

half-length. This hypothesis is based, in part, on the existence of a drawing of hands by Leonardo (now at Windsor Castle), which has been used to create a computer reconstruction on display with the exhibit.

Ginevra was the daughter of a wealthy Florentine banking family, who, in 1474, at the age of 16, married Luigi Niccolini. There is some dispute as to whether Leonardo's portrait was commissioned by the family to commemorate Ginevra's marriage (a somewhat dubious proposal, since unlike Ghirlandaio's Giovanna Turnabuoni, she is dressed in everyday clothing); or, as many believe, the painting was commissioned by her admirer, the celebrated bibliophile Bernardo Bembo, Venetian Ambassador to Florence from 1475-76, and again 1478-80, who, in chivalric fashion, chose Ginevra as his "Platonic" *innamorata*. That Bembo was the patron is further borne out by the fact that the reverse of the painting bears his family insignia, along with the motto, "Beauty Adorns Virtue." Knowing Bembo's Venetian pedigree, it is not too difficult to imagine that it was he who put that sad expression on Ginevra's face, and not the illness often proffered as the explanation for her pallor.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond dispute, however, is the fact that the painting was executed by a very young Leonardo da Vinci, who in 1474 would have been about 22 years old. Like Verrocchio's Bargello lady, Ginevra appears to us as a real person: she turns toward us, in three-quarter view. Like her brown dress, which is veiled by the diaphanous *coverciere*, her light brown eyes are veiled by her private thoughts. Her dress and coiffure are remarkably like those of Verrocchio's bust (we can now compare them side by side); yet, here too, we get a foretaste of what is to come in the mature masterpieces of Leonardo, especially the "Mona Lisa," whose watery landscape and distant horizon are already present in the Ginevra.

While it is always a joy to visit Ginevra when at the National Gallery, seeing her among her contemporaries in the current exhibit, and alongside the

## Why Does the Washington Post Hate Women?

Renaissance Florence was a lousy place to be a lady. If you survived to adolescence as a virgin, you were likely to be betrothed to some powerful stranger twice your age," observed Blake Gopnik, art critic for the *Washington Post*, in his October 3 review of "Virtue and Beauty." Mr. Gopnik, who seems to be a member of that strange art-world fraternity of men who hate women, goes on to lavish attention on every superficial aspect of the physical appearance—hairdos, clothing, skin texture, etc.—of the subjects of these Renaissance portraits, almost as if he were vying to become a Fifteenth-century Versace: "With a bit of work by a clever hairdresser, and a bank loan for her pearls, the anonymous beauty . . . could have looked almost this good in life," he hisses.

"We could wax lyrical about the humanizing Renaissance eye, and the friendly glance it cast at women, and maybe we still will," Gopnik avers, but he never actually delivers. Instead we are treated to the view of the Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino (the Venetian asset who founded the Florentine Academy to obscure the distinction between Plato and Aristotle), who is quoted as having said: "A woman should be like a chamber pot, hidden away once a man had emptied himself into her."

But, perhaps, the *Washington Post* just doesn't appreciate Italian Renaissance portraits? Well, then, there was Blake Gopnik's reaction to the Lon-

don exhibit of "Rembrandt's Women," printed in the *Post* just a few weeks later, on October 21, and titled "Rembrandt, Facing the Ugly Truth: The Dutch Master's 'Women' Turns a Few Heads in London." Contrasting Rembrandt's "ugly" women to the "truly pretty" ones painted by "the best guy artists of Renaissance Florence," Gopnik proceeds to deconstruct Rembrandt: "If you isolate the paint that Rembrandt goops onto his canvases from the magical effect it works on us, you see a coagulated mess of bits and blobs of fatty emulsion, like mayonnaise gone very wrong, built up on a background of oil smearings." (Recall that Gopnik is trashing paintings like Rembrandt's 1634 "Flora," a loving portrait of the artist's first wife, Saskia; and the powerful "Susanna and the Elders," among others.)

Not only Rembrandt's sublime paintings, but even his etchings and drawings come under fire: "Rembrandt, often credited as the greatest etcher of all time, tends toward a tangled line, that scratches like steel wool." Gopnik's foulest venom is reserved for one of Rembrandt's most lovingly beautiful drawings: "A quaintly observed scene of two women teaching a toddler to walk is hard to smile at, given the unforgiving inky snarl that it's rendered with."

The *Washington Post* doesn't only hate women, it hates art!

—BJ

Verrocchio sculpture, makes the trip especially worthwhile now.

—Bonnie James

*The exhibit will be open at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., from Sept. 30, 2001 to Jan. 6, 2002.*

1. *The Portable Dante*, trans. and ed. by Mark Musa (New York: Penguin Books, 1995).
2. *Petrarch: Selections from the Canzoniere*,

*and Other Works*, trans. by Mark Musa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

3. Bernardo Bembo, and his more famous son, the Cardinal Pietro Bembo, were leading Venetian "intellectuals," i.e., Aristoteleans, who were deployed to corrupt the Renaissance in Florence. Bernardo was active in the so-called "Platonic Academy" of Marsilio Ficino, which attempted to synthesize the irreconcilable philosophies of Plato and Aristotle.