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Ames-Lewis, Francis. Isabella and Leonardo: The Artistic Relationship between Isabella d'Este and Leonardo da Vinci, 1500–1506

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Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

Ames-Lewis, Francis.

Isabella and Leonardo: The Artistic Relationship between Isabella d'Este and Leonardo da Vinci, 1500–1506.

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012. Pp. ix, 290 + 60 colour, 60 b/w illustrations. ISBN 978-0-300-12124-7 (hardcover) \$50.

In *Isabella and Leonardo*, Francis Ames-Lewis re-inscribes two well-known protagonists of the Italian Renaissance, Isabella d'Este and Leonardo da Vinci, in the complex matrices of patronage networks, the *paragone* discourse, and antiquarian collecting through an examination of select commissions during Isabella's first two decades at the Gonzaga court in Mantua. Although Isabella's prominence has waxed and waned in Renaissance patronage studies—with some suggesting the discipline needs to move “beyond” her (*Beyond Isabella: Secular Women Patrons of the Renaissance*, 2001)—Ames-Lewis re-invigorates the study of her patronage by offering a nuanced treatment of the ramifications of her unfulfilled artistic projects with Leonardo and the gendered territory upon which she trod as a female patron, collector, and political ruler.

The book is divided into six chapters, each addressing Isabella's interactions with artists in Mantua and beyond. In chapter 1, “Isabella's Intellectual Preoccupations,” Ames-Lewis proposes that Isabella's ambitions were fuelled by her humanist education and exposure to powerful women such as her mother, Eleonora d'Aragona. In these pages, a multi-generational network of female patrons emerges. Isabella, enmeshed in this milieu, employed painting and sculpture to promote her persona in this elite community of female relatives and friends. The cultivation of identity through art was not, however, meant to pass idle hours: women, such as Eleonora, were often *de facto* rulers, and their artistic projects functioned in concert with their political ones. This political involvement allowed women to establish themselves in other practices gendered as masculine. Such activity was modelled for Isabella in her youth, and she began planning her *studiolo*, a male domain that she embraced for her own pleasure and cultivation, soon after arriving in Mantua.

Chapter 2, “Isabella and her Artists,” examines Isabella’s adoption of the critical terms of the *paragone* debate in order to describe and assess artistic talent. Drawing upon the extensive correspondence between Isabella, her artists, and her agents, Ames-Lewis provides a nuanced view of Isabella’s interpretive abilities, contending that her recognition of individual skill—such as Giovanni Bellini’s colouring, Andrea Mantegna’s *invenzione*, or Leonardo’s “devout” and “sweet” style—enabled a more sensitive engagement with these artists. Re-interpreting the correspondence between Isabella and Pietro Perugino, which once categorized her as demanding and petulant, Ames-Lewis concludes that this interaction was not representative of an “inflexible and prescriptive” patron. Indeed, the young marchioness employed many strategies to obtain works by the most prominent artists of the era, including Perugino, Lorenzo Costa, Bellini, and Leonardo. The power of the artist’s hand is a recurrent theme that is explored throughout this book.

Chapter 3, “The Arts in Mantua around 1500,” explores the antiquarian culture of Mantua and situates the work of Mantegna, Gian Cristoforo Romano, and Pier Jacopo Alari-Bonacolsi, called Antico, within Isabella’s *paragone* discourse. As Gonzaga court artist, Mantegna was the unquestioned arbiter of antiquarian knowledge, and Ames-Lewis considers his *Allegory of the Fall of Ignorant Humanity* and *Calumny of Apelles* as emblematic of a humanist court art that activated a multivalent *paragone* discourse. Furthermore, Mantegna’s designs, with their moralistic messages in antique garb, foreshadowed his painted contributions to Isabella’s *studiolo*. Gian Cristoforo provided Isabella with classicizing roundels that engaged in a similar dialogue between painting and sculpture. Antico, whose artistic pseudonym underlines his classical interests, produced small bronzes for Isabella that remained in her collection until her death. Although Ames-Lewis dutifully acknowledges that Leonardo’s reaction to Mantuan art is necessarily hypothetical, he offers a tantalizing suggestion of a relationship between the latter’s *Leda* and Mantegna’s *Parnassus*.

Chapter 4, “Leonardo’s Portrait Drawing of Isabella,” profitably investigates the Louvre drawing of Isabella through her strategies of self-presentation. Ames-Lewis contends that Isabella adopted the profile format in conformity with northern Italian court culture and as a means of expressing her virtue, erudition, and power through its classical connotations. Although Leonardo produced studies of heads in profile, his portraits of women in three-quarter view—*Lady with an Ermine* and *La Belle Ferronnière*—depicted female

courtiers, not noble wives and daughters. This breach of formality was permissible in the representation of Sforza mistresses; Isabella's position, on the other hand, was tightly circumscribed by standards of decorum. Ames-Lewis concludes that the gravitas demanded of her portrait was incompatible with the emotional immediacy of Leonardo's preferred composition, and this impasse, combined with the artist's peripatetic life, contributed to the project's abandonment.

In chapter 5, "Isabella and her Collection of Antiquities," the author reconsiders the role of artists as antiquities advisers. Isabella was a voracious collector of antique objects, such as gems, medals, and bronzes, and these *rariora* were enshrined in her *studiolo*. Given the opportunity to purchase vases once belonging to Lorenzo il Magnifico, Isabella asked Leonardo to produce coloured drawings to better assess their value. Although the drawings are lost, Ames-Lewis connects the drawings to Leonardo's concerns about the depiction of glass, stone, and marble, both having parallels with works by Mantegna that Leonardo may have seen during his brief visit to Mantua.

The final chapter, "Leonardo's Last Project for Isabella," concerning the unfinished *Young Christ* commission, resonates with debates in recent years on the icon versus the artwork and the ascendancy of the author's hand circa 1500. In this case, authorship trumped subject; as Ames-Lewis argues, Isabella craftily negotiated for a religious subject most conducive to Leonardo's "sweet" and "devout" manner, descriptors that evoke the art of the *maniera devota*. While the commission was ultimately unfulfilled, Leonardo's invention had a rich afterlife in the art of his Milanese followers and Correggio. Throughout the book, Ames-Lewis's investigations are complemented by excellent illustrations conveniently positioned in the text, juxtapositions that highlight the strength of his curatorial eye. Readers of various levels and interests will also benefit from the appendix of select correspondence reproduced in Italian and English. While the literature on both patron and artist is vast, Ames-Lewis illuminates a fascinating moment in Renaissance Mantua that merits his diligent and insightful treatment in this book.

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