RICE UNIVERSITY

COUNTERING CULTURE:
IMAGES OF ARTISTIC AGENCY BY SIXTEENTH AND
SEVENTEENTH CENTURY WOMEN ARTISTS

by

KELLEY J. VERNON

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
MASTERS OF ART

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE

[Signatures and titles of committee members]

Houston, Texas

May, 1998
ABSTRACT

Countering Culture:
Images of Artistic Agency by Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Women Artists

by

Kelley J. Vernon

Sometime around the year 1630, Artemisia Gentileschi, a famed Baroque woman artist, painted one of her most intriguing masterpieces, the stunning *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*. As a personal statement, the image has been unrivaled to this day, its daring symbolic formula unmatched by any other artist past or present. The focus of this thesis is to define the interactions between Artemisia's *Self-Portrait* and self-portraits of sixteenth century women artists, most notably Sofonisba Anguissola and Lavinia Fontana. In this manner, the extraordinary implications of Artemisia's *Self-Portrait* become even more pronounced. Likewise, the thesis also explores instances of "countering culture" in the works of sixteenth century women artists, highlighting moments when their own self-images progressed beyond the normal bounds of social definitions. Finally, the essay explores the possible symbolic meanings of Artemisia's *Self-Portrait* within the realm of the court of Charles I of England, its initial owner.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writing of a thesis is not a sole effort and there are many people I would like to thank for helping me realize my goal. The staffs of the Fondren Library and Alice Pratt Brown Library, Rice University, were instrumental in helping me locate research material for my thesis. Also, the Interlibrary Loan department of the Fondren Library and its courteous staff were a blessing when I found that my research needs extended beyond the Rice campus. Travel assistance money provided by the Department of Art and Art History and the Office of the Dean of Humanities were vital in making possible research in England. I graciously thank Dr. Joseph Manca and Dr. Walter Widrig, both of the Dept. of Art and Art History, for comments and suggests on early and late drafts of this thesis. Finally, my sincerest and deepest thanks are extended to Dr. Melissa Hyde, visiting lecturer in the Dept. of Art and Art History, who worked tirelessly on late drafts of this thesis, honing it into a compelling work of scholarship and, likewise, sharpening my own writing abilities.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Illustrations</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figures</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
"Should I also tell you whether a woman's nature is clever enough and quick enough to learn speculative sciences as well as to discover them, and likewise the manual arts? I assure you that women are equally well-suited and skilled to carry them out and to put them to sophisticated use once they have learned them..."

- Christine de Pizan
The Book of the City of Ladies, 1405

"I will say no more, except what I have on my mind, that I think Your Most Illustrious Lordship will not suffer any loss with me, and that you will find the spirit of Caesar in this soul of a woman."

- Artemisia Gentileschi
Letter to Don Antonio Ruffio, 1649

Introduction

Sometime in the year 1638, Artemisia Gentileschi, already a famed painter in her native Italy and throughout Europe, traveled to England to help her aged father, Orazio Gentileschi, complete the painted ceiling decorations for the home of Queen Henrietta Maria in Greenwich, England. She stayed in England only for a short time after the settling of her father's estate (he died in 1639), and left in 1640 or 1641 to return to her adopted home of Naples. She left in England a dazzling array of paintings attesting to her inherent
talent and technical virtuosity. Along with the Queen's House collaborations, several other paintings by her hand entered the English Royal Collection during those years. Among these were an *Allegory of Fame*, a *Susanna and the Elders*, and *Bathsheba*, all now lost, and the magnificent *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*, or *La Pittura*, currently housed at Hampton Court Palace (Fig. 1).¹

In the many studies and interpretations of Artemisia's *Self-Portrait* that have flourished in recent years, none have examined an important, yet overlooked, aspect of its iconographical and historical significance: namely, the painting's interaction with the self-representations crafted by the generation of women artists that preceded Artemisia. This forgotten relationship is one of the primary issues of this thesis. It is my belief that a more comprehensive study of this relationship is critical to understanding the significance of Artemisia Gentileschi's *Self-Portrait* in the history of art generally and in the reformation of the iconography of the image of the female artist.

A number of self-portraits by the preceding generation of women artists have survived to the present day. Indeed, Sofonisba Anguissola, who served as a principal generator of an iconography of self-representation for women artists, produced the most self-portraits in the period between the artistic endeavors of Durer and Rembrandt.² When Sofonisba's remarkable efforts are considered, along with self-portraits produced by other artists, such as her sister Lucia Anguissola, Lavinia Fontana, and Caterina van Hemessen to name a few, one begins to understand the rich prehistory that serves as a backdrop to Artemisia's *Self-Portrait*. By reexamining Artemisia's *Self-Portrait* in relation to self-portraits by late sixteenth century women artists, particularly Sofonisba Anguissola, this paper will attempt to elucidate the different claims, both social and artistic, that women artists wished to visually express, the difficulties they encountered in their careers, and

how they pictorially countered those cultural obstacles. In light of this tradition of women's self-representation, this paper will also reevaluate the reason for the revolutionary and unique aspect of Artemisia's self-image within this group. Whereas her predecessors tended to represent themselves in the conformist pictorial language of patriarchal expectation and social definitions of femininity (although some did manage to "counter culture" in their own subtle manner), Artemisia's *La Pittura* engages directly with the seventeenth century world of artistic practice and theory, almost completely side-stepping conventional artistic practices of depicting the female body as the object of materialistic and erotic consumption. While self-images by the first generation of professional women artists stressed painting as a pursuit of the educated, as a hobby of cultivated ladies, Artemisia's *Self-Portrait* dramatically highlights her position as an intelligent, ambitious artist and as a woman who practices art as a profession, not a recreation. While this aspect of *La Pittura* represents an audacious moment of artistic self-realization and self-promotion, it also consciously draws upon themes found in female self-representations of the sixteenth century. The aim of this essay is to demonstrate that, by uniting the concerns of her own day with those of previous artists of her own gender, Artemisia's *Self-Portrait* serves as a central document in the definition of the female artist in terms of the Baroque ideal of the artist.

In as much as Artemisia's *Self-Portrait* is related to the art that preceded it, it is also very much a document of a specific historical moment in both the artist's life and the Baroque artistic world at large. Thus, it is also the intention of this essay to show that Artemisia had specific intentions in mind with regards to the reception and interpretation of the *Self-Portrait* within the English Court, its final home. Her message is one of unapologetic ambition, of a woman's fight to be recognized and rewarded in a culture antipathetic to her personal goals.
A Preliminary Look: Artemisia Gentileschi's *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*

In an age that categorized women as passive, vain, and incapable of intellectual prowess, Artemisia attempted to counter these assumptions with a "dynamic image of a living woman who is an artist, whose personal worth is reinforced by the universal idea of the art of painting that culturally adheres to her (cf. Fig. 1)." By visually coupling her self-image with the abstract personification of Painting, Artemisia challenged the predominantly male artistic establishment, fellow artists, and - perhaps above all - patrons to view her as an artist in her own right, possessed of genius and originality. This message may have been intended initially for a specific patron and his collection. In 1630, Cassiano dal Pozzo, Roman art collector and intellectual, requested a painting from Artemisia, and it has always been assumed that the work was a self-portrait meant for his portrait gallery of intellectuals and luminaries. Although the original request is lost, three letters of that year from Artemisia to Cassiano mentioned the work. In the end, Cassiano's requested composition was never delivered. However, there was one mention of the canvas by Artemisia in a letter of 1637, this time in connection with paintings intended for the Barberini collection. There were no other allusions to the painting after this time. It is assumed that, having delayed sending the painting to Cassiano, Artemisia probably brought the painting to England with her in 1638, where it joined the Royal Collection. In 1962, Michael Levey was the first modern scholar to draw a connection between the Cassiano commission and the Artemisia self-image at Hampton Court. By re-establishing the painting as a self-portrait in the guise of the Allegory of Painting, a vital feature that

---

had been forgotten, Levey was able to hypothesize that it might have originally been intended for the Cassiano request, thus opening up a field of inquiry that has been pursued by more recent scholars.⁶

The painting itself is not monumental, as one might imagine given the extraordinary subject matter, but of moderate size, 96.5 x 73.7 cm.⁷ The image of the artist dominates the canvas. Seated slightly to the right, the artist leans into the composition, her body at a slightly tilted angle to the picture plane. She reaches up with her right arm, lightly applying a brush to the painted canvas which describes three-quarters of the painting's background. Artemisia's left hand, in which she holds her palette and three brushes, rests on a table upon which she has inscribed "A(remisia).G(enteschi).F(ecit)."

The positioning of the figure's arms creates a semi-circular arc that introduces a feeling of dynamism and energy to the composition. Artemisia used this open arm composition in several of her biblical narrative paintings, such as *Jael and Sisera* and *Esther Before Ahasuerus*, to suggest dramatic tension and violent action (Figs. 2 and 3). The positioning of the upper body and arms in Artemisia's *Self-Portrait* may be influenced by Caravaggio's *Narcissus*, in which the self-reflective figure of Narcissus forms much the same compositional structure (Fig. 4).⁸ Coloristically, the composition is somber; articulated mostly in dark reddish-brown, the canvas is enlivened only by the great green festoons of the painter's sleeves, the white of lace around her bosom and arms, and the gold chain and

---

⁶Michael Levey, "Notes on the Royal Collection," *Burlington Magazine* CIV (1962): p. 80. For more of the English history of the painting, also see Levey, *The Later Italian Pictures in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen* (London: Phaidon, 1964) p. 82. It is important to note, however, that Levey made the connection between the self-portrait and the Cassiano request in order to explain his own thoughts on the presence of the allegorical component of the painting. Levey attributed the blending of the self-portrait and the allegory of Painting to Cassiano's erudition, not Artemisia's own motives. He chose not to entertain the idea that the artist herself could have imagined the combination.

⁷Garrard, 1980, 112.

⁸Garrard, 1989, p. 365. Garrard suggests that Artemisia's adoption of this compositional strategy for her own allegorized self-portrait points out the extent to which artists believed in the Narcissus myth as a true allegory of the foundation of painting. R. Ward Bissell, the leading Orazio Gentileschi scholar, disputes the attribution of the *Narcissus* as a Caravaggio, suggesting that it may have been painted by Orazio. This theory is intriguing, for it suggests an even more intimate relationship between Artemisia's self-image and the *Narcissus*. See R. Ward Bissell, Orazio Gentileschi and the Poetic Tradition in Caravaggesque Painting (University Park: Penn State Press, 1981) p. 205-207.
The pendant she wears. The representation of Artemisia's portrait features are described in a very naturalistic manner, in an unflinchingly unidealized fashion.

As Mary Garrard has shown, Artemisia's Self-Portrait relies upon details from the writings of Cesare Ripa in the realization of its allegorical component. Ripa's 1593 manuscript Iconologia codified the attributes and appearances of various allegories and abstract personifications. Ripa described Painting as "a very beautiful woman dressed in multicolor garments," her hair unruly and free, and wearing a golden chain and mask to symbolize imitatio. All of these characteristics are seen in Artemisia's Self-Portrait. However, Artemisia departed from Ripa's descriptions in significant ways. Missing are Ripa's descriptions of a cloth covering Painting's mouth, indicating "that painting is a silent art, conveying its message by other means than words," and a plethora of painterly tools.

The iconography of Artemisia's Self-Portrait may also have been influenced by an earlier portrait medal of Lavinia Fontana that made use of Ripa's figure of Painting. The Fontana portrait medal was struck by Felice Antonio Casoni in 1611, three years before Fontana's death (Fig. 5). The obverse of the medal carries a profile portrait of the artist and identifying inscription. The reverse, however, is a little more intriguing. A woman, hair flying in ray-like formations from her head, her mouth bound, sits before an easel. Painting tools are scattered about the floor in front of her and her mahlstick droops, unused, from her left hand. For many years, this image was believed to be an image of Fontana in her studio, and many critics interpreted the scene with piquant facts from Lavinia's home life to explain the disheveled state of the figure. However, in 1972, Jean Owens Schaefer finally deduced that the verso is a representation of the Allegory of Painting, not Lavinia herself. Along with the description of Pittura in Cesare Ripa's Iconologia, Schaefer demonstrated that many Renaissance medals displayed portraits on the obverse and allegories of the subject's occupation or characteristics on the reverse,

\textsuperscript{9}Cesare Ripa, Baroque and Rococo Pictorial Imagery (New York: Dover, 1971) no. 197. \textsuperscript{10}Ibid.
thus debunking the former interpretations of this medal. Moreover, the medal's reverse inscription, "Perte stato glorioso mi mantene," celebrates Lavinia as an artist endowed with invenzione, a label usually not reserved for women artists. It is a distinct possibility that Artemisia knew this medal first-hand. Although she left Rome in 1612, Artemisia returned to the city often throughout her life and kept many associates in the city. Since Fontana, who also lived in Rome, was rather famous at this time, it is probable that Artemisia, as another female artist, would have been interested in her predecessor. In any case, in her self-image Artemisia made the bold decision to unite these two disparate sides of the "coin."

The issue of portrait likeness within the Artemisia painting has often been contentiously debated amongst Baroque scholars. However, this issue may be quickly resolved by comparing the painting to several seventeenth century images of the artist: namely, Jerome David's portrait engraving of 1625-1630 after a lost self-portrait by Artemisia, an anonymous portrait medal of the same time, and a figure from Orazio Gentileschi's frescos in the Villa Pallavicini-Rospigliosi's Casino of the Muses (Figs. 6-8). All show the same characteristic features that can be discerned in the Self-Portrait. There is the distinctive fullness of the face, including the double chin that David's engraving highlights. All three image show a wide brow, which can also be seen in the Self-Portrait. Finally, all three images display the same emphasis that is placed upon the artist's dark, unruly hair, which may be as much of a personal attribute as allegorical inclusion in the Self-Portrait.12

12The David engraving includes the words "Atem.Pinx" in the inscription, indicating that the image comes from a now lost self-portrait. The similarities of dress and representation between this engraving and the portrait medal may suggest that they are both patterned after the same self-portrait. For complete information on both pieces, see Levey, 1962, p. 79. It has been suggested by Garrard, 1989, p. 19, that the appearance of the Artemisia figure in A Musical Concert Sponsored by Apollo and the Nine Muses, Casino of the Muses, is a commemoration of Artemisia's beginning as an assistant in her father's workshop.
One painting that must be omitted when ascertaining the legitimacy of portrait likeness in the Hampton Court painting is the oft-debated *Portrait of a Female Painter* in the Palazzo Corsini, Rome (Fig. 9). Scholars have long wished to associate this painting with the missing Cassiano commission of 1630 or a later self-portrait Artemisia promised to Don Antonio Ruffio of Sicily. The Palazzo Corsini painting has little in common with Artemisia's late style of painting and presents a radically different would-be conception of her image as a female artist than the Hampton Court painting.\(^{13}\) The Palazzo Corsini painting has much in common with pictorial traditions of the Allegory of Painting that celebrate the (male) painter by having his portrait being painted or presented by an allegorical figure of Painting. This picture lends itself to such a reading. As such, it is improbable that Artemisia would have celebrated another male artist within the confines of a self-portrait. Indeed, not only does this painting celebrate the male artist alluded to, it dramatically limits the interpretation of the associated female figure in terms of both passivity and objectification. Because of the inherent ambiguity of the painting's provenance, it is better left out of a serious discussion of *La Pittura*.

The many self-referential symbols and images that Artemisia included in her own paintings need to be addressed when broaching the issue of her *Self-Portrait*. Her tendency to rely upon self-referential symbols that place her securely within the paintings, both literally and figuratively, is one of her pictorial habits. As we shall see, it is this tendency that helps to undeniably secure the Hampton Court allegory as a self-portrait.

In her *Judith and Her Maidservant* of c. 1613-14, Artemisia crafted a psychologically taut scene that focuses upon the kinship of the women in carrying out this gruesome deed (Fig. 10). In Judith's hair Artemisia has placed a delicate gold ornament that displays a cameo image; in that image one finds a pale representation of St. George, a favored saint of Florence, Artemisia's home at the time and where the *Judith* was

---

\(^{13}\)Garrard, 1980, p. 111.
In a later *Judith and Her Maidservant*, from c. 1620, Artemisia "signs" her work not with an inscription but with a symbol (Fig. 11). On her left arm, Judith wears a gold bracelet set with either etched-glass or cameo ovals. Two of the images in these ovals are legible to the viewer. One features a woman holding a bow; the other shows a woman holding a raised object, possibly a bow, with an object at her feet. Both of these are images of Artemis, goddess of the hunt, the mythological figure from whom the artist's name derives. So, in two ways Artemisia has here figured herself as an aide to Judith: by painting self-allusive symbols on the heroine's arm and by using her talent to bring the tale to life.

Artemisia also included two self-referential passages in her last, and perhaps best, *Judith*, now in Detroit (Fig. 12). As the protagonist raises a hand to shield herself from the candlelight, a dramatic shadow falls across her face and obscures half her visage. This compositional decision could be explained in purely formal, Caravaggesque terms. However, Garrard has convincingly argued that this imagery is taken from Galileo's wash drawings of the phases of the moon, which Artemisia would almost certainly have known since she was an acquaintance of the philosopher in Florence. The shadow forms a crescent moon shape, calling to mind once again the figure of Artemis/Diana, who was goddess of the moon as well as the hunt. One is also struck by the similar rendering of the upturned head of the maid Abra in this painting and the articulation of the artist's head in the Hampton Court painting. It has been suggested that the maid's head is another self-portrait. There are many physiognomic similarities, including the full face, wide forehead, and prominent eyebrows. If the figure is understood as a precursor to the Hampton Court *Self-Portrait*, then an important precedent is set for the later self-image. In this earlier *Judith*, Artemisia extended the claim of being seen as an integral part of her art, and

---

16 Ibid, p. 334.
taking part in a tradition of signature self-portraits that, as we shall see, had been reserved principally for male artists.

In any case, an undeniable pattern is set by these early paintings. It seems to be one of Artemisia's many artistic idiosyncrasies to encode her paintings with some form of self-referential symbol. Seen in this light, it is not strange, then, to find that Artemisia painted an Allegory of Painting couched in terms of a self-portrait. Taken with the evidence of portrait features, the reading of the Hampton Court painting as being both a self-portrait and an allegory is entirely plausible. For those who wish further proof, however, there is one additional bit of evidence. When the painting was sold from the Royal Collection in 1649, it was labeled "Arthemisia Gentilesco done by herselfe." Given that it was so designated less then ten years after Artemisia had left England, this title must almost certainly be based on first-hand knowledge.18

Sofonisba Anguissola, the Woman Artist, and Society

The extraordinary implications of Artemisia's Self-Portrait, a painting that insists that women can be active artistic agents, are most evident when related to the iconographic precedents of the late sixteenth century. At that time in Italy, there emerged a new breed of serious, ambitious women artists quite distinct from the previous generations of marginalized textile workers, painting nuns, and sewing women. As the professional artistic arena began to change (an arena from which they had been previously excluded), women artists, like Sofonisba Anguissola, began to compete with established male artists for international recognition and commissions. Their road was not easy. They

---

18Levey, 1962, p. 79. The painting was returned to the Royal Collection at the Restoration.
faced assumptions - considered facts at the time - about their sex that were derogatory, blatantly and, by present-day standards, shockingly sexist, as well as seriously limiting. If a female artist wished to succeed, she had to "negotiate through a whole range of forces - economic, social, and political" to create an image, in her paintings and society, that was both morally positive, intellectual, and socially nonconfrontational.19

There is a marked dearth of self-portraits by women artists in Italian art history before the sixteenth century. Female artists were, essentially, excluded from a tradition of self-representation that was well established for male artists. During the fifteenth century, Masaccio and Ghiberti crafted their images into some of their largest commissions (the Brancacci Chapel and Florence Baptistery Doors, respectively), as did Raphael in several of his papal commissions in the sixteenth century. Their self-images thus functioned as an indelible and unmistakable signature. In order to spark the interest of potential patrons, artists such as Parmigianino, often portrayed themselves as witty, creative geniuses, challenging the visual limits of both art and reality (Fig. 13). This tradition of pictorially crafted self-images was supplemented by written self-portraits, which began in the fifteenth century with treatises by Cennino Cennini, Ghiberti, and Alberti, and continued in the sixteenth century by the likes of Vasari and Benvenuto Cellini. Efforts such as these in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries helped to elevate the male artist from the role of mere craftsman to a more valued place in society. The unprecedented fame and popularity attained by artists, such as Raphael and Titian, attest to the success of these ennobling strategies.

The extent to which self-portraiture participated in reshaping the discourse surrounding the status of the (male) artist in the sixteenth century is evident in Antonis Mor's *Self-Portrait at the Easel* of 1558 (Fig. 14).20 As with most self-portraits, the

20 Although himself Dutch, Mor spent the best years of his career at the Spanish Court, as painter to Philip II. While there, his style was heavily influenced by Italianate artistic traditions and concerns, proving that concerns over the refashioning of the artist's image were not solely limited to the Italian peninsula.
composition is dominated by the person of the artist. In this particular painting, Mor is represented in a seated three-quarter pose, his head turned to face the viewer. Mor is dressed in a voluminous, black fur-trimmed coat, painted in a highly descriptive manner that captures the richness of the luxuriously textured cloth. Touches of a white ruffled undershirt can be seen at the artist's wrists and throat. While Mor's outfit might seem to belie the nature of his profession, his status as artist is clearly indicated by the instruments of his craft that are represented within the painting: three brushes and a mahlstick in Mor's left hand, a palette in his right hand, and the blank canvas that dominates the right side of the composition. Of all these attributes, the represented canvas plays the most pivotal role in conveying the image's message. "Tacked" to the surface of the canvas is a piece of paper rendered in trompe l'oeil. Upon this paper is written a laudatory passage which reads

Of whom, oh gods, is this likeness, who surpasses Apelles, the ancients as well as the moderns, while portraying himself peering in a mirror. Oh great artist! Moro is here portrayed. Wait and he will speak. 21

This painting extols Mor's expertise as a portrait painter within the confines of the sixteenth century artistic debate known as the *paragone*. As such, Mor's self-portrait epitomizes the efforts of sixteenth century artists, especially those influenced by Italianate ideas, to be valued as practitioners of a highly theoretical and intellectual art, as opposed to mere artisans or craftspeople. Introducing the idea of the *paragone* into the last line of the painted note within the self-portrait was one strategy Mor used to promote and redefine his artistic identity in relation to this unfolding discourse.

The *paragone*, in essence, is a debate about the superiority of one art form to another; in this case, the two art forms involved are painting and poetry. 22 By transforming his self-portrait into a speaking likeness through the inclusion of the last line of the

22 Ibid, p. 54.
panegyric ("Wait and he will speak"), Mor relates the arts of painting and poetry, capitalizing on a strain of humanist thought that casts painting as mute poetry and poetry as speaking painting. While helping to elevate the art of painting beyond its previous social status as a mechanical art, the *paragone* creates tensions between the separate categories of poetry and painting, combining the qualities of the one with the other while at the same time creating a sometime competitive atmosphere between them. By comparing the art of Painting to Poetry, which is an accepted Liberal Art, the *paragone* elevates the status of Painting beyond that of a Mechanical Art.

Mor's self-portrait also evokes the sixteenth century artistic concept of *aemulatio*. *Aemulatio* is the competition with and surpassing of a revered model, most often a celebrated artist of a previous era. The idea was first expounded by Alberti, who called for contemporary artists to both emulate and outdo classical models. The painted note within the Mor self-portrait clearly situates the painting within this practice by favorably comparing Mor's work to that of the Greek painter Apelles. By doing so, Mor's painting is both tied to the Classical past and deemed superior to it, and thus, by logical extension, is also elevated above mere decoration or craft.

There existed no such artistic tradition for women. Excluded from openly practicing a trade, consigned largely to being dutiful daughters and mothers, women were conditioned to fulfill certain social expectations. This presented certain difficulties for women artists. If they were to remain respectable, they had to visually reassure their patrons and admirers of their modesty and propriety, circumventing any negative connotations that might have been associated with a woman who chose to partake in an overwhelmingly male venture that likewise placed them in the public domain. Routinely,

---

24 De Jongh, p. 54.
in women's self-representations, the image of the artist was pushed aside for an image of ideal femininity that would have been both more recognizable and socially accepted by late sixteenth century viewers. Invariably these traditions privileged social concerns over artistic validation. For these reasons, issues of parentage, marital status, social status, and moral demeanor are often foregrounded in female self-images, just as they are in portraits of women by male artists of the time.\textsuperscript{26} Influenced by Baldassare Castiglione's \textit{The Courtier} and changing artistic currents that equated the sight of a beautiful woman with the beauty of art itself, the images of sixteenth century women artists typically present the ideals of womanhood: beauty, nobility, chastity, and piousness, rather than highlighting her intellectual capabilities or artistic skill.\textsuperscript{27}

Several sixteenth century currents, both philosophical and social, hindered a woman's potential to become a serious artist within the establishment. The greatest obstacles were the assumptions concerning the very nature of artistic production, which were rooted in Aristotelian ideas of biology. These Aristotelian precepts, which were repopularized during the Renaissance, contended that the process of procreation was a thoroughly male process. The female, while taking part in the process, was inherently passive, being only the vessel that carried the vital spark of life given by the male.\textsuperscript{28} This belief was linked to debates about the nature of artistic creativity, which was regarded as akin to procreation. The artist - the vital, aggressive force - was gendered male; the artist's materials - the passive media - were gendered female.\textsuperscript{29} This masculinist precept worked

\textsuperscript{26}King, p. 381.

\textsuperscript{27}Elizabeth Cropper, "The Beauty of Women: Problems in the Rhetoric of Renaissance Portraiture," \textit{Rewriting the Renaissance}, eds. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) p. 176. In brief, Cropper's article argues that, during the sixteenth century, the sight of a beautiful woman in a painting became a synecdoche for the beauty of painting itself. This belief, in turn, objectified portraits of women (especially those where the sitter's identity is unknown), turning many into semi-erotic, nonnarrative images.

\textsuperscript{28}Fredrika Jacobs, "Woman's Capacity to Create: the Unusual Case of Sofonisba Anguissola," \textit{Renaissance Quarterly} 47/1 (1994): p. 79.

\textsuperscript{29}Ibid, p. 80.
against the female artist who, in this scenario, could not be accepted as a true artist because of her imperfect biology; she did not possess the vital creative spark.

Another concern which devalued female artists was their labeling in society as unnatural or curiosity. For example, in 1558, Annibale Caro wrote to Amilcare Anguissola to request a self-portrait by his daughter Sofonisba, stating that he wished for "...the effigy of she herself, because at the same time one is able to find two marvels together: the one being of the work, and the other of the mistress."\(^{30}\) Two important conceptions are at work here: 1) the female artist as marvel or unnatural occurrence; 2) the portrait image of the female artist as eroticized "sight," a point I shall return to presently. Sofonisba Anguissola's self-portraits were routinely requested as curiosities and traded as a form of social visual consumption.\(^{31}\) One may conclude from this information that, during the artist's lifetime, the female artist was a social anomaly, not yet accepted as simply "an artist" as her male counterparts. A woman's artistic reputation could both be enhanced and restrained by such "curiosity" value. While ensuring that people would continue to request her work, the stigmata of being an anomaly sometimes also lowered critical evaluation of works by the female artist.\(^{32}\)

The sexualized component of the viewer's expectations presented problems for female artists. How could a female artist represent herself without thereby being seen to step over the lines of social decorum and respectability? Clearly Sofonisba was highly aware of the difficulties which were especially acute for her because of her class. Her self-portraits weave a complex dialectic between acknowledgment and disassociation of her status as artist/subject, woman/erotic object.


\(^{31}\)King, p. 387.

Sofonisba Anguissola, born sometime around 1535, was the first female painter to gain immense international fame and recognition, greatly expanding the possibilities of later women artists who chose to enter the professional art world. Hailing from the lower Cremonese nobility, Sofonisba and her five sisters were provided a broad education based upon ideas expounded by Castiglione. The Anguissola sisters were encouraged to cultivate those talents that would best suit them in an elevated social setting: reading and writing, music, and painting. Sofonisba and the second eldest daughter, Elena, were apprenticed to a local Mannerist painter, Bernardino Campi, between the years of 1546 and 1549. In turn, they instructed their younger sisters in the art of painting.

A miniature self-portrait by Sofonisba, painted sometime around 1555, is fairly typical of the self-fashioning based upon the social and cultural conventions that affected her self-representation (Fig. 15). Dressed in an elegant, yet simple, black gown - the perfect Castiglionic color - with white ruffled collar and neatly tied back hair, the young woman steadily engages the viewer's gaze. However, as Elizabeth Cropper has noted, the intensity of the gaze is eclipsed by the nascent smile on the sitter's lips, presenting a dislocation of the subject/object relationship. For while the smile tends to cast the figure as a coquettish, eroticized object of the male gaze, the steadiness of her gaze signals her position as subject.

In the self-portrait, Sofonisba holds a large shield, or plaque, whose

---

33 In 1559, upon the advice of the Duke of Alba, she was invited to join the Spanish Court as lady-in-waiting and painter to Queen Isabel de Valois. Sofonisba remained at the Spanish Court until 1573, when Philip II arranged for her marriage to a Sicilian nobleman. She remarried after her husband's death in 1578, and moved to Genoa for a time. She died in Sicily in 1625, leaving an artistic legacy which spanned over eighty years. For more complete biographical information, see Wendy Slatkin, Women Artists in History (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990) and Chadwick, Women, Art, and Society.

34 Cropper, p. 175.
inscription identifies her as the artist and sitter.\textsuperscript{35} It has been suggested that the fanciful calligraphy in the shield's center spells out "Amilcare," the name of the artist's father. By shielding herself, an act that has been associated with the allegorical figure Prudentia, and including the denominator "virgo," Sofonisba has emphasized her virtue to the viewer.\textsuperscript{36} Overall, we are presented not with an artist, but a proper young gentlewoman.

While this composition emphasizes Sofonisba's personal propriety and virtue, it is also a subtle reflection of the social status of the Anguissola family, who were members of the lower Italian nobility. Women's non-involvement in trade signified the social and economic status of their family. For the Anguissola family, the gentlewoman status of their daughters would signify a certain level in Italian society.\textsuperscript{37} Since the Anguissolas were of noble blood, neither Sofonisba, nor her sisters, who were also painters, could accept commissions for paintings. Instead, they accepted "gifts" from people for whom they executed paintings.\textsuperscript{38} This fact would be recalled by any Anguissola contemporary viewing a work by Sofonisba or her sisters, thus reinforcing the family's social claims and expectations.

In Sofonisba's contributions to the development of conventions of female self-portraiture, many aspects of her self-fashioning were dependent upon cultural ideals of femininity. These were often expressed through the use of portrait props, emblems that were thought to indicate the character of the sitter.\textsuperscript{39} The earliest prop employed by Sofonisba is a book, as seen in a self-portrait executed when the painter was nineteen (Fig. 16). Somberly dressed in an outfit that is probably her painter's frock, Sofonisba actively

\textsuperscript{35}Sylvia Ferino-Pagden and Maria Kusche, 	extit{Sofonisba Anguissola: A Renaissance Woman} (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Women in the Arts, 1995) p. 23. The inscription reads, "Sofonisba Anguissola Virgo Ipsius Manu Ex Speculo Depictam Cremonae." The inclusion of "Cremonae" may also suggest that the miniature was produced for an audience outside of Anguissola's hometown.

\textsuperscript{36}Ibid. The connection to Prudentia was suggested by Schweikhart, 1992.

\textsuperscript{37}Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, 	extit{Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology} (New York: Pantheon, 1981) p. 84.

\textsuperscript{38}Ferino-Pagden and Kusche, p. 12. Sofonisba did receive an annual payment while at the Spanish Court, a payment for her position as lady-in-waiting, not painter.

\textsuperscript{39}Cropper, p. 187.
engages the viewer, this time with no hint of a smile. The inscription in the book she holds indicates both her identity and her role as artist, "Sophonisba Anguissola Virgo Seipsam Fecit 1554."\(^{40}\) This is not a new usage for the book in painting. In *Portrait of Laura Battiferri* by Bronzino, painted sometime in the 1550s, the sitter holds an open book in which she indicates a section of Petrarch's works about his lover Laura, identifying both the sitter's name and her occupation as a poetess (Fig. 17).\(^{41}\) In Sofonisba's self-portrait, the book acts as a practical identification tool (her name is written on its page), an emblem of social identity, and as an indication of the artist's education, a broad humanistic endeavor fostered by her father. This sentiment was also adopted by Sofonisba's sister, Lucia, who included a book in her only surviving self-portrait (Fig. 18).\(^{42}\)

The usage of the book motif also indicates the extent to which education was becoming popular and accepted for noble daughters of the time. At this time it was considered beneficial to educate noble and middle class daughters, since many believed that education could serve as a conduit to virtue, teaching moral propriety.\(^{43}\) However, education for most women during this period was still practical, favoring knowledge that would be most applicable in a domestic setting. The broad humanistic education that Sofonisba and her sisters received was heavily influenced by ideas in Castiglione's *The Courtier*. In Book III of *The Courtier*, Castiglione expounds on the notion that the ideal (aristocratic) lady should "have knowledge of letters, of music, of painting, and know how to dance and be festive."\(^{44}\) For this reason, musical ability was an activity often depicted in sixteenth century portraits of women as a sign of intelligence and social grace.

---

\(^{40}\)Ferino-Pagden and Kusche, p. 16.

\(^{41}\)Norbert Schneider, *The Art of the Portrait* (Cologne: Taschen, 1994) p. 64.

\(^{42}\)For the biography of Lucia Anguissola, see Harris and Nochlin, p. 109-110. Other details may also be found in Ferino-Pagden and Kusche, numbers 11 and 12. Lucia was the third Anguissola daughter, possibly born around 1540. She was trained by her sisters instead of having a normal apprenticeship. She died young, around 1565. Her style is extremely similar to that of Sofonisba. To date, only three paintings can be securely attributed to her hand.


Not surprisingly then, during her lifetime, Sofonisba painted at least three self-portraits seated at a clavichord. The first of these self-representations was executed around 1555-6 and is now in the Museo Nazionale, Naples (Fig. 19). Here again, the artist represents herself somberly in both dress and demeanor. Sofonisba engages the viewer's gaze as one hand, delicately arched, hovers above the instrument's keys. While showcasing the lady's intelligence, skill, and self-possession, the musical scene also connects the sitter with the legends of St. Cecilia, thereby indicating Sofonisba's purity and piety. The link to St. Cecilia not only alludes to the facts of the saint's life but also to the rhetorical belief in "the virginal body as well-tempered instrument." However, Sofonisba's self-image goes one step beyond the conventional meanings associated with images of women with musical instruments. By pushing the painting's narrative into the shallow, narrow space of the canvas's foreground, the painter has forced the viewer to concentrate upon her gaze and action. As a result, her musical ability becomes more than a mere social grace. As Garrard has rightly argued, Sofonisba's playing becomes a metaphor for self-possession and creative achievement, visually taking the place of her role as artist.

Sofonisba's second Self-Portrait at a Clavichord, now in the Earl Spencer collection, dates to 1561, during her employment at the Spanish court (Fig. 20). The new complexity of the composition attests to Sofonisba's encounters with the immense art collection of the Spanish royal family. Familiarity with many of the masterpieces in this collection must have moved Sofonisba to experiment with her compositions. In this work,

---

45Garrard, 1994, p. 583. Garrard suggests that Sofonisba's constant use of "somber clothing" may be an attempt to do away with any associations with vanity or luxury, associations which might be at the forefront of a contemporary viewer's mind due to the usage of mirrors in crafting these self-portraits. Black, of course, is also the color chosen by Castiglione as perfect for the courtier. However, during the early half of Sofonisba's life, the color was still mostly worn by men and widows.

46It is stylistically possible that this is a self-portrait by Lucia, not Sofonisba. One, the prominent dimple is a known facial feature of Lucia, not her sister. Plus, the looser style of the painting is more indicative of Lucia's style during the 1550s than that of Sofonisba.


48Ibid p. 603.
a mature Sofonisba stands before the clavichord, both hands over the instrument's keys. Behind the clavichord to the right of Sofonisba stands an old woman, who stares at the viewer just as intently as the artist. One is struck by the intensity of this representation, which turns a self-portrait into a poignant double portrait. This old woman, whose identity remains unknown, had been portrayed twice earlier by Sofonisba, once in *The Artist's Sisters Playing Chess* and in an early drawing. Clearly, she was an important figure in the artist's life and may have even traveled with Sofonisba to Spain. Since the woman's identity is unknown, it is impossible to deduce the purpose of her appearance in this painting. Perhaps the woman had just died, which would explain the prominence accorded her within the portrait. It would also explain the similarities of the representation to Roman funerary busts. Without this commemorative function, which "claims to evoke the dead, to substitute itself for life," it is difficult to say why Sofonisba, at the height of her career, would place this figure in her self-portrait. Another possibility is that Sofonisba is drawing on portrait conventions which illustrate ties of filiation, especially that between artistic generations, and it is both a suggestive and interesting idea that Sofonisba attempted to introduce a new iconography of female filiation in this painting.

---

49 Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, Vol. IV. Translator Mrs. Jonathan Foster (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1911) p. 529. Vasari, who saw *The Artist's Sisters Playing Chess* in the Anguissola home in Cremona, labeled the woman as "belonging to the family," indicating that she was some form of servingwoman. This would accord with the fact that she is always shown as dressed a little poorer than her Anguissola counterparts. However, Vasari does not indicate the whereabouts of the woman during his visit, so we are unable to tell whether he actually saw her at the Anguissola home or if, being absent in Spain, her identity was made known to him by Amilcare Anguissola.

50 The representation is not a true bust relief, since the body and dress of the woman is clearly visible. However, the extent to which the head of the sitter has been isolated through the artist's manipulation of light makes the top half of the body seem eerily disjointed from the lower half. If one accepts this representation as an appropriation of classical motifs, then one must also acknowledge that this is the only overt reference to antique art in the whole of Sofonisba's œuvre. While Sofonisba did always use Roman lettering and Latin in inscriptions, this can be seen as a fairly common practice in her day.

When one mentally separates this enigmatic woman from the rest of the painting, one discovers a rather straightforward self-portrait, much in the same vein as the Naples self-portrait (cf. Fig. 19). The same themes of class, moral reserve, and intelligence are once again repeated. This image type, which Sofonisba seems to have refined during her years at the Spanish court, may have enabled the artist to "blend in" with the other courtiers of Philip II and Isabel de Valois. The creation of this self-portrait, then, may be seen as an attempt by Sofonisba to create a self-image as a "socially safe member of [the] court." Becoming this "safe member" of the court would require Sofonisba to place the ideals of social rank before any artistic ambition. This is particularly interesting in light of the concerns of this paper. While Sofonisba, and her immediate successors, purposefully stayed within the accepted conventions of female self-portraiture in her self-representations, countering cultural norms in only very subtle ways, Artemisia Gentileschi would take a radically different, and more unconventional, approach to the crafting of her self-image.

Countering Culture: Some Examples of Artistic Attestation in Sofonisba Anguissola's Self-Portraits

While many self-portraits painted by Sofonisba Anguissola privilege the representation of the social ideals of femininity, she did execute two paintings that effectively "counter culture," presenting instead a quiet assertion of her claims of artistic agency. This is not an assertion that she ever totally negated those social values that she so often stressed in her other self-images. Indeed, even these images in which she included  

\[52\text{King, p. 387.}\]
artist's tools still emphasize themes that are distant from the sitter's identity as painter. Nevertheless, in one of Sofonisba's few self-portraits at an easel, artistic identity is combined with themes of religious piety and purity (Fig. 21).

In *Self-Portrait at an Easel*, shown in a seated half-length pose, Sofonisba calmly stares out of the picture plane, apparently stopping her work to return the gaze of the viewer. Before her stands the easel, upon which rests a small devotional image of the Madonna and Child, an image that perhaps makes reference to the Virgin as the Bride of Christ and, by extension, the Church. On the one hand, this image within an image emphasizes the artist's piety by combining the image of the artist with that of the Madonna and Child. Conversely, it also defines her artistic identity in those same religious terms by calling to mind associations with the figure of St. Luke, who is traditionally represented painting or drawing the Virgin and Child.

By choosing to represent herself holding a brush and mahlstick, demurely dressed in only her plain black painter's frock, her hair tied back in a simple style, Sofonisba consciously negated her social image as a young lady of the Italian aristocracy, emphasizing instead her chosen profession. This is quite a distinct departure from her normal mode of self-representation. Only one other woman had produced an image of herself at work before Sofonisba: About ten years before Sofonisba, Caterina van Hemessen portrayed herself in a highly realistic manner, seated before her easel painting the very image we scrutinize (Fig. 22). Her plain clothes and solemn expression reject any association with the ideas of worldliness or display. By emphasizing plainness, Caterina rejects the eroticized reading of the female figure in art. By doing so, she stresses her

---

53 The image type upon the fictive easel, the kissing Virgin and Child, is very unusual. The image perhaps makes reference to the Virgin as the Bride of Christ and, by extension, the Church. This may be a devotional image intended for or somehow alluding to Sofonisba's sister Elena, who was a nun.

54 Ibid, p. 388. A second version of this painting, in the Zeri collection in Mentana, carries the inscription, "I, the maiden Sofonisba, equalled the Muses and Apelles in performing my songs and handling my colors." This is an exceptionally atypical Sofonisba inscription. It does not carry her father's name, which she tended to include before her marriage. Plus, it is unusually hubristic. This is probably not an original inscription by Sofonisba, but an admirer. It is also interesting that the inscription makes inclusion of Sofonisba's musical abilities.
value as artist, as intellectual creator. Sofonisba goes one step further, cleverly identifying herself with a model of virtuous artistic identity wholly appropriate to her sex.

Just as Sofonisba visually alludes to her piety through the inclusion of the Madonna and Child image, she uses artistic iconographic allusion to refer to her chastity, another prized attribute in young women of the time. At the same time, she identifies herself with two historical figures in a way that would probably have been recognizable to Sofonisba's erudite admirers. Not only does Sofonisba's *Self-Portrait* make reference to the image of St. Luke, her self-image also makes reference to the illuminated images of the artists Marcia and Thamar in Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus Claris*. Adopted from antique narratives, Marcia and Thamar function in Boccaccio's account as both examples of ingenious exception and also as moral exemplars, both being celebrated for their chastity and piety. In Boccaccio's narrative, Thamar is represented executing a panel painting of the Virgin and Child, suggesting a parallel with the figure of St. Luke similar to the one evoked by Sofonisba (Fig. 23). Marcia is shown peering into a mirror while painting her self-portrait (Fig. 24). One further female artist, Irene, shown painting a sculpture of the Virgin and Child, is also included in Boccaccio's text. These figures served as valuable exemplars to Sofonisba and others, testifying to the fact that women could be - and were - artists, at a time when a majority of society, including Boccaccio himself, believed that art was "very much alien to the mind of women." Given the lack of an established female iconography, Sofonisba, by identifying herself with these paradigms, indicated an ideal of artistic identity and model for female artists. Identification with Thamar and Marcia highlights the moral aspects of female character, suggesting a socially viable conception of the nature of female creativity, an alternative model to the ruling ideas of male productivity. For male artists, genius and artistic endeavors were seen increasingly as a

---

57 Ibid, p. 46.
function of the libido, as an exercise of the artist's masculinity. For women, Sofonisba is positing a model of creativity that is the product of pure intellectual and religious feeling, side-stepping the dangerous issue of sexualized creativity.

Another exceptional self-portrait by Sofonisba also breaks down these limited pictorial conventions and social expectations to present a scene of artistic success and control. In *Bernardino Campi Painting Sofonisba Anguissola*, the viewer is presented with two countenances: one of the artist's teacher and one of the artist herself (Fig. 25).58 While the painting would seem to glorify Bernardino's role in the creation of Sofonisba's artistic personality, several factors suggest that this is not the case. Due to stylistic factors, we can date the painting to 1558-9. Campi left Cremona for North Italy in 1549, indicating that his portrait within this painting could not have been done from life.59 Also, it is known that Campi never executed a portrait of Sofonisba. Thus, the painted Sofonisba is most likely a reflection of a now-lost self-portrait.60 In view of these circumstances, adding both the stylistic points and the prominence given the painted Sofonisba within the composition, Bernardino's presence within the picture must be marginalized in relation to the overall meaning.61 His gaze out of the picture plane - not directly at the viewer as with the painted Sofonisba - registers the presence of a third party: the critical eye of the real Sofonisba, the real painter of the portrait. Given all these factors, the double portrait ought to be understood as a rite of passage for the artist, declaring her independence and displacement of her teacher, an event validated by her appointment to the Spanish Court.

58Ilya Sandra Perlingieri, *Sofonisba Anguissola* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992) p. 52. Perlingieri lists the remains of an inscription that reads "... Virgo... ssola..." The usage of the denominator "virgo," so familiar from Sofonisba's numerous paintings, marks this as a work of Anguissola and not Bernardino Campi. While the attribution of this painting has been questioned, the remains of the inscription, coupled with stylistic elements, strengthens the attribution to Sofonisba.
60Ibid.
Yet this painting still offers a conciliatory description of the female artist. In order to celebrate her ascendancy as an artist in her own right, Sofonisba had to rely upon an inherently passive portrait representation, a mode determined by the rigorous definitions of femininity that bound her. In comparison to the Mor Self-Portrait (cf. Fig. 14), the issue of the use of *aemulatio* is not made sufficiently clear. Mor is explicit in his statement of his opinion as to his status as a valued artist. Sofonisba, on the other hand, uses a less direct, though no less subversive, mode of championing her own cause. This comparison shows that, even when female artists adopted established male modes of representation, Sofonisba was still constrained by social attitudes towards her gender when choosing certain forms of self-representation. Of course, the stakes for both artists in this enterprise are quite different. Mor's choice to represent himself as a gentleman lends to the redefinition of both himself and his art in society. Sofonisba choosing to represent herself as a gentlewoman is in accordance with both her real social status and the strict cultural conscriptions regarding her displayed social image.

Lavinia Fontana: The Artist's Daughter "Counters Culture"

Sofonisba's iconographical contributions to the field of female self-portraiture were adapted by a number of women artists. One such contemporary, Lavinia Fontana (1552-1614), hailed from a very different social background and artistic heritage than Sofonisba. Some twenty years younger than Sofonisba, Lavinia was the daughter of Prospero Fontana, a minor Mannerist painter from Bologna who blended the influences of Tuscan-Roman painters and Correggio in his painterly style.\(^{62}\) As the daughter of an artist, the

stakes of self-representation were somewhat different for Lavinia than those of Sofonisba, though self-portraits were equally crucial for Lavinia in redefining her image within the societal structures of sixteenth century Italy.

Instead of depicting themselves, as might be expected, with such instruments as easels and brushes, which were symbols of their profession (and, by extension, their fathers' profession), the artist daughters of painters often represented themselves with props such as musical instruments. But for them, these props functioned as symbols of class mobility, indicating that their accomplishments and virtue placed them above the social class into which they were born. This trend may be seen in the 1580s Self-Portrait of Marietta Robusti, the daughter of Tintoretto, who portrays herself as a beautiful, talented young lady (Fig. 26). 63 Interestingly enough, the one self-portrait by Fontana, executed in 1577, that displays the artist before a clavichord does also make reference to the sitter's painterly occupation (Fig. 27). Lavinia, dressed in an elaborate red gown, sits in the foreground, turning away from the clavichord keys to face the viewer. She seems to have a bemused look upon her face, as though she is sharing a secret with the audience.

63 For the most complete biographies of Marietta, see Carlo Ridolfi, The Life of Tintoretto and His Children Domenico and Marietta, Translators Catherine and Robert Enggass (University Park: Pennsylvania State, 1984) p. 98-100 or Painters by Painters, exh. cat. New York and Florence (New York: National Academy of Design, 1988) p. 46. Marietta was trained with her father's workshop, entering the milieu in early adulthood and remaining as one of his chied assistants until her death. During young adulthood, Marietta enjoyed great popularity as a painter of fashionable portraits in the Tintorettesque style. She was offered positions at the courts of Maximilian II and Philip II of Spain. Tintoretto refused both offers and instead kept his daughter at home. Marietta's life was cut short in 1590. Subsequently, much of her work has been lost or subsumed into the oeuvre of her more famous (and valuable) father.

Painters by Painters, p. 46. In this self-portrait, Marietta holds before her the First Book of Madrigals by Verdelot, published in Venice in 1533. The page contains the madrigal, "Madonna per voi ardo."

Garrard, 1994, p. 592. The problem with this supposed self-portrait, as Garrard rightly points out, is that there is no concrete evidence for its attribution as a self-image by Robusti. The painting was acquired by the Medici dukes in the seventeenth century. The tenuous reason for labeling it a Robusti is because of the fact that the woman stands before a clavichord, and it was known that Robusti was a trained musician. This, combined with the Tintorettesque format, convinced the buyers that it was indeed a self-portrait of Robusti. The painting, however, is stylistically dissimilar to the other known Robusti, the Old Man and Boy. In fact, compared to this superb double portrait, it is quite hackneyed and unsuccessful. Garrard suggests that this portrait is actually only one of a number of semi-erotic portraits of unknown women painted during the sixteenth century. She believes that the title of the madrigal, "Madonna per voi ardo," is a pun on the state of the viewer. This would be inappropriate for a young woman attempting to portray herself as cultured and virtuous.
Behind Lavinia a female servant steps forward, holding an open music book. There are strong indications that Lavinia borrowed this detail from works by Sofonisba Anguissola (cf. Fig. 20). In the background of the painting, bathed in rays of light from a window, sits the painter's easel, conspicuously unused. In this self-portrait, Lavinia stresses her physical attractiveness, dress, and social position as an accomplished woman, seemingly conforming to those roles already developed by Sofonisba. This self-portrait was used in the negotiation of Lavinia's marriage, illustrating that the artist understood that it was her "feminine accomplishments," and not her artistic identity, that would ensure her marriage and social identity.

Lavinia also produced one self-portrait that seems to challenge more overtly the social prescriptions for images of female artists at the end of the sixteenth century (Fig. 28). Painted in 1579, during one of the busiest times in Lavinia's career, the tondo presents the painter as collector and connoisseur, and an artist at work. Lavinia, clothed in a dark blue and cream dress and jewels, is represented in her study, a dimly lit space. In front of her, shelves and a table stacked with antique sculpture fragments stretch into the background. This is a singular and unrivaled statement in the history of art by women. As the humanist revolution began exploring and heroicizing the ancient past, studying antique sculpture and art came to the fore in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as a means of social and intellectual expression. Artists began assimilating antique sources as a form of artistic training and a sign of erudition. By presenting herself as a collector, which she was in real life, and showing herself copying these pieces, Lavinia is claiming an

---

64When viewed under regular lighting, the viewer can ascertain a large amount of overpainting in this area of the painting. Apparently, Fontana had originally shown the easel in a more open stance, perhaps indicating that the easel was in use in Fontana's first working of the self-portrait.

65King, p. 392. The painting's inscription reads, "Lavinia, maiden, daughter of Prospero Fontana, expressed the image of her face using a mirror." The social hierarchy of female expectations is clearly seen in the phrasing: virgin, then daughter, then painter.


67King, p. 403. One would have to wait until the eighteenth century, and Angelica Kauffman, to again find a female artist who makes use of antique sources in her self-images.
artistic heritage and education that places her outside of the dilettante status that was usually affirmed by women artists of her day. By using antiquity to allude to her profession, she is also adopting a form used by other artists, such as Lotto, Titian, and Moroni, whereby antiquity is used by men to proclaim profession, social position, and moral character. Thus, by using the symbols identified with her male counterparts, Fontana asserts that she is just as capable as they, able to produce large scale history paintings as well as portraits. In this self-image, Lavinia proclaims herself to be a true Renaissance artist: part scholar, courtier, and entrepreneur, while still operating within certain confines of ideal femininity.

The works of this first generation of women artists form a critical backdrop to the execution of Artemisia's *Self-Portrait as the Art of Painting*. Artemisia's knowledge of her predecessors must have been a constant factor in her decisions about self-portrayal. Artemisia would have been cognizant of social limitations placed upon women in their self-representations, as she herself was subject to them. She was also knowledgeable of the iconography established by Sofonisba Anguissola that established a model of female artistic agency and production. This cultural and artistic context must have surely shaped Artemisia's thinking when she conceived of her *Self-Portrait*, which laid claim to her status as an artistic producer and thereby "countered culture" in her own unique terms.

---

**A Reevaluation: Artemisia Gentileschi's *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting***

Artemisia's *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* belongs to a very specific historical moment, both within the artist's own biography and within art history. As Antonis Mor's self-image suggests (cf. Fig. 14), during the sixteenth century artists in Italy

---

68 Nancy Heller, *Women Artists* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987) p. 19. Because Lavinia was not a member of the nobility, there were no restrictions placed on her professional interests or her ability to compete for and accept paid commissions, as there were for Sofonisba Anguissola.
began to actively advocate for the addition of painting to the Liberal Arts, thereby contesting its then current reception as a mechanical art. The effort was undertaken for a two-fold reason: not only would the art of painting be better respected, so would its practitioners. As Mor's Self-Portrait illustrates, evoking the paragone was one strategy used by artists who wished to redefine and elevate the status of painting. Another means of emphasizing the intellectual aspects of painting was the employment of a new addition to the allegorical pantheon: the Allegory of Painting, figured as a woman. During the Middle Ages, representations of Painting in the decoration of such cathedrals as Laon and Chartres, show a male figure employed in the act of painting. Personifying Painting as a male figure marked Painting as a Mechanical Art, or craft, instead of one of the seven Liberal Arts, who were designated by female figures. By separating Painting from the Liberal Arts, medieval thought equated the practice with manual labor, denying the intellectual component of design. Thus, the new representation of Painting as a female allegory was, in itself, highly significant in creating an elevated image of painters.

The debate over the superiority of Painting over other manual arts, and its consequent claim to be a Liberal Art, first began in Quattrocento Italy. Alberti's treatise Della Pittura of 1435 included the first arguments in Painting's favor. Alberti based his arguments for the reevaluation of Painting in the thoughts of ancient Greece. He contended that while the Greeks considered all other art practitioners craftsmen, painters were not placed in the categories of manual laborers. Rather, because painting was "worthy of liberal minds and noble souls," the right to learn painting was forbidden to slaves, and practiced only by learned citizens. A second vocal supporter of the ascendancy of painting was Leonardo da Vinci. In his personal writings, Leonardo championed the inclusion of painting in the Liberal Arts category by constructing

69 Garrard, 1980, p. 100.
71 Ibid, p. 66.
exhaustive arguments about how it surpassed both music and poetry, both of which were included in that category. Despite the efforts of both these men, painting remained, in their time, a Mechanical Art, understood socially as an artisional craft, not as an intellectual pursuit. Nevertheless, Leonardo's writings and beliefs, coupled with the efforts of Michelangelo and Raphael, helped painting achieve its theoretical definition in the sixteenth century.

Because of the new importance of painting in the later Renaissance, the painter was accorded a new measure of respect within society. It was in order to maximize the importance of the new definition of the painter as intellectual and gentleman that the personification of the art of painting changed from a mere craftsman laboring in his studio to that of an allegorical female figure, one that stood for the intellectual, abstract connotations of Painting.

One of the earliest images of the Allegory of Painting is found in the fresco decorations of Vasari's house in Arezzo, executed in 1542 (Fig. 29). Here Painting is shown in a full-length seated pose, absorbed in the act of painting a human figure. Throughout the sixteenth century, representations of Painting multiplied, mirroring the evolution of the art as a worthy intellectual pursuit. While using the Allegory of Painting to promote the social status of the art of painting, artists were also keen to reinvent their own personal images within the greater realm of society. By so publicly linking himself with the Allegory of Painting, Vasari aggrandizes his own intellectual capabilities and status within society. However, the most important mode in this quest was self-portraiture, a genre that allowed the artist to fashion his perceived social persona into whatever he wished it to be.

Clearly, Artemisia's Self-Portrait fits into this fledgling tradition of the artist as intellectual. However, it also goes beyond the parameters of that tradition. The presence

---

of the Allegory of Painting - or rather, the allegory's attributes - expresses the intellectual, theoretical aspect of painting, thereby privileging the artist's own possession of these intellectual traits. For a female artist, as we have seen, this was one of the hardest claims to make within the world of art at this time. Society marginalized the intellectual capabilities of women in general, and, when they did exhibit extraordinary talents, they were often categorized as oddities or curiosities, instead of having their talents accepted as a matter of course. Sofonisba Anguissola, as it has been shown, cannily navigated these cultural currents; by using such portrait props as books or musical instruments she alluded to her intellectualism and her status as a creative agent, all the while staying within the narrow confines of social definitions of female propriety.

Artemisia's *Self-Portrait* departs from the conventions of self-portraiture implemented by Sofonisba Anguissola. It is important to note that there is never an attempt on Artemisia's part to be understood in terms of social ideals of femininity or ideas of beautiful display. One would be hard pressed to interpret Artemisia's *Self-Portrait* as pandering to or even acknowledging the presence of the ubiquitous male gaze. Instead, Artemisia embraces a self-contained world of her own making, one in which art and artist, object and subject, exist on the same plane, in which the maker and the produced are melded into one being. This is Artemisia's explicit attempt to "counter culture"; in this work she undercuts cultural norms and limitations, laying claim to a theoretical model of artistic identity that was solely the province of the female artist.

The boldness of Artemisia's new invention, the brashness of actually figuring herself as the abstract ideal of Painting, also reflects a very personal statement on behalf of the author. The exact message of that statement can best understood by considering the self-portrait in relation to a lost painting by Artemisia that was also in the Royal Collection at this time: an *Allegory of Fame*. When read as a pair, which they may well have been, the subjects of these images suggest that Artemisia must have intended her *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* to further her ambitions as a painter at the English Court.
The *Allegory of Fame*, a half-length painting, is recorded by Van der Doort as being in the King's collection at Whitehall Palace as early as 1639.\(^{73}\) It is again mentioned in the 1649 inventory of the Royal Collection made after the execution of Charles I, this time as a *Poesia with Trumpet*.\(^{74}\) The inventory entries describe the painting in the following terms:

No. 22. Done by Artemisia Gentilesco. Item: A woman's picture in some bluish drapery, with a trumpet in her left hand signifying Fame, with the other hand having a pen to write; being upon a straining frame printed upon cloth. 3 ft. 3 ins. by 2 ft. 5 ins.\(^{75}\)

Unfortunately, the inventories fail to mention how exactly the painting came to be in the Royal Collection. There are three possibilities. First, it may have been bought in the 1630s by Charles' agents in Italy and shipped back to the palace; second, the painting could have been executed soon after Artemisia's arrival in England in 1638, a dating that would still make it possible for Vander Doort to include it in the 1639 inventory; finally, Artemisia could have brought this painting with her from Italy, as is generally thought to be the case with the *Self-Portrait*. Barring any definitive proof to the contrary, this last possibility is the most plausible. A common arrival date for both paintings has major implications for both paintings.

While the Royal Collection *Fame* is lost to us today, Frolich-Bume and, later, Garrard have suggested that it may have resembled a similar version of the same subject now in the Wildenstein collection (Fig. 30). This 1632 composition also features a woman in "bluish drapery," though shown in three-quarter length rather than half-length. She wears a blue cloak over a white underchemise and red coat, visible in the softly articulated

---

\(^{73}\)Garrard, 1989, p. 111.

\(^{74}\)Ibid, p. 514, n. 191.

\(^{75}\)L. Frohlich-Bume, "A Rediscovered Picture by Artemisia Gentileschi," *Burlington Magazine* 77 (1940) p. 169. Frohlich-Bume quotes from the eighteenth century reprint of the 1649 inventory. The original inventory listing, which reads much the same, can be found in Garrard, 1989, p. 510, no. 157.
sleeves. She is crowned by loosely painted laurel leaves. She holds in her right hand a trumpet which rests upon an open book inscribed to the elusive "Mons. T. Rosiers." The looseness of Artemisia's brushstroke, along with the idealized features of the smiling young woman, accord well with her later Neapolitan style, which favored a more Reniesque manner.

Like the Hampton Court self-portrait, the lost _Fame_ also relies upon the writings of Cesare Ripa for its integral symbolic meaning. Ripa describes Fame as a woman who holds in her right hand a trumpet and in her left an olive branch. She has white wings and wears a golden chain about her neck from which hangs a heart.\(^{76}\) As in _La Pittura_, there were several significant deviations between the Ripan codification of the subject and Artemisia's actual execution of the figure. First, the trumpet has been switched from the right hand to the left (although it is correct in the Wildenstein version). Second, Artemisia omitted the olive branch. The 1649 inventory title, "Poesia with Trumpet," may allow us to assume that the lost _Fame_ also wore a laurel crown, much like the Wildenstein painting, since laurel is an attribute of Poetry, thus allowing for the title confusion. If this is so, then the olive branch was replaced by the laurel; laurel, after all, does also stand for triumph and fame, which is appropriate to the allegory.\(^{77}\) Though not mentioned in the inventory description, the white wings of Ripa's description that are missing in the Wildenstein painting may actually have been present in the lost painting, assuming that the two paintings are comparatively similar. If one looks carefully at the Wildenstein painting, one sees a dark form over the figure's left shoulder that does not approximate the shadow of the figure. Instead, the outline of this shape looks amazingly like a small wing reminiscent of putti wings, which would be in accordance with Ripa's codification of the allegory. However, since wings are missing in the Wildenstein painting, they may have also been omitted in the Royal Collection _Fame_. This willing divergence from Ripa's descriptions

\(^{76}\) Harris and Nochlin, p. 122.

\(^{77}\) Ibid.
accords with the same tendency in the Hampton Court *Self-Portrait*, and displays a certain artistic license on Artemisia's part.

The *Self-Portrait* and *Fame* in the Royal Collection have important similarities: both showcase valued allegories from Ripa, Painting and Fame; both are approximately the same size. The lost *Fame* measured 98 cm. x 73.7 cm. while the *Self-Portrait* measures 96.5 cm. x 73.7 cm. The slight difference may be due to a loss in the self-portrait or an inaccurate recording of the size of the *Fame* in the seventeenth century inventories. The coincidence of size and format of these two paintings has been overlooked by scholars, yet they are the most important allegories by Artemisia represented in the Royal Collection.

Considering the self-referential aspects of the one allegory, it is not unreasonable to suggest that a similar concept may be at work in the *Fame*, and that together they may be understood as a statement about the artist's hopes at the English Court. The *Self-Portrait* makes a grandiose claim to Artemisia's place as an artist. By combining her self-image with the Allegory of Painting, she posits an identity that she alone can lay claim to, for no male artist could achieve such a combination of person and profession. The *Fame* speaks of both past, current, and future artistic success in a rather literal manner. It is Artemisia's brush that has called this Fame into being, and the same brush and talent that will ensure the continuation of that fame; literally, this painting is Artemisia's "claim to fame." Thus, taken together, there is a collusion of symbolic meaning between the two works.

It is more than plausible that Artemisia meant these two paintings to be viewed together by her royal hosts as a form of self-promotion. She could very well have been vying to inherit the position at court vacated by her deceased father, and these paintings would have served as a form of proclamation of her qualifications. It would have been reasonable for Artemisia to aspire to such an appointment in the English Court. History was on her side: Levina Teerlinc had been a portraitist during the Tudor era, serving first
Henry VIII and continuing through the reign of Elizabeth I.\textsuperscript{78} Other women artists, most notably Sofonisba Anguissola, had also been painters at other European courts. Thus her gender need not have been a deterrent to her court appointment. Since her father was already at the English Court, Artemisia must have also been optimistic that their similar styles would have supported her aspirations.

Orazio Gentileschi had come to Charles I's court in October of 1626, as a letter of Amerigo Salvetti testifies.\textsuperscript{79} He soon became very close with the king and his chief advisor, the Duke of Buckingham, and served not only as a painter but also as a diplomatic envoy in negotiations with Spain. His position at court was lavishly endowed. Not only was he paid a pension of one hundred pounds per annum, but he was also granted a private residence on the York House estate, which cost four thousand pounds, an incredibly high sum.\textsuperscript{80} Gentileschi served as official painter to Charles and his wife Henrietta Maria, as well as the Duke of Buckingham. The last great achievement in Orazio's life, as well as a symbol of the high esteem in which he was held in the English court, was the 1635 commission for the ceiling of the Great Hall in the Queen's House, Greenwich.\textsuperscript{81}

It was into this milieu that Artemisia first arrived in England in 1638. She helped her dying father finish the Queen's House paintings; the figures of Arithmetic and the Muse Polyhymnia from this cycle can be securely attributed to her hand. Upon seeing the position her father had received at court, Artemisia must have been hopeful for the same appointment herself. Her prodigious output during her time there may indicate her sincere desire to impress her English patrons, thereby garnering a more permanent position as a painter at court. Until that time, her patronage in Italy had been uncertain. While her

\textsuperscript{78}Ibid, p. 102.
\textsuperscript{79}Bissell, 1981, p. 50.
\textsuperscript{80}Ibid, p. 51.
\textsuperscript{81}One may deduce that Orazio's appointment to paint the Queen's House ceiling was quite an achievement at that time. The building, regarded as one of Inigo Jones's finest, was thought a masterpiece of architecture at the time.
reputation had assured the patronage of such nobles as the Medici Dukes of Florence, Cassiano dal Pozzo, and countless nobles in Naples, a source of dependable, secure patronage had eluded her. Ever wary of losing patrons, as her surviving letters show, Artemisia no doubt envied the kind of patronage her father had achieved, though he himself was not always secure in his belief in the king’s continued benevolence. In any case, the position she sought would never be offered. Artemisia left England in 1640 or 1641, not long before the advent of the English Civil War.

The fact that Artemisia did not achieve the goal of lasting patronage at the English Court does not detract from the power of the united message of her Self-Portrait and lost Fame. It is unprecedented to find a female artist so actively promoting herself through the realignment of her projected self-image. While Sofonisba Anguissola painted the most self-portraits of any early modern female artist, she was careful to stay within the confines of a rigidly structured societal image that relegated her an inferior role to her male counterparts. While she did succeed in crafting two self-portraits that celebrated her role as an agent of creative energies (cf. Figs. 20 and 25), she was careful to also imbue those images with certain messages that alluded to more feminine attributes, such as chastity and beauty. Artemisia’s Self-Portrait stands apart from this tradition in the fact that it does not accept the equation of female image with objectified subject. Instead, through the inclusion of the allegory of Painting, she crafts herself as an undeniable artistic subject, unflinching in her realistic representation of herself while championing her own right to be an accepted and valued artist.

Conclusions
Artemisia's *Self-Portrait* stands as a singular monument in the annals of art history. No other artist had achieved such a melding of person and professional identity. Because of the female gendering of the Allegory of Painting, Artemisia's formula was one that was singularly unavailable to male artists. Male self-portraits incorporating the Allegory of Painting necessarily involved a certain division between the representation of Painting and the practitioner, a necessity that weakens rather than strengthens the relationship of subject and allegory. Surprisingly, very few later women artists seriously reinterpreted or elaborated upon Artemisia's conceit. It would seem that *La Pittura*, either because of its relative obscurity within the English Royal Collection or Artemisia's fall from popular opinion, is a painting that has had few artistic descendants.

In the end, Artemisia's reasons for painting such a daring and bold self-portrait must remain speculative. However, given the historical context at the time of its painting, it is reasonable to assume that she wished to validate herself as a female artist in a male dominated arena. As this paper has sought to demonstrate, it is probable too that she was vying for the attentions of highly placed patrons. While the motives may be ambiguous, the statement made by the *Self-Portrait* is not; Artemisia's self-image emphatically champions her status as a painter and her intellectual prowess. This may be seen as a climax to both the efforts of artists seeking to redefine the position of "artist" within society and the efforts of women artists in general, who had to prove their worthiness within the context of both societal structures of femininity and frameworks of artistic validation.

Artemisia Gentileschi's *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* exists as an important document in the reevaluation of female artists in light of the constricting social limitations that worked against them in their own day and age. For early generations of women artists, self-portraiture was undertaken as a careful balancing act of both personal agendas and social expectations. Women artists had to be especially careful when traversing the line of decorum, keeping in mind the expectations of a wide social audience.
Artemisia's *Self-Portrait* is one of the first to break with accepted social convention, the first to "counter culture" in an overt way. Instead of presenting herself as a socially respectable young matron, Artemisia insists upon her status as artist and creator. Joining her self-image with that of Painting, Artemisia insisted on the female ability to create, to enjoy intellectual representation (allegory). In short, she countered culture by claiming these as very real features of women's natural abilities.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


List of Illustrations

1. Artemisia Gentileschi. Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting, c. 1630. Collection of Her Majesty the Queen, Hampton Court.


8. Orazio Gentileschi. Female Figure (Artemisia Gentileschi?), 1611-12. Casino of the Muses, Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi, Rome.


Fig. 2
Fig. 12
Fig. 21