

## **Women in the Renaissance**

The women of the Renaissance, like women of the Middle Ages, were denied all political rights and considered legally subordinate to their husbands. Women of all classes were expected to perform, first and foremost, the duties of a housewife. Peasant women worked in the field alongside their husbands and ran the home. The wives of middle class shop owners and merchants often helped run their husbands' businesses, as well. The main responsibility of women belonging to the upper class, although attended by servants, was to maintain the household, e.g. sewing, cooking, and entertaining. Women who did not marry were not permitted to live independently. Instead, they lived in the households of their male relatives or, more often, joined a convent and became nuns.

A few wealthy women of the time were broke the mold of subjugation to achieve fame, if not independence. Lucrezia Borgia (1480-1519 CE), the daughter of Pope Alexander VI (1431-1503 CE), was one such woman. As pope, Alexander VI attempted to use Lucrezia as a pawn in his attempt to gain greater political power, e.g. he arranged her marriage to Giovanni Sforza (1466-1510 CE) of Milan when she was thirteen (in 1493). Four years later, when he no longer needed Milan's political support, he annulled Lucrezia's marriage to Sforza. In 1502, at the age of 22, Lucrezia was again divorced and remarried, this time to the duke of Ferrara, Alfonso d'Este (1476-1534 CE). She remained in Ferrara until her death in 1519, where she became a devoted wife and mother, and an influence in Ferrara politics and social life, and a noted patron of the arts.

Lucrezia's sister-in-law, Isabella d'Este (1474-1539 CE), was perhaps the strongest, most intelligent woman of the Renaissance period. She mastered Greek and Latin and memorized the works of the ancient scholars like Plato and Aristotle. She frequently gave public performances, in which she demonstrated her skill at singing, dancing, and playing musical instruments. Isabella exerted a great amount of influence over the Mantua court, and it was due in great part to her presence that Mantua became known as a major center of wit, elegance, and artistic genius. After her husband, the duke, was captured in battle, she ruled Mantua herself. She also influenced the economic development of the region by encouraging the development of the textile and clothing industry that became the cornerstone of Mantua's economy. As a patron of the arts, Isabella collected many paintings, sculptures, books, and musical instruments, and encouraged the people of Mantua to support the arts.