Lady with an Ermine
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Lady with an Ermine is a painting by Leonardo da Vinci, from around 1489–1490. The subject of the portrait is identified as Cecilia Gallerani, and was probably painted at a time when she was the mistress of Lodovico Sforza, Duke of Milan, and Leonardo was in the service of the Duke.

The painting is one of only four female portraits painted by Leonardo, the others being the Mona Lisa, the portrait of Ginevra de' Benci and La belle ferronnière. It is displayed by the Czartoryski Museum, Kraków, Poland and is cited in the museum's guide as the first truly modern portrait. When exhibited in The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, it was described as "signal[ling] a breakthrough in the art of psychological portraiture".[1]

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Subject and symbolism

The small portrait generally called The Lady with the Ermine was painted in oils on wooden panel by Leonardo da Vinci. At the time of its painting, the medium of oil paint was relatively new to Italy, having been introduced in the 1470s. Leonardo was one of those artists who adopted the new medium and skillfully exploited its qualities. The sitter has been identified with reasonable security as Cecilia Gallerani who was the mistress of Leonardo's employer, Lodovico Sforza, known as Lodovico il Moro.[2]

At the time of her portrait, Cecilia was about sixteen. She was one of a large family, neither rich nor noble. Her father served for a time at the Duke's court. Cecilia was renowned for her beauty, her scholarship, and her poetry. She was betrothed at the age of about ten years to a young nobleman of the house of Visconti but the marriage was called off. Cecilia became the mistress of the Duke and bore him a son, but he chose to marry a girl from a nobler family, Beatrice d'Este.[3]
The painting shows a half-length figure, the body of the young woman turned at a three-quarter angle towards her right, but her face turned towards her left. Her gaze is directed neither straight ahead, nor towards the viewer, but towards a "third party" beyond the picture's frame. In her arms Cecilia holds a small white-coated stoat, known as an ermine. Cecilia's dress is comparatively simple, revealing that she is not a noblewoman. Her coiffure, known as a "coazone", confines her hair smoothly to her head with two bands of hair bound on either side of her face and a long plait at the back. Her hair is held in place by a fine gauze veil with a woven border of gold-wound threads, a black band and a sheath over the plait.[4]

There are several interpretations of the significance of the ermine in her portrait. The ermine, a stoat in its winter coat, was a traditional symbol of purity because it was believed that an ermine would face death rather than soil its white coat:[5] Leonardo amused himself by compiling a bestiary in his old age; in it he recorded

MODERATION The ermine out of moderation never eats but once a day, and it would rather let itself be captured by hunters than take refuge in a dirty lair, in order not to stain its purity";[6]

he repeats in another note, "Moderation curbs all the vices. The ermine prefers to die rather than soil itself."[7] Ermines were kept as pets by the aristocracy and their white pelts were used to line or trim aristocratic garments. For Ludovico il Moro the ermine had a further personal significance in that he had been in the Order of the Ermine in 1488 and used it as a personal emblem.[8] The association of the ermine with Cecilia could have been multiply intended, referring to her purity and to the status of her lover. Alternatively, the ermine could be a pun on her name because the Greek for ermine is galay. This would be in keeping with Leonardo's placement of a juniper bush behind the figure in his portrait of Ginevra de Benci in reference to her name. Given that Gallerani gave birth to a son acknowledged by Lodovico in May 1491, and the association of weasels and pregnancy in Italian Renaissance culture, it is also possible that the animal was a symbol of Cecilia's pregnancy.[9] In addition, it has been speculated[10] that the animal in the painting appears to be not an ermine but a white ferret, a colour favoured in the Middle Ages because of the ease of seeing the white animal in thick undergrowth.

As in many of Leonardo's paintings, the composition comprises a pyramidal spiral and the sitter is caught in the motion of turning to her left, reflecting Leonardo's life-long preoccupation with the dynamics of movement. The three-quarter profile portrait was one of his many innovations. Il Moro's court poet, Bernardo Bellincioni, was the first to propose that Cecilia is poised as if listening to an unseen speaker.

This work in particular shows Leonardo's expertise in painting the human form. The outstretched hand of Cecilia was painted with great detail. Leonardo paints every contour of each fingernail, each wrinkle around her knuckles, and even the flexing of the tendon in her bent finger.

Conservation

The "Lady with an ermine" has been subject to two detailed laboratory examinations. The first was in the Warsaw Laboratories, the findings being published by K. Kwiatkowski in 1955. In 1992, the painting underwent examination and restoration in the Washington National Gallery Laboratories under the supervision of David Bull.[11]
The painting is in oil on a thin walnut wood panel, about 4 to 5 mm thick, prepared with a layer of white gesso and a layer of brownish underpaint.[11] The panel is in good condition apart from a break to the upper left side of the picture. Its size has never been altered, as indicated by a narrow unpainted strip on all four sides of the painting. The background was thinly overpainted with unmodulated black, probably between 1830 and 1870, when the damaged corner was restored. It has been suggested that it was Eugène Delacroix who painted the background. The previous colour of the background was a bluish grey.[11]

X-ray and microscopic analysis have revealed the charcoal-pounced outline of the pricked preparatory drawing on the prepared undersurface, a technique Leonardo learned in the studio of Verrocchio.[12]

The painted surface reveals that apart from the black of the background, and some abrasion caused by cleaning, the painting is almost entirely by the master’s hand. There has been some slight retouching of her features in red, and the edge of the veil in ochre. Some scholars believe that there is also some later retouching of the hands.[11] Leonardo's fingerprints have been found in the surface of the paint indicating that he used his fingers to blend his delicate brushstrokes.[13] Kwiatkowski observed that Leonardo had used his left hand to paint the coat of the ermine.[11]

**Provenance**

The painting was acquired in Italy by Prince Adam Jerzy Czartoryski, the son of Princess Izabela Czartoryska and Prince Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski in 1798 and incorporated into the Czartoryskis’ family collections at Puławy in 1800. The inscription on the top-left hand corner of the painting, LA BELE FERIONIERE. LEONARD D'AWINCI., was probably added by a restorer shortly after its arrival in Poland,[14] and before the background was overpainted.[15] Czartoryski was clearly aware that it was a Leonardo, though the painting had not ever been discussed in print; unfortunately, there is no record of any previous owner. The Belle Ferronière is the Leonardo portrait in the Louvre, whose sitter bears such a close resemblance that the Czartoryskis considered this sitter to be the same. The painting travelled extensively in the nineteenth century; Princess Czartoryski rescued it in advance of the invading Russian army in 1830, hid it, then sent it to Dresden and on to the Czartoryski place of exile in Paris, the Hôtel Lambert, returning it to Kraków in 1882. In 1939, almost immediately after the German occupation of Poland, it was seized by the Nazis and sent to the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin. In 1940 Hans Frank, the Governor General of Poland, requested that it be returned to Kraków, where it hung in his suite of offices. At the end of the Second World War it was discovered by Allied troops in Frank's country home in Bavaria. It has since returned to Poland and is once more on display at the Czartoryski Museum in Kraków.

In the book of 1877 about Leonardo it is said that the location of Cecilia's portrait is not known and its owners in the eighteenth century are mentioned: "It is said that the original portrait of the beautiful Cecilia was, during the last century, in the possession of the Marquis Boursane at Milan. But where is it now?".[16][17] Perhaps Adam Czartoryski bought the picture from them. Currently the painting is in Old Town, Kraków, on display at the Royal Castle.

**Popular Culture**

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady_with_an_Ermine
In the alternate history novel Fatherland, set in a world in which Nazi Germany won World War II, this work turns up in a Swiss safe deposit box in 1964, having been looted by prominent Nazis.

Notes

2. ^ M. Kemp, entry for The Lady with an Ermine in the exhibition Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration (Washington-New Haven-London) pp 271f, states "the identification of the sitter in this painting as Cecilia Gallerani is reasonably secure"; Janice Shell and Grazioso Sironi, "Cecilia Gallerani: Leonardo's Lady with an Ermine" Artibus et Historiae 13 No. 25 (1992:47-66) discuss the career of this identification since it was first suggested in 1900.
3. ^ Who was Cecilia Gallerani? (http://www.creval.it/gallerie_en/eventi/cecilia.htm), Barbara Fabjan and Pietro C. Marani, Exhibition notes, October 15, 1998
7. ^ James Beck, "The Dream of Leonardo da Vinci", Artibus et Historiae 14 No. 27 (1993:185-198) p. 188; Beck adds, "the artist left a pictorial record to accompany his written testimony—the famous Portrait of a Lady with an ermine (Czartoryski Collection, Cracow)

External links

- Czartoryski Museum (http://www.muzeum-czartoryskich.krakow.pl/)
- BBC article on Lady with an Ermine (http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/leonardo/gallery/ladyermine.shtml)
- Article from the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on the painting and its history (http://www.jsonline.com/onwisconsin/arts/aug02/70314.asp?format=print)
- *San Francisco Chronicle* on wartime threat to the work (http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2003/03/09/PK106032.DTL)

**References**


Categories: Leonardo da Vinci paintings | Collection of the Czartoryski Museum  
| Art and cultural repatriation | 1485 paintings | 15th-century portraits

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