

# Analysis of a “Lady with an Ermine” by Leonardo Da Vinci

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## Abstract

In early 1480 Leonardo da Vinci left Florence and moved to Milan, where he received important commissions from the Duke Ludovico Sforza. The most famous work performed by Leonardo during this period is the “Last Supper”, and the best psychological portrait he has created then is “Lady with an Ermine” in 1490. The women depicted in the painting is Cecilia Gallerani, Ludovico Sforza’s favorite. Upon closer examination of the painting, we discovered three details. Through the program Paint X, we moved these details to the final locations. By moving three details on the painting “Lady with an Ermine” we get the image of a crossed snake. We think that the ermine, who looks like a mongoose in dimensions, is associated with Ludovico Sforza. In the crossed serpent, Leonardo implies any danger from which Ludovico protects Cecilia.

## Keywords

Lady with an Ermine, Leonardo Da Vinci

## 1. Introduction

After the last recorded payment in September 1481 by the monks of San Donato a Scopeto for the still unfinished “Adoration of the Magi”, Leonardo da Vinci left Florence to take up a new position at the court of Ludovico Sforza in Milan. The artist stays in Milan from 1482, lasted 17 years, only ending in 1499 when his patron Ludovico fled the city to avoid the approaching troops of the French army (Ormiston, 2011).

The most famous work performed by Leonardo during this period is the “Last Supper”, and the best psychological portrait he has created then is “Lady with an Ermine” in 1490. The women depicted in the painting is Cecilia Gallerani, Ludovico Sforza’s favorite. The gaze of Cecilia is directed to the side and in it, one

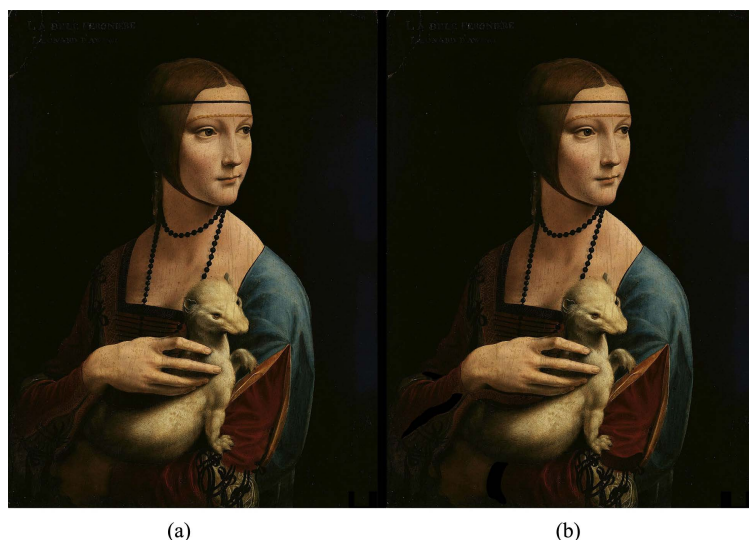
can feel the intensity that distinguishes this portrait from other portraits in earlier Renaissance art (Shau, 2018). Ermine draws attention to the painting. Her posture expresses tension and a willingness to protect women.

Cecilia was one of a large non-aristocratic family. Her father worked as a petty diplomat at the Milanese court. Although she was known at court for her intellectual gifts, her poetry and her love of music. She was actively involved in intellectual discussions. At these meetings Cecilia personally invited Leonardo da Vinci (Cork, 2013). Cecilia's family was busy shuttling her off to a Milanese convent when somehow, she caught the eye of Ludovico Sforza (Morelli, 2020). The Duke must have been fascinated by his intellect and creativity. Unlike many boring women around Ludovico, Cecilia was characterized by a special individualism. Over time, Ludovico and Cecilia's relationship slowed down under the influence of Ludovico's wife Beatrice d' Este. After Ludovico Sforza's marriage to Beatrice, Cecilia left the ducal palace. Eventually, she caught the attention of another Ludovico, Count Ludovico Carminati de Brambilla, known as "Il Bergamino". The son she bore with Ludovico Sforza, Cesare Sforza Visconti, was dedicated to monastic life. Cecilia also bore four more children with the second Ludovico (Morelli, 2020).

The Master decided to paint Cecilia in a simple dress and without expensive jewels. The women hold in her hand ermine, who is symbol of purity. Besides, in 1488, just before this portrait was painted, Ludovico was awarded the insignia of the Order of the Ermine by the King of Naples. As a result, the Duke of Milan was known as "l'Ermellino" (Cork, 2013).

## 2. Methods

The object of the research is the painting "Lady with an Ermine". This work was created in 1483-1487 by Leonardo da Vinci (Figure 1(a)).



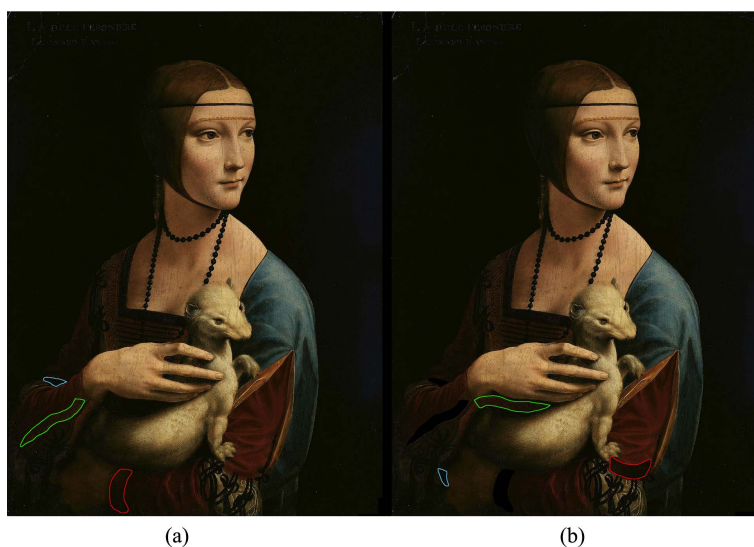
**Figure 1.** (a) "Lady with an Ermine" by Leonardo da Vinci; (b) Image obtained by moving three details.

Upon closer examination of the painting, we discovered three details (**Figure 2(a)**). Through the program Paint X, we moved these details to the final locations (**Figure 2(b)**). We circled the moving details in the painting according to the contours made by Leonardo. The space for the new location of the moving element is also drawn by the author and repeats the shape of the element.

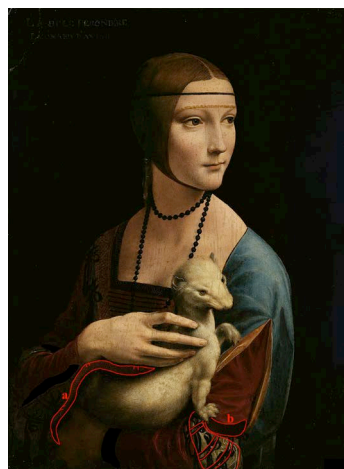
We used this method of moving details to interpret Leonardo da Vinci's other seven paintings as well (Keshelava, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d, 2020e, 2020f, 2020g).

### 3. Results

By moving the details marked in blue and green, we got the image of the snake's body and tail (**Figure 3(a)**), located between Cecilia's right hand and ermine's back. By moving the red marked detail we got the snake's head and front of the body (**Figure 3(b)**).



**Figure 2.** (a) Initial position of moving details; (b) Details after moving.



**Figure 3.** a) Snake's body and tail; b) Snake's head and front of the body.

*Interpretation of the obtained image.* By displacement of three details in the painting we get a tense scene. Ermine holds the cobra's head and small front of his body with his right paw. One gets the impression that this is the end of the battle between ermine and snake. The body of a snake is crossed in two parts. Ermine has his left paw in a fighting position. It is noteworthy that Cecilia and ermine's gaze is directed in one direction. This means that they are in a harmonious relationship. The animal's tense posture indicates that he is ready to protect Cecilia from danger.

As mentioned above Duke Ludovico Sforza had been awarded the Order of the Ermine by King Ferdinando I of Naples. The fact that Sforza was awarded this honor in 1488, is a prime reason Leonardo da Vinci likely included the ermine. Cecilia 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. It is logical to think that this is why Leonardo painted a woman with ermine. Ludovico, whose symbol is ermine, protects Cecilia from any danger. In this case the snake is associated with danger.

#### **4. Discussion**

Leonardo portrays the young woman as her head momentarily turns away from the viewer. It gives life to the portrayal of Cecilia Gallerani, whose head and hair are styled in the latest Milanese fashion. The master has captured the quizzical look of the woman's pet ermine as it swivels its head in unison with its owner. Leonardo has painted the ermine's head, body and feet with precise attention to detail. A text at the top of the painting to the left reads "LA BELLE FERONIERE LEONARD DA VINCI", which has led to confusion between this painting and the portrait of Lucrezia Crivelli, another of Ludovico Sforza's mistress (Ormiston, 2011).

This painting exemplifies several techniques of Renaissance works. First, Leonardo's mastery of chiaroscuro—the use of shadow to enhance the three-dimensional relief of the figure. Second, his use of sfumato to create fine and very gradual tonal changes. Third, X-ray and microscopic examination has revealed a preparatory drawing on the undersurface of the painting, a technic that Leonardo absorbed in the workshop of his teacher, Andrea Del Verrocchio. It is noteworthy that Leonardo's fingerprint was found on this work, which means that he used his fingers to blend his brushwork (D'Anastasio, 2005).

Researcher Pascal Cotte analyzed the painting using a reflective light technology. Until now, it was believed that ermine in this work was painted by a master from the very beginning. The researcher found that Leonardo painted one portrait without the ermine and two with different versions of the fur. Following the discovery, new theories have now been applied, including a suggestion the master may have introduced the ermine into the painting to symbolize Ludovico Sforza, later enhancing the animal to flatter his patron. Another theory is that Cecilia asked Leonardo to add the animal, so that the Milanese court made fully aware of her relationship with the Duke (Nikkhah, 2014).

In the first version of the painting was a simple portrait, with no animal. In the second version, Leonardo included a small grey ermine. In the third and final stage, the animal was transformed into a large white ermine.

In his old age, Leonardo compiled a bestiary in which he recorded: “*The ermine out of moderation never eats but once a day, and it would rather let itself be captured by hunters than take refuge in a dirty lair, in order not to stain its purity.*” (Beck, 1993). The artist’s records show that he had studied this animal and its behaviors.

It should be noted that the dimensions of ermine in the painting are exaggerated compared to the natural dimensions of this animal. Some authors think that the transformation of the ermine—from small and dark to muscular and white—could indicate the duke’s wish for a more flattering portrait (Munoz-Alonso, 2014).

We think that Leonardo’s goal was to paint ermine as a symbol of Ludovico Sforza, although this animal was painted large enough to make it look a mongoose. It is a known fact that the mongoose is the best hunter of snakes. The battle between a mongoose and a snake almost always ends in a mongoose victory. The image we get contains exactly this content.

## 5. Conclusion

By moving three details on the painting “Lady with an Ermine” we get the image of a crossed snake. We think that the ermine, who looks like a mongoose in dimensions, is associated with Ludovico Sforza. In the crossed serpent, Leonardo implies any danger from which Ludovico protects Cecilia.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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