Isabella d’Este (Ferrara 1474 – Mantua 1539) was already defined in her lifetime as “The first lady of the world”, and remains today one of the most brilliant characters of the Italian Renaissance. The first-born daughter of Duke Ercole of Ferrara and Eleonora of Aragon, at only six years of age was betrothed to Francesco II Gonzaga, heir of the Lords of Mantua. At sixteen, when she arrived in Mantua, she created one of the most culturally refined courts of the Renaissance. Driven by her insatiable desire for all things of antiquity, she collected in her Studiolo a precious assortment of classical artifacts. Fully aware of her extraordinary virtues, both physical and intellectual, she trusted the most illustrious artist of her time to represent her, and was portrayed by both Leonardo da Vinci and Titian – a privilege not bestowed upon any king, Pope, or Emperor. A demanding and discerning patron, she entrusted Andrea Mantegna, Lorenzo Costa, Pietro Perugino and Correggio to create a cycle of paintings for her Studiolo. As a refined trend-setter, she formed the fashion of her time according to her own tastes, and became a point of reference not only for all of the Italian courts, but also for aristocrats throughout Europe. From her astrological chart and emblems to her portraits and the canvases created specifically for her Studiolo, this book contains several clear and original perspectives that highlight and better define the profile of Isabella. Here we have a new view of a Renaissance woman.
Lorenzo Bonoldi

Isabella d’Este
A Renaissance Woman
Translated by Clark Anthony Lawrence
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The now-lost tombstone, once signaling the grave in which Isabella d’Este was buried in 1539, bore an inscription describing the Marchioness of Mantua as a VIRILI ANIMO FOEMINA, a woman with a masculine nature.

It might seem a most unusual way of characterizing a lady who, during her lifetime, was often described as a Prima Donna. And yet, to anyone who had to epitomize in a verse a woman like Isabella, as gifted and powerful as hardly any woman had ever been, little possibility was left other than describing her nature in masculine terms.

In translating the title of this book – which in Italian is La Signora del Rinascimento (literally, ‘The Lady of the Renaissance’) – the translator has suggested to abandon a literal interpretation in favor of ‘a Renaissance Woman’. Reference is made here to the expression ‘a Renaissance man’, which is used to describe a person with broad education and skills. This idiom, however, is found exclusively in a masculine form. The most illustrious Marchioness of Mantua deserves indeed the expression turned into this unusual, and yet undoubtedly appropriate, feminine version. And so, presented with the translator’s suggestion, the author happily agreed.

Isabella herself, we hope, would have been pleased: in describing her status, she never forgot to celebrate and present herself as a woman of power. In a long Latin inscription that Isabella wanted carved in stone in 1522, the Marchioness is described using only female terms and styled as “Regum Aragonum Neptis, Ducum Ferrarensium Filia et Soror, Marchionum Gonzagarum Coniux et Mater” (“Granddaughter of the Kings of Aragon, Daughter and Sister of the Dukes of Ferrara, Spouse and Mother of the Gonzaga Lords”). As a woman, she could never have defined herself publicly other than in relation
to the kings, dukes, and lords of her life; but the accumulation of so many titles granted only to men results in the personal celebration of a woman fully aware of being like no other. On the other hand, Isabella’s achievements, as stated in this inscription, were of the kind granted to women alone, for only as a woman she could have been mother, spouse, sister, daughter and granddaughter.

This long inscription runs around the walls of the secret garden of Isabella in the Ducal Palace of Mantua: a special hortus conclusus, adjacent the rooms where the Marchioness used to keep her private library and her collection of paintings and antiquities.

The translation of this book was made in a place, if humbler, with a similar spirit, home of the association “Reading Retreats in Rural Italy”: here paintings, books, flowers and plants are all to be found, and modern-day-Renaissance men and women gather and meet from all around the world, only minutes away from the places where Isabella lived her life, in the splendor of the Renaissance.
Isabella d'Este has been defined as “The Daughter of Humanism”, “The Lady of the Renaissance, and “The Prima Donna of the World”, and, without a doubt, she is one of the most fascinating and brilliant figures of Italy's entire historical panorama. The first-born child of the Duke of Ferrara, Ercole I d’Este, and Eleonora of Aragon, Isabella was born on May 17th, 1474, as is recorded in an illuminated page of the “Genealogy of the Este Family”, which, under the portrait of the infant Isabella, is inscribed:

“This Isabella è fiola legítima e naturale de questi Hercole et Eleonora, e naque marti adì 17 mazo 1474 a hore una e meza de nocte.”

[“This Isabella is the legitimate and natural-born daughter of Ercole and Eleonora, and was born on Tuesday 17 May 1474, one and a half hours after sunset.”]

In the first years of her childhood the Este princess began to receive a classical-humanistic education: her tutors, Jacopo Gallino and Battista Guarino, infused in her a love for classical languages and culture, and at only six years of age the little Isabella already knew Greek and Latin to perfection. In 1480 the Este princess, with her exceptional gift of intellect, was already entertaining and charming the Italian courts, and it was precisely during that year that Isabella's parents received two different marriage proposals: one from the Gonzagas of Mantua and another from Ludovico Sforza, also known as “il Moro”, both of whom had their eyes on the young lady. The messenger of the Gonzagas arrived first, and Isabella was promised as wife to the heir of the Lords of Mantua, their fifteen-years-old son Francesco. Ludovico il Moro then had to settle for Isabella’s younger sister, Beatrice. Upon sealing the marriage pact, the Mantuan ambassador to Ferrara, Beltramino Cusatro, sent a portrait of the princess to Mantua, writing “Sending the Lady Isabella’s portrait, so that Your
Lordships and Master Francesco may see her effigy: but even more enchanting is her intellect and ingenuity”. The work, now lost, was created by Cosmè Tura, painter of the Este Court, and is documented by a note in the ducal registers that show on May 30th, 1480, four florins were paid to the painter “for having done a portrait of the head of Lady Isabella” (Luzio 1913, pp. 185-186).

Ten years later, in 1490, the wedding of Isabella d’Este and Francesco Gonzaga was celebrated. The new Marchioness was allocated an apartment in the Castello di San Giorgio, inside the tower of San Nicolò. In the tower there were two rooms, one above the other, that Isabella chose as her private chambers dedicated to study and her collections. The upper floor was furnished as the Studiolo (‘the study’) of the Marchioness, an area for the learning of classical texts and philosophical meditation. In the years that followed, the walls of the Studiolo were adorned by the works of some of the greatest painters of the age: Andrea Mantegna, Pietro Perugino, Lorenzo Costa. The room below, with its low barrel-vault ceiling was called Grotta (literally ‘the cave’), and used as a private treasure chamber to house the collection of antique objects belonging to the Marchioness, who defined herself as afflicted by an “insatiable desire for antiquities”.

In February 1490, when Isabella arrived in Mantua as bride of Francesco II and the new Marchioness of the city, the official artist of the court was the Paduan painter Andrea Mantegna, who moved to Mantua in 1456. In 1493 the artist was commissioned to paint a portrait of Isabella that she promised as a gift for the Countess of Acerra. The final result of the commission, however,
had an unexpected result. On April 20th Isabella wrote to her friend, explaining:

“We are unable at this time to send you Our portrait, as the painter has done such a terrible job that it has no resemblance to Us whatsoever; so We have commissioned a foreign painter, who is famous for his ability to copy from nature.”

The ‘foreign’ painter whom Isabella chose to do her portrait was Giovanni Santi of Urbino, father of Raphael, but unfortunately the painting has been lost. With regards to Mantegna, whose painting technique was bound to representing a reality quite far from the needs and desires of Isabella, his unsuccessful attempt was enough to get him banned from ever portraying her again. And her decision remained firm. Isabella even refused to pose for the great votive altarpiece known as the Madonna of Victory, where, according to the iconographic project planned by the friar Girolamo Redini in August 1495, she was to be portrayed kneeling on one side of the Madonna, with Francesco II Gonzaga “armed as victorious captain” kneeling on the other (Luzio 1899, p. 360). The painter remedied this absence of the Marchioness by conjuring up a solution: beneath the Saints Andrew, Longinus, Michael and George, all united by their ties to the city of Mantua or by their virtues as warriors, Mantegna painted the figure of Saint Elizabeth, the name-saint of the Marchioness (‘Isabella’ being a Spanish form of the name ‘Elizabeth’).

It’s important to understand that Isabella’s negative opinion of her portrait and refusal to pose for the artist were not based on her view of the artist's