



LEONARDO DA VINCI

Ginevra de'Benci

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

LEONARDO'S PORTRAIT OF GINEVRA DE'BENCI

Great works of art, Nietzsche once said, have an element of mystery that cannot be fully explained. It is this inexplicable air of mystery which makes such a strong impression when we view Leonardo's portrait of Ginevra de'Benci. The picture casts a spell but when we attempt to explain fully its mysterious fascination and beauty its secret eludes us.

A great deal has been written about the portrait by art historians in the hundred years since it was first recognized as the work of Leonardo, and then identified as the portrait of Ginevra de'Benci which sixteenth-century accounts record Leonardo as having painted. About 1520 Antonio Billi, in his book on Florentine art, noted that Leonardo "painted Ginevra d'Amerigo Benci with such perfection that it was none other than she." Somewhat later, between 1537 and 1542, an unknown chronicler (now referred to as the Anonimo Gaddiano) wrote that "he painted Ginevra d'Amerigo Benci from life in Florence and completed it so perfectly that it seemed to be not a portrait but Ginevra herself." In 1550 Giorgio Vasari, the biographer of Italian Renaissance artists, mentioned it in his chapter on Leonardo as "una bellissima cosa" (a most beautiful work).

Ginevra's name accounts for the recurring juniper motif in the portrait: the juniper bush forming the background of her head and, on the reverse, the sprig of juniper encircled by a wreath of laurel and palm. *Ginevra* is a dialect form, in the feminine, of the Italian word for juniper (*ginepro*).

Ginevra was born in August 1457, the daughter of Amerigo de'Benci, a wealthy Florentine merchant. She was married on January 15, 1474, at the age of sixteen, to Luigi Niccolini in the house of her parents, a palazzo which still stands, now number 16 in the Via de'Benci in Florence. Her husband, then thirty-two years old, came from a highly respected family which was devoted to the Medici and had been prominent in the government of Florence for generations. Luigi became gonfalonier, or chief magistrate, of Florence in 1478 and prior (one of the six magistrates to whom the government of Florence was entrusted) in 1480. The

family fortune, however, was modest. Luigi's father had left the family's cloth-weaving business to his four sons in 1470; besides that, the family owned a house in Florence and some small farms.

The business of the Niccolini was gradually deteriorating. In his tax return of August 15, 1480, Luigi reported that because of financial difficulties he had "more debts than personal property," and that his wife, Ginevra, had been sick and "in the hands of doctors" for a long time. Ginevra was then twenty-three years old. The family fortunes did not improve with time, and Ginevra must have been supported by her mother, who was still alive in 1480, and by her brothers. Luigi made his will on March 31, 1505, and was buried on April 2 in the church of Santa Croce. In his will he specified that his wife's large dowry of 1,400 florins be returned to her, but his brothers, named as heirs, were unable to pay the sum because of their difficult financial situation. Ginevra, who never had children, lived on until about 1520 but the date of her death is not known.

Two sonnets and a letter are all that remain to tell us what sort of woman Ginevra was. The sonnets were written to her by none other than Lorenzo de' Medici, called the Magnificent, at the time the city was rocked by a family scan-





dal. We know that Ginevra's aunt who, in 1480, was twenty-three, the same age as Ginevra, and who lived in the Benci house, was infatuated with the forty-year-old Lorenzo de' Medici. This affair, which so scandalized the city and angered the friends of Lorenzo, caused the sensitive, upright Ginevra to flee to the country, and it was there that Lorenzo must have sent her the poems. In the first he addresses her as "gentle spirit" and in the second as "pious spirit." He implores her not to be suspicious or angry.

More detailed information is contained in a long letter to her by a Florentine lute player, an intimate of the Benci and Niccolini families, who signs himself G+H. He writes from Rome in August 1490 to his "magnificent patroness Madonna Ginevra, wife of Luigi Niccolini." She had commissioned him to get her some mother-of-pearl rosaries and wax discs stamped with the Lamb of God and blessed by the Pope. Confirming that he sent her two rosaries, he asks that she send him one of her poems. At the papal court he had sung the praises of Florentine ladies—their manners, clothes, amiability, high decorum and intelligent conversations—and among them he cited as examples Ginevra and her sisters Tita and Lucrezia. The Roman ladies, transported by his account of Ginevra's *virtù*, anxiously awaited some of her poems. He congratulates Lucrezia on the birth of a daughter and rejoices that a family so endowed with beauty and generosity will not die out.

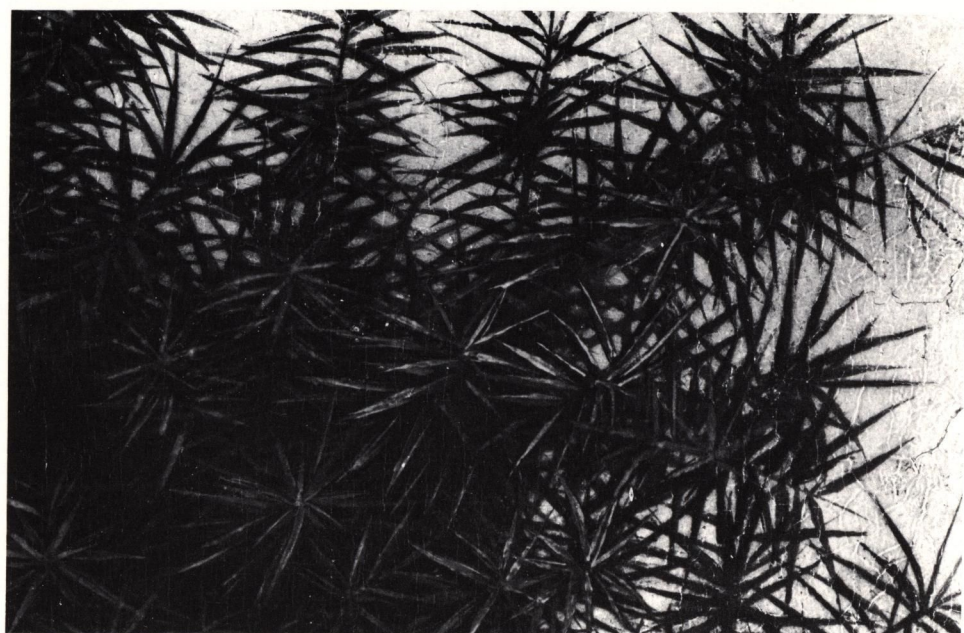
In Ginevra's family there was a long tradition of appreciation of learning and the arts. Her grandfather had built the cloister of the Suore Murate (cloistered nuns) and in 1443 had commissioned Fra Filippo Lippi to paint three altarpieces for it. Her father Amerigo attended meetings of the Platonic Academy, and gave to Marsilio Ficino, the Platonic philosopher, a rare codex of Plato. Her brother Carlo, a canon of the Cathedral of Florence, was actively engaged in matters of the decoration of its façade. The older brother, Giovanni, must have been a person of extraordinary culture and must have been on close terms with Leonardo for he exchanged with him books, maps, and even semiprecious stones. Finally, we learn from Vasari that Leonardo's unfinished *Adoration of the Magi*, now in the Uffizi, was in the house of Giovanni's son, Amerigo Benci.

When Ginevra's portrait was painted by Leonardo, most likely around 1480, she had been sick for a long time. The half-closed, hazel eyes—her gaze like Mona Lisa's meeting ours—and the pallor of the face against the dark olive-green of the juniper convey a sense of melancholy. The mouth is firmly closed, the lower lip slightly protruding, giving a sense of resolution. The high forehead and calm, sure gaze bear witness to intelligence. We are reminded of Leonardo's belief that a portrait should portray "the motions of the mind." The chestnut-brown dress is conservative for the style of the period but its sobriety is suited to the gravity of Ginevra's demeanor. Finally, the tranquil landscape implies her pleasure in the beauty of nature.

Leonardo shows the youthful, dignified figure in three-quarter view, the erect head turned to face the observer. The bodice is laced with a light blue ribbon passing through golden rings and knotted at the top, the neckline edged with a narrow, woven gold band. The sheer white blouse is fastened with a tiny gold button, and over her shoulders hangs a black velvet stole. Her auburn hair, parted in the middle, is smoothly combed over the head and coiled at the back in a knot, which is covered with a cap; the face is framed by cascading curls. These ringlets, infinitely varied in their shapes and movement, remind us of Leonardo's drawings of whirling eddies of water (in his *Notebooks* he observes that the motion of the surface of water resembles that of hair). Just as in the drawings, the parallel lines here thicken to form the golden highlights of the spirals and become thinner as they merge into the shadows or finally dissolve into barely perceptible wisps.

The soft light illuminates the figure from the front, coming from a source high on the right. Leonardo refers in the *Notebooks* to this kind of lighting in portraiture, "... faces acquire great relief, especially when the light is above the face." Also he advises that the lighted areas were never to be brightly lit: "Make your portrait at twilight, or when there are clouds or mist. That is the perfect atmosphere."

The modelling of the cheeks, the area around the mouth, and the throat is soft yet precise; the gradations of planes are imperceptible. The flesh seems to glow from within, faintly suffused with the palest of rose-violet. The subtle blending of light and shade, dissolving outlines, is the famous *sfumato* of Leonardo, who counseled students to "see that your shadows and lights blend like smoke without strokes or borders."



The mass of juniper serves not simply as a background for the face. The interplay of green and brown tones corresponds to the alternately cool shadows and warm reflections of the hair. So too, the cool and warm tones of the background colors seem to reverberate upon the face, the body and the garments. These are the colored reflections (*riflessi colorati*) of which Leonardo speaks in his *Treatise on Painting*. Although the thicket seems opaque at first glance, as we look more closely, we are able to see into its very depth. On the left, two junipers meet to form a complex network of spiky foliage, its forbidding mystery penetrated only at bottom and top to afford a glimpse of landscape bathed in a bluish haze. By contrast, on the right we are led into the open, placid landscape with a stream reflecting the blue of the sky along with the lengthening shadows of trees and shrubs. Beyond the low hills a church with two slender towers pointing to the distant horizon is barely visible.

The back of the panel (illustrated on back cover) is painted in grisaille with a device consisting of a sprig of juniper encircled by a wreath of laurel and palm, and a scroll inscribed *Virtutem forma decorat* (Beauty adorns virtue); the background simulates a slab of red porphyry. There is no other picture by Leonardo with a painting on the reverse.

Such emblematic designs were not uncommon in the Italian Renaissance. They are found, for example, on the reverses of portrait medals. They allude, ever so subtly, and usually obscurely, to the person represented. The practice occurs much more rarely, however, in painted portraits since the back would not

normally be seen. The laurel and palm usually allude to the distinguished accomplishments of artists and poets, while the juniper refers to the lady's name.

The portrait is painted in a mixed medium of oil, resin, and tempera on a single piece of Italian poplar wood about three-eighths of an inch thick. The same kind of wood was used by Leonardo for *Mona Lisa*. The dimensions of the panel are $15\frac{1}{8}$ inches high by $14\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide. Originally the picture was higher. At some time prior to 1780 (as is indicated by the measurements given in the Liechtenstein catalogue of that year), the panel had been cut off at the bottom, presumably because the lower part had been damaged by moisture, and a strip $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches high had been added. This strip is now concealed by the present sixteenth-century Italian frame which has been adapted for the portrait.

It is highly probable that the missing portion of the portrait included the hands, and it has been plausibly suggested by a number of scholars that Leonardo's beautiful silverpoint drawing of hands at Windsor Castle was a study for them. In three other portraits by Leonardo—the drawing of *Isabella d'Este*, the *Mona Lisa* and *The Lady with an Ermine* (Cecilia Gallerani)—the hands are shown.

The red seal on the back of the panel, with the coat of arms of the then reigning prince, Joseph Wenzel (1696–1772), and the date 1733, indicates that the picture was in the Liechtenstein Collection by that time. We know that the Benci family died out in 1611. The picture may, therefore, have entered the Liechtenstein Collection in the seventeenth century. The founder of the picture gallery was Prince Carl Eusebius (1611–1684), a distinguished connoisseur and collector. The portrait of Ginevra remained in the collection of the Princes of Liechtenstein until acquired by the National Gallery of Art in February of 1967.

This exquisite portrait is incomparably more beautiful than any reproduction can suggest. The marvelous sense of atmosphere surrounding Ginevra, the harmonious unity of landscape and figure, and the incredible delicacy with which minute details are rendered can only be appreciated in the original painting.

After nearly five hundred years this portrait, like all the works of Leonardo, which in his lifetime aroused curiosity and wonder, continues to exert its mysterious fascination.

PERRY B. COTT
Chief Curator

Washington, D.C.
March 1967



LEONARDO DA VINCI

Born: Vinci, Tuscany, 15 April 1452

Died: Château de Cloux, Amboise, France, 2 May 1519