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Identity Expressed Through Italian Renaissance Self-Portraiture: A Female Perspective

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Identity Expressed Through Italian Renaissance Self-Portraiture: A Female Perspective

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Abstract

The main goal of this research is to discuss how female painters identified themselves during the changing times of the early modern period in Italy and how they expressed themselves in their self-portraiture. This discussion will be carried out in juxtaposition to what their male contemporaries were creating and accounts published by early art historians. The specific examples of autonomous portraiture I will examine will help strengthen the argument that these women artists were aware of their somewhat unique position during this period. They utilized conventions of the genre to subtly assert themselves as talented, successful artists without attracting unwanted criticism. These works show how these women used this knowledge of their societal positions to defy certain norms, and that they were able to create innovations in the genre that paved the way for future women in the visual arts. Their self-images are unique in this way when compared to male self-portraits, and this constitutes female self-portraiture as its own genre. Feminist art history will be utilized to challenge the assumptions that continue to exist regarding women artists and how our views of art history, in general, are vastly different than they were prior to the 18th century.

I will examine paintings of Italian women artists of the 16th and 17th centuries. The prominent artists discussed are Sofonisba Anguissola, Lavinia Fontana, and Artemisia Gentileschi. Each of these women is responsible for important conventions that contributed to elevating the status of female artists during the early modern period. As such, woman artists should be studied in conjunction with each other to fully comprehend the important contributions they made to the visual arts. If we continue to study them as anomalies in the historical record, we risk them disappearing once more into obscurity.
Introduction

Women in the Early Modern period were expected to act in certain ways as determined by their gender and class. They were generally confined to the private, interior spaces with the assigned roles of wife and mother while men dominated the public arena. Women were relegated to serve as objects of representation and therefore objects of the male gaze. Male artists continued to dominate the workshops and guilds while women depended completely on the support of their families. This is not to say that there were no female artists at this time or even earlier, but that the apparent rise of female artists and the amount of scholarship that was dedicated to them is complex. The scholarship to which I refer is how contemporary historians were talking about women artists – the language they were using and what factors were omitted. These early writers of “the first art history,” such as Giorgio Vasari, shaped the course of the study of art up until the 1970’s when their objectivity began to be questioned. What is of interest to me is how women painters, specifically during the 16th and 17th centuries in Italy, identified themselves through self-portraiture and how these paintings compare with the self-representations of their male contemporaries. I argue that these women artists were able to subvert their models to make powerful, innovative images for women in the arts.

Although there has been an increasing amount of scholarship, there is still work to be done in questioning traditional art history in regard to gender. I want to discuss self-portraiture during the 16th and 17th centuries because this is a time in which we see an explosion of original conventions created by women artists. I also limited the research to Italy since this is where we first see a rise in female painters and in portraiture. I chose to limit my discussion to painting because I believe this is where we can see the most fully formed ideas and detail executed by the artists as opposed to drawings, engravings or miniatures. I will focus on the artists: Sofonisba
Anguissola, Lavinia Fontana, and Artemisia Gentileschi, who are not necessarily the first great women artists, but represent a large cultural shift affecting the identity of artists in society. Women saw themselves in an increasingly heightened role as successful artists in the public eye – an arena usually dominated by men. How artists chose to represent themselves in self-portraits is a source of primary evidence to address how women identified in this new role and how society may have perceived them. The self-portraiture of these women suggests that they were not only aware of their changing status in society, but that they embraced the opportunity to demonstrate their skill and push the boundaries of what was considered acceptable for female artists.

I believe it is important to begin with some historical information including the evolution of artistic terms and language stemming from the ancient world in addition to a short history of portraiture and self-portraiture. Where did art and specifically painting stand in the early modern period? What consequences did this have for other art forms and for women artisans? How were men and women depicted in portraits? What cultural atmosphere allowed for the emergence of self-portraiture?

My goal is to establish the norms that were already in place when female artists expressed their identity in their practice of self-portraiture. The argument challenges some assumptions that continue to exist regarding women artists. My main argument is that the artists I chose used these new conventions in self-portraiture because they were aware of the negative connotations associated with their gender. They sought to integrate expected behavior and increasingly asserted themselves as successful artists. They were not attempting to show the viewer how they actually saw themselves. Instead, they gave themselves agency that was previously denied in their models.
Part 1: The Underlying Factors

Literacy

It is important to begin with historical information regarding the lives of women leading up to and during the Early Modern period. This will allow us to understand how women’s roles in visual culture evolved. Where did women stand regarding marriage, family and education? What rights did they have? I also provide a brief history of specific styles of portraiture including the invention of self-representation and the evolution of the genre. I would also like to address some non-autonomous female portraits to suggest why they were created.

In regard to education and specifically literacy, some scholars define literacy as a skill that most men and women in Europe never gained at even the most basic level during the early modern period.1 Several other scholars have tried to define literacy, but these attempts do little to help us understand a period very different from our own and how this period may have progressed differently than we think. Margaret Ferguson proposed that we should not ask “What literacy is,” but rather “What counts as literacy for whom, and under what particular instances?”2 She claims that the accepted definition as the ability to “read and write in one vernacular language,” is insufficient if we are to try and understand different cultures and their development over time as opposed to western thought. She instead argues that “literacy is a social phenomenon surrounded and often constituted by interesting lies…”3

Further, there is a link between opposing ideas of language and notions of the natural characteristics of men and women, which has been neglected by scholars.4 This reflects how

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3 Ibid., 7.
4 Ferguson, *Dido’s Daughters*, 3-4.
inherently gendered language is. The next question is, who had access to education and the means to acquire literacy during the early modern period? Parents were the first teachers for their children regardless of gender. This practice of passing down knowledge was encouraged by early modern writers and the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. However, we see the equality of education for girls ends there as boys entered schools that did not allow girls. Girls remained at home and received their only education from their mothers. Even after elementary schools were opened for girls, the schools were more likely to teach domestic skills over reading and writing. If young girls did learn to read, it was only to embrace the Christian scripture in order to become religiously virtuous, necessary traits for their only career as wife and mother.\(^5\)

These aspects pertain to urban, middle-class children while upper-class woman and the nobility would have received a higher level of education. This proves that “for a woman to succeed as a painter…the circumstances in which she trained and then practiced as an artist had to be exceptional indeed.”\(^6\) In addition to seeing women in the visual arts in the uncharacteristic role of artists, Randolph includes examples of widows, women in religious communities and female aristocrats who all achieved a certain degree of autonomy as both patrons and artists. This suggests that women could also serve as spectators in certain situations during a time when it was the male gaze that was dominant in visual culture.\(^7\)

**Evolution of “Art”**

It is also important to understand how society defined art throughout history, because in Larry Shiner’s *The Invention of Art*, he discusses how our modern ideas of fine art were not due

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\(^5\) Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender*, 144-5.


\(^7\) Adrian W.B. Randolph, “Gendering the Period Eye: Deschi Da Parto and Renaissance Visual Culture,” *Art History* 27, no. 4 (September 2004): 545.
to a natural progression, but because humans invented it. The different terms that were used to explain art, including lower case “art” and uppercase “Art,” have been in use for over three hundred years. He also identifies an important “break” in the eighteenth century that other scholars have ignored. This break was signaled by the distinction between “fine art” and “craft,” and between “artist” and “artisan.”

Shiner explains that the Ancient Greeks, such as Aristotle and Plato did not even have a term for the concept of fine art as we do today. It was not until the eighteenth century that the modern system of art we are familiar with today emerged. “Art” changed from a broad term and split into two separate categories as, “fine arts” and “crafts.” There was also a split between “artist” and “artisan/craftsman.” In Shiner’s narrative, these changes did not constitute “merely the substitution of one definition of art for another…but the substitution of one entire system of concepts, practices, and institutions for another.”

In Jacob Burckhardt’s The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy (1860) the author claims that “to understand the higher forms of social intercourse in this period, we must keep before our minds the fact that women stood on a footing of perfect equality with men.” However, this is a significant overgeneralization that has persisted in art history discourse until Joan Kelly’s groundbreaking argument regarding the changed status of women. She asserts these cultural and social changes that were positive for men, were actually deleterious to the freedoms of women. Thus, “there was no renaissance for women – at least, not during the Renaissance.” But we see with Anguissola, Fontana and Gentileschi that there were women who overcame

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9 Ibid., 12-15.
10 Ibid., 5-6.
these obstacles and became successful in their profession. It is therefore important to examine the relationship between female painters’ careers and how they helped to establish the genre of female self-portraiture.

Paola Tinagli stated that, “to be able to make sense of the art of the past, we first need to be aware of the ways in which artists interpreted their vision of the world.” The term for that concept is “schemata” which was defined by E.H. Gombrich as a way to represent the world during a specific time. It is crucial to understand how the people in early modern Europe viewed and understood visual culture and how that differs from today.\(^\text{13}\) Michael Baxandall’s *Painting and Experience* sought to define the “cognitive style.” He posited that it is the set of skills that the viewer brings to the painting through their individual experiences. This way of thinking is what he termed the “period eye.” Baxandall attempts to describe how artists during the fifteenth century had to respond to their patrons’ way of viewing paintings.\(^\text{14}\) However, it appears Baxandall is only referring to male viewers. He only briefly discusses one example of female viewing practices with the *Zardo de Oration*, the *Garden of Prayer* from 1454. This book, which was written for young women, was similar to Books of Hours in which women were encouraged to visually meditate on biblical stories and make them more familiar by placing the scene in a well-known city and picturing the characters as well-known people.\(^\text{15}\)

Baxandall continues his discussion on “the period eye” with the concept of pictorial space and linear perspective in painting and states that there were a number of people during the Quattrocento who were familiar with using plane geometry for the purpose of “surveying

\(^{13}\) Tinagli, *Women in Italian Renaissance Art*, 7.


\(^{15}\) Baxandall, *Painting & Experience*, 46.
buildings and…land.” However, both Randolph and Chadwick argue that although humanists encouraged women to receive an education, this did not usually include learning mathematics, rhetoric or the sciences. With this in mind, it is assumed that the Quattrocento individuals to whom Baxandall is referring are predominantly male. Baxandall’s discussion in the 20th century heavily excluded women, which suggests that women did not have an active role in the arts during the 15th century.

Leon Battista Alberti’s *On Painting* from the mid-15th century was a treatise broken down into three sections: the mathematics behind painting, constructing the composition based on Nature and how the artist should act, and he also sought to help elevate painting from mere craft to that of a more distinguished liberal art. R.A. Sydie argues that Alberti’s treatise specifically contributed to a gender hierarchy of the fifteenth century, one in which women were inferior to men. Alberti discusses all of the skills artists must have and use to create their paintings and that if perspective is done successfully, the artist can feel almost like the Creator. Although “there was not deliberate gender bias involved,” Sydie claims that the cultural mindset of the time and therefore of Alberti, could have perpetuated this idea of the “phallocentric gaze” that ultimately excluded women because they could not meet the standards set forth in his treatise.

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18 Pollock references this hierarchy. She asserts gender difference between men and women result in a hierarchy where those assigned to the female gender “are negatively valued relative to the masculine…” Griselda Pollock, “Differencing: Feminism’s Encounter with the Canon,” in *Differencing the Canon: The Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999), 29.
Alberti also utilized the system of measurement based on the male body as opposed to a female body where the sum of three “braccia” was equivalent to the height of an average man.\textsuperscript{21} A braccio was meant to refer to the length of a man’s arm and was a Florentine unit of measurement. The system that Alberti uses was supposed to promote an understanding of how to establish spatial relationships in painting, but excludes women from being able to participate because they rarely received training in mathematics.\textsuperscript{22} Cennino Cennini echoed Alberti’s idea earlier in his \textit{Craftsman’s Handbook} (c. 1390) when he stated that the ideal form is the male nude, while the female form does not have any set proportion and therefore cannot be used as a consistent form of measurement.\textsuperscript{23}

Alberti is a primary source of the 15\textsuperscript{th} century which has shown that early modern authors defined concepts related to art in a way that excluded women from participating or that upheld assumptions about women in the visual arts. However, we will see that this did not necessarily stop women completely from contributing. Burckhardt from the 19\textsuperscript{th} century made an overgeneralization when he stated that women were equal to men during this time. But, scholars such as Kelly have made great strides in dissecting traditional art history in order to create a different narrative – one that includes women. Although this issue will never be completely resolved, historians are beginning to open up this area for innovative research.

\textbf{Looking Inward}

Portraiture emerged in the 14\textsuperscript{th} century in the form of the profile portrait. By the 16\textsuperscript{th} century, the more dynamic three-quarter portrait was introduced although women were still depicted in the restricting profile view until the 1470’s. It is possible then that profile portraits as

\textsuperscript{21} Alberti, \textit{On Painting}, 54-55.
\textsuperscript{22} Chadwick, \textit{Women, Art & Society}, 72-73.
a convention can be a site of gender construction.\textsuperscript{24} Tinagli defined portraiture as an individual representation, but which is based on the ideals of a particular society. Portraiture can thus “help to create or to redefine social and cultural ideals, and at the same time responds to them.”\textsuperscript{25}

Therefore, portraiture was not personal, but social and was used for specific functions.

Burckhardt claimed the rise of humanism allowed for people to think of themselves more as individuals, which resulted in a heightened awareness of self.\textsuperscript{26} Higonnet states that self-portraiture “expresses an individual physiognomy and psyche, but only on the conditions its culture allows.\textsuperscript{27} While Woods-Marsden said the “self-portrait means…the isolated self as both subject and object.” What is important to answer then is how did early modern artists reconcile this professional identity imposed by society with the identity of the conscious self?\textsuperscript{28}

Portraiture only required technical proficiency, which is why it was considered a mechanical art and not a liberal one. This resulted in a gender hierarchy reflected in the visual arts. Art “actively helped to shape [this] ideology – in this case, to perpetuate gender stereotypes.”\textsuperscript{29} However, we will see that these female painters went well beyond \textit{ritrarre} in their self-portraiture and into the realm of \textit{imitare}.\textsuperscript{30} This allowed for female self-portraiture to

\textsuperscript{25} Tinagli, \textit{Women in Italian Renaissance Art}, 47.
\textsuperscript{29} The distinction was between the male dominated genres of \textit{istoria} and the lesser respected genres of portraiture and still-life for women. Woods-Marsden, \textit{Renaissance Self-Portraiture}, 187-93.
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ritrarre} meant to “copy the face of nature while \textit{imitare} required complex though to create a “pleasing narrative or \textit{istoria}.” Ibid., 9.
become its own genre because the female face was so uncommon that that in itself was “enough to stop the image being read in the same way as a male self-portrait.”

I do not attempt to argue that there is a specific type of “feminine style,” but I think it is possible to find connections between women’s artistic careers in socio-cultural terms. Linda Nochlin states that “women artists and writers would seem to be closer to other artists of their own period and outlook than they are to each other.” I agree that there are no formal qualities that can be considered distinctly feminine, but I argue that these women painters were responding to similar issues regarding female identity in society. Although they lived at different times and thus would have faced slightly different obstacles, their self-portraiture attests to the fact they continued to struggle to assert themselves professionally in a patriarchal society.

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Part 2: Female Perspective

In this chapter, I delve into female self-portraiture, analyzing several specific examples of female, Italian Renaissance painters. I intend to argue from these analyses that while these women still faced certain limitations because of their gender, this did not stop them from creating innovative self-portraits. These works helped establish themselves as artists and also challenged the notion that women were merely passive objects subject to the male gaze and therefore, male control. Further, the new ideas that these specific female artists developed would not necessarily have contributed to depicting their own identities, but the identity they chose to show the public.

In 1988, Patricia Simon claimed that “studies of Renaissance painting are little touched by feminist enterprise” and while this may not be the case any longer, more research is needed to redirect masculine ideas of art history.\textsuperscript{33}

The early modern period is not the first time we see female self-representations. The ancient philosopher Pliny the Elder discussed the artist Iaia of Kyzikos who painted her own portrait with the use of a mirror. This story was the basis for Giovanni Boccaccio’s \textit{Concerning Famous Women} (1355-1359). Boccaccio used illustrations that depicted women painting their self-portraits.\textsuperscript{34} Convents provided the opportunity for women to excel in the arts, albeit privately. There are instances of manuscript illuminators in convents inserting themselves into their work as early as the 12\textsuperscript{th} century. I chose this period because women painters began to respond to the challenge of showing their artistic skill while also remaining modest as was dictated by their sex.\textsuperscript{35} Although there is some debate over dating of certain portraits, I discuss

\textsuperscript{35} “It is during this time that “these women were the pioneers of female self-portraiture.” Borzello, \textit{Seeing Ourselves}, 37.
the artists and their paintings in chronological order to show how their careers progressed and they changed over time.

**Sofonisba Anguissola**

Although I touched on religious women and those in the guilds who physically produced art, it is not until the sixteenth century that we see women being able to take advantage of hailing from artist or wealthy families in which education was encouraged in order to become recognized female artists. Sofonisba Anguissola (c. 1532-1625) of Cremona is an early example of how being born into an artist family can aid in a female artist’s career. She contributed many innovative conventions to female self-portraiture that helped to elevate the status of women artists in society. Fredrika Jacobs writes that she was considered the exception to women who were generally considered unable to achieve excellence in the visual arts by her male contemporaries. Her father Amilcare Anguissola encouraged all of his seven children to excel in the arts. He may have focused his energy on building Sofonisba’s artistic career as she was the oldest. He had her train with Cremonese painter Bernardino Campi and later Bernardino Gatti and even wrote to Michelangelo seeking advice for his daughter. However, she only studied painting for three years under her teachers, which is a relatively short time compared to aspiring male painters. Amilcare knew he could benefit financially if Sofonisba were to secure a position in a royal court. In 1559, she became a lady-in-waiting to the wife of Phillip II, Isabella de Valois of the Spanish court in Madrid. During her residency, she received an annual stipend of 200 ducats that went straight to Amilcare. She was well-known for her aristocratic and family portraits and also for the numerous self-portraits she painted throughout her life. In fact,

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she most likely produced the largest group of self-portraits between the time of Albrecht Dürer and Rembrandt.  

Vasari made this statement concerning the female artist: “if women know so well how to make living men, what marvel is it that those who wish are also so well able to make them in painting!” This could suggest Anguissola’s amazing artistic ability was somehow linked to her ability as a woman to procreate. Jacobs looks to the ancient source of Aristotle who provided four causes to understand what women’s role (or lack thereof) in creating children was and how that would have been seen as impacting her artistic ability. If the idea had persisted that women were merely the vessels of life and that men were the real creators, it could be argued that she had the ability to do something that only men were usually capable of. If that is true, it certainly would have made her stand out among her female contemporaries. The distinction then, is that she was not only using a tool (brush) that was usually handled by men, but she yielded it with the artistic ability that men possessed.

Women were also seen as being unable to envision the concept of invention or *invenzioni*. Along the same lines as ideas on procreation where men were thought to actively provide everything while women were the passive thing men acted upon, female artists were not capable of creating something original. Giovanni Lomazzo and Giovanbattista Armenini claimed that *invenzione* was similar to *disegno* in that it “has its origin in idea” and thus, women were only capable of copying what has already been done by male artists. However, Jacobs states how Anguissola is the exception here as well. Michelangelo instructed her to paint an early subject of

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40 Women artists focused on portraits and self-portraits as they provided access to subject matter. They could not study the nude form and was unable to paint male models if they were to uphold her feminine virtue.  
41 Jacobs, "Woman's Capacity,” 1-4.
a weeping boy, which showed her prowess in portraying emotion. Anguissola should not be considered only an exception to the rule, but as a case where we can see women challenging the previously held notions in art history. Just from this example, we can say that it is not as easy as simply saying women were equal to men or that women did not have a Renaissance. As Chadwick states, “this history of women’s contributions to visual culture does not necessarily fit neatly into categories produced by and around men’s activities, and accepting the concept of the Renaissance as a frame carries with it inherent risks for a feminist history.”

Margaret Miles presented two ideas that can be considered when analyzing a work of art from a different culture and/or time period from ours: first, if there is a high frequency of a certain motif, it could have a special significance to individuals of the original culture; second, that certain motifs can comprise several different messages intended for individuals in specific life situations. Therefore, we cannot simply look at the formal qualities or examples of iconography “if what we seek to understand is a complex communication signaled by the painting within a particular community.” With this caveat, I will analyze the paintings of Sofonisba Anguissola along with those of other female artists in these formal and iconographical terms, but will do so in conjunction with the cultural and societal norms of the time.

Modesty

Anguissola’s early Self-Portrait from 1554 (Fig. 1) was painted at the age of twenty-two, which was one year before her famous family portrait, The Chess Game. Already we can see her talent and skill as a painter as well as the conventions of self-portraiture she decided to include. Here she chose to depict herself in three-quarter view, which was a common pose for female

Chadwick, Women, Art & Society, 87.
portraits by the end of the 15th century and one that the artist used regularly in her self-representations. She is seen in rather plain, dark clothing with a white collar, which was also common in her early works. This, along with the object she holds, can be seen as a portrayal of herself as a virtuous woman. Both men and women were expected to embody certain virtues that were specific to their sex. Anguissola’s clothing attests to her modesty and is echoed in the writing depicted in the book she holds, which also serves to show her competency in reading as an educated woman. What is even more telling is the passage – possibly a devotional book that reads, “Sophonisba Angusola virgo seipsam fecit 1554” (Sofonisba Anguissola, a virgin, made this in 1554). She is demonstrating with the word “virgo” that she is indeed a chaste, unmarried woman, which again is mirrored in her modest dress.

Anguissola would have chosen the clothing, book and statement because she understood that these were elements that could showcase her feminine virtue. I believe she would have also realized the significance of the fact that these virtues were decided and imposed by men in order to not only control women, but also to assert their superiority. Her decisions are very clever because she is working within expected behavior in order to subtly point to her intelligence and artistic talent. She is manipulating and controlling the image she wants the public to see whether she actually identified that way or not. She does not simply sign the painting, but makes her name part of the art stating that she herself made it. Devices such as books or papers with inscriptions that indicate her age and marital status appear frequently in her self-portraits, which may have been used to make it clear to the viewer that she herself was the artist instead of made by a male’s hand. This, along with the fact that she calls herself a virgin, shows that she also understands the importance of remaining chaste as a female artist or at least the importance of

45 Women were expected to be passive, obedient and modest while also being somewhat accomplished in “feminine” activities.
46 Borzello, Seeing Ourselves, 24.
giving the appearance of chastity to the viewer. Even the language she chose for the statement (Latin) would have been strategic, for it proved she was an educated woman.

Painting within a Painting

One iconic image that comes to mind when people think of self-portraits is the artist depicting himself or herself in the act of painting. However, this convention was uncommon during the 16th century, and some scholars believe that the first example was created by a female artist. This early example of Northern European artist Catharina van Hemessen in 1548 (Fig. 2) shares a similar motif with Anguissola’s *Self-Portrait at the Easel* from 1556 (Fig. 3).47 They are both depicted in three-quarter pose, at an easel in the act of painting while still engaging the viewer. Both artists would have adopted this particular device to combine their identity as a talented artist with their identity as a virtuous woman. Although they are both shown in the act of painting, they are both cleanly dressed, with serious expressions and with their hair pulled back. This is because even though they wanted to be seen as successful painters, they could not be overly dramatic or boastful; to do so would have drawn attention to a possible lack of morality and decorum.48 Anguissola and Hemessen both seemed to understand the dilemma they faced as female artists, and this is a clear example where they are changing certain aspects about themselves to divert attention away from the fact that they were, indeed, boasting of their talent with these inventions.

How does this differ from the self-portraits men were creating at the same time? Male artists of the 16th century were painting self-portraits for a number of reasons, but one main one was that they wanted to raise their status in society. This tactic does not seem to include portraying themselves in the act of painting since the goal was to elevate the status of painting

48 Ibid.
from a mechanical art to a liberal one. While there are instances of male artists alluding to their profession such as Italian painter Annibale Carracci (Fig. 4), a majority of male self-portraits are more concerned with showing their style and wealth. Albrecht Dürer’s Self-Portrait (1498) (Fig. 5) shows the artist depicted himself the way he wanted the viewer to see him. Although Anguissola had a similar goal, she approached it differently within the constraints of her sex.

In Anguissola’s 1556 Self-Portrait, we see the same modest dress with white collar. She brings Hemessen’s idea of the female artist at work one step further by showing herself painting a specific narrative. One motif that Anguissola repeated in her self-portraits is depicting herself in the midst of painting the Virgin and Child as shown in this example. She would have chosen this specific subject matter for a reason, and it was most likely to reinforce the idea of Anguissola as an accomplished artist or possibly to align herself with the ultimate female figure of modesty. Women artists were mostly denied access to the same education that males received, and this included access to models to practice and perfect figure drawing necessary for religious narrative scenes.

However, this obviously did not stop some female artists from completing successful figural compositions. This decision subtly demonstrates her displaying her confidence and skill as a painter. In another example of the Virgin and Child motif, Anguissola took this idea one step further when she included the inscription that reads, “I, the maiden Sofonisba, equaled the Muses and Apelles in performing my songs and handling my colors.” Why did she decide to align herself with the classical male figure Apelles instead of a female artist such as Iaia discussed by Pliny the Elder? She may have thought there was an advantage to include Apelles

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49 In Albrecht Dürer’s self-portraits, he never depicts himself with any of the devices or tools of his trade, although he does commonly include inscriptions similar to Anguissola stating that he is the creator of his self-image. He sought to depict himself in the same high status that Italian painters enjoyed.

50 Borzello, Seeing Ourselves, 46.
other than a female who would not have been as well known.\textsuperscript{51} Although she may have garnered harsh criticism for aligning herself with a classical male figure, Anguissola avoids this by portraying the comparison through text, which will ultimately be overshadowed by the more prominent visual image of female virtue. Choosing Latin for the text not only served to show her degree of education, but would have also made its meaning less accessible, since only those of higher education would be able to translate it.

Utilizing the Male Teacher

Another major convention that Anguissola invented appears in her double portrait 

\textit{Bernardino Campi Painting Sofonisba Anguissola} (Fig. 6). She paints the artist Bernardino Campi painting a portrait of herself, which is another first for women artists. It is a painting within a painting, a story within a story, which creates a more complex narrative.\textsuperscript{52} What is interesting is that Campi also looks over his shoulder in the act of painting most likely to look at his model, Anguissola, while she gazes at her own work. Here we see her depart from her usual modest, simple black dress to a much grander maroon dress with dramatic neckline and gold embellishments. Great care was taken in painting her hands which hold fine gloves instead of painter’s tools. She is no longer the round faced youth seen in her earlier self-portraits; she is a confident and refined woman.

This innovative work highlights the traditional visual image of women as the object for the male artist and flips it on its head as she is the actual creator. However, Anguissola cleverly did so by focusing the attention on her former teacher’s supposedly superior skill. She is being painted by his talented hand, a device that Mary Garrard argues is the result of Anguissola

\textsuperscript{51} Borzello, \textit{Seeing Ourselves}, 45-46.

\textsuperscript{52} There seems to be conflicting dates with this painting as well the question of whether it was really by her or by Campi, but it was created sometime in the 1550’s, either during her time under Campi’s wing or shortly after while studying with the painter Bernardino Gatti of Cremona. Ibid., 42-43.
attempting to differentiate “herself as artist from her self as trope and theme for the male artist” and possibly to “collapse the subject-object position.” I believe that the artist knowingly gave up her role as the subject (artist) to become the object as Garrard suggests in order to conceal her own ambition as a female artist. She does so by making it seem like a male artist is the one presenting her to the world. She is the one that dominates the composition, not the artist painting her. She is able to show her skill and talent without coming across as boastful because he is alluded to as the creator of her image. This is a unique type of self-portraiture that she is able to use for her own agenda, similar to the convention of painting herself, painting the Virgin and Child. To depict herself painting her own self-portrait may have come across as too assertive. Male artists were not worried about depicting their confidence, which is apparent in Johannes Gumpp Self-Portrait (1646) (Fig. 7).

Myth of Two Talents

Anguissola’s Self-Portrait at the Clavichord from 1555 is the first self-portrait to depict the artist playing an instrument for both women and men. She repeated the same subject in 1561, which is the work I will discuss (Fig. 8). Here we see the same dark background with the artist in three-quarter view while engaging with the viewer. Her clothing, while still dark and modest, seems to include subtle elaboration. Although she is not shown in the act of painting, she is still actively playing the instrument pictured, which emphasizes her slender, but capable fingers.

The expectation that women were to learn multiple skills may play off the idea that women were only to excel in something up until a certain point so as not to elicit jealousy from...
men. Subject matter such as this would have been unique to women artists’ self-portraits and something that they could make their own. Although many male artists would possess other talents such as playing an instrument, they may not have found it beneficial to use this convention in their self-portraits. Their focus would have been placed on portraying themselves in a way that elevated the status of painting to a liberal art. This is evident in Raphael’s *School of Athens* (1510-11) (Fig. 9).

Anguissola also includes an older woman placed behind the clavichord. Most scholars find it unlikely that this female figure was the mother of the artist, since we know what her mother looked like from a portrait she painted in 1557. Instead, many believe she may signify a chaperone or nurse, which was common for young women. A similarly dressed older woman also appears in the earlier *Chess Game* from 1555 and may serve the same purpose. This is specifically a female self-portraiture convention because men did not feel the need to include this type of figure. This older woman may also be present to contrast with the artist’s youth and accomplishment. However, it is clear that the focus is the artist and the depiction of her two talents since the light falls on her and the clavichord while the elderly women is reduced to the shadows. All of the elements she uses in this self-portrait were suitable conventions for women, but they also allow her to brag of her multiple talents. I argue that Anguissola includes these characteristics because she knew they were unique to women and they gave her a sense of agency that helped elevate her status.

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57 Women were expected to excel in more than one activity in order to maintain their status as a gentlewoman and appropriate talents included singing, playing an instrument and painting.
58 Although not a self-portrait, Raphael still inserts himself surrounded by old masters like Leonardo and Michelangelo -- known supporters for the elevation of the arts -- as well as ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. These inclusions posited painting as a type of empirical science, which Leonardo argued for and that Aristotle was dedicated to. Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture*, 123.
During her time at court, she taught the Queen Elisabeth to paint and also painted portraits of members of nobility. What we do not see is a continuation of her self-portraits, the 1561 work being the only exception. Why is it that her self-portraits decreased during this time? Could it be that she just did not have the time to complete these works between teaching, painting portraits and seeing to her lady-in-waiting duties? In a letter she wrote to Bernardino Campi in 1561, she complained that the Queen was taking up most of her time so that she hardly got to paint on her own. Or is it possible that she was creating these autonomous portraits to serve another function in which it was necessary to include the motifs explained above? It can be argued that self-portraits were an appropriate outlet for the artist to represent her skill, accomplishments, physical beauty and virtue in order to be offered a court position in return. If this is the case, then she could be seen as participating in the “gift-giving culture” of the court where self-portraits of both male and female artists were given as gifts in exchange for some type of favor. This would have contrasted with male contemporaries whom we typically see creating self-images based on receiving a successful appointment at court. Their goal was to transcend the current status of male artists in society. An example of this is Titian’s Self-Portrait (early 1550’s) (Fig. 10). Anguissola’s earlier self-portraits were not based on her previous court experience, but her goal of actually attaining that position at court.

However, if the function of her self-portraits was fulfilled when she achieved her desire for a position at court, what was the purpose of creating the few autonomous portraits we see including the clavichord painting from 1561? Perhaps we can say that it was a combination of

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61 Woods-Marsden, Renaissance Self-Portraiture, 8.
62 Titian was a court painter to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and his son Phillip II of Spain beginning in the 1530’s. This self-portrait includes clothing of high wealth and power gained by his court appointment. Ibid., 160.
63 Ibid., 193.
her not having the time as she stated in the letter to Campi and Anguissola understanding it was no longer necessary to advertise her character to those in power. I believe examining her only other documented self-portrait from this time in her life can elucidate the earlier thought process behind her self-representations. Her *Self-Portrait* from 1564 (Fig. 11) is dramatically different from her earlier works in which she depicted herself in modest, plain colored clothing with little or no jewelry and simple pulled-back, braided hair. The plain look of her earlier works contrasts with the very elegant and sophisticated woman in the 1564 self-portrait. She wears very ornate clothing with a lace ruffle around her neck and dangling earrings. Her hair is intricately curled and she wears a headband that is highly decorated with an unidentified emblem at the top.

This is the first of her self-portraits in which she is shown from the shoulders up. Her face dominates the space. The decoration takes the place of the action in her earlier self-portraits. She is not in the middle of reading a book, painting, or playing an instrument. In fact, we cannot discern from the image if she is actively doing anything besides engaging directly with the viewer. This work is similar to her *Bernardino Campi Painting Sofonisba Anguissola* painted five years earlier where she deceptively allowed herself to be viewed as the passive object.

Why does her self-representation depart so much from her previous work? It was no longer necessary to depict herself as the chaste virgin now that she was active at court. She had found a new function for her self-portraits and adjusted her public identity accordingly. She adorns herself with courtly attire, which are gifts she would have received from King Phillip II. This was the new identity she wanted people to see; she was an elegant woman who had surrounded herself with the nobility. She would not need to be actively participating in any
activity in her self-representations because what she wears speaks for itself. Titian’s Self-Portrait is a contemporary male example of this convention as well (Fig. 10).  

The Mature Artist

The last known self-portrait of Sofonisba Anguissola is her Self-Portrait dated 1610 (Fig. 12). By the time she painted this work in 1610, she was approaching eighty years old. She seems to have retained that same sense of modesty late into her life as befit of her sex. She is turned toward the viewer, but her gaze does not seem to ever reach ours as it does in her previous works. In her hands, she holds a book in which her index finger holds her place, as if she had just stopped reading, and a piece of paper, which has an inscription, in the other.

Seated in this way, she almost appears to be a member of the aristocracy, which was a common way to depict nobility. She is shown as woman completely at ease with her surroundings and with her long career; she is certainly someone to be respected. With this self-portrait we see one last convention for the female genre: a female artist depicted in advanced age as opposed to emphasized youthfulness. She no longer had to worry about securing any type of position, so she could display the fact that she had a long and successful career.  

Perhaps this self-portrait served no other function than to portray the artist’s actual identity, proud of her accomplishments and comfortable with the success that she achieved during her long life. This is

64 Titian wears a gold chain around his neck to emphasize his wealth and connections. It was given to him by Charles V when he was appointed Count Palatine and Knight of the Golden Spur. Woods-Marsden, Renaissance Self-Portraiture, 160.

65 A common path for female artists in the early modern period was that many basically saw the end of their careers once they were married and produced children. Anguissola, on the other hand, not only had the support of the king of Spain, but also that of both of her husbands, and she did not have to contend with raising children or risk dying during labor, which would have made this unique self-portrait (the last of her career) possible.
another convention that we see some male painters utilizing such as Titan in his *Self-Portrait* (c. 1565-70) around the age of 80 (Fig. 13).  

The scholarship on Sofonisba Anguissola is vast, but few art historians have focused solely on her contributions to the genre of female self-portraiture. These conventions were specific to female artists because men would not have found them beneficial for the elevation of their status. Anguissola would have had few examples to study, which makes her innovations even more commendable. She also understood that she had to tread lightly in her new role to be successful, which is attested in her ability to subtly boast of her talent, thus retaining her modesty. I discussed works from her oeuvre which exhibited these new ideas and conventions that we see few male artists attempting. These examples prove she was not only a pioneer in female self-portraiture, but that she was doing things nobody else was (including men). She used these elements to her advantage to provide her audience with an identity that was pleasing to them. We will see that the remaining two artists I discuss were similar in this way, which is something that was not surprisingly ignored by early modern writers.

**Lavinia Fontana**

Like Anguissola, Lavinia Fontana (1552-1614) came from northern Italy, but was active approximately twenty years later in Bologna. Her father, Prospero Fontana, encouraged her painting and education just as Amilcare Anguissola had with Anguissola. Fontana had the added advantage that her father was a prominent painter himself and served as her teacher. Fontana was already an established portrait painter in Bologna by 1577, and she is recognized for her many religious and historical scenes. Her altarpieces show she was arguably the first female artist who

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66 Titian possibly used the outdated profile portrait to portray himself as withdrawn and deep in thought after a long, successful career. Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portrait*, 167.

67 Bologna was a beneficial place for a woman artist to grow up because it is home to the oldest university in the world.
was able work in the same arena as men, receiving commissions beyond the convent or the court as well as the first professional female painter in Bologna. Her success as a painter is evidenced by Bolognese poet Giulio Cesare Croce who wrote, “In painting there are those who know the great wonder of nature, Lavinia Fontana, noble painter, unique in the world like a phoenix.” Imitating from nature is a skill that goes back to Alberti and the idea of *ritrarre*, although Alberti also stresses the importance of *invenzione*. In 1611, the artist Felice Antonio Casoni also dedicated a medal to her, which depicts the artist at her easel.

However, not all men were as accepting of her artistic talent, especially when she ventured into the public sphere with her large commissions. Italian painter Giovanni Baglione praised Fontana for “being a woman, in this kind of painting she did quite well,” but this was in response to her declaring she would no longer paint large public commissions. This was a result of her perceived failure of the *Martyrdom of Saint Stephen* (1603-04) in the Basilica of San Paolo fuori le mura in Rome. When he says “in this kind of painting,” he is referring to portraiture as if it were an inferior art to monumental religious works and therefore more suitable for women, which is similar to Armenini when he says, “even an artist of mediocre talent can master this art as long as he is experienced in colors.” This sentiment echoes Lomazzo when he argued that women were not capable of *invenzione*, only of mere copying.

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71 Ibid.
Music

Only five self-portraits are attributed to Fontana, one of which was a drawing.72 Fontana’s *Self-Portrait at the Clavichord with a Servant* from 1577 (Fig. 14) utilizes the same theme of as Anguissola’s earlier self-portrait with a clavichord, which shows it was desirable for woman to be skilled in more than one activity.73 Like Anguissola’s, Fontana’s self-portrait shows the artist in the midst of playing while she turns to engage with the viewer, although Fontana’s three-quarter pose is slightly more dynamic, as she must turn her upper body more to face the audience. Another new element is that instead of merely alluding to her talent as a painter by the finished product, she uses the diagonal of the clavichord to bring the viewer’s eye to the easel in the background, bathed in the light of the window. This device also shows the artist’s ability to create depth and perspective. Fontana includes a servant who holds her music although she is not elderly as Anguissola’s painting reflects. Fontana includes a Latin inscription, which states, “Lavinia virgin/maiden of Prospero Fontana has represented the likeness of her face from the mirror in the year 1577.” I believe this inscription not only made clear who created the portrait, but also presented the artist as learned in the humanist language of Latin.

Fontana adds that she is the daughter of Prospero Fontana, which shows just how important the family name was and that she is representing that family in this portrayal. So why is it that Fontana decided to include her father’s name when Anguissola did not? I believe her decision to include it speaks to the possible function of the painting, which was most likely different than Anguissola’s attempt to attract the professional interest of the nobility. I will discuss the purpose in connection with another element of this work. The major difference between the two is the clothing that each chose to include. While Anguissola continually wore

72 Bohn, “Female Self-Portraiture,” 251.
73 The fact that this self-portrait is so similar to Anguissola’s earlier work shows that Fontana may have been aware of Anguissola’s self-portrait. Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves*, 47.
simple, plain clothing to portray her modesty, Fontana wears a lavishly decorated dress in a much brighter color. She wears a more highly ornamented, pulled-back hairstyle and several different necklaces that accentuate her lower neckline. The artist’s choice of clothing and decision to include her father’s name as well as the date she created it (1577) are important indicators of the painting’s possible function.  

Could this self-portrait have been a type of marriage portrait? She depicts herself excelling in two activities, lavishly dressed and adorned with a plainly dressed maid who serves not only as a clear contrast between the two, but also points to the wealth of the family that they are able to employ servants. Her claim that she is a virgin and and the daughter of Prospero Fontana indicates that her purity is intact and that she hails from a prominent family – two very desirable factors for marriage.

Although this type of portrait usually alluded to the fact that women were seen as property of the family and was to be used as an image demonstrating the family’s wealth and prosperity, Fontana is able insert more of her own identity into the work. She is still the object to be viewed by the male gaze, but she is no longer subject to the interpretation of the male artist, which therefore can be seen as an innovation in the genre of female self-portraiture. If this is, indeed, a wedding portrait, it is not something that male artists may have felt the need to create. It was women, not men, who were regarded as the ultimate visual representation of the family.

Classical Models

A second self-portrait attributed to Fontana entitled *Self-Portrait in a Studio* from 1579 (Fig. 15), asserts her talent as a painter even further than the marriage self-portrait. The Spaniard

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74 In 1577, Fontana entered into a marriage with Paolo Fappi, another painter who had studied with her father.
76 Simon called this participation of women from the mercantile class “display culture” where this kind of public show of wealth was essential for an individual’s identity. Ibid.
Alonso Chacon had designed a future ‘museo,’ which was to house his growing collection of portraits by famous artists, and he requested one from Fontana. Fontana stated in a letter she sent with the painting that she “had feelings of inadequacy at appearing next to works by artists such as Anguissola.” However, Fontana could be thought of as working within the confines of her gender where humility was key and was exploiting this for her own self-image. Here she presents herself seated at a desk in a very relaxed pose. Her left arm rests casually on the arm rest with her hand hanging loosely while her right hand lightly holds a pen as if she has just been inspired to draw something as shown by the piece of paper on the desk. On the desk and on the shelves behind her are small, classical statues, which would be the source of her new inspiration.

What benefit did she think depicting these classical elements as part of her identity would have? I believe she wanted to demonstrate that she had a humanist education, which is bolstered by the Latin inscription she used previously in her marriage portrait, and was something many male artist would have had but few women possessed. She may have been hinting at the fact that she was just as well trained and learned as male artists, which would be a bold claim during this time. Her casual pose indicates the she is comfortable surrounded by casts and bronzes. She was much more than just a portraitist, skilled at ritrarre (the ability to copy from Nature), and she had the training to prove it. However, she avoids comparison with male artists because she uses casts as models while men were able to study actual nudes. I think Fontana was aware she could show off more with this painting because of its function, but

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77 There are accounts of correspondence between the artist and the recipient of the painting. He actually already owned three paintings by the artist, but wished to have a small self-portrait from which he could produce prints. Borzello, Seeing Ourselves, 22.
77 Ibid., 42.
79 Woods-Marsden, Renaissance Self-Portraiture, 222.
80 The tondo shape also seems to emphasize the classical style of the sculpture within the frame as the tondo also hails from antiquity.
81 Borzello, Seeing Ourselves, 42.
82 Woods-Marsden, Renaissance Self-Portraiture, 9.
realized she still needed to use caution. This would have elevated her status as a female artist without the sense that she was trying to compete with men. In any case, she chose to depict herself as she did because of where the painting was to be placed, surrounded by the works of other famous and talented artists. In Baccio Bandinelli’s *Self-Portrait*, (early 1530’s) (Fig. 16) we see no such restraint.83

Virtuous Female Myth

Fontana’s *Self-portrait as Judith with the Head of Holofernes* from 1600 (Fig. 17) departs from her previous depictions as a professional painter. Fontana inserts herself as the historical figure Judith, and does something similar as the figure St. Barbara a year later in her *Madonna and Child Appearing to Five Saints*. The patron for the *Self-Portrait as Judith* is also unknown, although it has been posited that it was commissioned by a widow of the nobility, Costanza Biachetti Bargellini.84 This is a logical possibility, as the figure of Judith may have been thought of by women as the epitome of the virtuous and heroic widow.85 Even though we may know the purpose of the painting, why would Fontana have felt it advantageous to insert herself as the figure of Judith, and how are we certain that is even what she had intended?

In this self-portrait, we see the artist as the biblical heroine, which was a story that was a popular theme in 16th and 17th century art.86 She is a complex character because she is simultaneously capable of being a “paragon of virtue” as well as “a bold-faced liar” and “ruthless

83 Bandinelli explicitly holds a composition he completed of Hercules triumphing over Cacus even points to it with his index finger. He is showing of his skill of the nude male form while surrounded by classical columns. Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture*, 139.
84 Bohn, “Female Self-Portraiture,” 251-3.
86 Judith was a widow who tricked Holofernes into letting her into his quarters and, with the help of her maid, decapitated him while he slept. She was considered a heroine because Holofernes was an Assyrian general who was going to destroy her city.
In this depiction, the beheading has already taken place, and she holds the general’s head in one hand and presents the sword to the viewer in the other. She engages the viewer in an almost challenging way as if waiting for someone to question her actions. This would have been right before both women parade the decapitated head to the community, and we catch Judith/Lavinia in a moment of confidence because she was triumphant in saving her people.

Although it became common for Bolognese female painters to paint themselves as historical or mythological figures in the early to mid-17th century, evidenced by self-portraits created by Elisabetta Sirani and Antonia Pinelli, Fontana is the first woman artist to do so. It seems as though it was rarer for male contemporaries to create this type of self-portrait with Annibale Carracci’s *Self-Portrait as Bacchus* from circa 1585 being the earliest example. In fact, this is apparently the only such autonomous portrait created by a male artist in Bologna from 1550 to 1650. Why might we see this disparity between the occurrence of this type of self-portrait between male and female artists? I believe the answer to this question and the one I posed above regarding the reasoning for portraying herself as historical women are one in the same. Bohn points out that the figures Fontana associates with in both the *Self-Portrait as Judith* and the *Virgin and Child* are models for female virtue. Therefore, the artist was trying to link herself with women who had the morals gentlewomen were expected to have during the early modern period. Fontana may have also been aware of the parallels between herself and these women as a female artist. Both the artist and Judith were successful in their separate endeavors, which were traditionally carried out by men. With that said, male artists may not have deemed it as beneficial to create this specific type of self-portrait since men were already the dominant

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88 Bohn was unable to track the whereabouts of this work after its auction in 1990 and no image could be found. Bohn, “Female Self-Portraiture,” 273.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid., 273-4.
sex in the world of painting. She also avoids criticism because it could simply be perceived as a historical painting with virtuous female figures.

Fontana was similar to Anguissola in that she advanced the genre of female-self portraiture through new ideas that both female and male painters had not really attempted, except for rare examples. They both associated themselves with acceptable and positive characteristics, such as higher education, which would have elevated their status as female artists. Like Anguissola, she would have seen the value in using these conventions, whether it was asserting herself as equal to male painters as the historical figure Judith, or by depicting herself at ease, surrounded by classical statues and casts. She was bolder than Anguissola in asserting herself as a successful artist while remaining within suitable norms for Italian women. This idea was attested by Castiglione who claimed that aspiring in a certain field needed discrete modestia.  

There seems to be less scholarship on Fontana’s self-portraiture as opposed to the more famous Anguissola and Artemisia Gentileschi. Babette Bohn has focused on how Fontana influenced other female artists and how this presented the city of Bologna to the rest of Italy as the only place where women were able to aspire to this level of fame during this time. I was interested in the specific innovations Fontana made and how they contributed to the distinction of female self-portraiture as its own genre while also assisting Fontana in creating a certain identity for the viewer.

**Artemisia Gentileschi**

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1656) is key because she also developed several conventions of female self-portraiture. Like Anguissola and Fontana, Gentileschi came from an artistic family. Her father, Orazio Gentileschi, was a successful artist. In fact, many of her paintings were long misattributed to either her father or to Caravaggio (her most famous peer) because of

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similarities in style. These similarities have led to a natural inclination to compare works between the artists, which has resulted in debates over attribution. Comparing works between male and female artists is dangerous because it can perpetuate a gender hierarchy with the woman perceived as secondary to men. In the case of paintings attributed to Caravaggio, Artemisia has been relegated to the role of student. With Orazio, she is the daughter assisting a father who is a symbol of authority and influence. This dilemma of attribution is an obstacle to discussing her self-portraits, so the following discussion is restricted to self-portraits for which a scholarly consensus on attribution exists.

Another dilemma is distinguishing between what she considered an autonomous portrait and what was meant to be an allegory or a historical depiction, two genres for which she was known. In some of her portraits, even if they are not true self-portraits, Artemisia is still inserting some part of herself. This idea follows Bal’s concept of the “allo-portrait” where self-portraiture is combined with allegory, which results in a “play between ‘self’ and ‘other.’” The artist also frequently painted faces physically similar to her own, although this statement alone is troubling since we really only know her likeness through paintings.

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93 For example, an exhibition including both Artemisia’s and Orazio’s works (2001-2) displayed the painting *Cleopatra* (either 1611-12 or c. 1620) (Fig. 18), which curator Keith Christiansen attributed to Orazio. Curator Judith Mann alternately attributed it to Artemisia. Bal, introduction to *The Artemisia Files*, XIII.
94 Ibid., XIII.
96 Not only did she frequently use her own features in her portraits, but other male artists did including her own father.
Capable Women

Artemisia’s *Self-Portrait as a Lute Player* (1615-17) (Fig. 19) has recently been attributed to the artist, but there is debate over whether this is a self-portrait or a portrait of another woman. Here we see the female figure seated in three-quarter pose made even more dynamic by Artemisia’s signature dramatic chiaroscuro. The background is plain and dark to emphasize what is happening in the foreground. She engages with the viewer in a piercing gaze, but also actively plays the lute. As in the painting by Fontana with the clavichord, it is clear that the female figure is actually playing the instrument since the activity takes a certain amount of dexterity. It is in her hands and forearms, which are exposed and highlighted, that we see more originality from the artist. Artemisia’s paintings are filled with female characters who exhibit her trademark strong, agile hands and forearms as seen here. This definitely defied gender expectations that the hands of women were supposed to be feminine and have a light touch. In other words, they were meant to be limp and passive in portraits. An example is Orazio’s *Lute Player* (Fig. 20), but we can also see this approach in the work of Raphael and Bronzino. However, in this portrait, we see the woman has her sleeves pulled back to better perform the task, which reveals strong, capable arms because “it is through their hands that her women take on the world and confront adversity.”97 She again uses conventional subject matter and subtly inserts a different agenda.

It was believed to be an autonomous portrait because it was found at the Villa Medici and in the inventory of 1638 described as such. Mann agrees with this theory, but Garrard believes it makes more sense that it was another woman being depicted or that “it may represent the artist

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painted as another artist wished to present her, driven by eroticizing impulses. I agree with both Bal and Garrard in this case because it does not seem likely that Artemisia would choose to portray herself with such a low neckline combined with almost overflowing cleavage. If she was depicting herself as another artist would, that is proof that she understood how common it was for her gender to be sexualized by male artists. It is innovative in that she was able to take control of this over-sexualized image from the male artist in this instance. She controlled how the viewer perceived it, but she did so with appropriate subject matter. While it may not a true self-portrait, there is definitely some sense of the artist in the composition.

Some women artists may have attempted a similar style with their hands because it represented power that women could possess and gave a sense of agency beyond procreation. It was still rare for male artists to depict their hands in self-portraits because they were attempting to elevate their status as artists. Including their hands would have drawn attention to the physical work instead of the higher valued mind where invenzione was conceived. Artists wanted to elevate painting to a liberal art and, in doing so, felt the need to downplay the role of the hand in the creation of art. Leonardo wrote that “painting is a mental occupation” and Michelangelo claimed “we paint with our brain, not with our hands.” It seems that Artemisia did not hold this belief, as she prominently displays female hands in her works; she took pride in the manual labor of her profession here and in the next two self-portraits discussed.

99 This would have taken a high level of imitare that individuals like Lomazzo did not think was possible for a woman artist.
100 Garrard, “Artemisia’s Hand,” 12.
101 Woods-Marsden, Renaissance Self-Portraiture, 112.
102 Ibid., 4.
La Pittura

Artists became interested in classical myth regarding the origins of art beginning in the 16th century, and many of these concepts were personified in the female form. This interest intensified in the 17th century, and Artemisia seems to be the first female artist to take advantage of this idea with the personification of painting specifically.\(^{103}\) The painting *Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (1630?) (Fig. 21) in Rome has been attributed to Artemisia, although Garrard believes it could have been a portrait of her by another artist.\(^{104}\) Cesare Ripa described the personification of Painting in his *Iconologia* as “a female with disordered hair representing the frenzy of creation, with attributes of a medallion, brush and palette,” and these traits can be seen in both Allegory paintings.\(^{105}\) Although there is a general consensus that this was created by Artemisia and that it is indeed a self-portrait, there seems to be enough doubt regarding difference in style when compared to the *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (1630) (Fig. 22) in London that the attribution is brought back into question.

If one considers the uncharacteristic style of the Rome Allegory combined with the fact that the figure’s hand gesture would have been perceived as a direct challenge to male artists and is emphasized by the male portrait she paints while looking at the viewer (male), it seems unlikely it was painted by Artemisia. Although she was able to boast of her artistic talent more boldly than previous female artists, and we will see this in her London Allegory, I believe she would have showed more restraint knowing that its reception could jeopardize the status she had worked hard to achieve. I agree with Garrard and believe it was a portrait of Artemisia by another artist who would face no repercussions for painting the artist in this challenging manner.

\(^{103}\) Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves*, 53.
Therefore, I will move on to her London *Allegory* since scholars agree this painting was by her hand.

As I stated, Artemisia’s *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* from 1630 has all the characteristics described by Ripa: her hair is pulled back but disheveled, she holds a palette and brush and wears a gold chain around her neck with a pendant. She is in the act of painting, but we do not see her subject, and she gazes attentively at something outside the composition. It is possible she is studying her model, but more likely it was a mirror she stares at in order to paint her own features. In addition to this being a very early, if not the first, self-portrait as the personification of painting, the way in which the figure holds herself is very different than previous portraits and self-portraits of women. Instead of having her arms close at her sides and being seated properly upright as we witness in Anguissola’s *Self-Portrait* of 1556, Artemisia has thrown herself into her work, hunched over and leaning in to look at the possible mirror. Her sleeves are pushed back past her elbows to reveal the very capable forearms she was known for, and her hands strongly grip the brushes and palette. Her posture and three-quarter pose make for a dynamic portrait while the chiaroscuro adds drama. This is emphasized by the foreshortened palette, which seems to almost break the surface of the canvas and the chain that drops down as she bends over. The pose of the chain also functions to bring attention to the pendant, which appears to be a mask similar to a theater mask that has been taken as a sign of mimesis.106

As opposed to visually engaging with the viewer, she is oblivious of her audience and therefore is possibly seen as ignoring the male gaze, which shows the seriousness with which she approached her profession. All of these factors point to the artist’s focus on developing a chaotic and frenzied atmosphere of creation. She combines it with her image in order to create a truly unique type of self-portrait. This was a subject that male artists could never hope to embody, as

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the personification was strictly female. They also would have avoided representing themselves in such an act of physical labor, as they still wanted painting to be associated with the mind and not the hand that manually creates the work. By associating herself with this concept, she proved women could have a closer relationship to painting than was possible for men. In this way, she could assert her high level of talent without being accused of trying to use artistic devices relegated to men in order to challenge male artists. In accordance with Bal’s concept of allo-portrait, Artemisia could have also used the allegory of painting as a way to distance the portrait from her own identity so that it is not a true self-portrait of the artist, but the combination of the self and the “otherness of allegory.” Although male artists could not specifically depict themselves as the personification of painting, we see them taking on a number of mythical male figures. One instance is Rogier van der Weyden’s *Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin* (c. 1440) (Fig. 23).  

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109 Male artists portraying themselves as the patron saint, St. Luke was common. A popular motif was St. Luke painting the Virgin once the story was included in Jacopo de Voragine’s *The Golden Legend*. Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves*, 38.
Part 3: Conclusion

Although the history of female self-portraiture is more complex than saying there was a clear, linear progression through time, we can still say there is a certain amount of development from artist to artist where these women were building off of the generations of artists before her. However, there was a tendency with the emergence of feminist art history to not only shed light on previously ignored women artists, but to almost heroize them which does not help us to understand artists like Anguissola, Fontana, and Gentileschi much better than the traditional historical approach. Gentileschi in particular has been the subject of this idealized treatment although both Anguissola and Fontana have also been hailed as the ‘first great female artist’. To simply claim that these women, whose collective careers spanned almost a century, were similar in style ignores the influence of the diverse cultures and different time periods they came from. However, as women, they faced similar issues working as professional painters and responded to these issues in their self-portraiture.

These female artists used conventions of self-portraiture to give themselves a sense of agency in an arena where women were predominantly depicted as passive, but beautiful symbols of their families instead of as distinctive individuals. Anguissola, Fontana, and Gentileschi knew they represented the minority of professional women and thus were under intense scrutiny to behave as women were expected to. They found innovative ways to successfully comply with accepted standards for their gender while asserting themselves as talented artists during a time when the status of painting was changing. Although male artists also had a set of morals and behaviors to live by, they approached their self-portraits differently than women. The women painters I highlighted therefore used conventions in a way men were not, necessitating in a separate genre of female self-portraiture.
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Bibliography


