

# The True Face of Ilaria

Our cover photograph is of the ever fascinating Ilaria del Carretto, second wife of Paolo Guinigi, as she appears today. Ilaria lived from 1379 to 1405. She died in childbirth at the age of 26, after which her aggrieved husband, a rich Luccese *Signore*, commissioned Jacopo della Quercia to sculpt her sarcophagus. Ilaria was rendered even more touching by the realistic little dog at her feet, who symbolized marital fidelity. Ilaria on her bier, with that slight smile and her lovely curls surrounded by a flowered head-dress, has been enchanting visitors to Lucca's Duomo for over 600 years. But she hasn't always been so waxy and smooth.

Ilaria was "reborn" about 23 years ago (in 1989), when she underwent a controversial restoration. So surprised was the American sculptress Laura Zeigler, who has lived and worked in Lucca and Pietrasanta for the past 60 years, that she phoned up art historian James Beck, Founding Director of ArtWatch International and Professor at Columbia University. Beck was an expert on 14th and 15th century art, and especially on Jacopo della Quercia. He described the cleanup job as something between Spic and Span and Johnson's Wax, and suggested that the cleaning fluid used might have been Fomblin, an experimental synthetic oil manufactured by Solvay (near Livorno). Among the evidence he cited Ilaria's curls, which seemed thinner and flattened down after the restoration.

Beck's criticism sparked a lawsuit by the Lucca restorer. Beck was sued in Florence, Livorno, Alessandria and Turin, and he faced a possible three-year prison term for defamation. But his Florentine colleagues supported his right to criticize. Even one of Ilaria's relatives sustained Beck's critique. Ilaria was once the property of the Contessa Stefania Barsotti, a descendent of the Guinigi family. The Contessa commented: "The monument is changed. The marble was vibrant, living. And this sensation was given to me by the patina of time. Ilaria was still pulsating. Now she is so white, frozen, cold. She seems to have been sculpted yesterday." (*La Repubblica* 18 May 1991).

The case was resolved, and Beck was acquitted in 1991.

All this was brought to my attention by Laura over Thanksgiving lunch, as we were discussing the meaning and value of art. Laura, who studied in Rome on a Fulbright in 1949, is an excellent sculptress in her own right. She was selected for the Venice Biennale in 1956 and 1958, and is on exhibit in many distinguished galleries, including New York's Museum of Modern Art, the Hirshhorn in Washington, D.C., and private collections including those of the Rockefellers and the Whitneys. Her opinion, then as now, holds weight.

I want to thank Laura for helping me view Ilaria with imaginary distorting glasses, to remember her as she was. Not perfect, perhaps, but perhaps more alive. With that conservative spirit, later restorations will have been more careful, as in this lovely wooden polychrome of San Martino from San Cassiano di Controne.

**Complesso Museale e Archeologico della Cattedrale di Lucca.** Ilaria is in the Sacristy of the Cathedral, open to the public in winter (3 November to 14 March) from Monday to Friday 9.30am to 4.45pm, Saturday 9.30am to 6.45pm, Sunday 9.30am to 10.45am and 12 to 5pm. From mid-March to November she can be seen Monday to Friday 9.30pm to 5.45pm, Saturday 9.30am to 6.45pm, Sunday 9am to 10.45am and 11.30am to 6pm. Tel. 0583 490530, [www.museocattedralelucca.it](http://www.museocattedralelucca.it)



*Ilaria before her restoration. From the book by James Beck and Aurelio Amendola (photographer), **Ilaria del Carretto di Jacopo Della Quercia**, curated by the Archdiocese of Lucca and the Cathedral of San Martino. Edizioni Amilcare Pizzi, Milan, 1988.*



*San Martino, attributed to Jacopo della Quercia. A wooden sculpture from the early 15th century; from San Cassiano di Controne (Bagni di Lucca), thought to have originally been in the Duomo of Lucca and contemporary with Ilaria del Carretto's effigy. [http://sacrumluce.sns.it/mv/html/OPE/OA\\_\\_090051037200000/](http://sacrumluce.sns.it/mv/html/OPE/OA__090051037200000/)*

— by Norma Jean Bishop