The Politics of Acquisition: Venetian Objects in Italian Courtly Collections, ca. 1475-1525

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The Politics of Acquisition: Venetian Objects in Italian Courtly Collections, c. 1475–1525

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In May 1493 Eleonora d’Aragona, Duchess of Ferrara (1473–93) travelled to Venice accompanied by her daughter Beatrice d’Este, her son Alfonso d’Este, and his wife Anna Sforza. Their visit coincided with the well-known Ascension feast, or La Senza, when the Republic celebrated the Doge’s marriage to the sea in a public ceremony. Both Eleonora d’Aragona and Beatrice d’Este wrote home to their respective husbands – Ercole I d’Este, the duke of Ferrara, and Ludovico Sforza, who would become the duke of Milan in the next year – providing details of their trip over a number of days. The party’s reception included a journey on the famous ceremonial galley Bucintoro accompanied by the Doge, where they delighted in the spectacle.¹

One day, they were invited to hear Mass at San Marco and visit the treasury. En route, the boat dropped them off at the Rialto and as Beatrice tells us:

a pede ne andassimo per queste strade, che sono marzarie, dove trovassimo le boteche de spiciaria, de setta tute ben in ordine et per qualità et per quantità grandissima de diverse cose et così de le altre arte che facevano uno gran bel vedere, per modo che ne facevano sovenzo demorare per vedere hora una cosa hora una latra, e non ce rincresceti niente fin a Santo Marco.

On foot, we went up those streets, which are called the Merceria, where we saw the shops of spices and silks, all in good order and in great quality and quantity of the most diverse things. And of other crafts there was also an excellent display, so much so that we often lingered to look now at one thing, now at another and nothing displeased us all the way to San Marco.²

After Mass, they were then shown the treasury; this too delighted Beatrice as she remarks ‘vedessimo a cosa per cosa […]che ne fu de gran piacere et per esserli infinite et belle gioje cum alcuni dignissimi vasi’ (we saw everything piece by piece […] which was a great pleasure, for there was an infinite quantity of the most beautiful jewels and some magnificent vases). The Este party was further impressed when they were then led into Piazza San Marco, where the stalls of the Ascension tide fair were showing off

² For Beatrice’s letters, see the English translation Welch, p. 183 (see footnote 1). Italian edition in Pompeo Molmenti, La Storia di Venezia nella vita privata: dalle origini alla caduta della repubblica (Turin: Roux e Favale, 1905), p. 628. For Eleonora’s letters, see Archivio di Stato di Modena (ASMO), Caso e Stato (C&S) 131–32.
their wares. There they found such a magnificent show of beautiful glass, that they were astonished and remained there for a long time. Beatrice is making reference to the tradition whereby shopkeepers were required to close up their regular shops and instead sell from stalls for the two-week period of the Sensa.

A print from 1697 (Figure 1), but modelled on an earlier work by Titian, conveys a sense of the fanfare the Este experienced on their trip. The boats and the Doge’s Bucintoro are clearly visible, and a detail shows Venetian glass displayed along with other merchandise (Figure 2). Much of the language used by Venetians regarding the Sensa suggests that it was staged to reflect the pride and honour of the city. Like the ‘numerous Venetian gentlewomen adorned with jewels’ that Beatrice described partaking in one of the feasts, the stalls were to honour and ornament the city. Showing the stalls to the Este was certainly strategic. These commodities offered by the Republic — from mirrors to shoes, swords to paternoster beads, perfume to glasswork — were eagerly sought by court rulers across Italy and abroad. As women, Beatrice and Eleonora would not have normally had the same access to the marketplace as their male counterparts; this was thus a chance to showcase the latest merchandise and to secure future purchases by these ruling women. Indeed, on the same visit the party was taken to Murano where they were shown the famous glass factories there.

It is important to underline the value of having physical access to objects in the fifteenth century, a time when the rarity of mechanical reproduction of images did not allow for the visual circulation of commodities. By being shown the treasures of San Marco, Eleonora, Alfonso, Beatrice, and Anna were partaking in a knowledge exchange that provided them with a reference point to gauge other objects against. It was through the close engagement with objects, often through stately visits to others’ collections, that elites and their ambassadors and agents came to acquire knowledge about the qualities and values of things. This physical relationship to, and engagement with, material things also reveals the forms of knowledge that were at stake in commissioning, acquiring, and collecting objects at this time. As Ulinka Rublack has argued, ‘how objects were made and what they were made from’ had a ‘bearing on how they were perceived and gained significance’. Patrons did not usually buy ready-made goods but were often involved in the commissioning of objects that served customized tastes. Knowledge about quality, materials, and new styles was central to

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3 Molmenti, p. 628 (see footnote 2).
4 Welch, p. 177 (see footnote 1).
collecting practices; thus consumption is not studied here as something passive but an active and engaged relationship between people and things. Matter was often manipulated, interrogated, and even pushed to its limits by consumers and producers.6

This study is particularly attentive to the ways in which Venice features as a place of manufacture of and a point of purchase for quality goods. It begins with Venetian objects in Eleonora d’Aragona’s collections, followed by a consideration of the interests of her children, Isabella and Alfonso d’Este’s in Venetian commodities: Isabella became marchesa of Mantua in 1490 with her marriage to Francesco II Gonzaga, and Alfonso succeeded his father as duke of Ferrara in 1505. The objects considered include recognizable Venetian manufactures such as glass as well as items with more foreign origins such as Chinese porcelain. The terms by which objects were described, as well as the materials from which they were made, underline how the circulation of objects gave rise to a kaleidoscope of references to Venice. While the paintings of the studioli of Alfonso and Isabella d’Este have most often been the focus of their collecting habits in the literature, I argue that paying attention to other categories of objects and materials such as glass and ceramics can also provide new insight into the spaces of collections and can inspire new approaches to the history of collecting in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

As art historians more recently have begun drawing upon exchange theory, it has become increasingly evident that objects were central to diplomatic negotiations and relations in the Renaissance.7 The exchange of objects — as gifts or commodities — was almost always related to larger political and mercantile ambitions, as is evident in the cross-cultural exchange of material goods between Italy and foreign empires such as the Mamluks and the Ottomans. It is also apparent that objects could serve multiple purposes, interpenetrating the sphere of commodity exchange and encompassing shifting and multivalent realms of circulation, use, and value, as argued eloquently by anthropologists from Marcel Mauss to Arjun Appadurai and Annette B. Weiner.8 Even if many luxury objects in the late fifteenth century circulated as commodities at one

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6 Rublack’s discussion is based on a number of studies in the field of materiality including Caroline Walker Bynum, see Rublack, pp. 44–45 (see footnote 5).
point or another in their lifetime, we should, however, not be so quick to assume that these objects were merely neutral commodities. Objects could carry political connotations with them, with their meaning shifting according to context. Thus, they functioned as agents in court culture, as well as in larger politics and economics on the Italian peninsula, forging bonds, but just as equally creating rifts and operating as sites of political tensions. In the collecting culture of the Renaissance, objects such as hardstones, gems, and porcelain could be seen as repositories of knowledge as well as things that could be bought and sold, oscillating between a commodity and a symbolic object. This is certainly reflected in Eleonora d’Aragona’s account books from the 1480s, during the war with Venice, where numerous silver items are recorded as being pawned in Venice, as a means to raise funds for the increasingly expensive war.

In a time before the wide use of print, visual and material knowledge of collectibles was crucial, but it was not always obtained through direct contact with the object. Rather it was through agents and networks and the circulation of objects that collectors became informed. As this paper will demonstrate, access to, and knowledge of, Venetian commodities for collectors such as Eleonora d’Aragona and Alfonso and Isabella d’Este occurred through various means: from direct contact with objects on visits to Venice, through intermediaries such as agents and artists, and through depictions and copies in other media.

**Eleonora d’Aragona’s Collections**

Inventories and account books reveal that Eleonora had a large and substantial collection of art objects in Ferrara, which were predominantly religious in subject matter, ranging from sculptures of saints and altar crosses to numerous altarpieces made out of a variety of materials from gold to ivory, as well as painted works. Her accounts list *agnus dei* and rosary beads, many wrought in expensive materials, and a noteworthy collection of jewels, cameos, and rings. Among her paintings were works by Mantegna, Bellini, Cosmè Tura, Ercole de’ Roberti, and Gian Francesco Maineri. Her inventories also mention various mirrors, vases, flasks, hardstones, and ceramics, from maiolica to Chinese porcelain. The prevalence of works with similar subject

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11 ASMO Amministrazione dei Principi (AP) 638, 7r.

12 ASMO AP 631–640; Guardaroba (G)114.
matter, but executed in different media by different artists, demonstrates that the vast array of objects functioned together and often ventured into intertextual dialogues with each other. The archival sources that list these objects, however, are often silent on their particular location, so even though we know she had two studioli, we do not know their contents. Nevertheless, from her inventories and account books it is clear that objects in her extensive collection were often mobile, moving from room to room quite frequently.

Significant for this study is her vast collection of glassware, amounting to over 130 pieces. Among the items recorded are two vases made out of blue glass with gold, two glass jugs with gold, seven crystal ewers with handles decorated with gold, a bucket in blue glass used for holy water as well as a bucket in white glass, four small pitchers of ‘vedro di piu colori di vedro’ (probably millefiori glass), five beakers with their covers all gilded, and a crystal cup with gold sporting Eleonora’s arms. Her account books also record purchases, such as in February 1491, when she bought three receptacles for oil and a glass candlestick from Zoane Da Prero da Venezia. Her inventory also registers numerous vases in chalcedony glass (vedro d[il] calzedonio or calcedonio) including four tazze (two small and two big), and cups with feet. Chalcedony glass refers to the imitation of veined hardstones in glass and was known as a specialty of Venice (Figure 3). While this material may have appealed to patrons as a form of mimesis of more expensive objects such as antique hardstones, the presence of both chalcedony glassware and chalcedony hardstones in the same collections — such as Eleonora’s — attests that it certainly came to be prized as a work of art in its own right. Artists imitated not only materials but also motifs, as she owned authentic Chinese porcelain, in addition to ceramics that looked to Chinese porcelain for inspiration, produced in Spain, Syria, and Italy.

Chalcedony glass must have appealed to those who enjoyed the material qualities of porcelain, as the Florentine merchant-banker Filippo Strozzi, in 1475, had an agent in Venice buy both. Many categorized porcelain among precious hardstones, listing it with other collectibles of precious materials desired for acquisition, such as nautilus shells and gems.

13 This is explored in detail in Clark, Collecting Art, chapter 3 (see footnote 9).
porcelain was also eagerly sought. Some Venetian glass called *lattimo* mimicked the whiteness of porcelain, and was prized by collectors, Isabella d’Este among them. This interest in imitation ware marked an increasing fascination with foreign materials and products new sea routes and new trading links opened up more and more possibilities.

Letters between Eleonora and her husband Ercole d’Este reveal their interests in Venetian glass. In 1480 they discussed the possibility of sending ‘vedri chrijstallini’ from Venice to Eleonora’s sister, Beatrice d’Aragona, Queen of Hungary. In a letter to Ercole from 20 September 1493, Eleonora records that a Venetian glassmaker, Michele da Zara, came to Ferrara to sell wares, including a ‘beautiful little box and a saddle *ala morescha*’. 17 Eleonora’s account books confirm payments to the same ‘Michele Cristalaro’ from the same time for a variety of items costing a considerable amount of money. 18 A few days after purchasing these items, she was informed by a ‘Paulo da Monte cristallaro’ that Michele had been working with him and had stolen these glassworks and he did not have the right to sell them. 19 This is an interesting case of fraudulent behaviour and illuminates how access to Venice’s supply of specialty glassware was available by both licit and illicit means. Duke Ercole I d’Este’s own collection of Venetian objects included one glass vase, described as small with silver, decorated with the arms of Bologna, with feet and a mouth as well as a lid and a handle in the shape of two serpents. He also had a large glass vase bearing the heraldic Este eagle and a small silver cup that was gilded inside with a low-relief pattern ‘*ala venetiana*’. 20

Jewels from Venice appear frequently in Eleonora’s accounts books. For example, in May 1486 she paid Zoanno Francesco da Venezia for a jewel and a crystal cross and in July of that year she bought from him a diamond and a ruby as well as a small gold altarpiece ‘*ala francese*’. 21 In March 1487 she purchased jewellery from a jeweller named Lorenzo di Zosi di Nicolai in Venice, a transaction that also included setting some jewels — a ruby, a diamond, an emerald, a sapphire, among other stones. 22 Venice’s reputation as a place to obtain precious gems and jewels is also evidenced by an excerpt from Angelo Decembrio’s *De politia litteraria*, dating from the 1450s, where learned courtiers and humanists discuss with Leonello d’Este, the

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17 ASMO C&S 68.
18 ASMO AP 634 47°–48°, 70°.
19 ASMO C&S 131–32.
20 ASMO G117, 14°–15°.
21 ASMO AP 633 40°; 45°.
22 ASMO AP 633 73°.
Marquis of Ferrara, the practices of collecting. Leonello is noted as having ‘many different kinds of engraved stones and rings […] from Venice […] as well as splendid gems and great pearls’, which become the topic of conversation in one excerpt.23

In a letter from the 1480s, Galeazzo Strozzi, the Ferrarese ambassador, noted that he could procure a variety of things in Venice, including a ‘damaschine’ silver incense burner and the head of a Saracen, in addition to items that the Venetian dealer, Domenico di Piero, had obtained from Pope Paul II: ‘porphyry, chalcedony, porcelain, and alabaster worked into vases and dishes’.24 Textual evidence thus indicates that Venice was a place to purchase objects of Venetian manufacture, raw materials that were fashioned into luxury items, and goods from around the world.

Isabella d’Este’s Glass Specifications in Mantua

Eleonora’s collection of Venetian glass very likely had a bearing on her children’s taste for that material, particularly for Alfonso and Isabella d’Este, both renowned for their studioli in Ferrara and Mantua, respectively. Isabella’s acquaintance with Lorenzo da Pavia, a musical instrument maker based in Venice, reveals how such an intermediary could serve as a source for Venetian commodities.25 A great collector of rosary beads, like her mother, Isabella sought rosaries made out of fine Murano glass. In 1491 she was sent a string of glass paternoster beads, and five years later she had an additional shipment of 232 mounted on five strings.26 Numerous letters from Isabella, specifying exactly the kind of glassware she desired, indicate how customers outside of Venice ordered particular types of glassware to suit their needs. For instance, in 1496 she advised her correspondent in Venice that she was not pleased with the glasses that were sent because their length was not to her taste. In November of 1500 she sent a drinking glass to Venice, which was to serve as a model for ten others, while in 1503 Lorenzo da Pavia returned another model that she provided, along with eight drinking glasses with gold handles. In 1505 Isabella was in protracted negotiations with the glassmaker Maestro Anzelotti Barovier of Murano over an order

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26 Brown, pp. 229–30 (see footnote 25).
for crystal vases and sent two sets of designs to Venice for him to copy. In 1507 Lorenzo da Pavia was sent a silver soup dish, which Isabella wanted copied in five different types of glass. Lorenzo, however, was only able to send her ones made of green and crystal, since those in other colours had not yet been put in the furnace.\(^{27}\)

Isabella d’Este’s correspondence demonstrates that she was eager to procure Venetian glass, but felt that the style often needed updating or customizing to suit her taste. In February of 1496 she ordered two to three crystal beakers, however she specified they be made without gold trim — the absence of gold was a new style. In 1510 Isabella ordered and received six large water glasses with handles and covers, however she was not pleased with them, noting that the glass was not white enough, probably referring to its transparency.\(^{28}\) At the same time, she made sure her agents were on the lookout for new vases that ‘non ho veduto la simile’ (I have not seen before).\(^{29}\) In 1534 she was eager for the Mantuan ambassador to select various drinking glasses among the new designs that she assumed would be on show during La Sensa, although she did not give him free reign. She specifically wanted those decorated with the ‘lattimo’ design and, again, no gold (lattimo referencing the opaque white vessels that were decorated with designs often drawn from well known works by contemporary artists).\(^{30}\)

A quotation from one of her letters to her agent in Venice underscores how a discerning patron paid attention to form as much as decoration:

> abbiamo recevuto li vinti bichieri che ne scrivite mandare, quali de la longheza ne piaceno, ma non lo garbo, perchè sono tanto larghi in fondo quanto in la bocha; però vogliamo che ne faciati fare altri vinti de quella mesura, ma che si vadino restringendo in fondo, non li facendo già tenere più larghi de bocha de questi et siano simelmente senza ordello, a dece de li quali fareti fare lo circhietto d’oro che copri la bocha cioè che non remanghi da l’oro in suso niente de cristallo et non sia però più lrgho el circhietto de questi. Li altri dece fareti fare schietti senza oro, advertendo che il cristallino sia bianco et che gli sia datto bon garbo

We have received the twenty glasses which you wrote of having sent in your letter, which are pleasing as to their height, but not in their profile, since the foot is as broad as the cup. Therefore we desire you to have made another twenty of this size, but that they should be made smaller at the foot, and that the cup should not be larger than it is on the ones you sent […] and have the little gold border [around the cup] made so that it covers the lip, and so that there remains no plain glass above the gold border, seeing

\(^{27}\) Brown, pp. 215–16 (see footnote 25).

\(^{28}\) Brown, pp. 215–16 (see footnote 25).

\(^{29}\) Brown, p. 216 (see footnote 25).

to it however that the gold band is no broader than it is on these ones. Have the others made plain, without gold, ensuring that the *cristallo* glass be white [i.e. transparent] and beautiful.\(^{31}\)

Isabella also travelled to Venice herself, where she was introduced to things that she had not seen before and that piqued her interest. For instance, in spring 1530 she travelled to Murano and was impressed by a credenza that was being made for the Turkish Sultan. In 1502 she saw a fantastic marble tabletop in Murano and upon returning to Mantua she asked Lorenzo da Pavia to obtain it for her. She was informed that the table in question was designed for the Neapolitan ambassador, but was told that another one could be made. Isabella also sought to have three rooms paved in stone by a Venetian, as she was struck by the work she saw there and wrote to Lorenzo to see if he could send her a Venetian master.\(^{32}\)

The high demand for Murano glass and the rules around production and retail often meant that availability was limited, a scarcity that added value to these items. When she received fifty-three paternoster beads, she was told that they had come from different sources on Murano, since the factories had a poor stock and were not planning on restocking their supplies. In September 1491 Isabella’s agent was unable to fulfil her request for the acquisition of various glasses and cups, as their stock was not to be replenished until November — the feast of Ognissanti — when the vacation period ended. Lorenzo da Pavia faced the same problem in 1505 because of the feast. In February of 1534, one agent was obliged to apologize for the inferior quality of four small vessels (*ampolline*) and two beakers that had been purchased because the shops of Murano had been ‘pillaged’ by an unspecified cardinal and by Isabella’s brother, Alfonso d’Este.\(^{33}\)

Isabella’s letters demonstrate a specific interest in Venetian products as well as novelties, yet they also reveal that she required the tailoring of what was available to meet her needs and tastes. Some of these glasses discussed here likely grazed her dining tables and credenza, although her inventory demonstrates that her famous *Grotta* also housed a number of crystal wares.\(^{34}\) These Venetian glass goods were thus part of a larger collection, which included famous antiquities and contemporary works

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\(^{32}\) Brown, pp. 209–11 (see footnote 25).

\(^{33}\) The Cardinal is not specified only described as ‘Reverendissimo Monsignore Cardinale nostro’. Brown, p. 213 (see footnote 25).

\(^{34}\) Alessandro Luzio, *Isabella d’Este e il sacco di Roma* (Milan: Cogliati, 1908).
of art. Isabella’s close scrutiny and involvement in the customization of objects reflects a larger concern of patrons and collectors with knowing not only where goods came from but also how they were made and how they might be altered. This engagement in the ‘transformation of matter’, to use Rublack’s terminology, is also evident in Isabella’s brother’s collecting interests, where manufacture and metamorphosis played a role in the choice of objects for his camerini.

Alfonso d’Este’s camerini in Ferrara

The problem of procuring glasswork was not the only instance in which Isabella competed with her brother Alfonso d’Este for a Venetian speciality. Well-known is the rivalry between Isabella and Alfonso to procure the best artists to paint fabulae for their respective collecting spaces. Throughout the 1490s and into the early years of the sixteenth century, Isabella was involved in long and drawn-out negotiations with Giovanni Bellini for a painting destined for her studiolo. Bellini never provided a studiolo painting for Isabella, as it was Alfonso who secured Bellini and, among others, his Venetian compatriot Titian to execute mythological paintings for his camerino. Throughout this cycle, great attention is paid to representing the prized glasswares Alfonso so greatly admired – the specialty of both artists’ home city.

In Bellini’s Feast of the Gods (Figure 4) the scene is scattered with Venetian commodities. A clear glass jug, which the young Bacchus replenishes, appears at the centre left of the painting. On the far right corner, a unique vessel is depicted — what appears to be chalcedony or coloured glass finished with clear glass (Figure 5), executed in a similar way to a later bowl now housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figure 6). Glassware is also on display in one of Titian’s paintings for the room, The Bacchanal, where at the centre a clear glass jug, advertises the glassmaker’s skill as well as the painter’s dexterity in depicting its translucency. Scattered too on the ground are glass beakers, recognizably Venetian in design and manufacture. The presence of the Chinese porcelain vases in the Feast of the Gods also points to collectors’ fascination with rare materials (Figures 4 and 7). Part of the appeal of collections was the interest in the paragone — whether it was between painting and

36 Campbell, pp. 287–90 (see footnote 35); Brown, pp. 149–55 (see footnote 25).
37 Although the painting might simply be depicting a cup full of wine, there is evidence of similar types of glasses in other museums, such as a chalcedony glass vessel at the British Museum (1878,1230.266) http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?assetId=235213001&objectId=27348&partId=1.
sculpture, images and texts, or the comparison of materials. In the case of porcelain, hardstones, and glass, a clear appeal was the way they looked, the way they felt, the effects of light, and the craftsman’s manipulation of the material.

This interest in materials and their manufacture was at the forefront of the suite of rooms known as Alfonso’s camerini. The correspondence between Titian and Alfonso is revealing, as it records the artist’s involvement in procuring and designing Venetian products. In 1520 Titian was involved in making designs for maiolica and was also charged with procuring glass vases in Murano and jars for the spezieria, or pharmacy, of the duke. It was not rare to have artists as the designers for inventive tableware — Cosmè Tura (c. 1433–95) at Ferrara and Giulio Romano (c. 1499–1546) at the nearby court of Mantua are well known. But Alfonso’s turn to Titian might have had particular significance for the camerini. In 1517 Stazio Gadio wrote to Isabella d’Este describing Alfonso’s beautiful camerino made out of marble ‘adorned with vases and marble and antique and modern statues’. The function of the rooms and their contents is still a matter of debate, but what is clear from an inventory of 1559 is that statuettes, vases in porcelain and maiolica, and glass vessels were placed on cornices and in cabinets in the various rooms. The celebrated mythological paintings were not to be an isolated affair, but were to work together with Alfonso’s other precious objects spread across the camerini. Indeed, this is indicated by the placement of Titian’s Christ with the Coin in the camerino adorato, where it served as the cover to the coins and medals cabinet.

Scholars who have been interested in the iconography and symbolic meaning of the paintings have stressed the role that Pliny or Albertus Magnus played in the overall programme, although with varied and often conflicting interpretations. Studies have identified the theme of seasonal changes, metamorphoses, and the conversion of

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38 For the paragone tradition in Ferrara, see Clark, Collecting Art, chapter 3 (see footnote 9).
materials, such as water into wine. This emphasis on materials and their transformative qualities must have been a theme running not only throughout the paintings, but also — and perhaps primarily — in the objects of display. It certainly informed the larger interests in ceramics and their manufacture by Duke Alfonso. Paolo Giovio, in his biography of Alfonso, noted that not only did he admire ceramics but he was also keen on making them himself. The Este had a tradition of ceramic factories. In 1494 Isabella d’Este had sent a broken maiolica plate to Ferrara to be repaired there, and Cipriano Piccolpasso, in his famous treatise Li tre libri dell’arte del vasajo (1558–75) on the potter’s art, attributed to Alfonso the invention of a special type of white ceramic known as ‘bianco sopra bianco’. Alfonso also sought to have porcelain made in Ferrara, inviting a Venetian craftsman to experiment. He also eagerly looked out for this sort of imitation ware from Venice, such as in September 1504 when he purchased seven basins of ‘porcellana contrafacta’ (counterfeit porcelain) in Venice. Alfonso’s collections underline how patrons were closely involved in the manufacture of goods, their materials, and the creative process, and how these processes could have a bearing on display and interpretation.

Conclusions: The Politics of Acquisition

Tense relations between Ferrara and Venice, particularly in connection to control over trade and land, resulted in war from 1482–84 under Ercole I d’Este and again during the conflict of the League of Cambrai under Alfonso I (1508–16). Any trip to the Serenissima was thus imbricated in politics. In February 1476, for example, Bianca d’Este’s visit to Venice with Beatrice d’Este was used as an opportunity to articulate

45 Paolo Giovio, La vita di Alfonso da Este, Duca di Ferrara (Florence, 1553), pp. 18–19.
47 Campori, p. 24 (see footnote 46).
48 Campori, p. 24 (see footnote 46).
her opinion on Venice’s relationship with the Ottomans.\textsuperscript{50} When the war between Ferrara and Venice ended in 1484, Duke Ercole I d'Este made a trip to Venice shortly after, visiting the glass factories in Murano and residing in the Este palace that had been seized by the Venetians during the war. Equally, although the 1493 trip was couched as a private trip, Beatrice d’Este was actually there to negotiate politically on behalf of her husband Ludovico Sforza. Relations were uneasy throughout Eleonora and Ercole’s reign (1471–1505) and into Alfonso’s (1505–34), and the proud display of all the delights of Venice to the Este on their various visits should certainly be seen as a political demonstration of Venice’s prowess and power.

But aside from the more obvious diplomatic entanglements, acquiring and displaying objects were linked to the politics of knowledge and to one’s station in courtly society. The numerous intermediaries in the purchasing and commissioning of these goods — from agents to artists — also demonstrate the very complicated process of acquiring works for a collection and the competition between collectors. Eleonora’s visit to Venice with Alfonso and Beatrice d’Este allowed these collectors to acquaint themselves with the wide range of products available from that city but also with those that were not for sale. They viewed the prized treasures of San Marco, allowing themselves to obtain knowledge to aid them in their discernment of precious collectibles. They were of course shown commodities, as Beatrice remarked to her husband on the magnificent show of beautiful glass and the great quality and quantity of a diversity of goods. Beatrice, Alfonso, and Eleonora too, however, would have been on show, as their ability to hold objects, discuss them, and engage with them, would have been measured by those who were in attendance.

Translated from the performance of a courtly visit to Venice’s markets to the confines of the court in Ferrara or Mantua, the same sort of requirements were asked of viewers to studioli as well as of dinner guests.\textsuperscript{51} When viewed in collecting spaces, objects still played a paramount role in social performances and interaction, if on a more intimate scale. As testified by Isabella d’Este’s concern about seeking glasses with ‘no gold’, the decoration, execution, shape, and quality were key signifiers of taste. But so was knowledge of the technology. Set within a complex cycle of


\textsuperscript{51} While treatises and the development of new forms of glassware are specific to the sixteenth century, earlier texts and paintings suggest this was also the case for the fifteenth century. See, for the sixteenth century, Pascale Rihouet, ’Veronese's Goblets: Glass Design and the Civilizing Process’, Journal of Design History, 26, 2 (2013), 133–51.
mythological paintings in the camerino of Alfonso, the attention to materials such as glass and the technological virtuosity of their execution went hand-in-hand with the viewer’s ability to decipher the subject matter and to appreciate the representational qualities of the paintings that adorned the walls. The skill of comparison between the real object and its representation would have allowed the viewer to reflect, on a more profound level, on the dexterity of the painter and on that of the maker of the original object.

Such glassworks and paintings did not get there by chance, however. The acquisition of goods from Venice required access to networks and acquaintance with agents who would work on one’s behalf to obtain quality goods at reasonable prices. It was the circulation and exchange of objects that allowed for new ways for individuals to engage and connect with each other: 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.

Figures

Figure 1. Jost Amman, Procession of the Doge to the Bucintoro on Ascension Day, with a View of Venice, copy after Titian, woodcut, third state, 1560/1697, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Figure 2. Detail of Figure 1 of glasswares for sale

Figure 3. Venetian, Footed bowl, chalcedony glass, Venice, Italy, c. 1500, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Figure 4. Giovanni Bellini with Titian, Feast of the Gods, oil on canvas, Venice/Ferrara, 1514/29, Washington, DC, The National Gallery

Figure 5. Detail of Figure 4 of glassware

Figure 6. Glass bowl, Venice, Italy, 17th century, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Figure 7. Detail of Figure 4 of Chinese porcelain

Credits
Figure 1–2. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1949

Figure 3. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975.1.1196.

Figure 4–5, 7. © The National Gallery, Washington, DC, Widener Collection 1942.9.1

Figure 5. Detail of Figure 4 of glassware.

Figure 6. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Edward C. Moore Collection, Bequest of Edward C. Moore, 1891, 91.1.1440.