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Costume Style and Leonardo's Knots in the *Lady with an Ermine*

Costume Style

To understand the costume worn by the sitter for Leonardo's *Lady with an Ermine*, it is necessary to recall the evolution of womens' fashions in Quattrocento Italy. Regional differences reflected the political disintegration of the Italian nation into several independent states, most of which were simply city-states. Nevertheless, until the middle of the fifteenth century, in some places even longer, the international court fashion originating in France and Flanders predominated in Italy: high, padded, heart- and horn-shaped headdresses or turbans; high, uncovered, and convex foreheads; small V-shaped décolletages; tight-fitting bodices; and long, trailing skirts. The style of the period can best be seen in the paintings and drawings of Antonio Pisanello, as well as in the figurative decorations on *cassoni*.

The style of the Italian Early Renaissance was established in the second half of the fifteenth century, with its chief center in Florence. It is well documented in profile portraits by Alesso Baldovinetti, Paolo Uccello, Antonio Pollaiuolo, Sandro Botticelli, and Piero della Francesca. A particularly good example is offered in the fresco portrait of Giovanna degli Albizzi by Domenico Ghirlandaio in the Florentine church of Santa Maria Novella.

In such portraits, foreheads remain uncovered, but the high Gothic headdresses have been replaced by transparent veils and nets and the hair is arranged in elaborate plaits, braids, and knots, partly flowing and richly ornamented with ribbons, fillets, and pearls and other jewelry. Blond hair prevails, being praised above all. Gowns are made of heavy, patterned brocades and velvets, with added embroidery. Bodices are still tight and laced, sleeves are tied with ribbons, decoratively slashed, and white blouses show through the slits. Skirts fall in organ-pipe pleats.

Despite the existence of their own highly developed local style, Italian women were receptive to fashions imported from abroad. Spanish influence coming via Naples, ruled by the Aragon dynasty, was especially strong.

A unique new style was born at the Castilian court around 1470. It incorporated medieval traditions, Moorish motifs, Italian Renaissance ideas, and some innovations

of its own. Dark brown or black hair was generally favored, divided in two smooth waves circling the cheeks, gathered at the back in a long queue, covered on the head with a cap, the braid being hidden in a long cloth casing (called in Spanish *el tranzado*, in English pigtail). In the front the arrangement of the hair was identical with the dominant fashion for centuries among Oriental women as far as Persia and Arabia, as well as Moorish Andalusia. Braids were put into ornamented casings already in Romanesque France. The small cap at the back was fixed by a fillet across the brow.

The bodices of the Spanish gowns were similar to Italian ones but the skirts were entirely different. In 1468, when Juana de Portugal, the wife of the king of Castile, Enrique IV el Impotente, was pregnant with an illegitimate child, she invented a bell-shaped underskirt stiffened by reed hoops (*los verdugos* or *guarda-infante*, in English farthingale). A typical Spanish *los verdugos* gown was completed by a cape with one vertical opening for the arm (*sbernia*) and buskin shoes (*los chapines*), also an Oriental invention.

The fashion style *alla castellana* could only be created on Spanish soil as a successful combination of different elements in a highly organic and original form. It determined a new system of movements, poses, and gestures, contributing to the Spanish court etiquette which was soon to fascinate Europe. In a very short time the Spanish style for women had penetrated neighboring countries, appearing ephemerally in France, Flanders, England, and Germany and making its greatest conquest in Italy. It rarely kept its rigid form; more often than not, some typically Spanish features were combined with local ones. Who was capable of imitating fully the Spanish ladies?

It was about 1480 that the Spanish fashion entered Italy through Naples, and over the next ten years it reached the northern part of the country. Its path may be traced with great accuracy thanks to a profusion of literary and iconographic sources. One of the first paintings with ladies represented in Spanish style is Lorenzo Costa's *The Bentivoglio Family Before the Madonna Enthroned*, dated 1488, in the church of San Giacomo Maggiore in Bologna.

Lucrezia Borgia and Isabella and Beatrice d'Este were greatly responsible for the spread of the new fashion to northern Italy. The court of Este in Ferrara was closely connected to the Aragon court in Naples. Beatrice, daughter of Eleonore of Aragon, married the duke of Milan, Ludovico Sforza ("il Moro") in 1491, and introduced the Spanish style to Milan. Until then the ladies of Milan had worn costumes similar to the Florentine style, with some German influences (*alla tedesca*). Inspired by Beatrice, they combed their hair down in smooth waves, adopted the pigtails falling from small caps and the black fillets, and ornamented the coiffure and the neck with pearls and other jewels, favoring beads of black amber (*ambra nera*). They accepted the *sbernia*, but were not brave enough to wear the farthingales and buskin shoes.

This severely formal fashion is depicted in a great number of court portraits on panels, in miniatures, murals, marble busts, and even tiny cameos. Yet it was extinguished after Beatrice's death in 1497 and Ludovico's expulsion from Milan two years later. The most notable portraits of Milanese ladies in Spanish dress are as follows: Beatrice d'Este in the *Pala Sforzesca* (Brera Gallery, Milan) and in a bust by Gian Cristoforo Romano (Louvre, Paris); the supposed Beatrice in the *Dama alla Reticella*, school of Leonardo (Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Milan), and in a painting by Alessandro Araldi (Uffizi Gallery, Florence); *Bona of Savoy* (The National Gallery, London); *Bianca Maria Sforza* by Ambrogio da Predis (National Gallery of Art, Washington); and Lucrezia Crivelli (?) in *La Belle Ferronnière*, school of Leonardo (Louvre) [Fig. 15].

The *Lady with an Ermine* belongs to this distinguished list. The three-quarter position of her head allows one to see only the outline of the cap and pigtail. A gauze veil held by a black fillet covers the head. The auburn hair, combed down, has lost its original wavy line and now comes under the chin due to a fault in renovation. The sitter wears a necklace of black amber. Her gown, maroon in color, is embroidered in patterns of knots and loops. The black lines in the front of the bodice and the tapes of the sleeves are unfortunately repainted. She also has a blue *sbernia* with a golden lining.

Most scholars have dated the painting about 1483, just after Leonardo's arrival in Milan. This view is based upon the correspondence between Cecilia Gallerani, a lady of the Sforza court, and Isabella d'Este. In a letter of 1497, Cecilia wrote that she was quite young at the time when Leonardo painted her, and that she was

14) Leonardo da Vinci, *Lady with an Ermine*, Czartoryski Collection, Cracow.

15) Leonardo da Vinci, *La Belle Ferronnière*, 1490–95, detail, Louvre, Paris.

no longer like the portrait. Nevertheless, it cannot be proved that she is in fact the subject of the *Lady with an Ermine*. We do not know any Milanese portrait of around 1483 showing Spanish dress; almost all those portraits in which the fashion appears were painted about 1490 and in the next decade, at the time of the great matrimonial connections of Milan, Ferrara, and Naples. It would therefore seem correct to date the *Lady with an Ermine* about 1490.

Leonardo's Knots

The sitter's gown in the *Lady with an Ermine* is decorated with specific ornaments known as "Leonardo's knots" (*nodi di Leonardo*). No scholar has paid any attention to them, possibly because they are located in the dark portions of the picture and are partly deformed by repainting.

Three different types of ornaments may be discerned: First, double loops in figure-of-eight form repeated in an endless system (on the edge of the décolletage and on the sleeves); second, endless knots, slightly deformed, repeated in square fields (on the right side of the bodice, as well as at the top of the right sleeve); and third, knots as above with the addition of quatrefoil loops (on the left sleeve under the layer of red paint, visible only when lighted from a certain angle).

A comparative basis for the problem is offered by the knots Leonardo drew in his manuscripts, in particular in the *Codice Atlantico*; the emblematic etchings founded on the knots and interlacing motifs with the inscription *Leonardi Vinci Academia*, which are attributed to Leonardo, and woodcut copies of them made by Albrecht Dürer; the mural decoration of the Sala delle Asse in the Castello Sforzesco in Milan; and finally, by the analogous motifs of knots and loops in the costume decorations of certain other paintings by Leonardo.

There is also literary evidence. Vasari noted Leonardo's passion for knot designs; it is also known that he himself took such designs from Florence to Milan. Scholars were intrigued by these knots very early on, the French positivists J. D. Passavant and G. d'Adda explaining them as patterns for costume embroidery. More recently the interpretation was greatly broadened, as some symbolic intricacies were presumed. Ludwig Goldscheider put forward the suggestion that the emblematic engravings represented tickets for scientific debates organized by Leonardo, and read in the knots a cryptographic signature of the painter, based on a pun from *vincire* (to lace, to knot) and Vinci. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy interpreted the emblems as an old labyrinth subject or even a universal form denoting the cosmos. Mircea Eliade explained the knots as an ancient magic sign and an attribute of such Indo-European gods as Varuna, Ahriman, and Odin. Marcel Brion, in summing up the opinions of his predecessors, also stressed the symbolic values of Leonardo's knots.

These investigations were largely devoid of analysis of the forms Leonardo's knots take. Here the knots may be divided into several groups. Some of them simply repeat mainly Moorish and Turkish patterns, others are free variations on Oriental motifs, while still others are the artist's invention based on the European ornamental tradition.

Particularly important is the endless knot applied both in the emblematic compositions and in the gown decoration of the *Lady with an Ermine*. Deriving from the Far East, it belongs, as the sign of longevity, to the set of Eight Lucky Symbols of Buddhism. This sign was extremely popular and spread from one country to another, appearing on vessels, textiles, rugs, jewels, coins, and arms from at least the twelfth century. It came to Italy as early as the fourteenth century and is found, for instance, in Luccan textiles, but was much more in fashion by the second half of the fifteenth century, especially in Venice. Leonardo's drawings of the endless knot have survived in several places in the *Codice Atlantico*.

Thus we find in the costume and headdress of the *Lady with an Ermine* specific motifs of Oriental derivation: the Moorish-inspired Spanish style and the ancient, enigmatic knots.