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ISABELLA D'ESTE'S EVOLUTION OF ART PATRONAGE: A STUDY OF A
RENAISSANCE WOMAN THROUGH ICONOGRAPHIC AND FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

By

Katie Reinkemeyer

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Art History
at
Lindenwood University

April 2021, Katie Reinkemeyer

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ISABELLA D'ESTE'S EVOLUTION OF ART PATRONAGE: A STUDY OF A
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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Arts, Media, and Communications
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master in Art History
at
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April 2021

Abstract

ISABELLA D'ESTE'S EVOLUTION OF ART PATRONAGE: A STUDY OF A RENAISSANCE WOMAN THROUGH ICONOGRAPHIC AND FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

Katie Reinkemeyer, Master of Art History, 2021

Thesis Directed By: Dr. James Hutson, PhD

This thesis is based on how Isabella d'Este (1474-1539) cultivated her extensive collection of rare antiques and art, given the parallel evolution of her art commissions and political concerns as it pertains to iconography and feminism. Instead of discussing what previous scholars have researched concerning Isabella d'Este, this thesis will incorporate the iconography as it pertains to her commissions in a historiographical sense, as well as argue why this iconography would eventually become a beacon for feminist discussion. This will primarily examine Isabella's commissions from 1494 to 1507, including her earliest portraits and the first four paintings of her *studiolo*. This will include background of iconographic theory alongside how Isabella wanted herself depicted as a powerful court lady of Mantua from a feminist standpoint.

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Introduction

Isabella d'Este was the first-born child to Duke Ercole d'Este I of Ferrara on May 17th, 1474 amid the rise of emerging artists flourishing during the rebirth of Italy. Eleanora of Aragon taught her daughter Isabella everything about arts and the humanities, along with literature and decorum. Isabella's mother inspired her to collect antiquities and create her own art and music. At a very young age, Isabella received an extensive education of liberal arts, Greek and Latin, and literature by highly esteemed tutors, as the d'Este family was one of the most respected among the court families in Northern Italy. By age six, Isabella knew Greek and Latin almost fluently as well as sang and danced to contemporary composers while charming the courts with her quick-wit and intellect.

This same year, at the age of six, Isabella was promised into an arranged marriage with fifteen-year-old Francesco II Gonzaga of Mantua. However, it wasn't until a decade later when Isabella was sixteen that the marriage was held. Parting from her beloved mother and younger sister Beatrice, Isabella yearned to make her new palace in Mantua feel like home. Therefore, she wanted to decorate her rooms with mythological panel paintings and collect rare items from multiple centuries like her mother had to keep some memory of her family. She also wanted to continue her own artistic endeavors and needed inspiration in her *studiolo* and *grotta*. Stacked one above the other, these private chambers were in the tower of San Nicolò within the Castello di San Giorgio. The top room was Isabella's *studiolo*, (Fig. 14) where she would continue her language, humanistic, and artistic studies; the bottom room was her *grotta* (Fig. 15) where she kept her unique collectibles safe. While the *studiolo* contained mostly mythological panel paintings as muses for Isabella, the *grotta* was Isabella's retreat and creation that she decorated to her own liking with priceless objects.

Isabella d'Este has often been described as deviant due to her direct personality, considering women of the Renaissance were meant to be passive.¹ By dictating extensive instructions, artists often found her difficult to work with and unreasonable with strict deadlines and a discourteous personality. There are instances where she would threaten to refuse payment if she was displeased, or if deadlines were not met.² Some historians along with Isabella's contemporaries believed the type of art commissioned was considered unchaste and more suited for male patronage. While women often commissioned religious scenes, men would be more suited to commission eroticized, classicized paintings. However, there was reasoning behind these types of commissions, and motives behind the iconography, as the allegorized mythological panel paintings related to Isabella's events throughout her early reign as Marchesa, which historians unfortunately do not always delve into. Yet, there evolves a time to notice when these requests given to complete her commissions were not all that difficult, especially when compared to her male contemporaries, which will be discussed later.

To examine the background of Isabella d'Este as a historical figure and patron of the arts in respects to a feminist note, one must consider her upbringing, marriage, and resources to art. Isabella d'Este contributed large sums of money to the Church, charitable organizations, and art patronage. She was well educated in diverse studies and languages as well as being a skilled musician and artist.³ With a fascination for small antiques and mythological painting, Isabella

¹ 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): 67-78.

² Deanna Shemek, *Isabella d'Este: Selected Letters*. (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2017).

³ Julia Cartwright, *Isabella d'Este, Marchioness of Mantua, 1474-1539: A Study of the Renaissance*. Vol. 1. (University Press of the Pacific, 2002).

created a sanctuary for artistic expression both for her own works and the extensive commissions she endorsed during her forty years in the Ducal Palace of Mantua. Despite criticism of Isabella's direct and dominant personality among the correspondence with artists and political allies, she remains the most notorious female art patron from the Italian Renaissance with preserved artworks from her *studiolo* and *grotta*.⁴ These artworks were not just for flaunting wealth as they were for many patrons. Historians have understood the significance of why Isabella gave such specific and lengthy instructions, considering how her commissioned art almost always directly tied to her political, religious, and personal affairs. These lengthy instructions were often set so that Isabella would, at first, be depicted with courtly elegance in the beginning, eventually evolving into individualized mythological allegories as she began to gain respect on her own apart from her husband. It is also worth noting the shock of a woman patron commissioning anything other than religious painting or portraiture during this time in Italy, going against womanly decorum, which was expected to be chaste propriety and religious devotion.⁵

Isabella needed to preserve a valued public image both for political alliances and the citizens of Mantua, but she also promoted personal interests in her commissioned artworks, often in meeting places such as her *studiolo* and *grotta* in the Ducal Palace of Mantua. Isabella was deeply interested in mythological panel paintings, unusual for the time, since religious subject matter overflowed the art market demand. Scholars believe her collecting of gems, medals, and small figurines gave way to her love for interior design in her own home as well, which was not

⁴ J.M. Fletcher, review of *The Paintings in the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este at Mantua*, by Egon Verheyen, *The Burlington Magazine* 118, no. 879 (1976): 426.

⁵ 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): 67-78.

uncommon for women during this time.⁶ Her *studiolo* and *grotta* were her most prized art collections, making her a strong competition for other women art patrons such as Catherine de'Medici and Vittoria Colonna, both southern contemporaries of Isabella. As her difficulties and responsibilities as Marchesa evolved politically, becoming official regent ruler of Mantua, so too did her art commissions, as one can see chronologically starting with courtly busts and ending with pagan allegories. The argument at hand will elaborate on not only the changes seen in Isabella's art commissions as they correlated with what was simultaneously changing within her personal and political endeavors, but also how they can be understood through iconography and feminism. Thus, this thesis will contribute the understanding of Isabella's motives through imagery in her commissions and how they depict her as a woman in a powerful light. This will specifically be in parallel to Francesco's frequent absences, and therefore, the onset to Isabella's rising responsibility as Marchesa throughout her early reign, which would be the primary motive for her more independent commissions.

Literature Review

Many historians dispute the motives behind Isabella's collections, leading to multiple perspectives regarding her art patronage and her public image, as she would put ahead her political needs while also following courtly decorum as a woman. Most scholars tend to depict Isabella on praiseworthy terms, discussing her personality, education, success as regent, and grandiose collection of diverse artworks. However, others will review or state the troublesome opinions that have fused to her legacy. Yet, some sources discussed ahead will depict Isabella as a rather difficult patron to please, further playing into the dilemma of Isabella claiming power while still trying to gain respect from artists.

⁶ Lorenzo Bonoldi, *Isabella d'Este: A Renaissance Woman*, (Rimini: Guaraldi, 2015).

Delving into iconography, Cust discusses in his 1914 article the importance behind her image, especially in portraiture, and describing the power that can be attained through artistic rendition. Likewise, this would be the start to Isabella's lengthy commissions, as she began to understand how she must carry herself as both court lady and regent. In these portraits, such as completed by Leonardo da Vinci and Romano, the earliest form of her propaganda, she could give a strong presence, even only in a frame, to the Mantuan citizens and any enemies or alliances, as Cust describes:

It was not, moreover, to her patronage of the fine arts that Isabella d'Este owes her fame, but to her great qualities as a woman, not again to beauty, but to intellect and character. The portraiture of such a woman must therefore be of particular interest, seeing that it did not depend on the mere rendering of external beauty presenting the same features to every observer, but on the interpretation of character in a woman who never laid claim to special personal good looks.⁷

Cust describes the portraits completed and rejected by Isabella, as well as her desire to look more powerful and beautiful than she felt she was, a big reason she favored Leonardo's portrait more than any others. Isabella wanted to convey a powerful image, and therefore was extremely specific and particular with the outcomes of these portraiture commissions. Cust mentions that although she enjoyed Francia's rendition of her, she sold it to acquire new books. He mentions the difficulty artists had in completing a successful portrait, seeing as Isabella often refused to sit for portraiture, wanting artists to depict her from their *idea bellezza*, or beautiful idea.

Isabella d'Este is also studied by Gombrich in 1963, analyzing an interpretation and criticism behind the symbolism of *Parnassus* by Mantegna in Isabella's *studiolo*. Gombrich studied many of the artists that contributed to Isabella, including Antico, Mantegna, Bellini, and

⁷ Lionel Cust. "Notes on Pictures in the Royal Collections-XXIX. On Two Portraits of Isabella d'Este," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 25, no. 37 (1914): 286-291.

Perugino. He starts by explaining the subject of the painting being Mars and Venus caught in their erotic meeting by Venus' jealous husband, Vulcan, amusing the gods in the process. Mantegna's instructions by Isabella were to present a classical story with a beautiful meaning, which Gombrich analyzes via iconography within the piece. Gombrich suggests the possibility of Venus being represented as Isabella herself in her beauty with her military husband Francesco as the god of war, Mars. In questioning where the beautiful idea that Isabella prescribed lies in the painting, Gombrich declares that it is the unity of Venus and Mars to conceive Harmony and create peace among chaos. Thus, this allegory shows the unity of Isabella and Francesco, showing the harmony and unity they can therefore bestow upon Mantua, and important message for the time as the painting was completed in 1497, as the first Italian War was coming close to an end.

Lastly, after deciphering the main characters in the foreground, middle ground, and background, Gombrich discusses the small details and characters to the sides that still create a meaningful impact on the overall iconography of the piece. Gombrich utilizes Homer's *Odyssey* and suggests this was a heavy influence on the piece, as it would be one of the many literary sources readily available to patrons like Isabella d'Este and artists like Mantegna. There is a moment where Apollo and Mercury jokingly argue about who would trade places with Mars if they could be with Venus, again perhaps heightening Isabella's influence as Venus. In the background, nymphs dance in rejoice to the music of Apollo's lyre, and there remains an overall cheerful mood to the piece. Gombrich describes the small figure of Cupid mockingly aiming his blow pipe towards Vulcan in spite, giving a humorous and cheeky tone as well as joyous. By showing an upbeat, peaceful scene, it is apparent that Isabella wanted to assure her citizens that Francesco alongside herself would always maintain peace within Mantua together.

Upon reviewing the strenuous deciphering of Isabella's commissions by Egon Verheyen in 1976, historian J.M Fletcher declares: "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."⁸ This review of Verheyen's analysis of Isabella gives the influence that female patrons were to be avoided due to inconsistent directions and unclear motives for their commissions. This was a fair assumption, as Isabella received many declined invitations for commissions and lost many painters due to her lengthy instructions and specific wants, as Fletcher discusses. Fletcher delves into Bellini scoffing at Isabella for leaving very little artistic freedom, therefore not agreeing to her commissions except for a very small nativity scene that does not survive today. Therefore, by Isabella trying to develop respect from citizens and alliances, she then lost the favor of many artists in her political endeavors to create a powerful image of herself through allegories and very precise portraits.

Another topic of interest among historians is the overall space that was Isabella's *grotta*. In an article from 1989, Kolsky utilizes the writings of Equicola, who was Isabella d'Este's tutor and secretary, to formally describe Isabella's *grotta* as a whole. The formal elements such as composition, choice of material, type of walls, and design all come into perspective within Kolsky's writing, first describing the *grotta* as a place of high significance to Isabella and decorated rightfully so. As the room was meant as a place for classical reminiscence and peaceful retreat, the *Sleeping Cupid* allegedly created by the ancient sculptor Praxiteles, grounded the environment in a refined, classical mood for the visitor. The gold trim, green and

⁸ J.M. Fletcher, review of *The Paintings in the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este at Mantua*, by Egon Verheyen, *The Burlington Magazine* 118, no. 879 (1976): 426-427.

red wallpaper, gems on panels, and lush carpets all brought a dim light throughout the room, suggesting the place of a cavern or *grotto*. “The *Grotta* comes to represent the triumph of civilization over brute nature, incorporating the 'natural' form of a cavern into its design.”⁹

Kolsky mentions that Equicola deemed the *grotta* a place of beauty and ultimately pleasing to the eye upon viewing, valuing the aesthetic of wealth and expensive objects as well as vibrant colors and rare collectibles. Overall, the formal composition of the room, including the ornate décor and countless objects representing humanistic culture, complemented these inlaid wooden panels to have Isabella’s *grotta* stand out as a marvel for all kinds of visitors. This space would, in turn, become related to decorum as court ladies were expected to enjoy interior decorating and small collectibles. The room would also be a personal retreat for Isabella, developing a dual purpose to show her wealth, power, and personal interests.

Leading into a feminist viewpoint, San Juan has written her scholarship in 1991, pertaining to Isabella d’Este, especially regarding her public image and social standing as a renown female patron of the arts.¹⁰ She makes it clear that there were very few serious female patrons during the Renaissance, and they did not have the respect male patrons had, often making it difficult for women to enforce instructions for commissions without coming across as unreasonable or ridiculous. San Juan further declares that Isabella d’Este worried about her public image, as women do today, especially since she was left to rule Mantua on her own when her husband, Francesco Gonzaga, took leave for military duties. Therefore, it became crucial that she made alliances of her own, became an independent identity apart from her husband, and

⁹ S. Kolsky, “An Unnoticed Description of Isabella d’Este’s *Grotta*,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 52, (1989): 232-235.

¹⁰ 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): 67-78.

created her public image as powerful, alluring, yet respectable while still trying to remain a lady and comply with the womanly standards of the time. San Juan deers that this certainly brings about a dilemma as it was near impossible to remain a lady and gain political respect. These were simply two things that did not coexist at the time, as feminism was nowhere near development and patriarchal society still reigned supreme.

San Juan moves on to remind the reader that historians see Isabella in such different lights---sometimes as a miraculous patron of innovation and curiosities, while others declare her a controlling, stubborn, and manipulative woman who would be almost impossible to work with. These opinions, whether justified or biased, were gathered mainly through correspondence between artists and Isabella. San Juan further declares that men were often reluctant to take such strict instructions from a woman, such as Bellini, as it subconsciously made some male artists feel inferior that a woman was taking his artistic freedom. Yet, this is not the case in scenarios where the patron is a male, as this dictation was the norm for the Renaissance era. Thus, Isabella falls under another dilemma of not just trying to gain political and social respect, but also respect by being assertive to her artists. Asserting traits and bossiness were not the court lady decorum, and certainly angered many of Isabella's potential artists for hire. While San Juan does not believe some of Isabella's words meant to be manipulative or controlling, previous artists under her pay turned away, believing her language and written demeanor far more offensive and not ladylike in the slightest. Furthermore, artists such as Bellini became impatient and angered that a woman could have such jurisdiction over their artistic choices.

Turning to social standards for women of the Renaissance, San Juan mentions that Isabella d'Este was controversial with her personality, appearing quite a feminist in today's standards, with aims to question the social and political norms for gender equality:

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.¹¹

Furthermore, Cartwright discusses in a publication from 2002 how Isabella d'Este's feminist values did not favor the sexualization and objectification of women in mythological painting. She wanted a more didactic and meaningful presentation within her art commissions to show her power and knowledge rather than feeding just the male gaze. Therefore, she became fairly displeased when Perugino ignored her wishes of clothed goddesses in his *Combat of Love and Chastity*. Yet, art historians, according to Cartwright, will frequently ignore the status of gender during this time period and therefore judge Isabella's actions and behaviors falsely without fully analyzing things such as her social position as a woman and what restraints or norms that would create for her. However, it is this dilemma that would give Isabella the motive to commission more mythological works allegorizing herself as a powerful goddess, since she was not able to be betrayed in such a powerful light herself.

James continues the discussion in 2012 regarding Isabella d'Este's art patronage and regent position of Mantua. She considers mainly correspondence between Isabella and Francesco, declaring that they were not just an arranged married couple, but also influenced each other's reign when they were not together. "It was normal practice for an Italian Renaissance princely ruler and his consort to write frequently when they were separated, cooperating closely through this means to carry out the diplomatic work and administrative tasks that were central to

¹¹ 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): 67-78.

the successful governance of small and militarily vulnerable states.”¹² James declares that many historians and friends of Isabella considered her and Francesco an odd match with Isabella’s cultured ways and Francesco’s brute military background. However, these two shared a similar taste in the arts and had much more in common than these previous speculations would have discerned. Considering Francesco gave Isabella several apartments that she could devote solely to art, literature, and music, it is certain that he appreciated and supported his wife’s humanistic endeavors and extensive patronage. However, as he was required to leave Mantua more often, Cartwright notes the independence Isabella needed to gain in order to function successfully as a regent. Therefore, there are less depictions of Francesco as time goes on in Isabella’s commissions, seeing mainly the Marchesa in her political position, allegorized in a powerful way apart from her husband.

Bonoldi writes about the most influential and important pieces of Isabella d’Este’s *studiolo* and *grotta* as they pertain to the formal elements, aesthetic appeal, and overall composition within their location in his publication from 2015. He begins with the description of the precious gems and expensive materials funded by Isabella d’Este for her *grotta*. For example, Gian Cristoforo Romano had created a medal in 1505 for Isabella that was cast in gold, ornate with emeralds and rubies with “Isabella” spelled out in diamonds and displayed in a gold frame with more precious materials. The apartments had marble portal doors and several frescoes, along with wooden ceilings and intarsia. The ceiling designs were covered in golden inlay and presented the viewer with a musical pentagram with only rests and repeats to invoke silence among the room.

¹² James, Carolyn, “Marriage by Correspondence: Politics and Domesticity in the Letters of Isabella d’Este and Francesco Gonzaga, 1490–1519,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2012): 321-352.

Bonoldi is not too concerned with who the figures represent in Isabella's *studiolo*, but rather how they are positioned compositionally, the style of the artists, and the vibrancy of color as it pertains the viewer's experience. For example, he concludes that Mantegna's 1502 painting, *Triumph of the Virtues*, invokes anxiety and imbalance from the chaotic scene at hand accompanied with the dramatic lighting as the clouds overtake the sun. As for Mantegna's *Parnassus* from 1497, Bonoldi describes the triangular composition centered symmetrically with Venus and Mars at the top of the pyramid shape and the procession of dancing nymphs, all dressed in vibrant and stark colors to capture the viewer's attention. The bright and harmonious colors also are meant to invoke a joyous and giddy reaction from the visitors who saw this painting. It was also important to note that this was meant to invoke feelings of calm and peace among Mantua as the Italian Wars were at play.

Lastly, Bonoldi analyzes the formal elements of Costa's two works *Allegory of the Court of Isabella d'Este* from 1504 and *The Reign of Comus* from 1507, the former being the final pictorial scene in the collection of Isabella's *studiolo*. Bonoldi notes the calm pastoral scene with several figures throughout wearing colorful garments while playing classical instruments. He also notes that Isabella d'Este is sitting quietly in a shaded woodland, wearing a vivid crimson gown as Venus, opposite of her wears a vibrant blue gown. He does not quite focus on the meaning of this gathering, but more so how it attracts the viewer and finalizes the recurrent themes of battles set against classical pastoral scenes in the apartments. This later commission does not have the chaos of Mantegna and Perugino's paintings, as battles involving Francesco had settled and there was peace in the North. However, there is only Isabella present in this coronation pastoral scene, giving no evidence of Francesco, implying the image she intended to

maintain for herself individually as a ruler of Mantua, rather than paired with her husband as in *Parnassus*.

Ames-Lewis declares the extreme importance of the humanities and humanistic approaches in art throughout the Northern Italian Renaissance in his publication from 2016. However, he also mentions the strong schism between patrons who desire religious art and others who request mythological or allegorical scenes. A rise in political and social rebirth had led to a newfound sense of religious iconography and a revival of classicism with the idealized nude form in art. Italy was no longer under the dark shroud of the previous century, and Ames-Lewis approaches Isabella's life and upbringing from this perspective. For example, the court families of the North were provided immense opportunities for education and the arts considering their wealth and social status. Therefore, Isabella was exposed to art, languages, and humanities at a very young age, carrying these values throughout her life.

Ames-Lewis looks at the political values in the Northern Italian Renaissance, especially Mantua at the beginning of the sixteenth century. As aristocracies and court families rose, so did their legacies in histories and biographies during that time. This then led to these families being depicted in much of the art that circulated in the north. Considering the court families often valued antiquarianism and classicism, especially in Mantua, many artists throughout Italy had to change their styles depending on patron and the patron's desires. "The works of the major figures in the Mantuan artistic scene demonstrate a more purist response to the antique than those of other major artists and artistic centers on the peninsula. This can in part be attributed to the development within Mantuan intellectual circles of a more rigorous antiquarianism than

elsewhere.”¹³ Ames-Lewis declares that this style is influenced in some of Isabella’s closest artists, including Gian Cristoforo Romano.

Ames-Lewis lastly discusses Isabella’s high esteem in Mantuan society, considering her *studiolo* was considered one of the more popular projects created at the turn of the century and first decade of the 1500s. It was one of the more prominent artistic endeavors recorded in Mantuan archives and made Isabella d’Este such a renowned figure in Renaissance art patronage. Given her social position of a court lady during a time when art intertwined with politics, Isabella d’Este was known by almost every artist in Italy as she was linked to another powerful military family---the Gonzagas. Being well-known and having several political allies of her husband’s, Isabella was either admired or despised, but rather respected in the art scene.

In Shemek’s book from 2017, full of translated letters to and from Isabella, family, alliances and artists, she discusses the feminist aspects that affected Isabella’s position as a female patron in the Italian Renaissance. Despite her seemingly radical behavior against social norms, Shemek reminds the reader of her family values and strong aspirations for liberal arts. Isabella d’Este was also controversial in her art commissions because she was fascinated by mythological panel painting---a subject reserved for mainly male patrons. Females were expected to commission portraiture or religious art during this time, and Isabella’s non-Catholic art choices were considered radical.

Similarly, her collecting of gems and small objects of immense value was deemed appropriate when Isabella d’Este acquired the luxuries for her *grotta*, despite this being a common habit across both male and female patrons such as Lorenzo de Medici. Shemek

¹³ Francis Ames-Lewis, *Isabella and Leonardo: The Artistic Relationship between Isabella d’Este and Leonardo da Vinci, 1500-1506*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

declares that early historians belittled this as stereotypical feminine desires for home décor rather than true art collecting, a clear prejudice among the women as serious patrons. For example, Isabella's brother was considered inspiring and promoting by dictating his wishes for commissions, especially those among Titian's, while Isabella came off as manipulative and controlling in conveying her wishes for commissions.

Dr. Steven J. Cody takes on the interpretation of *Parnassus* by Mantegna in 2017. Cody begins discussing the privilege of Mantegna as a favorite to the Gonzaga family as well as his influence from his iconographical advisor, Paride da Ceresara, when it came to allegorical programs in art: "Each individual acted as an inventor by drawing from his own area of expertise: Paride, his knowledge of literature and humanist practice; Mantegna, his equally sophisticated understanding of form, composition, and antiquarian culture."¹⁴

In explaining the iconography and defending the idea that the scene presented is fully Platonic, with no sexual encounters occurring, Cody declares the joyous, festive tone of the painting brings a beautiful idea to coexist with a chaste intention; thus, Isabella complies with courtly decorum while depicting herself in a powerful light. The birth of Harmony was a way to show Isabella's intention of peace and concord among Mantua as well as redeem herself among the unchaste rumors surrounding her seemingly controversial *studiolo* paintings. Cody states that "This canvas presented its beholders with a logical edifice designed to defend Isabella against the more problematic interpretations of her *studiolo*."¹⁵ Cody also takes note of the underlying tone intended to leave Isabella's visitors in awe and wonder upon entering her chambers that were not completely private. By noticing the immense riches in her *grotta* and vibrantly colorful

¹⁴Steven J. Cody, "Mantegna and the Orators: The Invention of the *Mars and Venus* for Isabella d'Este Gonzaga," *Artibus et Historiae* 38, no. 75 (2017): 51-77.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

mythological paintings, her visitors, whether casual or professional, would be awestruck by her intellectual knowledge and wealth, along with her love for the arts and humanities, leaving a lasting impression for her public image.

Aside from a mythological iconography program, Paride and Mantegna utilized an astrological formula that had taken place during the marriage union of Isabella and Francesco on their wedding day. This was also criticized heavily because this was considered highly pagan, but also something reserved for male patrons. However, art historians now understand the painting from both mythological and astrological perspectives. In representing Venus and Mars as Isabella and Francesco, viewers either saw a chaste union or a scandal in wondering who Vulcan was to represent. Cody mentions Paride's use of constellations, such as that of Pegasus, who stands in the painting along with the god Mercury, in which this planet was also aligned with Venus and Mars during the wedding night. Cody quotes Lehmann in these respects: "The planet Mercury was in ascendance, flanked at equal distance by Mars and Venus. These stars all stood within the sign of Aquarius, as did the westernmost bright star of the Pegasus-constellation. Paride developed the iconographic program of Mantegna's Mars and Venus from this set of celestial relationships."¹⁶ Not only did this represent Isabella's fascination behind mythology and astrology, but also her knowledge behind it in dictating these wishes for Mantegna to successfully perform. It is also evident that this was meant as a civil union as well as showing Isabella conforming to her womanly duties as a wife and regent. This perspective evolves as Isabella's political concerns do throughout the years.

¹⁶ Steven J. Cody, "Mantegna and the Orators: The Invention of the *Mars and Venus* for Isabella d'Este Gonzaga," *Artibus et Historiae* 38, no. 75 (2017): 51-77.

Overall, scholars have discussed Isabella in terms of her art patronage and political reign as Marchesa of Mantua, regent ruler in her husband's frequent absences. Scholars such as Ames-Lewis, San Juan, and Shemek discuss the court lady decorum of the day and how Isabella complied in her early years at Mantua, slowly tapering off towards rebelling against these standards in her mythological panel paintings, especially after Perugino. Scholars such as Cody, Gombrich, and Bonoldi discuss the social and political climate that occurred during the commissions as well as the iconography behind the artworks as they pertained to what was currently happening in Isabella's life.

Methodology

Isabella d'Este and her luxurious art collection have been analyzed and studied by historians primarily via formalist, socio-political, iconographical, and feminist methodologies throughout the centuries. A formalist approach is taken by writers such as Bonoldi and Kolsky, who discuss the formal elements and decoration making up the luxurious apartments in which Isabella held meetings and shared her beloved artworks. The socio-political methodology has been discussed by Cust, Ames-Lewis and James, all primarily discussing correspondence among the thousands of letters between Isabella and artists as well as with her husband to rule Mantua while he was preoccupied. The iconographical methodology is discussed by Fletcher, Cody and Gombrich, who discuss the semiotics and meanings behind the paintings commissioned for Isabella's *studiolo* and *grotta* along with how they symbolize her life. This thesis will be heavily discussing the feminist methodology provided by San Juan, Cartwright and Shemek, who mainly covered Isabella's position as a woman during her time, along with serving as regent ruler in her husband's military absence.

In the beginning of the 20th century, scholars such as Cust have taken socio-political and formalist approaches regarding how the evolution of her Isabella's art commissions paralleled with her constantly changing life as well as how these works depicted her. Several topics are covered by historians as it pertains to Isabella d'Este's background, social status as a woman, and extensive art collection. Cust specifically delves into the motives behind Isabella's commissions as she wanted to conform to the court's decorum but also make herself stand out as a powerful and engaging woman of her time to leave a memorable legacy as regent to Mantua. In taking on a socio-politically focused approach, Cust conveys the importance of gaining respect from Mantuan citizens as well as combining courtly decorum and business endeavors for Isabella, as she would need to quickly learn her husband's political and trade concerns. Therefore, as a woman, the best way for Isabella to conduct this would be throughout art commissions.

Fletcher also takes on socio-political and formalist methodologies in the mid-20th century, discussing Isabella in a light where she was not always liked for her directness and particular stubbornness with her artists. However, Fletcher also delves into why this was crucial during the time and Isabella's situation, considering the importance of coming across as an esteemed and nonchalant ruler, with an *aria della grazia*, or air of grace, being a court lady of the Renaissance. In discussing the social aspects of being respected, Fletcher ties in the political concerns that Isabella would have needed to handle while Francesco was away. This would lead to very specific instructions for Isabella, who frequently changed her mind depending on how she wanted to depict herself, leaving artists often frustrated.

Moving to a more formalist methodology later in the 20th century, Kolsky approaches Isabella by discussing the specifics of the art commissions given by Isabella, including the

compositional aspects, subject matter, and the contents of her *grotta*. In doing this, Kolsky provides insight to visually appreciating the artworks as well as understanding just what Isabella collected and decorated to make this space so important to her as a personal retreat for her studies, but also a space that she could depict herself freely in a powerful allegory without being criticized for stepping outside of decorum, as mythological allegories were often seen more suitable in male patronage. Therefore, it becomes important to understand what items Isabella collected along with their meaning and the significance they held.

Moving into the 21st century, Bonoldi continues a formalist approach, discussing Isabella's portraiture, collectibles, and numismatics, primarily. In conveying these early commissions by formally assessing Isabella's features on coins, portraits, and portrait busts, historians can gather the beginning of the evolution of Isabella's commissions. Bonoldi delves into the formal aspects briefly for the mythological panel paintings in Isabella's *studiolo*, describing the allegorical sequence in each one and the symmetrical harmony within them. As he discusses the formal aspects of Isabella's further paintings, it becomes easier to see the change in perspective and motive as they become more isolated towards Isabella and her political affairs.

Iconography is discussed by Gombrich in the 20th century and by Cody in the 21st century, both discussing the *Parnassus* in Isabella's *studiolo*. Gombrich discusses the allegorical program and who the figures are meant to represent, such as Isabella and Francesco being allegorized by Venus and Mars joining hands in unity. He delves into the meaning behind this scene as not just a matrimonial statement but also one of political means, as Isabella wanted to show she, and her husband, were capable in restoring and maintaining peace among Mantua following the war. Gombrich's iconographical approach contributes to the state of field

immensely by showing the motive, historical context, and meaning behind the first mythological panel painting of Isabella's commission, showing her husband involved.

Cody discusses something similar, but also approaches the *studiolo* regarding the sense of space and the power it had in and of itself. The room was meant for Isabella to show her political and social successes and triumphs so that visitors could be in awe at not only the exquisite collectibles and ornate rooms but also the inspiring allegorical paintings that enveloped the walls. Cody suggests the different allegorical advisors within the project as well as the iconography behind the allegorical program, such as Gombrich did, to convey who is portrayed within the painting. He then discusses why this iconography is important to Isabella, as it was a way to remind herself of the beauty of art, convey a powerful message to visitors, and continue her collection of fine antiques for future patrons to admire from her legacy.

Lastly, in more recent studies within the past ten years, feminism is approached predominantly when regarding Isabella d'Este, as seen in Shemek's book. By describing Isabella's commissions and collections as an inspiration to further female patrons in the Renaissance as well to understand Isabella as a person, Shemek utilizes feminist methodology to convey the dilemmas frequently run into by Isabella. Shemek uses correspondence from Isabella to gather humanist aspects about her personality, as well as create a feminist judgement regarding her motives behind the commissions, frequently being that of making herself known without breaking court lady decorum.

Similarly, San Juan towards the end of the 20th century discusses how Isabella was held to a double standard frequently, gaining respect and admiration from depicting herself in art, but also gaining criticism from doing so in such a direct manner as a woman. Therefore, using a feminist approach, San Juan takes a look at the dilemma faced by Isabella as a woman in the

Renaissance, constantly creating commissions to passively assert her grace, chastity, and power as well as gradually break from the traditions of courtly decorum in subject matter. As Isabella wanted to promote herself in ways other than portraiture and numismatics, San Juan discusses the difficult and criticism received from Isabella's evolution to mythological allegories in paintings.

Feminism and iconography seem to be the most predominant methodologies used by scholars and historians in recent studies of Isabella's life, which helps in gathering accredited sources in the Art History state of field. Considering most of these sources within the past few decades discuss Isabella in a feminist light today, an iconographical methodology will also suit this thesis. However, in order to understand how Isabella represented herself in art and how it was meant to affect her public image, it is crucial to delve into the historical context behind her commissioned works as they tended to send a message to her allies, enemies, and Mantuan citizens while simultaneously creating a dignified legacy. As many scholars have written in mainly socio-political, feminist, iconographical, and formalist methodologies, this thesis will contribute uniquely to the state of field by merging feminism and iconography, delving into the history of both methods, and arguing how Isabella's art commissions show her motives in imagery and how they can be considered feminist in nature.

Analysis

Understanding the interpretation of iconography and feminist views behind Isabella's commissions requires a bit of historical context. Beginning with iconography and its history, Bal and Bryson discuss the idea behind iconography. An icon, being any symbol or image indicative of some underlying meaning or significance, has been considered many things throughout

history. Whether shunned by the iconoclasts or admired by the rise of the Baroque, icons have always been a part of Art History. Bal and Bryson would argue this point further:

“Human culture is made up of signs, each of which stands for something other than itself, and the people inhabiting culture busy themselves making sense of those signs. The core of semiotic theory is the definition of the factors involved in this permanent process of sign making and interpreting and the development of conceptual tools that help us to grasp that process as it goes on in various arenas of cultural activity.”¹⁷

This leaves iconography to be very subjective, as making sense of symbols and icons is interpreted different across many eyes. However, in the case of Isabella d’Este, it is important to revive the correspondence of her motives addressed to hired artists to understand the possible meanings behind the iconography presented in her commissions. As iconography may have received a bad reputation before the Renaissance during the iconoclasm, Isabella saw this method as an opportunity to get her message of empowerment across to viewers behind allegories, so not to break any feminine ideals of the time. It is this evolution of iconography that has benefited Isabella to the point of female empowerment hidden behind the mythological imagery commissioned for her *studiolo*, such as her using herself as an icon and then transitioning to being depicted as powerful feminine mythological icons, such as Athena.

One can also look at Isabella’s commissions in terms of Panofsky’s explanation of iconography and the history of this methodology. For example, Moxey determines Panofsky’s method in declaring that art cannot be interpreted if it is based completely off historical events. There must be something to contribute to symbolism and semiotics that speaks a message to the viewer as well as provides artistic freedom on the other side of the canvas.¹⁸ Therefore, as within

¹⁷ Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, “Semiotics and Art History.” *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (1991): 174.

¹⁸ Keith Moxey, Panofsky's Concept of "Iconology" and the Problem of Interpretation in the History of Art.” *New Literary History*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1986): 266.

Isabella's commissions, there were elements of mythology that would bring light to some sort of meaning and interpretation through these allegories that were created by the artist, often with the help of an advisor given the complexity of these programs. This leaves an opportunity for historians to dive into historical context during the time of commissions, turning over letters and researching possible motives. Yet, multiple interpretations have been created from this methodology because there is such variety in the strategy.

This relates to Isabella and her commissions regarding her as a public image. Using her image as an icon depicted as powerful allegorical figures within art helped Isabella in keeping a respected alliance with esteemed guests in the Ducal Palace, as these power paintings were usually in rooms for meetings discussing financial or political matters. However, Isabella's art patronage in the beginning strongly considered her husband and their political alliances when deciding what type of program or message to be sent within her commissions. Yet, this will change as Isabella became more confident in her reign and political position and well as functioned more independently on a social level. "The letters tell a compelling story about the waxing and waning of this relationship in the volatile political climate of early sixteenth-century Europe and document the ways in which conventional notions of male and female roles were at times put aside by this ruling couple to ensure the survival of their state and the orderly succession to power of the next generation."¹⁹

Portraiture was among the earliest commissions given by Isabella d'Este to several artists such as Mantegna, which did not turn out as desired. Andrea Mantegna was the court painter to the Gonzaga family, but was almost entirely banished as his first portrait of the Marchioness

¹⁹ James, Carolyn, "Marriage by Correspondence: Politics and Domesticity in the Letters of Isabella d'Este and Francesco Gonzaga, 1490–1519," *Renaissance Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2012): 321-352.

displeased her so much. “We are unable at this time to send you Our portrait, as the painter has done such a terrible job that it has no resemblance to Us whatsoever; so we have commissioned a foreign painter, who is famous for his ability to copy from nature.”²⁰ After this letter from Isabella d’Este circa April 20th, 1493, she informs a friend she is unable to show her finished commission and refused to ever sit for Mantegna again for any type of proper portraiture. This portrait, unfortunately, does not survive today and was discarded shortly after being presented to Isabella. In this early stage of Isabella’s rule, just three years into her marriage with Francesco, we see a very united way of thinking as they dealt with political concerns in a business partnership, which would eventually evolve into predominantly Isabella’s commissions depicting solely herself.

Isabella’s goal after this failed endeavor with Mantegna was to find someone to successfully portray her in a way that appealed to all the standards of courtly appearance, along with making her appear respectable as regent ruler, as she was still fairly new to Mantua and wanted to comply with decorum early on in her commissions. Here, one can see how different interpretations of iconography come into play, as Isabella’s idea of her portrayal was not the same as Mantegna’s. Furthermore, the subjectivity of what Isabella wanted from making an icon of herself in art has fallen into the hands of partiality. In her next attempt, she followed her sister’s advice in hiring Gian Cristoforo Romano in 1498. Creating a beautiful marble bust with a sincere and modest side profile of Isabella, Romano succeeded in trumping the efforts of Mantegna. Unfortunately, only a terracotta model bust survives today, but historians can still see all the same features. (Fig. 1) With an austere look of chastity and poise, Isabella appears regal as ever with flowing curly hair in this the shoulder-up bust. (Fig. 2) This bust would have been in

²⁰ Lorenzo Bonoldi, *Isabella d’Este: A Renaissance Woman*, (Rimini: Guaraldi, 2015).

the Ducal Palace, meant to be seen by the public as an icon upon entry, and also a reminder of Isabella's charm, chastity, and authority as a standalone woman of Mantua.

Keeping Romano as a favored portraitist, Isabella had him create medals with her profile portrait on them to give out to guests and friends that visited her at the Ducal Palace. Several medals survive today, including many unadorned bronze ones (Fig. 3), which most likely were the ones given out to visitors. On the back of these simpler medals are several zodiac signs with stars, uncommon during the time as they were considered pagan symbols, along with the inscription "Marchesa of Mantua" and the Latin translation of "For those who are well deserving," or "*benemerentium ergo.*" Isabella gave these away to friends and political allies after meetings and discussions as a reminder of her face, title, and what she wanted to be known by: just, open-minded, and welcoming, as a court lady should be. There is also a version of this medal from 1505 that was found in Isabella's *grotta*, made of gold, diamonds, and enamel, also from Romano. (Fig. 4) This one was Isabella's personal keepsake, as it is elaborate and significantly more adorned than the earlier models meant to give out. At this point in time, it is important to note that Isabella was still within the standards of the court while simultaneously creating propaganda to passively gain respect and admiration from the Mantuan citizens as well as any political alliances she was trying to make or maintain. By creating an icon of herself and presenting her face on objects she could give away or busts that would be seen when promptly entering the palace, Isabella was paving a road of respect for herself solely in imagery.

However, aside from her appreciation for Romano, Isabella's favorite and most famous portrait is the unfinished sketch by Leonardo da Vinci in 1494 (Fig. 5), made with several colored pigments in both a drawing and cartoon. Despite Isabella's efforts and countless letters to Leonardo for a finished painted product, this sketch was never followed up successfully as

Leonardo remained very busy and scattered with his employment at times. She wrote to Leonardo over the span of several years, either receiving letters from his assistants saying he was too busy or little to no response at all from the renowned artist. “When you were here in these parts, and did my likeness in charcoal, you promised me you would portray me once more in colours.”²¹ In this letter dated May 14th, 1504, Isabella is referring to the admired portrait that made her appear feminine and debonair, showing wavy hair and a barely exposed shoulder in profile, while also depicting her as chaste and true to her natural form.

Having a portrait painted from this exact model that Isabella loved so much would have been a beautiful sight created by Leonardo da Vinci. It would also have shown Isabella as a wealthy patron, being painted in such a personal way by an artist in such high demand. Isabella asked her former confessor, Fra Pietro in Florence, if he could ask Leonardo while he was there to create a painted version of her charcoal sketch, to which he responded in a letter dated April 3rd, 1501:

As far as I know, Leonardo’s life is changeable and greatly unsettled, because he seems to live from day to day. Since he has been in Florence, he has only done one sketch, a cartoon...He has done nothing else except that two of his assistants have been making copies, and he occasionally puts his own hand to some of them. He gives pride of place to geometry, having entirely lost patience with the paintbrush.²²

Seemingly receiving Leonardo’s portrait at the wrong time of his career, Isabella unfortunately never received a finished painted version of the sketch historians know and appreciate so well today.

Isabella’s portraiture on any medium, whether it be oil painting, marble bust, or medals, was often propaganda for political use. As her husband Francesco was absent for many months

²¹ Francis Ames-Lewis, *Isabella and Leonardo: The Artistic Relationship between Isabella d’Este and Leonardo da Vinci, 1500-1506*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

²² *Ibid.*

at a time attending to military duties, Isabella became regent and one of her husband's most trusted advisors. This led to heightened pressure for Isabella to promote her individual identity in any way that she could in a chaste, formal, and approachable manner as a court lady. Aside from becoming socially loved by the Mantuan citizens, Isabella also had to quickly learn financing and politics in her husband's time of absence. "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."²³ Therefore, learning how to fully upkeep the city of Mantua, helping the citizens find solace in their city, and keeping a powerful, authoritative appearance gave Isabella the clear path to political negotiations and commissions. This was an astonishing responsibility for a woman at the time, but Isabella succeeded remarkably, becoming an inspiration to future woman patrons and the feminist state of field.

Isabella was often criticized but also taken seriously, considering she had to often be direct and strict so not to be taken advantage of, given her position as a court lady. However, this brought several artists and historians to deem Isabella quite difficult and demanding. It seems crucial to note here, in terms of a feminist perspective, that the same ideas were not considered when working with a male patron. When historians look at Isabella's brother Alfonso, a worthy art patron of the same social standing, he is not criticized for being difficult, but rather a straightforward male.²⁴ As Nalezty discusses, Alfonso often had erotic and pagan

²³ Francis Ames-Lewis, *Isabella and Leonardo: The Artistic Relationship between Isabella d'Este and Leonardo da Vinci, 1500-1506*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

²⁴ Susan Nalezty, "Giovanni Bellini's 'Feast of the Gods' and Banquets of the Ancient Ritual Calendar," *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2009): pg. 758.

tastes as he was very pertinent about his specific instructions, especially with Bellini in his *Feast with the Gods*. (Fig. 12) Meanwhile, as mentioned earlier by Fletcher, Bellini had scoffed at Isabella for giving lengthy revisions, most likely on account for her crossing this boundary that existed during her time.

To further commission her visions of the studio space, Isabella decided to let Mantegna complete the first painting of her *studiolo*, which would popularly become known as *Parnassus* in 1497, (Fig. 6) and the last painting to portray Isabella with Francesco. This painting is the apex before the turning point in Isabella's evolution both politically and artistically. Discussing this painting in an iconographical lens, one can see the god of war, Mars, and the goddess of love, Venus standing in the middle ground above a mossy arch. Venus is nude as usual in representation and her lover Mars clad in armor. Mars, holding a phallic spear for battle looks on at Venus amorously as the goddess looks off to the distance with a gold ribbon sensuously wrapping around her shoulders and between her thighs.

By understanding the icons physically, it becomes necessary to then interpret their meanings or true identities, in this case, giving hints to the historical context. In the background is what is assumed to be the city of Mantua with lavish foliage surrounding the current scene of celebration, presumably the marriage of Isabella and Francesco. As Isabella is intended to be Venus and Francesco, a military leader, meant to be Mars, it makes sense to have bountiful harvest in the background to symbolize fertility of possible heirs. (Fig. 7) Likewise, Isabella wanted her citizens to feel at peace as the Italian Wars raged on, ensuring them that her and Francesco would protect the city, as Mars and Venus would do with love and war. Depicted by her husband's side, we see this as the last court conforming painting within Isabella's commissions as she began to embrace her individuality as an independent source of power.

In the foreground, one can see several muses in multiple-colored dresses in a line, prancing and singing in happiness. The delicateness of these fairy-like muses as their feet barely touch the ground give a pastorally grounded scene of a divine harmony with a semi-nude seated male playing a lyre to the far left and an idealized Mercury with a steed to the far right, watching over the two gods for protection. A small cherub to the left of Mars aims his long pipe instrument at Vulcan, Venus' husband, who is trapped in his rocky grotto to the far left, anguishing the sight of his wife with another man. "The small but sophisticated audiences welcomed into Isabella's *studiolo* at the close of the Quattrocento encountered a powerful statement of cultural ambition. Mantegna's painting, its bright colors hanging against rich Venetian fabric, greeted spectators with an exciting array of literary personae."²⁵ This would reign true for the other mythological paintings preserved so neatly and predominantly in the same room, such as Mantegna's second work for the *studiolo*.

Mantegna's next commission for Isabella's *studiolo* was *Triumph of the Virtues* in 1502. (Fig. 8) In this painting, one can read the iconographic suite as Isabella depicted as the goddess of war and wisdom, Minerva, (Fig. 9) chasing out vices, allegorically depicted as women in several colored dresses, who have seemingly overtaken the lush landscape with ancient ruins surrounding them under a darkened, daunting sky. The accompanied friends of these vices all appear gruesome, beast-like, and deformed as they also flee in panic. One can also see a centaur trying to defile the goddess of the hunt and chastity, Diana, in the center of a swamp-like marsh. Cherubs with golden ribbons aid Minerva in chasing out these vices of Temptation and Idleness as three virtues---Fortitude, Justice, and Temperance---watch over upon a cloud in the top right

²⁵ Steven J. Cody, "Mantegna and the Orators: The Invention of the *Mars and Venus* for Isabella d'Este Gonzaga," *Artibus et Historiae* 38, no. 75 (2017): 51-77.

corner of the painting.²⁶ This would have been an excellent commission to show Isabella as a goddess of both war and wisdom, solely chasing out vices and temptations in her own life, rather than the goddess of love next to her husband as the god of war seen in *Parnassus*. However, the standard of a woman patron depicted as a powerful war goddess was also not decorum for the time. Instead, this painting rested next to Mantegna's first piece, showing a stark difference in allegory with Isabella joining her husband in harmony and unity juxtaposed with Isabella allegorized as Minerva fighting on her own to rid Mantua of intruders and overall sin.

The third painting commissioned by Isabella d'Este for her *studiolo* was not by Mantegna, but by Perugino, who created *The Battle of Love and Chastity* in 1503. (Fig. 10) This artwork was probably the least enjoyed by Isabella, who argued with the artist that Minerva should never be depicted nude. She also bargained for at least a dozen more figures to be included in the scene, which was refused by Perugino. Setting in rhythm with the theme of Isabella's *studiolo*, the scene represents combat between the vice of temptation and the virtue of chastity. Several mythological figures are in attendance within this painting, including anonymous fauns and nymphs along with Minerva, Diana, and Venus, the three most popular goddesses in mythological works. (Fig. 11)

The viewer sees a lush and open landscape with nymphs as trees and idle forest warriors in the background while a chaotic battle ensues in the foreground. Diana and her maidens open fire with bows and arrows as Cupid and his cherubs follow their example fighting back. Analyzing this painting through an iconographic lens would have been a reminder to both Isabella herself and the public that she was a person of chaste morals to preserve her public

²⁶ Stephen J. Campbell, *The Cabinet of Eros: Renaissance Mythological Painting and the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

image and political identity. Once again, in this third painting, it is Isabella fighting out beasts and vices within a lush landscape reminiscent of Mantua, to show the individually she could protect and serve Mantua just as her husband could, creating an ideal trust between her and Mantua upon Francesco's absence.

The last mythological panel painting to discuss is that of Lorenzo Costa the Elder, called *Allegory of Isabella d'Este's Coronation* from 1505-1506. (Fig. 17) This oil and tempera on canvas painting was the fourth addition to Isabella's *studiolo*, giving an iconographical perspective on her coronation as marchesa of Mantua. Costa became the new court painter to Isabella after this painting originally being commissioned to Mantegna, who had died before completion. This pastoral landscape takes place in what would seem as a mythological serene paradise in a peaceful field. In this Eden-like environment, a woman is being crowned, seemingly Isabella d'Este, as this would be an allegory for her coronation. Surrounding her are allegorical figures of her virtues as she is being crowned by Venus. (Fig. 18)

From an iconographical point of view, this scenario of being crowned within a heavenly garden by a mythological goddess would then show Isabella's link to both the earthly and heavenly realms. The lush landscape itself would also show her as bringing peace and harmony to Mantua upon her coronation. Likewise, she is yet again seen coronated alone without her husband by herself, yet again with the motive to show the public that she was capable of creating peace, harmony, and unity on her own as regent ruler. This would have been the endcap of the four paintings, showing a peaceful allegory of unity with Francesco and Isabella in the first painting *Parnassus*, followed by chaos yet triumph of virtue over vice in the second and third paintings, ending with a peaceful scene with just Isabella, representing her claim to Mantua and her success in ruling justly.

These paintings when combined in one large space would have played a powerful role in Isabella's motives to show her personal interests as well as her political seat of power by commissioning artworks depicting her as mythological icons, mostly acting as a defender for Mantua as well as a peacemaker to show her devotion and protection towards Mantua, seen visual behind the iconography deliberately used. Meanwhile, these paintings also acted as a power statement for a woman of her time, as women generally were not fit to commission mythological or pagan subjects such as goddesses, much less be depicted as such.

Conclusion

As Isabella fell into the snare of women's social standards during her life and reign in Mantua, she decided to break the molding when it came to her *studiolo* and *grotta*. "The act of displaying relics of the classical past within a space notionally dedicated to reading and meditation was more than a simple display of wealth. It was a display of moral and intellectual worth, something that could not be measured adequately in terms of monetary costs or material value."²⁷ She did not commission religious works to promote her devotion, but rather mythological paintings and portraiture to show off her personal interests and political power as regent ruler of Mantua, simultaneously as her independence as a political leader rose, successfully through iconography. Starting with modest portrait busts and very small coins, Isabella's art patronage evolved into more allegorical scenes of power with her depicted as Athena or Venus, primarily and individually apart from scenes with her husband. As Isabella's political independence rose in the absence of Francesco, this thesis has incorporated the parallels of these life events juxtaposed with her art commissions through an iconographical and feminist lens by discussing the method of iconography and how it benefited Isabella in her political endeavors. Just as the strong imagery within Isabella's commissions proved her political motives very clearly, the immense collection of literature, antiques, medals, statuettes, and paintings found in the Ducal Palace can also be seen as a blueprint for future women art patrons who would use art to portray their power in a socially acceptable way.

²⁷ Steven J. Cody, "Mantegna and the Orators: The Invention of the *Mars and Venus* for Isabella d'Este Gonzaga," *Artibus et Historiae* 38, no. 75 (2017): 51-77.

Figures



Fig. 1 Gian Cristoforo Romano, profile of *Portrait Bust of Isabella d'Este*, 1498, terracotta, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas



Fig. 2 Gian Cristoforo Romano, frontal of *Portrait Bust of Isabella d'Este*, 1498, terracotta, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas



Fig. 3 Gian Cristoforo Romano, *Portrait Medal of Isabella d'Este*, 1507, bronze, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Fig. 4 Gian Cristoforo Romano, *Portrait Medal of Isabella d'Este*, 1505, gold, diamonds, and enamel, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien



Fig. 5 Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of Isabella d'Este*, 1494, drawing with several colored pigments, Musée du Louvre, Paris



Fig. 6 Andrea Mantegna, *Parnassus*, 1497, tempera and gold on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris



Fig. 7 Andrea Mantegna, detail of Venus and Mars from *Parnassus*, 1497, tempera and gold on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris



Fig. 8 Andrea Mantegna, *Triumph of the Virtues*, 1502, tempera on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris



Fig. 9 Andrea Mantegna, detail of Minerva in *Triumph of the Virtues*, 1502, tempera on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris



Fig. 10 Pietro Perugino, *The Battle of Love and Chastity*, 1503, tempera on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris



Fig. 11 Pietro Perugino, detail of Minerva in *The Battle of Love and Chastity*, 1503, tempera on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris



Fig. 12 Giovanni Bellini, *Feast of the Gods*, 1514, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.



Fig. 13 Isabella d'Este's virtually reconstructed *studiolo*,
Palazzo Ducale, Mantua



Fig. 14 *Grotta* of Isabella d'Este,
Palazzo Ducale, Mantua



Fig. 15 Gian Cristoforo Romano, Marble door of the portal to Isabella d'Este's *studiolo*, 1501, Palazzo Ducale, Mantua



Fig. 16 Ceiling of Isabella d'Este's *Studiolo*, Palazzo Ducale, Mantua



Figure 17 Lorenzo Costa the Elder, *Allegory of Isabella d'Este's Coronation*, 1505-1506, oil and tempera on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris.



Figure 18 Lorenzo Costa the Elder, detail of *Allegory of Isabella d'Este's Coronation*, 1505-1506, oil and tempera on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

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