

edition of his works in 1493, that is a year after his death⁸. A literary, subjective rendition of the portrait was provided by the poet more dependent on his patron than Leonardo was. Thanks to his talent and intelligence Leonardo enjoyed a much superior position at the Sforza court (in 1490 both artists collaborated on presenting the Festa del Paradiso commissioned by duke Ludovico⁹). The poet's imagination was stirred by the artists's vision, who grasped the sitter's psyche in such a perfect way. Thus we should not be surprised that the literary rendition of the portrait is not its detailed description. If the painting got lost we would not be able to reconstruct it on the basis of the sonnet. John Shearman pointed this out and explained that this is a general rule applying to numerous literary descriptions of portraits¹⁰. So what does the painting say, according to the poet?

Why are you angry? who do you envy, Nature?
Vinci, who has portrayed one of your stars;
Cecilia, now so beautiful, is she
Whose lovely eyes cast the sun into dim shadow.

The honor is yours, though in his painting
He's made her seem to listen, but not to speak.
Think how very alive and beautiful it will be —
To your greater glory — for all time.

Therefore you may now thank Ludovico,
And the genius and skill of Leonardo,
Who want her to belong to posterity

Her who sees her thus, even though too late
To see her alive, will say: this is enough for us
Now to understand nature and art¹¹.

By writing the sonnet the poet not only paid homage to Cecilia's beauty but also took a stand in a dispute on the differences between the art of painting and the art of poetry which had been going on at the court of Ludovico il Moro. It is clearly related to the so called *Paragone* written partly in 1490–1495¹². Leonardo claims that the art of painting serves a more refined sense than poetry does, and renders the forms of the works of nature in a more truthful way. The works of nature are grander than the words created by man, because the relationship between the works of man and the works of nature is like the relationship between man and God¹³. In the sonnet the poet not only extols Cecilia, but also praises Ludovico, who commissioned the painting, and Leonardo himself. Cecilia, whose eyes are so beautiful that they “cast the sun into dim shadow”, is not only compared to a star, and thus placed in the cosmic order, but she takes the place of the sun¹⁴. Thus she herself is the light

and the grandest ideal of beauty, which she embodies as — to use a fashionable expression of her times — Venus Celestis. Thanks to the creative power of art nature is elevated to an ideal. The art reveals nature but also reveals itself. Furthermore, the art shall make Cecilia's “very alive and beautiful” image stay in the real, earthly world because of Ludovico's affection and desire, and because of their love. In other words the poet says that the painting reveals the essence of nature. Yet, following the tenants of the dispute, he notices the limitations of the art of painting: “he's made her seem to listen, but not to speak”.

The ear, which, as the poet claims, is inferior to the eye, “takes the pleasure from hearing” thanks to the poet. Cecilia “does not speak” — is her silence meaningful? Maybe there is something which is beyond words. Or maybe the poet intends to reminds us that “the painting is silent poetry”. The sonnet's ending echoes Alberti's thought, who in his *Della pittura* writes that painting has a divine power, because it not only makes absent people present, but also shows the dead as the living¹⁵.

I believe the poet expresses a similar conviction; his sonnet makes Cecilia immortal.

The archive materials used by the 19th century scholars of the painting to establish Cecilia Gallerani's biographical data were frequently unclear and contradictory, which prevented a reliable dating of the painting. The confusion was due to a mistake made by a copyist who misquoted the year. The mistake was rectified by Janice Shell and Grazioso Sironi¹⁶, who also published new materials. The documents they compare indicate that Cecilia's grandfather was born in Siena and later moved to Lombardy. His son Fazio lived with his family in Milan and was attached to the court there. He died in 1480 when he was sixty six and left his last will. He orphaned six sons and two daughters. Their mother, Margarita nee Busti, became the guardian of the children, the oldest of whom, Sigerio, was between seventeen and nineteen, and the youngest, Giovanni Galeazzo, was between five and six. The document does not specify the age of the daughters — Zaneta and Cecilia. Another document directly related to Cecilia is the marriage contract of 15 December 1483. It says that Cecilia, who was then more than ten years old and less than eleven (which dates her birth to 1473) was “pro verba” betrothed to Giovanni Stefano Visconti, twenty four years old, coming from a family of a similar social standing (it was not noble). The contract specified that they would get married when Cecilia was twelve.