

# GOLD, CRIMSON AND IVORY: THE IDEAL FEMALE BEAUTY AND ITS MATERIAL CULTURE IN 16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY ITALY AND FRANCE

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This paper will explore the two ways in which female beauty was seen and approached in sixteenth-century Italy and France<sup>1</sup>. The literature of the *Secreti*, a genre that focuses on cosmetic remedies and medicinal recipes, much of which was written by women, among them Isabella Cortese, is an important source that will be considered, given that it presents the reader with a very interesting interpretation of the theme of female beauty, quite different from the one appearing in treatises on female beauty written by poets and learned men of the time. Taking this into consideration, I will analyse three allegorical portraits from the school of Fontainebleau, all entitled *La Dame à sa toilette*. The appearance of the sitters will be compared to the treatises on the female body written at the time, such as Agnolo Firenzuola's *Dialogo sulla bellezza delle donne*, Brantome's *Des dames gallants* and the *Blasons* by Clément Marot. Finally, evidence provided by the surviving material culture surrounding beauty will be examined through the analysis of the objects depicted, discussing their function, their symbolism and their relationship to the sitter.

KEYWORDS: female beauty, iconography, material culture, Renaissance Italy, Fontainebleau school France.

<sup>1</sup> The topic of female beauty in the sixteenth century in Italy and France has been previously addressed by: M. Françon, *Notes sur l'esthétique de la Femme au XVI siècle*, Harvard University press, Cambridge MA, 1939; E. Cropper, "On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, Petrarchismo, and the Vernacular Style", in: *Art Bulletin* 58, no. 3 (September 1976), p. 374–94; K. Clark,

*Feminine beauty*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, c1980; P. Tinagli, *Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, and Identity*, New York: Manchester University Press, 1997; M. Rolland-Perrin, *Blonde comme l'or: la chevelure féminine au Moyen Âge*, Publications de l'Université de Provence, Aix-en-Provence, 2010.

The three paintings of *La Dame à sa toilette*, currently held in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dijon, the Worcester Museum of Art and the Kunstmuseum in Basel, are very similar to one another except for several variations, and have been dated to the 1560s.<sup>2</sup> They were most likely made after a lost work by François Clouet. The influence of Italian portraits from the same period is undeniable, as they inspired the nudity of the sitter, the illusionism of the space and the all'antica style objects on the dressing table. The lost painting of a naked Gioconda by Leonardo da Vinci that survives in a drawing, the Fornarina by Raffaello, the Venus of Urbino by Titian and other allegorical depictions of Venus laid the foundations for this new genre in France during the sixteenth century. However, all is filtered through Fontainebleau's typical style, especially in the use of light and in the harmony of various colours<sup>3</sup>.

The paintings represent the ceremonial of the toilette: a woman is depicted in front of her dressing table, wearing nothing but a transparent veil and precious jewels adorning her blonde hair and her body. The action seems to be set in the anteroom rather than in the bedroom itself, as the woman is not completely naked. A coloured cloth, the toilette, covers the dressing table. As witnessed in the dictionaries of the time, the word *toilette* meant 'the linens, silk cloths or other fabrics that one spreads over the table in order to undress at night and to get dressed in the morning'<sup>4</sup> and, as time passed, the word started to signify the ritual of grooming oneself. It is not very common to find depictions of a 'complete' toilette in paintings from the sixteenth century. Touissant Dubreuil's painting, *Toilette et lever d'une dame*, is one of the few good and realistic examples.

In all three versions of the *Dame*, the woman's hair is adorned with precious gems. She is wearing a gold cottoire with precious stones around her neck and numerous rings and bracelets. Many other jewels are scattered both on the dressing table and in a beautifully decorated jewel-box. The presence of these many jewels underlines her high social status, as does the silk fabric that she is wearing over her naked body.

Strict rules governed the way a high society woman had to present herself. We have testimony of this in the *Istituzione morale* by Alessandro Piccolomini, where he states that it is inappropriate for a woman to dress in a way that is not in accordance with her rank in society<sup>5</sup>. The idea of beauty was influenced by social conventions and, furthermore, expressions of personal taste were subordinated to the demands of etiquette.<sup>6</sup> In her *Instruction pour les jeunes dames*, a work strongly influenced by Alessandro Piccolomini's Raffaella, Marie de Romieu tells her readers what kind of jewels a young wealthy woman was supposed to wear: 'a string of big, beautiful pearls, perfectly rounded and white, a well enamelled and delightfully coloured necklace, and a diamond ring'<sup>7</sup>.

Pearls and precious gems, as the ones seen in the paintings, at that time were subjects of treatises describing their virtues and properties, and most likely were used in paintings because they added a further layer of meaning. Pearls were associated with Venus<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, according to some alchemists, the pearl inspires those adorned with the virtues of chastity and modesty due to its whiteness that symbolises purity<sup>9</sup>.

2 *Le Bain et le Miroir, Soins du corps et l'esthétique de l'Antiquité à la Renaissance*, Paris: Gallimard, 2009, p. 302–303.  
 3 *La Dame à sa toilette*, Musée des beaux-arts de Dijon, Dijon, 1988, p. 19.  
 4 A. Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel*, 1690: "toilette: les linges, tapis de soie ou d'autre étoffe qu'on étende sur la table pour se déshabiller le soir et s'habiller le matin".

5 Alessandro Piccolomini, *Della institutione morale*, p. 556–557.  
 6 All this strongly echoes Cicero. *De officiis*, London: W. Heinemann; New York: The Macmillan Co., 1913, I, xxxvi, p. 131–133.  
 7 Marie de Romieu, *Instruction pour les jeunes dame. Par la Mere et Fille d'Aillance* (1597), a cura di C. Menna Sconamiglio, Scheina-Nizet, Paris, 1992.  
 8 Natale Conti's *mythologiae*, translated and annotated by John Mulryan and Steven Brown, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Tempe, 2006, Vol. 1, p. 315.  
 9 Oreste Beltrame, *Le Gemme nella leggenda e nella storia*, Vicenza: G. Raschi Editore, 1890, p. 321.

The sitter wears on her left annular finger a ring with a ruby, a gem that was said to represent love and to have the power to inflame the heart<sup>10</sup>. The ring she is gracefully taking out of a jewel box seems to be adorned with an emerald, a gem that was associated at the time by Jehan de la Taille with beauty and with the astral sign of Venus<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, emerald, if worn by a faithful wife, preserved her chastity and made her a loved and happy woman<sup>12</sup>. The gems used are all in accord with the theme of the paintings under discussion, as they all refer to the aristocracy, beautiful virtuous women, love and married life.

The mirror on the dressing table is adorned with ornaments taken from the repertoire of grotesques, masks, and necklaces of pearls and precious gems. The one in the Dijon and Worcester versions is adorned with a coral putto head. It is another symbol of the wealth of the sitter, since in sixteenth-century France mirrors of 'cristallin' were extremely precious and were often part of the dowry<sup>13</sup>. Lavish mirrors such as this one appear in the inventories of Charles V, Henry VIII, Catherina of Navarre and Maria de Medici, and are also described in the works by Rabelais<sup>14</sup>. The mirror is also associated with Venus who is often depicted looking at her own reflection in a mirror, since the idea of love was often linked to the contemplation of beauty. This theme goes back to Petrarch's sonnet *Il mio adversario*, a complaint to the mirror that held the face of his adored Laura.

The square wooden mirror frame is supported by sculpted caryatids, which vary in the three versions.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>11</sup> See: Jehan de La Taille, *La geomance abregee de Jean de La Taille de Bondaroy ...: pour scauoir les choses passees, presentes & futures: ensemble Le blason des pierres precieuses, contenant leurs vertus & proprietes*, Lucas Breyer ..., Paris, 1574.

<sup>12</sup> C. L. Daniels, Stevans C. McClellan, *Encyclopedia of Superstitions, Folklore, and the Occult Sciences of the World*, Vol. 1, Chicago: J. H. Yewdale & sons Company, 1903, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> D. Delacourcelle, *Le sentiment de l'art dans la Bergerie de Remy Belleau*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1945, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Julien Eymard, *Le thème du miroir dans la poésie française (1540–1815)*, Thèse présentée à l'Université de Toulouse, 1972, Lille, 1975, p. 55.

In the Basel painting we find a man and woman embracing, and thus the erotic tone of the painting is underlined. In the Worcester version the figures appear to be a man and a woman without arms that strongly resemble classical sculptures. In the Dijon version the same two figures can be found, albeit with a variation – the woman is wearing a sprig of wheat on her head. Wheat has been often associated with Ceres, the Great Mother and the goddess of fertility<sup>15</sup>. This probable allusion to fertility and motherhood fits well with the general theme of the painting, and some scholars have argued that the woman's waist seems to be that of a pregnant woman<sup>16</sup>.

The depicted ivory or bone comb is also appropriate for the theme of the paintings, as it refers to the ceremonial of the toilette. It could also allude to the goddess Venus who is often depicted combing her long hair while emerging from the sea. Combs such as this one, owned by aristocrats, were made of precious materials, carved and richly decorated<sup>17</sup>.

Now we should consider the ideal female beauty of the period.

Agnolo Firenzuola's treatise *Dialogo delle Bellezze delle Donne* is a two-part dialogue completed in 1452 and dedicated to the noble women of Prato. It draws upon many earlier works and is probably the most complete exposition on idealised female beauty among the texts written on this subject at the time. What emerges from the treatise is that a woman's beauty is based on two different aspects: the first one is made up of qualities that are definable, such as the harmony, proportion and order of the different parts, and the second one is based on the indefinable ideas of

<sup>15</sup> As seen in: G. Boccaccio, *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, edited and translated by Jon Solomon, 2 vols, Vol. II, The I Tatti Renaissance Library Harvard University Press, Cambridge-London, 2011, Book III, 4, 1; Natale Conti's *mythologiae*, p. 425, 428, 432; V. Cartari, *Le Immagini de i Dei de gli Antichi*, New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1976, p. 223.

<sup>16</sup> *La Dame à sa toilette*, p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> *Le Bain et le Miroir, Soins du corps et l'esthétique de l'Antiquité à la Renaissance*: Catalogue of the Exhibition, p. 313.

elegance, grace, charm, loveliness and majesty. Firenzuola quotes different authors, such as Aristotle, Plato, Cicero, Dante and Ficino, to define beauty as harmony and proportion among the parts<sup>18</sup>.

Firenzuola is also very precise in defining exactly what features and characteristics make a woman ideally beautiful. The hair is supposed to be blonde, wavy, thick, abundant and long, and is compared to gold, honey and the bright rays of the sun; the eyes are supposed to be round and dark, and he compares them to Juno's eyes as described by Homer; the cheeks are supposed to be white but slightly tinted with vermillion; the hands are supposed to be white with a pink palm. The ideal body type is described as somewhere between lean and fat, plump and proportionate, and the bosom has to be white<sup>19</sup>. While describing what constitutes ideal beauty, Firenzuola uses different women as examples for the different characteristics and parts of the body, thus fitting firmly into the tradition of the time, inspired by Pliny's story of Zeuxis<sup>20</sup>. Regarding the appearance of the women depicted in Fontainebleau's paintings, we find the qualities described by Firenzuola in his treatise.

Similar descriptions of idealised female beauty also appear in French literature. One example is *Les Dames Galantes* written by Pierre de Bourdeille, also known as Brantôme<sup>21</sup>. Manuscripts of this work were already circulating in the early 1600s. It was originally dedicated to François, Duke of Alençon, son of Henry II and Caterina de Medici, who died in 1584. *Les Dames Galantes* is a compilation of stories about the erotic world of the time<sup>22</sup>. Brantôme describes the appearance of a beautiful woman with the same parameters we have seen as being the standard of female beauty,

and the same metaphors and similes are also used. Brantôme states that thirty things are needed to make a woman beautiful, including three white things (the skin, the teeth and the hands), three black (the eyes, the eyebrows and the lashes), and three coloured (the lips, the cheeks and the nails)<sup>23</sup>.

Information regarding the ideal female beauty in France at the time is also found in the genre of the blasons<sup>24</sup>. In the blason entitled *Blason du Beau Tétin*, Clément Marot praises the bosom for being as white as ivory<sup>25</sup>. The blasons together with the genre of the contrebason received editorial success in France between 1536 and 1544. Marot inspired many of his contemporaries to imitate his poem. A famous example is the *Blasons Anatomiques du Corps Féminin*, first published in 1536<sup>26</sup>. In them the poets divided the female body into separate parts that were praised as if they were precious jewels<sup>27</sup>. It is possible to find the same characteristics that make a woman ideally beautiful. For example, in the *Blason des cheveux* written by Jean de Vauzelles, the hair is praised for being golden like honey and brighter than fine gold<sup>28</sup>, while in the *Blason de la Main* Claude Chappuys writes that the praised skin of the hand is so white that even snow is put to shame<sup>29</sup>. A strong influence of Petrarchismo and medieval French literature of amour courtois is evident. In Petrarch's sonnets<sup>30</sup> and later poetry imbued with Petrarchismo, the key words and metaphorical attributes

18 Agnolo Firenzuola, *Dialogo sulle bellezze delle donne in Opere di Messer Agnolo Firenzuola Fiorentino*, Vol. 1, Florence, 1763, p. 248, 262, 264.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 303, 308–309, 314, 326, 307, 320.

20 Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, XXXV, p. 36.

21 L. Lalanne, *Brantôme sa vie et ses écrits*, Librairie de la Société de l'Histoire de France, 1896, p. 7.

22 R. D. Cottrell, *Brantôme: The Writer as Portraitist of His Age*, Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1970, p. 10–11, 35–38.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 155–156. Quoting the Spanish version of *De la louange et beauté des Dames* by François Corniger.

24 See Mia Cocco, *La tradizione cortese ed il Petrarchismo nella poesia di Clément Marot*, Firenze: Olschki Editore, 1978 and J. Plattard, *Marot. Sa carrière poétique, son oeuvre*, Paris: Bovin & C. Éditeurs, 1938.

25 P. Lainé, P. Quignard, *Blasons anatomiques du corps féminin, suivis de Contrebasons de la beauté des membres du corps humain : et illustrés par les peintres de l'école de Fontainebleau*, Paris: Gallimard, 1982, p. 51.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 5–7.

27 R. D. Cottrell, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

28 P. Lainé, P. Quignard, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

30 See, e.g., *Erano i capei d'oro a l'aura sparsi*.

used to describe beautiful women are very similar to the ones discussed above. The same could be said about the literature of amour courtois and the epic romances, in which all women resemble each other: long blonde hair, brilliant eyes and small red lips<sup>31</sup>.

What seems to be missing in the analysed paintings, accurately showing various objects that were part of the ceremonial of the toilette and that express the concept of ideal beauty, is the ritual of makeup and various cosmetic remedies that were used to take care of one's appearance. An account about these practices can be found in the literature of the *Secreti*, which has its roots in Ovid's *Medicamina faciei feminae* and in the medieval tradition. This genre blossomed during the Renaissance<sup>32</sup>. Isabella Cortese, a Venetian woman who actually wrote a book of cosmetic remedies and medicinal recipes in 1561, described it as a 'collection of recipes on the occult secrets of nature'<sup>33</sup>.

The abovementioned definition of this literary genre includes various disciplines that are all considered part of the scientific domain, and include sections on alchemy, medicine, astrology, cooking and the art of looking beautiful<sup>34</sup>. In terms of content, the various treatises of the *Secreti* differ in terms of the subjects addressed<sup>35</sup>. These books occupy an important place

among the works of scientific knowledge, and some of them were written by women. Caterina Sforza of Forlì wrote a treaty entitled *Gli Experimenti*, which contained cures for illnesses, alchemical formulae and cosmetic recipes. Isabella Gonzaga was also known at the time for being an expert on perfumes<sup>36</sup>.

In fact, the subject that most interests the writers of the *Secreti* is cosmetology, and almost all the *Secreti* address the topic of female beauty and cosmetic remedies<sup>37</sup>. A great many works dedicated to the subject underline both the importance of beauty at the time and the unattainability of this idea of perfection. The importance attached to the subject is mainly due to the fact that looking beautiful was also seen as strongly related to good health. The majority of the cosmetic recipes in these works are mainly dedicated to the parts of the body that were not covered by garments, i.e. the face, the hands and the hair. The formulae to whiten the skin, the blanchet or fard, represent the majority of recipes included in these works<sup>38</sup>. In André Le Fourrier's work *La Décoration d'humaine nature et ornements des dames* published in 1540, more than a third of the described preparations have this function. In the same work the words *beauty* and *blancheur*<sup>39</sup> are often associated and in some cases even used as synonyms<sup>40</sup>. Despite the great success of these works, many philosophers and writers of the time negatively assessed the use of cosmetics and natural remedies<sup>41</sup>. The origins of this distaste for makeup have earlier

31 However, it is interesting to note that in French popular poetry of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries it is also possible to find references to beautiful women who are brunettes rather than blondes. François Villon, a fourteenth-century French poet, albeit one who often adhered to the medieval ideal of the blonde woman, also sings about the beauty of brunette haired women, e.g., in the *Double ballade des folles amours*. So did Clément Marot in *D'un nouveau dard je suis frappé* and in the *Lyrique LXXXVI*.

32 Claire Lesage, "La littérature des 'secrets' e 'I secreti d'Isabella Cortese", in: *Chroniques Italiennes*, 36, 1993, p. 145.

33 Isabella Cortese, *I secreti de la Signora Isabella Cortese ne' quali si contengono cose minerali, medicinali, artificiose, e alchemiche e molte de l'arte profumatoria appartenenti a ogni gran Signora*, Venetia: Giovanni Bariletto, 1565, p. 1.

34 Claire Lesage C., *op. cit.*, p. 147.

35 See, e.g., Giovanventura Rosseti, *I Notandissimi secreti de l'arte profumatoria*, 1555; Alessio Piemontese or Geromino Ruscelli, *De' secreti del reuerendo donno Alessio Piemontese, prima parte, diuisa in sei libri*, 1555; Thimoteo Rossello, *Della summa*

*de' secreti universali in ogni materia*, 1574, and *Secreti nuovi di maravigliosa virtù...*, 1567.

36 Claire Lesage, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

37 J. L. Flandrin, *Soins de beauté et recueils des secrets in Les soins de beauté. Moyen Age, début des temps modernes*, Colloque International de Grasse, 1985, Nice, 1987, p. 17.

38 C. Lanoë, *La poudre et le fard. Une histoire des Cosmétiques de la Renaissance aux Lumières*, Champ Vallon, Seyssel, 2008, p. 29.

39 Whiteness.

40 A. Le Fourrier, *La Décoration d'humaine nature et ornements des dames*, Lyon: chez Gilles et Jacques Huguetan Frères, 1541, rééd. Paris: Aux amateurs de livres, 1992, p. 11.

41 For example Leon Battista Alberti, *I Libri della Famiglia*; Ludovico Ariosto, *Satire*; Tommaso Campanella, *Civitas Solis*.

roots; in fact, the French term *fard*, still in use today, originally appeared around 1190 and was used to designate everything that had a misleading appearance<sup>42</sup> and dissimulation in words and attitude<sup>43</sup>.

To conclude, the analysis of the paintings and sources has shown that the characteristics and traits that a woman must have to be considered universally beautiful are blonde hair, ivory toned skin, a plump body and graceful hands. The paintings in consideration should be interpreted either as an allegory of beauty, or as an idealised depiction of a woman belonging to the aristocracy. This is strongly suggested by the woman's appearance, the refined and precious objects on the dressing table and the references to Venus that appear in the objects discussed.

Furthermore, I believe that the literature of the *Secreti* has to be considered an important source, as it presents the reader with a very interesting interpretation of the theme of female beauty, a very different one from what appears in the treatises written by men on the subject. In those treatises the idea of female beauty is usually approached from a single perspective: the women are presented as objects of contemplation or as moralised beings. Women are portrayed as static beauties, passive in respect to the male gaze. Instead, in the *Secreti* the reader encounters a dynamic image of a woman in her private sphere in front of the mirror taking care of herself in a ritual dedicated only to herself and her appearance – just as we see portrayed in Fontainebleau's paintings.

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42 A. Rey, *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, Paris: Le Robert, 1998, art. "Fard": "ce qui constitue une apparence trompeuse".

43 J. Dubois, R. Lagagne, A. Lerond, *Dictionnaire du français classique*, Paris: Larousse, 1971, art. "Fard": "une dissimulation dans les paroles et l'attitude".

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## AUKSAS, PURPURAS IR DRAMBLIO KAULAS: MOTERS GROŽIO IDEALAS IR MATERIALIOJI KULTŪRA XVI A. ITALIJOJE IR PRANCŪZIJOJE

Lorenza Gay

### SANTRAUKA

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: moters grožis, ikonografija, materialioji kultūra, itališkas renesansas, Fontenblo mokykla Prancūzijoje.

Straipsnyje yra nagrinėjami du būdai, kuriais moters grožis buvo suvokiamas ir analizuojamas XVI a. Italijoje ir Prancūzijoje. *Secreti* – literatūros žanras, daugiausia tyrinėjantis kosmetinius preparatus ir medicininius receptus; nemažai šio žanro veikalų parašė moterys, tarp jų – Isabella Cortese. Šio žanro literatūra yra labai svarbus šaltinis, pateikiantis skaitytojui nepaprastai įdomią moters grožio temos interpretaciją, kuri stipriai skyrėsi nuo ano meto poetų ir mokslo vyrų traktatuose sutinkamo požiūrio į moters grožį. Tokioje literatūroje moters grožio idėja paprastai yra pateikiama tik iš vienos perspektyvos; moterys yra vaizduojamos kaip kontempliacijos objektai ar moralizuojamos būtybės. Kitaip tariant, jos yra vaizduojamos kaip statiškos gražuolės, pasyvios būtybės, paklūstančios vyriškam žvilgsniui, tuo tarpu *Secreti* literatūroje moterys yra vaizduojamos jų privačioje sferoje, pabrėžiant dinamišką moters grožio įvaizdį. Atsižvelgus į tai, straipsnyje analizuojami trys alegoriniai Fontenblo mokyklos portretai, kurie visi vadinasi *La Dame à sa toilette*. Pozuotojų išvaizda yra lyginama su ano meto traktatais apie moters kūną, tokiais kaip Agnolo Firenzuolos *Dialogo sulla bellezza delle donne* (*Dialogas apie moterų grožį*), Brantome *Des dames gallantes* (*Dvaro damos*) ir Clément'o Marot *Blasons*. Galiausiai, išlikę materialiosios grožio kultūros liudijimai yra tyrinėjami analizuojant vaizduojamus objektus bei aptariant jų funkcijas, simbolių ir santykį su pozuotoju.