

EXHIBITS

The Heavenly Guide

If it is true that the level of development of a culture can be judged, in significant part at least, by the status of women in that society, then the Italian Renaissance produced a revolution in this regard—among all the others for which it is so justly famous. And the revolutionary idea that women should develop their intellectual powers, drawing upon Classical humanist education, was reflected in how women were portrayed in the paintings and sculpture of the age. (This, notwithstanding the

Virtue and Beauty: Leonardo's 'Ginevra de' Benci' and Renaissance Portraits of Women

Washington Post's scurrilous, and oddly “feminist” critique of this exhibition published October 3 [SEE Box, page 74].)

This view of the importance of women is most poetically expressed in the inscription placed on the reverse side of Leonardo da Vinci's portrait of Ginevra de' Benci (1474-78): “*Virtutem Forma Decorat*,” “Beauty Adorns Virtue,” from which the National Gallery exhibit takes its title, “Virtue and Beauty.” The portrait of Ginevra, a woman of renowned intelligence and grace, and the centerpiece of the current exhibit, is, arguably, the most important painting owned by the National Gallery—the only painting by Leonardo in the Americas. Thus, an event that showcases this little treasure, is most welcome; indeed, Ginevra is the most fascinating of all the young women portrayed in this collection, which derives almost entirely from Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-century Florence, i.e., the high point of the Golden Renaissance [SEE right and inside back cover, this issue].

That women appeared as secular subjects at this time is, in itself, highly significant. But, the origins of such female portraiture are to be found in two earlier sources: First, in the Italian

vernacular poetry of Dante and Petrarch; and, second, in Renaissance portrayals of the Virgin, especially those of the Annunciation, in which the Virgin is virtually always presented as an intellectual woman, interrupted by the angel Gabriel while reading a book. (This is true for both Northern and Italian paintings.)

Beatrice and Laura

In Dante's *Commedia*, or *Divine Comedy*, the Roman poet Virgil, whom Dante revered as his mentor, leads Dante through Hell, and up the Mount of Purgatory, until they reach the Wall of Fire, through which Dante must pass before entering Earthly Paradise at the summit. But, when Dante reaches the Wall, it is Beatrice alone who is able to give him the courage to enter the flames. And it is Beatrice—who for Dante represents Divine Wisdom—who must lead him upwards through the Heavenly spheres, to look directly into the face of God, as he does at the conclusion of the *Paradiso*, while along the way, she instructs him in the Renaissance sciences of physics and astrophysics.

In Canto XXXI of the *Paradiso*, Dante expresses his love for Beatrice, who has been his guide:

“O lady in whom all my hope takes strength,
and who for my salvation did endure
to leave her footprints on the floor of Hell,
through your own power, through
your own excellence
I recognize the grace and the effect
of all those things I have seen with
my eyes.



Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence

Andrea del Verrocchio, “Lady with a Bunch of Flowers,” c. 1475-1480.

From bondage into freedom you led me
by all those paths, by using all those means
which were within the limits of your power.

Preserve in me your great munificence,
so that my soul which you have healed may be
pleasing to you when it slips from the flesh.”¹

In the case of Dante's student Petrarch, his beloved Muse was named Laura. In a sonnet in his *Canzoniere*, Petrarch also speaks of her as a guide to the eternal:

From her to you comes loving thought that leads,
as long as you pursue, to highest good,
esteeming little what all men desire;
there comes from her all joyous honesty
that leads you by the straight path up to Heaven—
already I fly high upon my hope.²

Leonardo kept a copy of Dante’s masterpiece on his bedside table, while Michelangelo is said to have memorized most of it. In fact, the image of woman as the embodiment of Virtue, the pathway to the Good, which infuses the poetry of Dante and Petrarch, informs and illuminates the paintings of the Renaissance they fathered. It is uniquely from this standpoint that the portraits in “Virtue and Beauty” can be understood.

‘Character and Mind’

The exhibit, sponsored by Airbus, offers more than forty works rarely seen in this country, including several male portraits, as well as a small number of sculptures and medals.

Among these is a profile portrait of Giovanna degli Abizzi Tornabuoni, by Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449-1494), loaned by the Tyssen-Bornemisza Collection in Madrid [SEE inside back cover, this issue]. Although sometimes mistaken for a wedding portrait, memorializing one of the most celebrated Florentine marriages of the day, between the Albizzi and Turnabuoni families, the work was probably done posthumously

in 1488: Giovanna died giving birth to her second child, only two years after her marriage.

Behind the shimmering image of Giovanna, who is dressed sumptuously in garments usually reserved for brides, is a Latin inscription, meaning, “Art, would that you would represent character and mind. There would be no more beautiful painting on earth.”

The painting is extraordinary, in that, it is not only stunningly beautiful, but, despite the profile view of the subject, the artist has succeeded in conveying the subject’s upright character and intelligence, as well as her beauty. And, like the Madonnas we find in Annunciation pictures, she appears to have just put down her book, which rests on the ledge behind her, directly under the Latin inscription.

An earlier painting by Sandro Botticelli, “Woman at a Window” (1470/75), presents a different kind of beauty, in which the character and personality of the sitter transcend a rather plain appearance [SEE inside back cover, this issue]. The lady in question is believed to be Smerelda Brandini—the grandmother of the sculptor Baccio Bandinelli. In this portrait, Botticelli breaks with tradition by painting the subject in three-quarter view, allowing us to look into her eyes, which are dark and thoughtful. We are also drawn into her world by the perspective device Botticelli employs of having Smerelda rest her hand on the frame of the window she is looking out of, an illusion that connects her space with ours. All of which contributes to the impression that she is a real person, not an icon to be admired from afar.

Influence of Verrocchio

One of the most charming works in the exhibit is Verrocchio’s marble bust, “Lady with a Bunch of Flowers” (c. 1475), from the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, in Florence. Verrocchio was, of course, the teacher of Leonardo, and his studio was the most influ-



Lent by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

Leonardo da Vinci,
“Study of Hands,” c. 1474.

ential in Florence during the second half of the Fifteenth century. Both Botticelli’s “Brandini” and Leonardo’s “Ginevra” owe much to Verrocchio’s masterpiece.

In this revolutionary work, Verrocchio recalls Classical Greek relief sculpture, yet goes beyond it, by executing the figure fully in the round. The inclusion of the lady’s hands, which gently press a bunch of flowers to her breast, represent a Renaissance invention by Verrocchio: It is the only Fifteenth-century portrait-sculpture which portrays the subject half-length, showing the arms and hands. By employing subtle asymmetries—her left shoulder is slightly higher than her right; her head tilts slightly toward the side; the nosegay of flowers are placed off-center—Verrocchio conveys the illusion that the subject has been interrupted in mid-motion, a hallmark of Classical Greek sculpture.

Verrocchio’s most celebrated student, Leonardo da Vinci, in his “Ginevra,” adopts many of these innovations. Although the painting which has come down to us is incomplete—the lower third was cut off after being damaged—it is believed that the original version was, like Verrocchio’s bust, a figure in



Department of Imaging and Visual Services, National Gallery of Art, Washington

Computer reconstruction of Leonardo’s
“Ginevra de’ Benci” as a figure in half-length.
The hypothesis is based, in part, on the drawing
of hands shown above.

half-length. This hypothesis is based, in part, on the existence of a drawing of hands by Leonardo (now at Windsor Castle), which has been used to create a computer reconstruction on display with the exhibit.

Ginevra was the daughter of a wealthy Florentine banking family, who, in 1474, at the age of 16, married Luigi Niccolini. There is some dispute as to whether Leonardo's portrait was commissioned by the family to commemorate Ginevra's marriage (a somewhat dubious proposal, since unlike Ghirlandaio's Giovanna Turnabuoni, she is dressed in everyday clothing); or, as many believe, the painting was commissioned by her admirer, the celebrated bibliophile Bernardo Bembo, Venetian Ambassador to Florence from 1475-76, and again 1478-80, who, in chivalric fashion, chose Ginevra as his "Platonic" *innamorata*. That Bembo was the patron is further borne out by the fact that the reverse of the painting bears his family insignia, along with the motto, "Beauty Adorns Virtue." Knowing Bembo's Venetian pedigree, it is not too difficult to imagine that it was he who put that sad expression on Ginevra's face, and not the illness often proffered as the explanation for her pallor.³

Beyond dispute, however, is the fact that the painting was executed by a very young Leonardo da Vinci, who in 1474 would have been about 22 years old. Like Verrocchio's Bargello lady, Ginevra appears to us as a real person: she turns toward us, in three-quarter view. Like her brown dress, which is veiled by the diaphanous *coverciere*, her light brown eyes are veiled by her private thoughts. Her dress and coiffure are remarkably like those of Verrocchio's bust (we can now compare them side by side); yet, here too, we get a foretaste of what is to come in the mature masterpieces of Leonardo, especially the "Mona Lisa," whose watery landscape and distant horizon are already present in the Ginevra.

While it is always a joy to visit Ginevra when at the National Gallery, seeing her among her contemporaries in the current exhibit, and alongside the

Why Does the Washington Post Hate Women?

Renaissance Florence was a lousy place to be a lady. If you survived to adolescence as a virgin, you were likely to be betrothed to some powerful stranger twice your age," observed Blake Gopnik, art critic for the *Washington Post*, in his October 3 review of "Virtue and Beauty." Mr. Gopnik, who seems to be a member of that strange art-world fraternity of men who hate women, goes on to lavish attention on every superficial aspect of the physical appearance—hairdos, clothing, skin texture, etc.—of the subjects of these Renaissance portraits, almost as if he were vying to become a Fifteenth-century Versailles: "With a bit of work by a clever hairdresser, and a bank loan for her pearls, the anonymous beauty . . . could have looked almost this good in life," he hisses.

"We could wax lyrical about the humanizing Renaissance eye, and the friendly glance it cast at women, and maybe we still will," Gopnik avers, but he never actually delivers. Instead we are treated to the view of the Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino (the Venetian asset who founded the Florentine Academy to obscure the distinction between Plato and Aristotle), who is quoted as having said: "A woman should be like a chamber pot, hidden away once a man had emptied himself into her."

But, perhaps, the *Washington Post* just doesn't appreciate Italian Renaissance portraits? Well, then, there was Blake Gopnik's reaction to the Lon-

don exhibit of "Rembrandt's Women," printed in the *Post* just a few weeks later, on October 21, and titled "Rembrandt, Facing the Ugly Truth: The Dutch Master's 'Women' Turns a Few Heads in London." Contrasting Rembrandt's "ugly" women to the "truly pretty" ones painted by "the best guy artists of Renaissance Florence," Gopnik proceeds to deconstruct Rembrandt: "If you isolate the paint that Rembrandt goops onto his canvases from the magical effect it works on us, you see a coagulated mess of bits and blobs of fatty emulsion, like mayonnaise gone very wrong, built up on a background of oil smearings." (Recall that Gopnik is trashing paintings like Rembrandt's 1634 "Flora," a loving portrait of the artist's first wife, Saskia; and the powerful "Susanna and the Elders," among others.)

Not only Rembrandt's sublime paintings, but even his etchings and drawings come under fire: "Rembrandt, often credited as the greatest etcher of all time, tends toward a tangled line, that scratches like steel wool." Gopnik's foulest venom is reserved for one of Rembrandt's most lovingly beautiful drawings: "A quaintly observed scene of two women teaching a toddler to walk is hard to smile at, given the unforgiving inky snarl that it's rendered with."

The *Washington Post* doesn't only hate women, it hates art!

—BJ

Verrocchio sculpture, makes the trip especially worthwhile now.

—Bonnie James

The exhibit will be open at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., from Sept. 30, 2001 to Jan. 6, 2002.

1. *The Portable Dante*, trans. and ed. by Mark Musa (New York: Penguin Books, 1995).
2. *Petrarch: Selections from the Canzoniere*,

and Other Works, trans. by Mark Musa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

3. Bernardo Bembo, and his more famous son, the Cardinal Pietro Bembo, were leading Venetian "intellectuals," i.e., Aristoteleans, who were deployed to corrupt the Renaissance in Florence. Bernardo was active in the so-called "Platonic Academy" of Marsilio Ficino, which attempted to synthesize the irreconcilable philosophies of Plato and Aristotle.