

Lavinia Fontana

Portrait of a Noblewoman



Dear Dowry

The sumptuous garments and jewels adorning this woman in her wedding portrait are part of her dowry—the wealth she brings to her marriage. Unlike this sitter and other women of the day, Lavinia Fontana did not have to meet this requirement because of her earning potential as an artist.



Portrait of a Noblewoman, ca. 1580

Take a closer look

The nobility of Bologna sought **Lavinia Fontana (1552–1614)** for portrait commissions. Her ability to portray fabric textures and intricate jewelry realistically—seen clearly in this work—appealed to her status-conscious patrons.

Something to talk about

During the Renaissance, portraits were never simply about representing the likeness of the sitter. Consider Fontana’s handling of costume, expression, and pose. What do such details communicate about this young woman’s character, mood, and social standing?

Who knew?

Fontana incorporated symbols to suggest the sitter embodied qualities of an ideal 16th-century bride. The marten pelt suspended from her waist signifies fertility—this animal reproduces prolifically. The cross pendant, high collar, and affectionate dog represent piety, modesty, and loyalty.

Lavinia Fontana, *Portrait of a Noblewoman*, ca. 1580; Oil on canvas; 45¼ x 35¼ inches; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay; Funding for the frame generously provided by the Texas State Committee of NMWA; Photograph by Lee Stalsworth

