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Lavinia Fontana,
Portrait of Isabella Ruini with a Lady-in-Waiting, c. 1592

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LAVINIA FONTANA
(Bologna 1552 - 1614)

PORTRAIT OF ISABELLA RUINI WITH A LADY-IN-WAITING, c. 1592

Oil on canvas, laid down on wood.
69.7 x 66 cm.; 27 1/2 x 26 in.

Signed on the jewellery box: "Lavin. Fon. Facie".

Provenance

Family property, originally from Berlin, family-owned for at least 50 years;
Private Collection, Germany, by descent in 2010.



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We are grateful to Dr Raffaella Morselli for her in-depth study of this painting, which will be presented in a dedicated publication.

This recently rediscovered, signed portrait by Lavinia Fontana brings together two exceptional female protagonists: Lavinia herself, the first woman in Europe to sustain an international professional career as a history painter and portraitist, and Isabella Ruini Angelelli, a noblewoman praised by contemporaries for her beauty and intellect. Among the great achievements of Fontana's portrait practice is her sustained engagement with the women of Bologna's ruling families. Celebrated by contemporaries not only for her painterly skill but for her education, musical accomplishments and ease in intellectual debate, she occupied a singular position within the city's cultural life. The daughter of the painter Prospero Fontana, she was trained in his workshop yet worked with unusual independence from an early date. Her marriage in 1577 to Giovan Paolo Zappi did not curtail her activity; rather, Zappi acted as her assistant and agent while she became the principal earner of the household, raising eleven children and producing an oeuvre that ranges from intimate domestic portraits to monumental public altarpieces.

By the 1580s and early 1590s Fontana had become the natural portraitist of Bologna's female aristocracy. She moved freely through palaces and villas, forming close relationships with her patrons and developing a visual language capable of uniting physiognomic truth, material splendour and social meaning.

Her circle of cultivated women devoted to poetry, music and learned exchange is captured in the decoration of a spinet lid showing a concert of female musicians gathered around Apollo on Parnassus (fig. 1), where noblewomen appear as muses and the presence of men is reduced to that of a deity. This attention to the 'world of women', specifically in Bologna during these years, is seen in the literary output, such as in Ercole Marescotti's *Dell'eccellenza della donna* (*On the Excellence of Women*, 1589) and Giulio Cesare Croce's *La gloria delle donne* (*The Glory of Women*, 1590). In the spinet lid decoration, three women are identifiable - Lucia Garzoni, third woman on the left with a recorder; the famous Modena poet and musician Tarquinia Molza, playing the organ; and Isabella Ruini Angelelli, playing the viola da gamba in the centre. Lavinia's friendship with Isabella must have been one of her closest, as she is the only woman who was painted by the artist four times, over the course of eight years (1586-1593).

The present work belongs to this exceptional sequence. It stands at the centre of a progression that begins with the small *Wedding Portrait* on copper (Musée des Beaux Arts, Besançon) and until now not identified as Isabella Ruini, painted on the occasion of Isabella's marriage to Giovanni Angelelli in 1586 (fig. 2); continues with the celebrated allegorical transformation of the sitter into Venus in *Isabella Ruini Angelelli*

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as *Venus with Cupid*, signed and dated 1592 (Musée des Beaux Arts, Rouen, fig. 3); and the present rediscovered portrait, only signed but very likely executed in the same year; and culminates in the grand official portrait, signed and dated 1593 (Palazzo Pitti, Florence, fig. 4).

Taken together, these works chart Isabella's passage from young bride, to eroticised allegorical figure, to fully established matron of one of Bologna's most prominent households. In the Besançon portrait, a small painting on copper, Isabella is presented to her husband-to-be (or his family) in a tiny, portable portrait. Isabella was eighteen in the year of their marriage (1586) - a union of convenience that united the ancient Ruini family with one of the forty families of new senators created by Gregory XIII.

Following the intimate copper, Isabella reappears in 1592 in her dramatically altered guise as *Venus*. No longer the modest bride presented to a new household, she confronts the viewer directly, monumental and self-aware, assuming the identity of the goddess of love. Cupid grasps her wrist while she holds a golden-tipped arrow; the exchange is charged, theatrical and erotically intelligent rather than playful. A great red curtain fills the left of the composition, the flesh is rendered with pearly luminosity, and the luxury of the setting is described with a richness that reveals Fontana's close knowledge of Titian and Veronese. The painting has often been read as a celebration of Isabella's beauty, yet it also operates within the visual language of marriage imagery familiar in late sixteenth-century Bologna: Venus becomes guarantor of union, desire placed in the service of legitimacy and fertility.

The present canvas shows Isabella Ruini Angelelli half-length before a red curtain, accompanied by a lady-in-waiting who assists her in examining the contents of a jewel casket. The space is compressed, intimate and deliberately theatrical. The red drapery, drawn close behind the figures, eliminates distraction and pushes the exchange forward into the viewer's domain. Isabella's pale, luminous complexion, the refinement of her lace, the shimmer of pearls at her throat and ears, and the minute description of the goldsmith's work within the box proclaim both rank and cultivated taste.

From the outset the picture declares its relationship with the painting in Rouen. The format is the same unusual, almost square proportion; the compositional scaffolding is identical. In each, the monumental female protagonist dominates the centre, with a secondary figure on the right, and the drama is carried by an interlocking choreography of wrists and fingers. In the Rouen picture, Cupid grasps Isabella as she holds the golden arrow; here the maid replaces him, and the erotic encounter is translated into an aristocratic ritual of possession and display. The attendant raises a

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rope of pearls and an *aigrette*; Isabella steadies the lid of the velvet-lined casket and selects an ornament.

Infra-red reflectography has shown that the lady-in-waiting originally stood closer to Isabella, her head almost the same size and turned more directly towards her mistress. Had that design been retained, the field for the jewels would have narrowed. The revision pushed the attendant back, opening space for the hands and jewels to become the focus. A second pentimento, visible in the little finger of Isabella's left hand, further refined the rhythm of this presentation. On this basis, Morselli argues that the present work preceded the Rouen painting, since Cupid ultimately occupies the same position as the attendant's original head. The two works emerge as parts of a single conception - paired images developed together, like consecutive stanzas, exploring two states of the same woman. The signature reinforces the relationship between the two canvases. *LAVIN. FON. FACIE* is painted in gold capitals along the inner edge of the casket lid, half concealed within the object itself (fig. 5). The gesture precisely mirrors the hidden inscription woven into Cupid's bow in Rouen. Both demand close viewing; both reward privileged access.

Approximately six years separate Isabella's marriage in 1586 from the execution of the two canvases of 1592. Within aristocratic culture this was a meaningful interval, marking the movement from the first brilliance of alliance toward the consolidation of household, lineage and expectation. The jewels displayed in the casket may therefore be those associated with the wedding itself - gifts that once announced entry into marriage and that now, handled rather than worn, record duration. The shift is quiet but profound - what had proclaimed splendour in public becomes an object of private recollection.

Contemporary attitudes toward luxury reinforce the reading. Florentine legislation of 1472 sought to regulate the display of bridal ornaments across the years following marriage, progressively limiting their exhibition and thereby acknowledging the transition from bride to matron. Bologna's statutes were not identical, yet the underlying rhythm would have been readily understood. What had glittered outward returned to the interior, to be guarded, counted, reconsidered. Isabella's pause before the open casket becomes an act of assessment - of wealth, promise and time. In the Rouen painting she surpasses these treasures, reborn as Venus and equipped with different emblems; here she confronts the material foundations upon which that transformation rests.

As for the function of the two works, their uncommon dimensions are noteworthy. They are not standard workshop formats and were likely conceived for integration within furniture or architectural space. Their measurements diverge from the conventional *tela d'Imperatore* normally favoured for half-length portraits, while also

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refusing the elongated verticality typical of independent wall display. Instead, the almost square proportions suggest adaptation to a precise spatial envelope, calculated in relation to joinery, panelling or cabinetry rather than to a movable frame. Morselli suggests that they may have been aligned near the marital chamber, perhaps revealed in sequence. She further observes that such proportions imply an object intended to be encountered at close range, in conditions of privileged access, reinforcing the intimate, initiatory character of the imagery. Read together, Isabella attended by her maid and Isabella as Venus operate as guardians of conjugal harmony, affirmations of legitimacy and images intended to encourage fertility.

The sequence of portraits of Isabella reaches its resolution the following year in the great official portrait signed and dated 1593. In this portrait, Isabella stands fully installed within public identity. This present, rediscovered portrait therefore unites two extraordinary histories: that of Lavinia Fontana's groundbreaking career and that of Isabella Ruini Angelelli's carefully staged ascent from bride, to goddess, to matron, forming part of one of the Renaissance's most ambitious programmes of female representation.

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Fig 1. Lavinia Fontana, *Apollo e le Muse (Il Parnaso)*, c. 1598-1600, oil on canvas. Bologna, private collection.

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Fig. 2. Lavinia Fontana, *Wedding Portrait of Isabella Ruini*, 1586, oil on copper. Besançon, Musée des Beaux- Arts d'Archéologie.

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Fig. 3. Lavinia Fontana, *Isabella Ruini Angelelli as Venus with Cupid*, 1592, oil on canvas. Rouen, Musée des Beaux-Arts.

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Fig. 4. Lavinia Fontana, *Portrait of Isabella Ruini Angelelli*, 1593, oil on panel. Florence, Palazzo Pitti.

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Fig. 5. Detail of the present painting (lower right) with the signature on the jewellery box: "Lavin. Fon. Facie".

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