

Isabella D'este - Renaissance patron

Isabella d'Este: A portrait of a female patron in Renaissance Italy

Introduction

Art defined the renaissance and the renaissance defined art. It was the product of a society, a response to both social and political circumstances and a mirror to its values as well. Although it would be impossible to derive Isabella d'Este's exact taste, it is safe to say the rarity of an object was a driving force in a commissioned piece or a sought after item. A particular need for these slices of superiority were becoming more popular in order to convey messages of power and prestige into the public sphere. Patrons of the Renaissance could provide high valued artefacts to the church with the expectation that they would be spiritually rewarded. Rulers could make their land and cities more visually appealing and religious orders could emphasize within the "cultic life of the city." Although these reasons did not apply specifically to Isabella, we can ultimately identify her as a patron whose desire for art collecting was closely correlated to her personal goal of enhancing her image or those attached to her at a personal and public level. Art collecting became into a visual tool, which allowed members of the nobility, clergy and other elite groups to create representations of their status in the collective's subconscious. Therefore, it becomes evident how for Isabella the practices of collecting and patronage developed into outlets that gave her the capacity to present herself as a relevant figure inside the northern Italian socio-political sphere.

Raised in Ferrara and daughter of Duke Ercole d'Este and Eleonor of Aragon, Isabella d'Este was to pursue a life of cultural illumination. After moving to Mantua in 1490, she was able to learn much about art, music and most importantly collecting, thanks to the cultural exposure that came along with her family's position and the environment in which she was raised. The search for

artists to commission and antiquities was something that ran in Isabella's bloodline and it would not take long enough before she started to follow the steps of her relatives in regards to the practice of art collecting. Prompted her to start acquiring pieces at a relatively young age, there was a competitive push, which was driven into her by the rivalry with her brother Alfonso d'Este, who was also an avid collector. Although their tastes did vary, it was still enough to lead her along with the best patrons of the time. These experiences helped Isabella to discover how the collecting practices of the renaissance were highly linked with scholars who associated classical objects with exclusivity and intellect. Copious amounts of spending on items, which were for one's personal viewing pleasure assisted in granting this publicly, admired position. Thus, Isabella engagement with art collecting helped her to constantly redefine her public persona, in such a way that her taste for painting, sculpture and music would help her to portray herself as an educated, young and strong female character.

Defining Isabella as a collector

Isabella's searches for her collection were not only her longing for public acknowledgement, but achievements, which she herself could reflect on. Collecting was not only a form of independence that she could create for herself but also a form of expression. The places, which allowed her to reflect on her accomplishments, were her studiolo and grotta. Both built for the purpose of having both a private and public space of admiration, these two rooms were devoted for showing her accumulation of these valuable objects. Being able to show a private collection at one's own leisure assisted a character of sophistication. Her studiolo was kept as a library and it was the favoured in which she would display her collections. The walls were always adorned with paintings, (two of which were by Mantegna), and the ceiling was gilded, which complimented the visual effect of the artefacts held there. The private nature of this room could have allowed it to manifest itself into a forbidden destination for other patrons of the time. We

could even assume that a private collection had the capability to cause word of mouth to accumulate into a desire by other art lovers to seek out and see this infamous compilation of works. This would consequently make the collection and the owner, Isabella herself, as focal points of attention in the world of art trade and collection.

Her grotta on the other hand contained many Greek and Latin Manuscripts alongside of French and Spanish romances. The studiolo and grotta were two different worlds for Isabella. Her grotta was a barrel-vaulted space built below the studiolo and although she did continue her collection through out both rooms, the grotta was a place where she could completely submerge herself in the literature she had been raised to love. Antiquities and sought after pieces from medallions to musical instruments were what she fought for. The quest of an object was her asserting herself and she would use any means to achieve her goal of acquisition. Born into a time where noble women had limited access to professions and were trapped into arranged marriages, her persistent skills of negotiation would lead her to become "the most successful woman collector in a man's world". Public acknowledgement of the elite on a high level, whether it was through the possession of sought-after works or the representation of herself in a piece, is what she strived the most for. A status symbol of the times, these collections along with her personal incorporation was a means of immortalisation. It is of major significance to understand that Isabella's connection with the art world was not only the one of a collector, but also the fact that she wanted to employ herself as the muse for various artists of her time. Historically speaking she did not want to be purely preserved in text form, but also desired for physical representations of herself presented and preserved. She sought to maintain the present fame and acknowledgment through material legacies in order to uphold the same status she acquired during her lifetime, and be remembered as that inside the collective memory of future

generations. This practice of material immortalisation had been in practice in the Italian peninsula since Roman times, and it was a well-known trademark of social, political or economical power.

The complex cohesion between patronage and gender Isabella d'Este acquired a reputation of being one of the most demanding patrons of her time, especially by looking at her fixation in obtaining specific items that she had set her eyes on. We can try to explain why she gained this reputation of her being an over-demanding patron as a consequence to the mere fact that she was a female stepping outside the box in a traditionally patriarchal society. In a society that was known for the extreme persistence and eagerness that was employed in order to collect what is sought after most. A woman being in a setting, where gender rules were harshly implied and followed, could stand out merely due to contrast. If this is the reasoning behind her celebrity, then Isabella was certainly going to take full advantage of this. Due to the tremendous amount of information on Isabella derived from her personal books and letters, scholars have been able to examine the life she lead and the art she pursued. Concerned with her public image, these letters have preserved her personality as a cutthroat collector. Letters to and from artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Giovanni Bellini illustrate these efforts. In the end there was no artist too great to approach. Gian Cristoforo Romano, who would do a medal in gold of Isabella in a frame of diamonds and enamel in approximately 1500, was to become her main advisor regarding the pursuit of works. As her consultant he made sure that she pursued the best bargains and ensured her determination. Yet even more importantly, Romano played an indispensable role as the mediator between male art dealers and artists that would have not taken Isabella seriously just for the fact that she was woman. In the end, she was able to overcome any gender limitations that could have reduced her art acquisition capacity, giving her the opportunity of attaining almost any piece of art

she wanted, which was a luxury that other female patrons of the time did not have.

Visually, Isabella wanted to portray herself in similar way as many male noblemen did in order to imply that she was a personality with a vast social and economic power if not political. Two good examples of this are the medal done by Romano, which featured a stylized Isabella in profile and a portraiture drawn by Leonardo da Vinci. The portrait of Isabella D'este from approximately 1500 is done in black and red chalk along with yellow pastel on paper. It shows Isabella in profile but with her upper torso facing forward. Showing her in profile illustrates her need to be seen as a powerful figure along side of males who at the time often had their portraits represented in the same way on Roman coins. This type of depiction turned into an effective tool for self-advertisement, which helped them expose the political or economic power that they held in one or various Italian city-states. This was another tradition that was replicated from the Roman and Byzantine times that regained popularity during the renaissance. The portrait done of Isabella by Titian in 1536 makes her appear much younger than her actual age at the time of commission. The adjustment of her features for this retrospective representation demonstrates that Isabella did not want to be shown in her weakening state. Being around the age of sixty-three, she would rather have her self represented as a youthful, strong and keen woman who was ready and capable to accomplish her ambitious goals that would be remembered for all times. Through these portraits we see Isabella as a shining example of someone who has adhered to a renaissance notion of beauty, in a social environment where women were confined to a role in which they had to present themselves in specific and rigid roles through aesthetics, conversation and chastity among other things. Physically she met such demands, but mentally she broke barriers where a woman would usually be constrained to a more private sphere. Defining Isabella's personality through her collecting practices

A very unique element in Isabella's quest for her artefacts was the passion and processes she went through in order to acquire them. It is important to note some of the exact means used in order to obtain them and what this tell us about her own personality and mindset. A case in point is one in which Isabella sought to retrieve a piece from the debris of the Bentriglio palace. Isabella negotiated to take part in a theft to obtain a Hercules and "thought nothing of charming an antique Venus and Michelangelo cupid from Cesare Borgia." Clearly, we can see how Isabella would never doubt in using any of the resources and networking she had developed during the years in order to acquire a piece she so much desired. This is also evidence of how she used the process of acquisition as a channel through which she was able to demonstrate her power inside the elite circles. Just the fact that she was willing to flirt and deal with Cesare Borgia whose reputation of being a ruthless, cruel and extremely ambitious man it was well known, shows that she was willing to push the limits and go where her fellow art collectors would never go.

Death of other art beholders was also an opening for Isabella to seek out previously owned pieces that she desired. By attending to these deaths immediately she would gain first pick of the top available possessions. With this, she would be able to expand her collection with pieces that would have been made famous by other art collectors, so by acquiring them she would just increase de prestige of her own collection and conspicuously show her ability as very capable collector. It is said to be Isabella's searches in Rome that lead it to become a centre for art seekers in turn leading it's art resources to start running dry. It was no longer seen as a consumer's heaven because of the attention Isabella and other collectors had drawn to it. In combination with this, strict rules of export brought about by the Pope did not stop Isabella. The smuggling of a table top out of Rome during this time shows that she did not even question the actual consequences of satisfying her

craving. In the end, Isabella could have seen any legal or moral restraints as obstacles, the ones in her eyes were just challenges that were defying her power and abilities. Hence, it does not become surprising to find her in situations where she would be willing to break certain social norms of the time as a way in which she would display her power as a goal driven individual.

It is not the beauty of the object alone that she has the need to possess, but it is the permanent physical form of security, which she can actually touch and gaze that left her with an incurable hunger. Consequently, her public persona was developed through the acquisition of the pieces, but the piece itself became a physical trophy of her success. The implication of this, shows how for Isabella d'Este art collecting was a multiphase activity in which she was able to fulfill her desire for public acknowledgement and at the same time satisfy her love for aesthetic beauty.

Her specific taste for certain items was another factor that give us a glimpse into her psyche. A focal point for Isabella was antique and mythological themed pieces. She was unique for commissioning mythological based pieces that were brought about through a provided literary program. Often moralised to her liking, these slightly rewritten programs were to suit Isabella's taste and in turn, present a shift from its original base. Through them, she wanted to show a beautiful message in which the moral righteousness of the time could blend in with the motive of the painting or the sculptures. Through her taste in classical themes Isabella made her level of education and knowledge be something well known.

Undoubtedly she saw herself as a woman of high culture, with all the right reasons, however she always kept her modesty in place so in that way she would not be disassociated from the persona she had created for herself. This trait in Isabella's taste that made her extraordinary among renaissance women because she deviated from the standard of secular paintings and ornamental arts that were usually collected by female patrons. Technically speaking, she would go after the

same type of smaller and more feminine objets d'art that most women collectors went after, however any of the items she commissioned or pursued always had some attribute that would make reference to her own education, ideals or power. For that reason the paintings with moralized mythological themes became a clear expression of what she wanted to portray as her understanding of her own personal image, which was a woman with an eloquent character, good morals and a cultured mind.

Conclusion

In sum, we can see how art collecting happened to be Isabella d'Este's medium of expression, through which, she was able to create and project her persona through different public and more intimate circles of Northern Italy. Through the different contents and rare pieces she acquired she was able to create an idea of prestige and nobility that was able to settle in the mind of her contemporaries and the future generations as well. Her passion in acquiring and commissioning artefacts clearly illustrate the important function that art collecting played in her life. Through it she was able to express her power and abilities in different subjects, and in that way she challenged in a very subtle way the expectations that were held of women in her position at the time. Effectively she was able to become a female figure of success without being seen as a female that was outside her social or cultural niche. Finally, it is important to understand that the characteristics of an object she wanted to attain, and the means to do it became for Isabella d'Este's the ultimate expression of freedom and power. Through her love of aesthetics she was able to collect artefacts that represented what she stood for, but even more importantly they became a physical reminder of how she was able to use her charisma, influence and intelligence to gain something she desired in a society where women were limited by various social and cultural norms.

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