Contessa Lucia’s Jewelry:
Recreating a set of jewelry from the mid 16th century
by Donna Fede di Fiore

Giovanni Battista Moroni
Portrait of a Lady, perhaps Contessa Lucia Albani Avogadro (‘La Dama in Rosso’)
c.1556 -1560

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This is an attempt to replicate the jewelry displayed in the “Portrait of a Lady” by Giovanni Battista Moroni. The sitter is thought to be Contessa Lucia Albani Avogadro, a mid 16th century Italian noble woman. Having scrutinized her earrings, pearl necklace, and bracelets, I cross referenced them against other sources in the hopes of recreating them as closely as possible.

**Earrings**

One thing that is immediately apparent when browsing ladies portraits from the 15th and 16th centuries is that the upperclass loved pearls. Sometimes you see enameled gold, intricate metalwork and/or gemstones, but in most cases, drop pearls were the way to go. This is due, in large part, to mid 15th century advances in European exploration and trade, making pearls much more readily available (AJU 2008). It’s also important to note that you don’t really see post earrings yet. Nearly all earrings from this period (from what I’ve seen in portraiture) were dangles in style, which were mounted from a simple metal hoop (usually gold). Because of this fact, I was fairly picky about my choice of jewelry hardware. I was lucky enough to find a set of ring-shaped earring-findings on Etsy and I think they make reasonable imitations.

I should also point out that the examples I’ve displayed all have ribbons tied decoratively in various places-- particularly around the earrings. I theorize that this was not a permanent alteration and

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Figure 2.1 Allasandro Allori  
_de Bianca Cappello  
c.1565 (detail)

Figure 2.2 Caravaggio  
Judith Beheading Holofernes  
c.1598 - 1599 (detail)

Figure 2.3  
Giovanni Battista Moroni,  
Isotta Brembati  
c.1552-53 (detail)

Figure 2.4  
Giovanni Battista Moroni  
Portrait of a lady with a fan  
c.1570-1580 (detail)

Figure 2.5 La Dama in Rosso, earring and necklace detail

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suggest this because it appears the ribbon tied to the earrings are often of the same color used to tape the sitter’s hair. I also think it would be silly to use the same ribbon continuously given that it could easily be untied and swapped with a different color for a different outfit. That said, my earrings will have this same adornment, but will be starched so that you can handle them without fear of the ribbons coming untied.

As I am trying to replicate the Contessa’s earring as closely as possible, I picked up a strand of “potato” freshwater pearls to use for my drop pearls. I don’t mind that they are slightly irregular, because it doesn’t seem that people in the renaissance minded either (compare to Figure 3.3). I wire mounted these and added a golden bead as an accompaniment. I chose a roll of polyester ribbon to adorn this pair, mostly for aesthetics. While modern, the ribbons remind me a bit of raw silk and I think they will hold their shape nicely when tied.

Pearl Necklace

I was able to procure a gorgeous strand of freshwater pearls from Gem-Inside to make my replica necklace. The Contessa’s pearls sit high like a collar on her neck, so in order to match that appearance,
my necklace should measure about 16.5”. To start, I measured out 4 times this length in thread. I had some silk thread I was saving for this project, but I was ultimately unimpressed with the strength compared to nylon. So we will be breaking with period in this one regard.

Because necklaces of this sort were supported by thread alone, very little in the way of historical extants survive. However, this sketch (Figure 4.1) made by a late 16th century Dutch jewelry dealer demonstrates the practice of knotting the pearls as they were strung. This was (and still is) done to prevent disaster if and when the strand breaks.

The drawing also displays the necklace closure as a simple bow tie using the remaining cord. I suspect this may have been a closure option, but I chose against this route with my own necklace since I don’t want to secure my necklace permanently by accident.

So how did most of these necklaces close? It seems many were long enough that a clasp or tie was not necessary. Some, like the Contessa’s, were certainly too short for that option. To get to the bottom of it I began researching paintings from the 15th to 17th centuries.

I was able to find 2 examples in portraiture of ribbons being used to secure a necklace (Figures 5.1 and 5.2). However for these scant few, there are dozens of lady’s displayed with what seems like nothing at all securing their beads in place (Figures 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5). I theorize this could be an aesthetic choice on the part of the painter, or that the clasps used were very small.

As far as clasps were concerned, we know the S hook clasp technology was used prior and directly following this period (Figure 5.7). We also see an example of simple hoop findings finishing the chain of the early 17th century extant (Figure 5.6). I would guess these hoops would have been ideal for fastening the necklace in place… say with a small length of ribbon?

With this research in hand, I chose to finish my strand with a simple 0.4” gold rings at each end. A matching ribbon will tie everything together. To give my necklace more strength, I double threaded my needle and secured each bead in place with a square knot, using an extra needle to guide the knot flush to each pearl.
Figure 5.1 Paolo Uccello
A young lady of fashion c. early 1460s
Note red ribbon

Figure 5.2 Bernardo Poccetti c.1610

Figure 5.3 Antonio del Pollaiuolo
Portrait of a Young Woman c. 1465-70
© Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan

Figure 5.4 Piero del Pollaiolo
Ritratto di giovane donna c.1480
© Firenze Galleria degli Uffizi

Figure 5.5 Piero del Pollaiolo
Ritratto di giovane donna c. 1480
© New York The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Figure 5.6 Early 17th century
© Victoria and Albert Museum

Figure 5.7 17th Century
Necklace © Victoria and Albert Museum

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I was very lucky to find gold colored beads that resembled those in the painting so closely. They have a good weight to them and I think they are reasonable replacements. I had more trouble placing the beads used as spacer beads. When I first showed this to a friend who has a MFA in jewelry making, she suggested that these may be oxidized silver, artfully buffed to create a banded design. Although we know silver was used for jewelry in this time period, gold was far more usual (Campbell 2009:14). I have my doubts as to whether they would have allowed silver to oxidize, much less do it on purpose.

I think it is far more likely we are looking at a type of polished gemstone. There are period examples of late sixteenth century cameos being created from chalcedony which is a banded hardstone (Tait 1986:220). We can observe through paintings that (in addition to pearls) beads of red coral, rock crystal and other stones were also worn at this time. My educated guess is that these are either black banded onyx or agate, because they bare a very strong resemblance Victorian agate jewelry (Figure 6.2). Agate itself is not so precious a stone, but painstakingly selecting and shaping it so that the banding runs perfect, uniform and across the bead’s axis would have made it a fine jewelry material indeed. Vintage agate necklace of this sort still price out to the hundreds of dollars!

My search for the perfect set of banded agate beads is ongoing. I did, however, have imitation red coral beads on hand in my craft hoard so I
used them instead. I have at least one example of coral being paired with gold beads in this fashion (see Figure 6.3).

Knotting my strand in much the same fashion as my pearl necklace, I opted to use a S-hook clasp for my bracelet instead of a tie. This choice was more of out of practicality than historical precedent, though I think an S-hook is a reasonable guess for the period.

Future Projects

This was my first attempt to accurately recreate and document Renaissance jewelry. I was fortunate to find an extremely high resolution copy of Giovanni Battista Moroni’s La Dama in Rosso, which made the barrier to entry for this project much less formidable. I do think I need more practice knotting pearls so I will likely re-strand my necklace and bracelet, as well as try my hand at stringing more ornate necklaces in the future. I am also still searching for the perfect set of agate beads to make a true set of Contessa Lucia’s bracelets. Once I have found the right materials, I will likely enter this project into future A&S competitions.

REFERENCES:

