

This study examines the rich iconographic tradition of a painting by an unknown artist from the collections of Galleria Nazionale in Rome's Palazzo Barberini. The baroque picture depicting the bust of a young woman wearing a plain white robe and a cloth around the head in the fashion of a turban, was erroneously identified at the end of the 18th century as portrait of the Italian noblewoman Beatrice Cenci, who was executed in 1599 for complicity in the murder of her father Francesco Cenci. As Francesco had been jailed for many crimes and was known for tyrannical treatment of his family, general sympathy went out to Beatrice. She was admired for her beauty and the courage with which she faced imprisonment and torture. The dramatic case was exacerbated by a suspicion raised by the Cenci lawyer that Francesco had sexually abused his daughter Beatrice. Although this suspicion has never been confirmed, it brought Beatrice the aureole of a martyr.

General fascination with the lot of the young noblewoman became a romantic legend at the time of Beatrice's imprisonment. In popular oral tradition it lived on for several centuries. In the middle of the 18th century the Cenci story appeared in a popular chronicle, *Annali D'Italia*, published by the Italian scholar Muratori. In late 18th century, a painting of a young woman that was held to be portrait of Beatrice Cenci was discovered in the Colonna family collection. Soon afterwards the painting began to be associated with the Italian baroque painter Reni. The circumstances in which the painting was done passed into legend that told of Reni's dramatic visit to the prison on the eve of Beatrice's execution. The artist is said to have painted her portrait in moments of the deepest sorrow when she was searching her conscience and weeping over the fate of her family.

The romantic story and the picture associated with it caught and held the imagination of many writers and artists, in particular in the 19th century, who drew inspiration from them for their own works. Fascination with the assumed portrait of Beatrice Cenci has endured into the 20th century and is still a living part of popular culture, as we see, for example, in contemporary American film where the motif of the alleged portrait of Beatrice Cenci also appears.