

THE MEANING OF ORIENTAL CARPETS IN THE EARLY  
MODERN DOMESTIC INTERIOR:  
THE CASE OF LORENZO LOTTO'S *PORTRAIT OF A MARRIED  
COUPLE*

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**Abstract**

*Recent scholarship on the Early Modern domestic interior has brought renewed attention to the social and ideological functions of domestic objects, which grew in number and variety over the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The current study focuses on Turkish carpets, which appeared, along with other Oriental luxury goods, with increasing frequency within the homes of the urban elite during this period. Such carpets were highly valued by merchants and owners as well as by the artists who represented them with exquisite accuracy in their paintings. Through a close reading of the Turkish carpet in Lorenzo Lotto's Portrait of a Married Couple (Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia, 1523-24), this article argues that the display of Turkish carpets within portraits provides evidence of the complex and layered functions of these cherished exotic items. Specifically, representations of Turkish carpets within such portraits operated not only as markers of the economic, social, and intellectual status of the sitters, but also, within the context of the home and family, served a deeply spiritual and commemorative role by honouring the deceased and by acting as mediating objects between the physical and mental realms.<sup>1</sup>*

**A** recent focus of Renaissance studies centres on probing domestic interiors of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Italy through the

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Erin Campbell for inspiring me to study Early Modern interiors, though different from my own field of Islamic art, and for her ongoing instructive support throughout this study.

considerable quantity of furniture and household objects that have survived. These objects assist scholars in coming to a more accurate understanding of complex concepts such as family, private, public, and home, as well as patterns of consumption in Early Modern society. The importance of the Early Modern domestic interior as a field of study starts with our understanding of the roles of the domestic interior. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, houses and their interior spaces had a vital function in social life, equal to the court and church. The centrality of house (*casa*) focused considerable attention on both its building and interior as signs of the social status and wealth of its owner. A vast number of written sources preserved from the Italian Renaissance refer to the importance of the *casa* as the primary element of society.<sup>2</sup> Leon Battista Alberti advised that a home “should create a spiritual atmosphere suitable for man’s highest activities.”<sup>3</sup> With the expanding size of the house, the Italian elite became more concerned with furnishing the interior, and therefore required more objects and possessions to demonstrate their refined taste. This trend contributed to the development of “the culture of consumption.”<sup>4</sup> While such objects shape our understanding of domesticity in the period, we must nevertheless be cautious. As Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis warn, interpreting social history based on the meanings of these objects requires careful examination and must be done in conjunction with other source materials.<sup>5</sup>

One category of these objects, collected by patrician families, was Oriental luxury goods that became available in Europe through the East-West line of trade.

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<sup>2</sup> Marta Ajmar-Wollheim and Flora Dennis, “Introduction,” in *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, eds. Marta Ajmar-Wollheim and Flora Dennis (London: V&A publications, 2006), 12, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Richard A. Goldthwaite, *Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 1300-1600* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 224. Leon Battista Alberti was an Italian Renaissance humanist and architect.

<sup>4</sup> Goldthwaite, 224-242. Goldthwaite studies the process of this change.

<sup>5</sup> Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, 14-15.



**Figure 1. Lorenzo Lotto, *Portrait of a Married Couple*, 1523 – 1524. Oil on canvas, 96 x 116 cm. St. Petersburg, Russia, The State Hermitage Museum (Photo: Erich Lessing, Art Resource, NY).**

Such goods were generally interpreted as signifiers of wealth, social status and identity, and therefore became desirable among patrician families. These Oriental objects not only accumulated in homes but also appeared in the paintings the Italian elite commissioned, including both religious and private scenes. Thus, closer examination of such paintings allows us to assign additional meanings to these objects and to explore how their owners perceived them. Turkish carpets were one of the rarest and most desirable of these imported objects and received considerable attention not only by merchants and owners but also by the artists who represented them in their paintings with a significant amount of detail. Lorenzo Lotto, one of

the Renaissance masters of sixteenth century Italy, depicted carpets in several of his paintings, including *Portrait of a Married Couple* (1523-24) (figure 1). The emblematic meaning of this double portrait and its few objects has been the focus of many scholarly works. Yet, the role of the carpet as the Oriental object that occupies a rather large space at the center of this scene has received insufficient attention. By examining this family portrait of the sixteenth century by Lotto, I will attempt to demonstrate what Oriental carpets, in general, meant to patrician families and how their new owners perceived them. Although the constructed nature of Renaissance paintings does not allow us to fully comprehend the function of carpets in the real domestic interiors of the Early Modern era, the selection of the objects displayed in paintings provides access to the ideological and mental states of Early Modern inhabitants. This paper, in particular, interprets the symbolism of the carpet in *Portrait of a Married Couple* as a mediating feature that facilitates perceptions of the painting including the remembrance and admiration of its sitters by the viewers. Moreover, the carpet, here, signifies the spirituality, intellectualism and social status of the sitters and the ways in which they wished to be seen by the public.

This study starts by providing a wider perspective on how Oriental goods, Turkish carpets in particular, found their way into Renaissance interiors. The economic and artistic interactions between the West and the East as well as the exoticism of Oriental objects increased their popularity among Italian families. I also examine the origin and designs of these carpets to consider their relationship to the potential meanings of the carpet in the family portrait of this study. There exist various readings of *Portrait of a Married Couple* that, taken collectively, leave the meaning of the symbolism of the image uncertain. I, however, consider several lines of thought suggested by scholars of Renaissance studies that, though not

necessarily addressing this portrait nor the object of this study specifically, nonetheless assist in providing routes of interpretation of the meaning of the carpet in *Portrait of a Married Couple*.

The international trade line between Venice and the East assured the accumulation of Oriental luxury objects in Venice and beyond, including the whole of Italy and Europe. Venetians were merchants for whom trade and economy were central parts of their lives. The Venetian ruling elite ensured the political and economic growth of their wealth and their city into a powerful political centre in the world through maintaining a well-balanced religious, diplomatic, and economic interaction with the Islamic Near-East. In fact, this balance made Venice the strongest partner of the Near Eastern Mamluk and Ottoman empires among all European cities.<sup>6</sup> Italian diplomats and merchants regularly visited and resided in Islamic cities of the Near East and often received delegates from those cities during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; therefore, their understanding of the Orient differed from the rest of Europe.

As a result of diplomacy, Venice remained the primary place of import for Eastern merchandise into Europe.<sup>7</sup> In the first half of the sixteenth century, the artistic interaction between Venice and Ottoman cities reached its summit when there was a trend for Oriental patterns in Venice. Marketing policies, patronage, and political relationships with the Ottomans could all have influenced this trend.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, since the eleventh century, Venice had had several active trading posts called 'colonies' throughout the Islamic world with the Venetian elite travelling and

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<sup>6</sup> Stefano Carboni, "Introduction: Moments of Vision," in *Venice and the Islamic World, 828-1797*, ed. Stefano Carboni (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007), 22, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Deborah Howard, "Venice as an Eastern City," in *Venice and the Islamic World, 828-1797*, ed. Stefano Carboni (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007), 59; and Rosamond Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1600* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 20.

<sup>8</sup> Carboni, 23, 28-29.

residing in these colonies. Often, there were institutions in the colonies called *Funduq* that accommodated merchants and also controlled tax payments.<sup>9</sup>

The result of this international East-West trade line was a wealth of Oriental objects with different origins, styles, and types in Italian markets that “enriched the material culture and aesthetic horizons of Renaissance Italy.”<sup>10</sup> A shared feature of these objects was their portability, since they had to be imported in considerable quantity to spread throughout Europe. Superiority of the artistic quality, decoration, and the exoticism of these objects<sup>11</sup> as well as the growing wealth of the Italian elite in the Early Modern period not only generated an enormous demand for such goods, but also inspired local workshops to imitate and adapt them.<sup>12</sup> And, as Rosamond Mack points out, the absence of any religious icons in their decoration due to the Islamic prohibition of idolatry along with a shared Byzantine artistic heritage could be additional reasons for the acceptance and popularity of Oriental objects in Europe. Islamic artists and people of the Italian Renaissance alike put stress on harmony, balance, and perfection in design and composition, the former of an ornamental and the latter of a representational nature.<sup>13</sup> Although Oriental objects were the signifiers of economic status that only the upper class of society could afford, their function in the domestic interior was not explicitly decorative; they also found practical purposes in Italian domestic interiors, sometimes entirely different from their original purpose in their original lands.<sup>14</sup>

One such example was carpets. Hand-knotted pile carpets, produced with advanced technique and design, were commonly used as floor covers meant for sitting on in the East, while they decorated altars, tables, and chests or were hung

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<sup>9</sup> Howard, 60; and Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Anna Contadini, “Middle-Eastern Objects,” in *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, (see note 1), 309.

<sup>11</sup> Contadini, 308-309; and Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 2-3.

<sup>12</sup> Contadini, 309. Contadini refers to this trend as “Islamicizing tendencies within Italian art.”

<sup>13</sup> Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 4, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Contadini, 309; and Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 5.

from walls and balconies in Renaissance churches and homes.<sup>15</sup> Only on some special occasions, like weddings, were large carpets used as floor coverings in Italy. Carpets can be seen as floor coverings mainly in religious paintings, such as in scenes of the Annunciation and of the Virgin and Child.<sup>16</sup> Further, Venetian documentary sources, such as Marin Sanudo's diaries, indicate that in Venice on occasions of holidays and festivals, the Venetian elite displayed their carpets in public.<sup>17</sup> That demonstrated both individual wealth and the Republic's political and economic power. Rosamond Mack mentions specific occasions when Venetians displayed their carpets publicly, including religious occasions like the Feast of Madonna or celebrations like the victory over the Ottomans. Moreover, renting carpets was common in Venice.<sup>18</sup> The high cost, difficulty of portability, and failure of local workshops in reproducing such carpets reinforced their desirability for Italians, among whom even the richest elite could afford only few.<sup>19</sup> Yet, Venetian merchants guaranteed the supply of this demand in the market, and, in a few cases, were also involved in the production of carpets.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to their role in interiors, carpets were represented in paintings commissioned by patrician families, either in religious scenes or family portraits. Thus the naturalistic paintings of the Italian masters provide valuable visual evidence for the study of carpets and their meanings in Early Modern interiors. This indirect evidence, however, requires careful interpretation. As Luke Syson states with regard to devotional images of the period, these paintings which, so far, have been

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<sup>15</sup> Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 5; and Contadini, 315.

<sup>16</sup> John Mills, "The Coming of the Carpet to the West," in *The Eastern Carpet in the Western World*, eds. Donald King and David Sylvester (London, UK: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1983), 14.

<sup>17</sup> Marin Sanudo (1466-1536) was secretary of the Venetian state and recorded the lifeways of Renaissance Venice in his multi-volume *Diarii*, cited in Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 77-78.

<sup>18</sup> Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 77-78.

<sup>19</sup> Examining the value of carpets in different inventories, Rosamond Mack highlights Lorenzo Medici's best table carpet that was valued at more than two sculptures by Donatello owned in 1493. See Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 73.

<sup>20</sup> Contadini, 315. Some Venetians sponsored carpet looms in Eastern cities.

interpreted by art historians through “a fixed symbolic language”, actually delineate and instruct us as to the meanings of the real objects in “real interiors”.<sup>21</sup> Representations of carpets in paintings, which started in the fourteenth century, increased by the mid-fifteenth century. For example, a single Anatolian carpet design, known as a “Lotto” carpet, was reproduced in a hundred Renaissance paintings between the early sixteenth and the mid-seventeenth centuries.<sup>22</sup>

In the nineteenth century, carpet weaving became an area of study, and these paintings became the most important source of information for carpet designs of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>23</sup> The mastery of Italian painters in depicting the details of these high quality carpets, probably at the patron’s request, allowed the audience to recognize the knotted carpets through rows of parallel lines as well as to identify their designs. Since the provenances of these carpets were not known in the early years of carpet studies, it became convenient to call the designs after the painters who depicted them.<sup>24</sup> One example is the “Lotto” carpet design named after Lorenzo Lotto, the Venetian painter of the sixteenth century (c. 1480-1556/1557).<sup>25</sup>

Lotto, well-known for his large-scale religious paintings in Bergamo and the Vatican, upon his return to Venice, was commissioned largely by the wealthy businessmen and the elite of Venice to portray their private lives as well as smaller scale devotional images for their interiors.<sup>26</sup> In six of his paintings and one altarpiece, Lotto delineates two key designs of high quality Turkish carpets: the

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<sup>21</sup> Luke Syson, “Representing Domestic Interiors,” in *At Home in Renaissance Italy* (see note 1), 88-89.

<sup>22</sup> Contadini, 315; and Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 75-76. Rosamond Mack lists and explains some of these paintings and the types of carpets depicted in them.

<sup>23</sup> Kurt Erdman, *Seven Hundred Years of Oriental Carpets* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970), 21.

<sup>24</sup> Mills, “The Coming of the Carpet to the West,” 14. This trend was eventually followed in literature.

<sup>25</sup> Other examples are large pattern and small pattern Holbein carpets named after Hans Holbein.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Humfrey, “Lorenzo Lotto: Life and Work,” in *Lorenzo Lotto: Rediscovered Master of the Renaissance*, eds. D. Brown, P. Humfrey and M. Lucco (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1997), 8.



“Lotto” rug and the re-entrant prayer rug<sup>27</sup> (figure 2), both produced in the Ushak region in the center of western Anatolia. In his representations, Lotto paid outstanding attention to the details of these carpets. It appears he owned one of these elite imported carpets; however, it is not certain which design his carpet had.<sup>28</sup> The “Lotto” design was formerly known as “small pattern Holbein”, although Kurt Erdman’s detailed study shows that these two designs, “small Holbein” and “Lotto”, were actually different in the repeated field pattern.<sup>29</sup> The main characteristics of “Lotto” carpets were yellow field patterns on dark red backgrounds.

The re-entrant carpet design, also known as keyhole or “Bellini,” had a one directional design with a niche at the top end and a keyhole at the bottom. Artists such as Gentile Bellini, Giovanni Bellini, Carpaccio, and Lotto all depicted this carpet design in their paintings; however, it was Giovanni Bellini who, in 1507, depicted the carpet design in its entirety for the first time in *Doge Loredan and Four Advisors*.<sup>30</sup> The keyhole, typical of this carpet design, probably symbolized the basin for purification before prayer or an elevated ground for prayer, or simply the niche in a mosque (*mihrab*).<sup>31</sup> The one directional pattern and rather portable size of these carpets related them to the prayer practices of Muslims, facing Mecca, and therefore marked them as ‘prayer rugs’ or ‘mosque carpets’ (or ‘*tapedi a moschetti*’) as

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<sup>27</sup> Aslanpa comprehensively introduces this type of carpet design with all the variants in patterns and motifs; see Oktay Aslanpa, “Prayer Rugs,” *One Thousand Years of Turkish Carpets*, (Istanbul: Muhittin Salih Eren, 1988), 145-192. John Mills examines the variants of the same design in the paintings of European masters. See John Mills, “Carpets in Paintings: The Bellini, Keyhole or Re-entrant Rugs,” *Hali: The International Journal of Oriental Carpets and Textiles* 13 (Aug 1991): 86-103.

<sup>28</sup> Rosamond Mack, “Lotto: A Carpet Connoisseur,” in *Lorenzo Lotto: Rediscovered Master of the Renaissance* (see note 25), 59; and Mills, “The Coming of the Carpet to the West,” 16.

<sup>29</sup> Erdman, 59-60.

<sup>30</sup> Now in Bode Museum, Berlin. For its reproduction see Mills, “Carpets in Paintings,” 101, fig. 30. Oktay Aslanpa, however, acknowledges Gentile Bellini’s *Madonna and Child Enthroned* as the earliest representation of this design. See Oktay Aslanpa, “Prayer Rugs,” 146. John Mills attributes the name to both Giovanni and Gentile Bellini; see Mills, “The Coming of the Carpet to the West,” 16.

<sup>31</sup> Similar views are discussed in Aslanpa, “Prayer Rugs,” 146.

recorded in Italian inventories.<sup>32</sup> Their religious meaning, however, for Venetians and Muslims is unknown. Although these carpets may have had secular use and meaning in Anatolia and were applied in both sacred and secular settings in Italy, their association with Islam may be one of the reasons they were wholly removed from paintings by 1560.<sup>33</sup>



**Figure 2. Re-entrant Prayer Rug, Anatolia, Turkey, late 15<sup>th</sup> or early 16<sup>th</sup> c., wool. Berlin, Germany, Museum fuer Islamische Kunst, Staatliche Museen (Photo: Georg Niedermeiser).**

<sup>32</sup> Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 84. In Venice, the inventory of Francesco Badoer of 1521 lists eight mosque carpets. The inventory of Lorenzo Correr in 1584 lists ten of these carpets.

<sup>33</sup> Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, 84-85. Mack, of course, states this in a more confident voice.

In sixteenth century Italy, marriage portraits or double portraits of husband and wife in celebration of their marital union obtained great popularity among patrician families who were concerned about the “growing independence” of the conjugal couple and “the exclusion of the lineage”.<sup>34</sup> *Portrait of a Married Couple* was one of the private commissions Lotto received in Bergamo in 1523-24 immediately before his return to Venice.<sup>35</sup> In this family portrait, Lotto depicts the bottom end of a re-entrant carpet. The keyhole of the carpet is located between the couple. The shiny pile of the carpet with its curved palmette border shows the high quality of the rug. Lotto had already proven his expertise in depicting details of carpets in *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine with the Donor Bonghi* in 1523. In that painting, he shows the dense knot count of a rug by depicting its reverse side on the left of the painting behind the head of Bonghi. He represents different details of a re-entrant rug in an earlier painting, *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints Catherine, Augustine, John the Baptist, Sebastian, and Anthony Abbot*, dating to 1521.

The unconventional iconography of *Portrait of a Married Couple* has long puzzled scholars who have generated various theories about the identification of the sitters as well as the symbolic meaning of the few objects represented: the dog, the squirrel, the text, and the carpet. A preparatory drawing for this painting has survived in which the couple is represented in a more natural and intimate manner.<sup>36</sup> However, Lotto designed the completed portrait in a more constructed

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<sup>34</sup> Diane Owen Hughes, “Representing the Family: Portraits and Purposes in Early Modern Italy,” in *Art and History: Images and Their Meaning*, eds. Robert Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 15, 20.

<sup>35</sup> Attribution of this painting to Lotto is generally accepted while its dating ranges between 1521 to 1535 with the year 1523 as the most accepted date among scholars. For a summary of discussions see Mauro Lucco, “Bergamo,” in *Lorenzo Lotto: Rediscovered Master of the Renaissance*, 148.

<sup>36</sup> The preparatory drawing is now preserved in Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, RP-T-1949-551. For a reproduction, see John Pope-Hennessy, *The Portrait in the Renaissance* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1966), 232.

setting to emphasize the symbolism in the image<sup>37</sup> and to provide a “philosophical gloss.”<sup>38</sup> Lotto was well-known for his innovative use of symbols in his paintings to convey complex ideas and to emphasize the spiritual life and relationship between the couples he depicted in his marriage portraits.<sup>39</sup> His highly symbolic covers for the Biblical stories commission he received in 1524 in Bergamo confirm his knowledge of and fascination with allegories and symbols.<sup>40</sup> Using symbols, he constructed his portraits to convey more precise meanings—what John Pope-Hennessy calls an “emblematic tendency.” Pope-Hennessy further explains “the use of emblems to illustrate a psychological condition” as a German influence in the works of Venetian artists including Lotto.<sup>41</sup> Certainly the comparison between the painting and its drawing suggests that a more complex idea beyond a simple portrayal of the likeness of the sitters was meant to be delivered.

The similarity of the headdress of the woman in this family portrait with Agnese Cassotti’s headdress in Previtali’s *Virgin and Child with Saints Paul and Agnese*<sup>42</sup> combined with the possibility of the headdress as a family possession that remained in the custody of the male line has led some scholars to identify the man in *Portrait of a Married Couple* as a Cassotti—perhaps Gian Maria Cassotti, the elder brother of Marsilio Cassotti—and the woman as his wife, Laura Assonica.<sup>43</sup> While Mauro Lucco supports this latter identification and interprets the portrait based on that, other scholars doubt his hypothesis and believe the identity of the sitters has yet to

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<sup>37</sup> Pope-Hennessy, 233.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Humfrey, *Lorenzo Lotto* (London: Yale University Press, 1997): 72.

<sup>39</sup> Nancy Edwards, 268.

<sup>40</sup> Diana W. Galis, “Concealed Renaissance Hieroglyphic and Lorenzo Lotto’s Bergamo *Intarsie*,” *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Sep. 1980): 363-375.

<sup>41</sup> Pope-Hennessy, 223, 227-28. Pope-Hennessy observes that Lotto had contacts with the German colony in Venice and was in touch with Durer in 1505-1506.

<sup>42</sup> Accademia Carrara, Bergamo; ca. 1520-23.

<sup>43</sup> For a summary of various identifications, see Peter Humfrey, *Lorenzo Lotto*, 70-71; and Nancy Edwards, “Lorenzo Lotto, Catalogue 124: Portrait of a Married Couple,” in *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Andrea Bayer (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), 268; and Mauro Lucco, 150.

be discovered.<sup>44</sup> It is now generally accepted that the sitters portrayed were not a newlywed couple, as was earlier thought, but had been married for some time and, according to Lucco's theory, actually had two daughters by the time this portrait was done. The couple is portrayed sitting at the two sides of a rather small table covered by a re-entrant carpet that generates a distance between them. The man has both hands on the table, one holding a text saying *HOMO NUM/QUAM* (Man never), while pointing to a sleeping squirrel with the other hand. An unusual feature is the higher position of the wife in comparison with her husband, who occupies more space. Another is the contrast in skin tones of the couple; his skin is red and hers is pale white. Although the wife has placed her hand on her husband's arm, they seem to be separated, belonging to two different worlds. According to Lucco's interpretation, Laura had died by the time Lotto painted this scene and Gian Maria Cassotti had commissioned the painting right after her death. Cassotti's red eyes and nose in the image indicate that he has been crying, mourning the loss of his wife. He is referring to the sleeping squirrel to say that he never sleeps during the troubled days of his family life—a reference to his wife's death—as a squirrel does in stormy days, which are further symbolized by the bending trees in the window view.<sup>45</sup> The woman is holding a dog as a traditional symbol of marital fidelity. The emblematic meaning of the squirrel and its possible connection with the text has been the subject of opposing interpretations. Nonetheless, it is largely accepted as symbolizing an oath by the male sitter to remember the responsibilities of good husbandry in the difficult days of life.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Nancy Edwards, 268; and Alexander Nagel, Book Review, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 80, No. 4 (Dec. 1998): 744.

<sup>45</sup> Mauro Lucco, 148-151. Alexander Nagel calls Mauro Lucco's reading of this painting "ingenious and risky" and "difficult to accept"; see Nagel, 743.

<sup>46</sup> Religious, political and even meteorological disruptions in early 16<sup>th</sup> century Bergamo could have caused difficulties in the family life of the sitters; see Nancy Edwards, 268-69.

Yet the role of the carpet as one of the four objects depicted in the scene remains in question. As Syson argues in a slightly different context, the presence of contemporary objects in devotional images breaks the boundaries between past and present. He employs Henri Lefebvre's theory of representational space to interpret devotional images, classifying the objects as mediators with which viewers could identify.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, this study draws upon the same argument of connection between physical and mental spaces in relation to *Portrait of a Married Couple*. The carpet in this family portrait could mediate between viewers and the memory of the deceased wife/mother to connect the physical and mental realms or spaces. In Lefebvre's terms the physical-mental-social states are interpreted through the lived-perceived-conceived triad in which the physical realm or the representational space is alive and dynamic. It is a passively-experienced space that lives through images and representations and uses objects symbolically. These realms, or the triad of life-thought-society, can be interconnected.<sup>48</sup> If we consider *Portrait of a Married Couple* as a depiction of a representational space, the carpet can change from a thing or a decorative element into an object involved in the process of the production of space. Adhering to Lefebvre's theory, "the 'object' of interest must be expected to shift from *things in space* to the actual *production of space*."<sup>49</sup>

While the social meaning of the Oriental carpet as a desirable object and marker of the owner's status is clear, the spiritual meaning of this object stands out in *Portrait of a Married Couple*. After all, this portrait was not only facilitating the collective memory of the family in remembrance of the deceased wife, but it also represented the honour of both wife and family for the public and society; that is, the honour that a patrician family needed to possess in order to be remembered and

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<sup>47</sup> Syson, 87-88, 98, 101.

<sup>48</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (MA: Blackwell University Press, 1991), 38-42.

<sup>49</sup> Lefebvre, 36-37.

portrayed. In her study of Florentine portraiture, Alison Wright examines how the remembrance of absent or deceased family members was considered positive in Renaissance society and how their representations in portraits depicted their virtue in familial and public memories in Florence in the fifteenth century. This commemoration of deceased family members through portraiture, which was more often applied to the male members of society, later was devoted to women and their memory as well. This is how women could secure a place in public memory after death.<sup>50</sup> The power of images represented in devotional scenes is a well-studied subject. Yet, referring to writers such as Petrarch, Wright demonstrates that such power was also assigned to the portraits of individuals in case of their death or long absence. But did the carpet in *Portrait of a Married Couple* play any role in reinforcing the power of remembrance? According to Italian inventories, the re-entrant carpet was accepted as a prayer rug due to its one directional design or its small size, suggesting that it was perceived as an object that produced a spiritual space, capable of empowering the spiritual activity of remembrance.

If we accept the consumption of culture as an activity that “enables individuals to construct social identities,”<sup>51</sup> the excellence of the carpet represented in this memorial portrait could depict the virtue and excellent being of the sitters associated with it both for the family members who would have inherited the painting (perhaps the two daughters) as well as for public viewers. In the case of this portrait, as well as many other portraits of individuals, we do not know if they were displayed in more public spaces of the house nor do we know how the public perceived them. In addition, to borrow from Lefebvre’s concept of categories of

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<sup>50</sup> Alison Wright, “The Memory of Faces: Representational Choices in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Portraiture,” in *Art, Memory and Family in Renaissance Florence*, eds. Giovanni Ciappelli and Patricia Lee Rubin (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 87-88, 91, 106.

<sup>51</sup> Ann Bermingham, “Introduction,” in *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text*, eds. Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 9. Bermingham introduces this as the subject of many studies in this book.

space, we do not know how these representational spaces and the objects in them were interpreted symbolically by their viewers.<sup>52</sup> In her study of the Portraits of Old Women in Early Modern Italy, Erin J. Campbell draws on Lefebvre's theory of representational space to recognize the symbolic elements of these portraits as a "part of the lived experience of individuals within the homes where such portraits were displayed." Campbell suggests the possibility of looking at them as "cultural performances" and not only as works of art.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, *Portrait of a Married Couple*, with all its emblematic elements, could actively engage in the lives of its viewers by performing a cultural function. The display of objects to raise public admiration was a common practice in Early Modern Italy and can be recognized as one method designed to influence viewer response to the portraits.<sup>54</sup> In its least complicated interpretation, the carpet in this family portrait could have targeted this convention of admiration.

Unfortunately, it is not known if the sitters of this portrait actually owned the carpet or if such representation of the carpet was Cassotti's choice or Lotto's. In any case, as Maria Ruvoldt points out, display of carpets in portraits elevated "the sitter's identity as a connoisseur and collector" who owned this rare and excellent object. The convention of depicting carpets in the foreground of the portrait as a table cover was inherited from religious paintings and indicated an ideal world and "an imaginary gateway to a distant and exotic locale." Ruvoldt further states that the Eastern origin of the carpets related them to the Holy Land, the origin of Christianity, and thus their originating location functioned to emphasize their spiritual nature and authenticity. Moreover, she asserts that Renaissance secular intellectuals, as preservers of Christian heritage, were interested in Eastern

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<sup>52</sup> Lefebvre, 36-46; and Syson, 98.

<sup>53</sup> Erin J. Campbell, "Prophets, Saints and Matriarchs: Portraits of Old Women in Early Modern Italy," *Renaissance Quarterly* 63 (2010): 810.

<sup>54</sup> Wright, 88.



traditions and scholarship. Carpets could be signifiers both of that heritage and of contemporary intellectual interest.<sup>55</sup> Though we do not have information on the intellectual activities or interests of the Cassottis, it seems possible that public perception of carpets as signifiers of secular intellectualism may have influenced the selection of the representation of the carpet in *Portrait of a Married Couple*. Much like a portrait of a scholar in his study, this family portrait presents more than a space; more truly, it represents an imagined space, a state of mind. The painting yields the impression that the viewer is positioned at one side of the table where Cassotti is sitting while the representation of the carpet separates them from Cassotti's wife and the world to which she belongs. In Ruvoldt's terms, carefully selected Oriental objects such as the carpet hold the "powers of intercession and communion with another world."<sup>56</sup> I suggest, therefore, that the stilted mood of the sitters, the unusual higher position of the wife in relation to her husband, their contrasting skin colours, and the representation of the carpet could be Lotto's emblematic attempts to depict an imagined space.

Although portraits, because of their constructed nature, do not provide a factual presentation of domestic interiors in the Early Modern period, they do allow access to the ideological perception of objects in the eyes of the public, either their owners or the viewers of such paintings. The meanings of the carpet in *Portrait of a Married Couple* can be explained through several interpretations. It could function as a mediator and facilitate the shift from physical to mental space in the production of space, or it could highlight the honour of the deceased wife in family memory. Moreover, it could symbolize the sitters' wealth and social status and raise public admiration, or it could represent the intellectual appreciation of Oriental traditions

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<sup>55</sup> Maria Ruvoldt, "Sacred to Secular, East to West: the Renaissance Study and Strategies of Display," *Renaissance Studies* 20, No. 5 (2006): 654-55. Ruvoldt examines carpets as table covers in the study.

<sup>56</sup> Ruvoldt, 657.

in the secular intellectual atmosphere of the sixteenth century. Acceptance of any of these meanings assigns a social and ideological value to the Oriental carpet in Early Modern society and family, no matter if the Early Modern subjects depicted really owned a carpet and displayed it in their homes or only idealized having it.