

## Preface

Vittorio Sgarbi

The story of the Warsaw copy of the Sforziad is more fascinating than a novel as so often happens with things of great value. This impressive work by the humanist Giovanni Simonetta, brother of the influential politician Cicco, was written in commemoration of his recently deceased lord, Duke Francesco Sforza. It was a celebration in verse of his exploits which were to make Milan the great city it was in the mid-15th century. Francesco's successor, his first-born son Galeazzo Maria, was murdered. Then his widow Bona of Savoy informally conceded rule of the Duchy to Cicco Simonetta while waiting for her son Gian Galeazzo (to whom the Sforziad, originally in Latin, is dedicated) to come of age. Bona, though, was to regret her decision and so consented her feared brother-in-law, in exile in Pisa, to enter Milan in arms and liberate the city from Cicco. He was duly executed and Giovanni was forced to take refuge in Vercelli. And yet the Sforziad did not fall into disrepute, since the poem did in any case glorify the pater patriae whose son Ludovico, known to all as il Moro, felt himself to be the sole legitimate heir.

Several versions of the work were to follow. Firstly, the one translated into Italian and printed in 1490 possesses (as do other three surviving copies) a magnificent ornate frontispiece by the court miniaturist Giovanni Pietro Birago. The Warsaw version may not have been delivered to its owner until sometime after 1494, the year of Gian Galeazzo's untimely death and when the splendour of the Sforza family can be said to decline. Another five years in fact, and il Moro (certainly no innocent bystander to the death of Gian Galeazzo who had left him alone in power) was driven away by the French who were thereby to take over the Dukedom.

In part because of the miniature, which was less generous in its treatment of il Moro, a number of historians even claimed that Birago's Sforziad actually belonged to one of the Sforza family, Francesco (son of Gian Galeazzo and half-brother to Caterina Riario) who had been against the dynasty preceding the coup. In this case, the book also ended up prisoner of Louis XII and remained in the royal endowment until 1518, when his successor, François I, was to donate the book to Sigismund I of Poland on his marriage to Gian Galeazzo's daughter, Bona Sforza who had fled with her mother after il Moro's accession. This would explain the presence of the book in Poland. Alternatively, the book was first owned by Galeazzo Sanseverino, the commander of il Moro's forces, to whom the book would have been presented to celebrate his marriage to the young woman in the portrait, before it passed into French hands.

From the royal court of Cracow, the book finally turned up in the National Library of Poland in Warsaw from the hands of Jan Zamoyski, hero in the anti-Royalist revolt and man of letters. It was here in fact, from the National Library, that the book was to survive the infamous Nazi book burnings during the Occupation of Warsaw, already on its pilgrimage far from the walls of impending destruction before it could be carried out. As if this were not enough, the best of the story was to come. In the first quire of four folded sheets in the Warsaw incunabulum, one complete sheet and one half sheet are missing. Using the stitch holes as a guide, we can match the vellum of the portrait with that in the first quire. As one might have expected, it is an illustration: a splendid portrait of a woman in profile drawn with ink, coloured chalks and white lead. It came into the hands of the Canadian Peter Silverman after having belonged to the painter and restorer of Trieste, Giannino Marchig, a favourite of Berenson's, and then found itself in a sale at Christie's New York in 1998 where it had been presented as a work by unknown German artist of the nineteenth century.

Even before scientific testing, carried out under the direction of Pascal Cotte, that certified it had indeed belonged to the Polish Sforziad, the portrait had been skillfully examined by the British art historian, Martin Kemp who immediately suspected that its author was none other than Leonardo. In effect everything seemed to point to the artistic entourage of the Sforza family of the late 1400s and specifically to Leonardo's circles.

Not only were the similarities to Leonardo's work obvious, formal ones, but specific techniques which were

particular to the genius da Vinci were identifiable such as the sfumato or shading Leonardo obtained by rubbing and smearing the colour with his fingertips. Kemp was also to suggest that the portrait, which had by then come to be known as The Beautiful Princess, was of Bianca Sforza, illegitimate but to be later recognized, daughter of il Moro. She had been married off though still a child to Galeazzo Sanseverino in 1496 in the wedding to which the Birago frontispiece alludes.

Unfortunately the discovery of both Kemp and Cotte, though well-received by the majority of art historical scholars, came about at a time, above all in Italy, characterized by the spasmodic quest for Leonardo attributions in the hopes of a news breaking scoop and behind which lurked, if not shady speculation, then disarming ingenuity shared by all attributors alike – I had the chance to compare one of the above, as far as his critical eye went, to a blind black cat on a moonless night – and careless liars spreading tall tales.

I am specifically alluding to firstly, the so-called 'Acerenza Leonardo' (known as the Lucan Portrait) affair which somehow got away with being taken seriously and secondly, to the return from Japan of the unlucky Tavola Doria greeted with all the pomp of State honours and finally to that wishy-washy bad copy of the Leonardo-esque that is the portrait of Isabella d'Este turned into a St Catherine for the occasion.

Rest assured, the story of the Warsaw Sforziad is reliable, and The Beautiful Princess has nothing to do with that foolish nonsense. There may still be room for discussion concerning the certification or artistic paternity of the Princess, but only the endemic, physiological superficiality of the mass media could treat her in the same manner as the above mentioned daubs have been. You can take my word for it if you do not have the means to understand on your own.