The Court Lady’s Dilemma: Isabella d’Este and Art Collecting in the Renaissance

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Isabella d’Este, Marchesa of Mantua, avid collector of art, and always a woman acutely concerned with her public image, has suffered a highly ironic fate at the hands of art historians. Unlike other female collectors who have virtually disappeared from discussions of Renaissance art patronage, Isabella d’Este survives, but in representations strikingly at odds with those constructed in the Renaissance. While ‘that friend of illustrious deeds and fine studies, liberal, magnanimous Isabella’, in Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso (1512), is acknowledged as a biased topos of praise, the undiscerning, tyrannical and greedy Marchesa in recent histories of Renaissance art retains credibility as a scholarly evaluation.1 Most of these negative representations of Isabella d’Este owe their particulars, and even their existence, to the survival of an unusually voluminous and vivid correspondence.2 In their scrutiny of these letters, historians have not always agreed on the choice of anecdotes or their interpretation, but what they invariably keep to is the basic framework of a particular personality.3 It is the very process of elaborating Isabella d’Este’s personality, whether to attack or defend her, that has led to the marginalisation of her activities as an art collector. Certainly few steps have been taken to locate these activities within Renaissance patronage patterns, or to define Isabella d’Este’s own prescribed social position and patronage options.

The most elaborate representation of Isabella d’Este remains the Renaissance heroine of Julia Cartwright’s 1904 biography who fully conforms to Edwardian norms of desirable middle-class female behaviour:

In her aims and aspirations Isabella was a typical child of the Renaissance, and her thoughts and actions faithfully reflected the best traditions of the age. Her own conduct was blameless. As a wife and mother, as a daughter and sister, she was beyond reproach . . . She had a strong sense of family affections and would have risked her life for the sake of advancing the interests of her husband and children or brothers.4

Removed from the broader political and social concerns in which nineteenth-century historians such as Burckhardt had placed her contribution, here Isabella d’Este is ensconced in family life.5 Her art patronage, acknowledged as exceptional amongst her sex, becomes a way of defining a private space appropriate to her virtuous, nurturing character:

It was Isabella’s dream to make this Grotta a place of retreat from the world, where she could enjoy the pleasures of solitude or the company of a few chosen friends, surrounded by beautiful paintings and exquisite works of art . . . In this sanctuary, from which the cares and the noise of the outer world were banished, it was Isabella’s dream that the walls should be adorned with paintings giving expression to her ideals of culture and disposing the mind to pure and noble thoughts.6

While a number of Renaissance female patrons of art served the conventions of the late Victorian biography, only Isabella d’Este has been of interest to recent art historians.7 One reason for this is that Isabella d’Este, unlike the others, collected mythological panel painting. This, at least, is the one aspect of her activities that has received most attention, particularly her dealings with painters such as Mantegna, Bellini and Perugino. Another incentive has been the wealth of documentation on this patron which includes a detailed inventory of her collection and its manner of display, as well as the correspondence already mentioned.8 But since these written sources do not concur with the art historical tendency to privilege panel painting over other arts, they have been used to define Isabella d’Este as an anomaly among Renaissance patrons.

When considering the marchesa’s overall collecting tactics, scholars have deduced, correctly, that she was more interested in the acquisition of small scale decorative objects than large scale paintings. In 1964, Andrew Martindale aligned this preference to a female personality:

Isabella herself was a determined collector and, in a typically feminine way, her enthusiasm was especially aroused by objets d’art. At first sight, the Mantuan archives, which are rich in information about the paintings, might not suggest this was so; yet, on closer inspection, we soon realize that the bulk of the collection consisted of bronzes, medals, gems and the like: the paintings play, as it were, a supporting role. Moreover, the amount of money which Isabella paid, and was prepared to pay, for these pieces was certainly greater than it was for her paintings.9

Yet Isabella d’Este’s desire for antique medals and gems, as well as her willingness to spend more
money on these objects than on paintings, is in no way inconsistent with the attitudes and practices of other Renaissance collectors.\textsuperscript{10} The most celebrated case is that of Lorenzo de' Medici whose apparent lack of interest in painting has always been rationalised by linking his enthusiasm for gems and cameos to humanistic endeavours.\textsuperscript{11} An ahistorical assumption — a hierarchy of collectible objects that adheres more to modernism than to Renaissance court society — underlies discussions of both of these patrons, but only in Isabella d'Este's case is this sustained by notions of a stereotypical female personality. In the 1980s, an article by J. M. Fletcher reinserts Isabella d'Este into the traditional female domain of bourgeois domesticity:

Her motivation was aesthetic and social rather than scholarly and antiquarian . . . [H]er crowded yet calculated display [...] suggests that her collecting, like so much of her patronage, was directed by her highly developed sense of interior decoration.\textsuperscript{12}

In addition to anachronisms, the assessment of Isabella d'Este's patronage as atypical is based on, and reinforced by, shifting definitions of the 'norm'. The representation of the marchesa as old-fashioned and undiscerning was first elaborated by iconographers who privileged intellectual content in painting. Isabella d'Este is renowned for the detailed literary inventions which she instructed painters to follow, and this has served the case of iconographers and their view that humanist advisors were involved in the invention of mythological paintings. Even so, such iconographical studies as Egon Verheyen's \textit{The Paintings in the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este in Mantua} published in 1970, invariably stumble on the fact that the marchesa's inventions draw on moralised reworkings of classical myths rather than on the original texts favoured by iconographers.\textsuperscript{13} Verheyen extricates Mantegna — painter of the first two of five mythological paintings commissioned by the marchesa — from the implications of questionable literary sources, but reads the allegorical content of the other paintings in relation to Isabella d'Este's personality:

The importance of Perugino's painting (\textit{The Combat of Love and Chastity}, the third in the series) within the total decoration is based on the fact that it fulfills two functions. It links the later works to Mantegna's and at the same time introduces a new aspect which is strictly personal and cannot be separated from Isabella's personality. Isabella [...] turned to literary sources which celebrated the world of chivalry, and it may be appropriate to recall here once again Isabella's lasting interest in this world commemorated by Boffardo, whose works she adored. In his paintings, Mantegna contrasts the basic powers in man's life: reason and sensuality. Even more he implies that man's feelings strive with reason, he does not insist that one will ultimately triumph. Thus Mantegna's concept reflects the conviction that man has the liberty to choose one way or the other. Perugino's picture, with its explicit moral, does not offer a similar choice.\textsuperscript{14}

Initially, the critique of Verheyen's interpretation of this group of mythological paintings was directed not at iconography but at the wisdom of applying a rational methodology to an irrational collector:

No one will envy Professor Verheyen his task, for Isabella's aims are not easy to define. She was an exceptionally difficult patron. She changed her rooms, her artists, her mind . . . Professor Verheyen is methodical but Isabella is unpredictable.\textsuperscript{15}

Yet even when scholars challenged the literary focus of iconography, Isabella d'Este's role as patron continued to be reduced, only now in a different way. In a 1981 study of patronage by Charles Hope, the Marchesa of Mantua serves as a foil to the progressive Renaissance collector whose aesthetic interests dovetail into the increasing autonomy of the Renaissance artist,\textsuperscript{16} compared to her brother, the Duke of Ferrara, who supposedly encouraged Titian's initiative and appreciated the aesthetic and erotic components of his mythological paintings, Isabella d'Este's preferences are deemed deviant, and once again her female personality is seen as the most plausible explanation:

The \textit{Combat of Love and Chastity} illustrates only too clearly what she had in mind — the pedantic elaboration of a banal allegory, conceived with little or no regard for the distinction between a painting and a text. This attitude seems entirely typical of Isabella's pretentious personality; but whether it reflects the normal outlook of contemporary patrons remains to be seen.\textsuperscript{17}

The tactic of contrasting Isabella d'Este with such male counterparts as her brother and son is not new, and neither is the explanation of difference in terms of personality; Verheyen himself accounts for the marchesa's preference for moralised classical stories in this way.\textsuperscript{18} But now the comparison is based on the supposition that the duke's choices represented objective judgements of artistic quality and therefore did not hinder Titian's talents, while the marchesa's were the consequence of a manipulative personality and served to curtail the artistic process.\textsuperscript{19} In fact evidence suggests that while these patrons adhered to different criteria, each permitted certain liberties and disallowed others. Isabella d'Este is said to be unusual in providing painters with detailed literary programmes for mythological pictures yet scholars acknowledge that Alfonso d'Este gave Titian a text to follow.\textsuperscript{20} So what does distinguish the duke's dissatisfaction with Bellini's \textit{Feast of the Gods} (due to the fact that the painter relied on a moralised text and represented the gods as peasants),\textsuperscript{21} from Isabella d'Este's displeasure with Perugino, who, ignoring her instructions, painted a nude figure of Venus in the \textit{Combat of Love and Chastity}.\textsuperscript{22} Evidently different priorities: he adhered to a notion of
classical authenticity, while she wanted to ensure a moralising allegorical message.

Isabella d'Este does not demonstrate the 'normal outlook' if this is defined as a preference for mythological painting which privileges classical authenticity and an eroticised presentation. Unlike her male counterparts, she was primarily concerned with depictions of mythology which explicitly encouraged a didactic interpretation, what she called a 'beautiful meaning'.23 Yet instead of addressing why someone in her position should insist on this, art historians persist in judging Isabella d'Este's collecting activities as if she held a similar position to her brother and son. In other words, they have refused to acknowledge the significance of gender as a factor in social positioning. Isabella d'Este's patronage of mythological painting emerges as unusual in its context, but only by defining the specific role which she occupied can one establish in what ways these activities were exceptional, as well as the implications of such departures from the norm.

Part of the problem is that most art historical studies on collecting remain at the level of defining the preferences of individual collectors.24 Inevitably this approach tends to skirt such fundamental questions as the social implications of collecting as well as the collectors' links to a particular hierarchy of collectible objects. During the Renaissance the practices of collecting art and the attitudes that gave such practices social significance evolved in relation to an emergent courtly social structure. As with other court collectors, Isabella d'Este's activities register more than the unconstrained actions of an erratic individual, and must be considered in relation to the particular social constraints and expectations which this context imposed on someone of her rank and gender. My intention here is not to justify Isabella d'Este's tactics and attitudes, but to explain the role that collecting played in defining and, I would argue, successfully redefining her prescribed position as the Marchesa of Mantua. By examining her collecting practices within Renaissance social structures and patronage patterns, I hope to show that these functioned very differently in the sixteenth-century Italian court than they do in recent art history.

Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* is a useful source for my purposes, as it attempts to articulate the ideal that underlies courtly life in early sixteenth-century Italian despotic city-states such as Mantua;25 it is set in the comparable court of Urbino, where Isabella d'Este's position was occupied by her sister-in-law Elisabetta Gonzaga. The Gonzaga family, into which Isabella d'Este married, had taken control of Mantua by force, having divested an aristocratic class of its claims and land holdings.26 Like most despotic rulers, however, the Gonzaga remained dependent on tenuous alliances with larger Italian states and foreign monarchs, who employed them as professional soldiers — condottieri — and who offered the titles needed to validate their rights to signorial power. In his book, Castiglione reveals a complex social structure in which dependency — of the nobility and professional courtiers on the ruling family, of the Lady of the court on the prince, of the ruler himself on those he served as military leader — was worked out through rigidly codified behaviour and ritual. The development of a cultivated persona and the acquisition of luxury objects provided ways of negotiating an advantageous position within the court, and in turn a way of life which assured exclusivity and, therefore, some sense of control.

Renaissance collecting practices and their social significations were closely connected to the promotion of antiquity by humanist scholars who endowed classical remnants with an intellectual and ethical framework that proved flexible and assured exclusivity.27 Collecting became the concern of a larger sector of society when humanism itself was appropriated by the ruling classes, primarily through the employment of humanists in city-republics and small northern courts. The social conflicts that arose from lavish spending on private possessions, an outgrowth of more elaborate family residences, were soon offset with humanist arguments which aligned cultural possession — both physical and intellectual — with moral values.28 By the second half of the fifteenth century, when powerful families competed in their acquisition of enormous collections, modes of justification were established which not only validated such activities but also gave further social resonance to the collecting process. For the northern despot, the decoration of a public palace with luxury goods was an opportunity to reaffirm his right to rule by implying, among other things, cultural and moral superiority.29 It is significant that Alfonso d'Este's set of mythological paintings by Titian, based on Philostratus's description of classical paintings, were — following the example of his sister — kept in his studiolo. This type of chamber, originally associated with scholarly pursuits, became a visible component of prominent courts, devoted to the accumulation of objects and facilitating the opportunity to display refinement of taste and learning.30

What we know of learned court discussions prompted by collectible objects suggests that these tended to privilege distinctions of artistic skill over the appreciation of precious materials,31 deflecting criticism of excessive wealth and reinforcing distinctions of education and class. Yet forms of value established through the process of market exchange were very much in place, and served to distinguish the prince not only from his courtiers — the courtier could have intellectual access to a work of art yet the prince usually owned it — but also from his consort. The consort, who, as will emerge below, was more restricted than courtiers in verbal discussions of art, was also limited to forms of art patronage which did not require public competition. One can account for
the greater prestige of antique statues over modern painting by their ability to signify the most exclusive form of ownership, precisely because they were scarce, the competition public and increasingly fierce, and undertaken only by the most influential collectors. Such collecting activities, including the emerging hierarchy of collectible objects, presented opportunities to forge links of interdependence between participants while drawing distinctions of rank and gender.

While cultural acumen and the cultivation of personal charm was required of most members of the court, regardless of rank or sex, Castiglione makes clear that only for women was this the primary occupation. The social life of the court centred around the prince's consort who was the orchestrator of much cultural activity, and whose physical presence was the focus of court ritual. Women from the small ruling class of northern Italian city-states were trained exclusively to fulfill this role. Their instruction focused on religious and moralising literature, music, and dance, and prepared them for marriages arranged at a young age with members of other ruling families.

The practice of negotiating advantageous marriage unions put women in the role of cultural possessions whose acquisition required competition in the small but public sphere of Italian courts. At the same time the specific options and limitations faced by these women once married depended on the relative social and political status of the two families in question. For example, the marriage of Isabella d'Este's parents — Eleonora of Aragon, daughter of the King of Naples, and Ercole d'Este, Duke of Ferrara — represented a social leap for the Este family, and served to offset the appearance of sexual ambiguity and dynastic instability that the lack of a consort during the reign of the previous duke had brought to their court. It was no coincidence that the new duchess was encouraged to occupy an unusually visible place in the court of Ferrara. Unlike most court consorts who depended on an allowance from the family into which they married, Eleonora of Aragon had her own inherited income and spent much of this money on religious and charity projects; she collected religious books and funded humanists who produced works which promoted the edifying potential of classical literature. In addition, the duchess commissioned tapestries to embellish the public chambers of the court and was a collector of small precious metal objects. Eleonora of Aragon’s presence and patronage not only assured a well-orchestrated social and cultural life for the court, but she also represented its moral underpinnings and by implication contributed to the respectable image of its ruler.

While the role of the consort as patron of the arts served interests more directly embodied by the prince, her physical person and cultivated persona came to function as a catalyst for the cultural life of the court. In this way, she was not distinguished from other Court Ladies who, Castiglione, keeping to the chivalric tradition, views as the courtier’s physical source of inspiration:

no court however great, can have adornment or splendour or gaiety in it without ladies, neither can any Courtier be graceful or pleasing or brave, or do any gallant deed of chivalry, unless he is moved by the society and by the love and charm of ladies.

In Castiglione’s idealised Urbino court, the lady at the centre of cultivated discussions is Elisabetta Gonzaga who invariably remains a passive source of inspiration for eloquent courtiers. Apparently the Duchess of Ferrara’s youngest daughter, Beatrice d’Este, who was married to the powerful Duke Ludovico Sforza, occupied this kind of space in the court of Milan. Beatrice d’Este presided over a court much richer and culturally more active than the courts of either her mother or sister, but her own achievements were read primarily in terms of her physical person and her ability to inspire her husband and the court at large. Unlike her mother, Beatrice d’Este’s patronage was limited to courtly entertainments, particularly to supporting musicians and poets who wrote in the vernacular. Lacking any focus other than her person, the duchess’s position was more central but not essentially different from that of other noble women in the court of Milan. Beatrice d’Este as an embodiment of virtue — manifested primarily by her physical beauty, her lavish wardrobe and expensive jewellery — is a recurrent theme in court poetry. It is revealing to compare the references to Beatrice and her sister Isabella in Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso; while the former is praised for imparting strength and virtue on her husband, the latter is said to have challenged her husband in patronage and achievements.

Isabella d’Este’s marriage to Francesco Gonzaga aligned the Gonzaga with a court that superceded them in titles, wealth and even the potential to produce a healthy family dynasty. If the Mantuan court had none the less managed to become a significant presence among northern city-states, it was by making much of its adherence to humanism and its credited cultural pursuits, even supporting a humanist school for children from other courts. Recasting the court in the prestigious humanist vocabulary did not exclude Gonzaga women, who presumably became more desirable as marriage candidates by the distinction of a humanist education. While a humanist education purported to cultivate personal virtue, for women such education brought virtue into question. As the well known case of Cecilia Gonzaga — sister of Francesco Gonzaga’s father — demonstrates, humanist concerns had to be circumscribed within gender expectations if they were to serve the court hierarchy. For Cecilia Gonzaga to pursue humanist studies as an end in itself, she was compelled to
withdraw from the life of the court and retire to a
convent.45

In 1490, Isabella d’Este arrived in Mantua with an
established reputation for learned interests, and this
reputation — as well as her family connections —
well suited a court that relied on its cultural identity.
Initially she received an annual allowance of 6000
gold ducats, and to some extent she and Francesco
Gonzaga kept to the expected practice of patronising
different kinds of arts — he funding the building and
decoration of a palace, she arranging the cultural
and social activities of the court.46 By collecting
objects, fits within collecting practices of the
Gonzaga. From the beginning, her presence in
Gonzaga’s military achievements or family origins
did. At the same time, complications in the
court over which she presided buttressed the
marchesa’s political alliances and military duties
distanced him from the court, and this vacuum
permitted his wife greater room to establish an
independent presence.

In fact, Isabella d’Este’s position in Mantua did
not adhere to the role of the Court Lady — even the
one at the centre of the court — described by
Castiglione. Nor can it be explained simply as the
readjustment of the ideal to the particular needs of
the Gonzaga. From the beginning, her presence in
the court came to be represented in terms of physical
spaces and tangible external achievements, certainly
much more so than those of her sister or even her
mother. Her dedication to the acquisition of antique
gems, cameos, medals and other precious small
objects, fits within collecting practices of the
Mantuan court, although previously only pursued
on such a scale by male members of the Gonzaga
family.49 Isabella d’Este’s original allowance proved
inadequate for such pursuits, particularly since she
was expected to contribute to the expenses of her
large household, including the dowries of the
unmarried women.50 She negotiated an additional
2000 ducats by assuming full responsibility for one
hundred or so people in her service; since she now
took charge of employing people, she reduced the
numbers, imposed a strict budget, and was able to
save about 1000 ducats with which she bought lands
that earned her 2500 ducats a year in rents.

Not long after her arrival in Mantua, the
marchesa devised an elaborate scheme to display her
growing collection in rooms devoted exclusively to
that purpose.31 While this idea was a reworking of the
humanist studiolo, this is the first known case of a
court consort arranging such a space as part of her
apartments in the palace, as well as one of the first
instances in which this kind of space was devoted to
the display of an art collection.52 Evidence suggests
that these rooms — known as the studiolo and grotta
— became a focal point of social intercourse in the
court, and served as the setting for musical entertain-
ments as well as a showpiece for important visitors.53
Isabella d’Este’s collecting activities were instru-
mental in departing from the prescribed activities of
the consort, and in inserting herself in spaces
traditionally allotted to men. Not only did she collect
on such a much larger scale than other consorts, but more
to the point she departed from the types of objects —
religious painting, decorative arts — usually patron-
ised by women in her position. In acquiring
mythological paintings and antique statuary, Isabella d’Este seems to have been quite exceptional
among Renaissance court women.

But why precisely did activities such as these place
Isabella d’Este in a position that was not only unusually visible but also highly exposed? The
ruler’s consort, obliged to forego any direct action
within the court, could distinguish herself only
through her ability to influence its male members.
Isabella d’Este herself eagerly embraced visual
imagery which cast her in the passive role of
inspirational body and, as her attitude towards her
portraits shows, she was keen to adhere to expected
courty ideals of physical feminine beauty.54 In
relation to artistic endeavours, she even adopted the
Muse as a personal insignia.55 It was commonplace
for court poets who wished to please the marchesa to
refer to her as the tenth Muse.56

Yet the role personified by the Muse (or Titian’s
idealised portrait of the marchesa (Fig. 1)) should
not be confused with the actual role of social and
cultural catalyst, which obliged women to meet
complicated and conflicting expectations. Court
women, and particularly the ruler’s consort, were on
public display, and had to please with physical
beauty, personal charm, and intellectual skills, while
simultaneously conveying all the obvious signs of a
modest character and chaste body.57 Castiglione
acknowledges that these two sets of demands —
public visibility and private chastity — were
regarded as contradictory conditions and as such
obliged women to balance and offset a number of
conflicting impressions:

beauty is more necessary to her than to the Courtier, for
truly that woman lacks much who lacks beauty. Also she
must be more circumspect, and more careful not to give
occasion for evil being said of her, and conduct herself so
that she may not only escape being sullied by guilt but
even by the suspicion of it, for a woman has not so many
ways of defending herself against false calumnies as a man has. [...] [I]n a lady who lives at court a certain
pleasing affability is becoming above all else, whereby she
will be agreeable and comely conversation suited to the
time and place and to the station of the person with
whom she speaks, joining to serene and modest manners,
and to that comeliness that ought to inform all her
actions, a quick vivacity of spirit whereby she will show herself a stranger to all boorishness; but with such a kind manner as to cause her to be thought no less chaste, prudent, and gentle than she is agreeable, witty, and discreet: thus, she must observe a certain mean (difficult to achieve and, as it were, composed of contraries) and must strictly observe certain limits and not exceed them.58

The emphasis on chastity for women is of course not unique to the courtly situation, and in fact was articulated in humanist literature in relation to bourgeois city-states where the roles of men and women were rigidly confined to the public and private spheres respectively.59 Castiglione is explicit on why it was adopted in the courtly situation:

we ourselves have set a rule that a dissolute life in us is not a vice, or fault, or disgrace, while in women it means such utter approbrium and shame that any woman of whom ill is once spoken is disgraced forever, whether what is said be calumny or not . . . [C]hastity seemed more needful for them than any other quality, in order for us to be certain of our offspring.60

But unlike a woman from the merchant class, the Court Lady had to maintain a reputation for being constant and chaste, while enacting a highly visible and articulate role in the public sphere.

The ideal prescribed by Castiglione and the working out of courtly behaviour were bound in an uneasy relationship which manifests itself in the complex process of cultural representation. Verbal eloquence as defined by the humanistic education programme was at the centre of self-presentation in the court and consequently at the centre of this dilemma.61 Essential and unqualified to the demonstration of virtue on the part of prince and courtier, verbal proficiency was regarded as being at odds with the most crucial virtue of the Court Lady, namely chastity. For women humanists, such skills led to charges of sexual deviancy or at least sexual ambiguity, and inevitably forced them to choose between a social existence or their scholarly pursuits.62 The Court Lady was expected to have well enough developed verbal skills, at least to facilitate learned courtly discussion, and court consorts are frequently praised for their appreciation of the achievements of learned men;63 but the implication is that their access to culture was virtuously innate, rather than the result of a learned mind.

Isabella d’Este departed from this norm and, like many women humanists, was successful in building a reputation for herself as someone with skills and tastes grounded in the classical tradition. Her attempts to continue her study of Latin and read original classical texts, and her efforts to participate with court poets in their demonstrations of verbal and written skills, were visible enough to receive attention inside and outside the court.64 The Renaissance readings of these activities which survive, although biased towards Isabella d’Este, address any potential charges of excessive worldliness by using tactics frequently employed in the praise of female humanists.65 Ariosto, while employed by the Este family, praised the marchesa’s learning by declaring her an exception among her sex.66 On the other hand, the celebrated Virgil scholar, Pontanus, was also working from the premise of social deviation when he praised the marchesa for her campaign to raise a statue to Virgil, Mantua’s native son, and added that she deserved all the more credit since as a woman she could not appreciate the Roman poet in the original.67

But the issue of verbal fluency, central to the ways in which classical culture became a social signifier, as well as to the Court Lady’s ability to draw subde yet clear distinctions between visibility and accessibility, is for these very reasons also pertinent to the marchesa’s patronage of mythological painting. In spite of what scholars have suggested, Isabella d’Este was not unique in using mythological painting to show off her leaning; the function of this kind of painting was to facilitate learned witty discussion, and the presence of such images in the court became — like antique gems and cameos — the focus of

Fig. 1. Titian, Portrait of Isabella d’Este c. 1534. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.
social exchange. By insisting on elaborate moralised inventions, the marchesa, rather than unwittingly revealing outdated attitudes, was attentive to the fact that established forms of learned courtly wit invariably raised serious problems for the consort’s image. This is substantiated by a much self-publicised incident in which the marchesa forbade her unmarried ladies to attend a performance of the comedy Cassano held at the Ferrarese court on account of its lascivious language.68

The recorded responses to the marchesa’s paintings, all produced within the controlled circle of the Mantuan court, reveal underlying conflicts between the chaste female ideal and the conventional associations of courtly mythology. Court poetry which addresses these paintings, and in the process attempt to be both clever and complimentary to the patron, invariably represents Isabella d’Este in ambiguous ways.69 In particular Mantegna’s Mars and Venus (Fig. 2), led to implicit suggestions that the nude Venus depicted Isabella d’Este.70 When poets claimed for the marchesa the courtly expectation of an idealised physical appearance, they were simply following convention. The nude was after all one of the interests promoted by humanist discourse and while it permitted the male patron to display his ability to make learned visual distinctions,71 erotic interests — and implications — were never far from the surface. When this kind of interest was associated with Isabella d’Este, it incited other court poets to come to the defense of the marchesa’s chastity. By the same token, the very ambiguity of mythological images enabled the marchesa to challenge the established notion that classical learning was at odds with female chastity. Ronald Lightbown has noted that in the second picture by Mantegna, Pallas expelling the Vices from the Garden of Virtue (Fig. 3), the didactic inscriptions — in Greek, Latin and Hebrew — call for Pallas, the goddess of learning and the arts, and Daphne, who represents chastity, to expel vices that threaten a life of chastity, thus explicitly associating learning with chastity.72

Perhaps a relevant parallel is provided by the painted female portrait which gave tangible form to the unattainable ideal which court women were compelled to pursue. In fact this type of configuration (Fig. 1) had the potential to shift in signification, even within the courtly context, due to the

Fig. 2. Andrea Mantegna, Pallas expelling the Vices from the Garden of Virtue, c. 1504. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux.
emergence of a type of painting in which depictions of women came to be regarded only as signifying physical beauty. In an article on Renaissance female portraiture, Elizabeth Cropper argues that identity becomes a problem for women when ‘the portrayal of a beautiful woman also came to function as a synecdoche for the beauty of painting itself’. Since physical idealisation is used to represent both the chaste court consort and an anonymous image where beauty remains, but both chastity and specific identity are removed, what has to be considered is how idealisation impinges on women of specific social rank. It would seem that female portraiture, like conventional female court patronage, served to collapse any distinctions of achievements or access to power between women in the court, and thus distinctions of rank came to be determined primarily by their relations to men.

What is remarkable about Isabella d’Este’s patronage of mythological painting, is precisely that it proved a way out of this dilemma. In other words, it gave her a highly visible position within her exclusive courtly circle, while managing to retain a precarious balance between eloquence and a respectable sexual identity. One must consider how the presence of these paintings — as well as other objects in her collection — made her chambers in the court the centre of social exchange, as well as how much of this discussion served to assert her presence rather than that of the prince. Collecting tactics such as the marchesa’s novel idea of juxtaposing mythological paintings by different artists, encouraged comparisons of artistic styles, as well as learned discussions on mythological invention. The marchesa, then, unlike women who attempted to pursue humanist studies, was able to occupy a visible place in the cultural life of the court. One obvious reward was the strengthening of her political position when, during her husband’s absences and after his death, she eagerly undertook duties as regent of Mantua. For this to be possible, her learning had to be defined in very different terms than those open to and expected from her brother and son. It should come as no surprise that Isabella
d’Este’s mythological inventions did not address the hedonistic interests favoured by Alfonso d’Este and Federico Gonzaga, but were directed to moralising allegories, and usually revolved around the theme of the battle between chastity and love in which the former invariably emerged triumphant.

But Isabella d’Este’s departures from her prescribed role are not limited to her active and externalised position in the court of Mantua. One would be underestimating the social importance of collecting if the acquisition of desirable objects, or even their power to signify and establish a hierarchy within the court, were seen as the only aims; more crucially, the process itself presented a striking opportunity to assert one’s position in the social order, particularly outside the court, and even alter it to advantage. Perhaps more than any other type of collectible object, antique statuary offered not only the pleasures of physical acquisition but also the symbolic value of this acquisition in social terms; as suggested above, the public visibility and acknowledgement of such acquisitions were particularly rewarding. In other words it took place on an international public arena, and success, even more than money, which northern despots always lacked, depended on a network of contacts, on the strength of one’s position in the social order, and one’s skills in manipulating that position.77

But a woman’s access to social rank was indirect and invariably depended on the achievements of male members of her family; any course of action, including collecting, which involved direct public competition, was an avenue that society tacitly considered closed to women. It is here that it seems appropriate to turn to the marchesa’s correspondence, which in itself is not unusual since letter-writing was a traditional means of communication for Renaissance court women. What is unusual about Isabella d’Este’s letters, and what has made them the focus of so much scholarly attention, is their incessant discourse on the patronage of the arts. In her letters Isabella d’Este claims to favour, above all other objects, antique statuary, and in its pursuit, she entered into a highly competitive male domain.78

With less money than most prominent collectors, she was able to amass a remarkable collection of antiquities. Among the rare and desirable objects the marchesa acquired were a Cupid attributed to Praxiteles, statues from Rhodes and Naxos, and fragments from the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus.79 She became the acknowledged family expert on various arts, including antique sculpture, so that both her husband, and later her son, were anxious for her approval in their own acquisitions.80

How these activities — as well as lengthy negotiations for mythological paintings — feature in Isabella d’Este’s correspondence is an indication of the way collecting served as a pretext for building and maintaining a network of contacts outside as well as inside the court.81 Her tactics are hardly out of keeping within a courtly society in which personal and state interests were not differentiated, and it was expected that personal relationships would enter into the official workings of the court.82 Isabella d’Este displays, above all, an acute awareness of her position relative to particular individuals, and assumes drastically different tones, ranging from the reverential to the disdainful. As someone who depended on others to serve her interests, she well understood that it was not simply a question of tyrannising those decidedly beneath her, but of convincing those above that it was worth having the Marchesa of Mantua beholden to them. Isabella d’Este is in fact one of the few women who emerge at this time as facilitators and dispensers of political and social patronage.83

Yet this correspondence reveals the importance of forms of mediation when Isabella d’Este was participating in the public sphere. Other Renaissance collectors relied on agents and contacts in metropolitan centres, but a male representative was particularly crucial for a woman who could not move about freely, nor to deal directly with other collectors or dealers.84 For example, Lorenzo di Pavia, who made musical instruments for Isabella d’Este and her sister, served as her agent for many years; the exchange of letters between the two shows the marchesa actively competing for desirable antique pieces while retaining the appearance of a protected courtly situation.85

Of course, much of Isabella d’Este’s correspondence is to family and friends, but these too seem preoccupied with collecting activities, particularly with the acquisition of antiquities. Apparently letter-writing was not only a means to collecting and its social rewards but, as a traditional form of communication for educated women, one of the most visible public voices open to Isabella d’Este. Collecting enabled the marchesa to define a more credible identity within a traditional female sphere. Instead of limiting discussion to issues of family, these letters show the writer to be someone with access to the most exclusive forms of culture. In other words, an interest in antiquities and mythological paintings, regarded as exclusive and prestigious in her social situation, provided the marchesa with a sure way to be taken more seriously, to be more effective in building contacts and to endow her with a successful public image.

Renaissance discussions of Isabella d’Este’s patronage of art reveal a constant tension between the ideal of the court Lady articulated by Castiglione and the marchesa’s actual ways of operating in the court. At stake was an emergent hierarchy of objects and its connection to social positioning. Apparently, it was not the possession of objects usually acquired by men that raised problems for Isabella d’Este as much as the social significations and spaces occupied by these objects. The significances and spaces associated with antiquities and mythological paintings were at odds with the ideal of the Lady of the court, but they brought with them greater opportunity to manoeuvre...
in the court hierarchy. Thus Isabella d’Este’s activities as a collector must be regarded as part of an expansion of prescribed boundaries while also presenting ways of addressing the difficulties that such departures from the norm may have posed to her public image.

In the literature of art history, however, Isabella d’Este occupies a more uncomfortable position, remaining the exception (not only among Renaissance women but also among Renaissance patrons) and all too vulnerable to periodic reassessments of her character. The virtuous nurturingwife and mother in late Victorian biographies, the champion of popular chivalric stories in iconographic readings, and the undiscerning, wilful patron in more recent revisions of iconography are not only the products of gender bias, and diminish Isabella d’Este’s contribution, but in different ways have served established patterns of Renaissance art history. In a field concerned with the construction of individual personalities, Isabella d’Este’s unusual correspondence has provided more than ample material for such interpretations. But these letters, like other forms of Isabella d’Este’s social and cultural activities, must be considered within the intricate network of options and constraints which placed court women in a difficult and problematic relation to cultural representation. Unfortunately, when female patronage in the Renaissance is left largely unexplored, her case remains too much the exception. It would seem that aspects of Isabella d’Este’s collecting activities were unusual among court women and opened up certain opportunities for her, but only a fuller account of patronage patterns will forward the question of art collecting as an enabling strategy for Renaissance women.

I am indebted to Bridget Elliott, Karin von Abrams, Maureen Lunn, and Patricia Simons for many useful discussions and suggestions.

Notes

   De la sua chiara stirpe uscira quella
d’opere illustri e di bei studii amica,
ch’io non so ben se piu saggia e pudica,
liberale e magnanima Isabella,
che del bel lume suo di e notte aprica
fara la terra che M enzo siede,
a cui la madre d’Ocno il nome diede.

J. Aslop, The Rare Art Traditions. The History of Art Collecting and its linked Phenomena wherever these have appeared (New York, 1982), is an example of how Isabella d’Este features in general discussions of Renaissance patronage: ‘Although it is now risky to be unflattering about any leading lady in the long drama of the past, I have to confess that I have never found the celebrated Marchioness of Mantua really likeable. Her humanist culture, although famous in its own day, gives the impression of having been more for show than use. She could be remarkably cold-blooded in getting what she wanted, not least in her art collecting, as will be shown. Her priorities were also just a mite odd for a serious art collector’, (p. 430). In P. Burke’s Tradition and Innovation in Renaissance Italy (London, 1974), Isabella d’Este appears among collectors whose activities were motivated by pleasure rather than external signification (see p. 108). Studies of Isabella d’Este which criticise her collecting choices in terms of a female personality include: A. Martindale, ‘The Patronage of Isabella d’Este at Mantua’, Apollo, LXXIX, 1964, pp. 183–91; J. M. Fletcher, ‘Isabella d’Este, Patron and Collector’ in Splendours of the Gonzaga, D. S. Chambers and J. Martineau (eds.) (London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1981), pp. 51–63; C. Hope, ‘Artists, Patrons, and Advisers in the Italian Renaissance’, in Patronage in the Renaissance, G. F. Lytle and S. Orgel (eds.) (Princeton, 1981), pp. 293–343. S. Kolsky, ‘Images of Isabella d’Este’, Italian Studies, XXXIX, 1984, pp. 47–62, argues that recent critiques of Isabella d’Este are attempts to revise the nineteenth-century bias towards this patron, and that these attempts have been thwarted by ‘old prejudices’ and a recent trend to turn her into a protofeminist. Kolsky ignores the misogynist tendencies of the art historical literature and does not question the process of reconstructing a personality itself.


3. Male patrons are also discussed in terms of personality but, as I will show, the implications for female patrons are more problematic.


7. J. Cartwright’s Beatrice d’Este, Duchess of Milan (London, 1903), is another example of a Renaissance female patron who is represented as a virtuous, nurturing mother and wife.

8. On the content of the 1542 inventory, see Brown, pp. 155–171.


14. Ibid., p. 50. Matteo Maria Boiardo wrote Orlando Innamorato (published in 1495), a chivalric romance in the vernacular, while in the service of the Este family in Ferrara; Ludovico Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso was intended in part to complete Boiardo’s poem left unfinished at his death in 1494.


17. Ibid., p. 310.

18. Verheyen contrasts Isabella and her son: ‘Both Isabella d’Este and her son Federigo II Gonzaga commissioned paintings in which love affairs of the gods were illustrated. In both cases the literary source was the same, namely Ovid’s account of the adventures of the gods, especially Zeus, as woven into Arachne’s tapestry. Nevertheless, the two representations have entirely different meanings, and this divergence
can only be explained by the basic difference in the personalities of Isabella and Federigo (p. 5).

19. This conclusion is also reached by Alsop, pp. 436–9.


22. Isabella d’Este complained about the nude Venus in a letter to Agostino Strozzi. Abbot of Fiesole, who was acting on her behalf in Florence; her worry was that ‘by altering one figure he will pervet the whole sentiment of the fable’; see Chambers pp. 140–1.

23. See for example Isabella d’Este’s letter to Michele Vianello, Chamber, p. 127.

24. For two examples, see Gombrich, no. 8 above and Alsop, no. 1 above.


29. Men’s first duty was to serve as military leaders; see B. Castiglione, The Book of the Courtier, I, viii, (trans) C. S. Singleton (Garden City, N.Y. 1959), pp. 32–4. See also Kelly, p. 33.


31. The Duke of Milan, for instance, negotiated for Isabella d’Este, but eventually accepted her sister Beatrice since she was promised to the Gonfalonier heir.

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35. W. L. Gundersheimer, ‘Women, Learning and Power: Eleonora of Aragon and the Court of Ferrara’, in Beyond their Sex (n. 35 above), pp. 87–94; an example of city celebrations is the lavish procession proclaiming Francesco Gonzaga’s victory as commander of the League army over the French at the Taro valley July 6th, 1494; Cartwright, Isabella d’Este, pp. 126–7.


42. On the humanist school at Mantua, see Woodward, pp. 24–92.


45. King, p. 69.

46. Isabella d’Este’s income is discussed in a 1502 letter to her father; for the full text see Cartwright, p. 226.


50. In the 1502 letter to her father, Isabella d’Este explains the sources of this income: toll from various mills, excise duties and duties on lands of Leopoldaliano; in addition to her allowance she was given some houses by her husband but she complaints that their expenses suceede her income; Cartwright, p. 226.

51. On the gootta, see Brown, no. 8 above, and the second part of this article, Gazette des Beaux-Arts, XCIII, 1978, pp. 72–82.


53. On musical performances in these rooms, see Fenlon, pp. 87–8. Visits by political envoys are discussed by Kolsky, p. 54.

54. Discussions of Isabella d’Este’s portraits, particularly Titian’s 1516 portrait (Fig. 1), tend to focus on the Marchesa’s vanity; see Fletcher, p. 56.

55. This is a recurring theme in the studiolo where the muses appear on the relief on the doors, as well as in Mantega’s Mars and Venus and in Costa’s Coronation of a Lady in which apparently the marchesa is shown as the facilitator of the arts; see Verheyen, pp. 44–6. On Isabella’s adoption of the Muse as her personal insignia see Fletcher, p. 51; R. Lightbown, Mantega (Berkeley, 1986), pp. 197–200.

56. A. Luzio, I picciotti d’Isabella d’Este, Ancona 1887, p. 25; quoted by Fletcher, p. 51.


59. Kelly, pp. 36–47.

60. Castiglione, p. 189.


64. Kolsky, pp. 59–60.

65. See for example Poliziano’s correspondence with Cassandra Fedele, Grafton and Jardine, pp. 45–57.

66. Ariosto, p. 373.


69. On responses to Mantega’s Mars and Venus, see Lightbown, pp. 200–3.
70. See example mentioned by Elam, Splendours of the Gonzaga, p. 24, of Battista Fiera’s comparison between Isabella and Venus.


74. Cropper considers Titian’s portrait of Isabella d’Este in relation to Parmagianino’s Antea to illustrate the problem of identity. Titian also produced a number of eroticised representations of anonymous women; see C. Cagli and F. Valcanover, L’Opera completa di Tiziano (Milan, 1969), cat. ns. 178, 179, 374, 383, 386.

75. This tactic is discussed in a number of Isabella d’Este’s letters; see Chambers, pp. 130, 134.

76. Kolsky, pp. 55–7; Fletcher, p. 51.


79. Fletcher, p. 53; Martindale, pp. 188–9; Brown and Lorenzoni, pp. 76–7.

80. Fletcher, p. 61.

81. Letters, which were also used by women humanists to establish professional contacts, became an accepted means of building up social contacts; see Grafton and Jardine, p. 52. On networks based on obligation in Italian city states, see F. W. Kent and P. Simons, ‘Renaissance Patronage: An Introductory Essay’, in Patronage, Art and Society (n. 77 above), pp. 1–21.


84. On the importance of agents and representatives, see Ibid., p. 19.