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BERNARDINO LICINIO

(Recorded in Venice from 1511 to 1549)

A YOUNG WOMAN WITH A MIRROR

oil on panel

91 x 74 cm;

35 3/4 x 29 in.

Provenance

Albert Edward Harry Mayer Archibald Primrose, 6th Earl of Rosebery (1882-1974);
His sale, Christie's London, 5 May 1939, lot 7 (as Paris Bordone), for £52-10s to de Boer;
With de Boer, Amsterdam;
From whom acquired by Hermann Göring (as Bernardino Licinio) for 3,000 Dutch florins, Inventory
Reichsmarschall, no. 568, 19 September 1940;
Central Collecting Point (CCP), Munich, CCP no. 5413, 1945-1951;
Transferred to the Bavarian State Painting Collections by the Treuhandverwaltung für Kulturgut (Trust
Administration of Cultural Property), 18 May 1961 (Transfer List no. 38);
With W. Kelberer, Zurich, acquired from the Bavarian State Painting Collections through Galerie Lodi
(Bienne), Munich, for DM 4,500 (Bavarian State Painting Collections Sale List no. 65) 1966;
Salamon Collection, Sant'Alessio (Pavia), by 1975;
Sale, Dorotheum Vienna, 27 April 2007, lot 402.

Literature

L. Vertova, 'Bernardino Licinio', in *I Pittori Bergamaschi dal XIII al XIX secolo. Il Cinquecento, I*, Bergamo
1975, p. 433, cat. no. 111, reproduced p. 466, fig. 5.

P. Humfrey, *Paris Bordone. A 'Bella' with a mirror: Vanitas, Virtue or Vice?*, Turin 2015

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

<https://www.matthiesengallery.com/online-publications/paris-bordon-a-young-woman-holding-her-mirror-with-her-servant/mobile/index.html#p=24>

L. Syson, 'Belle. Picturing beautiful women', in *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, exhibition catalogue, New Haven and London 2008

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



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Est. 1760

In the study of Bernardino Licinio's oeuvre, the present painting depicting a *Young Woman with a Mirror* emerges as a significant piece, in which the artist skilfully blends the Venetian tradition of seductive female portraiture with complex iconographical elements. Licinio portrays an idealised young woman, with pale skin and luminous, blonde hair, wearing a white tunic and red cloak. She sensually reveals one of her breasts, whilst resting her right arm on a mirror which she seems to present to the viewer, all set within an interior. Reflected in the mirror are some toiletries arranged on a table, and two figures, a woman in a green gown and a man wearing a dark tunic and hat, standing in a room lit by a window and a fire. This painting, documented by Luisa Vertova in her comprehensive catalogue raisonné of Licinio's work, represents a pinnacle of the artist's mature period, dating back to the late 1530s. Licinio, a Venice-based painter of Bergamask descent, is celebrated for his adept portrayal of both religious and secular subjects, drawing upon his artistic lineage that traces back to the influential circles of Giovanni Bellini and Giorgione.

The painting in question illustrates the artist's mastery in depicting the idealised beauty of young women, a theme that he revisits throughout his career. This thematic preoccupation is evident in works such as the *Saint Margherita enthroned between Saint Lucia and Saint Catherine of Alessandria* today in the Accademia dei Concordi, Rovigo (**Fig. 1**) and the *Bust of a Woman Holding Gloves* painted in 1524 and now in the Ca' d'Oro, Venice (**Fig. 2**) – the distinctive physical traits of his subjects in these examples recall the rosy-cheeked woman in the present painting. Additionally, the quality of the brushwork and use of colour, as well as the more monumental conception of the figure within the composition, also recall other paintings from the 1530s and early 1540s, such as the *Portrait of Ottavio Grimani* now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (**Fig. 3**).

Furthermore, the painting engages with the Venetian *Belle* genre, which celebrates the sensuality and beauty of young women, often depicted with exposed breasts. This genre gained momentum from Giorgione's *Laura* (**Fig. 4**) and reached its zenith with Titian from 1510 onwards, in painting such as the *Allegory of Vanity* from circa 1515 in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich (**Fig. 5**). The inclusion of mirrors is particularly interesting; it is a motif that ultimately derives from Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Double Portrait* (**Fig. 6**), and indicates the artists' engagement with themes of vanity.

The inclusion of a mirror is notable – it alludes to the ritual of personal beauty and hygiene, especially with the inclusion, in the mirror's reflection, of the ivory comb, perfume pots and sponge arranged on the table, recalling a motif clearly derived from the mythological episode known as the 'Toilet of Venus'. These items are also seen in both Paris Bordon's *Young Woman with a Mirror*,¹ and *Venetian Women at their Toilet* (fig. 7), as well as Giovanni Bellini's *Young Woman at her Toilette* painted in 1515 and today in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (fig. 8). Additionally, it also evokes a deeper, possibly moralistic narrative suggested by the presence of a man and a woman in the reflection, whose relationship to the main subject remains intriguingly ambiguous. The fire, possibly symbolising carnal passion, also adds to the intrigue. This ambiguity lends the work a narrative depth that transcends its initial aesthetic appeal, inviting interpretations that range from the portrayal of courtesan life to more nuanced reflections on femininity and virtue. The backdrop of this painting, where a lion's head and a trophy of arms are seen in relief on a pilaster to the left, further accentuates the narrative and thematic richness of the piece, imbuing it with layers of symbolic meaning that possibly underscore the predatory or protective aspects of the depicted woman's environment.

¹ P. Humfrey, Paris Bordon. *A 'Bella' with a mirror: Vanitas, Virtue or Vice?*, Turin 2015, p. 24, reproduced fig. 10.

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

In recent decades, the study of *Belle* within Venetian art of the early sixteenth century has captivated art historians, sparking vigorous debates over the underlying meanings embedded within these images. This scholarly pursuit has unveiled a spectrum of interpretations, revealing the complexity and diversity in understanding these works.² On one hand, some academics argue that these paintings not only glorify the physical allure of women but also embody the virtues of chastity, serving as visual homages to the idealised, unattainable figures celebrated in poetry. Conversely, others posit that the *Belle* depict courtesans or prostitutes, presenting their beauty as a commodity and subtly critiquing the perils of overt sensuality, whilst also engaging the male gaze with a certain titillation. A third perspective suggests viewing these artworks as depictions of brides, melding sensuous charm with the moral expectations of matrimony. Despite the strong historical evidence supporting each of these viewpoints, it is becoming increasingly acknowledged that no single interpretation universally applies to all *Belle* images. The appeal of these paintings, to painters and patrons alike, lies in their versatility and the multiple layers of meaning they can convey. Thus, some may celebrate feminine purity, while others could be overtly erotic, or intentionally ambiguous, leaving interpretations up to the viewer's personal evolution or change in marital status. This ambiguity and the ability to engage viewers in an interpretative dialogue highlight the adaptability of this genre, as artists explored its varied potentialities according to their unique skills and artistic inclinations.

In aligning Licinio's work with those of his contemporaries, one appreciates the broader Venetian fascination with depicting the multifaceted aspects of female beauty and allure. However, Licinio's approach is distinguished by a more restrained, solemn treatment of his subjects, offering a counterpoint to the elaborate stylisations of his peers. Evidently this *Young Woman with a Mirror* is not merely a testament to the artist's artistic prowess but also a complex exploration of femininity, beauty, and morality within the rich tapestry of sixteenth-century Venetian art. Through this painting, Licinio contributes to a genre that is as diverse in interpretation as it is unified in its celebration of the female form, offering a window into the societal and cultural nuances of his time.

² For a discussion on the various hypotheses, see L. Syson, 'Belle. Picturing beautiful women', in *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, exhibition catalogue, New Haven and London 2008, pp. 246-254

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Fig. 1. Bernardino Licinio, *Saint Margherita enthroned between Saint Lucia and Saint Catherine of Alessandria*
Rovigo, Accademia dei Concordi.

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Fig. 2. Bernardino Licinio, *Bust of a Woman Holding Gloves*
Venice, Galleria Franchetti, Ca' d'Oro.

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Fig. 3. Bernardino Licinio, *Portrait of Ottaviano Grimani*, 1541
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

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Fig. 4. Giorgione, *Portrait of a Young Woman (Laura)*, 1506
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

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Fig. 5. Tiziano Vecellio, called Titian, *Allegory of Vanity*, c. 1515
Munich Alte Pinakothek.

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Fig. 6. Jan van Eyck, *Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434
London, National Gallery.

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Fig. 7. Paris Bordon, *Venetian Women at their Toilet*, c.1545
Edinburgh, National Gallery.

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Fig. 8. Giovanni Bellini, *Young Woman at her Toilette*, 1515
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.