

The Evolution of Caterina Sforza's Renaissance Patronage

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Introduction

The visual and material culture of Europe from the middle of the 13th century to the 16th century is marked by a remarkable amount of activity that portrays both continuity of tradition, and exploration of new ideas. This period that is termed as 'Renaissance', was shaped by artists, patrons, donors, connoisseurs and the audience alike. But mainstream historical narrative has largely been masculine; the word 'patron' has its linguistic origin in the Latin terms, *pater* and *paternitas*, and the terminology 'Old Master' does not have a feminine equivalent (Crum, 2001).

It was men born into royal, noble and wealthy merchant families and those that belonged to the guilds or the church who commissioned large public works. The patrons commissioned art work that was religious and secular, collected artefacts, and funded the art projects. Women were not expected or encouraged to have an active public life independent of their male counterparts; nor did they have the financial means to do so. Even then, women assumed the roles of regents and absentee rulers, appreciated the value of art through custodianship, and directed the ceremonial display of art work.

From the letters of Fra Giovanni Dominici to Bartholomea degli Alberti, it is clear that women from wealthy families were encouraged to use religious portraits and statuettes to instruct the Dukes and Duchesses-in-waiting (Crum, 2001). They were in possession of exquisite bridal wealth that included *cassones*, *masserizia* and *objets d'arts*. Women like Isabella d'Este commissioned projects on their own, gave exacting instructions to the

¹ This essay was written for the Italian Renaissance Art History credit course at the University of Oxford in 2012. I thank my tutor Dr. Emma Rose Barber for her kind encouragement and insightful comments. All errors are mine.

craftsmen, and raised the necessary funding (Miller-Lawrence, 1997). As Carolyn Valone remarked, 'Patronage was an extremely public act that determined the expression of ideas, motives, taste, wealth and status besides constructing a public persona' (Valone, 2001).

Beyond conjugal devotion and dynastic promotion, patronage was a political statement and creative outlet for self-expression for women just as it was for men. This essay seeks to explore the role of Caterina Riario Sforza de' Medici, Countess of Imola and Forli, and how she 'harnessed the power of images and objects, rituals and ceremonies, and spirituality and intellect' to emerge as an important patron (De Vries, 2010).

The Many Selves of Sforza

'Often the unconventional is the collage of familiar notions merged in unfamiliar ways.'

Jo Burr Margadant (De Vries, 2010)

Every person is an uneasy mix of fragmentary and sometimes contradictory 'selves'. In the case of Caterina Sforza, these 'selves' competed in how she was portrayed in the historical narrative. She was brought to prominence by Niccolo Machiavelli in his *Discorsi* as a ruthless politician; but she was much admired by her contemporaries for other reasons. Her biography was included in Filippo Foresti's *Lives of Illustrious Women*. Sandro Botticelli fondly portrayed her in the panels of the Sistine Chapel.

Born as an illegitimate daughter of the Duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza of Milan, she was brought up in *clausura*, but Caterina immensely benefitted under the tutelage of a humanist poet, an education in Latin and Greek classics and Christian doctrine, besides outdoor activities like hunting and the chase. This holistic development of her *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* was to serve her in an incredible life of political intrigue, military adventures, grand soirées and domestic life.

An Unconventional Patron

Caterina Sforza was as unconventional in her patronage as she was in her other roles. She was with limited financial resources and under constant political threat, residing far away from any dominant centre of art. The renaissance patronage studies that has largely focussed on painting, sculpture and architecture executed by well-known artists have relegated decorative art including fine clothing, jewellery, silver plates and tapestries as ‘minor arts’. But this was a major component of the visual culture of the time, fundamental to both princely interiors and élite commissions. In Caterina’s case, most of her architectural projects have been dramatically altered, and the art work she possessed were pawned or sold in her life time or lost. Yet it is undisputable that she was involved in different levels of artistic and literary patronage as confirmed by her contemporaries through letters and documents.

a. Architectural Projects

Primarily, Caterina undertook large architectural projects during her regency of Riario including urban improvements, military architecture and residential refurbishments. The Rocca di Ravaldino was renovated with improved living quarters, enclosed gardens, large parks and hunting grounds. Caterina modelled her palace on Medici Casa Vécchia and ordered Majolica tiles from Florence. Elizabeth Lev describes that she transformed the gloomy fortress into a magnificent castle with the square belt of the ramparts, high vaulted ceilings, richly carved columns, and delicate ceramic tiles of red and yellow- the hallmarks of Romagnole architecture (Lev, 2011). The military housing on the fortress provided her protection. The inner sanctum *Il Paradiso* was her personal retreat with open loggias and frescoed wines.

True to the tradition of a widow, Caterina commissioned a marble tomb with the Riario court of arms at San Francesco for her husband². She also undertook the execution of the shrine of Madonna de Piratello³. Besides generous endowments to convents, she reserved a cell within a convent for personal retreat.

b. Portrait Medals

Caterina is also well known for her innovative use of portrait medals that were politically effective and far less expensive than other artefacts of power. In the first series issued as a regent, she comes across dressed in an embellished gown, her uncovered hair decorated with a diadem of pearls with the inscription *tibi et virtuti* (De Vries, 2010). In the series of 1493, the stoic figure of Caterina is complemented on the obverse by winged victory- a masculine symbol of power- with the inscription *victoriam fama se-quetar* (Lev, 2011). To coincide with her son Ottaviano's Pisa campaign, another series of portrait medal was issued illustrating Caterina cloaked in a widow's veil with her son on the obverse. Overt political statement with gendered iconography was the hallmark of Caterina's portrait medals.

c. Costumes and Jewellery

Caterina was also a fashion icon of her time whose 'carefully chosen clothing, elaborate embellished living and reception areas, commissions of art, support of intellectuals and participation in public events'⁴ was well remarked. Always the one for political pageants, the Countess dazzled the indifferent public of Imola with her first entry as 'she was decked in a gold brocade dress of pearls, heavy cape of black silk trimmed with gems, heavy veil and

² "To you and to virtue". Niccolo Fiorentino, circa. 1488, Portrait Medal of Caterina Sforza, Bronze, London, British Museum.

³ "Fame follows victory". Niccolo Fiorentino, circa. 1498, Portrait Medal of Caterina Sforza, Bronze, London, British Museum.

⁴ Tomb of Girolamo Riario, Chapel San Francesco, Imola.

jewelled silk hair net'⁵. She also ordered serially manufactured goods from artistic centres, an important and widespread component of Renaissance visual and material culture. The countess's unusual sponsorship of experiments in alchemy and botany yielded *Experimenti*-her notebook of 454 recipes on medicine, health and beauty.

Conclusion

Caterina Sforza was an astute and resourceful patron who continued traditions, constantly foraying into the uncharted territories of the male prerogative. Her only surviving portrait is a three-quarter view of the countess in her Riario castle⁶- an unusually bold posture for a Renaissance woman. Incidentally, this portrait symbolizes the very essence of both Caterina and Renaissance- change in keeping with the tradition and the unconventional with the humanist touch of *splendore*.

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⁵ Santa Maria del Piratello, Imola.

⁶ Fra Filippo da Bergamo, 1497, Portrait of Caterina Sforza, Woodcut, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University, Houghton Library.

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