has shown that their diffusion took place earlier than previously thought. When and how Spanish fashion spread throughout Italy remain questions for further research. Around 1500, French influence on Italian dress began to increase, but French court fashion has attracted very little scholarly attention to date. More research on this particular subject may increase our understanding of Italian fashions of the day as well.

## 2. Art theory and workshop practice

The present research has shown that Leonardo's depiction of dress was profoundly influenced by art theory and a humanist concept of female beauty. Leonardo was a prolific writer and the *paragone* was one of his major topics. The question of which art form is best suited to represent female beauty is at the heart of this debate. Dress is obviously closely connected with female beauty and, inspired by ancient Roman writers such as Cicero, Leonardo incorporated the notion that a woman is more beautiful without ornaments in his own writings. In Neo-Platonist thought, a woman's physical and spiritual beauty went hand in hand. True beauty was a matter of inner virtue, not of exhibiting outer finery. The idea had already been revived in the vernacular poetry of Dante and Petrarch, but Leonardo was the first painter to apply this concept of beauty to portraiture, advising other painters, too, not to use excessive ornamentation. Leonardo's personal preference for ornate dress that his advice applied to painting exclusively.

A chronological examination of Leonardo's extant painted portraits shows a continuing elaboration of this notion of female beauty. Having first faithfully recorded plain dress in the portrait of Ginevra de' Benci (figs. 1-2), Leonardo invented a type of adjusted dress in his portraits of women of the Milanese court, *Cecilia Gallerani* and *La Belle Ferronnière* (figs. 3-4). The heavy, patterned fabrics of courtly attire were transformed into supple, monochrome material, revealing a living body underneath through folds. This entailed a gradual process of reworking the painting, adding garments and omitting distracting details. The foundation of Leonardo's interest in drapery and the human body had already been laid during his early years in Verrocchio's workshop and culminated in *Mona Lisa* (fig. 6). Over a period of several years Leonardo completely covered the sitter's Florentine fashionable dress with a free-flowing semi-transparent garment, composed of several stock motifs employed earlier for Biblical and mythological figures.

The recently published results of scientific analyses of several of his portraits were crucial in assessing Leonardo's working procedure. Unfortunately, the latest results on the *Lady*

*with an Ermine* appeared just after completion of this thesis and could not be included.<sup>1</sup> These and the forthcoming results of technical research on the *Belle Ferronnière* will certainly provide further occasion to elaborate on the subject.<sup>2</sup> It is to be hoped that technical research will be carried out on more Quattrocento female portraits by leading painters such as Filippo Lippi, Botticelli, Ghirlandaio and Ambrogio de Predis. Not least because it would make it possible to place Leonardo's workshop practice in a broader context.

Art historians too often assume that Leonardo faithfully depicted what his sitters were wearing. Although he often started out sketching his sitter's true dress, he kept reworking it over time. This is especially apparent in the *Lady with an Ermine* and *Mona Lisa*. Infrared images of his earliest portrait, the *Ginevra de' Benci*, show few alterations to the dress. It is well known that Leonardo often worked from nature and then gradually idealized his subject. There is evidence that he did the same with his subjects' dress. Furthermore, Leonardo's idealization of dress was not exclusively aesthetically motivated. It served to reveal the sitter's inner virtue, which he did not want to overshadow with an outward display of ostentatious finery.

### 3. Patrons

Leonardo's approach to dress was notably different from that of his contemporaries, who conformed to the prevailing social values attached to dress and textiles. In Florence wearing locally produced silk fabrics and depicting them in portraiture was a matter of civic pride and family honour. At the court of Milan splendour served to legitimize power and in Mantua Isabella d'Este was the embodiment of the expression of status through dress and jewellery. Portraiture reflected this appreciation of material wealth. Yet wherever Leonardo settled, he was able to impose his idiosyncratic ideal of the representation of female beauty on his patrons and sitters.

As the patron who commissioned the portrait of Ginevra de' Benci, Bernardo Bembo and his Florentine circle must have been highly influential in the development of Leonardo's notion of female beauty. It was through Bembo and the Benci family that Leonardo became acquainted with humanist thought. The Florentine cultural climate of the 1470s, governed by the Medici, in which Neo-Platonic philosophy and courtly love flourished, formed the crucial setting for the development of Leonardo's thoughts on the depiction of dress in portraiture.

Later on in his career, Leonardo apparently imposed these ideas on his patrons rather than complying with their demands. In Milan he followed none of the conventions of court portraiture. Why he was granted such a high degree of freedom is impossible to say, since Milanese sources are silent on this matter. However, the case study of Isabella d'Este's portrait shows that Leonardo enjoyed exceptional status and fame. The explanation may lie in part in the emancipated status of painting and, consequently, of the artist, initiated by Leonardo himself. He regarded painting as a science and his intellectual endeavours were appreciated by his patrons.<sup>3</sup> Although the prices of portraits were still only a fraction of what a length of silk textile or a piece of jewellery cost, the intellectual merits of painting were increasingly valued. Leonardo's reflections on female beauty and its preservation for eternity fit into this development.

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<sup>1</sup> Cotte 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Analysis of the *Belle Ferronnière* is currently being carried out by Pascal Cotte at Lumière Technology, Paris.

<sup>3</sup> Compare: Syson 2011, p. 29.

#### 4. Further research

A question that I have not addressed here is whether Leonardo influenced painters after him and if so, how. In his native Florence, portraits of plainly dressed women became increasingly popular in the 1480s and 1490s. Further research is required to clarify precisely which factors led to this preference. Was it Leonardo's influence or were there other, possibly social factors at play? At any rate, the acceptance of this new pictorial idiom in Florence is not altogether surprising, for it fitted into a republican ideal of restraint and equality preferred by local patrons. After 1500, however, painters and patrons appear to have favoured the depiction of lavish dress and jewellery again. Raphael's female portraits, for example, prominently display colourful silk fabrics and conspicuous jewels. The portrait of Maddalena Doni is a case in point (fig. 107). Similar questions can be raised regarding Leonardo's Milanese followers, including Boltraffio and Bernardino de' Conti. Contrary to the republican mode of Florence, splendour was deemed indispensable at the Northern Italian courts. Did this inhibit the emerging popularity of plain dress in portraiture or did Leonardo's influence in the portraits of the Milanese *Leonardeschi* extend to dress as well?

Leonardo da Vinci may be one the most studied and appreciated painters, both then and now, but his treatment of dress in portraiture has never been explored until now. This dress-history approach has proven valuable and contributed directly to our knowledge of the meaning of his portraits. It has also improved our understanding of Leonardo's workshop practice, art theory and his aesthetic ideals. Approaching early modern painting, and portraits in particular, from the perspective of dress history thus opens up a potentially vast research area for art historians and dress historians alike that has the potential to produce new insights, even into the work of artists who have already been at the centre of scholarly attention for a long time.