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SOME SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE FEMALE PORTRAITS OF PALMA
VECCHIO

By

Sarah Elizabeth Fruehling
B.A., Mount Vernon Nazarene College, 2000

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of the University of Louisville
in partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Art History
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

December 2004

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A Thesis Approved on

December 3, 2004

by the following Thesis Committee:

Thesis Director

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents

Rev. and Mrs. Robert & Paula Fruehling.

With your enduring love and support I have accomplished many things. Without it, I
would have never endeavored to take this journey.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my professor, advisor, and thesis director Dr. Christopher Fulton, who has seen me through this journey to its fruition. Thank you for your patience and guidance, Dr. Fulton. To my family and friends I owe many thanks for the support and love given through the tough times and the long nights. Thank you to the members of my family and friends in Ohio and California: Mom and Dad, Brother Andy, Grandma Riley, Uncle Byron and Aunt Laura, Uncle Doug., Tim and Karen Jensen and Trisha Grose. To my wonderful friends who reside in Louisville, Kentucky: Tom and Wendy Doyon, Jennifer Gruber, Dayne Gardner, Flint Collins, Blair Arsenaux, and Donna Moros. I would also like to thank my wonderfully caring and colorful neighbors, Dawn Muncie, Steve Burton, and Bridget Dattilo, and to Samuel J. Kat who is my constant companion and friend.

ABSTRACT

SOME SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE FEMALE PORTRAITS OF PALMA VECCHIO

Sarah E. Fruehling

December 3, 2004

This thesis is an investigation into the world of sixteenth-century Venice, encompassing a group of female portraits by artist Palma Vecchio. I utilized many primary and secondary sources concerning Renaissance society, including several which discussed the roles of women during the Renaissance.

This thesis is divided into four chapters that discuss the purpose and evolution of the female portrait, ideal poetic beauty, and the authority the courtesan carried in both the poetry and the painting in Venice.

Chapter one covers a short history of the portrait as well as an investigation of how the female portrait evolved from the profile image to the frontal three-quarter image. It also discusses how Palma Vecchio would have adhered to the early concepts of the portrait, yet came to depict women in a idealized fashion that came to be the Renaissance Venetian artist's specialty. Chapter two explores the issue of poetic beauty upon the paintings of Palma Vecchio and its birth from the Humanist movement, as started by the fourteenth-century poet Petrarch. Chapter three discusses the role of the courtesan predominately in Venice. An educated and sophisticated woman who sold sexual favors, performed a considerable role in the world of the female portrait in Venice, particularly the images by Palma Vecchio. Chapter four, the conclusion, concretizes the issues of

ideal poetic feminine beauty, the courtesan in female portraiture, and how these two factors carried an enormous role not only in the female portraits of Palma Vecchio, but in the social fabric of Venice.

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INTRODUCTION

The female portrait in the Italian Renaissance in the sixteenth century journeyed to a realm that dramatically changed the art of female portraiture. Palma Vecchio, an artist who lived in Venice most of his life, adhered to the Venetian school of painting. He belonged to the artistic circle of the legendary painter Titian, as well as other great painters such as Paris Bordone and Sebastiano del Piombo. Within Palma's oeuvre are a group of approximately twenty surviving paintings which depict unnamed female beauties. Quickly deemed as portraits of courtesans by many art historians, I believe these paintings reveal the story of a culture in Venice which revolved around the poetry, the female portrait and the beautiful woman.

In this paper I will address a number of issues concerning not just the female portraits of Palma Vecchio, but the underlying motives behind the brush work. Why were women depicted in such a fashion, that they appeared in either the state of utmost virtue, or was scantily clad, allowing herself to be ogled by a male audience? The answers to this question involves poetry of the sixteenth century, which brought the ideals of feminine beauty into light, which was then illustrated in paint. The courtesan, the living, breathing personification of such ideals, could be considered muse of the painting and poetry. This then developed into a portrait prototype commonly seen in the Venetian school of painting.

The portrait in the beginning of the Renaissance was for posthumous

commemoration, and usually served to immortalize men in bronze or marble. The female profile portrait served a similar purpose, but was a tool used by nobile families wishing to marry their daughters, while extending their familial lineage and power through the Italian countryside. Credit for the evolution of the female profile portrait into a frontal image is given to Leonardo da Vinci, who in his *Portrait of Ginevra de Benci*, presented a frontal image of a woman who interacts with the viewer, beckoning a conversation. With this composition, the ground work for any future female portrait was laid, opening an enormous door to a genre which would become a mainstay in western culture.

Poetic ideals of feminine beauty resounding in the artist's minds were a motivating factor in most female portraits. Poets and writers such as Agnolo Firenzuola, Giangiorgio Trissino, and Federingo Luigini fueled the beliefs that a woman of unsurpassing beauty and virtue could be depicted on the canvas, and existed for their viewing pleasure. Palma Vecchio's female portraits are a prime example of such poetic liscense. With their alabaster skin, golden hair, and vermillion lips, the ladies gaze intensely at the viewer, acknowledging that no distance nor time could keep her from returning the gaze. This granted the viewer the ability to seek solace in the image.

The courtesan, who is often viewed as the sitter in Palma's portraits, lived an autonomous existence apart from the societal rules for women. Educated, beautiful, and elegant, she ruled the hearts and bank accounts of many of the male elite in Venice. Her existence and success is due in part to the role she played within the artistic world in Venice. Through her involvement in a patriarchal society, the courtesan lived in a culture which was part of her own doing. It was a culture which was supported by her enigmatic qualities as a woman who fulfilled the fantasies of men on the canvas, and in the bedroom.

A coehsion of elements exist within the female portraits by Palma Vecchio. A

large piece of the social fabric of Venice lay in the story of the female portrait, the poetic ideal of feminine beauty, and the courtesan. The following essays are an exploration of these elements and the female portraits by Palma Vecchio fit the category.

CHAPTER I

THE FEMALE PORTRAIT IN THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

Leonardo da Vinci once said concerning female portraiture, that to paint a female one had the potential to charm the male beholder to such an extent that the very identity of the woman did not matter.¹ Leonardo was living in a time in history where the men were memorialized in stone and bronze. Women too were depicted in portraiture, but not in the same fashion, nor with the same intention in mind. The story of the portrait began as a practical function in the commemoration of men after death. While this continued to be a primary function of the portrait during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it appears that ulterior motives crept in concerning the female portrait.

Palma Vecchio, a Venetian painter and contemporary of Titian and Paris Bordone, executed a group of female portraits that have puzzled art historians for years. Two of these paintings, *Portrait of a Woman called La Bella* and *Portrait of a Woman in Profile*, (Figs. 1,2) are among a group of nearly twenty surviving paintings. Palma's intentions were far more complicated than simply depicting beautiful women for the sake of portraiture and commemoration. Many art historians have claimed that the women sitting

¹ da Vinci, L., *Leonardo on Painting, an Anthology of Writings by Leonardo da Vinci with a Selection of Documents relating to His Career as an Artist*. Martin Kemp, ed., Yale University Press, New Haven, 1989. 26.

for the portraits were simply courtesans or common prostitutes.² Nevertheless, within these two paintings lie numerous influences of portraiture from the fifteenth-century. Palma Vecchio followed the provocative route of the Venetian artist. He depicted creatures on the canvas that could bewitch the male viewer to the point of obsession. Palma intended to depict what many poets at the time of the Venetian Renaissance attempted to describe through verse which is ideal feminine beauty.

John Pope Hennessey states in his book *The Portrait in the Renaissance*, that the initial role of the portrait was a commemorative one. The portrait was directed towards the future when the living would no longer be alive.³ Fundamental to this was the making of proper records of the human face. An example of this is the death mask. A functional tool, the death mask was necessary for large commemorative functions such as the commemorative bust medal of Filippo Brunelleschi.⁴ Berger suggests the family archive essentially included a commemorative icon, such as the death mask, which was linked to the Early Modern portrait.⁵ He interprets the portrait as “an effect of the painter’s vision of the soul and an interpretation of the formal and archival evidence of the sitter. The portrait was an epitome of the sitter’s character, as it was manifested by the family archive.”⁶ Berger’s ideas are a more modern interpretation which deal with the relationship between the sitter and the artist. Although it is a modern interpretation of the function of the portrait Berger may be correct. But according to other scholars, portraiture involved a

² Rylands, P., *Palma Vecchio*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, 89. Rylands makes a comment stating that some of Palma’s blondes are intended to sexually arousing. I would insist that *all* of Palma’s blondes in the groups of paintings at hand, still in existence, were intended to be sexually arousing. Patricia Fortini Brown also insinuates that the images by Palma under examination attests to the fact that the ambiguity of the images lends to the assumption that courtesans were the sitters.

³ Pope-Hennessy, J., *The Portrait in the Renaissance*, Pantheon, New York, 1963, 8.

⁴ Ibid., 8. The death mask made of the architect of the Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence was used to produce the commemorative medallion of Brunelleschi. It now hangs on the exterior of the Florence Cathedral.

⁵ Berger, H., “Fictions of the Pose: Facing the Gaze of Early Modern Portraiture”, *Representations*, 46, 1994, 90.

⁶ Ibid., 89.

complex social transaction between the artist, the sitter and the spectator. People did not simply sit for portraits in the Renaissance. The artist's job was to find a proper balance between truth and flattery and to render a credible likeness, while satisfying the patron's expectations of a pleasing appearance.⁷ It is safe to say that the primary function of the portrait was to record the sitter's activity, status, or behavior. In the display culture of Renaissance Italy, these portraits signified wealth and importance of lineage.⁸

Yet further discussion about the birth of the portrait by Pope-Hennessy leads to the proclamation that the portrait expresses the reawakening of human interest in human motives and character. It is the story of how the eyes ceased to be linear symbols and became light possessing and perceiving organs we possess.⁹ It is intriguing that Pope-Hennessy should consider the eyes a powerful component in the function of the portrait. In the later years of the Renaissance, the gaze in Renaissance portraiture evolved into an object which held a distinct amount of power over the viewer in the portrait, particularly in the female portrait.

Patricia Simons, who wrote specifically on the profile portrait and the male gaze in the Renaissance, introduced several theories on the purpose of the female profile portrait in the early Renaissance. Pope-Hennessy mentions that while the profile was not the most advantageous depiction of the sitter, it was the most flattering view. And for this reason, until the late fifteenth century, the profile was the only way in which all women were cast.¹⁰

Simon's has a different view on the artifice of the female portrait. Pope-Hennessy describes the depiction of ladies in portraits, such as Ghirlandaio's *Portrait of*

⁷ Brown, P.F., *Art and Life in Renaissance Venice*. Harry N. Abrams Publishers, New York, 1997, 144.

⁸ Tinagli, P., *Women In Italian Renaissance Art: Gender Representation, Identity*. Manchester University Press, New York, 1997, 47.

⁹ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰ Pope-Hennessy, J., *The Portrait in the Renaissance*, Pantheon, New York, 41.

Giorama Tornabuoni, (Fig. 3) as possessing flaxen hair, expensive necklaces and golden hair.¹¹ Simons attests that the elements which make the image pleasing to the eye are simply descriptions of the woman's essential beauty. They are highlights of her ability to be a good wife, and a showcase for her family's wealth. The artist produced a wonderful depiction of the woman in profile, but to Simons, the girl in the portrait cannot be simply seen as an image of a woman from the Renaissance. She should be seen as an image which was once gazed upon with great contemplation as a showcase of her virtue or as a prized piece of her family's prosperity. The importance of women in society was centered around her family and their roles as respectable and virtuous wives and mothers.¹² The portraits of women were dynastic images, where family lineage was stressed

The motives behind the female profile portrait were not seen until the late twentieth century. Jakob Burkhardt, in his *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, stated that "women stood on a footing of perfect equality with men in the Italian Renaissance since the educated woman, no less than the man, strove naturally after a characteristic and complete individuality." Burkhardt continues in stating that the "education given to women in the upper classes was essentially the same as that given to men."¹³ Neither of these declarations are true for there is no adequate proof of their social equality. It is clear that the past decades did not question existing differences in men and women during the Renaissance. Therefore it is no surprise that scholars rarely saw a distinction between the depiction of men and women in fifteenth and early sixteenth-century portraiture.

The profile portrait was "painted by male artists for male patrons. They were

¹¹ Pope-Hennessy, *The Portrait*. 45.

¹² Tinagli, *Women*. 49.

¹³ Burkhardt, J., *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. Middlemore, London, 1960, 240, 241.

objects which primarily addressed male viewers.”¹⁴ This phenomenon is deemed as a *display culture*, where the outward display of wealth was vital to one’s social prestige and definition.¹⁵ A woman was an object of public display at the time of her marriage. Within a marriage or betrothal contract, a woman was seen as a thing to be adorned. A marriage could be performed without a priest present, where a level of social display and an honorable degree of adornment was necessary for the persons present to participate in the so-called visual display which took place at the ritual (i.e. marriage).¹⁶ She was rarely visible within the city streets or at any public functions save weekly or daily mass. One of a woman’s primary roles before marriage was to be a beautiful thing to look upon on the most important day of her life. She was then shut into her home to be a dutiful wife and mother.

“To be a woman in the world is to be the object of the male gaze. To appear in public is to be looked upon”, wrote Giovanni Bocaccio¹⁷. The male gaze and female portraiture are intimately linked upon closer scrutiny. It is impossible to look beyond the fact that these images were made for men to look upon. The male gaze within the profile portrait exposes issues concerning the mind of the Renaissance male. One of the issues to be exposed is that control emanated over the fairer sex, even in the art of portraiture.

From the beginning of the profile portrait in Italy, one has to wonder why the figure was portrayed in such a fashion. Pope-Hennessy suggests that the transition which existed between the profile and frontal portrait were contained in a long series of

¹⁴ Simons, “Women in Frames”, 41. Besides holding a tight grasp on who the women would marry, members of the ruling class in patrician Florence retained numerous restrictions on proper female behavior for women of their class.

¹⁵ Simons, “Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture”, *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*. N. Broude & M.D. Garrard, eds., Icon Editions, New York, 1992, 41. Display culture is indicated by the virtual display of honor, magnificence, and wealth, elements vital to one’s social prestige and definition.

¹⁶ Ibid., 42.

¹⁷ Ibid., 41, Bocaccio, G., *The Corbaccio*, Urbana, 1975. 68.

experiments beginning with a cut silhouette. This in turn became a solid image caught momentarily in side face. The cheek, which was originally an unfamiliar terrain, was plotted sectionally on the surface of the panel. It acquired an intelligible shape in which the jaw and cheekbone are defined.¹⁸ But why were women the main subjects in most fifteenth-century profile portraits? Indeed, the issue of the gaze is a complicated one. But within the Renaissance, particularly, the gaze could be seen as a metaphor for worldliness and virility, making a Renaissance woman an object of public discourse who was exposed to examinations that were framed by propriety, display and “impression management”.¹⁹ The profile was in line with the strict social laws adhered to by the chaste and married women of Florence. Rarely permitted to walk in the city streets during the day, a noble woman was considered to be chaste, modest, and possessing obeisance. She was to lower or avert her eyes in public, particularly in the presence of a man.²⁰ Poetess Veronica Gambara wrote that she looked upon her object of “desire” and was confronted not by a man, but “waters” and a “gracious site”. She narrates the plight of the noble woman of the Renaissance.²¹ Since she was a noblewoman, she could not look a man fully in the face.²² Sermons from San Bernardino who addressed women from his pulpit to “Bury your eyes” follow the strict social confines a proper woman faced in sixteenth-century society.²³ A woman’s eyes in the profile form, which cannot be downcast, are instead deflected or averted. Thence she is decorously chaste, the

¹⁸ Pope-Hennessy, *Portrait*, 3.

¹⁹ Ibid., 42. The last section of the *impression management*, Simons referenced the sociologist Erving Goffman in his *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Garden City, N.Y., 1959.

²⁰ Simons, “Women”, 50. In fifteenth-century society, Women were discouraged to make direct eye contact with a man for fear that he would be tempted by her.

²¹ Gambara, V., *The Defiant Muse: Italian Feminist Poets from the Middle Ages to the Present*, Allen, Kittel, and Jewell, eds., New York, 1986. Simons goes on to mention of Gambara’s that she was stated as saying with wit that her sonnet slips between contradictions, not even requiring an unavailable male object of the gaze: “desire is spent except for you alone,” said to her “blest places.”

²² Simons, “Women”, 50

²³ Ibid., 50.

men to ogle. The Renaissance man possessed an inherent fear of a woman's gaze. Lyrics by Petrarch which claim "her eyes have the power to turn [him] to marble", as well as Pietro Bembo's remarks of "I gaze defenselessly into a woman's lovely eyes and lose myself"²⁵ more than assert how an average man of the Renaissance culture believed the supernatural power of a woman's gaze. This "Medusa Effect" must have put a mythological fear of the Almighty into the hearts of all noble men.²⁶ Regardless, it was thought that a woman's gaze had the power to utterly bewitch a man to the point which he would lose control over his heart.

Love, as it was generally argued, began with the gaze, when the eyes of the woman set forth a flame.²⁷ The power of the image kept the Renaissance painter busy at producing new and innovative depictions of female sitters as ideally passive and modest young women. Theirs are the works which depict women who were viewed in the static form, unable to arouse any sense from men other than their ability to choose a suitable wife based on a profile image.²⁸

The transition of the profile into the frontal portrait was a monumental task credited to Leonardo da Vinci (Fig. 4). His painting of Ginevra de Benci has been universally acknowledged as a groundbreaking work. Upon its completion, *The Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci* must have been one of the most astounding visions to behold. Ginevra, in a three-quarter length image confronts the viewer with a frontal gaze, looking to engage in conversation. Leonardo did not make her portrait into the typical sexually-charged image

²⁵ Simons, *Women*. 50.

²⁶ The term "Medusa Effect" is in reference to the Greek Gorgon who was a female monster who possessed the power to turn a man to stone if she gazed directly upon him. This term is used by Simons in reference to the fear which accompanied the fifteenth-century views of the female gaze upon man, and the power entailed there.

²⁷ Goffen, R., "Titian's Sacred and Profane Love and Marriage", *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism & Art History*. Icon Editions, N.Y., 1992, 114.

²⁸ Simons, "Women", 42-43. It is evident that the profile portrait was intricately involved in the betrothal, dowry, and marriage process. The appearance of the young woman in the portrait, i.e. the dress and jewelry she wore, and her level of apparent beauty to the viewer, was intricately involved in choice made by her (future) husband.

universally acknowledged as a groundbreaking work. Upon its completion, *The Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci* must have been one of the most astounding visions to behold.

Ginevra, in a three-quarter length image confronts the viewer with a frontal gaze, looking to engage in conversation. Leonardo did not make her portrait into the typical sexually-charged image which followed the evolution of the profile portrait. He created an image of a woman which could be seen as respectable, gazing at the viewer in a noncapricious fashion. On the contrary, Palma Vecchio's *Profile Portrait of a Lady* (Fig. 1) and *Portrait of a Lady called La Bella*, (Fig. 2) are images which fall into the category of female portrait prototypes that were prevalent in sixteenth-century Venice.

It has been thought that Leonardo's interpretations of females was abnormal. He portrayed woman as individuals and as possessing intelligence, as well as a biological equal of the human species and philosophical ascendant to the principle in the cosmos.²⁹ In the case of the *Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci*, Leonardo attempted to depict a woman of extraordinary nature. Her portrait, thought to have been commissioned by Bernardo Bembo, points to a characteristic of the woman who was Ginevra de' Benci.

A renowned beauty, Ginevra was a poet in the Medici court of Florence who added a great deal of culture to the court.³⁰ Scholars believe that the portrait which now hangs in Washington, D.C. was a marriage portrait. The juniper bush behind the sitter's head as well as the inscription on the opposite side of the panel reads VIRTUTEM FORMA DECORAT. A Latin inscription such as this is a characteristic attributed to bridal portraits.³¹ By this observation, Bernardo Bembo could not have been the patron for Leonardo's painting. But we know that Bernardo Bembo commissioned ten poems

²⁹ Garrard, M., "Leonardo da Vinci: Female Portraits, Female Nature", *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism & Art History*. Broude & Garrard, eds., icon Eds., New York, 1992, 59.

³⁰ Ibid., 61.

³¹ Ibid., 61.

but Ginevra de' Benci, the poet of intellectual *virtu*.³³

A knowledgeable man might choose to regard a woman as his moral and intellectual inferior, his equal or even his superior. A Renaissance man would have been standing against strict prejudices concerning the female mind and character because of the potentially dangerous otherness that men perceived in women.³⁴ Leonardo's attempt to depict Ginevra as he saw her, as more than a beautiful woman, birthed a genre of female portraiture which revolutionized the depiction of women in art.

Petrarch, the father of Humanism, is given close ties to the execution of Leonardo's *Portrait of Ginevra de Benci*. Cropper suggests that classic models of this idea would be Petrarch's Laura and Dante's Beatrice. Petrarch's quest to capture the thought of ideal beauty within a pictorial image is thought to be housed in Leonardo's painting.³⁵ It is easy to believe that in discerning Leonardo's evident admiration for women of intellectual status as well as physical beauty, he was also within a social sphere which celebrated the depiction of ideal female beauty, a sphere which was exclusive to male members.

Aside from the social analysis of Leonardo's portrait of Ginevra de' Benci, a certainty remains: Leonardo possessed an idea about female portraiture unlike the traditional painter of the fifteenth century. To him, the portrait should project the female as a member of the human race. She is a participant as much as any man, and capable of things

³³ Garrard, *Leonardo da Vinci*. 64. Leonard enjoyed a personal friendship with the Benci family. He was a close friend of Ginevra's brother, Giovanni. Another possible attribution to the patronage for the Washington portrait has been given by some scholars to Leonardo himself, who is thought to have painted the portrait out of gratitude for having stayed at the Benci palace.

³⁴ Rancois Rabelais (c. 1494-1553), quoted in Ranum, 244. "nature has placed within their bodies, in a sacred, intestine place, an animale, a member, which is not in men. As expressed by Rabelais, physical professor of anatomy, viewed the uterus as a n entity which was controlled by the moon, and caused frightening behavior in women. This supernatural misunderstanding of the female gender was very common in Renaissance thought.

³⁵ Garrard references the issue of the paragon of ideal beauty, as created through Petrarch in her article on Leonardo da Vinci on page 61. Elizabeth Cropper's essay "The Beauty of Woman: Problems in the Rhetoric of Renaissance Portraiture", in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*. will be referenced again and in the following chapters.

Aside from the social analysis of Leonardo's portrait of Ginevra de' Benci, a certainty remains: Leonardo possessed an idea about female portraiture unlike the traditional painter of the fifteenth century. To him, the portrait should project the female as a member of the human race. She is a participant as much as any man, and capable of things which were given only to men.

The Platonic state of mind demonstrated by Leonardo in his first portrait, appears again in his *Portrait of Cecilia Gallerani*. (Fig. 5) An extraordinary woman Cecilia was the lover of Lodovico Sforza, Duke of Milan. She was "acclaimed for her incomparable beauty and sparkling intelligence".³⁶ Gallerani was noted for her ability to carry on learned discussions with famous theologians and philosophers. She wrote epistles in Latin and celebrated poems in Italian.³⁷ Leonardo created a portrait prototype in the *Portrait of Cecilia Gallerani* by displaying a figure which may be one of the first examples of a courtly lady. Cecilia, the mistress of Ludovico Sforza for ten years, was above the stigma that occurred within Renaissance court society and the position of mistresses at court. Cecilia's intellectual renown and high social status was above the traditionally inferior position of the courtier. We see within her an early instance of the courtesan.³⁸ The woman who was the courtier was a severe contrast to the silent, chaste, and obedient wife. She was celebrated as intelligent, accomplished, outspoken, and sensual.³⁹ Leonardo's *Portrait of Cecilia Gallerani* is an image of an admired and beautiful woman of high status at court, but is subject to the male gaze, even under the brush of

³⁶ Information on Cecilia's personality comes from Felice Calvi, *Famiglie Notabili Milanesi*, vol. III Milan: Antonio Vallardi, 1884, n.p., and from Francesco Malaguzzi-Valeri, *La Corte di Lodovico il Moro*, Milan: V. Hoepli, 1929, vol. II, 465ff.

³⁷ Information about Gallerani's achievements are praised by Francesco Agostino della Chiesa, *Theatro delle donne letterate* (Mondovi, 1620) p. 124. All of the above research was performed by Mary Garrard and end noted in her article "Leonardo da Vinci: Female Portraits, Female Nature", from *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism & Art History*. N. Broude & M.D. Garrard, eds., Icon Editions, New York, 1992, 58-85.

³⁸ Garrard, "Leonardo da Vinci", 64.

³⁹ Ibid., 64.

praised because she is shown listening rather than speaking, and as a creation of Leonardo's hand, he will succeed in keeping the sitter's beauty alive for generations to come.⁴¹ Leonardo is quoted in a reply to Bellincioni:

"How many paintings have preserved the image of divine beauty of which time or sudden death have destroyed Nature's original, so that the work of the painter has survived in nobler form than that of Nature, his mistress."⁴²

The issue of the portrait in the eyes of Leonardo and male viewers such as the poet Bellincioni implies that Leonardo strove to preserve her majesty of thought and intellectual brilliance. Bellincioni asserts that the beauty of the painting itself survives over any of the original ideas pertaining to the sitter, while Leonardo argues in his reply that the preservation of lost beauty is what is at stake. Leonardo insists that the true image of the sitter does not particularly matter, and the artist, patron, or creative nature itself will take over, resulting in the original sitter to be inconsequential.

The sixteenth-century artist who created images of ideal feminine beauty which did not exist in nature alludes to an evolutionary change in the female portrait. Paintings that came to be under the rubric of female portraiture did not always bear a complete resemblance to the sitter.⁴³

Whatever Leonardo da Vinci's ultimate goal in the realm of female portrait painting may have been, there is no denying his immense influence on the genre. His influence spread throughout the artistic arenas of Italy into different traditions of painting. Looking into the sixteenth century, we see an uprising of a specific purpose of the female portrait, particularly in the island city of Venice.

⁴¹ Garrard, "Leonardo da Vinci", 65. Bellincioni, *Rime Sparse*. (1493 ed.), Malaguzzi-Valeri, 1929, vol. II, 470.

⁴² Garrard, "Leonardo da Vinci", 65.

⁴³ Many of Palma Vecchio's portraits have been thought guilty of this. Some of the female figures appear to portray an artificial quality which many historians have thought to be women figures which were conjuring of the artist's imagination. In his book on Palma Vecchio, Rylands mentions that of the twenty female images, they must have been intended as portraits. It is possible that they are generalized images, where the sitter did not exist.

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Virtually untouched by invaders for centuries, Venice was a fantastically wealthy and decadent city unlike anywhere else in Renaissance Europe. The art and artists in Venice came to be world-famous, as well as the women who were portrayed on the canvases. Criticism by the tourists at that time who visited Venice spoke of the decadence of the women and the permissiveness of a society which was greatly reflected in the paintings by Palma Vecchio.

A contemporary of Titian, Palma Vecchio produced his own oeuvre of female portraits which have puzzled art historians for decades. The group of approximately twenty paintings of unidentified women came to be scattered about the world after Palma's death at the age of 48. Some analyses of the portraits claim the paintings were not intended as portraits of individuals, but as generalized and profane statements of feminine beauty inspired by courtesans in the spirit of the Petrarchan poetry revival then in vogue in Venice.⁴⁴ Indeed, the general analysis of the paintings as a whole are very good examples of Petrarchan poetry and ideal beauty. But on a closer examination of two paintings from this group, *Portrait of a Woman called La Bella* and *Portrait of a Woman in Profile*, are notable examples of the traditional portrait painting taken to a different level. Palma appears to have achieved the standard of ideal beauty within this small group of paintings. He created images of provocative and beautiful creatures, illusions of

⁴⁴ Mandel, C., "(Jacopo)[Giacomo] Palma (il) Vecchio", *The Grove Dictionary of Art Online*, Oxford Un. Press, Accessed March 30, 2004, <<http://www.groveart.com>>

what men wanted. Palma followed the traditional techniques of portrait painting and added tantalizing twists to his compositions which tell a story about the women within the frames, as well as the men who gazed at them.

A problem surrounding Palma's paintings is the fact that most art historians have, in a swift generalization, made all of the sitters courtesans. While this is an idea to contemplate, it produces speculation into another question involving female portraiture in the Renaissance. The issue of identity in female portraiture needs to be discussed.

An inventory conducted in 1529 of Palma's studio lists contents which were categorized in an advantageous manner. The male portraits which remained in his Palma's studio were identified in the same way: Portrait of Pier Antonio Zorzi, The Man from Murano, etc. the identity of the sitters in the paintings, save one, were anonymous.⁴⁵ Identity of female sitters in Renaissance portraiture is not a modern misunderstanding, nor was information about the patronage and sitter lost. The sitters in these images were never intended to be given a definite identity. Why was this? Cropper states that many portraits of unknown beautiful women are now characterized as representations of ideal beauty in which the question of identity is immaterial.⁴⁶ No unidentified male portrait, on the other hand, is ever said to be a beautiful representation made for its own sake. A technical explanation is called the *synecdoche for beauty*. By this she means that the representation of beauty, or a woman who was physically beautiful, was also seen as beauty itself.⁴⁷ This is very similar to the dilemma which Leonardo seemed to have faced in his *Portrait of Cecilia Gallerani*. Leonardo's wish to express the nonphysical qualities of the sitter in the portrait, are overshadowed in the paintings by Palma. The viewing audience, which was predominately male, requested a personification of physical beauty

⁴⁵ Rylands, P., *Palma Vecchio*. Cambridge U. Press, 1988, 93.

⁴⁶ Cropper, M., "The Beauty of Woman: Problems in the Rhetoric of Renaissance Portraiture", *Rewriting the Renaissance*. U. of Chicago, 1986, 178.

⁴⁷ Cropper, "The Beauty", 176.

wealthy means. Palma's *La Bella* mirrors Titian's painting by the same title. Although little is known about the attribution or patronage associated with Palma's *La Bella*, much is known about Titian's painting. (Fig. 6) Commissioned by the Duke of Urbino, he wrote to Titian requesting that the "portrait of the lady in the blue dress to be finished as soon as possible, and also requested that it be beautiful."⁴⁸ The Duke's readiness to purchase a painting of a beautiful woman whose name he does not mention and probably did not care to know, has led to speculation about Titian's purpose in painting it.⁴⁹ Ironically, the woman in Titian's painting has been identified as the same woman who posed for Titian's *Venus of Urbino*.⁵⁰ Did, in fact, the Duke of Urbino simply commission a painting of a beautiful woman to satisfy his visual appetite? It is logical to assume that the two paintings entitled *La Bella* were created under the same pretenses.

Since the time of commemoration and dynastic identity in portraits, the art of portraiture changed in the eyes of the Venetian artist. The transformation in portraiture that occurred in Venetian schools of painting resulted centuries later in the modern attempt to classify the erotic works, such as those produced by Palma, into a cohesive group. 'Paintings of people'⁵¹ is one attempt at the classification. Another was to simply call the erotic images the first pin up.⁵² Neither of these is a fitting generalization. Clearly

⁴⁸ Cropper, *The Beauty*. 179.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 179.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 179.

⁵¹ Hirst, M., Sebastiano del Piombo. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981, 93. Hope later states in his article *Problems of Interpretations* that it has been often argued that pictures of this type, which were by Venetian artists, have a complex philosophical content, usually associated with Neo-Platonism. Pope does not agree with this argument, as well as myself. The fact that there were so many paintings of this kind being produced in Venice during the sixteenth century, is evident that paintings of erotic content, mythological or non, was very popular and in great demand by the wealthy male citizens of Venice.

⁵² Hope, C., "Problems of Interpretations in Titian's Erotic Paintings", *Tiziano e Venezia: Convegno Internazionale di Studi*. Neri Pozza Editore, Venice, 1976, 119. Hope makes the statement that the tradition of the pinup girl seemed to have gradually developed. He refers to Giorgione's *Laura* which is a three-quarter image of a young woman with one bared breast, but is also wearing an expensive fur-lined cloak. I believe that this is a generalization which has been clouded by the modern idea of the pinup. A more noble desire was present in the patron's wish to procure paintings such as portraits produced by Palma. These women were more akin to wishful idealizations of what the men desired in the fairer sex.

group. 'Paintings of people'⁵¹ is one attempt at the classification. Another was to simply call the erotic images the first pin up.⁵² Neither of these is a fitting generalization. Clearly there was a portrait type⁵³ that was produced to the specifications of the patron. Images of women were made for a paying clientele which were not specific individuals, but idealizations of women who may have appeared in several other paintings by the same artist. Examples of this are seen in several paintings by Palma. One version of Palma Vecchio's *Lady with a Lute*, described by Marcantonio Michiel as 'a canvas of a woman, waist length, who holds in her right hand a lute, and has her left hand under her head, by Jacopo Palma.'⁵⁴ The same woman is said to appear in Dresden's *Three Sisters*, another of Palma's canvases depicting a female type of three women sitting in different positions. Palma was not the only Venetian artist known to use the same model in his female portraits. Titian used the same model in his *Girl in the Fur Coat* and the *Venus of Urbino*; both images of ideally beautiful types of female portraits.⁵⁵

This type was what Palma must have followed when he executed his female portraits. Although he must have been schooled in the art of depicting a sitter in a noble

⁵¹ Hirst, M., *Sebastiano del Piombo*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981, 93. Hope later states in his article *Problems of Interpretations* that it has been often argued that pictures of this type, which were by Venetian artists, have a complex philosophical content, usually associated with Neo-Platonism. Pope does not agree with this argument, as well as myself. The fact that there were so many paintings of this kind being produced in Venice during the sixteenth century, is evident that paintings of erotic content, mythological or non, was very popular and in great demand by the wealthy male citizens of Venice.

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⁵³ Tinagli, *Women*. 102-103. Tinagli proposes that in contrast to the art of portraiture in Florence, which was adamant about familial representation and lineage through female portraiture, Venice was immune to this need. The tradition never took root in the *Serenissima* where the political and social structure were disparate from the feuding territories in Tuscany. Instead, a type of portraiture developed on its own, producing three-quarter-length images which are prevalent in the oeuvres of Palma Vecchio, Titian, and Paris Bordone.

⁵⁴ Tinagli, *Women*. 103.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 103

fashion,⁵⁶ the professional art community in Venice pleased the wealthy male populace with stunningly erotic images of nameless beautiful women.⁵⁷

In Palma's *Portrait of a Woman in Profile*, (Fig. 2) the profile of portrait is given an unexpected twist. The sitter coquettishly looks from over her shoulder at the viewer in a coquettish manner while she gestures with her left hand, exuding a willingness to undress herself. Men were meant to gaze upon this image, for she looks to be acting of her own free will. There is no notion, on the part of Palma, to appoint control upon the sitter, as was done in the profile portraits of the fifteenth century. The apparent fear that clenched the hearts of the Renaissance man has transformed into something flirtatious, bordering on the erotic. This painting could be seen in direct correlation with the innovation in Leonardo's *Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci* who depicts the sitter to be interacting with someone outside of the picture plane, and looking directly at the viewer.

Palma Vecchio was following the boundaries within the art of portraiture. But it is also clear that he was greatly influenced by the eroticism which had taken over the world of Renaissance female portraiture in sixteenth-century Venice.

⁵⁶ Palma's work stylistically suggests that he was apprentice to Andrea Previtali, who studied under the master Giovanni Bellini. This is cited from the excerpt from the Grove Dictionary of Art online. <<http://www.groveart.com>>

⁵⁷ The main type of paintings executed during the fifteenth century at that time included either erotica with mythological figures and nude females or the traditional altarpiece which was continually being stretched to new limits. Palma Vecchio's oeuvre reflects the change from early to a High Renaissance conception of the human figure in secular and religious art. His specialization was the SACRA CONVERSAZIONE, paintings of the Virgin and saints in a rural setting. The paintings in question which are the three-quarter-length paints of women were not what he was known for while he was alive

CHAPTER II

THE POETIC IDEAL OF FEMININE BEAUTY IN THE PAINTINGS OF PALMA VECCHIO

The development of the female portrait evolved towards the end of the fifteenth century into a female portrait prototype. The expectations of women in Renaissance society may be easily read through the suggestively erotic images that became a Venetian art form. Following the emerging new art form of the prototype of female portraiture, a hobby for wealthy noblemen in Venice became known which coupled the commissioning and collecting of paintings of beautiful women with works of prose. The poetry, either influenced the paintings or was written upon the completion of the image. While the poets wrote of the images that captured their literary minds, their words manifested complex ideas of ideal feminine beauty. Ideal poetic beauty is evident in Palma Vecchio's series of twenty female portraits⁵⁸. The identity of the sitter in the painting was not a pertinent matter for the individual commissioning the painting. The prototype of female portraiture embodied the physical elements desired in fantastical female beauty.

A common argument in the Renaissance existed between poet and painter that concerned which was the purer form of art, painting or poetry. Upon closer observation,

⁵⁸ Rylands, P., *Palma Vecchio*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, 89. Rylands claims that in Palma's oeuvre, excluding the 'Nudes in a landscape', over twenty surviving female portraits fit into the groups of paintings discussed in this paper

this argument mirrors the age-old question of the chicken and the egg. Therefore it is important to understand that the two, painting and poetry, coexisted and relied heavily upon one another. Without the two, we would not have received the numerous paintings which can be categorized as female portrait prototypes.

During the evolution of the portrait, poetry was frequently written which praised specific paintings, along with the artist's ability to render such images. In his endless endeavor to achieve the world of the Classics, Renaissance man would have been aware of the beliefs of the Greek philosopher Horace who believed that poets and painters were equal in the realm of inventive imagination or more commonly called poetic license.⁵⁹ Philostratus, a student of Aristotle, claimed that poets introduced the gods upon their stage, and with them all the accessories of dignity, grandeur and power to charm the mind. Painting does so with figures in the visual manner, as do poets, who are able to visually describe in words.⁶⁰

In a poem by Bellincioni, he writes about Leonardo's portrait of Cecilia Gallerani, claiming that Leonardo had immortalized Gallerani in paint.⁶¹ Leonardo, always the man of quick opinions, is quoted on the issue:

"If a poet says that he can inflame men with love, which is the central aim in all animal species, the painter has the power to do the same, and to even a greater degree, in that he can place in front of the lover the true likeness of that which is beloved, often making him kiss and speak to it. This would never happen with the same beauties set before him by the writer. So much greater is the power of a painting over a man's mind that he may be enchanted and enraptured by a painting that does not represent any living woman."⁶²

Leonardo's statement encompasses a phenomenon not spoken of before. It is the

⁵⁹ Land, N., *The Viewer as Poet: The Renaissance Response to Art*, 3.

⁶⁰ Philostratus the Younger, *Imagines* (LCL), trans. Arthur Fairbanks, 285.

⁶¹ Garrard, M., "Leonardo da Vinci: Female Portraits, Female Nature", *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism & Art History*. Broude & Garrard, eds., icon Eds., New York, 1992, 65.

⁶² Martin Kemp, ed., *Leonardo on Painting: an anthology of writings by Leonardo da Vinci with a selection of documents relating to his career as an artist*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 1989, 26.

function of the painting. The image affords erotic arousal within the men looking upon it. The beauty of a woman could be depicted in a way that would induce the man to rely upon the image for comfort. Rogers speaks of the spell which was cast upon a man who possessed such paintings and sought the images to live and breath for their sake.⁶³ It appears that Leonardo was the first creator of images that evoked contact between the sitter and the viewer. His portraits of *Ginevra de Benci* and *Cecilia Gallerani*, perfected the affect of the painted image which enraptured the male viewer. Rogers asks why this innovation took place, and the answer is simple. The innovation of female portraiture from the profile into the three-quarter-length portrait was evolved and new expressive qualities were developed. Graceful liveliness and a deceptively 'real' presence, which were seemingly responsive to the spectator, were extolled in the poems.⁶⁴ An example of this interaction between the art and the viewer is manifest in the work of sculptor Tullio Lombardo.(Fig. 9) Lombardo was known for creating marble busts of women that could have elicited the kind of movements and interactions which poets of the Italian sixteenth century would identify as laughter, glances, movement, and speech.⁶⁵ Brocardo's admiration of a marble bust of Tullio Lombardo is seen in his written verse describing his imaginings of her in flesh and blood.⁶⁶ A search for ideal beauty to be depicted in both forms of art, poetry and painting, were sought in the talent of the artist. There was great need for the perfect female form within the work, which nature could not accomplish.

The Renaissance quest for perfect physical beauty is evident in the writings of Giovanni

⁶³ Rogers, M., *Sonnets on Female Portraits from Renaissance North Italy*, Word & Image, v.2, n.4, 1986, 296.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 294.

⁶⁵ Rogers, *Sonnets*, 296

⁶⁶ Ibid., 301. The following poem is by Antonio Brocardo entitled *On a marble bust of his lady* - "O pure snow, o choice white marble in which, if I gaze intently and fixedly, I see that heavenly laugh sparkling overflowing with joy and delight. Stone you are not, for this is the bosom, and the graceful face of my mistress: this is that pure air, that reveals a bright paradise in her fair presence. Ancient Phidia, if amongst your marble you once made a lovely face, who would have seen in it actions, laughter, glances, movements and speech, as I this stone discern all the graces of my lady? And truly it seems to me that she speaks with me, and I with her"

Paolo Lomazzo who wrote:

“in female portraiture beauty with exquisite delicacy will be seen, improving the mistakes of nature with art as far as is possible, in this imitating the poets when they sing their praises in verse.”⁶⁷

Artists were encouraged to smooth the natural imperfections of the sitter into a vision of perfection not found in nature

The shift to the three-quarter length female portrait from the profile could be seen as a celebration of Petrarchan verse. Petrarch's words described divine elements of female beauty as such: bright eyes, high brows, pale skin of alabaster or ivory with rosy cheeks and lips, a white neck and perhaps also bosom and hands. Living and writing in 1304-1374, Francesco Petrarch is the most accomplished lyric poet in the Italian vernacular. Possessing an ardent desire to revive the knowledge of antiquity, Petrarch was known as the procurer of ancient manuscripts. He is perhaps best known for his *Canzoniere*, a body of love poetry which is a lengthy description of his “keen but constant and pure attachment to a woman who would become his muse, named Laura.”⁶⁸ Within his *Canzoniere* Petrarch speaks of when he first gazed upon Laura. The infatuation which followed turned into an endless religious struggle in his love for her, and the torture he felt when she died of the plague twenty years after the love affair began. Within the *Canzoniere* lies description of how one man envisioned the woman he loved and the ideas which influenced a literary and artistic movement. His was a vision that became the

⁶⁷ Lomazzo, G.P., *Scritti sull'arte*, ed. R.P. Ciardi, Marchi & Bertolli, Florence, 1973, Book VI, chapter 51. Rogers, “Sonnets”, 297.

⁶⁸ Blanchard, H.H., *Prose and Poetry of the Continental Renaissance in Translation*. Longman's, Green & Co., New York, 1949, 3

rebirth of Humanist thought which greatly involved the ideal of feminine beauty.⁶⁹

There is ample evidence of followers of the ideas of Petrarchan beauty in the sixteenth century. A Venetian poet by the name of Galeazzo Capella, in his *Della Eccellenza el dignita delle Donne*, (1527) wrote:

“...beginning with the eyes, which at night are like two flaming stars, or instead two living suns spreading their lights about them, and with their clarity conquering the shadows of the night...What shall I say of the broad forehead? and of the curved eyebrows? of the refined nose? of the vermilion lips? of the white pearls perfectly arranged within the beautiful coral? of the cleft chin with no trace of hair? of the lively colour of the whole face? what of the white throat? what of the soft gold threads, which on the ivory white skin are spread?”⁷⁰

This passage is one example of the great influence of Petrarch's ideals of feminine beauty, and how they are manifested in sixteenth-century poetry and painting. The story of Petrarch and painter Simone Martini is an example of the endless quest to capture ideal beauty in paint. Petrarch commissioned Martini to complete a painting now lost, of his beloved Laura. He wrote several poems praising Martini's artistic ability as a painter, combined with the power the image wielded in his eyes.⁷¹ He also expresses his disbelief at what Martini was capable of producing in paint, as well as his own desire to acquire

⁶⁹ Blanchard, *Prose*, 10. The following is a good example of Petrarch's ideal beauty, as expressed in his *Canzoniere* on Laura: *Quando fra l'altre donne ad ora ad ora* - “When Love his flaming image on her brow enthroned in perfect beauty like a star, as far as she outshines the rest, so far I feel the blaze of passion surge and grow: yet still I bless the place, the hour when so supremely high, at light so singular I dared to look: “O heart, you blessed are to gaze upon that pure, that golden glow”, I murmur. “She inspired the splendid thought which points to heaven and teaches honest eyes all worldly lures and winnings to despise: through her that gentle grace of love is taught which by the straight path leads to paradise, and ever here hope's holy crown is wrought.” (Auslander)

⁷⁰ Capella, G.F., *Della Eccellenza el Dignita delle Donne*, Venice 1527, 19v-20r. This poem was used on page 94 in Ryland's book on Palma Vecchio when speaking on the poetic ideal of beauty within Palma Vecchio's group of female portraits.

⁷¹ Rogers, *Sonnets*, 300. The following poem is a work by Francesco Petrarch: *On Simone Martini's portrait of Laura (now lost) no. LXXVIII*: *When Simone, to the noble idea given him in my name, added his manual skill, if he had endowed the fair work with voice and mind, as well as form, he would have freed my heart from many sighs that make what others hold dear seem vile to me: for in appearance she looks humble promising me peace in her expression. But when I come to speak with her, she seems to listen very graciously: if only she could reply to my words. Pygmalion, how happy you must be with your image, since you obtained a thousand times what I long to have just once.*

what the Greek sculptor Pygmalion received from Venus in the ancient Greek myth.⁷²

Although Petrarch was a major inspiration to the ideals of poetic ideal of beauty, the sixteenth century painter came to develop his own vision of it. The Neo-Petrarchan mindset involved the rendering of a less virtuous woman. To Petrarch, chastity was the singular virtue that made a woman beautiful beyond all things.⁷³ She might possess the noted qualities of the pale, smooth skin, golden hair, high forehead and gently arched eyebrows, but in many cases painters in Venice were creating different compositions. They depicted women in close proximity to the viewer who were scantily dressed or not dressed at all.⁷⁴ A visual display as this is an example of the portrait prototype that came to be a common practice in the first half of the sixteenth century. A woman possessing the ideal standards of Laura was physically and emotionally unapproachable. According to Rogers, she would express humility and sweetness which potentially could respond to the viewer with pity. While this ideal was taken greatly into consideration and utilized in portraits by court painters such as Bronzino, the Venetian school of painting and other ideas in mind.

In the artists' circle of Giorgione, Titian, Palma Vecchio, and Paris Bordone in Venice, numerous portraits were produced which contain loose Neo-Petrarchan views.

The fleshy interpretation of Petrarch's ideal beauty made the sitter more approachable, or

⁷² Morford, M., Lenardon, R.J., *Classical Mythology*. Longman, New York, 1985, 117-118. In the story of Pygmalion, Venus grants life to a beautiful, lifelike sculpture which Pygmalion created, and then falls in love with. As the myth is told, on the most holy of the feast days of Venus on Cyprus, Pygmalion makes a humble request that the gods grant a special wish for his 'wife'. Venus, knowing that Pygmalion was referring to the ivory statue which he loved and clothed as a real woman, granted the statue life. The two married and had a family.

⁷³ Rogers, M., "The Decorum of Women's Beauty: Trissino, Firenzuola, Luigini and the Representation of Women in Sixteenth-Century Painting", *Renaissance Studies*, v. 2, n. 1, 1988, 51. Of the three writers discussed by Rogers, Trissino, Luigini, and Firenzuola, the diverse ideas expressed affirm that of the virtues and skills which make a beautiful woman, chastity reigns supreme.

⁷⁴ Rogers, M., "Sonnets", 295. Rogers identifies this phenomenon in a painting by Bellini. The image is of *A Nude Woman at Her Toilet*. The paradox of the image resides in the fact that the sitter possesses typical Petrarchan beauty, embodying the chief list of the typical Petrarchan ideals. Yet the close proximity of the viewer with the sitter, as well as the fact that the lady is nude, adheres to the Neo-Petrarchan ideals of female portraiture.

perhaps invited the viewer to take delight in the sitter. Some of images may have also represented mythological figures or specific idealizations which were manipulations of the real-life models.⁷⁵

The works of Several writers of the Renaissance, Agnolo Firenzuola, Giangiorgio Trissino, and Fedingo Luigini are authors whose works parallel the painted fantasies and ideas of female beauty as portrayed in female portraiture. To say that these men were writing in the classic Petrarchan tradition is false, although Petrarch was clearly an inspiration. Their thoughts and ideas concerning ways which female beauty should be depicted and appreciated were quite different from the traditional female ideals of Petrarch.

Agnolo Firenzuola's work *La dialogo della bella donna* is a two-part book in which the main character, Celso, is conversing with four noblewomen on the discourses of feminine beauty. It is Firenzuola who uses this guise to express his ideas on the subject. The four women question Celso on what physical beauty in a woman should encompass. Celso begins his answer with describing nature and several different elements. The elements are *leggiadria* (elegance), *maesta* (majesty), *vaghezza* (charm), and *venusta* (loveliness).⁷⁶ The four characteristics which adhere to a woman's outward behaviour, rather than her physical appearance, are discussed first. Celso states that like the beauty of art, beauty in women is formed from a certain harmony and order among parts. Harmony creates delight in the beholder and has the power to draw the mind to a desire for heavenly things.⁷⁷

In the second dialogue, Celso speaks of the elements of physical beauty which are

⁷⁵ Rogers, "Sonnets", 294.

⁷⁶ Firenzuola, A., *On the Beauty of Women*. first publishing, 1540. Translated & ed. by Konrad Eisenbichler & Jacqueline Murray, U. of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1992, 36-43.

⁷⁷ Cropper, E., "On Beautiful Women, Parmagianino, Petrarchismo, and the Vernacular Style", *Art Bulletin*. 58, 1976, 379

Petrarchan in origin. The different colors of lips, correct ways of wearing hair and the proportions of the body, as well as the correct level of fairness a woman's face should carry are addressed. It is quite remarkable to see that Firenzuola very carefully and eloquently mapped out the sixteenth-century list of elements to make a ravishingly beautiful woman.

Surprisingly, after having been subjected to a certain amount of misogyny, the reader of *La dialogo* encounters Firenzuola's Neo-Platonic views within Celso's dialogue. They are views which argue for an equality between the sexes and an understanding between the nature of men and women. It is a fair supposition to claim that Firenzuola had any design of feminist thought. But Firenzuola declares from Celso's lips: "we are one in the same thing, one and the same perfection, and you must seek us and love us, and we must seek and love. You are nothing without us, and we are nothing without you. Our perfection is in you, and your in us."⁷⁸

Giangiorgio Trissino author of *I ritratti*, wrote of a more decorous and restrained woman depicted in an ideal form of beauty. It seems as if Trissino's subjects are painted as distant aesthetic contemplations with no hint of erotic desire. Trissino writes of real-life noblewomen, such as Isabella d'Este, who wished for nothing more than a virtuous depiction of themselves without any shadows cast upon their virtue.⁷⁹ To Trissino, ladies were exquisite artefacts, carefully crafted out of precious materials. Trissino compares women of his mind's ideal of beauty to cold, hard substances such as ivory, alabaster, and marble.⁸⁰ His women belong on a pedestal conveying a loftiness which is compatible with women of nobility.

Federigo Luigini wrote of a female ideal that is the opposite of those in Trissino's

⁷⁸ Firenzuola, A., *On the Beauty*. 21.

⁷⁹ Rogers, M., "The decorum", 54.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

writings. In his prose entitled *Vibro della bella donna*, he does not speak of the virtuous qualities of the female figures. The subject of his writings concern the nude female figure. Luigini wrote in an uninhibited fashion that discusses every part of the female body. His prose was constructed in a manner which spoke of persons who did not exist.⁸¹ Perhaps his images of beauty are mythological characters taken from Classical tradition, personifications of Circe or Venus,⁸² figures who are far from the chaste females represented by Trissino. Luigini's writings on the beauty of women are the opposite of the ideas expressed by Trissino.⁸³ Trissino, spoke of perfect physical qualities of women and their virtues, as demonstrated through their dress. This is contradicted by Luigini's blatant denouncement for the need of such accoutrements. Luigini then proceeds to state that women are most appropriate when not clothed at all.⁸⁴ Luigini's words are unmistakably for the world of the male fantasist.

From an analysis of Firenzuola, Trissino, and Luigini, the woman of the sixteenth century was viewed in different regards, yet was viewed in the same perspective. She is seen for one purpose and one only: to be shown in the light of ideal feminine beauty as originally described by Petrarch. Looking through the lenses of Firenzuola, Trissino and Luigini, female beauty was shown either fully clothed or undressed. She might have been the spectator and the subject of men's fantasies, or she may have been a respected noblewoman, who wanted nothing more than to be viewed on a pedestal with her chastity

⁸¹ Richter, J.P., *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci*, Phaidon, London, 1970, 64. The doctrine which is written by Luigini concerning images of women who do not exist is also seen in the admiration of the followers of Leonardo. Leonardo speaks of the potent spell that a naturalist painting can cast upon a viewer. "The painter's power over men's minds is even greater [than the poet's], for he can induce them...to fall in love with a picture which does not portray any living woman. It once happened to me that I made a picture representing a sacred subject which was bought by one who loved it and who then wished to remove the symbols of divinity in order that he might kiss her without misgivings."

⁸² Rogers, "The Decorum", 54. Venus, the Greek goddess of physical love and beauty. Circe is the enchantress daughter of the sun and aunt of another Greek enchantress, Medea.

⁸³ Rogers, "The Decorum", 61.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 61-62. Rogers speaks of a passage by, Luigini who debates about the effectiveness of an adorned or unadorned woman. The resolution is in favor of the depiction of nudity in painting. Luigini even implores the audience to make the female sitter in the painting nude in their minds if the subject is clothed.

reigning as her greatest virtue. Regardless, linked to all of this was the desire to inspire the reader into believing that a woman of supreme beauty existed. As a result, that personification was conjured through paint and developed into the prototype of female portraiture. The identity of the sitter became obsolete, giving the artist license to recast the sitter into a personification of beauty not found in nature.

The abundance of images which reflected ideal female beauty poses a question: Was the male viewer in the Renaissance looking for something more than a picture of a beautiful woman? Did Renaissance man believe that the ideal of love resided inside ideal feminine beauty? It is peculiar that there came to be an abundance of frontal female portraits in the sixteenth century when in the fifteenth century, a considerable amount of fear was associated with the direct gaze of a woman. Although there were men spouting ideas concerning how women ought to be depicted, they also created an unequivocal evil which granted power to the female figure on the canvas.

A clear description of the fear and pain experienced when falling for a beautiful woman is seen in Petrarch. Numerous verses were written of the excruciating pain he felt in his inability to express his love for Laura.⁵⁶ Petrarch continually warned his readers of the perils of love and the pain which one would inevitably inflict upon himself if he

⁵⁶ Petrarch, F., For Love of Laura: Poetry of Petrarch. Translated by Marion Shore, Un. of Arkansas press, Fayetteville, 1987, 23. The following poem written by Petrarch in his *Rime Sparse* is an excellent example of his inability to express his love for Laura: *XX - Ashamed sometimes, my lady, that I still cannot express your beauty in my rhyme, I wander to that sweet and distant time when you alone granted power of my will. But even there I find no guiding skill, no strength to scale a height I cannot climb, for such a task demands a force sublime, at whose attempt I fall back, must and still. How often do I move my lips to speak and find my voice lies buried in my breast - but then, what sound could ever rise so high? How often in verses to I seek to find the words my tongue cannot express, but pen and hand are vanquished each try.*

should dare gaze upon a beautiful woman.⁸⁶

In Firenzuola's *La Dialogo della bella donna*, Celso gives an answer to a question concerning what a man conceived when he looked upon a beautiful woman, and would happen if he found her to be of surpassing beauty:

"...since each of us desires with a natural instinct and appetite to be reunited with his other half and become complete once again, it is inevitable that she should appear beautiful to us, and since she appears beautiful, it is inevitable that we love her, because true love, according to what the entire Platonist school claims, is nothing else but a desire for beauty. Loving her, it is inevitable that we should seek her out; seeking her, that we should find her; finding her, that we should contemplate her; contemplating her, that we should rejoice in her; rejoicing in her, that we should receive from her an incomprehensible pleasure, for pleasure is the end of all action."⁸⁷

Firenzuola admits that upon viewing any beautiful woman, instant love will occur because man is in constant search for pleasure, and a beautiful woman is what will conjure such pleasure. Firenzuola's admittance of the ease of falling in love, leads to a relationship between Renaissance man and a painted image of ideal female beauty. Since man strove for beauty, and seeing a beautiful woman is the creator of beauty, it is easy to see how even a conjured image of a beautiful woman would in the end induce love and pleasure.

* * * * *

There is ample evidence that Palma Vecchio adhered to the poetic ideal of beauty. In his *Portrait of a Woman in Blue* (Fig. 7) he executed a frontal portrait where the sitter is looks directly at the viewer. Her appearance is one Trissino would possibly approve

⁸⁶ Blanchard, H.H., *Prose & Poetry*, 14. One of Petrarch's poems which greatly illustrates love's dangers is entitled *S'amour non e', che dunque e quel ch'io sento?*: *If this should not be love, O God, what shakes me? If love it is, what strange, what rich delight. If love be kind, why has it fangs to bite? If cruel, why so sweet the barb that rakes me? If love I crave, why this lament that breaks me? If not, what tears or sighs can mend my plight? O death in life, dear pain, where lies my might if I refuse the doom that overtakes me? If I consent, without a cause I grieve: so in a tempest do my fortunes heave, by winds contrary and by waters tost; so, in a stupor, like a blind man lost in mischievous error, lured from doubt to doubt, June freezes, January thaws me out.* (Auslander)

⁸⁷ Firenzuola, A., *On the Beauty*, 18-19.

of, yet there are elements which suggest that she is a more than a haughty noblewoman. Depicted her in a posed position while holding a stylus she possesses flawless alabaster skin, carnelian lips, and golden tresses. The pen she holds in her right hand intimates that she is an educated woman of letters. This gives her an air of chasteness and virtue upon first glance. Yet there are certain peculiarities with Palma's *Woman in Blue*. In comparison with other traditional frontal female portraits, there are elements which make Palma's sitter more alluring than a portrait such as Bronzino's depiction of Laura Battiferri, (Fig. 10) which shows a very chaste and beautiful woman presented in a much more formal presentation. She sits with statuesque posture and an intimidating air, all the while holding a book of poetry in her hand to represent a chilly idealization of a virtuous woman of the aristocracy.⁸⁸ Trissino would be very pleased with this depiction of Lucrezia Panciatichi, for she is a representation of a beautiful and chaste woman.

In the regards to the *Woman in Blue*, the sitter is a clear example of Firenzuola's or Luigini's ideal for a beautiful woman. Her hair, which in Renaissance society would have been bound upon her head beneath a veil, snood, or turban,⁸⁹ falls off of her shoulders. This depiction of a woman in a portrait does not conform to the appropriate hair style fit for a woman of Trissino's regard. According to Luigini, Petrarch's unwed Laura wears her hair loose, which would have been seen as a modest act of behavior, indicating to the men that she was unavailable.⁹⁰ This would have also muted the erotic impact of the flowing locks of hair. It was known that heads were kept covered to keep desire in check.⁹¹ Palma's lady wears her golden locks in loose braids which flow down

⁸⁸Brock, M., *Bronzino*. Flammarion, 2002, 94-95. Brock speaks of the portrait of poetess Laura Battiferri with whom Bronzino had a Platonic relationship. He clearly demonstrated his respect and esteem for Laura in this portrait, which shows her holding a book of prose, and depicts her in a pose which harkens to a profile sketch of Dante Bronzino drew in 1532.

⁸⁹ Rogers, *Decorum*, 62.

⁹⁰ Luigini, F., *Il libro della bella donna*. Venice, 1554; English translation, E.M. Lang, 'The Book of Fair Women by Federigo Luigini of Udine', London/New York, 1907, 232.

⁹¹ Rogers, M., *The Decorum*, 62.

her back, as well as a flower tucked behind her left ear. Apparently, a woman's loose hair cast a great deal of tension upon the Renaissance woman. The response to the sight of golden tresses tumbling loose, cast an erotic spell, and connected the image with the alluring goddesses and sirens from pagan antiquity⁹²

In Palma's *Violante* (Fig. 8), the viewer catches a glimpse of a woman who adheres to Luigini's ideals of beauty to an even greater degree than the *Woman in Blue*. A coquettish look upon the sitter's rosy lips tells the viewer that she is looking to be admired for her loveliness. Her low neckline adorned with a violet, her name, and her abundant golden hair which flows down her back, is a recommendation of the ideals of beauty posited by Luigini.

Violante's dress is exquisite, that of a woman of means, but this is not a depiction of a noble woman who is striving to keep her virtue intact. The position with which Violante is sitting creates a very intimate situation. The intimacy suggested by the composition and the position of the sitter creates an arena for her bosom to be ogled by a viewing audience. The sitter appears to be fully aware of this fact, and seems to revel in the idea that she is the prime subject of the viewer's gaze.⁹³

It is clear that Palma Vecchio was an artist who falls into the Italian Renaissance circle of artists who strove to depict a ideally beautiful woman according to the provocations from the poetry of the time. The Petrarchan ideal of beauty, which became a cultural ideal for men and women alike, was clearly followed within Palma's compositions *Woman in Blue* and *Violante*. Like his affluent contemporary, Titian, he appears to have executed many of the paintings for the pleasure of the wealthy men of

Venice. Whether or not these anonymous portraits of beautiful women were in fact

⁹² Mellencamp, E.H., "A Note on the Costume of Titian's Flora", *Art Bulletin*. v. 51 June 1969, 174-77.

⁹³ Rogers, M., *The Decorum*, 54. Rogers introduced this idea in light of the painting entitled *Violante* which she attributes to Titian. Since the publication of this article in 1988, there was a change in attribution from it having been painted by Titian to being the work of Palma Vecchio

There is a need for further examination into the social ideals and demands on women at the time. The manner with which women were expected to appear depended greatly on the art and poetry produced. Although present scholarship has made great strides in women's studies during the Renaissance, there are still many pressing questions. Clearly the effects from the coupling of painting and poetry upon the fairer sex was elemental. It not only affected the ways in which women were viewed by outside audiences, but how the sixteenth-century woman viewed herself.

CHAPTER III

THE COURTESAN IN THE PAINTINGS OF PALMA VECCHIO

The courtesan in sixteenth-century Italy was the most educated and independent woman in the world.⁹⁴ She was used in many ways by the most powerful men in society as a devoted lover, confidant, counsel, and friend. It was because of this that the women who successfully practiced the profession of courtesan acquired a high rank in Rome and Venice.

Courtesans played an important role in pieces of Renaissance society. They were individual women who created a world which, if success prevailed, enabled a woman to acquire financial and social independence. Several of the courtesans in Italy, particularly in Venice, became published poets as well as tools for political and diplomatic affairs.

In the world of the visual arts the courtesan appears as herself, as well as in the guise of mythological figures. It has been said that the paintings of Palma Vecchio were

⁹⁴ Franco, V., *Poems and Selected Letters*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998, 5. It is said that in Venice, fewer than four percent of women had access to an education, ten to twelve percent of Venetian women were literate, with an average of thirty percent of men were literate. With this as a common average, and knowing that in order to be among the ranks of the Honest Courtesan, one needed to be versed in several languages including Latin, as well as versed in the poetry of the day. It is clear that a Venetian courtesan was among the most educated of persons in Italy.

simply portraits of courtesans.⁹⁵ This is a fair assumption, but there needs to be an examination into who the women were which captured the imaginations and hearts of the powerful men of sixteenth-century Rome and Venice.

One of the most famous Courtesans was the poetess Veronica Franco. She made strides to establish a important status and respectability for the role of the Honest Courtesan, the highest rank of the profession in Venice. She possessed beauty, “grace, wit in conversation, and style, good judgment, and proficiency in many skills”⁹⁶ elements that would distinguish the Honest Courtesan from the lower-ranked prostitute in Venice. The Honest Courtesan attempted to establishing herself as a respectable member of society and to ease the harsh and blatant hatred that was common towards the profession and the women who chose to practice it.⁹⁷ Thomas Coryat, an Englishman who journeyed to Venice in 1608 to survey its legendary sights and women, wrote of the Honest Courtesan:

“Moreover shee will endeavour to enchaunt thee partly with her melodious notes that shee warbles out upon her lute, which shee fingers with as laudable a stroke as many men that are excellent professors in the noble science of musicke; and partly with that heart-tempting harmony of her voice. Also thou wilt finde the Venetian Courtezan (if she be a selected woman indeede) a good Rhetorician, and a most elegant discourser, so that if shee

⁹⁵ Rylands, *Palma Vecchio*. 89. Rylands mentions that in an inventory of Palma's studio upon his death, a painting was listed which referred to the sitter in the portrait as ‘I retrato de la car.a con cavellj butadij su le spalle et vestida de verde meza facta de ca. brazo I’. The reference of someone in Renaissance Venice as ‘car.a’ was an abbreviation for *carampana*, a name given to Venetian prostitutes who were required by law to live in the area of ‘Ca’ Rampani in the parish of San Cassiano in 1421. Clearly the assumption by art historians that many of the sitters in the more provocative female portraits produced in the sixteenth century as being prostitutes or courtesans is a correct one.

⁹⁶ Franco, *Poems*. 12. Veronica Franco uses this list of qualifications for becoming a Cortigiana Onesta in a letter to a lady friend who consults Veronica on pimping her daughter for the profession of courtesan. Incidentally, Franco gives a reply to the mother which is surprising to scholars. She dissuades the mother from forcing her daughter into the profession. Veronica stresses the risks associated with the profession of courtesan, such as diseases and poverty, as well as a certain level of financial uncertainty, which lead, in many cases, to destitution and homelessness for the women who pursued the profession.

⁹⁷ Franco, V., *Poems and Selected Letters*. Ann Rosalind Jones & Margaret F. Rosenthal, eds., The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 10. An illustration of wit and morality demonstrated by Veronica Franco is evident in a letter which she wrote to a friend. Veronica, at one time, had given advice on how to face adversity. In reciprocation of the advice given, Franco uses her exemplary behavior and ability as a letter writer to demonstrate that although she held the occupation of a courtesan, she did not possess the disposition of the typical greedy, immoral prostitute. Equally important is how this letter must have made her to appear to an outside audience.

cannot move thee with all these foresaid delights, shee will assay thy constancy with her Rhetoricali tongue."⁹⁸

What were the beliefs of a woman who was attempting to make the profession of courtesan legitimate? This is a poignant question particularly when long-held traditions concerning a women's place were spouted by social commentators such as Ludovico Dolce. His ideas concerning women in society resounded through the social traditions of Venice:

"...But in a woman one does not look for profound eloquence or subtle intelligence, or exquisite prudence, or talent for living, or administration of the republic or justice, or anything else except chastity."⁹⁹

Aside from the sexist dictates heaved upon women in sixteenth-century Venice, a troubling matter concerning the courtesan in Venetian society was her autonomy and independence, qualities which appeared as blatantly as did her overt sexuality. In a novella by Francesco Pona entitled *La lucerna*, he describes the freedom experienced by courtesans:

"Freedom is the most precious gem a courtesan possesses and contains within itself everything she desires. Given the privilege, even infamy seems honorable to her. Since she is not subject to the tyranny of husbands or parents, she can deliver herself to her lovers without fear of being killed for reasons of honor. In this way she is free to express natural appetites and feminine lasciviousness."¹⁰⁰

Around the beginning of the sixteenth century approximately 10,000 courtesans moved about Venice, which was ten percent of the population.¹⁰¹ Many famous and powerful men were patrons to courtesans. The women who gave pleasure and compan-

⁹⁸ Coryat, T., *Coryat's Crudities*, Scolar Press, 1978, 267. Rosenthal uses this passage in her *Honest Courtesan*. 73.

⁹⁹ Brown, P.F., *Art and Life in Renaissance Venice*. Abrams, New York, 1997, 157.

¹⁰⁰ Pona, F., *La lucerna*. Salerno, Roma, 1973, 109.

¹⁰¹ Brown, *Art and Life*. 157. Brown makes this statement without any substantial note on the source other than best estimates. This statistic must have taken in the women who were in all walks of life. It must include the women who were the respectable Honest Courtesans, to the individuals who periodically practiced prostitution to make financial ends.

ionship at a very high price, lived unimaginably sumptuous lives thanks to the patronage of their wealthy and powerful clientele. There is evidence of the liaisons between the powerful men of Europe with the courtesan in the visual arts of Renaissance Italy.

Agostino Chigi was a banker to kings and popes and a great patron of the arts and letters. He was also one of the wealthiest man in Europe and he adored beautiful courtesans.¹⁰² Chigi was famous for his sumptuous dinner parties in his Roman villa which hugged the Tiber river. He commissioned master draftsman and the painter Raphael to design a decorative scheme in his Villa Farnesina which celebrated the love between himself and his mistress, the courtesan Imperia.¹⁰³ An entire decorative scheme of the villa was completed because of a Roman courtesan.¹⁰⁴ From the partnership of patron and artist, as well as patron and courtesan, the world received the legendary Farnesina frescoes.

The frescoes depict the two lovers, Chigi and Imperia, seated at their marriage banquet accompanied by a joyous celebration with the gods. From this commission also came the famous *Galatea* Fresco which depicts the sea nymph driving her chariot.¹⁰⁵

Further examples of the powerful men who patronized the courtesans of Rome are Julius II, who entertained the famous courtesan Masina before his succession to the papacy.¹⁰⁶ Other men in positions of power, such as Angelo Colocci and Biagio Pallai, secretaries to popes, held garden parties and gave suppers to which many courtesans were invited.¹⁰⁷ The opulent evenings designed to entertain the famous courtesans of Rome with their adoring patrons as host is described by Lawner:

¹⁰² Ibid., 37.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 37.

¹⁰⁴ Hartt, F., *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*. Prentice Hall & Abrams, New York, 1994, 528.

¹⁰⁵ Hartt, *History*. 530. According to Hartt, Raphael had no intention of depicting the courtesan Imperia as Galatea. Lawner contends that Imperia was depicted by Raphael as Galatea driving her chariot. It is also assumed that Chigi and Imperia are shown at their wedding feast with the gods in attendance, as seen in the *Wedding Banquet from the Loggia of Cupid and Psyche*, from the school of Raphael. See Lawner, *Lives*, 37.

¹⁰⁶ Lawner, L., *Lives of the Courtesans*. Rizzoli, New York, 1987, 35.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 36.

“When not promoting their careers, these men spent their time writing nostalgic Latin verses and imagining that they were still living in the time of the Circus Maximus, the Forum, and the formidable *hetaera* of old.”¹⁰⁸

In Venice, an important relationship between a powerful man and a courtesan existed between Domenico Venier and courtesan Veronica Franco. Venier was a former Venetian senator and member of a distinguished patrician family in Venice.¹⁰⁹ He was an influential personality in Venice who counseled, supported, and published the works of female writers and poets such as Tullia Aragona and Moderata Fonte, as well as Veronica Franco.¹¹⁰ Franco, described as a sixteenth-century Diotima,¹¹¹ was an intellectual courtesan who was also a socially conscious poetess who wrote numerous verses of prose on many subjects. How Franco came to be in the counsel of Domenico is not known, but their relationship lasted for a decade.¹¹² Through their ten-year relationship, Veronica was honored with the freedom to grace the threshold of Venier’s literary salon in Venice, the gathering place of the foremost intellectuals and writers during sixteenth-century Venice.¹¹³

Veronica Franco is one of the most famous of courtesans from the sixteenth century. She was not only famous for her clientele,¹¹⁴ but was acutely aware that her sex was greatly mistreated. Veronica’s strides towards achieving respect and high social status for

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 36.

¹⁰⁹ Franco, *Poems*, 1.

¹¹⁰ Lawner, *Lives*, 57.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 127. Diotima was a woman from Greek myth who is said to have had a long conversation with Socrates on the true natures of Eros. Diotima is sketched as a very intelligent woman who convinces the great and wise Socrates that Eros is not good or beautiful, nor bad and ugly, but in nature lies somewhere between the two. See Morford and Lenardon’s book on Classical Mythology, 3rd ed., 133-136.

¹¹² Rosenthal, M., *The Honest Courtesan: Veronica Franco Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth-Century Venice*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 89.

¹¹³ Franco, *Poems*, 5. Domenico Venier was a patron to other women writers besides Veronica Franco. He sponsored and published works from Tullia d’Aragona and Moderata Fonte. Venier’s salon boasted members who were the elite of Venice. She frequently requested sonnets and poems to commemorate members of the Venetian elite, such as Estore Matinengo, a military hero who died in 1575.

¹¹⁴ Lawner, *Lives*, 58. In the summer of 1574 Venice was visited by Henry of Valois, who was traveling to Poland to be crowned King Henry III of France. While in Venice, Henry visited Franco’s boudoir. After his departure, Veronica presented him with a miniature portrait of herself, along with love poetry addressed to him.

the status of her profession are apparent in her attempts to legitimize the profession of Honest Courtesan.¹¹⁵ Veronica established herself within the high society in Venice made predominately of men. Some of these strides are evident in her patronage of the wealthy and powerful merchants and ambassadors who passed through the city.¹¹⁶

Veronica's progress for respect in her profession is evident in her poetry which speaks in a defiant manner, that communicates awareness and sympathy for the fairer sex.¹¹⁷ She repeatedly defended herself against the misogyny that haunted the minds of even the most enthusiastic Humanists. Veronica's literary works express an open sexuality and eroticism that had never been seen before in the poetry of her sister poets and

¹¹⁵ Rosenthal, *The Honest*. 77. One of Veronica's wills states that she wished for capital from her investments to be given (if her mother was deceased) to the dowry balloting system of the six guardians of the Scuole Grandi. The dowry balloting system enabled funds to be available for members who could not afford a substantial dowry for their daughter. The increasing price of the dowry was a significant problem in Venice. The cost of an acceptable dowry rose to such great heights that very few Venetian families could afford to respectfully marry their daughters into another family. This then forced two choices upon the daughters of Venice: to become a courtesan or to enter a convent.

¹¹⁶ Franco, *Poems*. 32. A wonderful example of Veronica's charm is evident in a friendly invitation to an informal meal at her house: "Among the many favors I could receive through your kindness, the best of all will be that you do me the favor of enjoying some pleasant conversation today, along with your friend, who will be very eager to come. You see how this rainy weather invites all good folk to settle down inside by the fire, at least until evening. If you're willing to come, we can partake in mutual comfort, *sine fuco et caerimoniis more maiorum* [without pomp and ceremony, in the manner of our ancestors], of whatever food there'll be. And if you'd be so kind as to add a little flask of that good malmsey of yours, I am content and ask nothing more. This evening, then, I'll obey your order, a delight to me, to go to your friend's house. And whatever you choose to do, for my part, I'll always behave most lovingly toward you."

¹¹⁷ Franco, *Poems*, 245-256. In her *Terza Rima*, Capitolo 24, Veronica defends a woman who has been insulted by a man. Her words are quick to strike at male weaknesses, and asserts that women would be superior to men if given the chance: "...Look with the eyes of your good sense and see for yourself how unworthy of you it is to insult and injure women. Unfortunate sex, always led about by cruel fortune, because you are always subjected and without freedom! But this is certainly been no fault of ours, because, if we are not as strong as men, like men we have a mind and intellect. And virtue does not lie in bodily strength but in the vigor of the soul and mind, through which all things come to be known.. and I am certain that in this respect women lack nothing, but, rather, have given more than one sign of being greater than men. But if you think us inferior to you, perhaps it's because in modesty and wisdom we are more adept and better than you....And so we women, who are wiser than you, to avoid contention, carry you on our backs as the surest of foot carry those prone to fall. But most men do wrong in this matter; and woman, to avoid pursuing wrongdoing, adapts and endures being a vassal."

writers.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, Veronica acquired a certain respectability within the noble circles of Venice. She did so by utilizing her abilities to compose warm and courteous letters to not only friends, but prospective lovers.¹¹⁹

These were some of the strategic actions taken through her career as Venice's Honest Courtesan. They were actions that constituted a level of respect for the profession, further enabling the courtesan to move in high society.

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¹¹⁸Ibid., 69. The following excerpt is from Franco's *Terza Rima, Capitolo II* verses 149-178. Some of these excerpts are also used in Mary Rogers' article "Fashioning Identities For the Renaissance Courtesan", *Fashioning Identities in Renaissance Art*. Ashgate, 2000, 97. Veronica asserts a frankly erotic identity with Venus in the following excerpts from one of her poems: "Sweetly lying at your left side, I will make you taste the delights of love when they have been expertly learned. And doing this, I could give you such pleasure that you could say you were fully content, and at once fall more deeply in love. So sweet and delicious do I become, when I am in bed with a man who, I sense, loves and enjoys me, that the pleasure I bring excels all delight, so the knot of love, however tight it seemed before, is tied tighter still. Phoebus, who serves the goddess of love, and obtains from her as a sweet reward what blesses him far more than being a god, comes from her to reveal to mind the positions Venus assumes with him when she holds him in sweet embraces; so that I, well taught in such matters, know how to perform so well in bed that this art exceeds Apollo's by far, and my singing and writing are both forgotten by the man who experiences me in this way, which Venus reveals to people who serve her. If your soul is vanquished by love for me, arrange to have me in far sweeter fashion than anything my pen can declare. Your valor is the steadfast knot that can pull me to your lap, joined to you more tightly than a nail in hard wood; your skill can make you master of my life, for which you show so much love - that skill that miraculously stands out in you."

¹¹⁹ Franco, *Poems*, 32. In a letter to a young man, Veronica educates him on the fact that intellectuals win her affection. She cites Socrates from *The Symposium*, while also flattering the young man and building his ego, so to make herself look gracious and befitting respect. Veronica's ability to make herself appear gracious while also easing egos of the men who surrounded her is a characteristic which would have placed her in the interests of the noble men of Venice. She never appeared to slight a man without good reason...but turning to instead to our subject of love, there's no doubt that it acts as a stimulus in us, which, depending on how it's shaped by our feelings, is the source of opposite things...And for this reason, the wise man said that to assemble an army that would be undefeated and always victorious, it should be made up of men who respect loving and being loved by each other...And you know full well that of all the men who count on being able to win my love, the ones dearest to me are those who work in the practice of the liberal arts and disciplines, of which I am so fond. And it's with great delight that I talk with those who know, so as to have further chances to learn, for if my fate allowed, I would happily spend my entire life and pass all my time in the academies of talented men. This could be a great advantage to you, being industrious, as you are, in fine writing and in the flower of your youth, which if you nourish and cultivate it well, will bear fruit to your perpetual praise and fame in the opinion of every wise and experienced person. Take advantage of these capacities, attend to your studies, and by living a settled life in the tranquility of study and showing me the profit you gain from honest learning rather than any of the world's goods, you could lead me to love and cherish you.

The ancient Greeks used the term *hetairai*, or the Latin version *hetaera*,¹²⁰ which encompassed the profession of the original courtesan, dating to the fourth century, B.C.¹²¹ *Hetaerae* were unwed women who were sexual partners to wealthy and powerful men.¹²² Known to be intelligent, savvy companions, they were capable of being everything a common prostitute was not. *Hetaeras* were known to perform privately as entertainers and were lively conversationalists who graced dinner parties of wealthy and powerful men in ancient Greece.¹²³ In ancient Athens, as in Venice, different levels of prostitutes existed which denoted different levels of prostitute. All women who lived the lifestyle of prostitute were referred to as *hetaera* regardless of their social rank in the profession.¹²⁴ It is known that in classical theater the *hetaerae* were identified as fictive characters who were part goddess, part human being. This classical model, which placed the *hetearae* into the guise of mythological figure, inspired artists and writers of the Italian Renaissance.

The Renaissance desire to achieve all things of the classical world affected their attitude towards the courtesan. The guise of mythological goddess, temptress, or nymph, was common for the courtesan in sixteenth-century paintings. She was illustrated in the visual arts, and in stories from antiquity which involved the beautiful and sometimes troublesome goddesses of classical mythology.

¹²⁰ McClure L.M., *Courtesans at Table: Gender and Greek Literature in Athenaeus*. Routledge, New York, 2003, xi. McClure explains in the introduction that she used Latinized version of Greek titles and names. The Greek plural for prostitute is *hetairai*. I will be using the Latinized plural *hetaerae* (*hetera* is singular).

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹²² <http://www.bookrags.com/biography/Aspasia/>, *Biography of Aspasia*. The second wife of the emperor and general Pericles was Aspasia, courtesan of non-Athenian birth. Aspasia was born into a literate family in Miletu, the southernmost Ionian city and greatest metropolis in Asia Minor. She was the devoted wife of Pericles, who drew scholars, artists, scientists statesmen, and intellectuals to discuss current events, literature, and philosophy. It was said that Pericles trusted her advice more than any of his political advisors.

¹²³ McClure L.M., *Courtesans at Table*. 108.

¹²⁴ McClure, *Courtesans*. 15. The Greek term *porne* originally denoted a brothel slave and is often distinguished from the *hetairai* by the number and anonymity of her partners, as well as by the fact that she could not choose her partners. In the third century B.C. a distinction was made between the *porne* and the *hetaira*. The cultured courtesan, in both ancient Athens and in Renaissance Venice, possessed the freedom to choose her partners. There was a distinct difference between the levels of prostitute in ancient Athens, which was transferred to the Renaissance version of the courtesan, particularly in Venice.

Flora was, according to classical mythology, the goddess of flowering and ripening of grain vines. In the *Ovid*, she is the companion of Zephyrus the West Wind who, after a violent abduction, gave her a garden filled with flowers.¹²⁵

Fabricating Flora into a harlot came about in Roman antiquity.¹²⁶ The name of the Roman goddess who makes all things grow, was used by several great artists of the Italian Renaissance. Palma's *Flora* (Fig. 12) is widely acclaimed as being one of the most elegant and beautiful of depictions of Flora. One needs to ask, in reference to Palma's *Flora*, did he wish for the viewer to see the sitter as Flora the courtesan or Flora the goddess? With her blonde tresses falling freely over her bared shoulders, her entire appearance is a personal invitation for the viewer to taste her delights. The small bouquet she holds is the only indication of a representation of the illustrious goddess. The direct gaze of the blonde beauty is an indication of the sitter's chosen profession, as well as the bared breast which is shown particular attention by the blue ribbon loosely draped beneath it. The deliberate exposure of her supple white skin beneath her *camicia*¹²⁷ is another indication that this is not a simple personification of *Flora*, but a woman who chose such a guise for her profession as courtesan.

Titian's *Flora* (Fig. 13) glances off to the side of the picture plain, not directly at

¹²⁵ Morford, P.O. & Lenardon, R.J., *Classical Mythology*, 3rd edition. Longman, London, 473.

¹²⁶ Held, J.S., "Flora, Goddess and Courtesan", *Essays In Honor of Erwin Panofsky*. Millard Meiss, ed., vol. 1, New York University Press, 1961, 109. Held uses the reference to Flora from Boccaccio's *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium Libri*. Boccaccio received the inspiration for making Flora into a harlot when reading about a Roman prostitute who, in her will, left money for games to be held in her honor upon her death. Naturally, the Roman Senate was appalled by this act of philanthropy in the hands and name of a harlot. A man named Lactantius is said to have recorded the shame felt by the Roman senate upon learning of the proceedings of the prostitute Flora.

¹²⁷ Mellencamp, E.H., "A Note on the Costume of Titian's *Flora*", *The Art Bulletin*, v. 51 (June 1969), 174. The *camicia* was a full-length garment which was always sleeved, and always fell from the neckline. It was thought to be the apparel of the wedding night.

the viewer, as the sitter does in Palma's composition. Although she is a phenomenal beauty, as her copper tresses drape over her partially bare shoulders, one perceives that she is striving to retain her modesty. A blatant advertisement of her easiness is not evident as in Palma's *Flora*.

Paris Bordone's *Flora*, (Fig. 14) another bare-breasted beauty immortalized in paint, does not glance directly at the viewer either, as in Titian's composition. Sitting in an architectural setting, Flora holds loose flower petals in her right hand, indicating her identity. An almost indifferent look upon the sitter's face expresses a sadness and a longing to be elsewhere. Bordone's display is completely different from the arousing image on Palma's canvas. Palma's *Flora* exudes an open eroticism which is not seen in either painting by Titian or Bordone.

Depictions of Flora by Titian and Bordone present a partially nude woman on the canvas, yet their expressions do not entice the viewer to connect in an intimate manner as we see in Palma's *Flora*.

Leda, the daughter of a King of Aetolia and the wife of a Spartan King, is another mythological character given the profession of courtesan. Her union with Jupiter, who seduced her in guise of a swan, places a woman in the throws of passion with a non-human character. In the visual arts the union between a woman and the swan have been depicted in ways which are not only as erotic but disturbing, as seen in Raimondi's engraving of the myth. (Fig. 16)

Veronese's depiction of Leda and the Swan (Fig. 15) sets the encounter in an elaborate boudoir. Leda's opulent hair and jewelry are an indication of Veronese's intentions to present Leda as a courtesan. Lawner suggests that "Surely Leda knows that her unusual partner is, in reality, a royal guest. Leda appears in control of the situation so the swan no longer appears as a formidable divine force, but rather an affectionate pet."¹²⁸ The first observer of the painting would have been fully aware that such a union, one between a beautiful woman and a royal deity, housed contemporary connections. It was no secret that the courtesans who moved within the most powerful social circles, entertained the wealthiest of merchants, statesmen, and in the case of Veronica Franco, royalty. Leda, the beautiful woman seduced by a deity disguised as a swan on the Euphrates River Bank one day, bears a striking resemblance to a courtesan who allowed herself to be seduced by any number of powerful men.

Danae is a very common figure from classical mythology who is depicted quite frequently in the Renaissance. Painted many times by Titian for Philip II of Spain, Danae is a strong connection with the world of the Venetian courtesan. The myth of Danae tells the story of a virgin who was seduced by Zeus disguised as a shower of gold. A level of ambiguity in the story dwells in the question of whether or not Danae gave herself willingly to Zeus. Was she tempted by the sight of the gold dust which fell from the heavens? The answer to this question was duly illustrated numerous ways by Venetian artists.

¹²⁸ Lawner, *Lives*. 106.

An example of a series of paintings by Titian, (Fig. 17) which all depict the moment when Zeus visits her in the shower of gold, could be viewed as an outline for the progression of the Danae from an innocent virgin who was locked away by her paranoid father, into Danae, the venal, insidious woman who sold her virginity for a shower of gold coins. Numerous artists have depicted Danae as the pure, innocent girl waiting for the shower to reign down upon her, such as the painting by Gossamer. The opposite side of the spectrum in the depiction of the Danae myth is duly illustrated by Giulio Bonasone, who left nothing to the imagination in his engraved depiction of the moment before the union.(Fig. 18)

Venus is perhaps the most common and well-known of the mythological characters in the guise of the sixteenth-century courtesan. She is rendered hundreds of times as the goddess of love and beauty with her son Cupid at her side. Venus was first viewed in the position of courtesan as written by Boccaccio in his *Famous Women*. In Boccaccio's eyes, Venus was the daughter of two mortals with no known royal lineage. She was simply placed upon a pedestal for her outstanding beauty¹²⁹ of which Boccaccio speaks:

Indeed, Venus radiated such beauty in her face and her entire body that often those who saw her could hardly believe it. Some said that she was the very star we call Venus. Others believed that she was a celestial being who had fallen to earth from the lap of Jupiter.¹³⁰

The unrequited beauty of Venus did not keep her from the shame of two husbands. Boccaccio claimed that through her shame she “devised something that was abominably foul. Venus was the first, so they say, to establish public prostitution by setting up brothels

¹²⁹ Boccaccio, *Famous*. 39.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 41.

and forcing married women to enter them”¹³¹

The association between Venus, the goddess of beauty and love with the courtesan is very important when viewing the reclined nude in sixteenth-century art. Giorgione is known as the first painter to depict a reclining Venus since antiquity.¹³² In his *Sleeping Venus* (Fig. 19) the goddess of love slumbers in a pastoral setting with hills in the background mirroring the contours of her body. Devoid of a figure of Cupid,¹³³ this sleeping beauty is any man’s dream of a beautiful nude woman slumbering in the countryside, unaware of her surroundings or viewers. Sumptuous bedclothes beneath her hint of a possible tryst which is to take place; perhaps Venus is waiting for an elusive lover, and has fallen into a peaceful slumber. An explanation of the landscape setting in which Venus is reclined, is a realization that the Renaissance man may have looked upon this image and seen one thing: that as the land is for use by man, so is woman.

Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* (Fig. 20) is a reclining beauty commonly deemed a courtesan. A composition which followed the unveiling of Giorgione’s *Sleeping Venus* by thirty years, Titian’s *Venus* reclines inside an elaborate boudoir who appears to be awaiting a patron, a role which the viewer could assume. Venus’ intense, seductive gaze, which penetrates the picture plane, is enough to enrapture a viewer to the point of obsession. This is a seemingly nefarious quality of Venus and the Venetian courtesan. And just as in Giorgione’s *Sleeping Venus*, Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* is completely devoid of a Cupid figure. There is no connection with the mythological character Venus. It seems as if the

¹³¹ Ibid., 43.

¹³² Anderson, J., *Giorgione: The Painter of 'Poetic Brevity'*. Flammarion, Paris, 1996, 223. A cameo depicting a reclining Venus with a Cupid suspended above, is a consummate example of the visual inspiration needed to revive the classical reclining Venus and her mischievous son.

¹³³ Anderson, *Giorgione*, 339. Anderson mentions what many art historians have known since the first rays of Giorgione’s *Dresden Venus* in the 19th century, that there was once a Cupid in the composition which was holding a tiny bird clasped by its legs. Many different explanations have been offered to the reason behind the obscurity of the Cupid figure. It is believed that Titian actually finished the painting, which was left unfinished upon the early death of Giorgione in 1510.

contemporary theme surrounding images of Venus, transformed into an understanding that the Venetian courtesan possessed the qualities of Venus. Just as the goddess of love could beguile any man who looked upon her,¹³⁴ so could the courtesan.

Images of Venus, which followed those by Giorgione and Titian, proliferate in the annals of art history. A reclining Venus by Bernardino Licino is the epitome of Venus as courtesan. The canvas illustrates a reclining beauty in a very private boudoir, wearing nothing. Venus, who lies in a seductively erotic posture in the foreground of the composition, forces the viewer to look upon the nude woman, who appears to be waiting for someone. The realistic quality of the figure is one element which would beguile any man to look upon the image and wish to be Venus' partner. Once again, there is no figure of Cupid, yet the reclining nude continues to be given the name of the Roman goddess of love and beauty.

The concept of the mistress or courtesan as a model in portraiture was very common in ancient Rome and Greece. Throughout antiquity, monumental statues and sculptures were erected in honor of particular courtesans. This is yet another reference to the classical ideal which Renaissance man strove to assume.

There was Leaena, a courtesan who was dear to Boccaccio in his *Famous Women*, who defended her lover by mutilating herself. She was tortured in attempts to retrieve information needed to sentence her lover to death. Leanena's unwillingness to betray her lover, resulted in her biting off her own tongue, rendering herself unable to speak.¹³⁵ The Athenians, desiring to honor Leaena's heroism, erected a bronze statue of a tongue less li-

¹³⁴ Fiero, G., *The Humanistic Tradition From Romanticism to Realism in the Western World*. William C. Brown Comm., Dubuque, IA, 1992, 85. Manet's *Olympia*, painted in 1863, caused an uproar because it was thought to have debased a traditional subject. Modeled after Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, little is left to the imagination as we receive a languid gaze from Olympia, who reclines between clients while receiving flowers from a dozing patron. The similarities are easily determined between the sixteenth-century Venus and the nineteenth-century Venus (do we dare call Olympia Venus?). See also Rona Goffen's *Titian's Venus of Urbino*, Cambridge U. Press, U.K., 1997, 4.

¹³⁵ Boccaccio. *Famous*. 205.

oness in the Propylaea on the Acropolis.¹³⁶

There was Theodora, wife of the Emperor Justinian, known to be a venal, intelligent and beautiful prostitute,¹³⁷ was transformed into the noble wife of the emperor of the Roman world during the sixth century. She is portrayed in mosaic on the walls of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy. Theodora will forever wear the color of royalty.

Phryne, the mistress of Praxiteles, was immortalized in marble as the Aphrodite of Cnidus at her bath.¹³⁸ Phryne as Aphrodite is the personification of the Greek tradition of love. It was Praxiteles who came to be known as the greatest sculptor in ancient Greece¹³⁹ because, in part, of the work inspired by his mistress.

Lastly, the story of Alexander the Great and Campaspe is another instance from antiquity of mistress and powerful ruler. References of a painting of Campaspe commissioned by Alexander, appears many times in Renaissance texts. The story of the painter Apelles, who executed the portrait of Campaspe is as follows:

"The magnitude of Apelles' genius was significantly demonstrated by his painting of a beautiful woman, that is his nude portrait of Alexander's mistress, Campaspe. Seeing the beauty of the portrait, Alexander saw that the artist appreciated her (and loved her) more than he. And so Alexander 'paid' for the portrait by presenting Campaspe to Apelles."¹⁴⁰

According to this ancient story, whomever could best depict a beautiful woman deserved to have her. We could say that this view is indirectly reflected in Renaissance man. The mode of female possession was transferred to acquiring an image of her.¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ Lawner, *Lives*, 83.

¹³⁷ Kleiner, F. Mamiya, C. Tansey, R., *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: the Western Perspective, 11th edition*. Thomas Wadsworth, U.S.A., 2003, 268.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 84.

¹³⁹ Kleiner, Mamiya, & Tansey, *Gardner's*, 139. Praxiteles brought the human element to sculpture which looked as if they breathed and carried life. He was known as the greatest sculptor from the Hellenistic period and was later revered in the Italian Renaissance.

¹⁴⁰ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*. English Translation by H. Rackham, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1949, 79-97.

¹⁴¹ Goffen, R., *Titian's Women*. Yale University Press, New Haven. 1997, 9.

Tintoretto was the painter of the great Venetian courtesan Veronica Franco in sixteenth-century Venice.(Fig. 21) Upon seeing the image which Tintoretto produced on the canvas, Veronica's disbelief and amazement is stated in her letter to the artist:

"...Among the other things that cause them to praise the ancients to the skies, they include painting, sculpturing, and working in relief, and based on I do not know what, they declare that nowhere in the world is there to be found anyone who attains the excellence of Apelles, Zeuxis, Phydias, Praxiteles, and other noble and famous painters of those days...I promise you that when I saw my portrait, the work of your divine hand, I wondered for quite some time whether it was a painting of a ghost that had appeared before me because of some diabolical trick."¹⁴²

Veronica Franco's words illustrate a depiction of a courtesan in a visual context with no implications of idealization of the sitter. The relationship between Franco and Tintoretto was not one of a mistress and her master, but patron, sitter and painter. The power of the painted image which is Veronica Franco as herself, conjured exaltations which harken to classical antiquity. It exemplifies the importance of the painted image of the courtesan in the sixteenth century. Within the portrait of Veronica Franco by Tintoretto lies evidence that portraits were executed of women who were courtesans, not just idealizations of female beauty.

The courtesan in ancient art is followed many centuries later in the ambiguous female portraits prevalent in sixteenth-century Venetian art. Palma Vecchio's oeuvre of twenty unnamed female portraits contain all the aforementioned elements of the Venetian courtesan.

Portrait of a Woman with a Bared Breast (Fig. 22) is a composition that carries all of the implications denoting the sitter as a courtesan. The triangular composition which places the sitter in the foreground of an faint architectural setting is similar to most of Palma's women. This blonde beauty, whose hair falls freely onto her shoulders, clenches

¹⁴² Rosenthal. *The Honest*. 248.

her garment while exposing her bare breast to the viewer. The lady beholds the beholder with a provocative side glance, beckoning a conversation with the viewer, perhaps with a sharp-witted quote. She possesses intelligence in her eyes, offering herself to whomever is enjoying her company. Maybe our voluptuous sitter prepares an invitation soon to be uttered from her lips. She is the epitome of ideal beauty in the poetic tradition of the courtesan who frequented Venice.

Palma's *Woman with a Bared Breast* is similar to the composition of *La Fornarina*. (Fig. 23) Raphael produced a dark beauty with both of her breasts bared to the viewer who stares intently off the side of the canvas, avoiding a direct gaze with the viewer. *La Fornarina* is a blatant display of a willing courtesan or mistress posing for the viewer with a coy smirk upon her delicate lips. Palma's lady possesses a more serious expression which doesn't necessarily employ a look of sincere provocation, but more of a need to converse or relate to her viewer. In her eyes inhabit an intensity which most sixteenth-century painters did not achieve from their sitters, be they courtesans, or a beauty from the painter's imagination.

The intensity and intellect apparent in Palma's *Woman with a Bared Breast* is seen most keenly in Palma's *Woman in Black*. (Fig. 24) Attributed to Palma since 1720, this composition has been thought to be a work of Titian in recent years.¹⁴³ The woman in black holds an intense gaze which possesses an intellectuality akin to the gaze from Palma's *Woman with Bared Breast*. Her observant gaze is directed at her audience, with a glow of humanity in her eyes while she watches her viewers with as much fervor as she is receiving from her audience. Surveying her dress, posture and unadorned beauty, it is clear that she is likely a courtesan by profession. Her camicia drapes off her shoulders,

¹⁴³ Rylands, *Palma Vecchio*. 311. Rylands makes this assessment on a close examination of the handling of the paint. The free treatment of the lights in the complex folds of the black sleeve indicate is an indicator that this was not the handiwork of Palma Vecchio, but Titian.

nearly exposing her breasts, while her golden tresses fall over her smooth skin and down her back.

A final work of Palma's to examine is a peculiar painting entitled *Portrait of a Woman called 'La Cortigiana'*. (Fig. 25) It is a singular portrait of Palma's indicating, in the title, to be an image of a courtesan. A vision of an elaborately dressed woman with both of her breasts bared fits the prototype for the traditional courtesan portrait. But the depiction of this woman is divergent from Palma's other paintings. Her ethereal, glassy appearance lends a generic identity to the sitter. The execution of the woman, particularly in the face, is modern in comparison to what was produced in sixteenth-century Venetian painting. She does not possess any signs of outward interest in the viewer as in Palma's *Woman with a Bared Breast* and *Woman in Black*, where both interact intimately with the viewer. Her elongated nose, petite mouth and flawless skin, which cover nondescript shoulders, lend to the peculiarity of the painting. It appears as if Palma conjured the sitter on the canvas from his imagination. Could this be how Palma believed a beautiful courtesan would appear? Living in Venice for most of his adult life¹⁴, he would have been familiar with the Venetian courtesan in her appearance, mannerisms, and wiles. Regardless, *La Cortigiana* is the singular painting that leaves no question concerning who the woman within the frame was purported to represent.

The courtesan in sixteenth-century art encompasses a complicated and fascinating character who lived her life apart from the confines of traditional patriarchy and misogynist thought. The world of the visual arts indulged the courtesan beginning in antiquity. The ambiguity of who the courtesan was, followed by her overt sexuality and independence, is a fresh subject matter that will always be desirable and sexy. There lives an in-

¹⁴ Mandel, C., "(Jacapo) [Giacomo] Palma il Vecchio", *The Grove Dictionary of Art Online*. Oxford University Press, Accessed March 30, 2004, <http://www.groveart.com>. Palma's dates are c. 1479-1528. By 1520 he was living and working in Venice where he spent the rest of his life.

triguing person behind the paint and canvas, with a story to tell that is her own.

In the case of Palma Vecchio's female portraits *Violante*, *Woman with a Bared Breast*, *Woman in Black*, and *La Cortigiana*, the mystery confined to the ladies who gaze from the canvas, never ceases to intrigue the viewer. Similar questions will continue to occupy future spectators: who was the courtesan of the sixteenth century? How did she come to practice the singular profession which enabled women of the Italian Renaissance to acquire freedom not allotted the fairer sex until the twentieth century?

CHAPTER IV - CONCLUSION

The female portraiture, a singular object that evolved from what was once an illustrated document of a woman's social status and obligation to her family into a declaration of herself or a type of female beauty, has been thoroughly discussed in this paper. The early notions of the female portrait had nothing do with her sensual character or her desirable nature. This element of female nature was overtly concealed behind a veil to be witnessed only by the man who agreed to marry the woman in the profile.

Yet there are images, such as Palma's twenty female portraits, that served as types of ideal feminine beauty. They are said to be able to "invite a sensuous response through the use of clothes and jewels and through the direction of the gaze. This at times evades the viewer's eye through painting techniques which explore the rendering of the softness and luminosity of skin and hair, the richness of color and of different textures."¹⁴⁵ Different portrait types were adapted for specific patrons, as illustrated in Palma's series of twenty such paintings. Connections made between the rising population of single men and women of sixteenth-century Venice are said to have been due in part to the erotic nature of female representation in Venetian female portraiture.¹⁴⁶ This differs greatly from the traditional female representation as seen in the painter's work of the fifteenth-century profile portrait.

What was the ultimate function of the female portraits produced by Palma Vec-

¹⁴⁵ Herlihy, D., "Polpulazione e strutture sociali dal XV al XVI secolo", *Tiziano e Venezia*. Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Venezia, 1976, Veni Pozza Editore, Vicenza, 1980, 71-4. Connections made between the rising population of single men as well as single women sixteenth-century Venice are said to have been due, in part, to the erotic nature of female representation in Venetian female portraiture.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 73.

chio during the sixteenth-century? According to Paola Tinagli, the central theme in Italian Renaissance painting was specific to the female form. Well-born men and women were necessarily beautiful, and the need to give visual form to the type of female beauty described by poets resulted in new genres. Half-figure representations of idealized women, and the redefined artistic techniques developed to convey the qualities of female beauty.¹⁴⁷ This is true, though the answer to this question is more complex than expected, involving salacious societal mores in a culture that birthed a kind of sexual economy. The sexual economy was fueled by two motivating factors: painting and poetry. Poetic license fueled the paintings produced by the artistic elite such as Palma Vecchio, Titian, and Paris Bordone. Poets, in turn, such as Agnolo Firenzuola, Federingo Luigini, and Giangiorgio Trissino, created an ideal of beauty that embodied a desirable woman. She was then identified as the woman who practiced the profession of courtesan, making her an accessible tool for fantastical fulfillment.

The institution of the courtesan, educating women in the classics, poetry, and high societal manners, existed in a form not seen since antiquity. Classical references appeared in many forms in sixteenth-century paintings in Venice, particularly those eluding to certain mythological goddesses taking on the profession. The courtesan was the elegant, liberal, and beautiful woman whom every wealthy man wished access of. While many men who frequented the charms of the courtesan also possessed wives, the expectations The noble wives dwelled in a world of domesticity and child bearing.

One must wonder if the noble women's thoughts indeed paralleled what the poets were writing and the painters were painting. How did the wives of the men who were the main supporters of this so-called sexual economy view their place in society? Gaspara Stampa clearly expressed the answer to this question in one of her poems. Her writing

¹⁴⁷ Tinagli, *Women*, 188.

calls for artists to convey the interior life of the noble woman, as well as the clash of feelings which confronted her everyday. Stampa imparts the distress felt by the noble women of Venice in knowing that other women loved their husbands:

“You artists, who are able to reflect in marble, bronze, and colours, or in wax, a lifelike form precisely like the true one, even surpassing that which nature made, come all together in a gracious group to shape the fairest creature the First Care ever produced, since in creation’s time with His own hands, he formed Adam and Eve. Portray my count, and keep it well in mind to show the inward man as well as outer, that your portrayal may be lacking nothing. Take special care to show his double heart - as you well see he has just such a one: his own and mine, given to him by Love.

Then paint from the other side, just as you see me, as I truly am, alive without a soul, breast without heart, by an unheard-of miracle of Love. And like a ship that moves without its rigging, lacking a rudder, lacking main - or foremast, gazing forever on the blest North Star that guides the ship wherever it may go. And then observe that on the left-hand side my countenance is always sad and woeful, but on the right is joyful and triumphant. My happy side has only this one meaning: that I am standing close beside my Lord; the sad fear, that another woman holds him.¹⁴⁸

Neither the presence nor the influences of a sexual economy were have been a secret, even to the chaste wives of Venice. Paintings such as Palma’s female portraits would have hung in the homes of the wealthy men, perhaps in bed chambers, as celebrations of fertility and marriage, or as nude mythological figures who gave their blessing of progeny upon the marriage union.¹⁴⁹

What was Palma Vecchio’s ultimate intent within his unidentified female portraits? A possible answer appears in a discussion concerning Titian’s intent for his nameless beauties. Knowing that Titian was a contemporary of Palma, one may assume that the two painters would have conversed about the enigmatic subject of ideal feminine

¹⁴⁸ Stampa, G., *Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. L.A. Stortoni and M. Prentice Lillie, Italica Press, New York, 1994, p 48-51. In the case of Stampa herself, she composed the poem to celebrate her love for Count Collaltino di Collalto. See Tinagli, P., *Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender Representation Identity*. Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1997, 188.

¹⁴⁹ Tinagli, *Women*, 188.

beauty. Goffen claims that Titian identified some of his paintings of women as *poesie* or *favole*. He intended to evoke literature and antiquity in his female portraiture, not pornography, such as modern historians have claimed. Evidence of this lies in the fact that Titian was inspired by Horace's simile "*ut pictura poesis*" (poetry is like painting).¹⁵⁰ It is a viable claim that Palma also evoked literature in his paintings, enabling his women to become comprehensible creatures in relation to sixteenth-century Venice. The external motivators for his paintings are clear when one examines the poetry and the institution of the courtesan. Therein lay an accurate explanation of the paintings produced and the motivating factors which enabled Venice's sexual economy to exist.

Not surprisingly, the issue of the male gaze prevails in this genre of painting. Since we viewed Leonardo's *Ginevra de' Benci*, which permitted the sitter in the portrait to gaze back from the canvas at the viewer, a catalyst was created which spurred a culture of seeing.

The cultural pillar that traveled from the sixteenth into the twenty-first century is best described by a postmodern art critic.

"To be born a woman is to be born within an allotted and confined space into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image. Whilst she is walking across a room, or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught to survey herself continually."¹⁵¹

What can be taken from the paintings of Palma Vecchio? It is clear that knowledge

¹⁵⁰ Goffen, *Titian's Women*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 1997, 9. Partidge, L., "Titina's Women Book Review", *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 52, no. 2, (Summer, 1999), 521-22. Goffen's book is a very modern interpretation which challenges the universal assumption by critics that his portraits of women were nothing more than high class pornography. Goffen argues that Titian was sympathetic to women and represented them as empowered, self-possessed, fully in command of their bodies and emotions, and often even assertive toward the males with whom they interacted, including viewers.

¹⁵¹ Berger, J., *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin Group, London, 1972, 46.

of the social elements of sixteenth-century Venice is an absolute necessity when seeking an understanding of his twenty female portraits.

It is acceptable to end this paper with a poem by Petrarch. Within the verses, Petrarch expresses his desperate desire to declare his love for Laura in the most affable manner he can. His dilemma lies in the fact that he feels there are no accurate methods to clearly express his love for the fair lady

“Ashamed sometimes, my lady, that I still
cannot express your beauty in my rhyme,
I wander to that sweet and distant time
when you alone gained power of my will.

But even there I find no guiding skill,
no strength to scale a height I cannot climb,
for such a task demands a force sublime,
at whose attempt I fall back, must and still.

How often do I move my lips to speak,
and find my voice lies buried in my breast -
but then, what sound could ever rise so high?

How often do I seek to find the words
my tongue cannot express, but pen and hand
are vanquished with each try.”¹²²

In its purest form, conceivably, Renaissance men felt this way about the ideal feminine beauty they were so desperate to encounter and possess. The development of an image that would appease their wildest dreams could be conjured, and they would at last possess the beauty they so adamantly desired. Thus followed the phenomenon which took place in the world of female portraiture.

¹²² Petrarch, F., *For Love of Laura: Poetry of Petrarch*. Translation by Marion Shore, The University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville, 1987, 23.

Figure 1. Palma Vecchio. *Portrait of a Woman Called 'la Bella'*, 1518-20.
Oil on canvas, 90 x 80 cm. Lugano - Castagnola Collection Thyssen Bomenisza.

Photograph from Philip Ryland's book *Palma Vecchio*, p. 99.

Figure 2. Palma Vecchio. *Portrait of a Woman in Profile*, c. 1520-25. Oil on panel, 49 x 42.4 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Image courtesy of Philip Ryland's book *Palma Vecchio*, p. 99.

Figure 3. Domenico Ghirlandaio. *Portrait of Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni*, c. 1488-90. Tempera on panel, 77 x 49 cm. Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

Photograph from *Virtue and Beauty. Leonardo's Ginevra de Benci and Renaissance Portraits of Women*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., p. 191.

Figure 4. Leonardo da Vinci. *Portrait of Ginevra de Benci*, 1474-78. Oil on panel, 38.1 x 37 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Photograph from *Virtue and Beauty. Leonardo's Ginevra de Benci and Renaissance Portraits of Women*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., p. 143.

Figure 5. Leonardo da Vinci. *Portrait of Cecilia Gallerani (Lady with Ermine)*, 1489-90. Oil on panel. Krakow, Princes Czartoryski Foundation.

Photograph from Lynn Lawner's book *Lives of the Courtesans*, p. 117.

Figure 6. Titian. *Portrait of a Woman Called La Bella*, 1536. Oil on canvas. Galleria Pitti, Florence.

Photograph from Rona Goffen's book *Titian's Women*, p. 78.

Figure 7. Palma Vecchio. *Portrait of a Woman Called Violante*, 1516-18. Oil on canvas, 64.5 x 50.8 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Photograph from Philip Ryland's book *Palma Vecchio*, p. 99.

Figure 8. Palma Vecchio. *Portrait of a Woman in Blue*, 1512-14. Oil on canvas, 63.5 x 51 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Photograph from Philip Ryland's book *Palma Vecchio*, p. 98.

Figure 9. Tullio Lombardo. *Portrait Bust of a Woman*, 1520. Marble. Private Collection.

Photograph from Alison Luchs' book *Tullio Lombardo's Ideal portrait Sculpture in Renaissance Venice, 1490-1530*, p. 279.

Figure 10. Bronzino. *Portrait of Laura Battiferri*, 1558. Oil on panel, 83 x 60 cm. Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.

Photograph from Marice Brock's *Bronzino*, p. 95.

Figure 11. Raphael. Detail from *Galatea*, c. 1518. Fresco, Villa Farnesina, Rome.

Photograph from Lynn Lawner's *Lives of the Courtesans*, p. 38.

Figure 12 Palma Vecchio. *Portrait of a Woman Called Flora*, 1522-24. Oil on panel, 77 x 64 cm. National Gallery, London.

Photograph from Philip Ryland's book *Palma Vecchio*, p. 208.

Figure 13. Titian. *Portrait of a Woman Called Flora*, c. 1516-18. Oil on canvas. Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence.

Photograph from Rona Goffen's book entitled *Titian's Women*, p. 73.

Figure 14. Paris Bordon. Portrait of a Woman Called Flora, 16th century. Oil on canvas, 103 x 85 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris

Photograph from *Paris Bordon*, Electa, Milan, 1984, p. 80.

Figure 15. Veronese. *Leda and the Swan*, 16th century. Oil on canvas?

Photograph from Lynn Lawner's book *Lives of the Courtesans*, p. 107.

Figure 16. Marcantonio Raimondi. *Leda and the Swan*, 1520. Engraving,

Photograph from Lynn Lawner's book *Lives of the Courtesans*, p. 106.

Figure 17. Titian. *Danae and the Golden Shower*, c. 1545. Oil on canvas, Prado Museum, Madrid

Photograph from Rona Goffen's book *Titian's Women*, p. 220.

Figure 18. Giulio di Antonio Bonasone. *Danae*, 1545. Engraving.

Photograph from Lynn Lawner's book *Lives of the Courtesans*, p. 110.

Figure 19. Giorgione. *Sleeping Venus (Dresden Venus)*, 1510. Oil on panel, Staatliche Gemaldegalerie, Dresden.

Photograph from Jaynie Anderson's book *Giorgione*, p. 219.

Figure 20. Titian. *Venus of Urbino*, 1538. Oil on panel, Gallery degli Uffizi, Florence.

Photograph from Rona Goffen's *Titian's Women*, p. 147.

Figure 21. Bernardino Licinio. *Reclining Venus*, 16th century. Temporarily at Palazzo Vecchio.

Photography from Lynn Lawner's book *Lives of the Courtesans*, p. 135.

Figure 22. Tintoretto. *Portrait of Veronica Franco*, c. 1575. Oil on canvas, Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Photograph from Margaret Rosenthal's book *The Honest Courtesan*.

Figure 22. Palma Vecchio. *Portrait of a Woman With a Bared Breast*, 1524-26. Oil on panel, 79.1 x 62.2 cm. Gemaldegalerie, Berlin (Dahlem).

Photograph from Philip Ryland's book *Palma Vecchio*, p. 222.

Figure 23. Raphael. *La Fornarina*, c. 1515. Oil on canvas, 34" x 25.5". Palazzo Barberini, Rome.

Photograph from Lynn Lawner's book *Lives of the Courtesans*, p 2.

Figure 24. Palma Vecchio(Titian). *Portrait of a Woman in Black*, 1510. Oil on panel, 59.5 x 44.5 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Photograph from Philip Ryland's book *Palma Vecchio*, p. 311.

Figure 25. Palma Vecchio. *Portrait of a Woman Called 'La Cortigiana'*, 1524-26. Oil on canvas, 87.4 x 73.5 cm. Museo Poldi-Pezzoli, Madrid

Photograph from Philip Ryland's book *Palma Vecchio*, p. 221.

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