

1 Who Was Ginevra?

Ginevra d'Amerigo de' Benci (1457–c. 1520) lived in Florence, Italy, five hundred years ago. The daughter of a wealthy banker, she was the second of seven children. Her nickname, La Bencina (“little Benci”), was likely an endearing reference to her delicate appearance and gentle spirit. Ginevra was a poet (although only a single line of her work survives), and she was praised by those who knew her for her intellect and virtuous character. Leonardo painted her portrait around the time she married in 1474.

Ginevra was about sixteen years old in this portrait. It presents her as a refined young woman with a porcelain complexion. Her modest brown dress is enlivened with elegant details: blue ribbon lacing, gold edging, and a sheer white blouse fastened with a delicate gold pin or button. A black scarf is gently draped over her slender shoulders and neck. Her golden hair is styled simply—parted in the middle and pulled back in a bun—leaving ringlets to frame her face. Without the distractions of luxurious fabrics and sparkling gems, Ginevra herself attracts attention. Her brown eyes gaze steadily from under almond-shaped lids, and her lips are closed in a quiet line. Unlike portraits in profile that were more typical at the time, Ginevra's portrait shows her in a three-quarter view as a way to reveal more about her.

Describe Ginevra's expression. How does she feel? What might she be thinking about? What aspects of her personality does the portrait convey?

“A face is not well done unless it expresses a state of mind.” Leonardo da Vinci

2 A Renaissance Man

Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) lived during an exciting period known as the Renaissance (French for “rebirth”), a time recognized for a renewed interest in knowledge, the arts, and science. He was an artist as well as an inventor, architect, engineer, musician, mathematician, astronomer, and scientist. In many ways, his intellectual curiosity, careful observation of nature, and artistic creativity characterized the Renaissance itself.

Born in the small town of Vinci, outside Florence, Leonardo moved to the city at the age of twelve to train in the workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio, a leading artist of the time. Leonardo was just twenty-two years old when he painted this portrait of Ginevra de' Benci. It is the first of only three known portraits Leonardo painted in his career. The portrait may have been commissioned by Ginevra's older brother Giovanni on the occasion of her engagement.

Throughout his life, Leonardo embraced opportunities to experiment with materials and explore artistic approaches. Ginevra's portrait was among his earliest encounters with the medium of oil paint. Leonardo used his fingers and the palm of his hand to mix the wet paint, which enabled him to blend colors and create soft, delicate edges that allowed for subtle transitions from light to shadow. Evidence of Leonardo's innovative technique remains on the painting: his fingerprint is visible on the surface, where the sky meets the juniper bush above Ginevra's left shoulder.

3

A Landscape Painting, Too?

This was among the first portraits created in Florence that showed a sitter outdoors. In fact, Leonardo gave almost as much attention to the landscape as he did to Ginevra. Behind her is a tranquil scene with small trees lining the banks of a pool of water and a town nestled in the hills under a misty sky.

The large plant behind Ginevra's head is a juniper bush, an evergreen with sharp, spiky leaves. It is a witty pun on Ginevra's name: *ginepro* is the Italian word for juniper.

Both the figure and the landscape have been praised for their lifelike appearance. The painting demonstrates Leonardo's careful observation of the natural world, a practice he continued throughout his career that came to transform Renaissance painting.



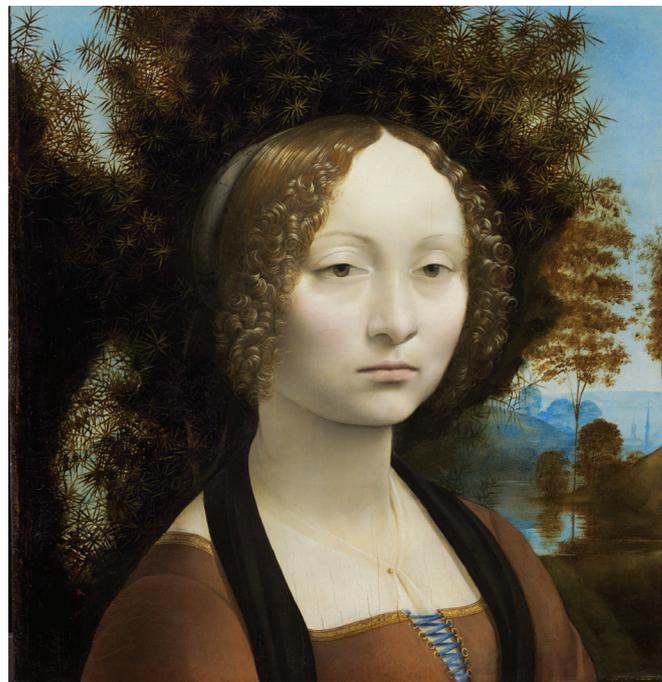
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Something's Missing!

Leonardo's original portrait probably included Ginevra's waist and hands. It was rectangular in shape instead of square and painted on a wood panel that was originally larger than what is seen today. At some point—possibly because of water damage—about six inches of the panel were cut off along the bottom and the right edge was trimmed.

Imagine how the portrait might have looked originally

How might Ginevra's hands have been posed? What would the rest of her dress look like?



left: Leonardo da Vinci, *Study of female hands* (detail), drawing, Royal Library, Windsor Castle, Windsor, Great Britain. Photo credit: Alinari / Art Resource, NY

above: Leonardo da Vinci, *Ginevra de' Benci*, c. 1474/1478, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

Dotted line shows probable size of original portrait.

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A Double-sided Portrait

In addition to the front side of the portrait, Leonardo was asked to create an image on its reverse. On this “verso” side, Leonardo painted a scroll entwined around a wreath of laurel and palm branches, with a sprig of juniper in the center. While the front of the painting is a physical portrait of Ginevra, the reverse is an emblematic portrait: it uses symbols to describe her personality. The juniper sprig identifies Ginevra by name, and the laurel and palm branches represent two of her attributes: intelligence and strong moral values. The scroll bears a

Latin inscription: *virtutem forma decorat*. This translates as Beauty Adorns Virtue, which was Ginevra’s motto.

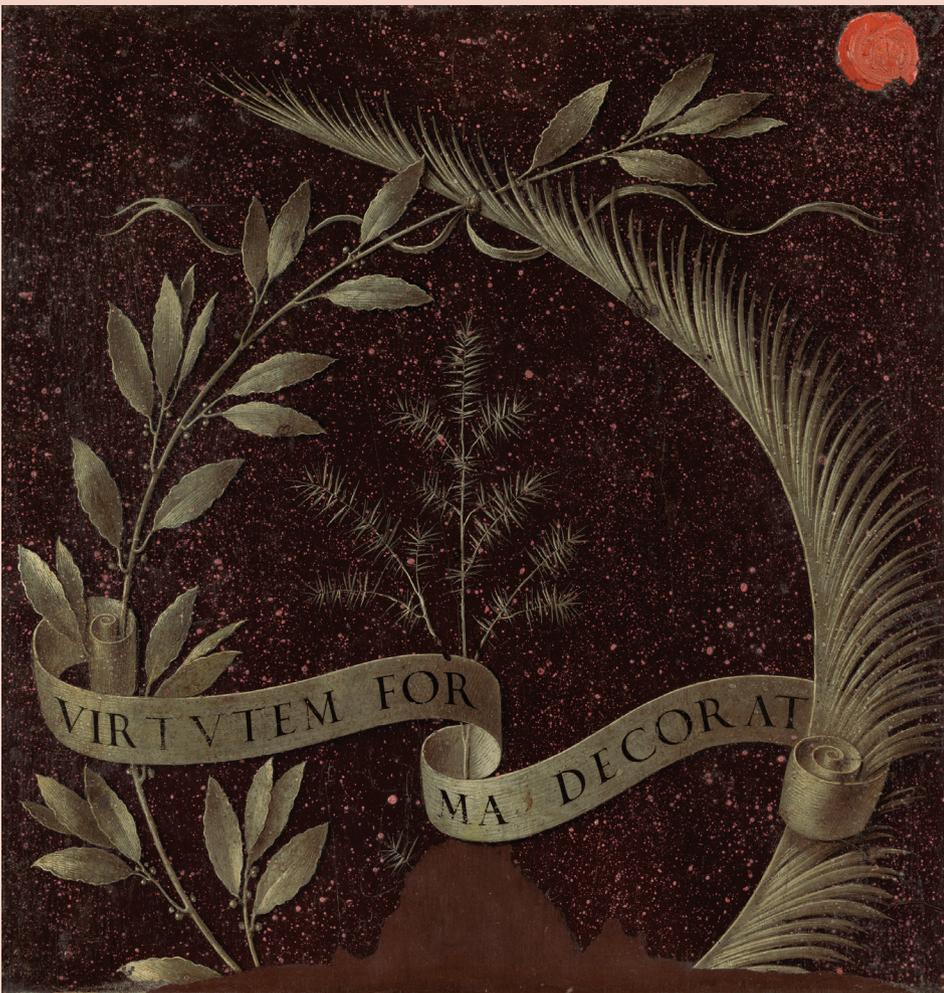
Originally, this painting might have hung from a ring on a wall or a piece of furniture so one side or the other could be seen. Today the painting is displayed in a free-standing case that shows both sides of the panel. It is thought to be Leonardo’s only double-sided painting.

Imagine what your own emblematic portrait might include (words, symbols, and so on).

Think about what you would illustrate about yourself. Which of your personality traits do you want people to remember? What characteristics make you unique?

Share these ideas with a family member or friend.

Create a double-sided self-portrait, with one side showing your physical appearance and the other side presenting an emblem of your personality and/or interests.



Leonardo da Vinci, *Wreath of Laurel, Palm, and Juniper with a Scroll inscribed Virtutem Forma Decorat (reverse)*, c. 1474/1478, tempera on panel, National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

It is believed Prince Carl Eusebius of Liechtenstein purchased this painting after 1611. The red wax seal on the upper right corner of the panel was added in 1733, when the painting was inventoried as part of the collection of Prince Joseph Wenzel of Liechtenstein. *Ginevra de' Benci* was purchased from Prince Franz Joseph II of Liechtenstein for the National Gallery's collection in 1967.