

# Caylus



**FRANS POURBUS THE YOUNGER**  
(1569–1622)

*Engagement Portrait of Princess Margherita Gonzaga*  
(1591–1632)

Mantua, Autumn 1605  
Oil on canvas  
72.5 x 62 cm

## PROVENANCE:

Possibly Carlo Maffei Juniore Collection, Palazzo della Pusterla, Mantua.

Art Market, Quai Voltaire, Paris. 1990's

Private collection, Switzerland.

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Depicted in a three-quarter bust view, Margherita Gonzaga di Lorraine is still a princess of the Gonzaga family when Frans Pourbus the Younger, official portraitist of Vincenzo I Gonzaga in Mantua since October 1600, immortalizes her in this intense and meticulously organized engagement portrait with Henri II of Vaudémont, Duke of Bar, and, from 1608, also Duke of Lorraine (fig. 1).

The painting is dated to the autumn of 1605, after Henry IV, King of France and guarantor of the agreement, communicated to Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga, the princess's father, the final acceptance of the marriage proposal. The portrait was created shortly before

or possibly a few weeks after the full-length portrait (Florence, Palatine Gallery, fig. 2), the only one signed and dated “Fran.us Pourbus iunior antverp. faciebat / Mant. 1605”<sup>1</sup>.

The iconography of Margherita Gonzaga di Lorraine has a complex history, and her portraits, which have surfaced over the years, demonstrate how central her marriage was to the marital politics of her father Vincenzo’s European courts. Many portraits of the adolescent bride, married at just fifteen years old, testify to the importance of the matrimonial choice of the 4th Duke of Mantua, who countered the House of Savoy with a French Gonzaga alliance, blessed by the King of France and his wife, Maria de Medici, the sister of Eleonora de Medici Gonzaga and thus Margherita’s aunt.

The young princess, born in Cavriana in 1591 and deceased in Nancy in 1632, was already lightly depicted by Rubens in the altarpiece of the Trinity alongside her family (now the fragment with only her bust is in a private collection in London) in the crucial year of 1605, likely in the first half or shortly before, as the altarpiece was inaugurated in June of that year.

In that decisive semester of her life, the princess became the focus of attention as rumors spread about her engagement to Henri II of Lorraine. For several months, the duke received formal requests for the princess’s portrait from ruling houses and ambassadors. Evidence of this is a letter from Venice dated October 22, 1605, in which Nicolas Regnault, on behalf of Madame Fresnes de Canaye, the French ambassador’s wife in Venice, requested the portrait of the “principessa che ha da essere duchessa di Lorena”. She wanted to hang it in her home, but there were no images of the future bride to copy in Venice. Regnault therefore implored Vincenzo to request one from “pit[t]ore di sua altezza serenissima”, that is, Pourbus. He expressed willingness to pay whatever the painter demanded, but it was up to the Duke to authorize it<sup>2</sup>. In light of this new portrait, one might think that this was the painting sent to Venice, but it was most likely a copy, as the original portrait, as will be seen later, was part of the Maffei collection in Mantua. Two other portraits attributed to Pourbus and his collaborators, dated 1606 (New York, Metropolitan Museum<sup>3</sup>, fig. 3, and Buenos Aires, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes<sup>4</sup>, fig. 4), are thus excluded as being the one requested from Venice: the first was possibly executed by Pourbus during the French stay in Nancy,

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<sup>1</sup> B. Ducos, catalogue entry P.A. 29, in B. Ducos, *Frans Pourbus Le Jeune (1596-1622): le portrait d'apparat à l'aube du Grand Siècle entre Habsbourg, Médicis et Bourbons*, Dijon 2011, pp. 210-21.

<sup>2</sup> Archivio di Stato di Mantova, Archivio Gonzaga, b.1537, f.III, cc.411-412.

<sup>3</sup> Ducos, catalogue entry P.B. 9, in Ducos, *Frans Pourbus*, cit., pp. 284-285; See also R. Morselli, “Francesco Purbus fiamengo” al servizio di Vincenzo I Gonzaga, in *La corona del principe: iconologia e simbologia per Vincenzo I Gonzaga*, edited by C. Continisio, Mantova 2015, pp. 89-107, in particular pp. 100-102.

<sup>4</sup> Ducos, catalogue entry P.B. 10, in Ducos, *Frans Pourbus*, cit., p. 285.

where he accompanied Duchess Eleonora Gonzaga to visit her daughter Margherita, and the second directly depends on the former.

The painting analyzed here, entirely by Pourbus's hand, is flawless in every detail—from the face to the hands, the dress, and the jewelry. It serves as the prototype of this family series. It is not the portrait of her already married but not yet en route to join her husband (formerly in the Weiss Gallery in London, fig. 5), which can be dated to May 1606<sup>5</sup>, nor the lost one from which the three-quarter portrait in Vicenza (Civic Art Gallery, fig. 6)<sup>6</sup> derives, where the young woman wears a dress with spikes and crowns on an ivory background. Instead, it is a family portrait in which the array of symbols refers exclusively to the Gonzaga house. The portrayed princess, who had suddenly become famous, is a living memory of a goal achieved by her father, and her sumptuous attire speaks precisely of this role.

This portrait focuses more on the features of the sitter, rendered more graceful in the proportions of her face. She wears a Spanish-style dress with oversleeves on a blue background with gold bands. The embroidery, reminiscent of the Gonzaga emblem of the trunk, is clearly visible, a motif also used on another dress by her sister Eleonora in 1622 (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, fig. 7)<sup>7</sup>. Margherita also displays the ring and bracelet of her mother, Eleonora, clearly seen in the portrait now in the Palatine Gallery in Florence (fig. 8)<sup>8</sup>, a double strand pearl necklace interwoven between her fingers to signify her name (Margarita means pearl in Latin), described in the 1626–1627 inventory of Gonzaga jewels, and two star-shaped diamond brooches with central settings and pearls, which Margherita would take with her when she married the following year<sup>9</sup>. The geometric shape of these two dress brooches is echoed in the intricate lacework of the wrist and collar, valuable both aesthetically and economically, like the jewels she wears.

The young Margherita is adorned with a headband holding her hair, intertwined with a light blue ribbon matching the vibrant turquoise shade of her dress. On the right, tied to the hair ornament, is a pair of carnations—a clear reference to marital and romantic

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<sup>5</sup> R. Morselli, “*Francesco Pourbus fiamengo*”, cit., pp. 89-107.

<sup>6</sup> Ducos, catalogue entry P.B. 11, in Ducos, *Frans Pourbus*, cit., p. 285. The existence of a full-length prototype, today untraceable, is demonstrated by a workshop version from the Cavriani collection (private collection) recently made known by L'Occaso and debated by Piccinelli. See *Gonzaga i volti della storia; mostra genealogico-ikonografica*, exhibition catalogue (Museo Diocesano Francesco Gonzaga, Mantova 12 april-20 september 2015) a edited by G. Malacarne, Modena 2015, pp. 198-199.

<sup>7</sup> Catalogue entry 20, in *Gonzaga. La Celeste galeria. Le raccolte*, exhibition catalogue (Mantova, Palazzo Te, Palazzo Ducale, 2 september - 8 december 2002), edited by R. Morselli, Mantova 2002, pp. 182-183.

<sup>8</sup> Ducos, catalogue entry P.A.19, in Ducos, *Frans Pourbus*, cit., pp. 203-204.

<sup>9</sup> M.S. Soria, *Gonzaga Portraits by Frans Pourbus II*, “The art quarterly”, 1, XV, 1952, pp. 37-44. See also P. Venturelli, *L'ornamento prezioso delle Dame di Casa Gonzaga: ritratti eoreficeria*, “Critica d'Arte”, 8, 16, 2002, LXV, pp. 57-62. More recent in the paper of R. Piccinelli, *I gioielli della duchessa Margherita Gonzaga di Lorena*, in *Itinera chartarum: 150 anni dell'Archivio di Stato di Mantova: saggi in onore di Daniela Ferrari*, Cinisello Balsamo, Milano 2019, pp. 308-319.

symbolism. The carnation is a "fiore da promessa", signifying the family's decision to give their daughter's hand to a future husband.

Based on the analysis of its iconographic elements, the painting of Margherita can be chronologically placed in the autumn of 1605, a pivotal year in the young princess's life during which the engagement agreement with Henri II of Lorraine was concluded.

In summary, this masterpiece of pictorial and interpretive skill is one of the finest examples of Gonzaga portraiture tied to Pourbus's production at the Mantuan court. It is particularly rare not only for its quality but also for its dynastic and historical awareness: Margherita displays the entire repertoire of Gonzaga sumptuous arts, not yet intertwined with her future connection to Lorraine. A few months later, on February 13, 1606, the representatives of the Duke of Lorraine and Carlo Rossi, the Duke of Mantua's procurator, signed the marriage contract in Paris in the presence of the princes of the blood and Henry IV's principal advisors. From that moment on, the portraits of the future bride would feature different symbols.

### **The Alphabet of the Portrait**

To unravel the numerous references to the Gonzaga family displayed and intertwined in Margherita's portrait—almost a concentrated expression of visibility—it is necessary to arm oneself with a vocabulary that allows the translation of images into concepts. This involves taking the opposite approach to the one Frans Pourbus followed in the autumn of 1605, when he worked to encapsulate in a single image a symbolic universe sedimented over generations within the family. Our gaze must inevitably expand from the individual portrait to the objects, documents, and volumes that interlace beneath the apparent wonder of Pourbus's painting.

Set against a dark background and turned toward the viewer, the half-length figure of Margherita presents herself from the left side of her face, her hand entwined with the pearls of her opulent necklace. The adolescent princess is dressed in a brocade blue gown, the color associated with September<sup>10</sup>, enriched with golden and silver inserts and adorned with the family jewels she wears with conscious poise. Her hairstyle, relatively modest compared to her other known official portraits from shortly thereafter, consists of small auburn curls framing her face. It is adorned with a headband wrapped with a blue ribbon, complementing the dress, and a jewel with eight points encrusted with gemstones from

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<sup>10</sup> S. Araldo, *Trattato de i colori nelle arme, nelle livree, et nelle divise, di Sicillo Araldo del re Alfonso d'Aragona*, Venezia, Appresso Domenico Nicolino 1565, p. 29.

which a pearl hangs. This pendant echoes the brooch on her arm, both tied to the Gonzaga emblem of the sun<sup>11</sup> (fig. 9). Two red carnations nestled in her hair, supported by a structure with visible white threads, further enhance her appearance and symbolically reference her betrothal to the Duke of Lorraine. The significance of the carnation is documented in *Trattato de' colori* by Coronato Occolti, where it is described: “I garofani, fiori di somma beltà, e di graziosissimo odore, significheranno amor nuovo, che quantunque sia pieno di vane aspettazioni [...]”<sup>12</sup>.

Additional symbols include the gesture of her left hand, sliding the long knotted pearl necklace through her fingers, an allusion to the marital bond. The hypothesis that this is a family memorial painting finds support in the half-length format and the few, though exquisite, ornaments adorning her figure, all tied to the Gonzaga lineage.

Among the most precious elements, special attention is drawn to her brocade gown, decorated with a pattern that must be interpreted as representing the family's emblems (fig. 10). This same design appears in two other portraits of women in the family: Caterina de' Medici (Florence, Uffizi Gallery, inv. 1890 n. 2427, fig. 11)<sup>13</sup> and Eleonora Gonzaga (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Schloss Ambras, fig. 12)<sup>14</sup>. Both were painted by Flemish portraitist Justus Suttermans during his stay in Mantua in 1621. A second version of Eleonora's portrait, with slight variations, was created by Lucrina Fetti in 1622, showing Eleonora after her marriage to Emperor Ferdinand II of Habsburg<sup>15</sup> (fig. 13).

The decoration of Margherita's dress holds symbolic significance as it alludes to the Gonzaga family emblems, such as the dove, with its meaning centered on the marital dimension of the flowering trunk<sup>16</sup>. In this regard, the reference to the dove emblem (fig. 14) is particularly significant: traditionally associated with the couple and widows' fidelity<sup>17</sup>, here it can be interpreted as a symbol of fertility. In fact, the withered trunk, on which the dove would ideally perch, is depicted on Margherita's dress in a state of blooming, covered with budding branches—an allusion to the matrimonial unions of the Gonzaga women. The flowers represented (fig. 15) include the daisy, which refers to the name of the princess,

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<sup>11</sup> R. Signorini, *Imprese gonzaghesche*, Mantova 2013, pp. 13-18.

<sup>12</sup> C. Ollolti da Canedolo, *Trattato de' colori*, Parma, Appresso Seth Viotto 1568, p. 70.

<sup>13</sup> Catalogue entry 5, in *Sustermans. Sessant'anni alla corte dei Medici*, catalogo della mostra (Firenze, Palazzo Pitti, Sala delle Nicchie July - October 1983), a. edited by M. Chiarini, C. Pizzorusso, Firenze 1983, p. 93.

<sup>14</sup> Catalogue entry 20, in *Gonzaga. La Celeste galeria*, cit., pp. 182-183.

<sup>15</sup> L'Occaso, catalogue entry 378, in *Museo di Palazzo Ducale di Mantova. Catalogo generale delle collezioni inventariate. Dipinti fino al XIX secolo*, edited by S. L'Occaso, Mantova 2011, pp. 322-323.

<sup>16</sup> For Gonzaga's emblems see Signorini, *Imprese gonzaghesche*, cit., pp. 13-18. For Gonzaga's arboreal emblems, see U. Bazzotti, *Emblemi arborei per il Duca di Mantova*, “Atti e memorie: Accademia Nazionale Virgiliana di Scienze Lettere ed Arti”, 67, 1999, pp. 93-125.

<sup>17</sup> Signorini, *Imprese gonzaghesche*, cit., pp. 13-18.

Margherita, and the lily, symbolizing her familial connection to the Medici (as her mother was Eleonora de Medici) and to her husband, heir to the Duchy of Lorraine.

This symbolic imagery aligns with the emblem of ardent love, documented in Paolo Giovio's *Dialogo dell'impresse militari et amorose*, where the concept takes form through interlocked tree trunks ready to be set aflame<sup>18</sup> (fig. 16).

Venturelli has previously noted parallels between the attire of Caterina and Eleonora, though their absence from Gonzaga inventories complicates definitive identification<sup>19</sup>. Unfortunately, the same applies to Margherita's dress, which is also absent from family inventories but aligns stylistically with the others. It can be hypothesized that the fabric pattern was associated with marital alliances chosen by the Gonzaga for their daughters or brides, as both Eleonora and Caterina, Ferdinando Gonzaga's wife, wore the same fabric in different colors.

Elegant, fashionable, and finely embroidered with golden and silver accents, Margherita's gown was likely crafted in a Milanese workshop<sup>20</sup>. Its quality reflects the expertise of Lombard tailoring in the 17th century, which was heavily influenced by Spanish fashion and renowned internationally<sup>21</sup>. Milanese textiles were exported to Poland, England, the Netherlands, and France. The Gonzaga also sourced fabrics and clothing from Milan, as evidenced by their family inventories<sup>22</sup>.

The collection of luxury goods—clothing, fabrics, and jewelry—was undoubtedly one of Vincenzo Gonzaga's greatest pleasures. He gave Margherita a dowry of 360,000 Mantuan lire upon her marriage to Henry II<sup>23</sup>. Roberta Piccinelli has thoroughly studied three inventories from the Mantuan State Archive detailing the jewels belonging to Duchess Margherita, the Duke of Bar and Lorraine, and their jointly owned properties. These inventories reveal the jewels Margherita brought with her to Nancy<sup>24</sup>. Of particular note for this study is the presence of numerous loose pearls—round and teardrop-shaped—that were sewn onto garments and mounted on bracelets and necklaces<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> P. Giovio, *Dialogo dell'impresse militari et amorose*, Venezia, appresso Gabriel Giolito de' Ferrari 1574, p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> P. Venturelli, *Spanish Fashion among Women of Milan and Mantua*, in *Spanish fashion at the Courts of Early Modern Europe*, edited by J.L. Colomer, A. Descalzo, Madrid 2014, pp. 104-105. On Gonzaga clothing, see P. Goretti, *In limatura della luna argentea. La scienza dei magnifici apparati, tra malinconia, vestiario e vaghezze d'antico*, in *Gonzaga. La Celeste Galeria*, cit., pp. 185-211.

<sup>20</sup> R. Orsi Landini, *Il linguaggio internazionale del potere e della moda*, in *Le trame della moda*, international symposium (Urbino 7-8 october 1992), edited by A.G. Cavagna e G. Butazzi, Roma 1995, pp. 17-32, in particular pp. 25-30.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> Piccinelli, *I gioielli della duchessa*, cit., pp. 308-319.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

The pearl trade was one of the most prolific sectors of the luxury goods market in the early modern era, and Vincenzo Gonzaga's passion for pearls is evident in the inventory of jewels listed in the 1626–1627 document<sup>26</sup>. The primary sources for pearl oysters were the Persian Gulf and the coast of Venezuela<sup>27</sup>. European courts were insatiable in their demand for pearls, purchasing not only high-quality specimens but also lesser-quality ones from French and European rivers<sup>28</sup>, or sometimes resorting to Venetian markets known for counterfeit pearls<sup>29</sup>. This trade was managed primarily by Spain, particularly through Seville<sup>30</sup>, which traded with Genoa and Venice. From these cities, annual convoys supplied Northern European markets<sup>31</sup>.

### Margherita's Dress

Cesare Vecellio, in his work *Degli Habiti antichi e moderni di tutto il mondo*, describes the attire of women from Milan, Parma, Ferrara, and Mantua, noting their use of “una veste di velluto pavonazzo, ò altra sorte di sera ad opera, e à belli fogliami fino in terra, con un braccio di strascico, con maniche larghe aperte, ma chiuse con bottoni d'oro, ò di cristallo, non molto lunghe. Sono altre mez[z]e maniche, ò bracciali, con detti bottani, dalle quali vengono fuori le braccia con le maniche della sottana di dascamo, o d'ormesino [...]”<sup>32</sup> (fig. 17).

He also references the bodices “chiuse ne' petti”, typical of “delle donne di Spagna”<sup>33</sup>, resembling the fitted jacket worn by Margherita. This garment is distinguished by two brocaded and protruding epaulettes on the shoulders, finely outlined with gold and silver threads, arranged to evoke the initial of the young woman portrayed. The same style of attire is seen in the *Portrait of Catherine Michelle of Austria*<sup>34</sup>, Duchess of Savoy and consort of Charles Emmanuel I, painted by Giovanni Caracca around 1590 and housed in the Museo Civico Casa Cavassa in Saluzzo (fig. 18). A second half-length portrait of the same duchess, dated to around 1595 and preserved in the Museo Civico di Arte Antica in Palazzo Madama, Turin, further attests to the use of this distinctive style within the context of the House of Savoy (fig. 19)<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> M.G. Muzzarelli, L. Molà, G. Riello, *Tutte le perle del mondo. Storie di viaggi, scambi e magnifici ornamenti*, Bologna 2023.

<sup>27</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 219-225.

<sup>28</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 250-251.

<sup>29</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 250-251.

<sup>30</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 244-245.

<sup>31</sup> *Ivi*, p. 214.

<sup>32</sup> C. Vecellio, *Degli Habiti antichi e moderni di tutto il mondo*, Venezia, Presso Damian Zenaro 1598, p. 189.

<sup>33</sup> *Ivi*, p. 253.

<sup>34</sup> F. Varallo, *Catalina Micaela at the Court of Savoy*, in *Spanish fashion*, cit., p. 72.

<sup>35</sup> *Ivi*, p. 74. See the online catalogue entry: <https://www.palazzomadamarino.it/it/archivio-catalogo/caterina-micaela-daustria-duchessa-di-savoia/>

A few years later, in 1606, Frans Pourbus depicted Margherita, daughter of Charles Emmanuel I of Savoy, in a stunning full-length portrait now housed in the Church of SS. Ambrogio e Carlo al Corso in Rome (fig. 20). The painting, commissioned for her marriage to Francesco Gonzaga, son of Vincenzo, was originally displayed in the Gallery of the Exhibition next to her husband's portrait<sup>36</sup>. Two other versions of this portrait exist, one in the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg (fig. 21)<sup>37</sup> and another in a private collection<sup>38</sup>.

### The Colors

Blue, gold, and silver are the colors that distinguish Margherita's dress. Each of these colors holds symbolic significance tied to the identity and status of the noblewoman depicted, as can be discerned through the analysis of 16th- and 17th-century treatises dedicated to color. Additionally, one must consider the connections and alliances between the ruling families of the Gonzaga, Medici, and the French crown.

First, blue and gold were the colors associated with the French crown on both a national and international level during the 17th century. It is no coincidence that these colors appear in the dress of Maria de' Medici, portrayed by Pourbus in a painting dated 1610 and preserved in the Louvre Museum in Paris (fig. 22)<sup>39</sup>. This portrait was created for the *Petite Galerie* of the Louvre, where the walls were adorned with depictions of monarchs and queens<sup>40</sup>. Beyond the color, attention is drawn to the numerous lilies on the dress, symbolizing both the French crown and the Medici family, as evident in the pointed shape of the bodice. Similarly, the queen's cuffs, finely embroidered in a crown shape, allude to her political role (fig. 23). The lace cuffs of Margherita's dress also adopt this form, referencing her family's heraldry, characterized by her father Vincenzo's coat of arms surmounted by a crown. In addition to the dress, Margherita's jewelry incorporates blue elements that also evoke the Gonzaga emblem of the sun<sup>41</sup>.

According to Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, the color turquoise, also called blue, symbolizes intellectual capacity, faith, and zeal, "come dicono i francesi"<sup>42</sup>. He also refers to the tradition among artists of depicting the Virgin Mary in a blue robe<sup>43</sup>. Coronato Ollolti da

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<sup>36</sup> Ducos, catalogue entry P.A. 31, in Ducos, *Frans Pourbus*, cit., pp. 212-213.

<sup>37</sup> Ducos, catalogue entry P.A. 38, *Ivi*, pp. 219.

<sup>38</sup> Ducos, catalogue entry P.A. 31, *Ivi*, pp. 212-213.

<sup>39</sup> Ducos, catalogue entry P.A. 42, *Ivi*, pp. 224-226.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>41</sup> Signorini, *Imprese gonzaghesche*, cit., pp. 28-33.

<sup>42</sup> G.P. Lomazzo, *Trattato de' colori de la Pittura*, Milano, Appresso Paolo Gottardo Pontio 1595, pp. 208-209, in particular, p. 208.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*.

Canedolo, in his *Trattato de' colori* (published in Venice in 1568), explains the significance of turquoise in relation to "ferma lealtà perché somiglia al colore del cielo"<sup>44</sup>, symbolizing justice as well<sup>45</sup>. He also provides interpretations for the pairing of gold and silver. Gold represents faith and "alti desideri", while silver symbolizes purity<sup>46</sup>. The combination of gold and turquoise conveys "una sincera, giusta, e leale fede"<sup>47</sup>, whereas silver with turquoise signifies "giustizia, lealtà e grandezza di core"<sup>48</sup>.

Finally, and most notably, in the *Trattato dei colori nelle arme, nelle livree et nelle divise* by Sicillo Araldo, published in Venice in 1565, blue and turquoise are associated with "giovani da marito" and are particularly linked to the month of September<sup>49</sup>. This connection appears to be reinforced by the use of velvet, a fabric typically worn in autumn and winter. This observation leads to the conclusion that the painting was unlikely to have been created during the spring or summer months.

### **The Pattern of the Dress**

As previously mentioned, the decorative pattern of Margherita's dress encapsulates a complex system of symbolic references to the Gonzaga family's emblems and, more broadly, to the military and romantic achievements described by Paolo Giovio.

The tree trunk recalls the emblem of the dove (fig. 24), typically accompanied by the French motto "l'amore vero non cambia". This emblem consists of a curved tree stump containing a swirling vortex of water, upon which a dove perches<sup>50</sup>. This imagery is eloquently described by the Carmelite and Mantuan humanist Battista Spagnoli in his *Parthenices Mariane*, where he explains that the dove, having lost its mate, stirs the water to obscure its reflection, avoiding the sight of its lonely image<sup>51</sup>. This emblem is associated with fidelity, further emphasized by the lifeless and dry wood.

In contrast, the tree trunk on Margherita's dress is adorned with blossoming branches, symbolizing fertility and marriage, represented through the daisy (a nod to Margherita's name) and the lily (symbolizing the Medici and France). This motif connects to Paolo Giovio's imagination, as expressed in his *Dialogo delle imprese militari e amoroze*, where a

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<sup>44</sup> Ollolti da Canedolo, *Trattato de' colori*, cit., p. 17.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>46</sup> *Ivi*, p. 40.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>49</sup> Araldo, *Trattato de i colori*, cit., p. 29.

<sup>50</sup> Signorini, *Imprese gonzaghesche*, cit., pp. 13-18.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*.

green "incavalcato" trunk catches fire to symbolize the flames of ardent love<sup>52</sup>, referring to the matrimonial union.

Almost hidden but present is the emblem *SIC* (*Sic Illustrior Crescam*), the crescent moon of Vincenzo I Gonzaga<sup>53</sup>, embroidered and depicted twice on the dress and positioned on the left shoulder (fig. 25). This emblem was adopted by the Duke during the military campaign against the Turks in Hungary<sup>54</sup> and appears in several portraits attributed to or copied from Pourbus, such as the example preserved in the National Trust at Tatton Park (Cheshire) (fig. 26)<sup>55</sup>.

The velvet brocade undersleeves are adorned with gold and silver thread inserts, stitched to the dress through the inclusion of beads that form the edge of the gold-leaf-decorated sections. These include "margheritine" or "canotigli", tiny perforated beads and crystal rods that, when sewn onto fabric, give the ornamental designs a sparkling brilliance<sup>56</sup>. The inserts are decorated with alternating spiral shapes forming an "S" and small crowns, further referencing the social role of the Gonzaga princess (fig. 27).

### **The Ruff and Lace Cuffs**

The sumptuous and fashionable ruff worn by Margherita is one of the most remarkable elements of the portrait. The triple-layered ruff features a decorative pattern directly tied to the previously mentioned Gonzaga emblem of the sun, reflected in the jewelry on her shoulder and hairstyle (fig. 28). The same sun emblem can be found in the lace adorning her cuffs, shaped like crowns—a reference to the crowned coat of arms of the Gonzaga family (fig. 29).

### **Margherita's Jewelry**

In the inventory of the Gonzaga household assets compiled by the fourth Duke Ferdinando, a section is dedicated to a diverse assortment of luxurious items: earrings, rings, bracelets, hatpins, brooches, necklaces, loose gems, cameos, crystals, hardstones, and various

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<sup>52</sup> Gioio, *Dialogo dell'impresa*, cit., p. 49.

<sup>53</sup> Signorini, *Imprese gonzaghesche*, cit., pp. 57-59.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>55</sup> Ducos, catalogue entry P.B. 5, in Ducos, *Frans Pourbus*, cit., pp. 282-283.

<sup>56</sup> *Gonzaga. La Celeste Galeria*, cit., p. 191.

goldsmith's works<sup>57</sup>. This wealth reflects the Gonzaga family's diplomatic, political, and social dynamics of public display<sup>58</sup>.

The jewelry worn by Margherita Gonzaga demonstrates that Pourbus's work is both a family portrait and a private encomium of the Mantuan dynasty<sup>59</sup>. This becomes evident when comparing other portraits of Gonzaga princesses<sup>60</sup>, which feature the same jewels as Margherita.

### The Hair Ornament

At the top of the composition (Fig. 30), Margherita Gonzaga wears a headband adorned with a light blue ribbon interwoven around it, echoing the vibrant turquoise hue of her gown. On the right side, attached via a gold (or metal) clasp, is a pair of carnations—a clear reference to marital and romantic symbolism<sup>61</sup>. Tied or sewn into the same accessory is a pin or hair clasp that corresponds to the “tacaglio o centiglio da cappello” mentioned in the inventory of 1626-1627<sup>62</sup>.

The jewel depicted in the portrait is characterized by a yellow gold setting with an outer ring of eight triangular diamonds, each pointing outward. The second decorative register alternates eight diamonds—four quadrangular and four rhomboidal—encircling a larger rectangular-cut diamond at the center<sup>63</sup>. The gold setting features jagged geometric contours, from which a pearl hangs on the right, attached with a gold clasp. In total, the jewel comprises 17 gemstones, plus the pearl.

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<sup>57</sup> Fundamental to a complete understanding of the inventory records of the Gonzaga family is the volume by R. Morselli, *Le collezioni Gonzaga: l'elenco dei beni del 1626-1627*, Milano 2000, pp. 237-249.

<sup>58</sup> P. Venturelli, *Le Collezioni Gonzaga. Cammei, cristalli, pietre dure, oreficerie, cassettime, stipetti; Intorno all'elenco dei beni del 1626-1627 da Guglielmo a Vincenzo II Gonzaga*, Milano 2005.

<sup>59</sup> P. Venturelli, *Gioielli e Gioiellieri milanesi: Storia, Arte, Moda (1450-1630)*, Cinisello Balsamo (Milano) 1996.

<sup>60</sup> Venturelli, *L'ornamento prezioso*, cit., pp. 57-62.

<sup>61</sup> A. Angelini, A. Re, *Parole, Simboli e Miti della Natura*, Palermo 2012, p. 156.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Morselli, *Le Collezioni Gonzaga*, cit., pp. 237, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245: “[15] Un tacaglio da cappello d'oro, con numero 36 diamanti, stimati lire 1500. V.; [119] Un gambaro con una rossa che serve per tacaglio da capello, pieno di rubini diversi, lire 1000. F.; [143] Un centiglio da capello tutto pieno di diamanti di diversa forma, al numero 140, lire 14000. F.; [144] Un gioiello da capello di forma storta tutto pieno di diamanti di diversa forma, lire 8000. F.; [148] Un tacaglio da capello di doi draghi, pieno di diamanti di diversa forma, lire 800. F.; [151] Un centiglio da capello di diamanti barette a fazzette al numero 318, qual centiglio fu permutato in altre gioie del serenissimo signor duca Vincenzo, lire 10000. V.; [163] Trei pezzi di centiglio da capello con numero 30 diamanti senza fondi, di diversa grandezza, stimati ducatonì trecento, lire 3000. V.; [166] Un centurino da capello con venti diamanti a faccetta di diversa grandezza, stimato ducatonì mille cinquecento, lire 15000. V.; [204] Un gioiello da capello per aironera con smalto bianco et rosso, pieno di smeraldi di diversa qualità, lire 900. V.”

<sup>63</sup> Cf. A. Bertolotti, *Le Arti Minori alla Corte di Mantova nei secoli XV, XVI e XVII*, “Atti e memorie delle RR. Deputazioni di Storia Patria per le provincie modenesi e parmensi, 3, III, Mantova 1885. Here is an accurate description of the Mantuan suntuary units with specifics regarding Mantuan pearls and their inclusion in inventories (see also Morselli, *Le collezioni Gonzaga*, cit., p. 45).

The identification of this object within the inventory raises challenges, particularly due to the mutable nature of jewelry, which was frequently disassembled, reassembled, and repurposed<sup>64</sup>. However, entry no. 144 in the inventory — describing “Un gioiello da capello di forma storta tutto pieno di diamanti di diversa forma, lire 8000. F”<sup>65</sup> — offers a potential match. While the description lacks specific details about the number of gemstones, it highlights two aspects associated with Margherita's jewel: the comprehensive use of diamonds (“tutto pieno di diamanti”) and the inclusion of variously shaped stones. The diversity of diamond cuts in the portrait—triangular, quadrangular, rhomboidal, and rectangular—supports this connection.

### **The Diamond Earring**

The second visible jewel in the portrait is Margherita's earring (Fig. 31), a striking rectangular-cut diamond encased in a yellow gold setting. Three pearls hang from this centerpiece, with the central pearl being larger and flanked by two smaller ones.

Although a precise match cannot be identified in the 1626-1627 inventory, item no. 31 describes “Un paro d'orecchini a lunete smaltati di bianco con attachate due perle vistose, stimate lire 150. V”<sup>66</sup>. This listing might relate to the earring depicted in Pourbus's work due to the pearl pendants. Regardless, the earring aligns with the broader cultural and political display of wealth and status associated with Margherita and her dynastic lineage. The continuous reconfiguration of jewels into different forms or objects often complicates direct identification within inventories.

### **The Diamond Brooches**

It is important to note that Gonzaga jewels were regularly dismantled, reassembled, and reinvented to suit the wearer and the occasion. It is unsurprising that diamond brooches were repurposed before and after this portrait. Margherita wears two diamond brooches shaped like stars, featuring a central bezel and pearls. These brooches were part of her dowry and accompanied her upon her marriage, as documented in the inventory of July 3, 1606. Prior to this, a similar brooch—possibly the same one—was worn by Duchess Eleonora de' Medici

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<sup>64</sup> P. Venturelli, “*Havendo hanimo a tutti li christalli, e altri vasi, cameo grande et altri camei*”. *Oggetti preziosi della Collezione Gonzaga (dal Duca Guglielmo I al 1631)*, in *Gonzaga. La Celeste galeria*, cit., pp. 233-252. The essay focuses on a large group of collectible sunuary units from crystal-engraved slabs to jewellery of different designs and sizes. The author focuses on the function of the jewellery and the fundamental practice of ‘recycling or reusing’ individual gems, as well as the jewellery itself.

<sup>65</sup> Morselli, *Le Collezioni Gonzaga*, cit., p. 242.

<sup>66</sup> *Ivi*, p. 238.

Gonzaga, as seen in her portrait at the Galleria Palatina in Florence (Fig. 32). Eleonora's brooch, referred to as a *brocchetta*, was worn on her left shoulder.

In later depictions of Margherita, including portraits in New York and Buenos Aires, the *brocchetta* is repurposed into a dress jewel, adorning the neckline of her gown. This jewel features alternating geometric gold settings adorned with pearls and a central gemstone embedded in each decorative module, further demonstrating the jewel's adaptability and the symbolic continuity within the Gonzaga dynasty.

### **The Pearl Necklace**

The pearl necklace (fig. 33) is another jewel of undeniable marital value, which, through a representative detail, refers to the indissolubility of marriage. The central element of the jewel is the knot: in the portrait of Eleonora de Medici<sup>67</sup>, Margherita's mother, the woman is depicted intertwining her fingers in a necklace of gold and gems, symbolizing the concept of "incantamento" — the social condition of a married woman, and thus unavailable<sup>68</sup>. Venturelli has already identified this jewel in the 1626–1627 inventory: it is item no. 217, described as a sumptuous gold object with "S"-shaped motifs decorated with stones of various sizes, including small and medium-sized emeralds, arranged along the perimeter of the jewel.

In contrast, Margherita Gonzaga is portrayed with her left hand in the act of holding the pearl necklace, tied in a knot that indicates her state of being bound, united, and therefore promised to a husband. The pearls are mounted in a double arrangement, in pairs, which adds another layer of symbolism to the theme of emotional and marital connection, ultimately reinforced by the knot. The knot encapsulates a significant number of pearl pairs, emphasizing the concept of matrimonial union.

Finding a precise match in the inventory for this jewel is challenging due to the repetitive nature of similar precious objects associated with the item depicted by Pourbus. The painter portrays a long double strand of pearls with 137 visible units; thus, the total number, including the hidden ones, undoubtedly exceeds 250 units. This considerable number evokes item no. 41 in the inventory, which refers to a group of assorted pearls: "[41] Numero 305 perle asciente, lire 1220. V"<sup>69</sup>. This entry can be considered evidence of the presence and value of pearls, which were subsequently used to assemble necklaces, jewelry, and buttons.

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<sup>67</sup> Soria, *Gonzaga Portraits*, cit., pp. 37-44; Venturelli, *L'ornamento prezioso*, cit., pp. 57-62.

<sup>68</sup> Venturelli, *Le Collezioni Gonzaga*, cit., pp. 68-71.

<sup>69</sup> Morselli, *Le Collezioni Gonzaga*, cit., p. 238.

## **The Bracelet and Ring**

The ring and bracelet worn by Margherita Gonzaga (Fig. 34) highlight their connection to her mother, Eleonora. The ring features a square-cut, shiny, transparent diamond set in a thick band of solid gold, while the bracelet is richly decorated with gold, displaying sinuous motifs that visually dominate the gemstones — pearls and sapphires — set alternately within the gold links.

The first person to wear the same square-cut diamond ring mounted on a solid gold band was Margherita's mother, Eleonora de Medici Gonzaga, portrayed by Pourbus in 1603 (Florence, Palatine Gallery) in a half-length portrait adorned with an elaborate ruff enriched with pearls. On her right hand, Eleonora wears the same ring seen in this portrait, accompanied by a gold bracelet with pearls and sapphires, also visible in Margherita's depiction.

These two precious items also appear in at least two other portraits of Duchess Margherita. The first is preserved in New York, where the maternal ring is paired with the bracelet, while the second is in Buenos Aires, where the bracelet is absent but the same Gonzaga ring is represented<sup>70</sup>. The hand posture, leaving the wrist exposed to reveal the gold-mounted bracelet with pearls and likely sapphires, is identical to that of her daughter.

## **Traces of provenance**

The collection history of the beautiful portrait of Margherita Gonzaga by Pourbus can be reconstructed through a wax seal affixed to the back of the painting. The seal depicts a rampant stag in the upper half of a shield, while the lower part shows a diagonal stripe, likely accompanied by two additional stripes that are not visible due to the wax spreading during the impression. The number "43" can be seen on the seal. This is the coat of arms of the Maffei family of Mantua, whose members settled in the city following Gianfrancesco Gonzaga in 1439, becoming important courtiers and collectors until 1626, when Carlo Juniore died at the age of 44. With him, the Mantuan branch of the Maffei family became extinct, and the entire collection passed to the Agnelli family through the marriage of Claudia Maffei and Count Giulio Agnelli<sup>71</sup>.

It is unequivocal, therefore, that the portrait was part of the Maffei collection in Mantua at a time that can be linked to the papacy of Paul V Borghese (1605–1621). During this period, nobles were permitted to add an eagle and a dragon to their coat of arms, likely

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<sup>70</sup> Ducos, catalogue entry P.A. 19, in Ducos, *Frans Pourbus*, cit., pp. 203-204.

<sup>71</sup> G. Rebecchini, *Private collectors in Mantua, 1500-1630*, Roma 2002, pp. 52-94.

when Vincenzo Gonzaga granted them the title of marquises. This event allows the presence of the painting in the Maffei collection to be dated around 1605, coinciding with its execution. The portrait must have been created as a gift for Carlo Maffei Juniore (1582–1626), whose parents, Nicolò Maffei and Olimpia Martinengo Maffei, had both died by 1603. Olimpia Martinengo Maffei, after Nicolò's death, maintained close ties with Duke Vincenzo and Duchess Eleonora Gonzaga for fifteen years, managing legal matters and facilitating the transfer of several important paintings from Nicolò's collection to the ducal collections<sup>72</sup>. These included Correggio's *Education of Cupid* (London, National Gallery) and *Venus, Cupid, and a Satyr* (Paris, Louvre), Titian's *Supper at Emmaus* (oil on canvas, Paris, Louvre), and Giulio Romano's *Alexander the Great* (oil on canvas, Geneva, Musée des Beaux-Arts)<sup>73</sup>. Notably, in Titian's *Supper at Emmaus*, painted for Nicolò Maffei Senior in 1534, the Maffei coat of arms featuring the rampant stag and three golden bars is visible on the stool in the lower right corner, demonstrating the family's tradition of incorporating their coat of arms into their paintings<sup>74</sup>.

Carlo Juniore, as the head of the family at 21, continued his involvement in courtly roles, serving as "cavallerizzo maggiore" to Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga around 1610<sup>75</sup>. Following Vincenzo's death in February 1612, Carlo became a courtier to the new Duke Ferdinando Gonzaga, who in 1615 appointed him ambassador to Duke Ranuccio Farnese of Parma. The gift of the portrait of Margherita Gonzaga by Pourbus to Carlo Maffei fits within the positive relationship between the Maffei and Gonzaga families, benefiting the dukes.

Identifying the portrait among the family assets listed in the inventory drawn up upon Carlo Juniore's death on October 1, 1626, remains a challenge. This inventory, which surveys the contents of the Palazzo della Pusterla near the Church of San Sebastiano and Palazzo Te, was published by Rebecchini in 2002<sup>76</sup>. The document, as is often the case, is generic, lacks expert assessment, and does not include numbers that could link the wax seal's "43" to an item in the inventory. Among the generic portraits, one stands out as a "ritratto di una signora antica" in "nella camera che si apre sotto la loggia", distinct from other portraits of "donne" located on the lower floor. This could very well be the engagement portrait of Margherita Gonzaga, presented as a gift to a long-standing courtier like Carlo Maffei Juniore.

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<sup>72</sup> *Ivi*, p. 88.

<sup>73</sup> *Ivi*, p. 89.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. G. Rebecchini, *Tiziano e Mantova: la "Cena di Emmaus" per Nicola Maffei*, "Venezia Cinquecento: studi di storia dell'arte e della cultura", 5, 10, 1995, pp. 41-68.

<sup>75</sup> *Ivi*, p. 90

<sup>76</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 287-295.

Prof. Raffaella Morselli, January 2025