

The Female Gaze

Women as Art Collectors in Renaissance Europe: Isabella d'Este and Margaret of Austria

Before Isabella Stewart Gardner, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, and others, there were women like Isabella d'Este and Margaret of Austria.

Something that has always fascinated me about studying art history is learning about women in the arts during periods when the majority of artists, patrons, and collectors were men. Isabella d'Este and Margaret of Austria were two powerful Renaissance women who formed prestigious collections and patronized artists in their own right.



Portrait Drawing of Isabella d'Este, Leonardo da Vinci. Louvre, Paris.



Portrait of Margaret of Austria, Workshop of Bernard van Orley.

Isabella d'Este (1474-1539) was the Marchioness of Mantua (a small city-state in northern Italy) and often ruled the state while her husband was away on military duty, while Margaret of Austria (1480-1530) was the daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor and regent of the Habsburg Netherlands. The art activities of these women are especially fascinating considering the vibrant Renaissance court culture in which they both participated. These women possessed the necessary political and social power and wealth to collect art and display collections. Their collections can be understood on the one hand as a way to present a certain image of the ruler and fashion a particular political identity, but they were also spaces of personal visual and intellectual enjoyment.

Isabella had a *studiolo* (study) and a grotto built in the palace in Mantua to house her collections. She was especially interested in collecting antiquities, including sculptures, cameos, and gems. By collecting antiquities, Isabella inserted herself into the humanist tradition that focused on the rediscovery of the art and literature of antiquity. She commissioned artists such as Andrea Mantegna, Perugino, and Lorenzo Costa to paint large mythological allegories for the walls of her *studiolo*, such as the *Coronation of a Woman Poet*. In surviving letters to the artists, Isabella wrote very specific instructions for the complex visual programs of these paintings, suggesting that their intellectual content was very important to her. Isabella also

commissioned portraits of herself, one by Leonardo da Vinci, though he only completed a drawing for it (shown above), and another painted by Titian.



Coronation of a Woman Poet, Lorenzo Costa. Louvre, Paris.

As an imperial daughter and regent of the Netherlands, Margaret had more financial resources at her disposal than Isabella. Margaret was less interested in antiquities and instead focused more on religious works and portraiture. She owned works by some of the great Netherlandish artists, such as Rogier Van der Weyden, Hieronymous Bosch, and Jan van Eyck. She owned Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Double Portrait*, given to her as a gift, and known to many art history students as one of the masterpieces of the Northern Renaissance. In her court at Mechelen (in modern Belgium), Margaret also patronized many artists who produced paintings, sculptures, and tapestries for her and her court. She owned a large number of tapestries (one of the most expensive media to commission and own during the Renaissance) and had a very impressive library that intellectuals and artists traveled to visit. Also interesting is her collection of objects from the newly-discovered Americas, including feathered headdresses, precious stones, weapons, and jewelry. The conquistador Hernán Cortés brought these objects to Europe as a present for Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, who in turn gave a large number of them as a gift to Margaret, his aunt.



The Arnolfini Double Portrait, Jan van Eyck. National Gallery, London.

Margaret and Isabella lived during an age of discovery (and rediscovery) of classical antiquity and the New World. This was an era of great intellectual and political change: the shifting balance of power between the nobility and the rising urban merchant class, the rise of cities, and the rapid travel of ideas thanks to new technologies such as printmaking and printed books.

The sense of excitement and discovery of the period certainly played a role in their collections. In her collection, Isabella drew on the legacy of classical antiquity and the Roman Empire, while Margaret juxtaposed objects from both the medieval period and the New World, which she would have understood as part of the expanded Habsburg empire.

While their collections have long since been dispersed and many works have been lost, Margaret and Isabella nonetheless occupy an important place in history as art patrons and collectors. The idea of forming art collections and building spaces in which to display them would eventually become the modern museum, where today we can enjoy some of the same works as these two Renaissance women.

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