

My Favourite Piece

By Frederica Burato: [Holburne Future Collective Member](#)



Style of Domenico

Ghirlandaio, *Costanza Caetani*, c. 1480-90, tempera and oil on wood, 57.2 x 37.5 cm, London, National Gallery, NG2490.

When I first arrived at the Holburne Museum at the beginning of June 2023, the temporary exhibition *Painted Love: Renaissance Marriage Portraits* was on display and it totally caught me off guard with the beauty of its pieces. One, in particular, always finds a way to amaze me every time I volunteer in that specific gallery: the portrait of Costanza Caetani', with its soft colours and small details, is indeed an open window into the period it was painted in and, because of that, has so much to tell.

“GHOS/TANZA / DE MED/ICIS IO/AN FRA/NCISC/HVS D/OMINI / FRANC/ICI DE / GHAE/TANIS /VXOR” can be seen written in humanistic script in the rectangular white label on the left; word for word it reads, “*Costanza de’ Medici, wife of Giovanni Francesco di Sir Francesco de’ Caetani*”. This particular type of script was first designed by the late-Medieval Italian writer Francesco Petrarca and later redeveloped during the 15th century by the poets and writers who considered the shapes of the Gothic letters to be too difficult to read and remanent of a time that the men of the Renaissance wanted to leave behind. Costanza was indeed born in a time of great changes: with the discovery of the Americas in 1492 and the end of the Middle Ages, European cities started to flourish, and Florence found itself being one of the wealthiest and most important of all in the continent. During these years the Medici family was slowly regaining power over the city after being previously exiled, thus finally consolidating its position in the game of alliances amongst the forces that used to rule the Italian peninsula at the end of the century. The Caetani family, a noble house from Gaeta, in the region of Lazio, was

superior to the Medicis in both power and reputation since it was bound to the papal throne since the 12th century. Sure enough, the true name of one of the most famous figures from the Middle Ages, also known as Pope Bonifacio VIII, and famously contributed to the expulsion of Dante from Florence and fought against King Philip the Fair of France's decision to tax the French clergy, was Benedetto Caetani.

However, we are talking about great conflicts and deeds Costanza would have probably only heard of and never experienced herself, not just because she lived two centuries later than Bonifacio and Philip but mostly because, during her life, she was forced into a simpler position as the wife of Giovanni Francesco. The painting itself speaks about her situation through all the symbols here depicted: the sprig of orange blossom she holds in her hands and the ruby necklace finished off with the three pearls, both of which are metaphors of chastity and purity, to the dog painted down on the right, which symbolizes fidelity, Costanza was meant to be the pure and loyal wife. In addition to her gown painted with magenta tempera – nothing but a specific shade of purple, the colour that has been associated with nobility and aristocracy since the Medieval times and the one the Medici family adopted during the Renaissance to represent its house – she wears a veil on her head, which, with the three rings on the bolster, the pins and the needle on the table she leans on, is an expression of her new life as a married woman. The idea that veils are only found in the wardrobes of Islamic women or occasionally on a bride is in fact completely deceptive: in past centuries Christian women were forced to wear veils and caps ever since Saint Paul wrote in his first epistle to the Corinthians “For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her be covered. For a man indeed ought not to cover [his] head, for as much as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man. For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man.”[1].

Even though the life of a married woman must have been everything but easy, Costanza looks at the visitors with kind eyes and a calm expression, only slightly facing viewers as if she had been busy doing something else before finally gifting the spectators a glance. I seriously think that she and I could stare at each other for hours; me just wondering what her whole story must have been, beyond the mere meanings of the objects she was portrayed with, and her just waiting in vain and in silence for me to fully understand it.

[1] Saint Paul, *Holy Bible, First Epistle to the Corinthians (11, 6-8)*

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