

PR PROFILO NUZIALE DA GIOVANE DAMA

Abstract

of the monograph

LEONARDO INFINITO

La vita, l'opera completa, la modernità

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Nuptial Portrait of a Young Woman

There now emerges a singular novelty: a splendid portrait of a young woman in profile, carried out in pen and ink and tempera on parchment and measuring 33 x 23.9 cm.

Dealing with an unpublished work as important as it is unexpected calls for caution. However, the refined intensity and aura of mystery that distinguish its quality and purity are such as to make the recognition of Leonardo's authorship the logical conclusion of a series of simple and clear investigations.

Above all else, the left-handed handling is unequivocal and impressive in its fluidity, certainty and precision.

The line serves to give form to the profile and texture to the garments portrayed, suggesting the classicism of a polychromed sculpture, interpreted in a dynamic interplay of light and shadow. This accentuates the purity of the lines in contrast to the suffused softness of the light, rose-tinted flesh. We will find this same trait, indeed, in the most accurate of the studies from the Madrid Codex and in the anatomical sketches in Windsor from the early Milanese period.

Nicholas Turner, who was the first to suggest Leonardo's name for this profile portrait, has emphasized that the handling of the parallel penstrokes, both incisive and concise, is clearly attributable to a left-handed artist and not an imitator.

The technique is masterly, Tuscan in style, but undoubtedly the work was finished in a Milanese context. Mina Gregori attributed it to Leonardo himself, noting not only its very high quality and left-handed execution, but also the reflection of its Florentine character and the style of Leonardo's first years of activity in Lombardy.

The use of parchment was until now unknown in the work of Leonardo, but in this sense, the new work fills a previously incomprehensible gap—given the frequency of its use among his Florentine miniaturist friends and colleagues and the activities of his Milanese collaborators (in particular De Predis). Besides, in his *Treatise on Painting*, Leonardo wrote, in the precept to “learn well by heart” and “not to make errors again”:

“...And if you want to prepare a thing, you should not have plain glass, take some skin of a goat, soft and well prepared, and then dry it; and when it is ready, use it for drawing,

and then you can use a sponge to cancel what you first drew and make a second attempt" (§ 72).

Moreover, the use of parchment might be more sympathetic for the creation of a lifelike and representative portrait for a long-distance marriage proposal. This genre of commission would also explain the highly finished character of this portrait, which one could, indeed, entitle a *Nuptial Portrait*, a work intended to attract interest and to represent beauty, without being licentious or overly ornamental.

The origins of this genre of female portraiture (in parallel with that of the male portrait tradition, known as "di Salai," which would be used by Leonardo for decades), can perhaps be traced, on a small scale, to a sheet in the British Museum, predating the present work by some years: here the *Madonna del Fiore* dominates but there is also an instrument that resembles a perspective device used to translate reality, and for this device one needed a transparent support—for which parchment was ideally suited.

In the inventory of Leonardo's effects, datable to the early 1480s, one finds "Una testa in profile con bella cappellatura" ("A head in profile with beautiful hair") and "Una testa di putta con trezie rannodate" ("A head of a girl with plaited locks").

The line of the face is of absolute purity and, though describing the physiognomy of the young woman, also succeeds on an idealized level. With a completely different effect and a profile in the opposite direction, it recalls a drawing in Windsor (inv. No. 12505). Notwithstanding the differences that stem from the noble effigy on the one hand and the popular type on the other, and between a finished work and a study in progress, the proportions coincide exactly.

The present *Profile* is the culmination of an extraordinary sequence that, in the story of Renaissance art, began with Piero della Francesca (with the *Portrait of Battista Sforza*, wife of Federico da Montefeltro, c. 1465, preserved in the Uffizi) and the presumed portrait of the wife of Giovanni de' Bardi, attributed to Piero del Pollaiuolo (c. 1470, Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milano), as well as Piero di Cosimo's *Cleopatra* (or *Simonetta Vespucci*, c. 1483, Musée Condé, Chantilly), and Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni* (1488, Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Madrid).

The composition is enlivened by a balance of elements vigorously interpreted, in a composed harmony of refined intensity and nobility. In the hair, the strokes run vibrantly in waves, interpreted in their natural visual flow with a dialogue with the natural lightness of the parchment.

The "Leonardesque knot" on the shoulder is obviously a paradigm of the artist and not only a decorative feature. It constitutes here an original assemblage, in a unique arabesque, in the form of geometrical matrices with two knots, alluding to symbols of infinity, like those drawn at the end of 1473 and which can be seen elaborated in the clothing of the both *Lady with an Ermine* and the *Mona Lisa*.

The border reinforces it, also with simplified knots, which run around the edge of the sleeve in a reticulated pattern, which is, in its turn, created by the most refined interlacing. The hairdo, called in Milan a “coazone”, is also characteristic of the period and was fashionable at the Sforza court.

Limpid is the detail of the eye that interprets Leonardo’s concept of the « Window of the Soul » and expresses in its unconventional gaze the interior grace and strength of character of the sitter.

The rhythms of the contours and borders, and the lines and profiles that intersect and vary in their course animate the subject. Equally as harmonious are the different proportions of the facial elements that correspond to an anthropometric ideal.

One is tempted to think that this actual portrait may have inspired other Lombard portraits, including the *Dama con la reticella di perle* in the Ambrosiana and perhaps the lost and this still mysterious painting attributed to Leonardo by Adolfo Venturi in 1941: “Leonardo executed the portrait of Beatrice d’Este, beloved of Ludovico il Moro, who he called his *puttina*. One sees this, unfortunately totally ruined, almost destroyed, at Krakow, in the Museo Czartoryski, the young little bride.”

Even Cristina Geddo excludes the possibility that one is dealing here with the work of a follower, and, in effect, the comparison with paintings attributed to Ambrogio de Predis or to Bernardino de’ Conti ultimately confirms the assignment to Leonardo.

A hypothesis for the identification of the sitter might also be suggested in passing: she could be a member of the Sforza or a similar noble family, for example Bianca Maria Sforza as a young woman. In 1494 Bianca Maria, the second-born daughter of Galeazzo Maria, Duke of Milan, and Bona di Savoy, kinswoman of the king of France, married the Emperor Maximilian I, who would praise her beauty rather than her character. The wedding ceremony and the marriage procession, at which it is sometimes said that Leonardo himself may have participated, were memorable. The comparison with the presumed portraits of Bianca Maria, attributed to Ambrogio (National Gallery of Art, Washington) or to Bernardino (Louvre), is eloquent: they reveal not insurmountable distances.

This *Profile Portrait*, so diaphanous and sculptural, elegant in its unadorned simplicity (without jewellery), is masterful in every detail, as has also been demonstrated by the scientific examinations and the in-depth analyses of the Lumière Technology.

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(translated from Italian by Nicholas and Jane Turner. Dr. Nicolas Turner, independent scholar, United Kingdom (formerly Curator of Drawings at the Getty Museum, Los Angeles [1994-1998] and Deputy Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum, London (1974-1994)).

