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INTRODUCTION: MOBILE OBJECTS AND SOCIABLE EXCHANGES IN THE RENAISSANCE COURT

In the Archivio di Stato di Modena, where the records of the Este family and the court of Ferrara are maintained, there exists a series of account and inventory books belonging to Duchess Eleonora d'Aragona. The parchment covers of these account books were often used for brief notes, and it is common to find quick sums of numbers being added as if the cover was a notepad. On one of the covers, one of the writers, most likely the *guardarobiere* Gironimo Zigliolo, has scribbled 'pensi la morte tua' (think of your death) (Figure 1). This *memento mori* creates a provocative statement regarding the transient nature of the earthly life and contentious issues around the wealth of goods, collected and recorded in such books as these. The writing of the inventory may have led those compiling to think of the issues at stake in collecting and the paradoxical status objects held in this period: on the one hand, they were symbolic goods reflecting magnificence and operating as repositories of knowledge, while on the other hand, they were often used as liquid capital, functioning as pawns for loans. The objects recorded within were sociable things – in their intended uses, but also in terms of the people who maintained them, recorded them in inventories or account books, and those who handled them during their movement. Numerous objects in the early modern period were extremely mobile, and traditional inventories – and approaches to them – do not always indicate the transient nature of these objects or their contradictory status.

Collecting Art in the Italian Renaissance Court is about the circulation, exchange, collection, and display of objects in the Italian courts (and in particular

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1. Parchment cover from Archivio di Stato di Modena, Amministrazione dei Principe 638 (ASMO AP 638) with 'pensi la morta' scribble (centre, left).
Photo by author, with kind permission to publish from the Archivio di Stato di Modena.

Ferrara and Naples). It charts the ways these objects served as the basis for court relations in the fifteenth century through diverse networks. This book examines the multiple lives these objects led: how they served as the source for narratives and stories, how they were used as the basis for artistic invention and were copied, how they functioned as the starting point for connections between individuals, and how they could also cause political problems and rifts. Rather than focusing on patronage strategies or the political power of individual collectors as is common with studies on the courts, this book begins with the objects themselves to elucidate the dynamic relationships formed through their exchange. By beginning with the object, this study brings forward the mechanisms structuring relations within the court, and most importantly, with individuals, representations, and spaces outside the court.

This book concentrates on the second half of the fifteenth century, a moment when collecting emerges as an important activity in the courts,

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but also coincides with the solidification and legitimation of many princely states and families (the Este of Ferrara and the Aragonese in Naples, in particular). The end of the fifteenth century was a pivotal moment in the courts of Italy, fraught with alliances and counter-alliances involving not only the courts on the Italian peninsula but also abroad. The court was an important space where individuals sought to assert and legitimise their power, and this was often done through material and visual means. Arguing for a reconsideration of the object's function in court life, the case studies investigate how the value of an object is tied to the role it plays in symbolic activities. The chapters that follow thus examine the courts of Italy through the myriad of objects – statues, paintings, jewellery, furniture, and heraldry – that were valued for their subject matter, material forms, histories, and social functions. Such objects are considered not only as components of court life but also as agents, which activated the symbolic practices that became integral to relations within and between courts. These activities – the exchange of diplomatic gifts, the consumption of precious objects, the displaying of collectibles, and the bestowing of knightly orders – were all ways that objects acted as points of contact between individuals, giving rise to new associations and new interests. The circulation of objects in the late Quattrocento initiated new ways for individuals to engage and connect with others: through a shared interest in a particular object; in vying for an object in competition with others; or through the marketing, consumption, trading, collecting, or pawning of items, often through a series of intermediaries. It is through associations that court objects prompted conversations, social exchanges that contribute to the formation of discourses around particular things or types of things. All the chapters highlight how objects were central to court life, although in diverse ways.

In the first chapter, a bronze fragmented horse's head is examined as a gift that forged connections between two diplomats (Diomede Carafa in Naples and Lorenzo de' Medici in Florence [Figure 3, p. 23]). Featuring prominently in Carafa's courtyard, the horse's head became synonymous with Neapolitan identity and is examined not only as symbolic of the city but also within the role of the equine in Italian politics. The sculpture is a fragment, an object whose provenance and date are up for debate, and it thus serves as the source for numerous narratives. The chapter argues that the gift functioned on multiple levels, situating Lorenzo and Diomede within humanist collecting circles, while the sculpture became a source of interest outside the intimate circles of Carafa and Lorenzo, as it was referred to across media – on coins, on neighbourhood insignia, and in print – generating its own public.

In the second chapter, focus shifts to the practices of merchant bankers, which facilitated the circulation of jewels and gems as well as larger items such as *lettucci* (daybeds). These objects moved between courts as pawns, commissions, purchases, and gifts. While many court rulers collected antique

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gems, possession was often temporary, allowing many objects to change hands repeatedly and to come into contact with a range of individuals. It was the practices of pawning and exchange that facilitated the circulation of objects, a process through which these artefacts accrued histories. Particular gems were sought after, not only for their material or artistic worth, but also for their histories and their previous illustrious owners, and many jewels were invested with names. Aside from their physical circulation, these objects were disseminated in visual form through replication across media, which raises art historical concerns around ownership, copies, and collections in the late fifteenth century.

Moving away from the wide circulation of transient collectibles, Chapter 3 considers a small devotional diptych belonging to the collections of Eleonora d'Aragona, Duchess of Ferrara (Plates III–IV). The diptych is studied in relation to humanist, social, and religious debates at the court of Ferrara, revealing how its particular form is closely tied to how one engages with and interprets the object. The diptych copied elements of a painting by Andrea Mantegna and referenced a number of other paintings with similar iconography and composition. This practice was not uncommon in the collecting culture of the Quattrocento, whereby many paintings and objects such as cameos, gems, and statues were replicated across media, and many collections often contained both the original and its copy, as explored in Chapter 2. This third chapter, however, examines the ways the multiple images on the diptych, and their reference to other objects and texts in Eleonora d'Aragona's collections, encouraged a particular form of viewing, asking the viewer to piece together the various textual and visual sources in an intertextual manner. This intertextual reading is linked to new modes of viewing exemplified in the tradition of *fabula* and myth, which became a crucial aspect of *studiolo* culture and collecting.

In the fourth and final chapter, the Neapolitan Order of the Ermine is examined through the mantle, gold collar, and representations of the emblem to demonstrate how these material aspects constituted the rites of the Order. The Order was founded by King Ferrante of Naples in 1465 as a means to propagate his legitimacy to rule, and the multiple symbolisms associated with the animal soon came to signal Aragonese hegemony and loyalty. The chapter elucidates how the emblem's fixed repeatable sign became central in its ability to reference a constellation of symbolic associations and claims within an image, and unite individuals across time and space. The representation of the ermine in various media gave rise to emblematic modes of reading, while also transforming a highly exclusive *impresa* belonging to only twenty-seven members into a symbol that could have meaning and signification in social practice, not only in Naples but also across Italy and even Europe.

The objects explored in this book thus include more traditional art historical media – colossal sculpture and painting – as well as material culture – gems,

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jewels, collars, and *lettucci*. Distinctions between these types of objects belong to modern categorisations; those who attended court in the Renaissance would likely have prized a small gem over a painting for instance, pointing to the risk of anachronisms when applying our modern categories and object hierarchies on to things of the past. The modern distinction between commodity and gift is also evaluated within the context of transactions, to elucidate how value creation was a process, and that the labels 'commodity' and 'gift' are less about what a thing is and more about how it is exchanged or its potential for exchange. Indeed, an emphasis on exchange is important for all the objects encountered in this book, as the conditions of exchange determine the value of the object as well as those individuals involved. Identities of objects, and those who exchange them, are never fixed but are often contested constructions. Thus the concept of obligation, which figures into gift exchange, is also examined here as providing a crucial component in economic exchange. The gift of the horse's head, for example, is often studied within a limited time frame of gift and counter-gift between two individuals, but as Chapter 1 argues, it is indeed part of a protracted relationship over time not only between individuals or even groups, but as part of what Annette Weiner has coined a 'reproductive system' involving a much larger network.[1] The obligation of the gift is part of a series of exchanges, where gifts and counter-gifts are both material and immaterial, and in some instances, the rewards are undetermined, stored up as favours that might be tapped into when necessary in navigating the stormy waters of fifteenth-century diplomacy. The same applies for what is often understood as more 'neutral' commercial transactions such as pawns or loans. A merchant banker such as Lorenzo de' Medici provided bills of exchange, pawns, loans, and 'commodities' to the princely elite, but he was also heavily involved in political negotiations and gift exchanges. Objects were used to solidify alliances, pay for wars, create ties of indebtedness and obligation, and operate as signs of virtue or magnificence, but they were also the sites of political tensions, instigators of financial ruin, and indicators of betrayal.

Courtly account books that trace the movement and value of these objects also signal how the archive and the texts it contains should be considered a courtly object too, one that partook in, and was instrumental to, the daily running of the court. It is in this light that this introduction takes an account book from the court of Ferrara as a point of departure to elucidate the central (and often controversial) roles that objects played in court life. The account book displaying the *memento mori* message on its cover (known as Amministrazione dei Principi [AP] 638) is both an object in itself and a list of objects (Figure 1). The book details many items in Duchess Eleonora d'Aragona's ownership, and is less an inventory than a mobile object, an ongoing record that traces the movement of other objects.[2] The book can be seen as a general account for the *guardaroba* for

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the years 1478–85, keeping tabs on items, from silverware to mirrors, and from tapestries to books. What is particularly interesting about this account book is that it often lists where the objects have come from, detailing the item as being received as a gift and from whom. It records when and if an item was pawned and specifies if an object has been borrowed or lent. In the case of items such as cloth and silver, the book notes if the cloth has been cut up and re-sewn, or if the silver has been melted down and remade into something else. It does not, therefore, fall into the category of a regular account book, which keeps track of expenditures, but rather takes note of the movement of objects, thereby contributing to our understanding of the social lives of things therein. This account book does not, by contrast, fit into the category we would normally associate with the inventory, as it does not list the items to record monetary worth, usually in the case of a death or will, but rather maintains a particular interest in the objects and their use, movement, and circulation.

Under most items there are entries in different pens, from different years, that announce the particular object's movements. AP 638 was thus largely dedicated to moveable goods: things that were leant out to Eleonora's staff; items placed in rooms when visitors came to stay; religious objects used according to the liturgical calendar in the chapel; cloth remade into something else; books read and leant; silver pawned; and tapestries moved from room to room. A few examples taken from AP 638 overseen and written by Gironimo Zigliolo will suffice to give an idea of the social nature and movements of such objects:

> Saucers two and ewers two, large, made of silver and worked *alla venetiana* with the arms of Signore Re [Ferrante], which were given by the Prefect of Rome to Madama [Eleonora], weight: one of the saucers 58 onze and one of the ewers 58 onze.
>
> Consigned to Antonio to give to Misser Andrea di Zenaro, servant of the Duke of Calabria [Alfonso d'Aragona] on the 7 of June 1484—which, instead, were given to Misser Piedro da lino [of Linen] in Modena.
>
> Note that the two saucers, which are in the *guardaroba*, as they appear in the said inventory [inventory written by Gironimo Zigliolo] at 15 and one of the ewers were pawned in Venice as it appears in the book of records of Zironimo at 9.
>
> The other ewer is in the guardaroba as it appears in the inventory of the said Zironimo, at 15.[3]
>
> Elephant teeth [i.e. tusks] small, length, around two thirds of a brazzo......... two
>
> Note that Madama Her Excellency sent to Bologna half of one of the said teeth to Misser Egano di Lambertinj
>
> Item, other half of the said tooth Her Excellency gave on 10 January 1488 to her Illustrious children Don Alfonso and Madama Isabella [d'Este]

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> Item another tooth, and posted and noted in the inventory of the said Gironimo at 127[4]
>
> Garment, one, long made of crimson silk, unlined
>
> Note that the above garment was made into coverings for carriage horses, the said coverings are being sent by Her Excellency Madama [Eleonora] to Florence to Lorenzo de Cosimo [de' Medici].[5]

There is a particular interest in the movement of these objects and their provenances, in addition to marking the social and political nature of the items as gifts.

Returning to the cover of the book (Figure 1), we are confronted with the very materiality of the object: the exterior cover is made from parchment, where leather straps, with metal buckles disintegrated and rusted with time, make their mark on the stretched calfskin. Splats of rust, pen ink, and mould stain the cover – unintended markings mix with the intentional and authoritative script, which states this is the 'Book of the Wardrobe of Her Excellency Madama.' In pencil, at the bottom of the cover, are the markings of a later authority – the archivist who gives order to this old book by categorising it as 'AMM.NE DEI PRINCIPI 638,' and above, making sure later scholars are aware that 'Madama' refers to Eleonora d'Aragona. In between the buckles we find the *memento mori* message, written in fifteenth-century ink 'pensi la morte tua,' and as an added emphasis, the script is marked by long dashes, as if to frame the cautionary message. The text thus offers us layers of histories and points to the biography of the book. It makes us aware of the journey it has taken, and the various individuals who have come into contact with the text: compilers of the goods in the fifteenth century to the archivist who again categorises these books, and finally the scholar, who takes this book out of its *busta* to examine its contents and make meaning of what lies therein.

The *memento mori* message transforms the cover into a sort of frame, while making the object self-reflexive. It is similar to vanitas paintings of still lives that were to become popular in much later centuries, which made the viewer aware of the transient nature of earthly life and the danger of acquiring too many goods, such as the painting he or she observed. The cover makes the reader self-conscious of putting too much emphasis on the world of goods, while its function was to do precisely that. While the author of the *memento mori* message was certainly not the owner of the goods, he was an employee of the court, and would have sought to gain a higher position at court. In the culture of the Italian courts, power and status were reflected in the things one possessed, wore, collected, and exchanged. Magnificence and splendour, as is well known, were virtues expected at court, always according to one's rank. As Sabadino degli Arienti informs

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us in his treatise from 1497 dedicated to Duke Ercole d'Este of Ferrara, Eleonora's consort:

> The lofty virtue of magnificence, which you [Ercole I d'Este] display with singular glory in everything [...] Magnificence therefore must be considered as consisting of sumptuous, great, and sublime things. As [does] her name, [so] she proclaims largesse and vastness in spending gold and silver on things eminent, high and divine as befits magnificence, always according to the condition and status of the man.[6]

Objects could certainly embody the virtues of a prince, but they were also indicators of political and economic instabilities, and the very volatile nature of princely rule. The fifteenth century in Ferrara saw a restructuring of the social organisation of the aristocracy, implemented by the Este in attempts to secure political loyalty by constructing a circle of courtiers who were dependent on the court for privileges and entitlements, as explored further in Chapter 3.[7] This was particularly evident under the rule of Borso d'Este, who created a new nobility, and these practices continued under Duke Ercole d'Este and Duchess Eleonora d'Aragona; like Borso, Ercole's legitimacy to rule was in question, and Ercole facilitated social fluidity and political loyalty by allowing civic and court offices to be bought every year.[8] New wealth and the rise of a new nobility in Ferrara and in other centres in Italy undoubtedly raised anxieties and tensions around the relation between the acquisition of goods and noble status.

A *guardarobiere* such as Gironimo Zigliolo would have spent much of his time recording purchases of the ruling family and then itemising and cataloguing those possessions into books, and recording them if they were pawned. The *memento mori* message on the Ferrarese account book might simply be Gironimo testing out a new quill pen but it signals larger anxieties and can be read a number of ways: a criticism of the luxuriousness of the ruling family; a reminder to the compiler to not be envious of the goods he handled; a cautionary statement for anyone who might be tempted to steal the possessions of the ruling family (it might be noted here that these books also recorded in rare instances the theft of objects); or possibly even an apocalyptic warning as the year 1500 approached.

Our confrontation with this message immediately brings to the fore the numerous issues relevant to those who maintained, tracked, exchanged, and collected these goods. As it is very similar to the script inside the book, we might think of these words as the authorial voice of the compiler – a signature of sorts, within the humanist culture that placed emphasis on writing and script as a means of identity. This signature is comparable to the authority assumed by the slashes of pen inside the book, crossing out entries already compiled, or the manicules telling us to 'nota bene' a particular entry. Following many of the entries we find an added comment stating, 'posted to the inventory of Gironimo' with an accompanying

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2. Anon Ferrarese, *Virgin and Child*, fifteenth century, tempera, oil, and gold on panel, National Gallery, Edinburgh, NG 1535.
Photo: The National Galleries of Scotland.

page number, thus these slashes indicate goods re-entered into another inventory, another book of things. Gironimo has provided us with the equivalent of a self-aware image, to use Victor Stoichita's words, but in textual form.[9]

This self-reflexive nature can be found in paintings of the time, such as a *Virgin and Child* (Figure 2) by an anonymous Ferrarese artist, whereby the status of the painting as painting is made explicit by the torn parchment pieces with ripped tacking strips and a fly. We are made aware of the image as image, similar to the ways we are made aware of the account book as a thing and a book of things. The relationship between painting and writing at the court of Ferrara was tied to the social mobility of artists and humanists in the service of the Este. The differentiation between liberal and manual practices, especially in relation to writing, was a particularly charged debate, and was played out

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in the discussion around the position of the scribe, as explored in Chapter 3. Texts written by Ferrarese humanists such as Angelo Decembrio's *De politia litteraria* criticised the conflation of the manual scribe (who merely copied texts and made them beautiful through adornment), with the figure of the author (who had the intellectual capacity to compose and interpret texts).[10] References to writing were also taken up by court artists such as Ercole de' Roberti and Cosmè Tura, who engaged with debates around the paragone, further examined in Chapter 3. The act of writing and the authorial script was thus a fraught subject in Ferrara in both literary and artistic spheres, and it is probable that our compiler was aware of its connections to social status.

Gironimo Zigliolo, the compiler of many of Eleonora's account books, was not merely a servant who tracked goods or recorded accounts, but rather, he was an important figure at the court of Ferrara. A *guardarobiere* such as Gironimo received, consigned, and recorded goods and had access to mercantile networks, even travelling to acquire items. He not only did this for the court of Ferrara, for which he worked, but also for other ruling houses in Italy, especially those that had marital and political ties with Ferrara – Mantua and Milan. In 1489, Eleonora d'Aragona had Gironimo scout out precious objects for her when he travelled to France. He returned to Ferrara with a number of treasures from Lyon, including a variety of small altarpieces, amber *paternostri*, and sculptures made out of precious materials such as ivory and gold.[11] In April 1491, Isabella d'Este wrote from Mantua to Gironimo requesting him to buy 'anything that is new and elegant' in France for her, such as 'engraved amethysts, rosaries of black, amber and gold.'[12] Isabella obviously felt that she could trust Gironimo's taste and that he would interpret 'elegant' appropriately. Also in 1491, Isabella d'Aragona, Duchess of Milan, requested from Gironimo some textiles and Beatrice d'Este (daughter of Eleonora d'Aragona and Ercole d'Este, and wife of Ludovico il Moro) wrote requesting various items.[13]

There is little secondary literature specifically on Gironimo, although there are numerous references to him and his family in Este court documents. Gironimo Zigliolo had brothers who also worked at court (Francesco, Guglielmo, and Giovanni), and the Ziglioli were a well-established Ferrarese family. The original name of the family was Pellicciari, but it was changed to Zigliolo (or Gigliolo) by a courtier and favourite of Alberto d'Este.[14] Gigliolo dei Pelizzari bore two sons, Jacopo (Giacomo) and Guglielmo. Giacomo Zigliolo became a courtier and ambassador to Marquis Niccolò III d'Este, and maintained a close friendship with Guarino, sending his sons to be raised by the famous humanist. One of these sons, Ziliolo Zigliolo, also became well established with Niccolò III, representing Ferrara as ambassador to the Pope in Rome. Through his diplomatic and political manoeuvring, Zigliolo became Count of Serravalle and was nominated podestà of Modena. This political and social success brought the family wealth, as the Zigliolo fortune was estimated at 300,000 scudi

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