



A CLOSE  
LOOK AT THE *STUDIOLO* OF  
ISABELLA  
D'ESTE

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**S**tudioli and cabinets of curiosity were very popular for the powerful and affluent of the Renaissance who desired to showcase collections of rare and unusual objects. These studioli were intimate places for private contemplation that also served to exhibit inner worthiness and refined taste, and they have long been regarded as one of the greatest inventions of the Renaissance.<sup>1</sup> The conventions of display at work in these studioli originated from the display of holy relics in churches. Studioli, however, would include objects that were clearly less divine in nature, including rare and often valuable curios, precious gems, ostrich eggs and even crocodiles.<sup>2</sup> The shift in these types of collections from religious institutes to the domestic sphere is indicative of studioli being the domain of the influential, the powerful and the wealthy of the time.

A studiolo was intended and designed as a secular space devoted primarily to scholarly and humanistic activities such as reading and contemplation. These activities also expanded their purpose to serve as a bridge between the secular and the sacred, since they shared parallels with the cells of the scriptoria used by monks when they created illuminated manuscripts. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, a Renaissance philosopher and humanist, stated: “[T]hrough study

and contemplation, a scholar might find union with God.<sup>3</sup> In 1434, Leon Battista Alberti described the studiolo as: “[A] sanctum sanctorium that only the head of the household [can] enter.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the owner of a studiolo becomes a creator who shapes an external effigy of themselves through an array of meticulously chosen objects they collect and acquire. These objects were, to be handled delicately, meditated upon and thought of in a very intimate way as they mirrored the owner’s perceived virtue and worth, which signaled a secret membership into a class of knowledgeable collectors and scholars.<sup>5</sup>

Studioli were predominantly associated with male ownership at the height of their popularity. The patriarch was generally the one to choose which objects would be part of the collection. Also, it was usually the patriarch’s task to control the household’s money. It was commonplace for men of great influence to have such a space to act as a sanctuary from the harsh realities of Renaissance life (war, death, plague, etc.). A studiolo curated by a woman would not have been regarded in the same way, since during the quattrocento, it was expected that a woman spend almost her entire life within the domestic sphere. Female activity within the household was seldom looked upon with reverence or appreciation. Women were not considered to possess a desire to better themselves through meditation and they would rarely - if ever - be encouraged to pursue the same scholarly interests as their male counterparts.<sup>6</sup> Feminine engagement in any intellectual or leisure activity would be dismissed as a mere pastime and viewed flippantly when compared to a man following identical pursuits.<sup>7</sup> In his *De Mulieribus* from 1505, Mario Equiola, Isabella d’Este’s secretary, reiterated the words of Xenophon and Giovanni Boccaccio, writing: “[A] woman is confined within the home where she withers away through ocium (leisure), nor is she allowed anything more to occupy her mind than a needle and thread.”<sup>8</sup> Isabella d’Este, was the exception to this norm. Her life was unique in that she exhibited an intense need to interact with the social world around her. Despite the fact that she never had enough money for her liking, and little or no knowledge of Greek and Latin, she constructed her own image through her love of arts and literature.<sup>9</sup> Isabella also had a vast network of contacts,

which included the many influential members of her own family.<sup>10</sup> Isabella d’Este was born in 1474 to Ercole d’Este, the Duke of Ferrara, and Elenora of Aragon, the daughter of King Ferdinand I of Naples, in the city of Ferrara. Isabella d’Este’s siblings were likewise noteworthy. Beatrice, Isabella’s sister, was married to Ludovico il Moro the Duke of Milan until 1499. Alfonso, one of Isabella’s brothers, was the heir to the Duchy of Milan; another brother, Ippolito, eventually became one of the richest cardinals in the curia. At the age of sixteen, Isabella married Francesco Gonzaga, the Duke of Mantua, on February 11, 1490. At seventeen, Isabella moved from Ferrara to the Castillo San Giorgio in Mantua to be with her husband who was a captain of war. While her husband appreciated art and literature, he was much more interested in dogs, arms and horses.<sup>11</sup> Together they had eight children, including a son named Federico, who would succeed his father Francesco as the Duke of Mantua after his death in 1519. It was in this castle that Isabella would build her very own studiolo, whose legend and fame has stood the test of time whereas many of its counterparts have faded into obscurity.

Isabella, who retained a remarkable network of connections even after her marriage, was described by her husband Francesco Gonzaga as “a woman with her own opinion.”<sup>12</sup> Isabella was not the type of woman to stay home and occupy her time with idle chores; she desired to create a positive reputation for herself in the realm of arts and literature. Her ultimate goal was a much-coveted position in the intricate world of the Italian courts.<sup>13</sup> Her self-given role was a public one, albeit one that was often highly scrutinized. Due to the hegemonic gender roles that were in place during her lifetime, the people that adhered to these norms were highly disapproving of her desire to be part of the sphere of male privilege.<sup>14</sup> Isabella was known for her pioneering fashion sense and she was often a trendsetter within the fashion and art world. She was even fortunate enough to be able to sit and to be painted by the most famous artists of the day, including Titian and Leonardo da Vinci. The latter painted two portraits of the Marchesa while traveling through Mantua, one of which hangs in the Louvre today.<sup>15</sup> There is also archival evidence that Isabella cultivated relationships with some of the great literary

figures of her time, including Pietro Bembo, Castiglione, Matteo Bandello, Mario Equicola, and Paolo Giovio. Ludovico Ariosto even paid tribute to her in his saga entitled *Orlando Furioso*.<sup>16</sup> However, she did possess an uncompromising side as well: Isabella wanted her laborers to work quickly and even threatened them with time in the dungeon if she felt that they were not working fast enough.<sup>17</sup>

Her castle was conceived of as a square-planned structure with four towers at every corner, as well as three doors and drawbridges.<sup>18</sup> Luca Fancelli, an Italian sculptor and architect, built a stunning Renaissance portico surrounding the castle on two sides after it became part of the Palazzo Ducale and acquired a non-defensive purposes. After her move to the Castillo San Giorgio, Isabella inhabited her own apartment, which was not very far from the camera degli sposi (bridal chamber). The camera degli sposi was located in the corner of the northeast tower known as the camera picta interamante (completely painted room).<sup>19</sup> In her quarters were a series of smaller rooms as well as two camere (chambers). The smaller rooms contained an oratory, a library, and the room that was her pride and joy—her studiolo.<sup>20</sup> The suite that belonged to Isabella included a camera delle Armi (reception space), which opened up onto a chapel, a bedroom, a library, and a camerino de bagno. The first time that any work was recorded regarding the construction of the studiolo was in the summer of 1491, shortly after Isabella had moved to be there with her husband. It was at this time that a room on the second floor of the Saint Nicholas tower, adjacent to Isabella's apartments, was being prepared to eventually become her studiolo.<sup>21</sup>

It was after she visited her father's court at Belfiore in 1495 that Isabella passionately pursued the renovations to her small studiolo, which would take ten years to complete. In true Renaissance style, Isabella's studiolo was a symbol of her status and showed that she was able to acquire all manners of luxurious goods. It was also a space where she wrote her numerous correspondences, many of which have given historians a clear glimpse into the personality and mind of the Marchesa. Despite the fact that the studiolo was lavishly decorated, it still retained much of the monastic cell-like quality of

earlier studioli due to its diminutive size. The studiolo could host no more than Isabella herself and perhaps three additional guests. The space measured 3.65 meters in height - although it was 5.05 meters across the vaulted ceiling - 2.73 meters wide, and 6.98 meters long. This meant that there were not a lot of options for seating arrangements; many of the guests would either have to sit on upright benches or wooden chairs. However, there was a beautiful panoramic view of the Mantuan lakes that could be seen from the window.<sup>22</sup>

Isabella greatly desired to convey a sense of the push and pull of virtue and vice on her walls, which was a fitting theme for a female collector walking the line between what she wanted and what was expected of her as a woman. The iconography of the works that Isabella added to her studiolo were precisely chosen and were very well researched from texts written by Boccaccio, Petrarch, Ovid and Philostratus.<sup>23</sup> Each figure, in every commissioned work, was carefully chosen in order to represent the character and the meaning Isabella had intended. The narrative found in each image was meant to be read in a particular order.<sup>24</sup> One set of paintings by Andrea Mantegna, *Mars and Venus* (fig. 1) and *Minerva* (fig. 2), both created around 1497, are noteworthy. We can see that the light in the *Mars and Venus* painting comes from the left and that the light in the *Minerva* painting comes from the right. As such, we can speculate that Mantegna had a good idea of where the pieces were to be placed within the studiolo and painted them accordingly. They were eventually placed opposite to each other within the studiolo and were considered as one unit through a spiritual connection. It is only when both paintings are placed together that their true meaning becomes clear: the pair represents the struggle between vice and virtue, moral and immoral: Both paintings are filled with pagan themes with pagan characters such as muses, anthropomorphized vices, gods and goddesses, satyrs and centaurs who play out an epic scene. These moralizing metaphors were usually depicted around the battle between chastity (virtue) and love (vice), with chastity always emerging as triumphant.<sup>25</sup>

Isabella, in the guise of Venus, is the central figure in the allegory

of both paintings. This Isabella/Venus figure is portrayed wearing the same jewelry in both paintings. In *Minerva*, she is seen as the source of the vices and in *Mars and Venus*, she is the ruler of the spiritual empire.<sup>26</sup> In *Mars and Venus*, it is Isabella that was used to create the likeness of the nude Venus, Roman goddess of love and beauty. Experiencing the nude was one of the male privileges of the Renaissance, something that very few women were allowed to see because of issues of propriety and respectability. The fact that the patron chose to have herself depicted as the nude figure in all her erotic splendor meant that the court poets had to frequently defend her chastity and fidelity to her husband.<sup>27</sup> Just the very act of having these paintings in her collection made Isabella the center of attention and discussion, whereas her husband, who is not depicted in the paintings at all, is relegated to obscurity.<sup>28</sup> This theme of virtue and morality also plays out on the door that is inlaid with coloured marble, carved by Giovanni Crisoforo Romano at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

There were many carefully selected items that gave Isabella much distinction, including two sculptures depicting sleeping cupids that her husband first told her about in May 1496. The first sculpture was previously owned by a Roman patron whose family originally hailed from Mantua.<sup>29</sup> Isabella quickly took up the responsibility of complex dialogue in order to purchase the piece. These negotiations did not conclude until February 1506, when the *Sleeping Cupid* attributed to Praxiteles was finally sent to Mantua.<sup>30</sup> Negotiations for a second sleeping cupid began around the same time. The sculpture was originally touted as being from antiquity, but was later revealed to be a contemporary piece by a young, not-yet-known artist named Michelangelo. Once Isabella learned of the deceit, she halted negotiations for the Michelangelo cupid, because she did not feel it was worth the two hundred scundi that the owners were asking for. Ultimately, however, Isabella could not forget the beauty of the cupid and wished to restart the process to purchase the piece, but it had already been sold to someone else in the early sixteenth century. In 1502, the Marchesa received the same Michelangelo cupid as a gift from Cesare Borgia, the brother of her husband's mistress Lucrezia.<sup>31</sup> There are also four tondi, or

circular artworks, where figures have been carved in relief within the studiolo. The true identity of the figures depicted in these tondi are still a matter of debate, but it is speculated that they represent Minerva, who is portrayed as a female military figure; the Muse Clio; and Fortune, as a semi-nude figure with two books and a skull - there was also the Muses Euterpe and Erato, each demonstrating several attributes. But the myths and fables that decorate the studiolo are not simply quotations; they are in place to pay homage to the ancients who drew upon these stories in their own traditions. This is why figures of origin are a recurrence within the imagery of the studiolo. Some figures include Helicon, Apollo, Cadmus, and Sappho, just to name a few. These figures of origin were also added to honour musicians, and poets who were part of the oral tradition and so were instrumental in creating the poetic fable.<sup>32</sup>

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Isabella found that her studiolo could not accommodate the number of objects that she had acquired and decided to create a grotta situated directly underneath the studiolo. This grotta was decorated by brothers Antonio and Paolo Mola in 1505. They created intarsia panels that were used as walls and the ceiling was made out of wood with carved emblems of Isabella d'Este, so that no one would mistake to whom this extension belonged.<sup>33</sup> In this new space, Isabella juxtaposed ancient art with modern art, creating an interesting dichotomy of styles. When Isabella first arrived in Mantua, she collected mostly carved gemstones and cameos, but starting in 1496, she decided to devote her time to collecting a wider selection of antiquary objects such as bronzes and marble statuary.<sup>34</sup> In 1506, Isabella wrote one of her chief advisors on the antiquities trade, Gian Cristoforo Ramano, saying:

*I believe you have heard that we obtained the agate vase belonging to Vianello along with a painting by Jan van Eyck of the Drowning Pharaoh. We will have the Faustina of Mantegna, and thus little by little we are putting together a study. You must remain ever alert to see if fine and ancient bronze medals can be obtained, or some other excellent thing, and notify us of their price and their quality.*<sup>35</sup>

Isabella was no fool when it came to acquiring fine objects: she knew what she wanted, but correspondences like these earned her an erroneous reputation of being greedy, tyrannical and undiscerning, even though her art patronage was unparalleled for anyone, especially a woman.<sup>36</sup>

In 1591, Isabella's husband Francesco Gonzaga died of what is speculated to be syphilis that he would have contracted from one of his many indiscretions. During the next three years, the studiolo would be moved from its original home in the Castillo San Giorgio to the part of the palace complex called the Corte Vecchia in order to accommodate Isabella's son Federico, who wanted to have the castillo for his own. These new quarters also had a grotto with a lavish decoration, surpassing the original space occupied by Isabella.



There was also a large vestibule that was decorated with grotesques by Leonbruno. Mantegna created a false oculus where his Mars & Venus looked down upon visitors. This false oculus paid homage to the original Camera Picta.<sup>37</sup> This is where her studiolo would stay until her death in 1539. An inventory of Isabella's studiolo and grotto in the years shortly after her death, recorded by Odordo Stivini, revealed that she was in possession of numerous cameos, statuettes and reliefs that were strongly pagan themed. This collection included small bronzes of Cupid, the two Sleeping Cupids, Apollo, Neptune, satyrs, Laocoön, Hercules, Mars, and Mercury. It also included sculptures made of marble of Venus, Leda, Silenus, and Pan, as well as reliefs of Pluto and Persephone.<sup>38</sup>

As art historian Rose Marie San Juan writes:

*"It was Isabella's dream to make the studiolo a place of retreat from the outside 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."<sup>39</sup>*

It was Isabella's ambition and her burning desire to be at the center of attention that drove her interests in creating a studiolo, a place usually reserved for the male and male-dominated interests, and it was this ambition that earned her an important place in history. Perhaps she was a little rough around the edges when it came to getting things that she desired, but one could hardly blame her. Being a woman in a traditionally male-dominated space, she had to assert herself as well as her trendsetting love for art in any way that she could. Isabella did not want to be just another woman who spent her life in the domestic sphere; she strongly desired to stand out from the rest, on her terms and in her own unique way. Today the pictorial cycle from the studiolo is now on display in its entirety in the Louvre, along with her portrait painted by Leonardo da Vinci. From this prominent placement in a museum of great renown, it is clear that she was successful in her pursuit to join the ranks of the greatest art patrons in history.<sup>40</sup>



## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Marta Ajmar-Wollheim et al., eds., “Sacred to Secular, East to West: The Renaissance Study and Strategies of Display,” in *Approaching the Italian Renaissance Interior: Sources, Methodologies, Debates*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 18.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.
- <sup>6</sup> Stephen Campbell, *Cabinet of Eros: Renaissance Mythological Painting and the Studiolo of Isabella d’Este*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004), 59.
- <sup>7</sup> Ajmar-Wollheim et al., 18.
- <sup>8</sup> Campbell, 60.
- <sup>9</sup> Barbara Furlotti and Guido Rebecchini, “Isabella d’Este and the Culture of the Studiolo,” trans. A. Lawrence Jenkins, *The Art of Mantua: Power and Patronage in the Renaissance*, (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2008), 92.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> Campbell, 61.
- <sup>15</sup> Furlotti and Rebecchini, 92.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> Campbell, 61.
- <sup>18</sup> “Castello San Giorgio, Mantova,” accessed November 11, 2013. <http://www.lifeinitaly.com/tourism/lombardy/castel-san-georgio>.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> Furlotti and Rebecchini, 95.
- <sup>21</sup> Campbell, 61.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> Furlotti and Rebecchini, 99.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> Rose Marie San Juan, “The Court Lady’s Dilemma: Isabella D’Este and Art Collecting in the Renaissance,” *Oxford Art*

*Journal* 14, no. 1 (1991): 75.

- <sup>26</sup> Egon Verheyen, *The Paintings in the Studiolo of Isabella D’Este at Mantua* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), 37.
- <sup>27</sup> San Juan, 73.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.
- <sup>29</sup> Furlotti and Rebecchini, 104.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 104. This ceiling still survives to this day.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> Campbell, 64.
- <sup>36</sup> San Juan, 67.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.
- <sup>38</sup> Furlotti and Rebecchini, 91
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

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