

Virtue, Power, & Profession: A Study of Women in Renaissance Portrait Medals

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Women and art has been a subject highly researched and studied for decades. Since the rise of feminism in scholarship in the 19th century, scholars have eagerly delved into the female experience of art, females in art, and females that make art. The purpose of this paper is to examine women in art, and more specifically, the role of women in Renaissance portrait medals. Renaissance portrait medals were a prominent device in the early modern period, and were used frequently in Italy, which is the region this discussion will address. This study will discuss the women depicted in the medals selected and the image that they wished to convey through the highly unique and pseudo-propagandistic device. The women of concern will be Giovanna Albizzi, a Florentine noblewoman, Isabella d'Este, the Marchesa of Mantua, and Lavinia Fontana, a High Renaissance artist. This essay will examine the experience of the portrait medal and what it meant to the women they depicted.

A portrait medal is a very specific object. It is small enough to be held in hand, but large enough to render portraits and other image types on them. This size and subsequent subject matter is integral to the power and purpose of portrait medals, which will be discussed later in this paper. They are usually round and cast from metals such as bronze, silver, or gold. Medals usually bear the portrait of a certain individual on the obverse (front) with identifying inscriptions and an image or scene related to the sitter on the reverse (back). The majority of known medals employ this formula. Medals, though similar to coins, are not at all a currency. Firstly, they are not produced on a civic basis. There is no governing to their production, nor are they regulated. There are no size, weight, or material restrictions, as there are with coins and currency. Second, they are not used for commerce or

consumerism. Third, they were not made in large numbers, nor did they circulate among the public.¹ This distinct individuality was to capitalize on the purpose of the medals. Medals were meant for commemoration of an individual. They were meant to convey an individual – who they were, what they stood for, or what they may have done. Since these medals were meant for the promotion of an individual, they were produced on an individual basis to be given to certain people. Usually, the sitter would distribute their medals to those they felt were important or those they wished to make an impression upon.² This selective distribution to certain people for personal gain or otherwise ties into the idea of fame and the interests of the Classical world, which are discovered through the Italian Renaissance belief/practice of Humanism. Humanism is an interest in the revival of classical Greek and Roman ideas, writing, learning, and the visual art styles. Medals, though not coins, were distinctly tied to antiquity and the idea of fame and history. This was especially true in Renaissance Italy, the area of focus for this discussion.

As previously mentioned, medals are not a form of coin. But, Renaissance medals were in fact inspired by coins. Coins, like medals, have a generally static format. Usually, the obverse is decorated with the portrait of a ruler or important figure to the current society in which the currency circulates. On the reverse, there is generally an image related to the ruler or society. Before the move to depict individuals, Roman coins depicted certain prominent events within the empire's history.³ These objects were also made of metal, precious to the culture it was moving within. Coins vary from era to era and region to region, but for the purposes of this study, Roman coinage (the influence for Italian Renaissance medals) fits the aforementioned format. Roman coins were the prototype and influence of portrait medals because of their form, purpose, and place in time. Roman coins were a form of currency. They were not an object of fame, but rather one of commerce and propaganda (for the leader/ruler pictured). The prestige of the Roman empire was what was important to the Renaissance

1 Scher p. 13 and also the “Medals” entry by Scher from Oxford Art Online.

2 Scher p. 13.

3 Favro “Rome, ancient” subsection two (2), “coins” under heading “I. Roman Republican and Imperial”.

Italians, though. This directly relates to the Renaissance agenda of Humanism. As already stated, Humanism was an interest in classical literature and thought. This expanded beyond learning and scholarship into the visual arts, and later society and the way in which people viewed themselves and others. Most prominently, Humanism examined the human condition and the worth of an individual. Through the classical ideals studied by Humanists, individuals were meant to better themselves and increase their potential and worth.⁴ The point was to look to the illustrious past to better the future. By learning and applying the beliefs and ideals of their ancestors, Renaissance Italians were finding practical uses for classical conventions. A perfect example of such a marriage is the Renaissance portrait medal. The medal is influenced by the Roman coin.⁵ Roman coins were objects of commerce and propaganda, that usually followed a static format. They were widely-distributed and were a hand-held, familiar item. Medals take the well-known format of the coin and modify it. The coin has now become larger, and is now called medal. It is not longer an item of commerce, but an item of fame and image. They are not widely-distributed, but rather given to a select few for social purposes. The Roman coin went from an everyday object to the Renaissance medal of fame and image. In a way, the medal is an updated form of proganda. In the following paragraphs, this study discusses three Renaissance women and their portrait medals. The questions addressed are who made the respective medals, what they show (visually), and what is their purpose in regard to their individual patrons.

The first medal to be discussed is that of Giovanna Albizzi. It was cast in bronze in 1486 and designed by Niccolo Fiorentino.⁶ Giovanna was a young Florentine noblewoman and her medal was commissioned upon her marriage to Lorenze Tornabouni. Giovanna's medal is all about ideal virtues and the perfect woman.⁷ Her medal falls into the normal standard for female portrait medals. Typical portrait medals of women capitalized on the moral character and feminine virtue of the sitter. The

4 Duke, "Humanism" from Oxford Art Online (link in Works Cited).

5 See fig 1 in Image Appendix.

6 See fig 2 in Image Appendix.

7 Christiansen p. 67, p. 118-120.

obverse of her medal shows a portrait of herself in opulent dress and pearls, and her beautiful profile is prominent. Her dress not only denotes her station in life and capitalizes on her great beauty, but the pearls she wears carry a meaning of chastity and purity.⁸ The inscription around the obverse says, “UXOR LAVRENTII DE TORNABONAS IOANNA ALBIZA” or, “The wife of Lorenzo Tornabuoni, Giovanna Albizzi”.⁹ This indicates to the viewer that this medal may have been cast for the occasion of her wedding to Lorenzo, and that is the viewpoint that most scholars agree on. The reverse of her medal shows the Three Graces, three well-known figures from antiquity. This is yet another way individuals tied their medals to antiquity. Some simply adopted the form of an antique coin and therefore aligned themselves with antiquity. Others utilized antique images or figures to relate back to themselves. Giovanna's medal shows the utilization of classical images. The Three Graces are supposed to represent Chastity, Love, and Beauty. The inscription is the respective virtues in Latin: “CASTITAS PVLCHRITVDO AMOR”, or “Chastity, Beauty, Love”.¹⁰ Chastity holds a sprig of wheat, which represents fertility, as a wish for the pending marriage. Love holds a stem of myrtle, which represents Venus, the Roman goddess associated with the virtue.¹¹ Beauty stands without accessory, but her back is to the viewer, and her body is prominently displayed. Giovanna's medal is the quintessential portrait medal of a Renaissance woman. Her virtues and beauty are capitalized and her goodness is celebrated.

The second medal in question is that of Isabella d'Este.¹² The version that will be discussed is the plain, cast bronze copy by Gian Christoforo Romano. (Usually, scholars note Isabella's own gold and enamel copy in discussion).¹³ It was made in 1498, and is currently housed in the British Museum in London, England. Romano authored several works for Isabella; most notably the marble door frame between her grotta and studiolo as well as a bust portrait of her husband, Francesco. Through many

8 Christiansen, p. 119.

9 Scher, p. 135.

10 Scher, p. 135.

11 Christiansen, p. 119.

12 See fig 3 in Image Appendix.

13 See fig 4 in Image Appendix.

letters between the artist and Isabella, we know that Romano not only created the aforementioned works, but also acted as an agent for Isabella in her acquisition of antiques.¹⁴ His role in her passion for the antique may have been what drove the way in which Isabella's portrait medal is rendered. Isabella was an avid patron of literature and the arts, a passionate collector of antiquities and antique art, and overall, a very unique woman of the Renaissance. Her penchant for frequent correspondence gives scholars a great model of a secular female patron in the Renaissance. Through her active role in the construction of her studiolo, grotta, and her patronage of literature and the arts, some argue Isabella was responsible for the resurgence of culture in Mantua.¹⁵ She was the Marchesa of Mantua, and her elevated position allowed her much freedom and wealth to conduct her patronage projects. As a noblewoman and wife to the ruler of Mantua, Isabella was a revered public figure. On several occasions, Isabella acted as Marquess in her husband's absence.¹⁶ This blatant wielding of power is very important in a time when women were still tied to the home and domesticity, rather than politics and power. Isabella's medal, though, does not discuss or comment on her role as a patron. Rather, it capitalizes on the power she had. Isabella and the medal's artist, Romano, were involved in acquisition of antiques. The obverse shows Isabella in profile, with her name and title around her image: "ISABELLA ESTEN MARCH MAN" or "Isabella d'Este Marchesa of Mantua". Capitalizing on her own contemporary position as ruler and collector, Romano fashioned Isabella's medal after the coins she collected.¹⁷ Her hair is even rendered in a unique style, reminiscent of the hairstyles of ancient Roman women.¹⁸ The reverse shows an image of her astrological sign, Sagittarius, and a figure of peace. There is also an inscription that reads, "BENEMOERE NTIVM ERGO" or "On account of high merit".¹⁹ Isabella's medal is meant to convey a sense of peace and leadership. Her portrait and astrological sign are distinctly her, but the blatant allegory of peace aligns her with her intentions as a

14 See Norris' entry from Oxford Art Online entitled, "Gian Cristoforo Romano" (link in Works Cited).

15 See p. 93-94 in Bourne's essay in "Beyond Isabella" (source in Works Cited).

16 See British Museum link in Works Cited (information in the essay on the web page).

17 See British Museum link in Works Cited.

18 Christiansen, p. 239.

19 Scher, p. 152.

ruler. She is promoting a particular image of herself as a ruler. Isabella is clinging to the prestige of antiquity and modifying it for her own purposes. Her medal was distributed to few, and most were members of the current aristocracy. Isabella used her medal to project an image and power. Her medal is the picture of a woman aligning herself with power, and specifically a masculine form of power.

The third and final medal, by Felice Antonio Casoni, technically borders on the Baroque. It is a portrait medal of the Renaissance artist, Lavinia Fontana.²⁰ Raised in Bologna, Lavinia was trained in the arts at a young age by her father, Prospero. Lavinia is known most prominently for her portrait work, but her oeuvre also contains allegorical and religious subject matter.²¹ Her medal was made in 1611 in cast bronze, and follows the general portrait medal formula that has been thoroughly discussed already. As with Isabella's medal, the obverse simply shows Lavinia in bust and turned in profile. Around her is the inscription, "LAVINIA FONTANA ZAPPIA PICTRIX 1611" or "Lavinia Fontana Zappi painter 1611". The back, on the other hand, shows the allegory of painting, Pittura, and an inscription. It reads, "PERTE STATO GIOIOSO MIMANTENE", or "Through you, joyous state, I am maintained". This inscription was a statement on Lavinia's love of her art and her occupation as an artist. The role of the artist was changing in the Renaissance, and moving from the title of artisan to that of master and intellectual. This inscription embodies that new view. The state of making art is commented on as a consuming, intellectual state through this inscription and the image of Pittura. The figure of Pittura is also a way to convey the new way in which artists and the practice of art was viewed in the Renaissance. Pittura is an allegory that actually appeared in the 17th century. Written on by Ceasare Ripa in his work, *Iconologia*, Pittura was a brand new allegory, not known to anyone prior to the turn of the 17th century.²² In the visual arts, it is not seen until later in the period, such as in the work of female Baroque artist, Artemisia Gentileschi.²³ In aligning Lavinia with Pittura, Casoni is

20 See fig 5 in Image Appendix.

21 Robin p. 147-149.

22 Schaefer p. 233.

23 See fig 6 in Image Appendix

flattering her. To associate her with such a new and meaningful figure meant that Lavinia may have believed her work was worthy of praise and aligned herself with this new idea of intellectualism. This is a degree of self-fashioning and consciously controlling her image. It is also very flattering to compare herself to higher mythological allegories, these lofty beings that transcend human existence. The point and theme of Lavinia's medal is not her power (as with Isabella's), or her virtue (as with Giovanna's) but rather her profession. The medal is all about her personal prestige and her profession as an artist. It is the picture of the occupation of a woman.

The realm of the Renaissance portrait medal is varied and fascinating. Like most Renaissance art, portrait medals were an unequal ground for men and women. Throughout history, we see far more medals of men than women, but we also see several women adapting masculine representation for themselves. This is the whole premise of this essay. It examines the self-fashioned images of three women, who used a device normally employed by men to promote themselves. The traditional format of the medal stems from the coins of antiquity. This ties exclusively to the Renaissance interest in the antique called Humanism. Through the study and reverence of the antique, Humanists wished to better themselves and focus on individual experience. The stereotypical portrait medal of a woman in the Renaissance capitalized on a woman's virtue and idealized portrayal. This is seen through the aforementioned example of Giovanna Albizzi. Her medal is about her personal virtues and her marriage. The medals of Isabella d'Este and Lavinia Fontana break the stereotypical mold. Isabella was a prominent noble in Mantua. Her medal combines her knowledge and love of the antique with the power she wielded. It was a statement about her power and might in an age when women were not usually in her privileged position. The medal of Lavinia Fontana, a Renaissance artist, comments on her occupation. She is aligned with the allegory of painting, Pittura, and her skills and title are stressed most through her medal. Lavinia is about the title or occupation of a woman. These three medals, seemingly similar in format and intention, are very different in meaning and message. Renaissance portrait medals, and especially those of women, are very interesting and tell us much about the Renaissance peoples they commemorate.

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Fig 1. *Silver denarius of Augustus, Roman, 2 BC–AD 4, Minted in Lugdunum (modern Lyons, France).*



Fig 2. *Portrait Medal of Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni, Niccolo Fiorentino, 1486, cast bronze*



Fig 3. *Cast bronze medal of Isabella d'Este,*
Gian Cristoforo Romano, 1498, cast bronze



Fig 4. *Portrait Medal of Isabella d'Este, Giovanni*
Cristoforo Romano, 1495–98, gold with diamonds and
enamel



Fig 5. *Portrait medal of Lavinia Fontana, Felice Antonio Casoni, 1611, cast lead*



Fig 6. *Self-portrait as the Allegory of Painting (La Pittura), Artemisia Gentileschi, 1638-39, oil on canvas*