

# Cecilia Gallerani and The Ermine

**Christina Moss, 2003**

Leonardo da Vinci's portrait of Cecilia Gallerani has a very mysterious feel to it. The expression on the woman's face is peculiar in that it reveals contradicting impressions about her personality. In this portrait Cecilia Gallerani is holding an ermine. Although the ermine<sup>1</sup> was considered to be a representation of purity and chastity, they are actually much more aggressive animals than myths about them suggested. I believe that the significance of the ermine in this painting is that this two-sidedness is representative of Cecilia Gallerani's personality. Leonardo da Vinci used the ermine not only as a metaphor, but also to denote the woman's connection to Lodovico Sforza. Although she was young<sup>2</sup> at the time her portrait was painted, Cecilia Gallerani had already been seduced by Lodovico and borne him a son.

"Throughout the renaissance, the ermine was a very important symbol of purity."<sup>3</sup> The ermine earned his reputation as an animal representative of purity because of a fable. It was believed that the ermine would rather die than soil its snowy white coat. This myth was started by trappers and hunters who claimed to use this unique trait to their own advantage in capturing these animals<sup>4</sup>. "...the story commonly told at this time was that the hunters would surround the ermine

---

<sup>1</sup> The ermine is a weasel-like animal with a white coat during the winter. It is native to northern Europe.

<sup>2</sup> Not all sources are consistent, however they indicate that Cecilia Gallerani was anywhere from 15 to 17 years of age at the time this portrait was painted.

<sup>3</sup> From *The Ermine* by Christopher Gregg

<sup>4</sup> The ermine was hunted primarily for its tail, which was pure white with a black tip. Many people actually believed the ermine had a white coat with black spots as many garments were made with an arrangement of many ermine tails together, which produced this spotted look.

with a mud ring. The ermine, realizing it cannot escape without soiling its fur, would give up and surrender its self to the hunters and their dogs."<sup>5</sup> This is clearly



**FIGURE 1.** Giovio's *Imprese*. Christopher Gregg.

depicted in Giovio's *Imprese* (figure 1).

The banner above the scene says "Malo Mori Quam Foedari" which means "rather a bad death than to defilement. Leonardo da Vinci made a similar drawing depicting this common renaissance sentiment of purity.

Leonardo's drawing the ermine "...suffers itself to be beaten and captured rather than become dirty by escaping the hunter through the mud."<sup>6</sup> This drawing (figure 2) shows that Leonardo da Vinci was familiar with this myth and was using this "common knowledge" at the time to evoke a certain effect. He purposefully used this little creature to give an impression of outward purity and chastity.



**FIGURE 2.** Leonardo da Vinci. Robert Wallace.

To look at her portrait, Cecilia Gallerani appears to be a good image of purity and chastity. She was a lovely and talented young woman. The length of her fingers (and the fact that Leonardo da Vinci felt it was important for the fingers to be displayed in the painting) indicate musical ability. "...her fingers long and sensuous, those of a musician and a voluptuary."<sup>7</sup> Cecilia Gallerani was described as quite a captivating and charismatic young woman, in fact "[Lodovico Sforza] chose his mistresses for their beauty or charm..."<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> From *The Ermine* by Christopher Gregg

<sup>6</sup> From *The World of Leonardo* by Robert Wallace

<sup>7</sup> From *The World of Leonardo* by Robert Wallace

<sup>8</sup> From *The World of Leonardo* by Robert Wallace

Although Cecilia Gallerani's purity to the ermine's purity seems like a logical comparison, there is an opposite side to the story of each of them. The ermine is deceiving in that it has a brown coat during the warmer months of the year and a white coat during the winter. Cecilia Gallerani could be compared because although "...she was [Lodovico Sforza's] favorite and gave birth to his child..."<sup>9</sup> she was not Lodovico Sforza's wife. In fact, she gave birth to their son in the same year that he married his wife, Beatrice d'Este. The ermine is in the weasel family, which is a strong indication of the animal's character. The weasel's reputation of being a conniving trickster is known as commonly now as at the time this portrait was painted. Ermines are "Truly Carnivorous"<sup>10</sup> and will attack their prey with the same viciousness as the weasel. "A rabbit will cry out in terror at an ermine's approach, apparently paralyzed with fear, even while the ermine is some way off."<sup>11</sup> There is a hint of this fierceness in the expression on Cecilia Gallerani's face in the portrait. Her expression has been described as "...a slight expression of defiance..."<sup>12</sup>. The fact that Cecilia's figure is shrouded in darkness is also very ominous. Both Cecilia and the ermine are turning their heads to look in the same direction: towards the light. They are both seeking the light which could be an allusion to the enlightenment of the renaissance period. Cecilia Gallerani was known as an intelligent woman and "...occupied a commanding position in [Lodovico Sforza's] court..."<sup>13</sup>. Ermines are intelligent as well, with an acute ability to adapt to new surroundings.<sup>14</sup> Another similarity between Cecilia Gallerani and the ermine is the comparison of each to snakes. "The young woman has a particular posture, 'serpentine', with her shoulders turned away from her face, giving profundity to the

---

<sup>9</sup> From *Web Gallery of Art* by Emil Kren and Daniel Marx.

<sup>10</sup> From *International Wildlife Encyclopedia*, Marshall Cavendish Corp.

<sup>11</sup> From *International Wildlife Encyclopedia*, Marshall Cavendish Corp.

<sup>12</sup> From *Leonardo Pittore*

<sup>13</sup> From *The World of Leonardo* by Robert Wallace

<sup>14</sup> The ermine is actually more capable of adapting to new climates, environments and populated areas than it's more commonly known cousin the weasel. The ermine is more prolific in northern Europe than the weasel because of these heightened survival skills.

figure."<sup>15</sup> The ermine also is described as "Serpentine" in its hunting abilities. "The ermine characteristically moves in a succession of low bounds, its long, lithe body assuming an almost snakelike appearance. It can swim and climb well, its senses of smell and hearing are acute and its sight is well adapted for detecting movement."<sup>16</sup> Both woman and ermine appear to be slithering toward the light in this painting.

The unlikely pairing of a wild, vicious animal with a Lady definitely suggests a deeper meaning. "...[Leonardo da Vinci] saw a parallel between the characters of woman and weasel – their cool eyes and pointed faces are bent in the same direction."<sup>17</sup> Leonardo was without a doubt comparing these images as ones relating through chastity and purity, but many comparisons could also be made between the more negative aspects of each.

The ermine is also important because it represents the connection between Cecilia Gallerani and Lodovico Sforza. "The ermine is described in old bestiaries as being of such a pure nature that it will suffer capture or death rather than crawl into a muddy hole. Sforza, with a stunted sense of irony, adopted the ermine as his symbol."<sup>18</sup> The correlation between the ermine and purity was not necessarily meant as a physical comparison. It has been suggested that the lesson of the ermine should be applied differently to lords and ladies. This myth is a warning that "Great Lordes, and Ladies should prevent their minds and consciences from becoming soiled, just as the ermine will not allow its fur to get dirty."<sup>19</sup> Though this is a powerful concept about the avoidance of corruption in leaders, it's sentiment is

---

<sup>15</sup> From *Leonardo Pittore*

<sup>16</sup> From *International Wildlife Encyclopedia*, Marshall Cavendish Corp.

<sup>17</sup> From *The World of Leonardo* by Robert Wallace

<sup>18</sup> From *The World of Leonardo* by Robert Wallace

<sup>19</sup> From *The Ermine* by Christopher Gregg

lost on Lodovico Sforza. Although not entirely corrupt he was somewhat power-driven and not totally moral. He married his wife exclusively for political reasons.

He viewed his marriage to Beatrice d'Este<sup>20</sup> as a strategic career move more than the traditional motivation of a marriage: love. Lodovico Sforza chose this emblem for himself, it was not appointed to him by someone else. This shows how Lodovico wanted to be viewed by the public, not how he was actually viewed by them. He wanted to be thought of as "un-soiled" regardless of whether or not it was



**FIGURE 3.** Leonardo da Vinci's portrait of Lodovico Sforza. From *The World of Leonardo* by Robert Wallace.

truthful. "...the ermine was used as a heraldic figure by Ludovico, it appeared on his coat of arms."<sup>21</sup> The Sforza coat of arms was also painted by Leonardo da Vinci, which proves again that Leonardo was familiar not only with the legend regarding the ermine, but Lodovico Sforza's connection with the creature as well.

The similarities between Cecilia Gallerani and the ermine set the tone for this portrait of her. Leonardo captures two sides of this woman's personality through the comparison. Leonardo also denotes her as a mistress of Lodovico Sforza by use of the ermine. In many ways the ermine tells the story of Cecilia Gallerani.

---

<sup>20</sup> When Lodovico Sforza and Beatrice d'Este married he was 39 years old whereas she was only 15 years old.

<sup>21</sup> From *Lady with the Ermine*



