Leonardo da Vinci and Flemish painting  
—On the Portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci—

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“Only the northern elements provide the right foil for the victorious classical form.”

—E. H. Gombrich

1. The ethos of Flemish painting as a restraint on Classical pathos

Aby Warburg, who pioneered research on the relationship between Flemish and Florentine painting in 15th century, focused on this theme based on Florentines’ taste during that era. In 1888, Müntz published a list of assets belonging to the Medici household as of 1492, giving insights into the important situation of Flemish panel paintings and tapestries. Florentine patrons were thought to have favored the progressive artists of the time, according to records and documents; however, it has become clear that they were fond of the products of the Gothic North. Classical and Gothic art were accepted side by side. Since Flemish artwork can be found along with classic sculptures in the Villa Medici, Warburg convinced that it was no longer possible to treat the art of the Gothic North and Renaissance South separately, and that the background for the real Renaissance lies in the mutual complement of these two arts. Warburg believed that the problem was the collective psychology that allowed the idea of supermen and the realistic and devout art of the North to be compatible.

Warburg found a hint as to the answer to this question in the linguistic theory of Hermann Osthoff, that is a switch of the root word used in the superlative. He stated that the reason why Indo-Aryan languages, in cases where our emotions are most engaged, frequently do not form the degree of the comparison from the same root word, but form each class from different root words is because those words thereby get the true emphasis. Warburg applied this theory to a clash of forces between southern and northern art in Florence, and found the conciliation of opposites in The Adoration of the Shepherds by Ghirlandajo in the Sassetti Chapel. To yield too easily to the temptation of pagan influence may render the pathos hollow and the movement theatrical. Thus, to express the “superlative” of devout concentration, Ghilandajo would be on the look-out for different roots, Hugo van der Goes’ adoring shepherds from a Flemish model

Warburg stated that “because the image of these men who are totally engrossed in looking becomes an unconscious symbol of that self-effacing objective observation in which the Flemings were psychologically superior to the Italians with their classical education and their bent for rhetoric. This led to the conclusion that the dangers of “pathos formula,” the act of intensive sensationalism, are inhibited by the static and contemplative ethos of Flemish painting. In other words, Northern element can be dual role as obstacle and ally to the threat of superfluous classical rhetoric. As a result, Florentine art was able to attain the capacity for holding contrasts in equilibrium. In addition, Warburg argued that the products of Northern oil painting were among the first to be collected and appreciated for their own sake. This means that the Northern influence provided a challenge to the Quattrocento
Florence which had retained so much of mediæval dependence on ritual in the widest sense.\(^{(1)}\)

From this perspective, the portrait as a theme is quite easy to understand, as the style of the three-quarter portrait has its root in Flanders.\(^{(12)}\) However, according to Pope-Hennessy, we are never justified in discussing the interaction of Flemish and Italian portraits throughout the 15th century. In 1475, the first significant breakthrough occurs with the arrival in Venice of Antonello da Messia, who came in contact with Flemish painting.\(^{(13)}\) The oil painting technique introduced by the Flemish permitted pictorial expression of hair texture and sparkling of eyes. In 1470s Florence, the Verrocchio workshop was most active in introducing this oil painting technique, and engaged Leonardo da Vinci as an apprentice.\(^{(14)}\) Additionally, *Ginevra de' Benci*, which is closely associated with the Verrocchio workshop *(Fig. 1)*, might be said to be the origin of Leonardo’s portraits.\(^{(15)}\) That is why we can recognize this portrait to be the strong influence of Flemish painting, for example, the landscape on the front and the juniper coat of arms on the back of the painting.

The *Mona Lisa*, created by Leonardo during his second stay in Florence from 1503 to 1506, can be considered to be a surmmit of developmental process of his portrait pictures. Although the portrait is often regarded as representative of classicism, according to Kenneth Clark, its subtlest facial expressions, including a gothic smile, are anti-classical, filled with un-Mediterranean features.\(^{(16)}\) Furthermore, he concludes that Leonardo gained a new quality of classical completeness by idealizing the gothic sense. Heinrich Wölfflin has argued similarly, that the antithesis of idealism and realism is thought to represent the essential difference between classic and Quattrocento art.\(^{(17)}\) In other words, it is the gothic idealism to transcend the limits of Quattrocento naturalism. That is the reason why I tackle this theme at present. The root of the question lies in how Flemish painting was involved in the formation of classicism from 1500 to 1525, during the so-called High Renaissance.

2. Provenance and current situation of *Portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci*

Leonardo da Vinci’s *Portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci* (Fig. 1), estimated to have been painted in 1474, is currently on exhibit at the National Gallery in Washington, DC. This panel painting was purchased by the Mellon Foundation in 1967. Its dimensions are close to square (39 cm high and 37 cm wide), and it is clear that, for several reasons, the bottom part of the panel has been cut away.\(^{(18)}\) In the top right portion of the back side, there is a red wax seal with the arms of Prince of Josef Wenzel of Liechtenstein and the date 1733.\(^{(19)}\) It seems that the painting had acquired by one of his ancestors, but its previous owners are unknown. One theory suggests that among the collection confiscated from Ludovico Sforza of Milan and sent to France by Louis XII in 1499, “le visage d’une fame” in the inventory is described as “Genevra,” and this portrait may be identical with the painting in question.\(^{(20)}\) In the catalogue of Liechtenstein published by J.Dallinger in 1780, it was regard as “Lucas Cranach, une tête de femme” and was joined with a fir wood and repaired in retouching (42 x 37 cm).\(^{(21)}\) Yet, in 1866, Gustav Waagen attributed the “une tête de femme,” exhibited in the Liechtenstein gallery (Nr. 2326) in Vienna then, to Leonardo or his disciple Boltraffio as a working hypothesis.\(^{(22)}\) This hypothesis was accepted later by Müller-Walde and Bode.\(^{(23)}\)

In his *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, Vasari wrote that “Leonardo made a portrait of Ginevra, the wife of Amerigo Benci, an extremely beautiful painting.”\(^{(24)}\) In 1518, Antonio Billi praised its lifelikeness “painted with such perfection that it was none other than she.”\(^{(25)}\) Yet, *The Life of Leonardo da Vinci,*
written by Paolo Giovio in 1527, does not mention this portrait. (26) Anonimo Gaddiano, the direct source for Vasari’s Life of Leonardo da Vinci, written by an anonymous author between 1537 and 1546 and found in the Gaddiano Archive in Florence, repeats Billi’s passage nearly verbatim: “completed so perfectly that it seemed to be not a portrait but Ginevra herself.” (27) Based on these records, the sitter for the portrait was identified as Ginevra who was born in 1457 and the daughter of wealthy Florentine merchant Amerigo de’ Benci. (28)

The bush surrounding the head of Ginevra is juniper, which is called ginepro in Italian and genevra in the Tuscan dialect, punning on the sitter’s name. (29) On the reverse, there is decorate with an “arboreal rebus” (Fig. 2), which is the earliest Italian example. The central juniper sprig is encircled with the wreath of laurel and palm branches. A scroll with the inscription “VIRTVM FORMA DECORAT (Beauty Adorns Virtue),” which is the beginning of a hexameter in Latin, entwinds around the branches. (30) This seeming ambiguity of the inscription will be discussed in detail later. Since the lower part of the branches are not crossed, the bottom panel must have been cut down. John Walker conjectured that the bottom of the panel was placed against a damp wall, so moisture has raised up the panel by capillary action. (31) On the other hand, Goldscheider suspects that the lower part of painting was unfinished. (32) In 1903, Bode attempted to restore the missing portion: the picture was once about one-third longer than it currently is. (33)

What was the lower part of the front surface of Ginevra de’ Benci like? There are several samples that could provide clues. For example, a marble bust in Bargello, Lady with a Bunch of Flowers (Inv. 115), is pressing wild roses against her chest with her left hand. The marble, created at the Verrocchio workshop to which Leonardo belonged, has similar face and hairstyle shapes to that of Ginevra de’ Benci. (34) Another piece called Portrait of a Lady (Fig. 3) now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was in Florence, is attributed to Lorenzo di Credi, who belonged to the same Verrocchio workshop. The arboreal background is also presumed to be juniper, and the inscription “GINEVRA D’AMERIGO BENCI” can be found on the back; thus, the sitter is assumed to be the same as the Leonardo. (35) She crosses her arms in front of her abdomen, holding a ring with her fingers of the left hand. But the X-ray photograph shows that the index finger of the left hand has been changed at some time. Furthermore, Credi’s Portrait of a Young Lady, located in Forli, is also assumed to have been painted under the influence of Leonardo’s Ginevra de’ Benci. (36) Another similar piece is a sketch in silver point called Study of Hands, possessed by Royal Library at Windsor Castle. It has been thought that Leonardo’s silverpoint drawing of hands in Winsor is a preliminary study for this passage. (37) From these examples, it can be conjectured that Ginevra was originally holding a bouquet in front of her abdomen; indeed, a computer reconstruction of such an image was recently published. (38)

3. The issue of who commissioned the Portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci

Leonardo’s Portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci is usually dated 1474 on the supposition that it was executed to
commemorate her marriage to a wool merchant, Luigi di Niccolini.\(^{39}\) As Ginevra was born in 1457, the sitter was estimated to have been about 17 years old.\(^{40}\) Möller assumed that after Niccolini passed away in 1505, the portrait was returned to the Benci family, and it presumably became a possession of Liechtenstein until the family had been extinct in 1611.\(^{41}\) However, there is no evidence of its actual whereabouts during these days. It is entirely conceivable that the Niccolini and the Benci families never owned the portrait.\(^{42}\)

In contrast, scholars like Walker and Fletcher regard Bernardo Bembo, who had a relationship with Ginevra, as the original customer for the painting.\(^{43}\) If it was commissioned during his second stay in Florence (1478–1480), Ginevra’s age would have been around 23. Recently, we have found convincing proof to support this claim. The examination with an infra-red camera has revealed beneath the present inscription other Latin letters, “VIRTUS ET HONOR,” corresponding to Bembo’s own motto.\(^{44}\) Furthermore, the wreath that combines palm and laurel branches is quite similar to the garland on the cover of a manuscript of Paolo Marsi’s poem describing Bembo’s journey to Spain in 1468-69.\(^{45}\) If it was Bernardo Bembo who commissioned the painting, it is possible that Bembo, staying in Burgundy as a Venetian ambassador in 1471-74, brought the “arboreal rebus” to Leonardo and had the portrait painted in the Flemish mode.\(^{46}\)

The reason why the romantic relations between Ginevra de’ Benci and Bernardo Bembo were in the open is that the Neoplatonist poets of the Medici circle, Cristoforo Landino and Alessandro Braccesi, sang of the love affair of the two in Latin.\(^{47}\) If we may rely on the poems, Bernardo met Ginevra at a friend’s house and fell in love at first sight. After the exchange of a few words, he was enthralled by her. Later on, Ginevra dropped a violet that she was wearing on her breast on the way back from the church, and sent it to Bernardo through the poet.\(^{48}\) Bernardo may have commissioned the work before he left Florence in 1480.\(^{49}\)

If Bernardo Bembo can be considered as the customer, what possible interpretations of the portrait exist? As was already mentioned, through the ex-ambassador to Burgundy, the connection between Leonardo and Flemish painting becomes stronger. In addition, as Fletcher argued, Bembo—who idolized Petrarch—compared Ginevra to Petrarch’s lover, Laura.\(^{50}\) This can be deduced by the fact that Bernardo’s son Pietro Bembo owned a copy of Simone Martini’s Portrait of Laura.\(^{51}\) It was a common knowledge back then that Simone frescoed St. George on the portico of a church in Avignon; it contained a likeness of Laura, who lived in Avignon, disguised as Mary Magdalene.\(^{52}\) If Ginevra was likened to Laura, the portrait would be contained some symbolic meaning.

### 4. The relationship between Portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci and Flemish painting

Ever since Paul Hills’ research in 1980, it has been pointed out that the cold stare, reinforced by a slight turn of the head, of Leonardo’s Portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci is similar to that of Petrus Christus’ Portrait of a Young Lady (Fig. 4).\(^{53}\) For example, Paula Nuttall assumes that the similarity between these two portraits cannot be fortuitous, and that Leonardo must have scrupulously studied the above-mentioned portrait by Christus, presumably.\(^{54}\)

David Brown stated that “Taken by scholars as a touchstone of Leonardo’s interest in northern art, Ginevra de’ Benci betrays a striking resemblance to Portrait of a Young Lady by Petrus Christus in the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin. […] Though presumably incorporating the lady’s physiognomy, Leonardo’s Netherlandish-inspired likeness is clearly not a straightforward record of her appearance. Nor does it capture her unique personality in the sense of a modern psychological portrait.”\(^{55}\) In other words, he means that, in Portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci, Leonardo realized his own unique idealism apart from

![Fig. 4 Petrus Christus. Portrait of a Young Lady, 1452–1457, 29×22.5cm, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin (Kat.Nr.532).](image-url)
Quattrocento naturalism or modern psychologism.

On the other hand, Hills stated, regarding *Lamentation* by Rogier van der Weyden—found at a villa of Medici in Careggi near Florence—that “Leonardo was the first Italian fully to comprehend this meditative inwardness of Flemish painting. In fusing this northern spirituality with the physical consciousness and sense of grace which was the legacy of the antique, Leonardo created a style which is inexplicable by reference to a purely Italian tradition.” He also conjectured that the spirituality of the portrait by Leonardo would depend on the influence of Flemish painting, which could not be explained by the legacy of the antique alone.

The possibility that Leonardo’s *Portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci* was involved with the portrait by Christus is supported to some extent by records of existing archives. What is especially important is the description of “a small panel painted with the head of a French lady, coloured in oil, the work of Pietro Cresci from Bruges” in the 1492 inventory of Lorenzo de’ Medici’s collection. Quite a few scholars identify the small panel painting with *Portrait of a Young Lady* by Christus. This painting was owned by Edward Solly until 1821, who used to purchase his collection in Italy. Gustav Waagen initially believed that the sitter was a niece of the Talbot family of Shrewsbury, based on an inscription on the original frame, which has been lost. Yet, there are many objections to this identification which argue that this does not mean that the portrait was not in Italy.

Also, regarding Christus, there is an entry of payment for a “figura” to “Piero di Burges” in the 1453 ledger of Duke Sforza. If we assume Piero to be Petrus and Burges to be Bruges, this implies that Christus created the portrait for the court of Milan. Some scholars interpret “Piero di Burges” as Piero della Francesca by assuming that it means “Piero di Borgo.” However, I suppose that unless the description of “Piero di Burges” in Milan agrees with biographical records of Piero della Francesca, the potential that it refers to Petrus Christus is strong. Sterling stated that, since Christus’s innate tendency for synthesis is akin to that of painters such as Antonello da Messina and Konrad Witz, he might have been an appropriate messenger with these artists.

As mentioned above, on the reverse side of *Portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci* is a Latin hexameter line, “VIRTVTEM FORMA DECORAT (Beauty Adorns Virtue),” written on a scroll entwined in a juniper sapling. Painting an *impresa* such as *arboreal rebus* on the back of a portrait was common in Flemish portraiture. For example, “Branch of Holly” is depicted on the reverse side of *Portrait of a Man holding an open Book*, an early work of Rogier van der Weyden. On the upper frame of the back inscribes a French epigram, “Je he ce que mord (I hate that which I sting).” Similarly, as an early Italian example, the *impresa* like that is shown on the reverse side of *Portrait of a Man* by Jacometto Veneziano circa 1490. If we compare *Portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci* with the case of the Venetian school, we comprehend that the portrait by Leonardo was an early example of the application of the Flemish style to Italian art. Therefore, it is quite likely that he was inspired by the head of a French Lady, stored in the Medici’s collection.

5. Conclusion

According to the above reasoning, it is obvious that Leonardo’s *Portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci* would be influenced by the Flemish painting. Its idealized, mysterious atmosphere is closer to that of Flemish portraiture than to that of Italian ones of the time. Both of these portraiture are common to the fine finish of the oil painting and the *arboreal rebus* on the back. The style of the portraiture established in those days would have been the cornerstone for the Venetian school.
for the *Mona Lisa*, engaged during Leonardo’s second Florentine period, after 1500. In this respect, it is important to elucidate the relationship between Leonardo’s early work and Flemish painting.

Yet, upon considering this relationship, we must return to the first problem posed by Warburg. According to Osthoff’s linguistic theory on which Warburg depended, for our language in case where our emotions are most engaged, mere logical inflections from familiar roots become unsatisfactory. The same principle operates in the field of visual art; thus, the expression of the static and contemplative ethos of Flemish painting inhibited the excessive expression of antique pathos. It seems that the fundamental reason why Leonardo focused on Flemish portraiture was likely his unconscious awareness of this principle. As Hills stated, “In fusing this northern spirituality with the physical consciousness and sense of grace which was the legacy of the antique, Leonardo created a style which is inexplicable by reference to a purely Italian tradition.” That is precisely why Leonardo made a great contribution to the history of the portraiture.

**Notes**


20) Adhémar, Jean, “Une Galerie de Portraits Italiens a Amboise en 1500,” *GBA*, 84, 1975, p.100.
22) It was located in the 6th room of the Liechtenstein Art Gallery in Vienna. Waagen believed that the sitter was the wife of a diplomat, Alice Talbot, based on the inscription on the frame. Waagen, Gustav, *Die vornehmsten Kunstdenkmäler in Wien I, Wien, 1866*, p.276.


29) The interpretation of this paronomasia was supposedly proposed by Aby Warburg. Bode, op.cit., p.276. Möller, op.cit., p.196.


35) X-rays photograph reveals that the left index finger has been changed at some time. Walker, op.cit., p. 16. Cook, op.cit., p. 346; Dalli Regoli, op.cit., p. 130.

36) Walker, op.cit., p. 13. Many scholars believe that the silver point of folded hands at Windsor (no. 12558) has been associated with Ginevra de’ Benci. However, Gould regards the Windsor drawing as the style around the 1480s or later, and is not convinced that the relationship between the two is clear. Gould, op.cit., p. 30.


45) Fletcher supposes that the Leonardo picture has a relationship to Bembo’s stay in Flanders. Ibid., p. 816.


47) Both of the Latin poems of Landino and Braccesi were published in the 20th century, but the original texts and English versions are found in the appendix to Walker’s paper. Walker, op.cit., pp. 28-37.


50) In 1520s, Marcantonio Michiel stated that he saw “a portrait copied from the mural of Avignon based on a portrait of Laura” at the home of Pietro Bembo in Padua. Frimmel, Theodor, Der Anonimo Morelliano: Marcanton Michiel’s notizia d’opere del disegno, Wien, 1888, pp.22-23.


62) According to the 1465 ledger, commission was paid to Antonello da Sicilia, Piero di Burges, and maestro Zannino. Malaguzzi-Valeri, Francesco, Pittori Lombardi del Quattrocento, Milano, 1902, p.89, p.217.


66) Based on the headgear of the doctor, the sitter is assumed to be Guillaume Fillastre, who obtained his doctoral degree at the University of Louvain in 1436. The reverse sideshow a holly branch and an old French motto, “Je he (haïr) ce que mord.” Panofsky, op. cit., pp. 477-478.


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