

INTRODUCTION

BRILLIANT BODIES AND FASHIONABLE MEN AT COURT

Sonno pomposo un pocho, e non è gran peccato in un signore.

—Galeazzo Maria Sforza to Zaccaria Saggi

In April 1473, in the spirit of Lent, Galeazzo Maria Sforza confessed to Zaccaria Saggi, the Mantuan ambassador to Milan, “I am a little bit ostentatious [*pomposo*], but that is no great sin in a lord.”¹ Scholars have long recognized pomposity in many aspects of the life and rule of this imperious and profligate Duke of Milan (fig. 1), and the exasperated Saggi, who confided in his lord that he wanted to smack Sforza but lacked the authority to do so, seems to have felt much the same way. Galeazzo affirmed that he was inclined to lust in “full perfection” and “in all the fashions and forms that it can be done,” and even his widow, Bona of Savoy—in a remarkable letter to Pope Sixtus IV, an endeavor to save her husband’s soul—willingly conceded his “extortion of subjects, neglect of justice . . . carnal vices . . . and innumerable sins.” Rather than inventory Galeazzo’s evildoings—and leaving aside

rumors that he poisoned his mother—I want to turn critical attention to the cultural and ideological ramifications of Sforza’s playful and arrogant but nonetheless salient assertion that it was “no great sin” for a lord to be “pompous.”² In short, it was a prince’s duty to exhibit and manifest extravagance, to distance himself visually from his subjects.

Brilliant Bodies investigates Galeazzo Maria Sforza and other lords to explore and interpret how they used art, spectacle, and especially clothing and adornment to reinforce and advertise power, and to seduce those who beheld them. The images and bodies of these *signori* convinced subjects that those who were represented and displayed ruled rightfully. Aristocratic ideologies of bodily representation are thus the focus of this book. I argue that brilliance and other qualities of light, including resplendence,



glamour, and splendor, were essential courtly ideals that constituted authority and manifested status by emitting distinction and nobility. Radiant bodies—both actual living bodies and efficacious images of them—proclaimed courtliness and were requisite components of signorial sovereignty in fifteenth-century Italy. Lords were described in glowing terms as glorifying their city with the material splendor of their patronage and person. Light radiating and reflecting from skin, hair, clothing, jewels, weapons, and armor manifested virtue and hierarchical status in bodies on display in dazzling spectacles and shimmering frescoes. These illustrious and lustrous bodies were magnetic and charismatic, drawing gazes and desires toward them.

Brilliance and the Courtly Values of Light

Splendore (splendor) and other values of expenditure and display reveal the contemporary resonance of brilliance, brightness, and shine.³ The honorific titles with which lords were addressed in letters and life, such as *illustrissimus* and *spettabilis*, further indicate both that ideals of nobility often related to light, for the former, and that visual attention should be directed to these men, for the latter. This study is attuned to inflections relating to light in adjectives such as *chiaro* (more *luminous* than merely *clear*, and in some contexts denoting fame) and *pulito* (*polished*, in addition to *clean*, with connections to noble class and decorum, as intimated by the English *polite* or the French *politesse*). English words that also shed valences of light in general usage include *splendid*, *illustrious*, *luminary*, and *glamorous*, among others.⁴

Radiance and splendor had long served as customary signifiers of sanctity and divine presence in Christianity, and the familiarity and currency of these traditions, which were second nature for Renaissance men and women, lent considerable authority to resplendent lords. Yet many cultures associated brilliance and resplendence with social status, sacrality, beauty, political authority, or wealth—for example, the coeval rulers of China, the Ming or “Bright” Dynasty, and many Amerindians.⁵ Light still dazzles and beguiles. Flashy metallic bling—which Krista Thompson excellently explores in relation to Black male spectacularity and self-representation—comes immediately to mind. And the word *candidate* derives from the *toga candida*, the specifically lustrous and “candid” white garment that marked “exclusivity and social superiority” as the traditional clothing of political office in ancient Rome.⁶

The adjective *brilliant* illustrates the positive value we accord words relating to light. In the book’s title, *brilliant* means bright, shining, or full of light, though one is most likely today to hear it used—often as an exclamation—without consciously suggesting illumination but rather to proclaim something to be wonderful, impressively clever or intelligent, or otherwise exceedingly well done. *Brilliant* derives from the translucent mineral beryl (*beryllus* or *berillus* in Latin and *beril* in Middle English) that, depending on its chemical makeup, occurs in a number of colors and varieties, including emerald and heliodor. Though the word did not exist in English in the fifteenth century, its Italian counterpart did, as both adjective (*brillante*) and verb (*brillare*—to shine). In “De Beryllo,” the humanist Nicolaus Cusanus described the stone as “bright, white, and clear.” Beryl crystals of various sorts, some of which were imputed magical powers, are found in Renaissance collections and wardrobes, among them Isabella d’Este’s chrysoberyl, known to her as a cat’s-eye. One particularly perceptive Sforza courtier—Leonardo

FIGURE 1 Piero del Pollaiuolo, *Galeazzo Maria Sforza*, 1471. Tempera and oil (?) on cypress panel, 65 × 42 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Photo: Scala / Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali / Art Resource, New York.

da Vinci—enthused about the seductively kaleidoscopic color and light effects of sunlight refracted through the *berillo's* facets. Leonardo compared the beryl's brilliant rainbow with the “most beautiful colors” produced by the movement of iridescent feathers.⁷

Deploying metaphors of light in his *Treatise on Architecture*, Filarete likened princes to lustrous gems, asserting that both should be “splendid and luminous without any blemish.”⁸ Accordingly, sources celebrated the radiant beauty of Galeazzo Maria Sforza in the very years that Filarete composed this treatise in Milan. During a visit to Florence in 1459, the fifteen-year-old lord was lauded as *pulito* (polished), *lustre* (lustrous), *candido* (shining white), *aureate* (golden), and *splendido* (splendid) by a poet who praised Galeazzo's *luce* (light), *bianchezza* (whiteness), and *splendor*, and compared him to a “living sun.” Courtiers traveling with Galeazzo were, according to Pope Pius II, “splendid and most ornamented.” Sforza possessed, moreover, “blond and splendid hair . . . that seemed to be rays of the sun and stars,” and a single lock from his gold, curly tresses could seduce even icy Diana. Resembling “the son of Mars descended to earth,” Galeazzo was extolled as “the most beautiful creature that was ever seen . . . the most polished and noblest lord.” One poet described him as a sun surrounded by “shining stars” at a dance, while another affirmed that his “gold and silver brocades, and pearls . . . made midnight a bright, clear day.” So too at the joust for Galeazzo organized by the young Lorenzo de' Medici, “polished” fighters “made midnight seem day.”⁹

Lords' splendor inescapably drew observers' gazes. These were bodies dressed to impress, glittering in the Renaissance cityscape. The entire Medici clan—“young and old, female and male”—stared at the scintillating Galeazzo Maria Sforza, “just as the ostrich stares at her egg,” according to a poet echoing the avian lore that rays of heat from an ostrich's unwavering glare accelerated the

chick's hatching. “Gazing on him is like running with your eyes fixed on the sun,” for the young Count of Pavia “dazzles so that nothing else is visible between.” This “flashing and sparkling” prince seemed to “shine more than the morning stars” when he moved.¹⁰ Metaphors praised and reinforced the ideals of radiant beauty embodied in lords, who responded in turn by presenting bodies specifically made brilliant by clothing, adornment, and somatic manipulation.¹¹ Courtly male bodies were cynosures that glistened and glimmered with every move, whether in the sun or under torch or candlelight.

Galeazzo Maria Sforza spent a veritable fortune on jewels, and a pair of his sleeves was adorned with nearly thirty-five hundred pearls and forty-five rubies.¹² In life and in paintings, he wore expensive gems, including the balas—a reddish spinel often conflated with the ruby—suspended on a golden chain in Piero del Pollaiuolo's portrait of 1471 (fig. 1). Crucially, Galeazzo dressed not only himself but scores of courtiers in silk brocades suffused with gold, that most desired and precious of metals, which contemporaries appreciated for its malleability and ductility, and because it did not tarnish or corrode. As Marsilio Ficino put it, gold was the safest from decay.¹³ In June 1466, an ambassador reported that Galeazzo—months after becoming duke at the age of twenty-two—planned to outfit his chamberlains splendidly “two or three times a year, from head to toe.” Two years later, the prince distributed four hundred silk velvet tunics embroidered with Sforza devices for the feast of Saint George, and in 1472 he dressed courtiers in crimson apparel brocaded with either silver or gold, depending on their status.¹⁴ Among these lavishly attired men and boys was the teenaged Bernardino Corio, the future historian of Milan. Galeazzo had indeed, as Corio later asserted, made his court “one of the most resplendent in the universe” and “splendid beyond measure.”¹⁵

Galeazzo understood that he was always on display, watched and judged by peers and courtiers and at times by large public gatherings. As a teenager, in letters to his parents, he described in detail the crowds who came to see him as he traveled. Throughout his life, moreover, the lord was clearly aware of subjects' and courtiers' expectations of signorial beauty and body type. On the day he was assassinated in 1476, Galeazzo took off a protective garment because he thought it made him look "too fat."¹⁶ We shall see that noble men paid close attention to their self-image, their weight, and the presentation of a slender silhouette. Sforza's death, it seems, was hastened by the fact that he could not bear to be seen as overweight and unlordly, particularly in the company of so many idealized portraits of himself.

Although the bodies under interpretative scrutiny in this book are those of lords, I also examine men, and to a lesser extent women, from across the social hierarchy. Nobility was manifested somatically not only in the prince but in the entire court: wives and mistresses, courtiers and officials, children and attendants, and the crowds of beautiful young men and boys who surrounded and mirrored their *signore*. Courts were social arenas in which distinctions of rank were displayed and embodied, in the process simultaneously constituting and illustrating ever-shifting hierarchies enacted by economies of favor, access, and status. The illustrious lads whom we can with good reason call the fifteenth-century glitterati brought honor not merely to the prince but to the wider court and city, and to courtiers who turned proximity to the lord to their own advantage. As Galeazzo reminded men whose attendance he had requested in Milan for the approaching Christmas season, through their presence, "the prince himself stands out more, and the noble and excellent men who are in a state of favor in the prince's eyes grow in grace and increase in honors." Displays of courtliness and authority were collaborative rather than individual

efforts, and thus to understand signorial power, we must describe the bodies not just of the lord but of the entourage visibly surrounding him.¹⁷

Spectacular Male Bodies

Fifteenth-century courtly bodies were hardly ever seen or represented as undressed or unadorned. Indeed, clothing and accessories constituted these social bodies that efficiently conveyed immediately accessible and politically significant messages about social status and power for widely varying audiences.¹⁸ Courtly bodies were not mere flesh and blood, for bodies are never completely natural but are constituted and understood through culture and are ornamented, disciplined, and manipulated. Brilliance shone forth from the lord's face, jewels, and brocades, whether he was glimpsed by subjects in the piazza or depicted on the frescoed walls of a palazzo. The shimmering surfaces of clothing and adornment reinforced light-emitting properties embodied in aristocratic men. Radiance was thus manifest in somatic, natural, and artificial materials. Skin and hair were cultural productions blanched in art and, cosmetically, in life. Somatic appearance and beauty were filtered through class- and gender-specific expectations, as we see in the Golden Chamber (Camera d'Oro) on the piano nobile (noble main floor) of the Castello di Torrechiera near Parma. Here, the almost fifty-year-old Pier Maria Rossi is represented as an idealized courtly warrior, youthful and fair haired (fig. 2). This "bel signore"—as he was called by a poet celebrating the room's gold and azurite frescoes—delicately grasps the baton of command with his index finger and sports two swords at his side.¹⁹ This "beautiful lord" in shining armor stands forcefully but gracefully, his impossibly slender waist enclosed within the gleaming metal plates.



Beauty served as a potent ideological tool wielded by *signori* and their supporters to legitimize authority and naturalize hegemony, to convince subjects that it was right and just that those in power remained there. Theirs were fair bodies—beautiful, blached, *and* good—and fair seems to be an appropriately suggestive word, given its chivalric connotation and implicit value judgment. Light-emitting beauty had for centuries been conventionally invoked as an integral aspect of nobility and lordship. While scholars of medieval France and Germany have pointed to the cogency of brilliance in literary rhetoric, I investigate that value in material and visual culture.²⁰ Fifteenth-century *signori* expected to be praised as beautiful, and contemporaries admired their ideally blond hair, luminous eyes, and beaming faces, fair complexioned and clean shaven. One chronicler lauded “the most courtly” Borso d’Este’s “ornamented body” and “beautiful face.” The duke was elsewhere characterized as “lordly and resplendent with his imperial appearance ornamented by gold and gems . . . in all ways refulgent.” His visage seemed bright enough to “obscure the sun,” even at midday.²¹ Brilliant bodies captivated viewers for whom radiant markers of beauty confirmed power and aristocratic status.

This book builds on scholars’ valuable and lively focus on gender in the study of Italian Renaissance art. I draw attention to men and their array as a means of interpreting representations of masculinity (then as now essential to patriarchal power). Productive feminist scholarship by Patricia Simons, Cristelle Baskins, and Evelyn Welch, among many others, has investigated women on display.²² Only more recently has scrutiny

been directed toward performances and constructions of masculinity, including in crucial studies of early modern male fashion and adornment.²³ Precisely because of widespread suspicion and disregard of men’s ornamentation, however, the bodies of Italian lords have not received the sustained, fine-grained, critical analysis that the present study offers. Looking in detail at *signori* allows us to denaturalize and shed new light upon commonplace assumptions about male fashion and ornamentation, through an examination of a period before the so-called great masculine renunciation of fashion: modernity’s broad, though never absolute, rejection of color and adornment in European men’s dress, conventionally associated with the Protestant Reformation and the Industrial Revolution, among other historical changes and trajectories.²⁴

By scrutinizing male bodies, this study challenges the diminishing yet still resilient tendency to assume that only women are gendered or sexed, and that women have sexed bodies whereas men have standard or essentially human bodies, which were (and are) visible and valued, yet in certain ways unmarked and beyond critical surveillance. Without sustained interrogations dedicated to dismantling masculinity’s false claims to universality and immutability, patriarchal power generates the perception that it is inevitable and entirely natural. *Brilliant Bodies* seeks to unclothe (to divest) masculine privilege by examining its apparel and adornment. Popular culture today, of course, is increasingly attentive to male attire and performances of maleness, and studies of masculinities are flourishing. Male fashion has been reclaimed, if it ever truly was renounced.

It is vital to recognize and interpret both similarities and differences between aristocratic men and women. Both were lavishly ornamented in fifteenth-century Italy. Likewise, brilliant ideals of somatic beauty manifested nobility through complexion and hair color, regardless of

FIGURE 2 Bonifacio Bembo and workshop, *Pier Maria Rossi*, ca. 1460. Fresco. North lunette, Camera d’Oro, Castello di Torrechiara. Photo: author, courtesy of the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali e per il Turismo—Direzione Regionale Musei Emilia-Romagna.

gender, such that courtly women were commonly described as radiantly beautiful, just as their male counterparts were. Distinctions, however, will come to the fore, including the emphasis on men's legs and the cultural invisibility of women's. Men's legs were shown off and accentuated by tight *calze* (stockings), while women's were generally hidden beneath long, cascading dresses. Explanations for these differences are complex and range from prevailing moral strictures, to variations in clothing and modes of fastening, to traditions of literary praise. Sexual interest in specific body parts is to a certain degree historically and culturally specific, and distinct and resolutely gendered conventions of display—rather than somatic morphology or transhistorical truths about fashion—prompted the varying ways in which men and women were evaluated and their bodies and body parts idealized and eroticized.

As crucial as gender is as an analytical category, it cannot be our sole interpretative key. Of course, fifteenth-century men were not all equally privileged, even if most nevertheless enjoyed the benefits of the patriarchal dividend, and even if patriarchal systems are more forgiving and flexible for subordinated men than for analogous women.²⁵ An individual's power and visibility were shaped by and contingent upon a number of additional overlapping and potentially conflicting circumstances and identities that intersected with gendered power dynamics. Age, beauty, skin color, sanctity, and dynastic affiliation and allegiance all come into play in this study, and I investigate, for instance, youthful bodies surrounding the prince as he aged and lost his ideally svelte form. Intersecting and mutually constitutive expectations of gender and social rank shaped the values imputed to courtly individuals, and the centrality of noble status and lordship cannot be overstated. James Schultz coined the term *aristophilia*, love of the aristocracy, and convincingly argued that alluring bodies were more cogently marked

by a hierarchy of courtliness than by gender in medieval German literature.²⁶ Likewise in quattrocento Italy, fair beauty revealed and embodied privilege as much as sexual desirability. *Brilliant Bodies* fundamentally argues that nobility was manifested, and aristophilic subjects were seduced, not so much through *sprezzatura*—the calculated and affected nonchalance that looms large in discussions of Renaissance courtliness—as through material signs of wealth and culturally legible somatic markers such as radiance, adornment, and resplendent clothing.²⁷

On the walls of the Salone dei Mesi (Room of the Months) on the piano nobile of Ferrara's Palazzo Schifanoia (figs. 3–4), the affable and flashy Borso d'Este smiles and laughs, surrounded by lavishly dressed courtiers. These bright young things with golden locks, shimmering sleeves, and elegant legs encircle Borso, whose gems and brocaded garments reflect social status, lucre, and light. This painted cortege manifests an idealized vision of Borso's emphatically homosocial court, which itself was conventionally praised for the reciprocal, complementary qualities of nobility and beauty. Courtiers traveling to Rome in 1471—"some dressed in gold brocade, others in silver, and others in velvet"—included among their ranks the poet Matteo Maria Boiardo. They were "florid and gallant," "beautiful, ordered, and adorned."²⁸ Borso was famous for his brocaded apparel, and chroniclers and other commentators asserted that Italian lords were not seen in public attired otherwise. Whether it was strictly true, the insistence that *signori* always wore cloth of gold clearly demonstrates the indispensable role of brilliant array in the display and exercise of power.

Dazzling bodies established authority at first glance by reinforcing the separation between signorial dynasties and their subjects. Indeed, the artistic representation of vertical relations and interactions between classes made audiences ever more aware of these distinctions. In



FIGURE 3 Salone dei Mesi, late 1460s. Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara. Photo: Alinari / SEAT / Art Resource, New York (George Tatge).

Schifanoia's splendid frescoes, courtliness and aristocratic identity are conspicuously bolstered by the visualization of difference. In each month's lowest register, Borso greets a supplicant whose inferior social and economic status is typically marked by clothing or skin color. Such social distinctions are reiterated by depictions of courtly activities—golden boys hunting and falconing—juxtaposed with agricultural labor performed by peasants in the

frescoes' secondary scenes. Borso's radiantly embroidered nobility was thus visually articulated through opposition to rusticity and peasant status, marked by skin color and by dull, damaged clothing. In many ways, this book is a study of ideologies of representation activated through images of social distance, difference, and hierarchy.

The display of elite men's bodies in frescoes and spectacles constituted rather than merely reflected their

authority. Power absolutely relied on such display. Laura Mulvey's influential interrogation of the cinematic gaze inspired vital studies of the male gaze directed toward women in Italian Renaissance art and society.²⁹ Yet this book acknowledges that fifteenth-century Italian courts put *men* on display. Here, men were peacocks, colorfully adorned to attract attention. Here, men became a "spectacular gender" in ways that remain insufficiently understood.³⁰ Visibility and representation mattered. They produced real effects by persuading subjects to submit to their lord. Such display was an essential aspect of rule, necessary to support and amplify authority, even if it could simultaneously expose one to unanticipated judgments and criticisms. Thus we turn our gaze toward men not simply to challenge gendered assumptions about spectacle and bodies but to critically evaluate operations of power and dominance. The exhibition of noble bodies was as indispensable to lords' rule as were waging war, dispensing justice, acquiring territory, and collecting taxes. Brilliant bodies were the fundamental images and models through which signorial power was sustained.

Material and Power: Bodies That Mattered

Concomitant with art history's expanding notions of visual and material culture, this study investigates a wide array of light-emitting and skillfully crafted objects: scintillating brocaded velvets, gleaming armor, metallic fresco cycles, and jewels and other glistening adornments, including sequins and belts. Though today they are most familiar to us frozen in paint, for fifteenth-century

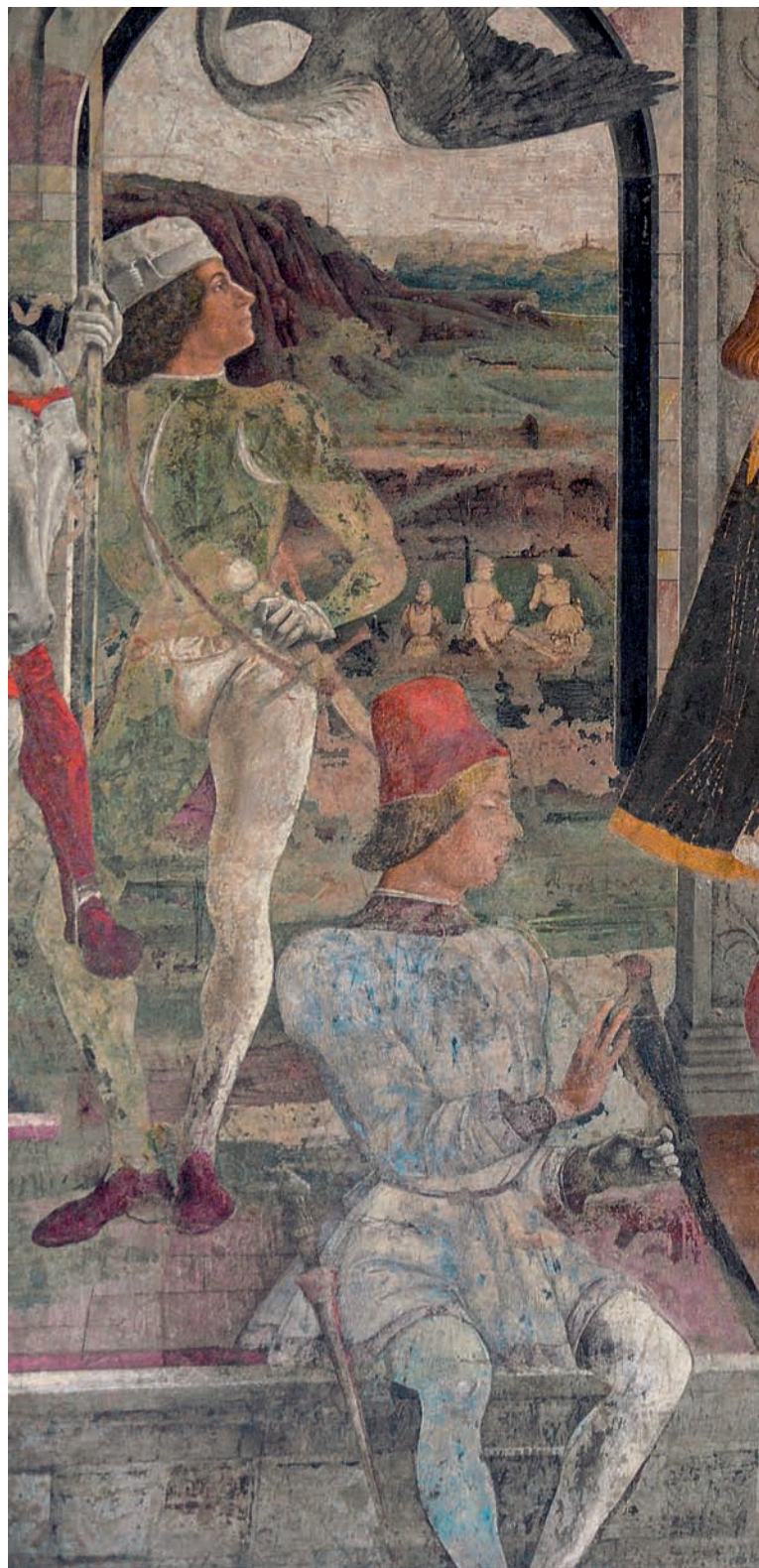


FIGURE 4 Francesco del Cossa, *Borso d'Este and His Court*, late 1460s. Fresco. April, east wall, Salone dei Mesi, Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara. Photo: AGF Srl / Alamy Stock Photo.



audiences, courtly bodies were rarely still. They moved through space, walking or on horseback, and so we must attend to bodies' multisensory phenomena: reflections, reverberations, and sounds produced by clanking metal, twinkling gems, and glistening metallic threads.³¹ Radiating light would have been all the more spectacular as the individual moved and turned under different forms of illumination. Indeed, Georg Simmel's influential sociological account of adornment ties its power and material means to brilliance, to flashes and reflections intended to arrest attention.³²

I cultivate sensitivity to the material and sartorial eyes (and bodies) of consumers, producers, and wearers—and here I borrow and amend Michael Baxandall's trenchant formulation of the period eye: society-specific, culturally contingent modes of viewing.³³ These men and women were discerning and discriminating evaluators of clothing's somatic, surface, and visual effects: the weight and feel of fabrics; the sparkle and sheen of metal adornments and iridescent silk velvets; the fastness of colors. These qualities, crucially, were embodied and not merely visual phenomena. As such, this book conceptualizes the material culture of Italian lords not as scraps of textile in museum storerooms or as jewels in vitrines, but rather as lustrous garments draped over bodies in motion. By investigating the materiality of signorial bodies, we can begin to appreciate the effort and labor that went into the production and presentation of these living images of power. Not only was the expense great; the prince's discomfort could be too. Metal-infused garments were heavy, and adornments changed how their wearers stood or sat. Recent forensic analysis of lords' embalmed bodies, moreover, confirms the grave physical damage done by a lifetime of bearing hefty armor.³⁴ Gleaming swords and scabbards proclaimed knightly status, threatened violence, and changed the way men walked.

Clothing and array are dynamic agents that provoke and communicate cultural ideals about bodies to which subsequent fashion innovations respond. Both the material artifacts of Renaissance bodies and their visual representations possessed remarkable agency.³⁵ They engendered and not merely reflected meaning; they shaped and not merely embellished political power. Attending to contemporary values of light and radiance allows us to reconsider even the most familiar court monuments, notably the Salone dei Mesi in Ferrara and Andrea Mantegna's *Camera Picta* in Mantua, though it is essential to remind ourselves of how much luster has been lost from these frescoes through the deterioration and tarnishing of metallic surfaces.

Moving beyond art historians' conventional focus on a single city, this study utilizes evidence from various courts to investigate the ideals and images that most efficaciously expressed lordship and authority. In recent decades, scholars have increasingly paid critical attention to Italian court society and art in order to redress disciplinary imbalances tilted toward Rome, Venice, and Florence, resisting what Vincent Ilardi diagnosed as "florentinitis."³⁶ Yet, by investigating the representation of lords, I intend not to glorify them but rather to lay bare the means by which art masked and facilitated the brutal effects of aristocratic rule even while it unrelentingly affirmed differentials of power. *Signori* maintained authority and enriched their regimes through intimidation and violence against even their own citizens. Relationships between lords, subjects, and partisans fluctuated between fealty, protection, consent, hostile coercion, and vicious domination. In 1447, men under the command of Francesco Sforza and Pier Maria Rossi mercilessly sacked Piacenza and raped the town's women and girls on a systematic scale.³⁷ Francesco seized Milan by holding the starving city hostage in a time of famine, and four decades later Sforza was posthumously celebrated as the "devastator of

Piacenza” in the imagery of a triumphal arch constructed for his grandson’s wedding. In the same decade, Rossi’s son Guido threatened “fire and flames” to villagers who refused to swear allegiance to his dynasty.³⁸ Displays of male bodies were fundamental to such intimidation and dominance, as, for instance, when Francesco Sforza menacingly clad himself in armor in the presence of a delegation of Piacentine peasants rebelling against Milanese rule following rumors of the duke’s ill health in 1462. As the Gonzaga ambassador who witnessed the meeting related, “because some said he [Sforza] was swollen and could not move, he wanted them to see him, so he took off his robe to get dressed in front of them and have some armor put on and then said: ‘Do not doubt that I am the same as I ever was; if you do not wise up, you will all regret it.’”³⁹

Renaissance *signori* were ruthless warlords, though they have often been regarded as enlightened patrons, ennobled by the art and other cultural productions they commissioned and inspired. In truth, these men were both, as violence and cultural refinement were equally attributes of the martial, noble culture that *Brilliant Bodies* excavates, alert to subtle relationships, intersections, and differences between reality and representation. These men were certainly lightened, if hardly enlightened rulers. All the same, it is crucial not to slander *signori* as tyrannical despots and as less cultured or benevolent than Italy’s republican leaders. Jacob Burckhardt, in the mid-nineteenth century, famously and influentially contrasted the illegitimacy, moral depravity, “unscrupulousness,” and “measureless egotism” of Italian lords with the “most elevated political thought,” “intellectual freedom,” and “wondrous . . . spirit” of the republics, chief among them Florence and Venice.⁴⁰ The present study, by contrast, contributes to revisionist scholarship of recent decades that has critically examined the still tenacious and resilient court/republic divide from both historicist and historiographical perspectives. It is well known, for

instance, that differences between modes and conventions of masculine clothing and ornamentation in courts and republics could be stark, whether manifested in the varying ideologies of male adornment separating aristocratic Milan from (ostensibly) self-effacing Florence, or in the contrasting cuts, colors, and materials worn by the ruling classes of Ferrara, where fashionable attire revealed courtly bodies, or Venice, where columnar togas asserted enduring political longevity and hid physiques underneath. All the same, where scholars once drew stark distinctions between courtly and republican cultures and forms of government, we now increasingly recognize similarities and parallels.

Both republics and courts, after all, were ruled by aristocratic families and their noble adherents, who made up, fought against, and cooperated with civic institutions also built on privileged male oligarchies. The Medici of fifteenth-century Florence were not lords, though they expressed signorial ambitions and in particular contexts dressed and displayed themselves much like their princely peers. Theirs was a “republic of swaggering princes . . . gradually settling into oligarchy,” as Florence circa 1469 was recently characterized.⁴¹ The previous year, in fact, a Ferrarese ambassador informed Borso d’Este that Florence “honors clothing more than virtue or anything else.” The peninsula’s city-states can be defined, to varying degrees, as both courtly and republican, plutocratic and oligarchic. Parma was governed by councils equally divided among men from four *squadre* (factions), each commanded by a noble dynasty that directly controlled extra-urban territory.⁴² Dominant republican families such as the Medici, and the Bentivoglio of Bologna, moreover, deployed brilliant spectacle in ways similar though by no means identical to those of princes. All used the threat of violence, and, as Jean Campbell has shown in an eloquent study of republican San Gimignano, courtliness was constituted in the minds of the ruling classes and

their subjects through art, and not merely through structures of government.⁴³ We should not separate in absolute terms the visual exercise of power in republican from courtly contexts when evidence suggests shared forms and strategies.

Audiences in courts and republics could be either seduced or outraged by extravagant display, and when lords came to town, people paid attention. Niccolò Machiavelli claimed that Galeazzo Maria Sforza's entourage in 1471 not only spurred new sumptuary laws in Florence but also occasioned God's wrath, identified in Santo Spirito's fire, sparked by pyrotechnics intended for the *sacra rappresentazione* of Pentecost. The author of *The Prince* must have rolled over in his grave when Galeazzo's great grandson became Tuscany's first grand duke.⁴⁴ Sforza's visit to Florence in 1459 may have stimulated sumptuary legislation as well (though, in a seemingly but not entirely contradictory manner, such restrictions might be temporarily suspended while lords were in town). A few months after Galeazzo's departure, Florence's *signoria* updated legislation, troubled by the "immoderate expenditure upon the clothing and ornamentation of girls and women who are no longer content to go as daughters and wives of merchants and private citizens, but [dress] as daughters and wives of great princes and lords."⁴⁵

Of the Renaissance values deployed to sanction and sustain expenditure, in both courts and republics, magnificence looms large.⁴⁶ While not insisting upon an absolute separation or dichotomy, let me suggest that magnificence was customarily conceptualized as an architectural and monumental paradigm, while splendor and *politezza* were conceived as embodied and somatic. The humanist Giovanni Pontano contended that "magnificence derives its name from the concept of grandeur and concerns building, spectacle and gifts, while splendor is primarily concerned with the ornament of the household, the care of

the person, and with furnishings."⁴⁷ By spending vast sums on palaces and churches, lords and civic councils strove to "make great" (*magnum facere*, the etymological root of *magnificence*) their dynasties and cities. Accordingly, influential studies of the essential value of Aristotelian magnificence—one of the few such ideals not related etymologically to light—have engaged predominantly with architectural patronage. *Brilliant Bodies* builds upon these foundational investigations of the primarily architectural virtue of magnificence by shifting focus to the materialization of lordship through the bodily display, dress, and adornment that likewise constituted aristocratic power and authority in Renaissance Italy.

Brilliant Bodies Revealed

Courtly bodies were clothed and ornamented in gilded spurs and stirrups, vibrant stockings revealing slender legs, glistening metal belts, sparkling metallic brocades, and candid gloves. These men were adorned with buttons, clasps, and fastenings that tightened clothing, shone, and produced sonorous effects; with ribbons of silk woven with gold or silver thread, used as trim or to tie together sleeves or hold up hose; with stamped gold-plate ornaments and gold foil; with scores of pearls and jewels, some real and others simulants (but most somehow enhanced), integrated into clothing or set in brooches; with gleaming daggers and swords; with shimmering spangles and sequins; and with shining armor, lined with silk or gilded leather.

Through a sustained and resolutely historicist examination of the material culture that clothed and adorned aristocratic men, chapters 1 and 2 of this study explore the ways in which lords attained brilliant bodies. Resplendent surfaces captivated viewers, drawing gazes to these charismatic cynosures. Sensational phenomena marked

privilege by differentiating courtly bodies from common ones. Viewers understood that lustrous fabrics and glimmering metals were essential components of the visual presentation of lordship. Of course, prodigious amounts of wealth, labor, technical skill, and precious materials were expended to manufacture clothes and adornments. *Signori*, in fact, could barely afford to satisfy their categorical imperative to embody radiance, even if (or specifically because) their power fundamentally rested upon it. These responsibilities weighed heavily on lords, and thus I evaluate the precarious political ramifications of the production of brilliant material culture.

Chapter 3 examines gendered and class-specific expectations of male fashion by investigating masculine garments that emphasized certain body parts and types and animated period-specific understandings of bodies, one's own and those beheld in art and spectacle. Bodies both informed and were shaped by visual representations. A slender form was the masculine ideal, and it both drove and was conditioned by cuts of cloth and changes in fashion, specifically the pervasiveness of tightly buttoned doublets and close-fitting *calze* showing off shapely legs. Chapter 4 historicizes conceptions of noble beauty and argues that blanched bodies elicited status-affirming gazes from both men and women. For aristophiliac audiences enthralled by radiant allure and courtly splendor, these glamorous bodies elicited social and sexual desire. By interrogating fair male beauty—contrasted to darkness, along an axis of factors relating to status, skin color, occupation, and race or geographic origin—I aim to lay bare

the contingent nature of equivalences between power, whiteness, and ideal bodies. Whiteness has for too long retained the unspoken and undeserved privilege of an inevitable norm in Renaissance studies. Its constructions are subjected to critical analysis here.

Though quattrocento princes glittered in gold, this book also reckons with the less pervasive aristocratic practice of dressing in black, a notable exception to the rule that calls attention to the polysemic complexities that operate through clothing. The epilogue investigates the intermittent adoption of black attire by fifteenth-century aristocrats, setting the stage for black to become the conventional color not just for lords and courtiers but for men generally. The sixteenth-century distrust of brilliant clothing and adornment—men's turn from peacocks to penguins—responded to, among other cultural and historical factors, the invasions and foreign occupation of Italy. Cinquecento moralizing and often exhortatory discourses against the bejeweled and (only from a later perspective) effeminate lords of the quattrocento should not be indiscriminately mapped onto the earlier century. The book thus ends by exploring transformations of normative masculinity wrought by social and political change and moving in a trajectory toward modern men's ostensible rejection of adornment and their adoption of sober apparel. Here, as throughout *Brilliant Bodies*, quarrying masculinities of the past enables us to denaturalize, challenge, and resist not only patriarchal power but also our most familiar assumptions about male display, adornment, and fashion.