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*The Patronage of Isabella d'Este:*  
An Examination of Isabella d'Este's Motivations as a Patroness in Renaissance Italy

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The patronage system gave birth to some of the greatest artistic masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance. The role of the patron was not just a position held by men but by women as well. One woman in particular stands out from her peers: Isabella d'Este. Known as the "Marchioness of Mantua", Isabella was able to commission works by new and emerging artists of the time. These artists are now immortalized as some of the finest in history.

In an attempt to understand why the wealthy families of Renaissance Italy spent exorbitant sums of money to have these works produced, scholars such as Howard M. Brown have considered two primary motivations for patronage: *mecenatismo* and *clientelismo*. *Mecenatismo* refers to works that are patronized out of a love for the art itself or the artist's work. *Clientelismo* refers to works that are commissioned not so much for the enjoyment of the art, but for the social and political status of having it.<sup>1</sup> At the time, commissioning works of art was a primary way in which aristocratic individuals could showcase their wealth to others. In order to understand Isabella's motivations for her patronage, it is necessary that the works she patronized be examined. This investigation will look at her *grotta* and selected works of literature and music patronized by Isabella d'Este to understand how both a personal fascination with the arts and the socio-political culture of her court shaped her patronage.

Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua, was a pivotal figure within the Italian Renaissance. While she was neither the wealthiest nor most powerful amongst the aristocracy, her influence was widely respected, as she tended a metaphorical gateway to the artistic audience.<sup>2</sup> A marriage with Francesco Gonzaga sealed her place at this gathering of Italian artists, thinkers, and musicians. She moved with her husband from Ferrara to Mantua in 1490 at just seventeen years old. Her living situation was small, yet sophisticated. Francesco had a personal apartment within the compound of Castello di san Giorgio. The rooms included were two living *camere*, an oratory, a library, and her prized *studiolo*, affectionately named her *grotta*.

The epicenter of Isabella d'Este's art collection was her *grotta*. It held her personal library and her extensive art collection. It evolved out of the common *studiolo* culture during the Italian Renaissance.<sup>3</sup> These *studioli* were private spaces where aristocratic families showcased their library, art collection, and other antiquities.<sup>4</sup> In their original use, these spaces were intended to be private, and accessible only to members of the family. They

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Mayer Brown, "Round Table IX: Local Traditions of Musical Patronage, 1500-1700," *Acta Musicologica* 67, no. 1 (1991): 29.

<sup>2</sup> Guido Rebecchini, "The Art Of Mantua", J. Paul Getty Publishing, 2008: 92.

<sup>3</sup> S.Kolsky, "An Unnoticed Description of Isabella d'Este's Grotta." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 52 (1989): 232-35.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen J. Campbell, "Giorgione's Tempest," *Studiolo Culture, and the Renaissance Lucretius*, *Renaissance Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (2003): 299-300.

functioned as outward representations of the homeowners' artistic tastes, but were not intended to be shared with visitors or members of other families.<sup>5</sup> In their earliest function, Isabella's *studiolo* and the artwork she curated are an example of *mecenatismo*, because they were not intended for public display; they were kept because Isabella valued the art, and not the status it afforded her.

Throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, these *studioli* gradually became more public venues, where many families and individuals would meet and entertain guests. With this development, the *studioli* became less about housing an owner's personal art collection, and more about providing an opportunity for owners to showcase their wealth and class for others to see.<sup>6</sup> In particular, the books a nobleman had in these later *studioli* served primarily to broadcast one's learnedness. This created a shift from *mecenatismo* to *clientelismo*, since these works of art were prized more for their prestige than their artistic value.

Although Isabella d'Este's *studiolo*, which she called her *grotto*, existed during an age when *studioli* were more similar to public exhibition spaces than personal studies, Isabella defied the culture at the time and kept her *grotto* almost exclusively private. Julia Cartwright notes that rather than a means to flaunt her wealth, "It was Isabella's dream to make this *grotto* 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."<sup>7</sup> Because her *grotto* functioned like the earlier *studioli* in that it was a private chamber, the books, artworks, and other antiquities that Isabella commissioned and collected are examples of *mecenatismo*. In fact, Isabella exercised complete control over the works she had commissioned for her *grotto*, further reinforcing the idea that the art in her *grotto* was only intended for her. Isabella frequently gave the artists she sponsored specific directions for what scenes to depict and what colors to use.<sup>8</sup> These directions were often based on the other works in her collection. Isabella wanted works that would have similar colors and themes with her pre-existing pieces. The result is that Isabella created for herself a unified and aesthetically pleasing space based on her own tastes, and not the tastes of others.

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen J. Campbell, "Giorgione's Tempest," *Studiolo Culture, and the Renaissance Lucretius*, *Renaissance Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (2003): 302.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</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): 67.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

Isabella was viewed as an embarrassment to her husband because of her independent thinking and stubborn decision-making process. In today's society, bold individuals are admired; however, it was culturally frowned upon in the Italian Renaissance for a woman to lead her life this way. Her family often viewed her as reckless. Isabella was a self-proclaimed trend-setter and was often imitated in fashion and patronage styles. She often started rivalries between other members of the upper-class in Mantua. One of these competitors included Lucrezia Borgia.<sup>9</sup> Isabella was an avid musician and music enthusiast who commissioned both new pieces of music and new instruments on which to play them. One of the most notable instrument makers of the time was Lorenzo da Pavia. At Isabella's request, he built multiple keyboard instruments for her, including a clavichord and a positive organ.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the keyboard instruments commissioned from da Pavia, Isabella was also a frequent commissioner of stringed instruments. The patronization of these stringed and keyboard instruments arose out of Isabella's love of music and a friendly competition she had with Lucrezia Borgia.

After visiting Lucrezia at Ferrara, Isabella was exposed to the vast collection of instruments at Lucrezia's estate, and upon returning to Mantua, commissioned numerous stringed instruments from Lorenzo da Pavia. Correspondence between Lucrezia and Isabella suggests that a friendly rivalry arose between the two, and each began to learn to play the viol and lute, both motivated to learn by a desire to be the better instrumentalist than the other.<sup>11</sup> Not only did this relationship inspire musical training, but it also led to the patronization of works from musical artists such as Marchetto Cara. The commissioning of these string instruments is an example of *clientelismo*. Although Isabella enjoyed music, it was her passion to compete with Lucrezia and this competition prompted her to purchase instruments from da Pavia.

This rivalry between Isabella and Lucrezia also inspired other members of both families to commission and learn to play stringed instruments, particularly instruments described as viols (although to which specific instrument in the viol family the letters refer is unknown). Don Alfonso of Ferrara was directly influenced by both Lucrezia and Isabella, and subsequently commissioned multiple viols and lutes from da Pavia.<sup>12</sup> Although a lover of music, it was

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<sup>9</sup> William F. Prizer, "Isabella d'Este and Lucrezia Borgia as Patrons of Music: The Frottola at Mantua and Ferrara." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 38, no. 1 (1985): 14.

<sup>10</sup> William F. Prizer, "Isabella D'Este and Lorenzo Da Pavia, 'Master Instrument Maker'." *Early Music History* 2 (1982): 95.

<sup>11</sup> William F. Prizer, "Isabella D'Este and Lucrezia Borgia as Patrons of Music: The Frottola at Mantua and Ferrara." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 38, no. 1 (1985): 4.

<sup>12</sup> William F. Prizer. "Isabella D'Este and Lorenzo Da Pavia, 'Master Instrument Maker'." *Early Music History* 2 (1982): 97.

ultimately social pressures that led to the commission of many new musical instruments, marking this as an example of *clientelismo*.

Though Isabella's patronage was significant, it was still limited. Particularly limited in scope was her patronage of music, not only due to the restrictions against women in Italian Renaissance society, but also because Isabella was uninterested in any music that she could not perform herself.<sup>13</sup> In her court, there was no evidence of wind players or a chapel for the performance of sacred music. In order to have music she could play, Isabella commissioned new music to play on the instruments that da Pavia had built for her. Of particular interest to Isabella were frottole, secular songs sung in Italian with instrumental accompaniment. Isabella d'Este frequently patronized Marchetto Cara and Bartolomeo Tromboncino, two of the most popular frottolist composers in Mantua, to write new frottole for her.<sup>14</sup> The frottole written by Tromboncino for Isabella are characterized by their use of Petrarchan verse.<sup>15</sup>

Isabella's emphasis on frottole as opposed to other popular genres at the time, like the chanson, likely stems from the fact that she intended to play these new compositions herself. Frottole could be performed by a single person singing and playing the lute simultaneously. This suggests that her interest in frottole stemmed from her desire to engage with the music directly, performing music that she could play herself.<sup>16</sup> This marks her frequent commissioning of frottole as *mecenatismo*.

Although her patronage of music was limited, her patronage of new literary works was far more varied. Isabella d'Este was also a patron of new literary works. Perhaps the most notable work of commissioned literature was the epic poem *Orlando Furioso*, written by Ludovico Ariosto. At the time it was written, Ariosto was employed by the nobility at the court of Ferrara. Throughout *Orlando Furioso* are flattering references to Isabella, indicating that perhaps Ariosto was using Isabella as a threshold patron, and was looking to secure a more permanent position with the more influential men of the Este family at Mantua, as writing works in praise of future patrons was a common way to secure future support from patrons.

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<sup>13</sup> William F. Prizer. "Music in Ferrara and Mantua at the time of Dosso Dossi: Interrelations and Influences." *Dosso's Fate: Painting and Court Culture in Renaissance Italy*: 294.

<sup>14</sup> Claudio Gallico, "Gonzaga," Grove Music Online, Oxford University Press, January 20, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> William F. Prizer. "Isabella D'Este and Lucrezia Borgia as Patrons of Music: The Frottola at Mantua and Ferrara." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 38, no. 1 (1985): 16.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

Isabella first encountered Ariosto when he visited the Court of Mantua in 1507. She decided to support him after he read for her some fragments of *Orlando Furioso*. Subsequent correspondences between Isabella and Ariosto suggest that Isabella took an active role in supporting Ariosto's writing of *Orlando Furioso*, despite the fact that he was employed by the court of Ferrara. These same correspondences also suggest that Isabella intended for *Orlando Furioso* to be a part of her private collection of literary works, especially because her involvement with Ludovico Ariosto was concealed from the Ferrara family with whom Ariosto was employed.<sup>17</sup> This suggests that her commissioning of this work was an example of *mecenatismo*, since Isabella's involvement with its production was meant to be kept secret.

Although the evidence suggests that this was an example of *mecenatismo*, at the time, Isabella's involvement with the commissioning of *Orlando Furioso* was much more political. In 1516, as Ludovico Ariosto was writing the epic poem, scholars in the Mantuan court were debating the use of Latin in literary works rather than the courtly vernacular of Tuscan, due to Isabella's lack of proficiency in reading and speaking Latin.<sup>18</sup> The political implications of this commission were likely not foreseen by Isabella. Like many female patrons in her day, Isabella was vulnerable because she was a woman. During the Italian Renaissance, it was commonly believed that if patrons are to be famous they must reward poets, and if poets are to be rewarded, they must praise patrons.<sup>19</sup> She only wanted to commission a new literary work to keep her good standing in society, yet this commission was interpreted by other members of the Mantuan court as her making a social statement as well. Because of her vulnerability, Isabella's act of *mecenatismo* was viewed by members of her court as *clientelismo*. The relationship between Isabella and Ariosto illustrates the manipulation of women in the hierarchy of the Renaissance age of patronage.

Isabella d'Este's involvement with Ariosto also sheds light on the role of female patrons and how they were viewed by the artists they supported. At the time, female patrons were frequently used as threshold patrons. Their artists would seek out work with them, while trying to secure positions with other more influential family members, most of whom were male. For example, Isabella's court Humanist, Marco Equicola, received multiple commissions

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<sup>17</sup> Lisa K Regan, "Ariosto's Threshold Patron: Isabella D'Este in the 'Orlando Furioso.'" *MLN* 120, no. 1 (January 2005): 52.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

from Isabella before taking a position with her son, Federico Gonzaga. It is possible that Ariosto was using Isabella as a threshold patron in order to secure a position with her husband or another male member of her court.<sup>20</sup>

This idea is further supported by Ariosto's use of flowery language to complement Isabella throughout *Orlando Furioso*.<sup>21</sup> Though it is possibly a result of the pair's amicable relationship, Isabella makes a total of three appearances in the epic poem; however, it is more likely that Ariosto was using the literary work as an opportunity for advancement. Due to her position in society as a woman, Isabella was always vulnerable, and the rigid expectations held for her behavior put her in constant need of praise.<sup>22</sup> It is not known whether Ariosto partnered with Isabella just to write *Orlando Furioso* or whether he used her to help further his loftier employment goals. It is more likely that Isabella believed that she was helping commission a new work for her library because of the pair's friendship.

In addition to new literary works, Isabella also commissioned the translation of classical texts. As a surprisingly well-educated woman for her time, Isabella d'Este commissioned the translation of Greco-Roman works into her native Tuscan dialect. One notable translation was a book of explanations and descriptions of artwork by two Grecian thinkers, both called Philostratus. Organized by her court Humanist Marco Equicola, Isabella requested that this new translation be completed in the Tuscan dialect. At the time, a Latin translation had long been available. In 1521, Stefano Nigri translated the work into Latin and this manuscript was readily available; however, Isabella lacked proficiency in Latin.<sup>23</sup> Her desire to have the work translated into her own vernacular suggests that she wanted this translation done so that it could read herself. This indicates that the motivation behind this commission was of *mecenatismo*, as she most likely wanted to read the work by the Grecian thinkers.<sup>24</sup>

Throughout much of the Renaissance, female patrons played a pivotal role in the production of new art across numerous genres and mediums. Isabella d'Este enjoyed a long and fruitful career as a patron and helped artists, both new and established, to create new works. Her motivations for doing so are just as varied as the works she commissioned. At times, she sought out new works she wanted for herself. Other times, she commissioned new works because of social and cultural forces in her court. Regardless of her motivations for doing so, many of the

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<sup>20</sup> Lisa K Regan, "Ariosto's Threshold Patron: Isabella D'Este in the 'Orlando Furioso.'" *MLN* 120, no. 1 (January 2005): 59-60.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Koortbojian and Ruth Webb, "Isabella d'Este's Philostratos," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 56 (1993): 260.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.



works she commissioned live on today, providing modern audiences with an opportunity to understand and value not just the works of art themselves, but also the culture in which they were originally commissioned, conceived, and appreciated.

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### **Abstract**

The patronage system was the dominant force behind the creation of new works of art throughout the Renaissance and helped to bring about some of the greatest masterpieces of the time. This paper will specifically examine the works patronized by Isabella d'Este, including music, musical instruments, and literature. Using the patronage classification system discussed by Howard M. Brown, this paper will discuss Isabella's motivations as a patron, either out of an internal love of art (*mecenatismo*) or to conform to societal expectations and other external cultural pressures (*clientelismo*). Using works by Ariosto, Tromboncino, and Cara, this study will endeavour to better understand the motivations of Isabella d'Este as a patron and by proxy, other female patrons during the Italian Renaissance.