

# Beyond Isabella

Secular Women Patrons of Art in Renaissance Italy

Edited by  
Sheryl E. Reiss and David G. Wilkins

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## Introduction: Recognizing New Patrons, Posing New Questions

David G. Wilkins

A pious woman, or—such is the power of images—a woman who wished to be recognized as pious, is represented kneeling in the foreground (fig. 1). She is in profile and at first glance seems proud and prim. She is wearing a sumptuous white overdress with wide hanging sleeves, a narrow blue hem, and a blue and white brocade panel in the front. A red and white chemise is visible at the wrists, while a decorated red belt and pearl necklace complete her outfit. Her elaborately arranged blond hair is adorned with pearls. This emphasis on fashion and elegance is countered by the humility of her kneeling pose and by the position of her hands, which are raised in a traditional Christian gesture of prayer.

This elegantly dressed woman may well be the person who commissioned the altarpiece in which we find her portrait (fig. 2), for she has assumed a place traditionally identified with the patron and/or donor during the Renaissance.<sup>1</sup> The large tempera painting on wooden panel is dominated, however, by the enthroned Virgin and Child and Saints Leonard, Jerome, John the Baptist, and Francis; the woman is in miniature, kneeling at the feet of Jerome. She is positioned on the left side of the painting, a position that in the Renaissance was generally reserved for the man when both husband and wife were represented in such a context. Although the large figures dominate because of their scale, the gazes and gestures of Mary and Christ return our attention to the woman; Mary is represented as if praying with and for her, while the child blesses her. Despite her size, then, it could be argued that at one time this contemporary woman was the most important figure in the altarpiece. In terms of history, the holy figures are more important than she, but to her friends and acquaintances, her appearance here and the notice she is granted by Mary and Christ must have made her loom large in their eyes. While her contemporaries would have understood why she was so prominently presented, some may not have liked it or accepted it without complaint. She looms large for us too, for she is shown without a male companion and in the location usually taken by the man when contemporary figures were presented in an altarpiece. Her unexpected presence raises questions that reveal the breadth of our topic. A study of her role in this altarpiece, painted by a minor, derivative artist working outside the innovative urban centers of the period, urges us to revise our standard of what is worthy of investigation. To understand more fully the roles possible for Renaissance women, we need to cast our net as broadly as possible.

Exactly what constitutes a patron is, of course, an appropriate question at this point. The study of patronage traditionally was understood as the identification and investigation of the person or group who ordered and subsequently paid for a work. To advance our discussion, let me propose that we also consider as patrons a person or group of persons who were assumed by the artist to be potential buyers and users. An artist who responds to the needs or wishes of a particular person or group of persons could then be considered to have a patron,

Wilkins Fig. 1. Nicola di Maestro Antonio d'Ancona, detail of patron, *Madonna and Child with Donor and Saints Leonard, Jerome, John the Baptist, and Francis*, 1472. Pittsburgh, Carnegie Museum of Art (photo: University of Pittsburgh)

a foundation for the study of Renaissance patronage,<sup>2</sup> this altarpiece demonstrates how an undocumented work is useful in raising questions about patronage. The historical circumstances of the Renaissance suggest that many instances of patronage by women are unlikely to have been recorded in documents; while many female patrons will thus remain anonymous, perhaps their achievements can now be recognized. Their activity as patrons during a period when such behaviour was neither expected nor encouraged deserves our close attention. But to help set the stage for our anonymous woman and to further our discussion, an analysis of the rich information offered in this volume about documented women patrons and their activities is in order.

### New Evidence for “What Secular Women Did”

In her contribution to this volume, Carolyn Valone asserts that “We need to discover what women did, not what men said.” Most of the contributions in this volume respond to this request by offering specific examples of what secular women did in securely documented examples of patronage dating from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries. These studies of particular acts of patronage bring us into intimate contact with specific women and their lives and activities. The end result is a gathering of individuals and acts of patronage that expands our understanding of the patronage of secular women during the Renaissance and makes possible some broad generalizations about their activities.

It is clear from the evidence presented, for example, that Italian Renaissance women were often continuing a tradition or were inspired by earlier or contemporary women who had commissioned art. Valone points out, for example, that women patrons interested in architecture had models from the ancient world. Other women looked back to the immediately preceding generation: Veronica Gambarà, for example, modeled her patronage on that of her predecessor in Correggio, Francesca of Brandenburg, as discussed by Katherine McIver; Gabrielle Langdon suggests that Dianora de’ Medici was motivated by the model of her aunt, Eleonora di Toledo. Molly Bourne suggests that Isabella’s inspiration may have been her

even if the work was not specifically commissioned. While this broad interpretation blurs the distinctions among patron, donor, and audience, I would argue for its usefulness. Such a thesis recognizes that whenever an artist creates a work with a specific audience in mind, even if that prospective audience is a group instead of an individual, the artist is accommodating the work to the needs of a patron. It also suggests that the individual or group who pays for a work should not automatically be accepted as the sole patron or even as the most important patron. This extended concept of patronage is in part inspired by the provocative paper by Roger Crum in this volume, and is further discussed below.

This broad definition of patronage opens the possibility of discussing patronage in the altarpiece now at the Carnegie Museum of Art, even though the woman represented is anonymous and is not certainly the patron.

While a number of studies have begun to lay

mother, Eleonora d'Aragona, duchess of Ferrara. Connections between women almost certainly played a role in encouraging patronage. Vittoria Colonna, who plays the key role in Marjorie Och's paper, was the aunt of Dianora da Toledo, whom Langdon proposes as the patron of the Thyssen-Bornemisza miniature (Langdon fig. 1). Veronica Gambara of Correggio corresponded with Colonna and sent her two of her own devotional poems. One important Renaissance model was, as we might expect, Isabella d'Este. McIver demonstrates that both Silvia Sanvitale and Veronica Gambara were encouraged by Isabella's example and that Gambara specifically modeled her *Studiolo* and other activities on those of Isabella.

Isabella d'Este's significance as a model receives a new interpretation in Molly Bourne's paper on the relationship between Isabella's patronage and that of her husband, Francesco II Gonzaga. Bourne's suggestion that Francesco's activities as a patron were in part motivated by a rivalry between Francesco and Isabella is supported by a letter from Isabella to her husband that refers to his new rooms as "beautiful, and even more because Your Excellency has learned from the example of my room, although I must confess that you have improved upon it."<sup>3</sup> Bourne analyzes the gendered nature of the programs husband and wife developed in their rival *camerini*, and questions the traditional assumption that Isabella's commissions overshadowed those of her husband. Bourne's case history offers a rare documented example of a female patron whose commissions served as inspiration and models for a man's activities as a patron.

Wilkins Fig. 2. Nicola di Maestro Antonio d'Ancona, *Madonna and Child with Donor and Saints Leonard, Jerome, John the Baptist, and Francis*, 1472. Pittsburgh, Carnegie Museum of Art (photo: University of Pittsburgh)

A second common factor is based on research demonstrating that Saint Jerome, his writings, and his female followers all served as models for women patrons; Valone demonstrates that this is especially true for widows in Rome at the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Two of the papers offered here expand our understanding of the significance of Jerome for educated women.<sup>5</sup> He figures in two altarpieces by Parmigianino commissioned by widows, for example, as discussed by Mary Vaccaro (Vaccaro figs. 1, 2). Vaccaro also draws attention to Correggio's *Madonna and Child with Saints Jerome and Mary Magdalen* (Vaccaro fig. 4), which was commissioned by the widow Briseide Colla for her husband's burial chapel. Katherine McIver points out that Veronica Gambarà commissioned Correggio to paint a *Saint Jerome*, now lost, for her chapel in San Domenico in Correggio. While the importance of Jerome for women at the end of the sixteenth century had been established previously, papers by McIver and Vaccaro demonstrate that Jerome was a significant factor for women patrons during the first half of the century. While every appearance of Jerome cannot be associated with his importance for women, the appearance of Jerome in two specific quattrocento works made for women is worth noting; the altarpiece now at the Carnegie (fig. 2) and the *Assumption of the Virgin* commissioned by India Salviati and her brother Bernardo from Neri di Bicci, as discussed in Rosi Gilday's paper.

Carolyn Valone observes that Jerome's works were especially important in supporting women—especially widows—when they commissioned works of architecture. She demonstrates that women's patronage of architecture was not a new phenomenon by tracing documented examples beginning in the Hellenistic period and concluding with a group of monuments commissioned by Roman widows in the second half of the sixteenth century. Valone cites three motivations for these activities: commemoration, religion, and social welfare. The motivations for some other women, instead, seem to have been dynastic and, on occasion, politicized. Lawrence Jenkens's research elucidates the role played by Caterina Piccolomini, sister of Pope Pius II, in the commissioning and construction of the Palazzo delle Papesse in Siena (Jenkins figs. 1–3). Jenkens suggests that Piccolomini may have been the first fifteenth-century woman to build such a residence. Similarly, Sheryl Reiss demonstrates how much of Alfonso Orsini's attention was focused on secular architecture, especially the Palazzo Medici-Lante in Rome and the completion of the Medici villa at Poggio a Caiano. Both authors associate these women's building activities in terms of their relationships to male members of their families.

A third factor discussed in several papers is the importance of the erection and/or decoration of the family burial chapel, which often became the responsibility of a widow after the death of her husband. Mary Vaccaro discusses two sixteenth-century women who were active building or decorating chapels for their husband's burial: Maria Bufalini, who decorated a burial chapel in San Salvatore in Lauro in Rome to honor her husband and his father, and Elena Baiardi, who commissioned Parmigianino's *Madonna of the Long Neck* (Vaccaro fig. 2) for her husband's burial chapel in Santa Maria de' Servi in Parma. Katherine McIver discusses Veronica Gambarà, who built a chapel dedicated to Saint Jerome for her husband at San Domenico in Correggio.<sup>6</sup>

Some of these women ignored the specific directions left by their husbands. Carolyn Valone points out, for example, that Marchesa Vittoria della Tolfa took the 17,000 scudi her husband had earmarked for a grand family chapel in the Lateran and used it to found a Franciscan nunnery; later, in her own will, Vittoria left the comparatively modest sum of 2,000 scudi for a burial chapel for herself and her husband in another church, the Aracoeli. Livia Muri, also discussed by Valone, chose to bury her husband not in one of the churches he had specified in his will, but in an alternative location.

The altarpiece by Alessandro Allori (Pilliod fig. 1) discussed by Elizabeth Pilliod was

created for a chapel that the head of the family, Girolamo di Cino Cini, stipulated should be dedicated to his patron saint, Jerome. The titular saint, however, was relegated to the altar frontal (Pilliod fig. 4), and Anna di Michele Videmon, Cini's widow, chose the virtually unprecedented subject of Christ and the Adulteress for the chapel's altarpiece. Girolamo married Anna, a German woman who was the mother of his children, only on his deathbed; her choice of the adulteress theme is explained by Pilliod in light of her personal history.

As Rosi Gilday points out in her paper, widows often had more autonomy than single or married women, and the death of a husband often required a woman to be more active outside the home than expected or possible when the husband was living.<sup>7</sup> Of the ten documented secular women patrons of Neri di Bicci examined in Gilday's survey, five are widows, while one was married, and the status of the other four is uncertain; four of the widows commissioned altarpieces, and the fifth commissioned a *tondo* intended for a church.

The rich documentation presented here also helps to elucidate other activities undertaken by secular women, making it clear that patronage should be studied within the broad context of women's lives. Isabella d'Este, Eleonora di Toledo, Veronica Gambara, and Silvia Sanvitale, for example, all assumed rulership when their husbands were away from court or had died. Even when their husbands were present the women generally were responsible on a day-to-day basis for behind-the-scenes management of their courts and official public and private entertaining. Veronica Gambara met Pope Leo X and hosted both King Francis I of France and Emperor Charles V in Correggio. In her contribution, Sheryl Reiss details Alfonsina Orsini's role in the planning and staging of ceremonial display at the time of Leo X's Florentine *entrata* of 1515 and the second *nozze* in 1518 of her son Lorenzo and Madeleine de la Tour d'Auvergne. The patronage of women for such events that is documented in the papers by McIver and Reiss suggests that this may be a fruitful avenue for further research. Silvia Sanvitale ruled Scandiano between 1553 and 1560 with the approval of Ercole II d'Este, duke of Ferrara. Silvia and her husband, Boiardo, count of Scandiano, entertained the Este family at their townhouse in Ferrara and in Scandiano; they also hosted a pope, cardinals, princes, and other important individuals. Veronica Gambara and Vittoria Colonna, among others, were active as poets. The fresco discussed by Roger Crum (Crum fig. 1) reveals the seldom-recognized behind-the-scenes roles played by women.

In several cases documents bring to light the difficulties that women faced during the Renaissance. Elizabeth Pilliod's discussion of Anna di Michele Videmon suggests the difficulties this German woman suffered in Florence before and after her husband's death. Probably the most poignant example discussed here is Dianora de' Medici who, as Gabrielle Langdon argues, commissioned Allori's portrait miniature (Langdon figs. 1, 2) as a gift for her husband, Pietro de' Medici. The allegory on the back is a panegeric for marital harmony, but Dianora's story ended tragically when Pietro strangled her five years after their marriage.

Documentation also reveals that women often demonstrated a special concern for the situations of other women, as indicated in the will of Fina da Carrara, with its many provisions for the women of her household, including dowries to help her legatees find husbands after Fina's death. As Ben Kohl points out, Fina even left a legacy to an illegitimate daughter of her husband being raised in Fina's household. Maria Bufalini, discussed by Mary Vaccaro, was generous in her legacies to the women of her patrilineal family.

Despite extensive documentation, the patronage practices of secular women can be difficult to trace for a number of reasons. Sometimes the works women commissioned have not played important roles in the literature simply because they are lost, as is the case with Correggio's *Saint Jerome*, commissioned by Veronica Gambara. In discussing Roman religious buildings that were supported by women during the sixteenth century, Valone emphasizes that these women's advocacy of radical religious reform meant that their build-

## About the Contributors

**Molly Bourne** teaches art history at Syracuse University in Florence, Italy. She received her Ph.D. from Harvard University with a thesis on the artistic patronage of Francesco II Gonzaga and its relationship to the patronage of his consort, Isabella d'Este. A specialist in the art and architecture of Renaissance Mantua, she has published on topics including villa design and cartography at the Gonzaga court, as well as on cultural exchange between Mantua and Spain. Currently she is editing and contributing to a collection of interdisciplinary essays on art and culture in Renaissance Mantua.

**Roger J. Crum** received his Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh in 1992, and in 2000 was named the Dr. Thomas C. and Janet M. Graul Chair in Art and Languages at the University of Dayton, where he has taught since 1991. A specialist in the art and architecture of Renaissance Florence, he has published articles and reviews in *The Art Bulletin*, *Art Journal*, *Artibus et Historiae*, *Renaissance Quarterly*, *Renaissance Studies*, and *The Sixteenth Century Journal*. Together with John T. Paoletti, he is presently editing a volume on the spaces of Florentine art, 1300–1600, forthcoming from Cambridge University Press. He has been a Samuel H. Kress predoctoral fellow at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence, a fellow at the Newberry Library in Chicago, and a member of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton.

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