

**Sinister Speculation: Breast Cancer in Raphael's *La Fornarina***  
Meagan Khoury, Stanford University

*La Fornarina* is a contested painting: doctors and art historians each claim it as their own. With the health of Margherita Luti's breasts attracting attention in polemical postulations and diagnostic debates, Raphael's *La Fornarina* (1518-20) has been weaponized as a hostile inflection point of art history and medicine. Art historical scholarship has discussed the painting minus the diagnosis, and the medical establishment has weighed in on the diagnosis, but only marginally on the picture. While surgeons admit the presence of a mass in Margherita's left breast, the vagaries of color, shadow, and inexact brushstrokes make diagnosing breast cancer in art history fraught with limitations and irresponsibilities. However, if we follow the tradition of Raphael as a painter of incorruptible grace and perfection, and that *La Fornarina* is a hyper-realistic portrait of Margherita Luti, as argued by Daniel Arasse, then claims of breast cancer in the painting should be taken seriously. Discussing breast cancer in *La Fornarina* exposes questions about art history as a form of symptomatology. What is a symptom for art historians? How do medical semiotics connect to visual semiotics? To answer such questions, I turn to scholars such as Georges Didi-Huberman and Carlo Ginzburg to explore the concepts of diagnostics and prognostics, and the relationship between "formal" and "informal" knowledge. Through these frameworks, we can begin to scratch at the veil of *La Fornarina*, revealing the secrets of her corporeal interiority, responsibly conjuring fragments to inform the whole.

**Meagan Khoury** researches and writes about late medieval and early modern art and cultural production, with a particular emphasis on Italian single women, saints, and mystics. Her theoretical concerns explore questions around feminist utopias, eucharistic ecstasies, and gendered boundary transgressions. Meagan is currently a doctoral student in Art History at Stanford University. She received her master's degree from the University of York.