

The Significance of Female Artists in the Renaissance

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the lives of female artists during the Renaissance, who faced many challenges while pursuing their career. Societal prejudices and lack of education placed restrictions on their career; problems such as misattribution and absent recognition also led to difficulties in accrediting female artists. Still, artists like Plautilla Nelli, Sofonisba Anguissola, Properzia De' Rossi, Caterina van Hemessen, Diana Mantuana, Lavinia Fontana, and Artemisia Gentileschi became significant figures in the art field by breaking the conventional gender barriers. From tiny portraits to sculptures to large scale paintings, female artists accomplished works across all areas in the art field. Some worked their way up to the courts of Spanish royalty, others earned a living through artistic commission and owned their own workshop. Some, like Anguissola and Gentileschi, were courageous enough to incorporate unconventional opinions and even feminist ideals into their art. This paper aims to accredit the deserved recognition of many significant female artists who accomplished great achievements in the course of art history.

Keywords: Renaissance, women, history, art

1. Introduction

What are some names of the artists that pop up in your mind when the word “Renaissance” is mentioned? Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, and more. Notice anything common about them? All of them are men. Now, think about any women artists in the Renaissance, can you count them on one hand? If you are more knowledgeable in art, maybe you can count them with two. Why are there so few of them? On the one hand, most of them weren't given an opportunity to do art; on the other hand, even if they were, their names could only thrive for a short time while they were alive. However, it is not their lack of talent but the social barriers that prevent historians from writing their names down, and it is important to acknowledge their significance in the Renaissance period. Female artists of the European Renaissance period dedicated their lives to their careers, ignored gender norms, and overcame societal barriers to cause great waves in this male-dominated territory of art. Their legendary experiences, just like their remarkable works, left significant traces in art history and greatly influenced the cultural development of their region.

The Renaissance is a time that links the Middle Ages to modernity, it began in 14th-century Italy with the rise of humanism and ended in the early 17th century; by that time the entire Europe was under its influence. The Renaissance did not just breed thousands of astonishing pieces of art—such as the Last Supper by Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo's David—but also brought outstanding philosophical ideas and significant findings in science. Similarly, Renaissance art did not just offer “pretty decorations” to churches or a nice-looking portrait for a renowned duke, but also brought

meaningful transformation in art from which many modern masterpieces were impacted. Therefore, the Renaissance was a crucial part of European history and art history. However, rarely were any female names mentioned in this part of history despite its long-lasting and essential role; but that doesn't mean they were completely out of the picture. Names that will be introduced in the next few pages, Sofonisba Anguissola, Properzia de' Rossi, and Artemisia Gentilisci, were outstanding individuals who broke gender rules and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with many celebrated male artists—they just weren't remembered.

2. Content

Like most women when stepping into a field of male expertise, female artists during the Renaissance also had to overcome obstacles set by their society in order to fulfill their artistic careers and even more to have accomplishments. Conventional gender roles in a patriarchal society have existed in many different forms ever since the creation of the first human civilization. So unsurprisingly, the Renaissance period was also a time when women were expected to solely remain as housewives, thus banned from owning careers. This form of exclusion was inevitably significant in the education system. As every Renaissance study revolved around education, society did not allow women to receive the same amount of education as men. So in the end, opportunities were naturally distributed amongst men, leaving women at a significant disadvantage [1]. Nonetheless, the hardships they faced and the persistence they maintained add another layer of significance to their contribution to the art field. Their hardships could also be interpreted from all aspects of life; from basic social construction to literature to art pieces, gender norms were everywhere.

In the portraits by Titian, a renowned male Venetian painter, remarking the Duke and Duchess of Urbino [2], ideal symbols of gender roles were represented from his sophisticated portrayals of masculinity and femininity. On the painter's lively and detailed canvas, the Duke, a mercenary captain, is in his stiff standing posture, a perfect way to show off his shiny armor. But his arm does not rest, instead, it juts outward from his body as if breaking through the canvas to reality, eventually stopping at a war baton he is carrying, signifying his authority. Meanwhile, the Duke's heavily bearded face with a cold stare, in addition to the beautiful and well-polished helmet on the background adds to the aggressive and demanding temperament of this man in the painting—a model patriarchal man with power and authority. On the other hand, the Duchess's passive sitting posture as well as her gentle and relaxed facial expression, are the exact opposite of the Duke's piercing atmosphere. She is in a silky and soft gown, her left hand placed gently on the chair she is sitting on; in the back, a tiny pet puppy is lying on its belly. The elements in the painting all point towards the loyalty of the Duchess to her husband and her benevolent, motherly nature—the best virtues a woman should hold. Similar assumptions on female virtues were either directly described or subtly inferred throughout all kinds of Renaissance works, forming a recessive pattern that rejected female painters whenever they appeared.

Naturally, the gender norms rooted in the patriarchal society were a major factor contributing to the scarce number of female contributors in Renaissance art pieces; they not only pushed away girls from pursuing their careers but also caused neglect and mistreatment towards women artists. Giorgio Vasari was a painter and architect himself outside of his major contribution to art history. Vasari was the first art historian ever, for his massive number of writings in the biographies of one hundred artists in his most renowned work, *the Lives of the Artists*. However, amongst them only four female names were mentioned, and these limited portions of pages were nonetheless praised only for breaking their "biological" barriers instead of focusing on their self-earned achievements [3]. He claimed that women artists had parted away from "the usual course of her sex," which was supposed to be housework only [3]. It is certainly unfortunate to see that even when a female artist does get recognized, the description is usually incomplete and misjudged.

Often, the imbalance in gender norms took away the deserved respect and fame of female artists; their credits were significantly denounced and even misattributed to their male peers. Such are the reasons why men's arts were more recognized in museums and exhibitions while female arts were buried under them. Sofonisba Anguissola was a sixteenth-century royal court painter, one of the highest roles any artist of the Renaissance time could receive [4]. However, because of her gender, Anguissola was given a more "appropriate" title—"lady-in-waiting" [4] to King Philip II's queen, Elizabeth of Valois. More factors, such as the absence of documented payment for her art commission and the absence of a signature on her work while in Spain, eventually caused many misattributions of Anguissola's paintings [1]. In the end, many Anguissola were attributed to the official male court artist of Spain, Alonso Sanchez Coello, and she was only able to retrieve her names until the twentieth century [1]. Cases of misattributions occurred numerous times on women artists and have been a leading reason why it is so hard to find the art of Renaissance females in museums nowadays.

The factors piled up to make it extremely difficult for any ordinary woman to pursue an artistic career; there were rare circumstances where a girl would be encouraged to become an artist, and not for her personal development but for the legacy, fame, or convenience of her family. Here are three types of girls who would most likely receive opportunities to pursue art. Firstly, there were nuns, the girls who belonged to their religions and dedicated themselves to religious activities. In addition, they were also able to receive artistic education in order to complete religious art commissions, such as religious murals and paintings to decorate the convents. However, only a very few nun artists were historically documented, despite their mass potential [4]. The second type was the noble women, whose families could provide them with a decent education. Meanwhile, they would have the time and luxury to pursue the artistic path; some even became masters to earn a reputation for their family and an opportunity for a good marriage [4]. Lastly, there was the most common type of girls who were lucky enough to be born into a family of artists. They would be exposed to art at a young age and were often encouraged by others to pursue art [4]. Sarcastically enough, no girls could choose to be born into a noble or artistic family; and even though females did have choices of becoming nuns, many would also choose to back away from the austerity the sisters faced in the churches for their lifetimes. So, the problem is not only with the sparse number of female artists but also the poor level of recognition they received.

But yes, it wasn't totally impossible for women to become artists during the Renaissance. After all, it was a time of vast development and an era when some conventional barriers were broken. Although the number was rare, there were some significant female artists during the Renaissance who became successful in her time and even prevailed over some renowned male artists in their proudest area. For example, the name Plautilla Nelli [4] was very well known in sixteenth-century Florence due to her outstanding achievement as a respected nun artist, which was very unusual considering the religious title she owned and the limited resources she received. Born from a noble family, Nelli was sent to a convent, St. Catherine of Siena in Florence, Italy, for cheap and convenient purposes. However, this unexpected branching in young Nelli's life also gave her an opportunity to pursue art. Her process of studying art progressed gradually until she became the master of colors and lines [4]. According to Vasari, she would have become an even greater painter if she studied math and anatomy like most male artists [3]. Still, Nelli produced magnificent paintings for churches and even private commissions, jobs uncommon for a nun, and was largely praised and revered by her audience. Nelli was an exceptional figure; even when her identity created barriers, and her work environment was restricted, she continued to thrive in art, bringing names to the neglected group of nun artists.

Another famous female artist whose name was already mentioned above, Sofonisba Anguissola, was born into a noble family in Cremona, Italy [4]. However, it is also ironic to see how her noble identity in a patriarchal society gave her an opportunity to explore interests, which eventually came back to reduce her artistic accomplishments to family honors and noble marriages. At a young age,

Anguissola's parents were open-minded enough to send her to local painters where she was able to explore her phenomenal talent. In her teenage years, Anguissola traveled to Rome, where she studied with Michelangelo, who immediately recognized her talents [5]. Anguissola was the oldest among her siblings, and she indeed became a role model and proud daughter in the family by eventually becoming a court artist of King Phillip II [5], bringing privileges and favors for her family to the royals. Like King Phillip's wife, Queen Elizabeth of Valois, who was the person who appointed Anguissola first to court, King Phillip also admired Anguissola's skills and arranged a noble marriage for her with a luxurious dowry [4]. Nevertheless, as mentioned, very few of Anguissola's works were attributed under her own name for complicated reasons related to gender norms. Even for women with an authoritative background, their talents and achievements might also be lessened to the accomplishments of men in their lives.

In addition to the exceptions of nuns and noblewomen, the most common path for a woman to pursue an artistic career was for her to be born into an art family first. Once again, sarcastically the fate of a woman was solely determined by her family, which eventually came down to the power and authority of men. Levina Teerlinc was an exemplary example in this case. Teerlinc's father, Simon Bening, was a renowned artist himself and she trained under his studio [4]. Eventually, Teerlinc became one of the highest-paid and most skilled artists in England in the sixteenth century [4]. Teerlinc was a master at miniature portraits, a popular format of painting made and given as keepsakes or gifts that could be privately worn. Before photography was invented, these tiny portraits allowed individuals to show their own images to others in a more intimate way. Some people, like the nobles of the Tudor court, wanted miniatures because they were high-quality images with contemporary styles [4]. Similar to Anguissola, Teerlinc was a court artist as well; her annual salary was forty pounds a year, a very significant number and even greater than many of her male predecessors [4]. As a female artist, Teerlinc was one of the few to make her art career outstanding enough to support herself financially; this was one of the advantages of the legacy of an art family, that the title of her father's name would make her "unusual" path of pursuing art more understandable to the crowd.

At last, there was Properzia De' Rossi. Even in a field where women were already rare, she chose the career the rarest and hardest one of sculpture; in fact, she was the first recorded female sculptor ever in history [4]. Little was known about her early life, but it is known that despite sexual boundaries, De' Rossi became one of the best sculptors of her time, breaking patriarchal norms and astounding her audience with artistic prowess. De' Rossi was a woman from Bologna, Italy, a city where many female artists had an opportunity to thrive. De' Rossi was born into neither an artistic nor noble family like her common female contemporaries, but she managed to get her hands on rough stones and produced magnificent figures [3]. However, in Vasari's passages, De' Rossi was first introduced by her extreme beauty, her excellence in "household matters" and such angelic voice that she "sang better than any other women of the city [3]." Such perfect characteristics indeed made her a goddess-like figure in not only Bologna but almost the entire Italy [3]. However, similar comments that focused on the maternal virtues of women could bring fame but also led to the neglect of the efforts they paid and the challenges they broke, which were supposed to be the pivot of any description of female artists.

Indeed, Renaissance names like Properzia De' Rossi were very well known in their times, but throughout history, became rarely mentioned or even replaced by other male artists. It is important to acknowledge their achievements and talents because most of these women became great legends of their time under enormous pressure and critical comments. Although De' Rossi gained her fame from her virtuous appearance, cardinally she was a revolutionary who not only broke the societal standards to pursue sculpture but also became a great sculptor. This is how Vasari praises her art talent in *The Lives of the Artists*:

“And because she [Properzia de’ Rossi] had a ready and inventive wit, she began to carve peach stones, which she did so well and with such patience that they were most unusual and marvelous to see, not only for the precision of her work but for the slender figures she carved on them and for her most truly delicate style of arranging them. It was certainly a marvel to see the entire Passion of Christ carved upon such a small peach stone in the most beautiful intaglio, with countless characters besides the crucifiers and the Apostles [3].”

In one of her works, when she worked with three doors of the facade of San Petronio [3], she asked for help from the church trustees who, impressed by her skills, agreed to give her an actual part of the reference object. Later in her career, her sculpture for Count Alessandro de’ Pepoli [3] also greatly astonished the Count himself as well as the entire city of Bologna. De’ Rossi’s talents were not only performed in sculptures but also in her charming personality and appearances, both outstanding characteristics were acknowledged to make her a legendary individual in art history.

Caterina van Hemessen was another woman born in an artistic family of five children, like her siblings and her father, she pursued paintings as well [1]. Van Hemessen was known for her innovative and delicate skills at the court, yet very few of her works were attributed under her own names. Other than art skills, van Hemessen also received a decent humanist education as a child when studying under her artist father’s studio, evidence like the Latin signature in *The Self Portrait* can prove her intelligence shown at a young age [1]. Moreover, this famous portrait of van Hemessen herself was also the earliest known self-portrait of a female artist. In this painting, van Hemessen used her excellent skills in color and texture to paint a woman seated before the easel, holding a palette and delicate brushes, with a confident-looking face staring out of the canvas. Eventually, she became the lady-in-waiting of Mary of Hungary, the governor of the Netherlands during the mid-sixteenth century. Van Hemessen accompanied this lady throughout her rule and she herself thrived in courts with her talents in art [1]. However, after van Hemessen’s marriage in 1554, no known paintings were signed or attributed to her name. It is suggested from here that “her career was neglected in favor of that of her husband [1].” It is very unfortunate to see the mistreatment of fame to a great woman artist simply for marital purposes and to comply with patriarchal rules.

As the last woman mentioned in Vasari’s *The Lives of the Artists*, Diana Mantuana was the first recorded female printmaker and a court artist at Gongoza; but her talent was neglected by her artist father and was later criticized by Vasari for abandoning maternity. Mantuana’s father, Giovanni Battista Scultori, was a renowned engraver himself, it was assumed that Mantuana followed her father’s steps. However, unlike her brother Adamo, there is no evidence to prove that Mantuana had received any printmaking education under her father’s studio [1]. Instead, it is suggested that she studied engravings by solely studying the drawings of her father, family members, and male friends [1]. Vasari described her in his passages that she was not only having a virtuous personality but also a pair of marvelous hands [3]. However, Mantuana was also the last of her family, having no progeny. Therefore, Vasari also commented on this “oddity,” he highlighted Diana’s artistic lineage while suggesting that she lacked the ability to produce her own creative legacy [3].

Lavinia Fontana, born from a wealthy artist family, was one of the most successful artists of the Renaissance. Compared to other female artists, Fontana has many works attributed to her name today because she was one of the first female artists to run their own workshops [5], a remarkable accomplishment that prevailed over many of her male peers. At an early age, Fontana’s sophisticated and detailed brush techniques already allowed her to thrive when she studied at the School of Bologna [5]. Fontana later made several challenging works, breaking traditional standards, and became the first woman to paint large-scale altarpieces and mythological nudes [5]. In the end, she was able to financially rely on her art commissions and produced many impactful works such as *Portrait of Antonietta Gonsalvus*, *Minerva Dressing*, and *Christ Appears to Mary Magdalen* [4]. Today, Fontana has around 150 works under her name, with a variety kind of commissions, mostly public, from

authorities like the nobles and churches; such massive works also indicate her outstanding talents as well as perseverance to maintain a career regardless of gender norms.

Finally, when speaking of artists, it always comes down to their artworks as they directly reflect their minds and skills. The feminist passion and maturity of Renaissance female artists are important breakpoints in art and human culture. They were the first group of female activists who worked in the field of art not to present their naked bodies for men to depict on canvas, but to create great art of their own in order to express their thoughts, sometimes against the males. While working in Spain in the 1550s, Sofonisba Anguissola formed a close friendship with Queen Elizabeth of Valois [5]. Queen Elizabeth was the first royal she served as a court artist upon first arrival and was the person who gave Anguissola the title “lady-in-waiting.” In the *Portrait of Elizabeth of Valois* [5], Anguissola depicts the young queen as not only a noble figure but also a confident and responsible lady. In the painting, the Queen stands firmly with a miniature portrait of King Phillip in her hand, representing their intimacy in marriage; her lavish-looking velvet dress and heavy jewelry around her body also symbolize the weight of an empire burdened on her. As a renowned court artist, this portrait of Queen Elizabeth is not the most significant work of Anguissola’s but infers many important characters of herself. Anguissola was known for her strong personality and a force of will even when working at courts [1]. This painting of the Queen ignores a typical soft and benevolent female nature, but focuses on a queen’s strength and courage, which is often associated with men.

Other than her many years of career at the Spanish royal court, Anguissola was also a loving sister and daughter. However, born in a noble family where legacy and bloodline are valued more than the family itself, Anguissola’s parents often cherish their youngest son much more than their four daughters. In her works related to her family, Anguissola sometimes depicts warm and intimate playtimes like in the *Game of Chess*, but sometimes she also creates an ironic and tragic sense of unequal love and patriarchal attitudes between her father and her siblings; these humane emotions are a crucial element to the greatness of her paintings. In the *Family Portrait* [5], Anguissola depicts her loving family members: an old father, one younger sister, and a brother. In the painting, her sister Minerva stands alone on the left, having very little attention and space on the canvas, carefully observing the intimate interaction between her father and little brother Asdrubale. Meanwhile, her father sits on a chair, both hands embracing Asdrubale, whose eyes are curiously looking up back at him and Minerva. Minerva struggles to be seen by her father; she awkwardly stands, fiddling around with her dress. Anguissola’s use of space and human demeanor in this painting is extraordinary, it is even more extraordinary when deciphering the meaning of strong bias between two sexes, from the hands of a woman and a sister.

In the end, like many other female artists, Anguissola’s career constantly faced criticism and mockery, especially from other male artists; but she chose to argue back with her inventive and playful techniques. In 1554, a friend of Bernadino Campi, Anguissola’s art teacher at that time, wrote a letter to him about Anguissola, referring to her solely as a beautiful and intelligent work belonging to Campi, discrediting her talent [5]. Anguissola eventually created a portrait of herself as a comeback [5], except there is one other person on the canvas, her own teacher Campi, who becomes the one painting Anguissola. In the painting, although Anguissola herself is in a painted portrait, she is depicted so realistically that even her hand can be seen as clearly as Campi’s hand, which is holding a brush. This fascinating idea of “a painting within a painting” was a pioneering and innovative iconography that made this painting so much more than a seemingly immature or disrespectful fightback, it thus became a breaking point both in the field of art and feminist mind made in a humorous way.

Other than portraits commissioned by royals or wealthy families, religious paintings were also a popular and significant genre of Renaissance art. It was unusual for anyone to challenge this genre, but Artemisia Gentilisci, a seventeenth-century Italian woman painter from Rome, Italy, created an

exceptional work that is still legendary today by breaking the conventional portrait of religious women figures. *Judith Slaying Holofernes* is not only an important event in the Hebrew Bible, in which a young Jewish woman named Judith heroically freed her people of Israel from siege by the Nebuchadnezzar army [6], but is also a popular scene depicted by numerous artists over and over again throughout history. Usually, male artists like Caravaggio, tend to paint Judith in a soft and scared posture, as if she was not able to complete such a brutal task of murder. While male artists focus more on the beauty and delicacy of Judith, Gentilisch chose to do the opposite. On her canvas, Judith [6] looks intimidating and powerful; she stands firmly beside the bed of the drunk and vulnerable general Holofernes lying on his bed. Face disgusted but determined, Judith does not hesitate to hold him down and plunges the sword deep into his neck, even when her hands are tangled by the man's hair. Even then, Judith does not shy away when the spraying blood stains her breast; her face and body all signify victory and aggression. When the painting was completed in 1613, there were strong reactions in Florence that it was taken away the chance to be exhibited. It was with Gentilisch's male friend, Galileo Galilei's help, that she managed to gain payment from this commission with the Grand Duke Cosimo II de' Medici [6], who was horrified by the painting. However, today, this astounding version of Judith remains the most famous and significant one, remarking strength of women's potential and a feminist spirit determined to make changes in the artist.

3. Conclusion

Today, historians are beginning to acknowledge the significance of female artists across the world and time. Indeed, the minds and works of Renaissance female artists are just as valuable as the works of the male artists whose names we are so familiar with. In fact, there are still hundreds of significant females out there, forgotten by history, waiting to be discovered. It is important to study and explore the lives of these figures, for they maintained a passion for art despite their unfortunate fate in a patriarchal society. In honor of their accomplishments and so many other females in the field of male dominance, whether in science, politics, sports, or more, historians continue to dig out traces of their existence and celebrate their stories.

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