

# Attributes of Decorum. Youth, Beauty, Lion Fur



by Cesare Ripa, Giovanni Zaratino Castellini

*Immediately after the Ekphrasis (i.e., description) of Decorum, epigraphist and scholar Giovanni Zaratino Castellini motivates the various attributes of the allegory he compiled for the 1613 edition of Cesare Ripa's Iconologia, starting with the anagraphic-physical ones (he is a young and handsome man), and then moving on to the first of the garments covering it, the Lion Fur. Each element is faithfully reproduced in the image paired with Castellini's text. He writes meticulously and repetitively, piling notion upon notion, without any stylistic embellishment. The reader who will have the patience to follow him will be able to gain insight into the antiquarian culture of the Renaissance and Baroque periods and the circumstantial method followed by the intellectuals and artists of the time to elaborate images, both conceptual and visual, that are dense with meaning and capable of speaking for a tradition, a civilization and a complex cultural universe. In this context, the notion of Decorum is pivotal, almost the sum of various other virtues, better known and analyzed by scholars, which have already appeared in previous editions of Iconologia. Indeed, in the figure of Decorum converge ethical and aesthetic reasons, rectitude of action and good manners through which it manifests itself and gains credibility. See C. Ripa, Iconologia, Eredi di Matteo Florimi, Siena 1613, pp. 171-173.*

He is a fine young man, because decorum, and the ornament of human life, is honest, for decorum is always united with honesty: for, as Marcus Tullius wisely argues in *De Officiis*, Book I, propriety, understood in general, is that in which all forms of honesty are found; & it is of two kinds, for to this general decorum there is implied another, which is essential in every form of honesty. The first is defined as follows. Decorum is that which befits the excellence of man, in so far as his nature differs from that of other animals. The other part, which is subject to the sex, they define thus. Decorum is that which is so agreeable to nature, that moderation appears in it, is temperance, with a certain noble, civil, and free manner. So that decorum is present in everything that belongs to the honest in general & in particular in every kind of virtue; therefore, as the beauty of the body, with the beautiful proportion of the limbs, allures & attracts the eye & for that very reason is a delight, because all the parts relate gracefully & correspond to each other, so from decorum, the splendour of life, comes the approval of those with whom one lives with order, constancy & moderation in all that is said & done: from this it follows that decorum is observed in speaking & acting with honour & in considering what is proper to follow & what is proper to avoid, following just & honourable things as good & expedient, avoiding unjust & dishonest things as bad & unbecoming, contrary to decorum & honour, which is derived from either of these parts; either from the diligent respect & observance of truth, or from the maintenance of human conversation & commerce, giving to each his own, according to the faith given, in contrary things, or from the exalted & invincible greatness & strength of mind in all things, which is known & told in order & manner, in which there is modesty, temperance & every mitigation of the disturbance of the soul, in which there is decorum, the strength of which is that it cannot be separated from honesty, for what is proper is honest & what is honest is proper. Hence Marcus Tullius said. *Hoc loco continetur id quod dici latine Decorum potest, græce enim (τὸ prepon) dicitur, huius vis est ut ab honesto non queat separari; nam & quod decet honestum est, & quod honestum est decet.* Further down he adds. *Et iusta omnia decora sunt iniusta contra, ut turpia sic indecora. Similis est ratio fortitudinis, quid enim viriliter animoque; magno fit, id dignum viro, & decorum videtur: quod contra id ut turpe, sic indecorum* [1]. In order to show the greatness, strength & high virtue of mind that decorum requires, we have depicted him with a lion's fur, for the ancients regarded lion's fur as a symbol of the value of virtue & strength of mind that they assigned to those who had observed decorum, & had shown themselves to be generous, strong and magnanimous, because everything that is done with humanity & great soul seems worthy of a man who observes decorum, while he who lives effeminately, without constancy & greatness of mind, is devoid of decorum. Bacchus, whom Orpheus chose as the symbol of divine intellect, wears lion's fur in Aristophanes [2]; Hercules, the most virile and virtuous of the Argonauts, always wore lion's fur; Ajax, the first captain of the Greeks after Achilles, also chose lion's fur for his

adornment, & it is said that where he was covered with it he could not be wounded, where he was uncovered he could be wounded, to which may be given this beautiful meaning, that a man, in actions in which he behaves with decorum, but in actions in which he does not observe decorum, he suffers stings of blame and shame which go to his heart, as in the case of Ajax, who, so long as in his actions he maintained a manly attitude of decorum, was never blamed, but much praised; but was much reproached when he divested himself of the lion's fur, that is to say, of the strength of mind, and yielded to despair without decorum. We have also wrapped decorum in the lion's fur, for just as this animal is physically the best structured and composed of all, so in soul no one follows decorum more than him, for he is liberal, magnanimous, victory-loving, mild, just & amiable with those with whom he converses, as Aristotle says in *Physognomics* ch. 8 and lib. 9 ch. 44, concerning animals [3], he is not suspicious but pleasant, festive and affectionate with his companions & family members. He never gets angry with a man unless he is offended, he is moderate in his punishment if someone has slightly annoyed him, he does not tear him with his nails but merely shakes him off, & as soon as he has frightened him he lets him go: if anything, he tries to punish severely those who have beaten & injured him with darts or skewers. From Elianus, supported by the authority of Eudemus [4], we learn that he disliked outrages & indeed punished them; in fact, Elianus relates that a Lion, a Bear & a Dog reared together and lived for a long time without quarrelling and with intimacy; but one day it happened that the Bear, seized with rage, slashed the Dog; the Lion, seeing the offense done to his friend, could not bear the outrage and attacked the Bear, slashing him, and, being an impartial king, condemned him to death. According to Pliny [5], he is a grateful animal, attentive to favours, mild and forgiving to those who submit to him, he always shows nobility and generosity of spirit, and when he is forced to retreat by a multitude of hounds & hunters, he does not immediately flee before them, lest he jeopardise his reputation, which is unbecoming to a king like him, but retreats little by little with elegance, & from time to time, for the sake of decorum, he stops in the open field & threatens them & shows them contempt, until, having gone into the vegetation without being seen, he hastily hides himself, stumbles several times & disappears from sight, not out of fear, but so as not to inspire fear and terror in others & in short, he constantly observes decorum, like a Prince & like a King; and this applies to the decorum of actions; let us now come to the decorum of speech.

[1] «Also included in this part is what in Latin is called *Decorum* and what in Greek is called *Prèpon*. It is such by its intimate nature that it cannot separate itself from the honest: for what is decorum is honest and what is honest is decorous [...] and so every right action is decorous, and every wrong action, as it is dishonest, so it is also indecorous. In

the same way fortitude behaves: all generous and magnanimous actions appear worthy of man and informed by decorum; contrary actions, on the other hand, as dishonest, so offend decorum.» Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Officiis*, book I, 93-94 [ed.].

□2□ Castellini refers to Aristophanes' comedy *The Frogs* and its protagonist, the theater god Dionysus, Bacchus in Latin culture [ed.].

□3□ Castellini refers to *Physiognomics*, a Greek treatise (c. 300 B.C.) attributed to Aristotle but probably not autograph, and the definitely Aristotelian *Historia Animalium*, dating from a few decades earlier [ed.].

□4□ Claudius Elianus (165/170-235 CE), Latin writer in Greek language and author of a seventeen-book treatise *On the Nature of Animals*. Eudemus (not Eudomus, as Castellini writes) from Rhodes, lived between about 350 and 290 B.C., Greek philosopher and scientist, possible source of Elianus [ed.].

□5□ Castellini refers to Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia*, book VIII [ed.].

Homepage; "Decorum", graphic elaboration from the image illustrating Casare Ripa's "Iconologia" in 1618 and 1625 (Tozzi, Padua) and 1630 (Pasquardi, Padua) editions.

Below; reproduction of pages 171-173 from Cesare Ripa's "Iconologia", *Eredi di Matteo Florimi, Siena 1613*, ([www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)).



fia piantata la figura del Mercurio, da man sinistra tenga vn ramo, d'Amaranto volgarmente detto fior di velluto con questo motto intorno. **SIC FLORET DECORO DECUS.** del medesimo si potria anco incoronare, & fregiare l'habito, che fara vn saio lungo fino al ginocchio, nel piede dritto tenga vn coturno, nel sinistro vn locco.

È giouane bello perche il decoro, e ornamento de la vita humana, è honesto, perche il decoro sta sempre vnito con l'honesto: impercioche il decoro si come dottamente discorre Marco Tullio nel primo de gli offitij generalmente si piglia per quello, che in ogni honesta consiste: & è di dua sorti, perche a questo decoro generico ve n'è soggetto vn'altro, che appartiene a ciascuna parte de l'honestà. Il primo così definir si suole. Il Decoro, è quello, che è conueniente a l'eccellenza dell'huomo, in quello, che la natura l'ua da gli altri animali differisce. L'altra parte, che è soggetta al genere, così la definiscono. Il Decoro è quello, il quale è così conueniente alla natura, che in esso apparisca la moderazione, e temperanza, con vna certa maniera nobile, ciuile, e libera. Si che il decoro diffusamente si dilata in ogni cosa, che appartiene a l'honesto generalmente, & particolarmente, in ogni sorte di virtu; impercioche, si come la bellezza del corpo con proportionata compositione de membri, alletta, & muoue gli occhi, & per questo stesso diletta, perche fra se tutte le parti con vna certa grazia conuengono, & corrispondono, così il decoro, che ne la vita riluce muoue l'approbatione di coloro co quali si viuue con ordine, costanza, & moderatione d'ogni detto, & fatto: dal che si raccoglie, che il decoro si offerua nel parlare, & operare honestamente, & considerare ciò che si conuenga seguire, & sfuggire, seguendosi le cose giuste, & honeste, come buone, & conuenienti, sfuggonsi le ingiuste, & dishoneste, come cattiuè, & inconuenienti, contrarie al decoro, & a l'honesto, il qual nasce, da vna di queste parti; O dal risguardo, & diligente obseruanza del vero, o dal mantenere la conuersatione humana, & il commertio dando il suo a ciascuno, secondo la data fede, ne le cose contrarie, o da la grandezza, & fortezza d'animo eccelfo, & inuitto in ogni cola, che si fa, & si dice con ordine, & modo, nel quale vi è la modestia, la temperanza, & ogni mitigatione di perturbatione di animo, nelle quali cose si contiene il decoro, la cui forza è, che non si possi separare dall'honesto, perche quello, che è conueniente è honesto, & quello, che è honesto è conueniente. Onde Marco Tullio disse. *Hoc loco continetur id quod dici latine Decorum potest, grace enim (το' prepon) dicitur, huius vis est vt ab honesto non queat separari; nam & quod decet honestum est, & quod honestum est decet.* Più a basso loggia unge. *Et in ista omnia decora sunt iniusta contra, vt turpia sic indecora. Similis est ratio Fortitudinis, quod enim viriliter animoq; magno fit, id dignum viro, & decorum videtur: quod contra id vt turpe, sic indecorum.* Per dimostrare questa grandezza, fortezza, & eccelsa virtù d'animo, che il decoro richiede, habbiamo figurato con la pelle di leone adollo, atteso che gli antichi presero la pelle di leone per simbolo.



del campo s'arma contro loro, & mostra di iprezzarli fin tanto, che tu uando qualche macchia non veduto da niuno con veloce fuga s'afconda, & s'imboica alle volte, come discreto s'occulta non perche tema, ma per non mettere timore, e terrore ad altri, & in somma offerua il decoro da Principe, & Rè in ogni parte; Et questo sia detto circa il decoro dell'operare; venghiamo hora al decoro del parlare.

Il quadrato col legno di Mercurio significa la gravità, stabilità, & costanza del parlare conforme al decoro, & per tal conto Mercurio fu da Greci cognominato Tetragonos, cioè quadrato sodo, stabile, prudente, perche non si deue essere imprudente, vario, e mutabile, nel parlare fuor de termini del decoro, ne si deue con leggerezza correre a mordere, e biasimare col parlare le persone, & disprezzare ciò che essi sentono essendo cosa da arrogante, & dissoluto ma si deue portare vna certa riueranza a ciascuno, come n'ammonisce M. Tullio parlando del decoro circa la moderazione de fatti, & detta. *Adhibenda est igitur quodam reuerentia aduersus homines, & optimi cuiusq; reliquorum. Nam negligere, quid de se quisq; sentiat non solum arrogantis est sed etiam omnino dissoluti.* Dimodo che deueli essere considerato nel ragionare parlando honoratamente d'altri perche chi parla bene, & honoratamente d'altri è segno, che è persona benigna, & honorata, chi parla male è legno, che è persona cattiuà, maligna, inuidiosa, & poco honorata, quale è appreso Homero Theriste di lingua serpentina, volubile, & pronta al chiacchiarare pessimamente, & dir mal del suo Rè; per il contrario Ulisse, e taciturno, & pensoso prima che parli, nel parlar poi è quadrato eloquente, e prudente, conoscendo egli, come saggio, & accorto, che per offeruar il decoro d'un huomo sauo, la lingua non deue essere più veloce della mente, douendosi pensare molto bene, come si habbia a ragionare. *Linguam praire animo non permittendam.* Disse Chilone Lacedemoniese, & molto ben pensare ci si deue perche il parlare è inditio dell'animo di ciascuno. secondo, come parla con decoro, & pero da Greci fu chiamato il parlare *Αυδός χαρακτηρ* *Hominis character.* Merco de l'huomo, come riferisce Pietro Vitrono ne le varie lettioni lib. 9. Cap. 6. perche si come le bestie si conoscono dal merco di qual razza siano, così le persone dal parlare si conoscono di qual natura, & conditione siano. Epitetto filosofo morale, come Greco disse nell'Enchiridio. *Præfige tibi certum modum, & characterem, quem obserues, tum solus tecum, tum alijs conuersans, operam da ne in colloquia plebeia descendas sed, siquidem fieri potest, orationem transfer ad aliquid decorum, si minus, silentium age.* Cioè formati vn certo modo ò carattere da offeruarlo teco steslo priuatamente, & in paese conuersando con gli altri, procura di non incorrere, in discorsi plebei, ma per quanto si può trasferisci il parlare in qualche cosa ch'habbia del decoro, altrimenti stà più tosto cheto. Offeruerassi dunque il decoro nel parlare col ragionare discretamente d'altri, col non vituperare alcuno, ma più tosto lodare, & col non tassar l'opere altrui massimamente in cose, che non sono della sua professione. Atteso che molti fanno de gl'vniuersali, & in ciascuna