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Camilla Guerrieri's *Portrait of Vittoria della Rovere*

Liana De Girolami Cheney¹

ABSTRACT

This essay describes the symbolism in the recently discovered painting by Camilla Guerrieri Nati (1628–94), an Italian painter from the seventeenth century. The painting portrays Vittoria della Rovere, Grand Duchess of Tuscany, a remarkable woman who successfully governed Tuscany with her exceptional qualities of being well-educated, pious, valiant, and a historical ruler. Camilla's depiction of Vittoria della Rovere in the portrait is magnificent, as she captures her patron's spiritual beauty and wisdom. Vittoria della Rovere's significant contributions to expanding cultural diplomacy and her passion for the Fine Arts and popular art make her an admirable historical figure. She also created an environment for women to develop their literary skills and express themselves creatively, a remarkable achievement during those times. The Altomani Portrait of *Vittoria della Rovere* is a testament to Camilla Guerrieri's artistic talent and her patron's extraordinary legacy.

Keywords: Camilla Guerrieri, Vittoria della Rovere, emblematic and symbolic portrait, honorific medals.

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1. Introduction

This study has a dual purpose. Its primary objective is to discuss a painting recently discovered by Camilla Guerrieri Nati (Fossombrone, Province of Pesaro) 1628–1693/94), depicting the Serenissima Grand Duchess of Tuscany, Maria Vittoria Leonora Montefeltro della Rovere (Pesaro 1622–Pisa 1694). Secondly, it aims to analyze the iconography of this newly discovered portrait painting of Vittoria della Rovere. The significance of this study lies in the fact that only a few works are attributed to this exceptional female painter from Fossombrone. The quality of this painting highlights the importance of this painter and other female artists from the seventeenth century. Another noteworthy aspect of this study is the patronage of Vittoria della Rovere, a renowned Italian female ruler, who commissioned this work to a female painter in her court, Camilla. Therefore, the iconography and symbolism used in this portrait reveal its uniqueness and distinction.

¹ UMASS Lowell, United States. Email: lianaquarta@gmail.com



Figure 1. Camilla Guerrieri, *Portrait of Vittoria della Rovere*, oil on canvas, 85 x 70 cm.
Altomani & Sons, Pesaro.
Restorer: Bacchiocca Restoration Studio, Urbino, 2023.
Photo credit: Altomani & Sons, Pesaro

2. Methodology

The approach to the iconographic study of this exquisite portrait entails, first and foremost, establishing the painting's provenance and condition as a source of historical evidence for attribution. Subsequently, an examination of the artist's accomplishments and assess her art historical contributions through an investigation of the existing literature on her oeuvre. This includes examining literary references during Camilla's life tie and modern scholarship on some of her known paintings and patronage. Given the dearth of information available on this female artist, it is imperative to scrutinize her newly discovered painting in terms of visual analysis and symbolic significance. This art historical iconographic and emblematic method facilitates the contextualization of the artist and the interpretation of the painting's symbolism within the cultural framework of the period. As such, the present study is primarily concerned with a detailed analysis of the symbolic significance of various motifs that are present in Camilla's portrait. Specifically, this analysis will focus on a range of materials, including bows, lace, precious stones, brooches, pearls, and flowers such as roses. Additionally, the design of the bust-length portrait itself will also be examined in detail. By doing so, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the underlying meaning and significance of the various elements that comprise this iconic portrait.

3. Provenance of the Painting

This exquisite oil canvas (85 x 70 cm) is part of the art collection of the antique dealer Altomani & Sons in Pesaro. This painting underwent a professional restoration at Bacchiocca Restoration Studio in Urbino in 2023. A written notation appears on the lower back of the canvas: "Woman with a flower in hand" (Giardini 2024, 1–2) (Figure 1). Giardini's attribution and identification of this work provide new insights into Camilla's painting and assist in furthering the scholarship of her art Giardini 2024, 1– 2).

4. Scholarship on Camilla's Portraits

Information about Camilla Guerrieri, a female painter, is scarce, and there is limited scholarship on her art by only a few scholars. (Emiliani 1997; Straussman-Pflanzer 2016, 121–34, Giardini 2024, 1–2). It is documented that she learned the art of painting from her father, Giovanni Francesco Guerrieri (1589–1657) (Emiliani 1997; Straussman-Pflanzer 2016, 121–34). In 1655, she married a native of Gubbio, Paolo de' Nati; hence, she is sometimes called Camilla Guerrieri Nati (Archivio Stato Firenze 9 March 1674). After her father died in 1657, she relocated to Florence, where she became a painter under the patronage of Vittoria della Rovere, Grand Duchess of Tuscany. Guerrieri's *Allegory of the Painting*, 1658–1662, oil on maiolica, 14.2 x 16.7 cm (Figure 2), was formerly in the Altomani & Sons collection but now is in the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence. The painting depicts Camilla as the painter portraying Vittoria della Rovere, who is seen in the middle of the portrait and also on a small canvas that rests on the painter's easel (Giardini 2023, 1; Straussman-Pflanzer 2016, 126; Modesti 2020, 176). The painting is a beautifully crafted triple portrait, set in an elegant oval frame and adorned with a striking red curtain on top. The painter has included herself in the painting, depicted in the act of painting and standing beside his easel.

Additionally, the painting includes a finished small portrait on an easel of the esteemed Vittoria della Rovere, Grand Duchess of Tuscany, and another large portrait of Vittoria della Rovere in the process of being painted. The attention to detail and skillful execution of this work of art are impressive. This type of triple portraiture recalls Johannes Gump's *Self Portrait*, 1646, oil on canvas, 8.85 x 8.90 cm, now at the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence (Figure 3).



Figure 2. Camilla Guerrieri, *Allegory of Painting*, 1658–1662, oil on maiolica, 14.2 x 16.7 cm. Former location Altomani & Sons, Pesaro, now at the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Photo credit: Altomani & Sons, Pesaro.



Figure 3. Johannes Gump, *Self-Portrait*, 1646, oil on canvas, 8.85 x 8.90 cm.
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.
Photo credit: Public domain.

5. Iconographical Sources and Interpretation

This section on "Iconographical Sources and Interpretation" pertains to identifying and analyzing various symbols and images found in works of art. It endeavors to elucidate the meaning and significance of these visual elements and the ways in which they are associated with the culture, religion, and history of the people who created them. The interpretation of iconography involves a comprehensive understanding of the context in which the art was produced, the cultural influences that shaped it, and the artistic techniques employed in its creation. By studying iconography, scholars gain insight into the ideological and philosophical beliefs of the artists and the society they belonged to.

In the Italian Baroque period, the renowned poet Antonio Abati (1600–1667) praised Camilla as an exceptional painter from Fossombrone. He was a member of the Roman Accademia degli Umoreisti (the Humorists) and nicknamed "Abbot of Vitality and Wit" ("Abbate delle Vivezze e delle Argutezze"). One of his madrigals honors Camilla's artistic talent: "Mortal che intent miri/Di pennello vital le provid'orme,/ quando Camilla il giri/Per dar ne' lini suoi spirito alle forme/ non ti stupir..." [Mortal who intends to gaze/The footsteps are equipped with an essential brush,/When Camilla puts her mark on it/the figures on her canvases come to life/Be amazed...] (Abati 1676; Vernarecci 1903, 809; Straussman-Pflanzer 2016, 123). This means that Camilla's brushstrokes are an essential tool that brings her canvases to life, inspiring mortals who seek to gaze upon them as visualized in the Altomani portrait.

In the last years of Abati's life, Vittoria della Rovere greatly appreciated his sharp wit and satirical flair. She generously provided him access to one of her villas in Urbino (Senigallia) so he could continue his creative work (Colella 2022, 77–100). The Grand Duchess of Tuscany was a remarkable woman who sincerely appreciated art and culture. She was well-educated and proficient in several languages, and her devotion to her faith was admirable (Benadusi and Brown 2015, 264–301). Her

impressive art collection was a testament to her refined taste and appreciation for beauty (Pitti Palace, Poggio Imperiale, Villa La Quiete).

During her lifetime, the Grand Duchess actively promoted and supported literary scholars, musicians, poets, architects, and painters, with a particular emphasis on female artists. One of the most notable beneficiaries of her patronage was Camilla, who gained recognition and success due to her support. In recognition of women's challenges in the male-dominated artistic and literary world, Vittoria established the first women's academy dedicated to literature in Siena in 1654, *Le Assicurate* (Modesti 2018; Modesti 2020, 198–199). This academy provided a safe and supportive environment for women to develop their literary skills and express themselves creatively at a time when such opportunities were rare.

There are many remarkable portraits of Vittoria della Rovere by famous Florentine painters such as Francesco Furini (1603–1646), Carlo Dolci (1616–1686), and Justus Sustermans (1597–1681) (Langedijk 1983, 75–511; Saso 2020, 97–164; Modesti 2020, 75–92; Giardini 2023, 2). Still, none is as insightful as Camilla's *Portrait of Vittoria della Rovere*. Her clever visual effects create an immersive experience that transports viewers to a private reception with the Grand Duchess of Tuscany in Florence. This way, Camilla engages the audience in an interactive and exciting encounter with the Tuscan ruler. She composed two types of gazes: an internal one from the royal sitter looking out from the canvas and an external one from the viewer looking into the canvas at the sitter. The Serenissima Vittoria gently observes the viewer but introspectively. She emerges from a background adorned with a tapestry of blooming red roses, dressed in her finest royal attire and bearing all the attributes of her role as a female ruler.

Camilla selected an octagonal frame for her painting (Giardini 2024, 2). She adroitly engages the viewer in a complex composition that reveals layers of symbolism in the objects in the paintings. Metaphysically, the octagon is an intermediary symbol between natural and spiritual realms (Cirlot 1962, 279). The octagonal shape of this portrait is associated with the Duchess's custody and residency in Florence and Florentine symbolism. The octagonal physical constructions recall the architectural shape of the Baptistery's Dome, Brunelleschi's Dome, and the *Medici Tribuna* at the Gallery degli Uffizi (Reynolds 2008, 54). Symbolically, the canvas format based on the number eight is a powerful medium that allows artists to express their creativity and explore concepts of beauty and wisdom. When a painted image is displayed on a canvas, it becomes a platform for artistic and aesthetic discourse about the physical and metaphysical realms.

The Altomani painting's background is adorned with beautiful roses, and the left curtain is smartly adorned with oak tree branches, which allude to the subject's family name, Rovere. The portrait is half-waist length. The sitter is dressed in aristocratic attire (Modesti 2018, 107–129; Modesti 2019). Her black silk or satin dress is inlaid with white lace motifs in the neckline, waistline, and sleeves. The V-neckline is decorated with intricate lace resembling a broad collar mantle. The embroidery of lace design combines floral motifs of fleur-de-lis, roses, rose branches, and oak leaves, symbolism associated with her royal lineage and the vicissitudes of her life.

The lace embroidery design is an exquisite work of art that intricately weaves together a tapestry of floral motifs. It is possible that Caterina Angiola Pieroncini, a lacemaker and lady-in-waiting at the court of Vittoria della Rovere, made it (Modesti 2020, 108–109). In the embroidery, the fleur-de-lis, roses, rose branches, and oak leaves are carefully chosen symbols, each representing a different facet of Vittoria's life. The fleur-de-lis is a traditional symbol of royalty, as well as an emblem of Florence, and was adopted by the Medici family (D'Ancona 1977, 146; De Tervarent 1997, 295), hence referring to Vittoria's royal marital union as well as her virtue of candor. The oak leaves (*rovere*) are an emblem of the Rovere family, representing stability and steadfastness (D'Ancona 1977, 252–53), alluding to her sagacious ability to govern through time and endure her family's difficulties. The rose's branches represent her strength and resilience, while the roses symbolize love and beauty. Together, these symbols create a beautiful tapestry that tells the story of a remarkable woman and her extraordinary life.

Furthermore, the red rose symbolizes passion, spiritual turmoil, and victory over hardship. It is linked to the name of the Grand Duchess of Tuscany, Vittoria (Victory) (D'Ancona 1987, 340), and the suffering of the unforeseen death of her first two children, Cosimo and Innominata. Camilla designed

Vittoria to hold a red rose and a redbud branch in her right hand at her abdomen level, recalling her pregnancies. The flower's red color recalls the ancient story of Venus's love and the death of Adonis. According to the legend, the white anemone turned red with the blood of Adonis (De Tervarent 1997, 377).

The red rose has long been a symbol of beauty, honor, and nobility in heraldry (Camajani 1940, 457). It was also associated with Vittoria's royal status. Hence, Camilla placed the natural open red rose diagonally across from Vittoria's brooch pinned on her left shoulder. The metallic brooch is composed of a ducal crown in red colors with three large initials in filigrees of gold and silver referring to the Medici lineage. The anacronym formed with the initials CIF alludes to the names of Vittoria's four children: the first two died at a young age, Cosimo and Innominata (initial C and I), and the two surviving children were Cosimo III and Francesco Maria (C and F). This type of mourning or commemorative jewelry was popularized during ancient Roman times. It provides a physical connection to a loved one who has passed away.

Another significant interpretation is the anacronym containing the painter's signature with the initials CAF (Camilla Fecit) (Giardini 2024, 2; Vitali 2022, 33).

Camilla displays superb use of color in fabric design. The portrait's attire features gorgeous green silk bows, a traditional symbol of unity, while green symbolizes spiritual hope. The artist strategically positions bows in her portrait to guide the viewer's attention from left to right, ultimately focusing on the large bow that secures the heraldic mourning brooch. From there, the viewer's gaze moves upward to the sitter's hairdo, where another green bow is revealed in Vittoria's curly black hair. Her hair falls in cascading tresses that frame her broad forehead with small curls, accentuating her large brown eyes, aquiline nose, high cheekbones, and red lips.

Camilla displays her artistic expertise by incorporating natural and metallic gemstones in the portrait as physical adornments and moral references. The dress—*devant le corsage*—features an elegant metallic jewelry piece shaped like an opened rose, which is beautifully designed with a filigree of gold and silver. The jewelry is pinned to the center of the laced shoulder mantle on the front of the dress, and it sits perfectly perpendicular to the natural red rose, enhancing the overall appearance of the dress and its symbolic meaning.

The fabric's opaque texture contrasts with the faceted metallic gemstones and lustrous pearls, creating a glittering refraction. Camilla further emphasizes the traditional symbolism of the pearl as a symbol of beauty and purity because of its shimmering white color and circular shape. The Grand Duchess of Tuscany is depicted wearing a string of large, shining pearls around her neck, dangling pearl earrings, and a pearl bracelet. The precious gem had a special meaning for Vittoria since her husband gifted her a magnificent pearl on their wedding day. The pearl was as large as a pigeon's egg (Acton 1980, 71).

During the reign of Vittoria, one of the artists in residence, the medalist Antonio Selvi (1679–1753), cast a bronze medal before 1690 with a recto representing the profile and bust length of the Grand Duchess of Tuscany. This elderly Vittoria is veiled and dressed as an Oblate of the Congregation of the Montalve. A clasp and a cross are pinned at the center of the shoulder mantle. Encircling her image is a Latin motto: “Victoria Robor M D Etrvr” [Victoria of Rovereto, Medici Family from Etruria (Tuscany)]. The verso of the medal shows an emblem where a large oyster carrying a pearl navigates in an open stormy sea (Boschio 1701, 184; Toderi and Vannel 1987, 51–52; Modesti 2020, 142 and 166). The Latin motto above states: “Dos in Candore” [My virtue (gift) is purity]. Hence, her natural gifts of intellect, integrity, and nobility help her deal with life's challenges. Vittoria's *impresa* derives from Pliny the Elder's writing, “Dos in omnibus candore” [Purity (Integrity) is a gift in all things] in *Naturalis Historia* (IX, 56, 112) and the Christian symbolism of sincerity and purity (Matt. 7:6).

Familiar with the *impresa* of the Grand Duchess of Tuscany, Camilla adds another attribute of her patroness in her portrait. Vittoria's neckline, for example, is adorned with a dangling silver chain and a filigree locket. This medallion depicts a nude figure carrying a pearl in a shell. A similar image is seen on the reverse of a medal of the Grand Duchess of Tuscany cast in bronze by another court medalist, Massimiliano Soldani (1565–1740), in 1685. The medal features a bust portrait of Vittoria on the recto and a scene of Galatea, a mythical sea goddess holding an open shell with a pearl, on the verso (Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, Acc. No. 1996.369). Vittoria's *impresa* is crowned with the Latin motto “Dos in Candore” (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Massimiliano Soldani, *Dos in Candore*, 1685, Vittoria della Rovere, Grand Duchess of Tuscany bronze medal, recto and verso, diam. 8.6 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Credit line: Purchase, Stephen K. Scher Gift, 1996.

In addition to depicting the virtues of purity, nobility, and grace in the erudite Vittoria, Camilla also includes the intellectual gift of wisdom. The bust-length portrait shows the Grand Duchess of Tuscany wearing an outfit whose sleeves are designed with appliqué floral patterns and shoulder fringes. It draws inspiration from ancient rulers like Alexander the Great and Augustus Caesar and ancient deities such as Minerva. Combining these elements creates a formal military regalia look, like the bust portraits of wise rulers from ancient times (Figure 5a and 5b).



Figure 5a. Andrea del Verrocchio, attr. *Alexander the Great*, 1485. marble, 55.9 x 36.7 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Credit line: Gift of Therese K. Straus. Photo credit: Public domain.



Figure 5b. *Minerva of Arezzo*, det., bronze. Second Century, BCE. H:150 cm. Former location Medici Collection since 1541, now Etruscan Archeological Museum, Florence. Photo credit: Public domain.

The Grand Duchess of Tuscany had a symbolic connection with Minerva, the Goddess of Wisdom, Victory, and the Arts. She drew inspiration from the deity's heroic and intellectual aspects, symbolizing victory and wisdom. Being a Tuscan ruler, she knew the importance of the region's cultural and political origin and the Medicean historical collection of artifacts from this area, including the statue of the Etruscan Minerva or Aretine Minerva (Greco et al. 2002, 325–331). The deity's attire typically comprised military armor and a cuirass with the head of the Medusa (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Books 4 and 5). The representation of victory on the center of the breastplate was a source of inspiration for Camilla, who used the victory motif in Vittoria's shoulder mantel, where a faceted filigree rose served as an aegis of victory. The regalia worn by Vittoria conveys the idea of victory, which is what her name means. Additionally, the association with Minerva is a testament to Vittoria's wisdom in the arts, which she greatly admired and accomplished.

6. Conclusions

By utilizing the iconographic approach in art history and relying on meticulous archival research, it is possible to decode and interpret the meaning of a portrait in the 17th century in Italy. This process begins with analyzing the frame's structure and moving on to the image and the attributes depicted within it. The culturally established emblematic tradition further assists in visualizing the portrait's significance. Additionally, it is possible to identify the sitter by comparing the exact subject portraiture of contemporary artists (Dolce, Furini, and Shusterman) during Camilla's time with her own. This comparative method also helps observe the uniqueness of the portrait in question and establish the remarkable innovation of the painter Camilla Guerrieri Nati. In the *Altomani Portrait of Vittoria della Rovere*, Camilla effectively captures her patron's spiritual beauty and wisdom—Vittoria della Rovere, Grand Duchess of Tuscany.

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