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PIERO DI COSIMO'S SIMONETTA VESPUCCI
A FANTASY PORTRAIT

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PIERO DI COSIMO'S SIMONETTA VESPUCCI
A FANTASY PORTRAIT

By
Michelle Wharton Vanderzant

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ABSTRACT

PIERO DI COSIMO'S SIMONETTA VESPUCCI

A FANTASY PORTRAIT

By

Michelle Wharton Vanderzant

Piero di Cosimo's Simonetta Vespucci is, like many of his other paintings, problematic in its dating and subject matter. Stylistic analysis of Piero's oeuvre suggests that he painted it during the 1490s. The portrait conforms to the Quattrocento profile tradition, although its evocative landscape is unique. The inscription "Simonetta Vespucci" appears to be a later addition, and there is apparently no basis for identifying this or any other painting as an imaginary portrait of Simonetta Vespucci. Vasari's description of a "work by the hand of Piero, a very beautiful head of Cleopatra, with an asp wound round her neck" recommends the identification of the woman in Simonetta Vespucci as Cleopatra. The painting is a fantasy portrait and probably belongs to a category of profane images prevalent in the late fifteenth century. Sixteenth century literary sources suggest that such images were viewed in the bedroom and were believed to influence procreation.

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INTRODUCTION

Piero di Cosimo's Simonetta Vespucci as Cleopatra (Figure 1) is, like many of his other paintings, problematic in its dating and subject matter. Measuring 57 by 42 centimeters and executed in tempera on panel, this painting may well be identical with the "beautiful head of Cleopatra, with an asp wound round her neck" mentioned by Vasari which he saw in the house of Francesco da San Gallo.¹ Until the early part of the nineteenth century, the painting was in the possession of the Vespucci family. In 1841, it was acquired from the last member of the Vespucci family by M. Reiset, director of the Louvre and well known connoisseur.² The Duke of Aumale purchased the painting from Reiset in 1879; it now hangs in the Musée Condé, Chantilly.³ No record exists of a commission and aside from the portrait's beauty and enigmatic appeal, no other facts can be brought to the

¹Giorgio Vasari, Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, trans., by Gaston Duc de Vere, Vol. IV (London: Philip Lee Warner, 1913), p. 146.

²Louise M. Richter, Chantilly in History and Art (London: John Murray, 1913), p. 146.

³François Anatole Gruyer, Chantilly Musée Condé Notice des Peintures (Paris: Braun and Clément, 1899), p. 21.



Figure 1: Simonetta Vespucci Piero di Cosimo

understanding of the subject or its placement in Piero's oeuvre.

Piero's fanciful profile portrait of a woman compels and delights. A dramatic thundercloud frames the face, and a snake coils around Simonetta's necklace seemingly striking its own tail. The beauty of the woman dispells this threatening atmosphere. Simonetta Vespucci is one of Piero's eccentric fairy tales. Who is the woman? A portrait is a presumed record of an individual's existence, yet this woman appears to belong to an imaginary world.

Mina Bacci in her monographs on Piero di Cosimo has summarized the scholarship on Simonetta Vespucci. The provenance and attribution to Piero were established in the nineteenth century. The portrait has been interpreted as the death of Simonetta Vespucci or Cleopatra. The inscription is probably a later addition, perhaps by the Vespucci family, and the date assigned Simonetta Vespucci has been variously made between the extremes of 1480 (Knapp) and 1520 (Ragghianti). This range represents Piero's entire career.⁴

The purpose of this paper is to place Simonetta Vespucci within the context of Piero di Cosimo's work, the Quattrocento portrait tradition, and what is known of the Renaissance household. Piero's eclectic style defies a precise

⁴See Mina Bacci, Piero di Cosimo (Milan: Bramante Editrice, 1966), p. 69, for a comprehensive bibliography on Simonetta Vespucci.

chronology. I sought patterns in his paintings and grouped works according to common themes and repeated motifs. Jean Lipman in "The Florentine Profile Portrait in the Quattrocento," has established the formal aspects of profile portraits painted between 1450-1500.⁵ Simonetta Vespucci conforms to this tradition despite the imaginative landscape background. The inscription "Simonetta Ianvensis Vespuccia" has associated the portrait with the famous Florentine beauty who was the Petrarchan mistress of Giuliano di Medici. The legend of the "Bella Simonetta" popularized in the nineteenth century led to the identification of a number of Quattrocento paintings as imaginary portraits of Simonetta Vespucci. What do these portraits have in common and if they were not meant to be portraits of an actual individual, why were they painted? Vasari's identification of a "beautiful head of Cleopatra" by Piero raises the further question of the role of the Egyptian queen in literature and painting during the fifteenth century. The portrait is intimate in scale suggesting that it might have been a household image. Was it intended as something other than decoration? There is no doubt that Piero celebrates feminine charms in this beautiful portrait of a woman with a snake wrapped around her neck.

⁵ Jean Lipman, "The Florentine Profile Portrait in the Quattrocento," Art Bulletin 18 (March 1936): 54-102.

A Suggested Date for Piero di Cosimo's

Simonetta Vespucci

Piero di Cosimo (b. c. 1461, d. 1521) was artistically active during a period of great stylistic change in Italian art. A more precise chronology for his work could indicate the assimilation of such change as well as document Piero's own artistic development. Scholars disagree on Piero's chronology, and the date of Simonetta Vespucci is no exception. Fritz Knapp compares the profile of Simonetta to Mary in the Visitation with Saints Nicholas and Anthony Abbot, the nymphs in Hylas and the Nymphs and Catherine in the Innocenti Altarpiece. The fantastic quality of Piero's portrait is reminiscent of Sandro Botticelli and Filippino Lippi in their work of the 1480s.¹ Mina Bacci agrees with such an early dating.² A. Venturi, C. Gamba and R. Van Marle, on the other hand, place the portrait within the last years of the Quattrocento.³ Van Marle groups Piero's works

¹Fritz Knapp, Piero di Cosimo Sein Leben und Seine Werke (Halle: Verlag Von Wilhelm Knapp, 1898), p. 30, 31.

²Bacci, Piero di Cosimo, p. 68.

³Bacci, L'Opera Completa di Piero di Cosimo, p. 86.

according to what he sees as a succession of influences on the artist, starting with that supposedly from his teacher Cosimo Rosselli, and then those that might be credited, respectively, to Filippino Lippi, Lorenzo di Credi, Signorelli, and Leonardo. Simonetta, Van Marle thinks, has features that recall both Lippi and Signorelli especially. Other works that Van Marle includes in what he postulates as a Filippino-Signorelli phase in Piero's career are Vulcan and Aeolus, Hylas and the Nymphs, the Strassburg Tondo and the Visitation. He believes that these works evidence characteristics of Filippino's advanced stage and therefore would place this group in the last decade of the fifteenth century, even after 1495.⁴ According to Langton Douglas, Simonetta Vespucci is one of the first works that Piero painted after Leonardo's return to Florence in 1500; "for, while it gives clear proof of that master's direct influence on Piero-both in its wonderful landscape and in the modelling of the head, neck, and bust of the subject... we also find in it evidence of the lingering influence of Filippino Lippi."⁵ Alfred Frankfurter believes that Piero adopted a style using line and delicate color harmonies reminiscent of Botticelli for his third period of work; in Frankfurter's opinion Simonetta

⁴Raimond Van Marle, The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting, Vol. XIII (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1931), p. 356.

⁵R. Langton Douglas, Piero di Cosimo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), p. 74.

Vespucci is among the paintings of that period which begins after 1510.⁶

More recent research into the activities of patrons at the end of the Quattrocento has produced records of accounts paid to Piero di Cosimo.⁷ This strong circumstantial evidence suggests dates for three of Piero's works. The Visitation with Saints Nicholas and Anthony Abbot was originally the Altarpiece for the chapel of Saint Nicholas in Santo Spirito. Piero Capponi commissioned Clemente del Tasso to build a frame for the altarpiece in 1489. Stephanie Craven argues that the Quattrocento practice of building the frame first is likely to have occurred in the case of the Capponi Altarpiece. The decorations of Santo Spirito followed a uniform program; all the altarpieces were the same size. In the same church, Guiliano da San Gallo carved the frame for the Bardi Altarpiece before Botticelli was employed to paint it. Therefore, 1489 is the earliest date possible for the Visitation. A more general date could be proposed as around 1490.⁸

The accounts of Filippo Strozzi Il Giovane contain records of payment to Piero di Cosimo for the Mummery of the

⁶Alfred Frankfurter, "Piero di Cosimo: A Modern Master of the Renaissance," The Art News 37 (November 12, 1938): 21.

⁷Stephanie J. Craven, "Three Dates for Piero di Cosimo," Burlington Magazine 117 (September 1975): 574-576.

⁸Ibid., p. 574.

Dead and "lavoro di camera mia."⁹ Vasari describes the Triumph of Death "which was contrived mostly by Piero, when he was already of a mature age..."¹⁰ The payment date of 1507¹¹ agrees with Vasari's report. The account books indicate only partial payments to Piero for a room decoration. Relying on Vasari's description of a panel by Piero belonging to the Strozzi family and the provenance of Liberation of Andromeda, Craven proposes that the partial payments made in 1510 were for this panel.¹² Such circumstantial evidence would seem to give a date for Liberation of Andromeda, an important mature work, of around 1510.

The twenty years between the Visitation and Liberation of Andromeda comprise half of Piero's career. Within that period Piero's style changed significantly, but not, contrary to what Vasari says, almost from one work to the next.¹³ Patterns emerge in Piero's work and his paintings can be grouped according to subject matter, style, and facility. Simonetta Vespucci is, in my opinion, one of a group of works painted between 1490 and the first years of

⁹Ibid., p. 575.

¹⁰Vasari, Vol. IV, p. 128.

¹¹Craven, p. 575.

¹²Ibid., p. 576.

¹³Vasari, Vol. IV, p. 127.

the sixteenth century. Populated by Piero's "exceptional humanity,"¹⁴ these paintings share a common attitude towards landscape, and express Piero's naturalistic interests and attention to surface detail. In their individuality they suggest a complete independence from Cosimo Rosselli whom he assisted in the Sistine Chapel from 1481-82.¹⁵ These paintings do not appear to be affected by Leonardo's sfumato or figure types which are evident in the Andromeda, from very likely c. 1510. A tradition starting in the sixteenth century claims that Leonardo designed the composition of Liberation of Andromeda.¹⁶

Piero creates in this group of works a species of humanity that undergoes a reciprocal metamorphosis between human and animal form. Fauns and satyrs are capable of human tenderness in Death of Procris and Lapiths and Centaurs, whereas in the Hunt, humans are as bestial as the animals they slaughter. The short, stocky figures in the Visitation's Massacre of Innocents are the prototype of this latter aspect of Piero's humanity. Piero's ideal type of beauty is portrayed in Simonetta Vespucci, Death of Procris, and Mars and Venus. Oriental shawls drape rounded shoulders

¹⁴S.J. Freedberg, Painting of the High Renaissance in Rome and Florence (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 73.

¹⁵Bacci, L'Opera Completa di Piero di Cosimo, p. 83.

¹⁶Freedberg, p. 74.

and breasts. Golden red hair is braided and adorned with jewels. The female satyr cradling the dying satyr is both beauty and the beast. The life cycle of Piero's people is one of extremes: the senseless destruction of Forest Fire and the building of a new society in Vulcan and Aeolus; the debaucheries of Lapiths and Centaurs and the peaceful slumber of Mars and Venus. In Simonetta Vespucci the thundercloud and snake introduce a theme of latent violence. Feminine beauty prevails, however, and like the other paintings of this period, the threatening atmosphere gives way to the fanciful and bizarre.

Piero often takes liberties with the Quattrocento landscape tradition in these paintings but remains within conventional boundaries. The shaded brown hillocks and generalized blue mountains which create pattern as much as the illusion of distance in Simonetta Vespucci are typical of Piero's landscapes in this period. Because the sky combined with the face is the compositional focus in Simonetta Vespucci, the panel has none of the individual flowering plants that appear in the foreground of Vulcan and Aeolus and proliferate in Fall of Vulcan, Mars and Venus, and Death of Procris. The green and dry tree, a conventional landscape motif, flanks the "Simonetta" as it does also Mary and Elizabeth in the Visitation. The motif symbolizes Christ's sacrifice. In the Renaissance, it was believed that the tree of life dried up and died after the fall of man. The sacrifice of Christ's passion brought the tree to life again.

The significance of the motif in Simonetta Vespucci is not clear. Piero exploits the graphic character of the denuded tree in the Pugliese panels and the Lapiths and Centaurs. The same effect is achieved by the scaffolding in Vulcan and Aeolus and Return from the Hunt. The unexpected silhouette intrigues Piero throughout his career, and in paintings of his that I would consider to be later, from c. 1505 on, such as the Vespucci panels, the Uffizi Immaculate Conception, and the Berlin Adoration, he exaggerates and animates these landscape forms. Piero's "stranger imaginations came to be confined among flora, fauna and geology of his backgrounds."¹⁷ The bulbous tree stump in the Vespucci panels appears to be something more than just a tree. The sea monster's lair itself writhes in Liberation of Andromeda, and a zoomorphic mountain towers over the village. Nature participates in these narratives. The light of the Heavenly Spirit descends with the dove and breaks through the clouds in the Uffizi Immaculate Conception, and clouds seem to imitate Prometheus' gestures in the Story of Prometheus. In Simonetta Vespucci, which I think is an earlier work, the thundercloud, despite its evocative shape, can still be regarded as a natural, not a bizarre, phenomenon. Likewise, in the Pugliese panels, the Visitation, and the Fall of Vulcan, the drifting clouds are, it would seem, nothing more than the effects of a warm day.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 73.

Piero's naturalistic observations include, of course, more than just clouds. He embellishes many of the paintings that I would locate in the 1490s with curious details of flora, fauna, and even insects. He depicts the individual scales of the snake coiling around the Simonetta's neck. A wallflower has been specifically identified in the Visitation,¹⁸ but even more interesting are the cattails, which may have no symbolical significance, other than signifying Piero's own evident interest in individual flora as well as fauna. Tadpoles swim in the pond in the Toledo tondo, and a grasshopper rests on a rock in the foreground of Vulcan and Aeolus. The giraffe in this Vulcan picture was probably painted from life and may indicate the date for the canvas. A shipment of rare animals, including a giraffe, reached Florence in 1487. Erwin Panofsky suggests a date not too long after 1490.¹⁹

Passages of consummate surface detail accompany Piero's naturalistic observations. For example, Piero paints each link of Simonetta's gold chain. The embroidered picnic cloth and the woven mat in Lapiths and Centaurs are rendered in such detail that either could be reproduced in actual weaving. The text held by St. Nicholas in the Visitation

¹⁸Mirella Levi d'Ancona, The Garden of the Renaissance: Botanical Symbolism in Italian Painting (Florence: Leo S. Olsecki, 1977), p. 270.

¹⁹Erwin Panofsky, "Early History of Man," Studies in Iconology (New York: Harper and Row), p. 47 note 44.

has been identified.²⁰ The golden balls reflect an image of a church and the gold braid of St. Anthony's robe details images of other saints. Contrasts of fabric - gauze, satin, brocade, appear in the Visitation, Fall of Vulcan, the Innocenti Altarpiece, Mars and Venus, Death of Procris and Lapiths and Centaurs. Metal objects, such as Mars's suit of armor, the dinnerware and weapons in Lapiths and Centaurs, and the jewelry in the Innocenti Altarpiece capture Piero's eye. This interest in surface detail indicates Northern influence transmitted by paintings such as the Portinari Altarpiece or absorbed indirectly through the work of other Quattrocento artists.

An analysis of compositional and figural development suggests a rough chronology for this group of paintings: some of them appearing to be earlier and others later within this span of years between c. 1490 and c. 1505. The carousel-like horses, reminiscent of Uccello's, in Allegory and Vulcan and Aeolus, with their disproportionately small heads and wooden limbs seem to be early renderings of the horse when compared to the greater success of the retreating steed in the Hunt. The transition from foreground to middle-ground in Death of Procris and particularly Mars and Venus, is more subtle than in the Vulcan panels or the Visitation.

²⁰ Dario Covi, "Lettering in Fifteenth Century Florentine Painting," Art Bulletin 45 (1963): 16.

But even in these panels consistent anatomical accuracy still eludes Piero.

The Pugliese panels pose a thorny problem in Piero's chronology. The Forest Fire, Hunt and Return from the Hunt are generally acknowledged to be the "various scenes with little figures" executed round a chamber in the house of Francesco del Pugliese.²¹ The Pugliese Palace was constructed in 1488, and therefore the earliest possible date for the series might be around 1490.²² The inconsistent handling of the figures and the compositions make it difficult to date the paintings as a group. Return from the Hunt is composed in receding planes parallel to the picture plane. This approach to the representation of landscape space might be seen as a further development of the patterned composition seen in Death of Procris and Mars and Venus. The staggered planes of Mars and Venus mark a measured progression to the horizon. The Hunt, however, is Piero's most dynamic composition of this period. The foreshortened cadaver, the fallen branch, and the horse and rider reinforce diagonal movement, and, with the exception of the two foreground trees which terminate the diagonals, he does not assert the frontal plane. Piero achieves a variety of successful figures in the Hunt. Musculature is well developed, and none of the figures has a withered limb or malformed hand or rubbery

²¹Vasari, Vol. IV, p. 131.

²²Douglas, p. 14 and 34.

wrist. If skill in handling composition and figure is a criterion for chronological position, then the Hunt is the latest Pugliese panel and the culmination of this period of work.

The Vespucci panels, Misfortunes of Silenus and Discovery of Honey appear to me to be later than the Pugliese series.²³ The house where Vasari saw the paintings had been purchased by Giovanni Vespucci in 1497.²⁴ The terminus post quem of 1500 could suggest a hypothetical date for the Hunt. The last of Piero's forest fires blazes in Discovery of Honey. His odd humanity has a grace and composure not seen in the earlier figures. Piero coordinates a variety of gestures and poses in an almost dancelike harmony of movement. The "X" composition organizes the figures around a single focal point in contrast to the agglomeration of four separate zones of activity in Lapiths and Centaurs or the

²³ Everett Fahy in "Some Later Works of Piero di Cosimo" proposes the reverse. He believes that the Battle of Lapiths and Centaurs was influenced by Leonardo's cartoon for the Battle of Anghiari and that the Vespucci panels "which are organized along traditional Quattrocento lines" are conservative compared to the dynamic composition and daring foreshortening of the Hunt. Everett Fahy, Jr., "Some Later Works of Piero di Cosimo," Gazette des Beaux-Arts, 65 (April 1965): 206, 207. The complicated poses and foreshortened figures which Fahy finds remarkable in Lapiths and Centaurs and the Hunt have precedent in the Quattrocento and in my opinion, do not necessarily depend on Leonardo's Battle of Anghiari. The retreating steed in the Hunt, for example, is more like the horses in Uccello's Battle of San Romano.

²⁴ Fahy, p. 211 notes 6 and 7.

anarchy of the Hunt. The light has changed from the general illumination of the earlier paintings to spot-lighted areas and pronounced shadows. The assiduously described flora of Fall of Vulcan and Death of Procris have disappeared, and there is less concern for surface detail. The swarming bees indicate Piero's sustained naturalistic interests, but the bizarre tree form seems to belong already to the type of fantasy landscape of Liberation of Andromeda.

It is difficult to assign a position to Simonetta Vespucci within the rough chronology of works which I believe to have been painted in the 1490s and early years of the sixteenth century. The profile portrait is a static composition, and the Simonetta's features can be isolated in a number of women in this group. For example, Mary in the Visitation; the nymphs in Fall of Vulcan; and Venus in Mars and Venus have the same s-shaped profile with a high forehead and slightly upturned nose as Simonetta. The tandem portraits of Francesco Giamberti and his son Guiliano da San Gallo appear to be later and should be dated together. Francesco Giamberti died in 1480,²⁵ and his profiled image suggests a commemorative post-humous portrait. Between 1490 and 1500 Guiliano da San Gallo was engaged in commissions outside of Florence. In 1505, he left Florence again for Rome to work for Julius II. Because of his prolonged

²⁵ Rab Hatfield, "Five Early Renaissance Portraits," Art Bulletin 47 (September 1965): 328 note 37.

presence in Florence between 1500 and 1504, it is likely that Piero painted his portrait during that time. Born 1445, a date of 1505 would be consistent with his appearance as a man of about sixty.²⁶

The landscape in Piero's Stockholm Madonna with its prominent dark cloud in the sky, may be relevant to the dating of Simonetta Vespucci. The Stockholm Madonna suggests that a close connection existed between Piero di Cosimo and Filippino Lippi in the 1490s.²⁷ Filippino's Strozzi Madonna probably served as a model for Piero's Stockholm Madonna; the composition is quoted almost verbatim, and Piero picks up the same green lining of the cloak.²⁸ The Strozzi Madonna was painted around 1487, although Katherine Neilson finds it impossible to say whether it was the morceau de réception in connection with the Strozzi Chapel in Santa Maria Novella as Scharf proposes.²⁹ The question remains how Piero would have known the composition. Neilson suggests that Filippino's Madonna may have hung in a public place.³⁰ Scharf recommends a date before 1492 for Piero di Cosimo's Stockholm Madonna. After his return to Florence from Rome

²⁶Bacci, Piero di Cosimo, p. 83.

²⁷Katherine B. Neilson, Filippino Lippi A Critical Study (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), p. 120.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 69.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 68.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 120.

in 1492, Filippino's style changed. It is unlikely "that so individual a master as Piero di Cosimo would model himself retrospectively on a stylistic phase of Filippino's art which the latter had already outgrown."³¹

Piero's Simonetta Vespucci, if not painted in the last decade of the fifteenth century, belongs nonetheless to a group of paintings which were painted during that period because the landscape, although imaginative, does not contain the bizarre elements of some of his later works nor does it have the sfumato of Perseus and Andromeda. The profile of Simonetta also conforms to the Quattrocento portrait tradition.

³¹ Alfred Scharf, "Filippino Lippi and Piero di Cosimo," Art in America, 19 no. 2 (February 1931): 62.

Simonetta Vespucci A Quattrocento Profile Portrait

The woman in Piero di Cosimo's portrait Simonetta Vespucci exemplifies what seems like the Quattrocento ideal of beauty, which is displayed in feminine profile portraits in the second half of the fifteenth century.¹ The independent profile panel is the one form of portraiture which generally does not depend on works in larger forms.² These portraits evidently served some kind of family, domestic purpose and were only secondarily works of art. It is possible that they were made as visual addenda to the often assiduously compiled family records.³ The extant profile portraits of women produced between 1450 and 1500 indicate that this type of portraiture was painted according to a formula. The bust length figure, usually facing to the left, is set against a neutral background or landscape or sometimes within a narrowly defined architectural space. The static profile limits characterization to the external and reduces

¹Heinrich Wölfflin, Classic Art, trans. by Peter and Linda Murray (London: Phaidon Press, 1952), p. 238.

²John Pope-Hennessy, The Portrait in the Renaissance, Bollinger Series 12, National Gallery of Art (New York: Pantheon, 1966), p. 35.

³Ibid., p. 37.

form to pattern; the artists seem to think of the feminine profile as intrinsically flat and decorative.⁴ Within the limits of this formula aesthetic and stylistic changes did occur,⁵ and Simonetta Vespucci stands apparently at the end of this profile tradition. Piero di Cosimo's figure and landscape examined separately fall within conventional boundaries, and the relationship between his sitter and landscape background is conservative.

Replace Piero's evocative landscape with a flat blue background and compare Simonetta to one of the finest examples of the feminine profile at mid-century, Baldovinetti's Portrait of a Lady in Yellow.⁶ Both women represent the Quattrocento ideal of beauty. Elaborately coiffed hair is drawn up to display long necks. Jewels crowning the heads emphasize high dominant foreheads relieved only by thin arched brows. Bright lips contrast with pale faces. Baldovinetti, following convention, cuts away the garment to extend the neckline down the back and Piero joins the neck,

⁴ Jean Lipman, "The Florentine Profile Portrait in the Quattrocento," Art Bulletin 18 (March 1936): 95.

⁵ Josée Mambour, "L'évolution esthétique des profils florentine du Quattrocento," Revue Belge d'Archéologie et d'Histoire de l'Art 38 (1969): 43-60.

⁶ Recent research likely confirms the earlier identification of the subject as Francesca degli Stati. Eliot W. Rowlands, "Baldovinetti's Portrait of a Lady in Yellow," Burlington Magazine 122 (September 1980): 624.

back, and shoulder in one continuous curve. In the Cinquecento, breadth not verticality was emphasized and a more mature beauty was preferred to the adolescent prettiness of Baldovinetti's lady or Piero's Simonetta.⁷

In both portraits, the figure is centrally placed facing left and the head occupying one half of the panel dominates the composition. The effectiveness of the silhouette of Simonetta against the neutral ground corresponds to that of the lady in yellow even though Simonetta's torso is shown in a three-quarter view. The three-quarter torso occurs occasionally in the profile portrait. An example is Pollaiuolo's Berlin Portrait of a Lady (1465). Here, the right shoulder thrusts forward while the left remains in profile. But because the pineapple design on the sitter's dress is barely foreshortened, the rotated torso nevertheless appears flat. This dual perspective can be seen in a low profile relief of a woman, a possible early work of Verrochio while under the influence of Desiderio.⁸ A striking resemblance exists between Simonetta Vespucci and this relief. Both breasts are exposed; the artist depicts the right breast as though seen from the front and renders the left in profile. Piero, on the other hand, foreshortens the torso as a whole and combines it with a profile head.

⁷Wolfflin, p. 239.

⁸John Pope-Hennessy, Catalogue of Italian Sculpture in the Victoria and Albert Museum, 2 vols. (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1964), I: 169.

Jean Lipman states that Simonetta Vespucci "is neither primarily a low relief nor a flat silhouette."⁹ Illuminated from the left, the face is modelled only to accent the features. A light shadow crosses the bridge of the nose suggesting an eye socket. However, instead of modelling the eye, Piero draws a triangle with two lines and creates a lid with a parallel line above the eye. He deepens the same shadows used by Baldovinetti to define features: the nostril projects and recedes; full lips part; and a faint jawline connects the chin and ear.

The raised profile in Verrochio's relief separates the profile from the background as does the dramatic contrast between the brilliant blue background and the luminous gold dress and pale skin in Baldovinetti's Portrait of a Lady in Yellow. The thundercloud in Piero's Simonetta Vespucci sets off the profile. The contrast between the dark cloud and the light face is maintained from the high forehead to the base of the neck. Piero repeats this value contrast along the left shoulder and around the right breast completing the essential figure silhouette. The device of a cloud accentuating the profile against a landscape background is a sophisticated response to the graphic demands of the profile.

Architectural forms could also be used for the same purpose. Mainardi positions a dark thick column behind the

⁹Lipman, p. 80.

profile in his Berlin Portrait of a Lady (1486-1490).¹⁰ A heavy curtain divides the panel of Ercole Robert's Ginevra Bentivoglio (1480) and separates the figure from the landscape.¹¹ Such devices, like Piero's cloud, are effective as foils for the profile head. That the profile portrait formula required an effectively contrasting background can be seen in essential, simplified form in Deruta maiolica of the early sixteenth century. A salver in the Victoria and Albert Museum which dates around 1500 has four profile figures each on a background partially shaded in blue to set off the profile.¹²

Was it Piero's whim to frame the face with a cloud rather than, say a column or curtain or plain background? The fanciful landscape in Simonetta Vespucci is unique, apparently reflecting his own strange fancies. Giorgio Vasari enjoys describing Piero's eccentricities. "He set himself often to observe such animals, plants, or other things as Nature at times creates out of caprice, or by chance, in which he found a pleasure and satisfaction that

¹⁰ Raimond Van Marle, The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting, Vol. XIII (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1931), p. 186.

¹¹ Fern Shapley, Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection Italian Schools XII-XV Century (London: Phaidon Press, 1966), p. 86.

¹² Bernard Rackham, Guide to Italian Maiolica Victoria and Albert Museum (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1933), p. 44.

drove him quite out of his mind with delight,"¹³ and "it pleased him to see everything wild, like his own nature; and he declared that Nature's own things should be left to her to look after, without lifting a hand to them."¹⁴ An unruly thundercloud would perhaps appeal to Piero's imagination although Vasari reports that Piero was frightened by thunderstorms.¹⁵ Evidently Piero was sensitive to the weather; he liked to see the rain pouring from the roofs to the ground.¹⁶ The clouds in Simonetta Vespucci might then be said to be a combination of observed weather effects and Piero's fancies.

Other artists in the Quattrocento paint darkened skies. The Portinari Altarpiece by Hugo Van der Goes arrived in Florence about 1483. Piero must have seen this altarpiece.¹⁷ Although it cannot be proven that the landscape in the right wing of the triptych influenced Piero's landscape, similarities do occur. Bare trees are silhouetted against a winter sky in Hugo's right wing and grey clouds encroach upon white

¹³ Giorgio Vasari, Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects, trans. by Gaston Duc de Vere, Vol. IV (London: Philip Lee Warner, 1913), p. 127.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 126.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 133.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ The shepherds in Piero's Berlin Adoration appear to be derived from Hugo Van Der Goes's shepherds in the Portinari Altarpiece.

clouds. Brown hillocks recede up to the distant mountains. Piero softens this harsh Northern landscape: iridescent colors tinge the clouds; and the horizon glows much like the horizon in Perugino's portrait of Francesco delle Opere (1494). In Transfiguration of Christ (late 1480s) by Giovanni Bellini, dark clouds effectively set off against white clouds loom in the sky creating a sense of mystery, as well as alluding to the "white and glittering" appearance of the transfigured Christ, as narrated in the Gospels.

Andrea Mantegna sees figures in cloud formations. In his St. Sebastian (c. 1460) a horse and rider emerges from a cloud. An even earlier example dated around 1448 by P. Schubring¹⁸ comes from a Florentine cassone. Two panels tell the story of Cupid and Psyche. Parts of the tale are illustrated by the clouds: the West Wind brings Psyche to the hidden valley; Cupid comes to Psyche and remains invisible because their union is only a cloud formation. Perhaps Piero visualized a woman's face in the clouds. The face might appear to be a variation of the clouds.¹⁹ According to Vasari, Piero appreciated forms made by chance. "He would sometimes stop to gaze at a wall against which sick people had been for a long time discharging their spittle, and from this he would picture to himself battles of

¹⁸Paul Schubring, Cassoni (Leipzig: Verlag von Karl W. Hiersemann, 1923), cassone 911 and 912.

¹⁹Lipman, p. 80.

horsemen, and the most fantastic cities and widest landscapes that were ever seen; and he did the same with clouds in the sky."²⁰

The fanciful cloud in Simonetta Vespucci distinguishes the landscape from the background clouds in Pollaiuolo's Berlin (1465)²¹ and Milan (c. 1467-70)²² profile portraits. No attempt has been made in these portraits to suggest an actual landscape. The schematic clouds appear as though on a stage backdrop which has then been placed behind the figure. The effect is flatter than a plain background might have been because the pattern of the clouds asserts the surface of these panels. Simonetta Vespucci is also primarily a pattern on the surface rather than a representation of a figure in space. Piero's rendering of the three-quarter torso only hints at a three dimensional form. Bright local colors and the arabesque of the snake and braids decorate and draw attention to the panel's surface. It is unclear how far back the middleground extends; hills and trees frame the face which projects them forward. Only one shaded hillock prevents the brown hills from appearing absolutely flat. The dramatic value contrast of the dark cloud and face brings the thundercloud to the frontal plane. The

²⁰Vasari, Vol. 4, p. 127.

²¹Alberto Busignani, Pollaiuolo (Florence: Edizioni d'arte, 1969), plate XLIV.

²²Ibid., plate LXIV.

background has a tapestry-like appearance; it tends to be read up and down rather than in depth.²³ The result is a decorative unity on the surface.

Backgrounds that include an architectural enclosure define better the space in which the sitter exists. In two examples which may be contemporary with Simonetta Vespucci, the conception of the profile has changed from that of an almost flat-seeming image, typical of the third quarter of the century,²⁴ to a more naturalistic and illusionistic approach to the features, typical of the final quarter of the century.²⁵ The woman in A Portrait of a Lady attributed to the school of Botticelli (Lindenau Museum)²⁶ looks out a window while she rests her hands on the sill. The landscape viewed by the woman and the landscape behind her appear to be the same. A balustrade separates the figure in Mainardi's Berlin portrait (c. 1486-1490)²⁷ from the landscape. The figures in these portraits appear to receive light from their landscape. "Simonetta" on the other hand, is modelled by the conventional effect of diffused light. The architectural context of Mainardi's Portrait of a Lady

²³Lipman, p. 84.

²⁴Mambour, p. 49.

²⁵Ibid., p. 56.

²⁶Lipman, figure 26.

²⁷Van Marle, Vol. XIII, p. 186.

and the portrait attributed to the school of Botticelli still segregates the sitter from the landscape. The three-quarter and full portrait, not the profile portrait, achieve an effect of continuous spatial recession and integration of figure and landscape.

In the profile portrait the perception of character, like the effect of space is, again limited. Facial expression is omitted. To what extent can the Quattrocento landscape reveal the personality? Lipman finds that the wide imaginative landscape of Simonetta Vespucci provides a contrast to the prosy scenery of all earlier fifteenth century portraits. "The landscape now echoes the personality and mood of the sitter. The bare trees, the distant castle, the swirling clouds combine to form a rich romantic scene, full of suggestive overtones and subtly suggested relationship with the person portrayed."²⁸ That the landscape influences the overall impression of the sitter is certainly true. But the landscape and personal adornments determine the exotic character of Piero's woman rather than reflect the personality or mood of the sitter as Lipman suggests. Simonetta Vespucci is not unique in this type of characterization. Compare Simonetta to the Duchess of Urbino. Each is set before a landscape. The horizon line meets the figures at the base of their necks dividing the panels in

²⁸Lipman, p. 91.

half and releasing the heads to the sky.²⁹ Piero della Francesco allows nothing to distract from the Duchess's head. Frederick Hartt suggests that Piero set out to prove the curvature of the earth visually. "The rate at which the conical hills diminish and the rate at which their intersection with the plain vanishes, demonstrate that the plain is part of the surface of a sphere."³⁰ This is an interesting idea, but whether Piero intended such an elaborate scheme cannot be proven. Nonetheless, the measured landscape suggests the presence of a rational intellect. The thundercloud in Simonetta Vespucci could create the opposite impression. A thunderstorm is unpredictable, disorderly, an accident of nature. Emotion perhaps governs the sitter. The Duchess wears a strand of regular pearls. "La Bella" adorns herself with an unruly snake. Without their props, the Duchess and Piero's Simonetta are left wearing equable masks.³¹

An early portrait by Leonardo, Ginevra di Benci (1475), raises the Quattrocento portrait to a new power.³² "The

²⁹ Although slightly more than half of the panel is devoted to the Duchess's head.

³⁰ Frederick Hartt, History of Italian Renaissance Art (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall; New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1969), p. 244.

³¹ The respective landscapes may also be said to reflect the different temperaments of the two artists.

³² Pope-Hennessy, Portrait in the Renaissance, p. 101.

definition of the contours is more delicate and the sense of the face as a relief surface is more pronounced."³³ Her pensive, almost melancholic expression suggests that this is a serious young woman. It is most likely that an emblematic connection exists here between the sitter and the landscape. A prominent display of juniper surrounds the face. On the back of the panel, a sprig of juniper enclosed by a laurel and palm wreath, gives plausible evidence that the painting could be identified with three sixteenth century accounts of the portrait.³⁴ The juniper bush envelops her head as the dark clouds surround Simonetta's profile. However, the proximity of the bush to the face is more believable than the cloud to the face in Piero's portrait. The bush appears almost overbearing, especially as it is seen together with the melancholy of Ginevra's expression.

The general composition of Neroccio di Landi's Portrait of a Lady (1490) has been related to Leonardo's Ginevra di Benci.³⁵ The overall impression of the portrait is one of charm. The sparkling landscape accords with the sweet smile and the gentle eyes of the sitter. Her appeal would remain even without the attractive landscape because her sweet disposition is revealed in her expression.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Shapley, Paintings from the Kress Collection, p. 251.
Juniper, ginepro = Ginevra.

³⁵Gertrude Coor, Neroccio de' Landi 1447-1500 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 57.

The remote and elusive Mona Lisa transcends the immediate charm of Nerocchio's lady. "Leonardo was not concerned directly with psychology, but the working of the brain was reflected in the immanence of movement in the face. In that sense and in that sense only there is a profound congruity between the human image of the Mona Lisa and the landscape at the back, for both result from protracted ocular analysis and both are scientific and passionless."³⁶ Leonardo as observer of nature seeks an underlying universal vision. Piero di Cosimo, on the other hand, sees in nature a reflection of his own peculiar imagination. He appropriates the superficial aspects of forms to spin his yarns and weave his fantasies. Simonetta Vespucci is a kind of fantasy. Conjured from Piero's imagination, the cloud, face, snake, and decorations each play a role in the portrait. Langton Douglas says, "Take away the exciting, vital landscape with its dark, minatory stormclouds overshadowing Simonetta, and you mar the affect of the whole picture."³⁷

³⁶ Pope-Hennessy, Portrait in the Renaissance, p. 109.

³⁷ R. Langton Douglas, Piero di Cosimo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), p. 74.

Imaginary Portraits of Simonetta Vespucci

Piero di Cosimo's portrait of a woman with a snake coiled around her neck bears the inscription SIMONETTA IANVENSIS VESPUCCIA. This portrait and several other Quattrocento portrait-like images have been said to be the likeness of the beautiful Simonetta Vespucci. Born Simonetta Cattaneo c. 1453, she married Marco Vespucci and assumed a position in Florentine society.¹ Her favor was worn by Guiliano di Medici, brother of Lorenzo di Medici,² in a famous tournament celebrating the conclusion of a defensive league between Florence, Venice, and Milan.³ Guiliano's victory and Simonetta's beauty were celebrated in the Stanze of Angelo Poliziano. Poliziano began the Stanze to commemorate an earlier joust won by Lorenzo Il Magnifico in 1469.⁴

¹Ronald Lightbrown, Sandro Botticelli Complete Catalogue, 2 vols. (London: Paul Elek, 1978), 1: 42.

²Herbert P. Horne, Alessandro Filipepi, Commonly Called Sandro Botticelli, Painter of Florence (London: George Bell and Sons, 1908; reprint ed., Botticelli, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 52.

³Lightbrown, 1: 41.

⁴Horne, p. 53.

While he was writing his Stanze, Simonetta Vespucci died,⁵ and Poliziano and other poets wrote epigrams on her death.⁶ Simonetta Vespucci may then be said to have been the Petrarchan mistress of Guiliiano, chaste, beautiful and unassailable because of being married and her high birth.⁷

Vasari does not mention the inscription,⁸ and the question has arisen as to whether it is original or whether it was added at a later date by the Vespucci family.⁹ M. Reiset, director of the Louvre, purchased Simonetta Vespucci from the last member of the Vespucci family in 1841.¹⁰ When the painting was acquired by the Vespucci family is not known. Vasari saw it or something like it in the house of Francesco da San Gallo, who had been Piero's friend and intimate companion. Francesco painted Piero's portrait; a

⁵ Enrico Barfucci, Lorenzo de' Medici e la Societa Artistica del Suo Tempo (Florence: Gonnelli, 1945), p. 151, note 6, from Achelle Neri, La Simonetta in Giornale Storico della letteratura, Vol. V, anno III, p. 131.

⁶ Horne, p. 53.

⁷ Lightbrown, 1: 42.

⁸ Giorgio Vasari, Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects, trans. by Gaston Duc de Vere, Vol. IV (London: Philip Lee Warner, 1913), p. 134.

⁹ Mina Bacci, L'Opera Completa di Piero di Cosimo (Milan: Rizzoli, 1976), p. 86.

¹⁰ Louis M. Richter, Chantilly in History and Art (London: John Murray, 1913), p. 146.

woodcut copy was used by Vasari in his life of Piero.¹¹ Piero di Cosimo himself painted Francesco's father, Guiliano da San Gallo and his grandfather, Francesco Giamberti.¹² Piero's Simonetta Vespucci too, may have been painted for all we know, for Francesco da San Gallo. Perhaps Piero even gave the portrait to him or to Guiliano, in which case the identification of the figure as Simonetta Vespucci would then seem unlikely.

The inscription on the bottom of Piero's portrait is probably a later addition. Underneath the painted band, the so-called Simonetta's shawl continues to the bottom of the panel,¹⁴ although this in itself does not necessarily prove that the inscription was added at a much later date. It would have been to the artist's advantage to complete the figure before adding an inscription.¹⁵ The Chambery Portrait of a Man (1430-5) has an inscribed ledge that was painted at the time of the portrait.¹⁶ X-ray photographs

¹¹Vasari, Vol. IV, p. 134.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ulrich Middeldorf, "Portraits by Francesco da Sangallo," Art Quarterly 1 (1938): 115.

¹⁴Bacci, p. 86.

¹⁵Rab Hatfield, "Five Early Renaissance Portraits," Art Bulletin 47 no. 3 (September, 1965): 327 note 29.

¹⁶John Pope-Hennessy, Paolo Uccello, 2nd ed. (London: Phaidon Press, 1969), p. 148.

taken of this portrait reveal that the ledge, like the band in Simonetta Vespucci was painted over the sitter's coat.¹⁷ This is apparently true for two portraits attributed to Domenico Veneziano, Matteo Olivieri and Michele Olivieri (1440-1445), although the identifying inscriptions on these portraits were added later.¹⁸ The overlaid band on Simonetta Vespucci therefore reflects a standard painting technique and is insufficient proof of an amended inscription without an analysis of the lettering.

Like the inscriptions on the Chambery and Olivieri portraits, SIMONETTA IANVENSIS VESPUCCI is written in Roman capitals. Roman capitals, although seen in Italian picture inscriptions as early as the fourteenth century, do not begin to prevail until the 1420s.¹⁹ The Roman capitals used by Florentine painters from about 1420 to about 1470 are a mixture of medieval and classical forms.²⁰ The lettering on the Chambery portrait exhibits two nonclassical conventions: the stroke splays and terminates without a conspicuous serif; there is a center-point between ELFIN and FATVTTO. The more "correct" lettering of the Olivieri

¹⁷ Hatfield, P. 327 note 22.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Dario A. Covi, "Lettering in Fifteenth Century Florentine Painting," Art Bulletin 45 (1963): 5.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

portraits recommends a date for the inscription in the last few decades of the fifteenth century. "Certain anomolous features such as the serifs of the "A," "Ms" and "Ns;" the tails of the "Rs," and the abbreviation mark, may indicate that the inscriptions were put on before 1550, when such forms became obsolete."²¹

No flourishes distinguish the lettering at the bottom of Piero's portrait. The letters are Roman capitals executed with a heavy hand. The spacing is uneven. The painter allows adequate space for SIMONETTA but must squeeze in the last two names. The letters are not particularly well formed: "Ss," especially in VESPUCCIA are awkward; the lower parts are too small; the upper part of the "C" hangs over the bottom portion. This clumsy lettering compares unfavorably with other examples in Piero's work. Piero uses Roman capitals in only one painting, the Fiesole Immaculate Conception. Here he skillfully foreshortens the letters forming the didactic inscriptions and paints letters in reverse when the scroll turns back upon itself. Two conservative elements, the ligature "NE" in BENEDICTA and the centerpoint between QVE and ANGEL, indicate a transitional style at a time when many artists had purged their Roman capitals of inconsistencies and some of the nonclassical

²¹Hatfield, p. 316 note 4.

conventions.²² The earlier date of Piero's portrait could perhaps explain its clumsy inscription, but it is unlikely that Piero would use a more conservative script in a late work if he had already adopted a completely classical style.²³ Two other paintings by Piero, the Visitation and the Toledo Tondo demonstrate his awareness of epigraphical conventions.²⁴ He chooses the Gothic miniscule for the book inscriptions, an appropriate choice for a painted sacred text in late Quattrocento painting.²⁵ The inscription on Simonetta would seem, then, to be a later addition.

Simonetta Vespucci appears to be the only panel portrait of a woman painted in the Quattrocento that has a ledge inscribed with the presumed name of the sitter. Neroccio, in Portrait of a Lady (c. 1490), paints the letters "AP" and "NER" on opposite sides of the inscription honoring his sitter. Attempts to interpret the lettering as abbreviations of the names of the sitter, Alessandra Piccolomini, and the artist, Neroccio, have been discredited. Such abbreviations are unfamiliar in Italian Renaissance

²²Covi., p. 6.

²³The possibility that Piero relegated the task of painting the inscription to a helper cannot be ignored.

²⁴Covi in "Lettering in Fifteenth Century Florentine Painting," demonstrates that after 1420 artists were aware of different lettering styles and used them for formal and iconographic purposes.

²⁵Covi., p. 16.

epigraphy.²⁶ The inscription, "Although I achieve with wondrous art what man may, I get nowhere, a mortal competing with gods,"²⁷ compliments the beauty and virtue of the sitter as does the inscription "Noli me tangere" on a presumed portrait of Lucrezia de' Donati after Verrocchio (c. 1496).²⁸ The sitter's name is sometimes inscribed around the base of the portrait bust. The fine portrait of Battista Sforza, Duchess of Urbino (c. 1473), by Francesco Laurana is such an example. The incised inscription differs very little in placement or in appearance from the painted inscription on Simonetta Vespucci.

Other Quattrocento portrait inscriptions would associate the portrait image with a respected ancestor or famous person. If the Olivieri portraits represent father and son, at the time they were painted, the father, Matteo had been dead for some time, and the son, Michele, would have been sixty years old. The sitters are not known to have been persons of great importance outside their family and it is presumed that portraits representing members of the Olivieri family were later taken for Matteo and Michele.²⁹

²⁶Fern Rusk Shapley, Catalogue of the Italian Paintings, 2 vols. (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1979), 1: 343.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Raimond Van Marle, The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting, Vol. XI (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1929), p. 549.

²⁹Hatfield, p. 325 note 18.

The inscriptions identifying the founders of Florentine art on a panel (c. 1450) attributed to Paolo Uccello probably date from the sixteenth century, and there is no certainty about who is actually represented.³⁰ Such appropriations of existing images are compatible with the practice of painting posthumous portraits. Fidelity to the appearance of the sitter is less important than the recognition accorded to the individual.

Most Quattrocento portraits do not have identifying inscriptions. A heraldic device, motto, or play on the sitter's name make the family connection. For example, the word juniper in Italian is ginepro which is transposed to Ginevra. The juniper bush behind the woman in the portrait attributed to Leonardo in the Washington National Gallery and the juniper incorporated into the emblem on the back of the panel suggest that the sitter is Ginevra di Benci.³¹ The representation of juniper to refer to the name of a sitter possibly identifies Pisanello's profile Portrait of a Woman (c. 1440) in the Louvre as Ginevra d' Este. The Este emblem is embroidered on her sleeve and a sprig of juniper is worn on her bodice.³²

³⁰Pope-Hennessy, p. 158.

³¹Shapley, p. 251.

³²Ibid., p. 252 note 5.

Frederick Hartt proposes an etymological relationship between wasps and asps (vespe and aspide) for Simonetta Vespucci.³³ The Vespucci coat of arms displays golden wasps against an azure ground.³⁴ Piero di Cosimo's Story of Silenus painted for Giovanni Vespucci, recounts the discovery of honey and Silenus's unfortunate encounter with the hive. The subject matter probably held heraldic significance for the Vespucci family. In Botticelli's Mars and Venus, wasps swarm out of a trunk in the upper right hand corner of the panel where the coat of arms is expected. The panel may have been a nuptial piece for a Vespucci marriage.³⁵ The branch of the Vespucci family that patronized Botticelli and Piero de Cosimo was only remotely connected to that of Marco Vespucci, Simonetta's husband,³⁶ and the idea of a punning association between an asp around a woman's neck and the Vespucci name remains conjectural.

The device of a snake biting its tail appears on a medal of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco di Medici.³⁷ The snake

³³ Frederick Hartt, History of Italian Renaissance Art (Englewood, N.J.: Prentice Hall; and New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1969), p. 432.

³⁴ Ernest H. Gombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies: A Study in the Neo-Platonic Symbolism of his Circle" in Symbolic Images Studies in the Art of the Renaissance (New York: Phaidon, 1972), p. 216 note 139.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 68.

³⁶ Ibid., note 140.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 66.

in Piero's portrait teases its tail. What connection, if any, can be made?³⁸ Such an incorporation of an emblem into a portrait could find parallel in Neroccio's Portrait of a Lady; the frame, which is contemporary with the painting is decorated with two eagle heads biting into a golden ball alternating with a golden flame. The motif is a heraldic device of the Sienese family of Bandini who through marriage were privileged to use the Piccolomini name.³⁹ The snake biting its own tail, a hieroglyph described by Iamblichus as signifying eternity and the aura of esoteric wisdom which surrounds it may have proclaimed to Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco's contemporaries a preoccupation with mystic lore.⁴⁰ Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco's mentor Marsilio Ficino translated Iamblichus and discussed the sacred symbols in his writing.⁴¹ For Ficino heavenly wisdom is achieved by the abandonment of the soul's lower regions for the higher realm of the intellect.

Wisdom, who is born from the exalted head of Jupiter, creator of all things, prescribes to philosophers, her lovers, that whenever they desire to grasp a

³⁸ Frederick Hartt, History of Italian Renaissance Art, 2nd ed. (New York: Harry W. Abrams, Inc., 1979), p. 486.

³⁹ Gertrude Coor, Neroccio de' Landi 1447-1500 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 59.

⁴⁰ Gombrich, p. 66.

⁴¹ Ibid.

beloved thing, they should aim at the top, at the head of things, than at the feet below. For Pallas, the divine offspring who is sent from the high heavens, herself dwells on the heights which she makes her stronghold. Furthermore she shows us that we cannot attain to the summits and heads of things before having mounted to the head of the soul, the intellect leaving behind us the soul's lower regions.⁴²

If there is a link between Pierfrancesco and Piero di Cosimo's portrait, could the subject represent Pallas? She wears an attribute of Pallas, the serpent, and is up on a promontory as protectress. Pallas is the sky's daughter and often carries her father's thunderbolt. Thunderclouds signify her birth.⁴³

Such speculation curiously leads back to Simonetta Vespucci. The joust of 1475 intended as an occasion for Guiliano di Medici to display his prowess was an elaborate affair.⁴⁴ As was customary, standards bearing a device celebrating amorous thoughts of the jouster towards his mistress preceded each participant. Known only from literary descriptions, Guiliano's standard, which Botticelli had painted,⁴⁵ represented Simonetta in the semblance of Pallas.⁴⁶ The meaning of the standard was meant to be a

⁴²Ibid., p. 70.

⁴³H.J. Rose, A Handbook of Greek Mythology (New York: Dutton and Co., Inc., 1959), p. 108.

⁴⁴Lightbrown, 1: 41.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 39.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 42.

secret. Poliziano's Stanze revealed it. "The mistress he loved was a matchless lady, armed with prudence and chastity against the darts and flowers of love."⁴⁷

Botticelli's Standard may have been the only image of Simonetta Vespucci painted by an artist. A persistent art historical myth has resulted in many spurious identifications of Simonetta in portraits and paintings. The quest for her image may be due in part to a portrait mentioned by Vasari in his life of Botticelli. "In the guardaroba of the Lord Duke Cosimo there are two very beautiful heads of women in profile by his hand, one of which is said to be the mistress of Guiliano di Medici, brother of Lorenzo, and the other Madonna Lucrezia di Tornabuoni, wife of said Lorenzo."⁴⁸ The legend of the "Bella Simonetta" became part of the nineteenth century aesthetic movement.⁴⁹ Ruskin first popularized the myth by publishing a note by Mr. Tyrwhitt in "Ariadne Florentina" in 1873.⁵⁰ Mr. Tyrwhitt sought to prove that after Guiliano's death in 1478, Simonetta must have been induced to allow Botticelli to

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 44

⁴⁸Giorgio Vasari, Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, trans. by Gaston Duc de Vere, Vol. III (London: Philip Lee Warner, 1912), p. 253.

⁴⁹Horne, p. 52.

⁵⁰Ibid.

paint her in the nude and that she was the model for the women in Primavera, Birth of Venus and Calumny Apelles.⁵¹ His account fails to note that Simonetta died in 1476, two years before Guiliano's death.⁵² Horne rejects the notion that Simonetta Vespucci was Guiliano's mistress. "According to the notions of Medieval chivalry, ladies were as indispensable to a joust, as were arms or horses; and it would be entirely unhistorical to necessarily imagine in the attentions of Guiliano to Simonetta anything beyond an elaborate piece of ceremonial compliment."⁵³ No portrait of Simonetta is known to exist and many different looking women have been identified as Simonetta Vespucci.

Domenico Ghirlandaio's fresco of the Madonna of Mercy in the Vespucci Chapel, Ognissanti, Florence (1473) includes portraits of the Vespucci family. Two sources identify one of the male members as Amerigo Vespucci.⁵⁴ Jan Lauts acknowledges the female members without naming them,⁵⁵

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²L.D. and Helen Ettlinger, Botticelli (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 164.

⁵³Horne, p. 53.

⁵⁴Barfucci, plate 37; Jan Lauts, Domenico Ghirlandaio (Vienna: Anton Schroll and Co., 1943), plate 9.

⁵⁵Lauts, plate 9.

while Enrico Barfucci states that Ghirlandaio's fresco contains the only documented portrait of Simonetta Vespucci.⁵⁶ As stated above, Simonetta was distantly related by marriage to Guido Antonio, his son Giovanni and Amerigo Vespucci.⁵⁷ If the identification of Amerigo is accurate, it is difficult to accept the portrait of the young woman in Ghirlandaio's fresco as Simonetta Vespucci. Barfucci describes Piero di Cosimo's portrait as an idealization of someone else's portrait of Simonetta.⁵⁸ He does not state which one, but the resemblance between Piero di Cosimo's Simonetta Vespucci and the woman in Ghirlandaio's fresco is greater than any other supposed portraits of Simonetta Vespucci. Both, at any rate, conform to a type of Quattrocento beauty.

Five portraits attributed to the school of Botticelli have in the past been designated imaginary portraits of Simonetta Vespucci. The woman in the Frankfort picture (c. 1483-6) wears a cameo representing a famous antique cornelian of Apollo and Marsyas which was included in an inventory of Lorenzo di Medici's possessions in 1492.⁵⁹ Her hair is braided with pearls; two plaits joined at her breast form a pendant. She wears an aigrette of heron

⁵⁶Barfucci, p. 122.

⁵⁷Note 35.

⁵⁸Barfucci, plate 34.

⁵⁹Lightbrown, Vol. II, p. 116.

feathers. A portrait in the Cook Collection, Richmond, England, portrays a woman squeezing her breast. A feathered headdress and pearls adorn her long loose hair. The Berlin portrait is of a similar type of beauty and probably contemporary with the Frankfort portrait.⁶⁰ The Yamazaki and London (National Gallery) portraits depict women in contemporary gowns and coiffures wearing a type of cloak borrowed from the antique.⁶¹ Raimond Van Marle suggests that the Frankfort, Berlin and Cook Collection portraits represent Simonetta Vespucci. Although Piero di Cosimo's Simonetta Vespucci "does not bear a strong likeness to the others, it appears nonetheless, to represent the same person. Piero di Cosimo's painting proves that the romantic tradition which arose around the figure of Simonetta and which inspired certain of Poliziano's Stanzas, continued for a good many years after her death."⁶² But the only description of Simonetta's beauty is in Poliziano's Stanze. Piero di Cosimo's painting cannot be used as proof that Botticelli or any other artist painted a portrait of Simonetta. These so-called portraits of Simonetta Vespucci share a common approach to a portrait-like image of an ideal beauty. They

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 117.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 118.

⁶² Raimond Van Marle, The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting, Vol. XII (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1931), p. 70.

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are imaginary portraits. An inscription apparently added to an existing image of a beautiful woman served to associate Piero's painting with the "Bella Simonetta."

Renaissance Images of Cleopatra

Vasari in his life of Piero di Cosimo mentions "a work by the hand of Piero, a very beautiful head of Cleopatra, with an asp wound round her neck."¹ This description recommended the profile with the inscription "Simonetta Vespucci" to Gustavo Frizzoni who made the attribution of the portrait to Piero di Cosimo in 1879.² According to Frizzoni, the portrayal of Simonetta Vespucci as Cleopatra would be following the custom of flattering one's love, especially the fair sex, by association with an antique personage of virtue and beauty.³ Not all scholars agree that the Simonetta is the same as Piero's Cleopatra. Hatfield believes that there is only a fair possibility that the two paintings are identical.⁴ Whether Piero's painting of a bewitching beauty, a snake, and threatening sky

¹Giorgio Vasari, Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects, trans. by Gaston Duc de Vere, Vol. IV (London: Philip Lee Warner, 1913), p. 134.

²Gustavo Frizzoni, "L'art Italiana nella Galleria Nazionale di Londra," Archivio Storico Italiano Series IV, 4 (1879): 256.

³Ibid., p. 257.

⁴Rab Hatfield, "Five Early Renaissance Portraits," Art Bulletin 47 no. 3 (September, 1965): 327 note 31.

symbolizes either the death of Cleopatra or that of Simonetta Vespucci cannot be known. The particular position of the snake, "wound around her neck" as noted by Vasari, differs from other representations of Cleopatra in the Renaissance. She is generally shown holding the snake at her breast. But because Vasari identifies a woman with an asp around her neck as Cleopatra and specifically mentions the configuration of the snake, it seems reasonable to accept with Frizzone that Simonetta Vespucci is indeed the beautiful head of Cleopatra. Two additional details in the painting may strengthen the identification. The pearls studding the hairpiece perhaps refer to Cleopatra's legendary banquet. To demonstrate to Marc Antony her extravagance, Cleopatra dissolved an expensive pearl in vinegar and drank it.⁵ The red ornaments in her hair look like strawberries. If so, these, too, could be a small clue to the sitter's identity, as one meaning attached to the strawberry in the Renaissance was that of seductive power. The strawberry symbolized the

⁵Giovanni Boccaccio, Concerning Famous Women, trans. by G. Guarino (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), p. 195.

sensual pleasures of the world because however much one consumed, one's hunger was not satisfied.⁶

Few representations of Cleopatra dating from the Renaissance can be located. With the exception of Piero di Cosimo's portrait and a cassone panel painted by Neroccio di Landi all portrayals are from the sixteenth century. Scattered references to Cleopatra occur in Vasari's Lives and from these and extant examples it can be assumed that the consort of Julius Caesar and Marc Antony figured as part of the Renaissance interest in antiquity. Ancient history and mythological subjects were known through the Middle Ages, but by the middle of the fifteenth century a substantial component of classical references had entered everyday

⁶Mirella Levi d'Ancona, The Garden of the Renaissance: Botanical Symbolism in Italian Painting (Florence: Leo S. Olsecki, 1977), p. 366. That the pearls and strawberries have any relevance as attributes of Cleopatra is strictly conjecture. Each held other meanings. The pearl was considered a gem of purity. Lightbrown, Sandro Botticelli, 1: 73. The strawberry was a symbol of Paradise, and according to Ovid, men fed on strawberries during the golden age. d'Ancona, p. 366. These clues would be subtle, yet Piero can be cryptic. The flower beneath the feet of Mary and Elizabeth in the Visitation has been identified as a wallflower. The wallflower was created when Ion, after hunting a wild boar, spent the night with the Ionic nymphs who offered him a chaplet of wallflowers. The flower is a symbol of love, earthly and divine. Such sentiments are appropriate for the Visitation, and the boar between Elizabeth and St. Abbot completes the anecdote. d'Ancona, p. 270.

life.⁷ Cassone panels depict battles and victors' triumphs celebrating deeds of antiquity. The triumphs of Roman generals are the most common subjects on cassone in the second half of the century. These events were thought to be examples worthy of emulation. Allegorical tales encouraged the bride's humble submission to her lord and master.⁸ Birth trays narrate classical tales. Although painting of cassone chests declined after 1530,⁹ classical subject matter of course continued. Maiolica became more figurative; by 1510 the whole surface of a vase or dish could be covered with a picture, usually from classical mythology or history.¹⁰ Cleopatra is specifically mentioned among subjects appearing on maiolica.¹¹

The image of Cleopatra appears in drawings and engravings as well. Michelangelo apparently drew a Cleopatra. In the life of Madonna Properzia di Rossi, Vasari reports that "it is no long time since Messer Tommaso Cavalieri, a Roman

⁷ John Pope-Hennessy and Keith Christiansen, "Secular Painting in 15th Century Tuscany: Birth Trays, Cassone Panels, and Portraits," The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin (Summer 1980): 12.

⁸ Ellen Callmann, Apollonio di Giovanni (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 40.

⁹ Paul Schubring, Cassoni, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Verlag von Karl W. Hiersemann, 1923).

¹⁰ Bernard Rackham, Guide to Italian Maiolica Victoria and Albert Museum (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1933), p. 18.

¹¹ Schubring, 1: 213.

gentleman sent to the Lord Duke Cosimo (in addition to a drawing by the hand of the divine Michelangelo, wherein is a Cleopatra) another drawing by the hand of Sofonisba [Anguisciola]..."¹² Michelangelo's Cleopatra is lost although a drawing by "Andrea di Michelangelo" of a bust representing Cleopatra recalls the over-elaborated and highly finished designs of Michelangelo for Cavalieri.¹³ Engravings depicting Cleopatra by Jacopo di Barbari (Venice, 1440-1515),¹⁴ Jacopo Francia (Bologna, 1487-1557),¹⁵ and the Master of the year 1515¹⁶ are examples that show her with the snake held to her breast. Three small engravings by Nicoletto da Modena, Leda and the Swan, The Rape of Europa, and Cleopatra,¹⁷ place Cleopatra in the company of two other images of sexuality.

Literary sources present the most complete characterization of this famous queen. Plutarch's Lives was published

¹²Vasari, Vol. 5, p. 128.

¹³Bernard Berenson, The Drawings of the Florentine Painters, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938) 2: 128.

¹⁴Arthur Hind, Early Italian Engraving Part I Florentine Engravings and Anonymous Prints of Other Schools, Vol. V (New York: M. Knoedler and Co., 1938), plate 714.

¹⁵Ibid., plate 813.

¹⁶Ibid., plate 861.

¹⁷Ibid., Vol. VI, plate 681.

in Florence in 1470,¹⁸ and Boccaccio had written Concerning Famous Women between 1355 and 1359¹⁹ which continued to be much read in the Renaissance. The intellectual complexity of Piero di Cosimo's "Early History of Man" suggests a familiarity with the texts of Pliny, Ovid, and Vitruvius,²⁰ although Vasari's life of Piero di Cosimo does not leave the impression that Piero was learned. Piero's painting of a woman with a snake around her neck could derive from either Boccaccio's or Plutarch's account of Cleopatra's life. But the prevalence of antique heroes in Quattrocento painting would more likely indicate a literary or folk tradition rather than a specific text as a resource for Piero. Still texts such as Plutarch's Lives and Boccaccio's Concerning Famous Women clearly helped to shape the visual tradition. Only one reference to a presumed ancient image of Cleopatra is known to me. A colossal recumbent statue was mistakenly identified as "Cleopatra." Vasari, in his preface to the third part of his Lives lists "certain excavated antiquities cited by Pliny as amongst the most famous, such as the Laocöon, the Hercules, the Great Torso of the Belvedere, and

¹⁸ Schubring, 1: 34.

¹⁹ Guido A. Guarino in the introduction to Concerning Famous Women, by Giovanni Boccaccio, trans. by G.A. Guarino (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), p. xxxi.

²⁰ Erwin Panofsky, "Early History of Man," Studies in Iconology (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

likewise the Venus, the Cleopatra, the Apollo."²¹ Knowledge of these works overcame "the dryness, hardness and sharpness of manner," which had been left by the excessive study of masters such as Piero della Francesca, Andrea Mantegna and Sandro Botticelli.²²

Neroccio di Landi's The Visit of Cleopatra to Antony (1470) and the companion Battle of Actium follow Plutarch's account quite closely. Neroccio paints the arrival of Cleopatra.

She came sailing up the river Cydnus, in a barge with gilded stern and outspread sails of purple, while oars of silver beat time to the music of flutes and fifes and harps. She herself lay all under a canopy of cloth of gold, dressed as Venus in a picture, and beautiful young boys, like painted cupids, stood on each side to fan her. Her maids were dressed like sea nymphs and graces, some steering at the rudder, some working at the ropes...that Venus was come to feast with Bacchus, for the common good of Asia.²³

He chooses the episode in Cleopatra's life with the most pageantry. The lavish use of gold for decoration and the festive scene entertain and delight.²⁴ The meeting between Antony and Cleopatra as portrayed on this cassone panel teaches the same lesson stated directly in panels showing

²¹Vasari, Vol. IV, p. 81.

²²Ibid.

²³Plutarch, The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans, trans. by John Dryden, revised by Arthur Hugh Clough (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), p. 757.

²⁴Gertrude Coor, Neroccio de' Landi 1447-1500 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 29.

the meeting between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon; the bride must humbly submit to her lord and master.²⁵ Neroccio makes no distinction between the winning and losing side in the battle of Actium. The whole representation is a fairy tale.²⁶ And it is difficult to ascribe Cleopatra's sins to the woman that Piero di Cosimo has painted; like Neroccio, he speaks only of her beauty and charms. These paintings avoid her wickedness and retain a seeming naiveté which characterizes Quattrocento secular painting.²⁷

But Renaissance scholars of ancient history were not uncritical. Julius Caesar had been much admired in the fourteenth century as the legendary founder of Florence and a symbol of virtue. In the fifteenth century, however, greater familiarity with ancient texts and a more sharply defined republican sentiment prompted the humanists to call Julius Caesar a tyrant.²⁸ Boccaccio in Concerning Famous Women, takes liberties with his sources in order to present exemplars of virtue and vice in his biographies. The lives of women who were loyal in love such as Penelope, Dido, and Artemisia would contrast with the lustful ones of Cleopatra,

²⁵Callmann, p. 40.

²⁶Coor, p. 28.

²⁷Schubring, 1: 178.

²⁸Callmann, p. 47.

Venus, Helen and Faustina Augustus.²⁹ He emphasizes Cleopatra's appetites and passes moral judgment. "She gained glory for almost nothing else than her beauty, while on the other hand she became known throughout the world for her greed, cruelty and lustfulness."³⁰ Compare his account of the meeting between Cleopatra and Marc Antony to Plutarch's and Neroccio's. "Later, when Caesar had already been killed and Brutus and Cassius overcome, and Antony was advancing toward Syria, she went to meet him and easily ensnared that lustful man with her beauty and wanton eyes."³¹ Boccaccio embellishes Plutarch's account with fascinating anecdotes and imaginary conversations. His refusal to discuss "the Arabian ointments, the perfumes of Saba, and the drunken revels" further entices the reader.³² Cleopatra's life is more interesting than that of some of the virtuous women Boccaccio discusses, and this may explain her appeal.

Lucretia's virtuous suicide is a story told often on cassone panels in the Quattrocento.³³ Interest continues

²⁹Guarino, p. xvi.

³⁰Boccaccio, p. 192.

³¹Ibid., p. 193.

³²Ibid., p. 194.

³³Schubring, 2: plates 21, 141, 261, 304, 469, 565, 644, and 735.

in the Cinquecento, and there is some evidence to suggest that images of Lucretia and Cleopatra were paired. Two panels by Giampietrino in the Kress Collection (c. 1525), a Lucretia (K346, Madison, WI) and Cleopatra (K347, Lewisburg, PA), are presumed to be pendants; they are the same size (95.6 x 70.8 cm, 94.3 x 71 cm respectively) and were together when they first attracted attention in this century.³⁴ Both women were renowned for their beauty and committed suicide to protect their honor. Lucretia stabbed herself with a knife to avoid the tarnishing of her virtue and to set an example for other women.³⁵ Cleopatra refusing to submit to the conqueror Octavian put two asps to her veins.³⁶ Lucretia's chastity should shame the wanton Cleopatra, yet Giampietrino treats the women similarly. The half-length figures are partially nude draped discreetly at the pubis. The beautiful, but not individualized faces could be interchanged with one another or for that matter, with Giampietrino's Mary Magdalene. There is another half-length Cleopatra in the Kress Collection by Giampietrino (K1238 Oberlin, OH c. 1530-40).³⁷ This image includes the

³⁴Fern Shapley, Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection Italian Schools XV-XVI Century (London: Phaidon, 1968), p. 136.

³⁵Boccaccio, p. 102.

³⁶Ibid., p. 196.

³⁷Shapley, p. 137.

basket reported to have contained the asp which Cleopatra had smuggled into her monument. Plutarch appears to be the source for this motif.³⁸ The two snakes in the Lewisburg Cleopatra are a convention perhaps drawn from Boccaccio's account.³⁹

Vasari, in his life of Domenico Puligo, mentions Puligo's production of Cleopatras and Lucretias. "The same master made many other paintings, which are dispersed among houses of citizens, and in particular some wherein may be seen a half-length figure of Cleopatra, causing an asp to bite her on the breast, and others wherein the Roman Lucretia killing herself with a dagger."⁴⁰ He makes no distinction between the relative virtues of the two women nor does Puligo. The allegorical significance of Cleopatra and Lucretia, respectively if not visually apparent must then be assumed to have been known from their biographies. Boccaccio justifies the inclusion of less virtuous women in his biographies.

...Nor do I want the reader to think it out of place if together with Penelope, Lucretia, and Sulpicia who were very chaste matrons, they find Medea, Flora and Sempronia, who happened to have very strong but destructive characters. For it is not my intention to give the word 'famous' so strict a meaning that it will always seem to signify 'virtuous,' but rather to give it a wider sense, ...and to consider as

³⁸Plutarch, p. 779

³⁹Boccaccio, p. 196.

⁴⁰Vasari, Vol. IV, p. 282.

famous those women whom I know to have become renowned to the world through any sort of deed.⁴¹

Cleopatra's fame rests on her charms. Of her actual beauty Plutarch says:

...It was not in itself so remarkable that none could compare with her, or that no one could see her without being struck by it, but the contact of her presence, if you lived with her was irresistible; the attraction of her person, joining with the charm of her conversation and the character that attended all she said or did, was something bewitching.⁴²

At the beginning of the fifteenth century large mural decorations celebrating the deeds of famous people became popular.⁴³ One hundred years later this type of decoration still enjoyed popularity, and images of Cleopatra are among the fragments of two such cycles now in the Chigi-Saracini Collection. Cleopatra, The Vestal Virgin Carrying Fire, and the Vestal Virgin Tuccia (c. 1500-1510) attributed to Girolamo di Benvenuto form part of a larger cycle adorning a cabinet or studiolo of some member of the Sienese aristocracy.⁴⁴ It is possible that the Numidian King Jugurta and the Roman Emperor Augustus attributed to Benvenuto also belong to this cycle, although it is equally likely that Tuccia, Cleopatra and the Vestal Virgin Carrying Water formed

⁴¹Boccaccio, p. xxvii, xviii.

⁴²Plutarch, p. 757.

⁴³Hatfield, p. 320.

⁴⁴Olga Pujmanova, "Italian Primatives in Czechoslovak Collections," Burlington Magazine 119 (August 1977): 548.

a series of exclusively female Allegories. Remnants of another cycle of 'Famous People' attributed to Matteo Balducci (c. 1500-1510) include Judith, Cleopatra and Sophonisba.⁴⁵ The image of Cleopatra combined with those of famous virgins in the Benvenuto cycle suggest the allegorical contrast of virtue and vice. On the other hand, the women in the fragments from the Balducci cycle are famous for the effect their beauty and charm had on military events. Here, Cleopatra seems no less virtuous than Judith or Sophonisba. The sexual meanings of these Renaissance "Cleopatras" appear to vary. Physical beauty often emphasized by nudity remains constant. Neroccio and Plutarch visualize her "dressed as Venus...come to feast with Bacchus." Boccaccio judges her harshly and her image juxtaposed with one of Lucretia could have been the visual equivalent of his moralizing. Piero di Cosimo's Simonetta Vespucci called "Cleopatra" by Vasari is a sensual portrait-like image.

⁴⁵Ibid.

The Fantasy Portrait in the Renaissance Household

Piero di Cosimo's "head of Cleopatra" and the so-called portraits of Simonetta Vespucci seem, in fact, to belong to a whole class of portrait-like images celebrating feminine beauty, which might be called fantasy portraits. Probably not meant to represent particular individuals they nonetheless conform with Quattrocento portrait convention. The quasi-abstract character of the profile portrait becomes exaggerated and mannered in these images.¹ Such examples as those attributed to the school of Botticelli, Piero di Cosimo's Simonetta Vespucci and Portrait of a Woman by Raffaellino del Garbo all differ from portraits assumed to be of individual women in details of costume and hairstyle, and Piero's portrait displays a fanciful attitude also toward the landscape background. Allegorical or mythological meanings, in addition to the desire to please, or even sometimes inflame the beholder, may have engendered the creation and replication of such fantasies. The attractiveness and the utility of the fantasy portraits may have been seen as like that of the many nudes and images of Venus that Botticelli is supposed to have painted. "For

¹Jean Lipman, "The Florentine Profile Portrait in the Quattrocento," Art Bulletin 18 (March 1936): 67.

various houses throughout the city he painted round pictures, and many female nudes," Vasari says, "of which there are still two at Castello, a villa of Duke Cosimo's; one representing the birth of Venus...; and likewise another Venus, whom the Graces are covering with flowers as a symbol of spring."² Robert Lightbrown suggests that:

The charm of such pictures was their delight to the eye, just as Politian's verses on the birth of Venus delight, not by the acuteness or profundity of philosophical thought, but by the caress of their sound and the bright fancy of their imagery, which stimulates the mind's eye and ear into bodying out a picture as radiant as Botticelli's.³

Evidently not a portrait of a particular Florentine woman, a fantasy portrait would probably correspond to an ideal type or pattern of feminine beauty in the repertoire of the individual artist. The type of beauty in the Frankfurt, Berlin, and National Gallery panels compares favorably with Botticelli's Venus, Pallas, or figures from the Primavera. On the other hand, the Pitti Portrait of a Lady attributed to the school of Botticelli features a much plainer woman. Piero di Cosimo's woman with a snake around her neck is the same sensual type found in his Death of Procris or Venus and Mars: young women with high foreheads, perfect features, red-blond hair which is elaborately braided and

² Giorgio Vasari, Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, trans. by Gaston Duc de Vere, Vol. III (London: Philip Lee Warner, 1912), p. 248.

³ Ronald Lightbrown, Sandro Botticelli Complete Catalogue, 2 vols. (London: Paul Elek, 1978), 1: 89.

adorned with jewels; small round breasts draped with embroidered shawls. His portraits of Guiliano da San Gallo and Francesco Giamberti would seem to omit none of the sitter's flaws in appearance. The face in Raffaellino's portrait, on the other hand, is of a type, and comparable to profile features of the Madonna in Filippino Lippi's Vision of St. Bernard or to Raffaellino's own Mary Magdalene. Portraits of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries perhaps always idealize or generalize the sitter in some way or other; the posthumous, commemorative portraits are especially likely to do so. But particular features can survive this process of idealization or generalization. For example, the up-turned nose, short upper lip and prominent chin in Pollaiuolo's Milan Portrait of a Woman, while not detracting from her charm, could nevertheless have been seen in Pollaiuolo's time as imperfect features. In a female portrait attributed to Pollaiuolo now in the National Gallery London,⁴ the artist has evidently enhanced the sitter's original appearance, but an intricate jewelled cap, elaborate brocade dress, and an exceptionally high forehead cannot alter the prominence of the nose.

The elaborate and at times free-flowing hairstyles and lavish use of jewelry in the fantasy portrait overstep

⁴Raimond Van Marle, The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting, Vol. XI (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1929), p. 338 figure 213.

conventional ornateness seen in Quattrocento feminine portraiture. The intertwining braids of Piero's woman's head-dress are matched only by the intricate woven hair of Leonardo's studies of heads, possibly for Leda.⁵ Long braids meet forming a kind of pendant in the Frankfort fantasy portrait. The only women that Botticelli paints who wear two separate braids are biblical and mythological figures: in the Sistine Chapel, one of the daughters of Jethro; in the Birth of Venus, the nymph standing on the seashore.⁶ The women portrayed in the school of Botticelli Frankfort and Berlin portraits and Raffaellino's Portrait of a Woman wear their hair down and loosely arranged. Neroccio's sitter also wears her blond hair hanging loose around her shoulders. It was the custom of young women to wear their hair hanging free and of married women to dress theirs in a knot.⁷ However, Neroccio's sitter lacks the abandoned appearance of the fantasy portraits; her hair is capped on top and neatly arranged. The opulence and liberty of the fantasy portrait contrasts with the decorum of Quattrocento portraits that

⁵ Bernard Berenson, The Drawings of the Florentine Painters, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), 2: 128 figures 543 and 545.

⁶ E. Bertaux, "Botticelli Costumier," La Revue de l'Art 21 (1907): 276.

⁷ Gertrude Coor, Neroccio de' Landi 1447-1500 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 59 note 193.

are supposedly of actual people.⁸ Piero di Cosimo substitutes a snake for the pendant. Strings of pearls are woven in her hair. In the authentic portrait, jewels generally rest on top of the head or embellish a cap.⁹ Elaborate jewelry can appear in Quattrocento portraiture, but the ornaments serve a different purpose. For example, a jewelled brush bearing a Sforza motto decorates the headdress of Bianca Maria Sforza in her portrait (c. 1490) by Ambrogio de Predis. The brush and her pendant are listed in an inventory of the Sforza family¹⁰ and were probably included in the portrait as a means of identifying the sitter and proclaiming dynastic power and authority. The cameo of Apollo and Marsyas worn by the Frankfort figure cannot be used to identify the patron of the painting as a Medici;¹¹ the cameo was so famous that the artist probably appropriated the image to decorate his beauty.

The opulent costumes of these portrait-like images differ from the courtly splendor displayed in Predis's Bianca Maria Sforza no less than from the bourgeois elegance of Domenico Ghirlandaio's Giovanna Tornabuoni. They suggest

⁸Bertaux, p. 277.

⁹Ibid., p. 278.

¹⁰Fern Rusk Shapley, Catalogue of the Italian Paintings, 2 vols. (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1979), 1: 380.

¹¹Lightbrown, 2: 117.

another realm, quite apart from that of the daily life of even the Medici or other noble families. Festivals, tournaments, jousts and carnivals were celebrated with much pomp and pageantry. The artists played a role in the preparations: Botticelli painted Guiliano's standard; Vasari goes to great lengths describing Piero di Cosimo's Car of Death.¹² "Piero, in his youth, being fanciful and extravagant in invention, was much employed for masquerades that are held during the Carnival, and he became very dear to the young noblemen of Florence, having improved their festivals much in invention, adornment, grandeur, and pomp."¹³ Engravings of men wearing fantastic helmets used in pageants illustrate the highly imaginative costumes that might have been worn.¹⁴ Andrea Verrocchio's profile relief Alexander the Great and Leonardo's drawing of a profile bust of a warrior in fanciful armor (after Verrocchio's relief)¹⁵ are works of art that possibly take their inspiration from the giostre. Triumphs of antique heroes were celebrated, including a Triumph of Augustus after his victory over Cleopatra, and records of

¹²Vasari, Vol. IV, p. 128, 129.

¹³Ibid., p. 127.

¹⁴Arthur M. Hind, Early Italian Engravings Part I Florentine Engravings and Anonymous Prints of Other Schools, Vol. I (New York: M. Knoedler and Co., 1938), plate 53.

¹⁵W.R. Valentiner, Catalogue of an Exhibition of Italian Gothic and Early Renaissance Sculpture (Detroit Institute of Arts, 1938), p. 54.

these triumphs are common subjects of cassone panels.¹⁶ The same Piero di Cosimo who delighted Florence with his dread Car of Death could have equally amused his patron with a portrait of a woman with a snake wrapped around her neck. A. Warburg, on the basis of a 1466 description of costumes worn in giostre and pageants suggests that the Frankfort portrait and the allegorical portrait attributed to the school of Botticelli in the Cook Collection represent Simonetta idealized as a nymph.¹⁷ Whether these fantasy portraits are permanent records of a fugitive festival or pageant cannot be known. Certainly the paintings and the festive decorations both reflect a desire for elaboration in a fantastic vein.

But the half-length figure, however fantastic, still suggests a portrait image. The standard half-length form of the independent portrait is in fact used also for images of sacred figures.¹⁸ In a portrait context the figure, following convention, is painted before a landscape or architectural background. The Madonna in half-length confronts the worshipper with the reality of her presence while maintaining

¹⁶Paul Schubring, Cassoni, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Verlag von Karl W. Hiersemann, 1923), 1: 59.

¹⁷Lightbrown, 2: 116.

¹⁸Rona Goffen, "Icon and Vision: Giovanni Bellini's Half-Length Madonnas" Art Bulletin 57 (December 1975): 495.

the mystery of divinity. The half-length figure suggests the partial knowledge of god.¹⁹ Only Giovanni Bellini and the Venetians used this form for the Madonna,²⁰ but, portrait-like images of saints exist in the Florentine tradition. Images of Mary Magdalene by Piero di Cosimo and Raffaellino may appear less devout than Bellini's half-length Madonnas. The Venetian half-length Madonnas wear simple garments; sumptuous texture is reserved for the cloth of honor. The Florentine Magdalenes, particularly Raffaellino's, appear to be more like the idealized beauties in the fantasy portraits. Their long hair is worn down on the shoulders and is adorned with embroidered scarves or pearls. Only the unguent jars distinguish these images of Mary Magdalene from portraits or fantasy portraits. St. John the Evangelist (Honolulu) by Piero di Cosimo is similar to his Magdalene in composition and facial type. The earlier profile of St. John resembles the silhouette of "Cleopatra" and the sensual appeal of the bare chest and fur drape is similar to that of the breasts and snake. Savonarola objected to such treatment of holy images. "The quality of the gods worshipped in Florence can be seen...in the pictures of those gods, for when youths pass someone in the street they say, 'there goes the Magdalen' or 'that one is San Giovanni' because certain actual people are represented as the saints

¹⁹Ibid., p. 498.

²⁰Ibid., p. 495.

by painters."²¹ Savonarola also criticized luxurious dress in religious images. "The artists paint the Virgin...dressed and ornamented as if she were a harlot when she actually was attired as a poor woman, very simply. Such things can cause great harm."²²

Intimate in scale, these portrait-like images were probably privately owned and kept in the house. Bellini's Madonna paintings were part of the studio repertoire of compositions and not painted for individual patrons.²³ Vasari in his life of Domenico Puligo seems to make a distinction between portraits painted from life and other pictures such as the half-length portrait-like images of Cleopatra and Lucretia. He cites specific examples of portraits painted from life. For example, one of Monsignore Messer Piero Carnesecchi, or the Florentine Barbara, "a famous and most lovely courtesan."²⁴ But in summing up Puligo's career, Vasari says: "...since it was his profession to attend rather to pictures of Our Lady, portraits, and other heads, than great works, he gave up almost all his time to such

²¹Ronald Steinberg, Fra Girolamo Savonarola, Florentine Art, and Renaissance Historiography (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1977), p. 51.

²²Ibid.

²³Goffen, p. 512.

²⁴Vasari, Vol. IV, p. 282.

things."²⁵ If "other heads" can be interpreted to mean Cleopatras, Lucretias and other portrait-like images, there would seem to have been a kind of industry developed in the production of such works.

Adopting the portrait form, busts and half-length figures decorated interiors and household items. Generalized facial features, often rudimentary execution, and a repetitiousness in the types of image distinguish this decorative class from the independent panel portraits. There are many examples of ceilings decorated with bust length figures of men and women in profile. This type of decoration was common in all of Lombardy and Western Emilia.²⁶ In the latter half of the Quattrocento, maiolica was being adopted not merely as part of the useful furniture of life but also in conjunction with paintings, sculpture, silversmith's work and embroidery, as a means of providing an environment of beauty.²⁷ The human form played a leading part in the decoration. Single figures or busts occur, either without particular significance or representing persons in ancient or modern history. Moralizing inscriptions often accompany the figure. Potters evidently had stock designs to which suitable names

²⁵ Ibid., p. 283.

²⁶ Federico Zeri, Italian Paintings in the Walters Art Gallery Vol, I (Baltimore: Walters Art Gallery, 1976), p. 295.

²⁷ Bernard Rackham, Italian Maiolica (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1963), p. 12.

and mottoes could be appended.²⁸ The ideal beauties on the maiolica plates are simplified versions of the fantasy portrait. Mirror frames composed as portraits of ideal beauties suggest the "concept of woman's beauty as a mirror in whose reflection the image of the true self is revealed."²⁹

A different meaning is attached to the Martelli Mirror. Made in the last quarter of the fifteenth century in Mantua, the bronze relief opposes a Bacchante in left profile with her breast exposed pressing milk into a rhyton and a Satyr in right profile holding a goblet.³⁰ The relief is regarded as an allegory of reproduction in which natural instinct is presented as a stimulus towards fulfillment of a necessary law.³¹ The iconography of a woman squeezing her breast is also found in the Allegorical Portrait of a Woman attributed to the school of Botticelli in the Cook Collection.³²

²⁸B. Rackham, Guide to Italian Maiolica Victoria and Albert Museum (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1933), p. 19.

²⁹For example, a maiolica frame from the Salting Bequest, and a cartapesta frame attributed to the workshop of Neroccio di Landi, both in the Victoria and Albert Museum. John Pope-Hennessy, "A Cartapesta Mirror Frame," Burlington Magazine 92 (1950): 290.

³⁰J. Pope-Hennessy, Catalogue of Italian Sculpture in the Victoria and Albert Museum, 2 vols. (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1964), 1: 325.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 327.

³²Lightbrown, 2: 155.

Ulmann suggests that the picture is an allegory of fruitfulness.³³

Other portrait-like images of a woman with one breast covered and the other bared have been regarded as portraits of courtesans. Bartolomeo Veneto's Frankfort Portrait of a Woman had been identified as Guilia Farnese, mistress of Pope Alexander VI, but appears to have been painted in Ferrara for Lucrezia Borgia between 1505 and 1507 and is among a series of emblematic portraits painted by Veneto.³⁴ The meaning of the symbolic flowers and attributes in these paintings remains a puzzle. The sexual meaning of such paintings and Giorgione's Laura may be something quite different. Egon Verheyen believes that the motif signifies the antithesis between pudicitia and voluptas and that Giorgione's portrait is a marriage allegory.³⁵ The motif of the bare and covered breast occurs in other media suggesting the currency of the imagery. A glazed terra cotta bust of a woman attributed to Leonardo³⁶ and a marble bust of a

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ J. Pope-Hennessy, The Portrait in the Renaissance, Bollinger Series 12 National Gallery of Art (New York: Pantheon, 1966), p. 266.

³⁵ Egon Verheyen, "Der Sinngehalt von Giorgiones Laura," Pantheon 26 (May/June, 1968): 227.

³⁶ Leonardo da Vinci (New York: Reynal and Company, 1956), p. 196.

woman by the workshop of Bernardo Rossellino,³⁷ are two examples. Neither of the women appears to be wearing contemporary clothing, and the "Rossellino" subject wears her hair down on the shoulders. If the covered and bare breast symbolize chastity and sexual pleasure respectively, then these portrait-like images, like the marriage cassone, may have been appropriate celebrations of a marriage. "From Boccaccio's admonitions, we learn that the ideals of chastity and virginity in girls were not considered, by the ordinary layman at any rate, as violated by marriage."³⁸ Such a belief could explain Giampietrino's tandem images of Lucretia and Cleopatra; one woman renowned for her chastity, the other for her sexual prowess.

The portrait of a woman by Piero di Cosimo that Vasari calls "Cleopatra" is perhaps a different type of sexual image. Both breasts are exposed, and the portrait appears to be sufficient as a beautiful image without allegorical significance whether of Cleopatra or just a lovely woman. The only comparable image known to me is a profile relief in the style of Verrocchio in the Victoria and Albert Museum.³⁹

³⁷ J. Pope-Hennessy, Luca della Robbia (Oxford: Phaidon, 1980), figure 62.

³⁸ Lightbrown, 1: 85.

³⁹ A relief in Milan differs from this relief in that there is no moulded border; it is oval; drapery in front of the figure is absent; the right arm is truncated; and the shape of the ear is altered. J. Pope-Hennessy, Catalogue of Victoria and Albert Museum, p. 168.

The finely rendered features suggest that the relief was not intended as a perfunctory part of a decorative scheme. The nudity in this relief and Piero di Cosimo's panel is another characteristic of a fantasy rather than authentic portrait. The independent portrait was a family record; a statement of family connections. Nudity would have been an inconceivable liberty in a female portrait at the end of the Quattrocento.⁴⁰

How, then, would the sensual beauty of Piero di Cosimo's painting have been perceived in Quattrocento Florence? Two sixteenth century accounts describing images which might be considered fantasy portraits suggest an erotic function for such images. Louis Vives in his Dialogues of 1532, pays an imaginary visit to a beautiful home.⁴¹ Accompanied by Leon Battista Alberti and Vitruvius, he describes in detail the furnishings of each room. The atrium is embellished with frescoes like those seen in Italian palaces.⁴² Of greater interest is the bedroom which is decorated with tapestries and pictures. "There are many images of the Virgin Mary and

⁴⁰ Mina Bacci, L'Opera Completa di Piero di Cosimo (Milan: Rizzoli Editore, 1976), p. 86.

⁴¹ Vives does not state the location of the house, however, Bonnaffe concludes that it was in Bruges where Vives spent a great deal of his life. Edmond Bonnaffé, Études sur la Vie Privée de la Renaissance (Paris: Société Française d'Éditions d'Art L. Henry May, 1898), p. 107.

⁴² Ibid., p. 108.

Jesus Christ; the others are of Narcissus, Euryalus, Adonis, and Polyxene, all of which are very beautiful."⁴³ The images that Vives names reflect a range of subject matter. Narcissus falls in love with his reflection and dies of exhaustion and unsatisfied longing. Adonis' beauty proves fatal, and Polyxena, claimed by the ghost of Achilles, is sacrificed at his tomb in order to accompany her master to the other world.⁴⁴ Eurayle is one of the three Gorgons and appears to be an anomalous image, although, in fact later Greek art could portray Medusa, another Gorgon, as a beautiful woman.⁴⁵ At any rate, it is the beauty of the figures and not the subject matter that evidently impresses Vives. According to Edmond Bonnaffé, it is an old belief dating from antiquity, that women contemplating types of beauty placed around their bed would be more apt to conceive beautiful children.⁴⁶

Bonnaffé's source, De la Beauté, was written in the sixteenth century by Gabriel Minut and dedicated to Catherine de Medicis.⁴⁷ Chapter five entitled "Plusieurs femmes

⁴³Ibid., p. 110.

⁴⁴H.J. Rose, A Handbook of Greek Mythology (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1959), p. 235.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 30.

⁴⁶Bonnaffé, p. 110.

⁴⁷Gabriel de Minut, De la Beauté Discours Divers avec "la Paule-graphie" (Lyon: Barthelemy Honorat, 1587), republished by Raretés Bibliographiques, Brussels: Imprimerie de A. Mertins et Fils, 1865.

engendrent des enfans semblables à ce qu'elles s'imaginent ou cequi leur est représenté devant leurs yeux"⁴⁸ recounts examples from history which 'prove' that what the woman sees at the moment of conception influences the appearance of the offspring. In the Old Testament story of Jacob, Jacob and Laban agreed that all the spotted sheep and goats would be Jacob's. To ensure the reproduction of such stock, Jacob scored twigs and sticks and placed them around the watering hole where the animals reproduced. The spotted images helped increase his flock.⁴⁹ A beautiful woman, white in face and body, was married to a king who was also fair. When she gave birth to a baby blacker than any Ethiopian, the king consulted the royal doctors. The culprit was a painting of a Moor upon which she had gazed while performing the laudable work of modest marriage. (Minut wonders why the king who was so powerful, had not thought to change the painting in his wife's bedroom.)⁵⁰ Another woman living in the time of Charles the Fourth, gave birth to an infant who was as shaggy as a bear; the explanation: she had looked upon a portrait of St. John.⁵¹

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 44.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 45.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 46.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 47.

Whether such beliefs were seriously held is a matter of speculation. Two cassone panels by Matteo di Giovanni depicting Antiochus and Stratonice provide slight circumstantial evidence.⁵² Each panel includes a bedroom scene. The beds are decorated with independent paintings apparently hung on the wall directly over the beds or attached to the bed frames. Because they are sketchy details, the precise images cannot be discerned. One image is a full length clothed female figure possibly clutching a knife. If this is the gesture, an identification as Lucretia is probable. Other framed images in the bedroom scenes appear to be typical devotional Madonnas. Carpaccio's Arrival of the Ambassadors of Britain at the Court of Brittany clearly shows a Madonna on the wall. In his Dream of St. Ursula, a painted statue of a nude Venus and a water carrier adorn the door mantles, and what appears to be a devotional painting hangs next to the martyr's bed.

A pattern emerges among the images reported by Vives and Minut and the details observed in Matteo's cassone panels and Carpaccio's paintings. Different levels of experience appear to be represented in the same room; the anagogical image of Mary is perhaps meant to counter the sensual message of profane images. Botticelli's Primavera and Minerva and

⁵²Schubring, 2: plates 474 and 475.

the Centaur hung in the same room with a Madonna.⁵³ The Renaissance household apparently acknowledged both the spiritual and sensual aspects of morality. The prevalence of such profane images disturbed Savonarola who condemned among other things, lascivious paintings of nudes, "indecent writings" (e.g. Boccaccio and Petrarch), and musical instruments to the fire of Vanities in 1497 and 1498.⁵⁴ Piero di Cosimo's Simonetta Vespucci very likely painted close to this time, may be seen as a refined example of this type of profane image.

There is no rein on Piero's imagination in Simonetta Vespucci. The portrait painted during the 1490s is among a group of works that exhibit Piero's eccentric vision and establish his independence as an artist. The question remains whether the evocative combination of the profile of a beautiful woman and a stormy sky was fortuitous or whether Piero attempted to take the profile portrait tradition as far as it could go with a highly suggestive landscape and the provocative nudity of the subject. In any case, Simonetta Vespucci is not a portrait that was intended as a family record of an individual. The woman probably represents Cleopatra, and the inscription "Simonetta Vespucci" was very likely added at a later date by a Vespucci family member in order to

⁵³ Webster Smith, "On the Original Location of the Primavera," Art Bulletin 57 (March 1975): 35.

⁵⁴ Steinberg, p. 6, 7.

associate a remote ancestor with the exotic Queen of Egypt. The portrait's sensual appeal must have been recognized in the Renaissance and is no less compelling today. The threatening snake and foreboding cloud leave a haunting impression which is contradicted by the woman's beauty and the decorative appearance of the panel. Piero di Cosimo's Simonetta Vespucci is "pleasing through its beauty," and its "strange, horrible and unexpected invention."⁵⁵

⁵⁵Vasari, Vol, IV, p. 128.

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