Women and Art in the Renaissance

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"Did Women Have a Renaissance?" With these words, Joan Kelly entitled a 1970s feminist paper about early modern history and helped begin a scholarly revolution surrounding the study of women in the Renaissance. Feminists from a variety of disciplines began to reexamine the long-held belief that early modern women were on an equal par with men. From their studies, we know that the roles of women in social, political, economic, and cultural life were greatly constrained during this period. Unfortunately, the absence of women's stories in many areas of Renaissance studies has led to little discussion of the social and political regulation that caused it, and of how transgressions of female boundaries might have been achieved. However, a growing number of feminist scholars have shown that women in the Renaissance did not merely internalize the roles urged on them, but rather constructed positions for themselves in everyday life, as well as in the more elite pursuits of literature, music, and art. Art in particular was a powerful method of controlling women, through a myriad of visual examples and social pressures, and it offers especially rich material for the study of Italian Renaissance female roles and women's transgressions of them.

One role that was rarely encouraged for women was that of the artist. The requirements of artistic training—such as drawing nude studies—and the social unacceptability of such a career, combined with the economic restrictions of guild membership, allowed little capacity for female artists to flourish. The few documented female Renaissance artists were either daughters of artists who trained in their fathers' workshops or children of noblemen, who were expected to have fairly accomplished literary, musical, and artistic skills. Although records indicate that they were talented, these women frequently ended their artistic careers when they married, concentrating their oeuvre on subjects considered proper for women artists: portraits and pictures of family members in domestic settings.

For example, Caterina van Hemessen received her artistic training in her father's studio, and of ten surviving pictures, eight are portraits, most are of women shown at domestic pursuits, such as playing the spinet or chess. She married a musician and appears to have ended her career as an artist. Marietta Tintoretto studied in her father's workshop in Venice, and was discussed in a section of Carlo Ridolfi's biography of Tintoretto. However, she died at an early age. The Bolognese artist Lavinia Fontana was also the daughter of a painter, and was recognized in her day for her portraiture talent. She never married, but continued to paint, eventually receiving public commissions in her forties. One of the most talented female Renaissance artists was Sofonisba Anguissola, the daughter of a Cremonese nobleman, trained, as many hightborn women were, in letters, music, and the arts. She had exceptional artistic talent praised even by Michelangelo, and with her father's encouragement, she produced a large number of portraits. She painted many of herself and her five sisters, three of whom also became painters. Interestingly, only two of the five married. Anguissola herself married twice, the first time at age 40. However, instead of renouncing her artistic career, she became a lady in waiting and court painter to Queen Isabella of Valois in Spain.

Although these skilled artists were well-known in the Renaissance, contemporary accolades were qualified. These women contended with many diminutions and stereotypes of their talent and skill. Contemporaries either lauded them as exceptions to their gender, even miracles of nature; denounced them as overly sexualized and even deviant because of their independence and self-confidence; or emphasized their womanly virtue, intact virginity, and chastity. Tintoretto's abilities were belittled and explained away as a labor similar to childbirth, and Fontana was criticized when she began expanding her career by winning public commissions. These previously neglected women's lives and art works have been rediscovered in
recent years by art historians seeking to acknowledge women artists in the Renaissance, including the publication of monographs on Anguissola, Fontana, and the Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi.

However, the rediscovery of their life stories may be problematic with current methodologies. By integrating female artists into the canon, we are still elevating artists into singular geniuses whose masterpieces are the only artistic creations focused on, instead of examining many products of culture and society, popular as well as elite. Also, some scholars have positioned female artists as figures with a particular female sensibility, such as an interest in domestic settings and portraiture, instead of considering those subjects socially directed, and the women as socially constructed. With this methodology, some pictures have been interpreted biographically, with an essentialist reading, thus attributing a possibly anachronistic feminism to these artists.

Women were also active artistic patrons and commissioned art in their roles as secular and religious, royal and noble women. Documentation is not abundant, but we do know that even more women commissioned art than the contracts between artists and female patrons suggest. Often, agreements with artists were arranged for women by a male family member, a monk, or a priest. In the case of more independent and especially highborn women, we have clear evidence of women acting for themselves. Among the religious, holy orders, individual nuns, and abbesses ordered decorations for their convent cells, refectories, and church altarpieces. Widows who had retired to convents sometimes purchased pictures for their orders, and many used their dowries to commission funerary chapels for their husbands. European queens and royalty often had their portraits painted and noblewomen sometimes commissioned works of art for their villas. One example is the noblewoman Isabella d'Este, who commissioned a substantial amount of art by famous painters to decorate her private studiolo quarters. In some of these pictures, the iconography emphasizes traditional womanly virtues combined with "male" reason and self-control feminized as chastity, fidelity, and moral purity. D'Este was a highly involved patron, pursuing artists she wanted represented in her studiolo, and at one point sending Perugino a sketch for an allegory she wanted him to paint.

Art was often used by female members of royalty to establish and strengthen their power. After Eleanora of Toledo married Cosimo I de'Medici, a portrait of Eleanora and her son was painted by Bronzino. Cosimo, who had married her to strengthen his dynastic claim to power in Tuscany, and Eleanora used this image to remind the viewer that the Medici had married into high nobility and that the children of this union were born of royalty. Catherine de'Medici, the Italian-born widow of Henry of France, wanted to strengthen her position as the rightful ruler of the kingdom as regentess of the future king of France while at court her husband's mistress, Diane de Poitiers, was recognized and had her own power base. To establish support for herself, she created her own iconography of virtue and commissioned images of herself as Artemisia, a classical queen who became Catherine's prototype.

Women were not only the impetus behind works of art, they were also featured in countless pictures. Although images of women are abundant, their meaning is regulated through eroticization or a Neo-Platonic interpretation. Various depictions of Eve and the Virgin Mary demonstrate the well known dichotomy of the shameful, lustful cause of the expulsion from Eden and the ideal, virginal mother of Jesus. Furthermore, images of women were often considered to be an empty sign that could symbolize or allegorize various virtues, vices, and intangible ideas. Often women were presented in the guise of famous exemplars, such as Lucretia, a Roman matron who committed suicide rather than bring the shame of her rape upon her family. Popular role models also included the Biblical heroines Judith, who saved her people when she seduced their enemy Holofernes with alcohol and cut off his head after he collapsed, and Susanna, who refused to have sex with two voyeuristic Elders. These women were ostensibly utilized to show female virtues, but were almost without exception eroticized, emphasizing the sexual wiles these women either used or were accused of using to attract men.
Images of women who are naked or partially disrobed have also been given a limited number of interpretations; either they have been viewed as courtesans or as figures with a Neo-Platonic higher meaning. The figures are sometimes posited as courtesans posing as their classical precedents, such as Flora, a conflation of the goddess of flowers and a rich Roman courtesan who endowed games for the citizens of Rome, or as Danae, a mythological woman who was impregnated by Zeus in a shower of gold and whose actions were sometimes interpreted in the Renaissance as those of a mercenary prostitute. Alternately, these images have often been understood by current art historians as figures with a higher, Neo-Platonic meaning. Because many of the artists who painted these pictures had social or political connections with Neo-Platonic philosopher-scholars, these nude women are interpreted as representing earthly beauty, who when gazed upon can lead the viewer to the contemplation of the divine. Some scholars have found the Neo-Platonic terrestrial love and celestial love in Titian's Sacred and Profane Love, an image of two women, one clothed and one nude, sitting by a fountain. However, recent research has shown that the images may not primarily induce Neo-Platonic thought, but may celebrate the 1514 marriage between Nicolo Aurelio and Laura Bagarotto, whose coats of arms appear in the picture.

In all of these cases, those of the artist, patron, and subject, we see that women were controlled and regulated, whether by social pressure, lack of independence, or manipulation of image and meaning. Women in the Italian Renaissance were restricted so that their undisciplined and tempting bodies did not threaten social order and the position of men in the societal hierarchy. However, women were able to transgress these boundaries and roles when they had the means and opportunities to do so. We do not have much documentation to determine how female viewers reacted to images or whether they rebelled against what they saw, but we do know that certain pictures were intended for female consumption. We also have some evidence, though scant, that women were not to be controlled as easily as may have been hoped. Nor were women completely conjoined from being successful artists and assertive patrons or from interpreting and understanding art of various subject matter in ways transgressive and unacceptable towards the dominant male view. A story in Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* describes a painting of St. Sebastien, an image of a mostly nude, sensual man being shot with arrows as he stands bound against a tree. Vasari relates that this picture had to be removed from a church and hung in the monks' chapter house because at confession, large numbers of women said they had lustful thoughts in front of a religious picture of a holy saint. So much for the illusion of control.