

Sally Anne Hickson. *Women, Art and Architectural Patronage in Renaissance Mantua: Matrons, Mystics and Monasteries*.

Women and Gender in the Early Modern World. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012. xi + 192 pp. \$104.95. ISBN: 978-1-4094-2752-0.

One might have thought that everything had been said about Marchesa Isabella d'Este, given the amount of iconographic ink that has been spilt on the interpretation of the secular paintings for her *studiolo*, works by Perugino, Mantegna, and others. Yet this book opens up a new aspect, what one might call

the “late style” of Isabella’s patronage. Sally Hickson’s monograph takes as a point of departure Isabella d’Este in her widowhood, by 1518 a patron of devout imagery. The book defines networks between her female relatives and friends to present a complex and sympathetic study of the intertwined patronage of Mantuan women in mourning over several generations.

Francesco Bonsignori’s little-known altarpiece of the *Veneration of the Beata Osanna Andreasi* (Museo della Città, Mantua) provides the inspiration for the book. The blessed Osanna was a Dominican saint and contemporary to Isabella who experienced mystical visions and endured self-inflicted physical suffering. The painting depicts most of the protagonists of Hickson’s study. Isabella is depicted in widow’s clothes on the lefthand side, together with her best friend Margherita Cantelma, Duchess of Sora. Among the three nuns to the right of Osanna is Isabella’s daughter, Ippolita Gonzaga, who entered into the convent of San Vincenzo in 1518, and who is shown looking up at the mystic. By 1546 Ippolita had become the prioress. Another daughter, Livia Osanna, took the name of Suor Paola, after the monastery which she entered. Thus two of Isabella’s daughters spent their lives as nuns in Mantua, while Isabella’s firstborn daughter married Francesco Maria della Rovere, nephew of Julius II. Hickson’s book gives one of the few in-depth accounts of Isabella’s relationships with her children.

In the first chapter Hickson argues the case for Isabella d’Este’s commitment to popular devotion expressed by her commissions of images of female sanctity in Mantua. Isabella’s altarpiece of the Beata Osanna is seen as an effort to redefine herself as a pious widow, to self-consciously change her persona away from the concerns of her *studiolo* towards those of the monastic communities that she depended on in her widowhood. The evidence for this thesis is to be found in the iconography of the altarpieces. The following chapter is an account of Margherita Cantelma’s friendship with Isabella. Women of a similar age, they both arrived in Mantua as young brides. Isabella d’Este’s tutor, Mario Equicola, asked Margherita’s advice on books that he was writing. Equicola included both Isabella and Margherita in an updated version of Boccaccio’s *Lives of Famous Women*, the *De Mulieribus*. Margherita introduced Isabella to her most flattering portraitist, Gian Cristoforo Romano.

In the third chapter the pietistic aspects of the friendship between Margherita and Isabella are further explored within the context of the Monastery of Santa Maria della Presentazione in Tempio at Mantua, an Augustine monastery that Caterina founded. In 1530 Margherita petitioned Isabella to obtain from her son, Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga, her right to create the monastery. Two years later Margherita died and Isabella was left with the task of constructing the monastery and building a funerary monument by Agostino da Covo in memory of her best friend. By the time of Isabella’s death the building was complete.

The last chapter concerns Isabella’s daughter-in-law, Margherita Paleologa. In the space of her nine-year marriage to Federico Gonzaga she had five children, the eldest of whom, Francesco, lost his father at the age of seven, when the child inherited the Dukedom of Mantua. Margherita Paleologa’s widowhood was

a regency. In her marriage she was somewhat overshadowed by her mother-in-law's presence, and even after Isabella's death, she became the caretaker. The book concludes with an account of Margherita's relationship to Vittoria Colonna, and of her daughter Isabella Gonzaga, Marchesa of Pescara, another great woman patron.

The only regrettable aspect of this book is the dreary black-and-white photographs. Surely these little-known paintings, especially Bonsignori's altarpiece, could have been reproduced in color in order to enhance the argument in the text.

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