

A Mistress & a Scholar – The Lady with an Ermine

By Richard Cork. Reprinted from the Wall St. Journal, October 5-6, 2013

*Editor Note: This article is from a regular series that examines recognized masterpieces. I thought those who've admired this painting but KNEW it was a ferret pictured might be interested in learning why art historians continue to call the animal an ermine. One additional reason is that the painting shows the animal with black eyes. In the Renaissance, white ferrets would have **all** been albino, thus with red eyes. So while DaVinci clearly used a ferret as a model, he deliberately painted it as an ermine. The info about the woman who is holding the famous little critter is interesting, too.*

After mounting a steep staircase at the ancient Wawel Castle in Krakow, Poland, I am permitted to enter a room containing only one mesmerizing painting. The guard looks at me with a stern expression, and his vigilance is understandable. For the portrait displayed on the wall has long been venerated as one of Leonardo da Vinci's most consummate achievements. He executed it, with outstanding finesse, in 1490. And the patron who probably commissioned it was the powerful Duke of Milan, Ludovico Sforza.

The painting enjoys a mysterious title, "The Lady with an Ermine." But historians now feel confident that she is Cecilia Gallerani, a beautiful and talented young woman whose father served at Ludovico's court. Still a teenager when this portrait was painted, she had just become the Duke's mistress. Even so, Leonardo had no desire simply to produce a glamorous painting of a youthful beauty showing off her allure. He shows her in a relative simple dress, and Cecilia's necklace does not glisten with expensive jewels. Nor is her hair coiffured in a conventionally seductive manner. Far from it: A center part divides Cecilia's hair into two smooth bands confined very tightly to her face. The sheathed plait at the back is difficult to detect, and a severe black band runs round her head as if to control the fine gauze veil holding her coiffure in place.



Cecilia seems determined to ensure that no one mistakes her for a flamboyant noblewoman. She was admired not just as a beauty but as a scholar, a wit and a poet. Ludovico must have been impressed by her precocious intelligence and creativity. Doubtless bored with the brainless charm of so many ambitious ladies, who continually dressed up to compete for his attention at court, he had become captivated by Cecilia's far cooler and more perceptive individuality. Leonardo, who began working for the duke in 1482, must likewise have admired her thoughtfulness. Cecilia does not stare out directly at the viewer. Unlike the Mona Lisa, she turns her gaze away from us completely.

When regarded solely as a symbol of honor and purity, the ermine's prominent appearance in this painting of a mistress might seem surprising. The presence of this carnivorous animal, whose brown fur turns white in winter, undoubtedly adds to the work's richness of meaning. The creature Cecilia holds in her arms may well have been kept as a pet by the duke and his mistress. But Ludovico had a special reason to cherish the ermine. In 1488, just 2 years before the portrait was painted, he was awarded the insignia of the chevalric Order of the Ermine by the King of Naples. As a result, the Duke of Milan was known as "l'Ermellino," and Cecilia Gallerani herself would have appreciated the fact that the Greek word for ermine (or weasel) is *galay*. The animal's presence in this painting may therefore have been seen as a visual pun on her surname.

Since Leonardo was also obsessed with drawing, his image of the ermine surely benefits from his sensitive yet systemic study of the animal from life. It comes alive in paint, burrowing into the folds of Cecilia's dress yet at the same time twisting its head, raising a militant paw and staring out at the world with as much avidity as its mistress. She does not acknowledge the ermine's presence with her eyes. But she makes sure that the animal is supported securely within the fold of her left arm. As for her right hand, it stretches across the ermine's back and touches the fur in a very protective way. Fascinated by anatomy, Leonardo is able to give Cecilia's elongated fingers an extraordinary amount of representational and emotional conviction. She almost seems to be prodding the animal's neck with her index finger, as if bent on directing the ermine's attention in the firmest way possible. *[Editor: Haha! As any long-suffering ferret photographer will tell you, that's the only way to keep a ferret looking in the direction you want it to!]*

Cecilia seems committed to looking after the pet, and the fact that it symbolizes purity must have been enormously important to her. However creatively independent she had become, this young woman realized just how carefully she ought to conduct herself as the duke's mistress in the Milanese court.

It was filled with all kinds of danger, and perhaps that is why the ermine appears to twist around with alarm, as if preparing to defend Cecilia from anyone who might want to attack her.

Leonardo himself, who was the illegitimate son of a wealthy Tuscan notary and a peasant woman, knew a great deal about the perils of human relationships. And Cecilia, who bore a son acknowledged by Ludovico in 1491, never became the duke's wife. He chose in the end to reject her. Eerily enough, Leonardo's portrait succeeds in prophesying this melancholy outcome. Along with her poise and intelligence, Cecilia appears in this subtle, multilayered painting to be isolated by the ominous darkness around her. In March 1491 the Duke of Ferrara was informed that Ludovico "no longer wished to touch [Cecilia] or have her nearby, since she was so fat, ever since giving birth."

Her plight was echoed by the subsequent fate of Leonardo's painting. After its acquisition in 1798 by Prince Adam Jerzy Czartoryski, it remained in this Polish family's collection. But in 1939, the portrait was seized by the Nazis when they conquered Poland, and sent off as booty to Berlin. A year later Hans Frank, the brutal governor general of Poland, ordered its return to Krakow. Leonardo's painting was displayed as a prized item in Frank's office until, at the end of World War II, he fled – taking Cecilia's image to his house in Bavaria, where the Allied troops rescued it. Eventually, "The Lady with an Ermine" was returned to Poland and now belongs to the Czartoryski Foundation in Krakow. Here, safely preserved in the castle, this spellbinding portrait can be scrutinized by visitors fortunate enough to discover it for themselves.