

Federico da Montefeltro of Urbino and Italian Renaissance Court Culture

Background Notes

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Justus of Ghent, *Double Portrait of Federigo Montefeltro and his son Guidobaldo*,
c. 1475, oil on panel, 134.5 x 75.5 cm, Palazzo Ducale, Urbino, Italy

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Studies of the Italian Renaissance tend to focus on the famous centres of Florence, Venice and Rome. Without denying the undoubted art-historical importance of these major cities, there are numerous other centres of excellence which are often overlooked. For example, some of the most sophisticated courts in Europe were concentrated in a few small towns in north-east Italy. These courts were small in comparison with other courts like that of the Visconti and Sforza in Milan, and their prestige was largely due to their patronage of the arts. Indeed, from these families emerged some of the most magnificent patrons of the Italian Renaissance. Each court was dominated by a ruling dynasty such as the d'Este at Ferrara, the Gonzagas at Mantua or the Montefeltro at Urbino.

These regional courts, with their hunger for novelty, love of magnificence and thirst for recognition, engaged major figures in the visual arts, music, literature and humanist learning. They gave patronage to such major figures as Piero della Francesca, Andrea Mantegna, Leon Battista Alberti, Leonardo da Vinci, Titian, Josquin des Prez, Claudio Monteverdi and Lodovico Ariosto. Further, they played an important role in the development and the dissemination of Renaissance ideals, both within Italy and across wider European culture.

These rulers were *condottieri*, or mercenaries, earning significant sums from the larger Italian powers. An education in arms and horsemanship was therefore crucial, as was a humanist education, combining chivalric ideals of honour and glory with ancient statecraft and military strategy. In addition, the ethics of ancient Greece and Rome provided the moral framework that shaped their public and private lives. Humanists such as Leonardo Bruni and Leon Battista Alberti cited the Greek philosopher Aristotle to support the display of

magnificence, the wealthy having the obligation to spend money proportionate to their status.

Leonello D'Este (1407-1450) at Ferrara was a prime example. He appreciated Roman gems and coins for their precise and intricate detail plus their association with antiquity. He had many bronze medals made, many by the Veronese artist Pisanello, as did other North-Italian rulers. He also gave patronage to Jacopo Bellini, Piero della Francesca, Andrea Mantegna and, from Northern Europe, Jean Fouquet and Rogier van der Weyden. He was succeeded by his half-brothers Borso (1430-1471) and Ercole (1431-1505) who were both also significant patrons of the arts.



Pisanello, *Portrait medal of Leonello d'Este*, 1444, bronze. Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Isabella d'Este (1474-1539) was the daughter of Ercole and Eleonora of Aragon (1450-1493) and, like her mother, took a keen interest in culture. She married Francesco Gonzaga II of Mantua (1466-1519) and became the principal woman to

patronise culture in Renaissance Italy, commissioning works from major artists (not just those at the Mantuan court and including Leonardo) or collecting them to furnish her famous *studiolo*.

Isabella maintained a life-long correspondence with her sister-in-law, Elisabetta Gonzaga (1471-1526) who married Guidobaldo da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino (1482-1508), the son of Federico da Montefeltro (1420-1482). Urbino had been a small, remote and relatively poor hill town with no particular cultural history, but in a relatively short time, Federico embellished the town and, through his wide patronage, raised Urbino to the status of an ideal Renaissance court and centre of artistic excellence. Baldassare Castiglione called him “the Light of Italy” in his *‘The Courtier’*, the book which spread Italian ideals of courtly behaviour across Europe.

Federico was the most successful *condottiere* of his time and his fees grew along with his prestige, earning huge sums, whether through peacetime retainers or when taking up arms. Alongside his military expertise, obtained from the best tutelage, he also received a humanist education at the court in Mantua, learning Latin, astronomy, athletics, music, mathematics, geometry, self-discipline and moral restraint.

Federico invested more in art and architecture than any other Italian ruler. He, along with Cosimo de’ Medici, was praised by his manuscript supplier, Vespasiano da Bisticci, as the most munificent patron of art in fifteenth-century Italy. Federico extended patronage to, amongst others, Piero della Francesca, the Spanish painter Pedro Berruguete and Justus of Ghent. He commissioned a library, one of the finest in Italy, and had his own scriptorium at Urbino. He employed the Dalmatian architect, Luciano Laurana, followed by Francesco di Giorgio Martini, who, influenced by Vitruvian architectural principles,

transformed the palace into the most beautiful of its age. Rather than being an aggressive statement of power, it symbolises peacetime ambitions with its broad and perfectly proportioned colonnades, spacious courtyard, fancifully medieval towers and large-windowed rooms bathed in natural light. His *studiolo* was richly decorated with intricate intarsia panels, some possibly created from designs by Sandro Botticelli.

Federico had numerous motivations apart from his appreciation of the arts. He needed to assert the legitimacy of his succession, having been born illegitimate and, although later formally recognised by the ruler of Urbino, questions remained regarding his paternity. He came to power in 1444 when his legitimate brother, Oddantonio, was murdered and waited many years for the arrival of a male heir. He also desired to promote himself as an ideal of Christian virtue, to advertise his military prowess and to spread his image as a just and benevolent ruler.

His second wife, Battista Sforza (1446-1472), who was brought up with her cousins at the court of Milan, also received a humanist education. She and Federico discussed political issues. She accompanied him to official events outside Urbino and ably acted as regent in Federico's absence. Their marriage was happy and her death, shortly after the birth of their son, Guidobaldo, was hard for Federico to bear. The two-sided, double portrait of Federico and Battista, painted by Piero della Francesca, circa 1472, is a good example of a work of art as a carrier of the sort of messages that Federico might have wanted to convey, including commemoration.



Piero della Francesca, *The Duke and Duchess of Urbino*, c.1465-72, oil on panel, each panel 45.5x33.6cm. Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

Federico died of fever in 1482 whilst fighting for Ferrara against Venice. The political upheaval and overthrow of governments in subsequent years led to the dispersal of many artistic treasures from the courts of Italy. Artists, musicians, writers and architects moved to other centres. Some, like Bramante and Raphael (both from Urbino), to Rome where Pope Julius II was working to restore the city to its former grandeur, thus contributing to the creation of the “High Renaissance”.

Further Reading

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