

# Female and Artistic Identity in the Self-Portraiture of Lavinia Fontana and Artemisia Gentileschi

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## ABSTRACT

When thinking of the Baroque period, people are most likely to first recall names like Velazquez and Caravaggio, who were the representative artists during this period. However, few would know that during the same time, a group of female artists also strived to establish their reputation, and some succeeded doing so. This paper aims to shed light on the ignored stories of female artists during the Baroque period and discusses the balance between their two identities—femininity and artisanship, by introducing the background in which they grew up in, and detailed analysis of their most notable works. To fully discuss the issue, the paper incorporated articles by specialized art critics including Babette Bohn and Mary D. Garrard. This paper concludes that these female artists made their names because of their capability to merge their two identities and therefore achieved something their male counterparts could not.

**Keywords:** *Self-Portraiture, Female and Artistic Identity, Lavinia Fontana, Artemisia Gentileschi*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

During the late Renaissance and Baroque period, when Italy witnessed a burgeoning development of art, women artists strived to fashion their artistic agency among their male counterparts as well as womanhood by presenting themselves in their works. Works by female artists during the Baroque were more appreciated due to their expanded agency by Book of Courtiers. Unlike their precedents, female artists during the Baroque are allowed to make a living, even fashion themselves and eventually establish their reputation through painting. This paper first explains the historical background in which Baroque Italian female artists lived, and what their self-portraits conveyed as an articulation of identity and self-recognition. Then the discussion focuses on some notable works by Italian female artists especially Lavinia Fontana and Artemisia Gentileschi and explores the ways in which they present themselves as artists and how they balance their identities through their artistic inventions.

## 2. BOLOGNA, ITALY IN THE 17TH CENTURY

### *2.1. Social and Cultural Background in Bologna*

In 1528, Baldassare Castiglione published the famous philosophical dialogue Book of Courtier, in which he outlined the expected behaviors from noblemen and noblewomen. The speakers specifically mentioned that "all things that men can understand, women can likewise", indicating an intellectual equality between men and women. It is notable that in bringing women's intellectual capacity to the same level as men's, it allowed women a greater accessibility of education than traditionally thought. The conversation also stated that besides the parallel comprehensive ability, women are also expected to behave in a different way from men: "a woman ought to be very unlike a man; for just as it befits him to show a certain stout and sturdy manliness, so it is becoming in a woman to have a soft and dainty tenderness with an air of womanly sweetness in her every movement." While men striven to perform their masculinity, women should display their femininity as to strengthen the gender differences. Women, therefore, were given more agential powers

during the Renaissance and Baroque periods than the Middle Ages.

Bologna, among all cities in Italy during the 17th century, was famous for its progressive view on women. Gabriele Paleotti, born in Bologna, became the cardinal of Bologna in 1567. He was noted for his promotion of women's role in the city. It was said that Paleotti himself once worked with widows in the city to advocate charitable deeds. Bologna was then more open to women in terms of their ways of living and women were given more opportunities to further education. However, it did not mean that women had full freedom to cultivate their artistic skills as men did. According to the Code of Behavior, women were still "protected" from society and their opportunities of communication and commercialization with the outside world, and thus obstructed in fashioning themselves as artists. For example, although Lavinia Fontana managed to open her own workshop after her marriage, it was her husband who took care of the communication with the outside and solicitation. These social norms on the one hand elevated women's status in the Italian society by anticipating them to have the equivalent intellectual performances as men, but on the other hand, the rules still constrained women artists to fashion themselves in the same way as their male counterparts did.

## **2.2. Female Artists in 17th Century Italy**

It was during this period that a generation of outstanding female artists emerged in Italy. However, the motivations behind women fashion themselves as artists were different from those of men. It is important to note that in the 17th century, women worked more as collaborators rather than creators in their artisanship [1], partially because they were not given the full freedom to learn in a workshop. They were not allowed, for instance, to paint alone, nor paint male nudes. As a result, most female artists, including Lavinia Fontana and Artemisia Gentileschi, were taught by their fathers or in the family workshop. Instead of a mere inhibition of their talents, female artists' primary motivations included painting as a way to fundamentally make a living. Artemisia Gentileschi, slightly different from the previous two artists, were trained by her father so that she could gain entry to a convent [2]. Other than making a living, these female artists also regarded painting as a way out of financial difficulties. Lavinia Fontana, for example, was trained by her father because she was the only child in the family and her talent to paint was cultivated to save the financial difficulties [2]. Besides, their works were often given to selected receivers to promote themselves as artists.

## **2.3. Self-Portraits by Baroque Female Artists**

Self-portraits became one of the most notable means through which female artists expressed their identities during the 17th century. "A self-portrait involves an artist objectifying their own body and creating a 'double' of themselves" [3]. It first challenges the artists' skill to not only imitate but also present the physical likeness through brushstroke, lightings and colors. The artists then have the freedom to make metaphorical or allegorical additions to this double to further illustrate both how they perceived themselves and how they want the viewer to interpret the painting. In fact, self-portrait did not become a popular genre of painting until the 16th century, and Shearer West, in *Portraiture*, assumed that this rather late emergence of self-portraiture in the history of art may be caused by "a piety that prevented artists from glorifying themselves" [3]. She also provided possible reasons for the appearance and growing popularity of self-portraiture during the 16th and 17th century: the existence of mirrors that was not available in Europe until the 15th century, the artists' growing self-consciousness about their identities, and the changes in the artists' social status brought by the Renaissance [3]. Artists during the Baroque period, therefore, not only used self-portraits as a demonstration of their skills, but also as manifestations of their incorporated identities to gain reputation and attract patrons. The increased openness to female artisanship in the 17th century Italy allowed female artists to fashion their artistic identity, but meanwhile the persistent social role of women prevented them from obtaining the same access to the art markets as that of their male counterparts. Consequently, self-portraiture emerged, besides a demonstration of artistic skills and identity, as a means for the female artists to communicate with the outside world and promote themselves first as virtuous women and then proficient artists. As art historian Babette Bohn pointed out in *Female Self-Portraiture in Early Modern Bologna*, the social background of the city gave rise to the production of self-portraits, especially for female artists [4]. Bologna's humanistic culture was among one of the main reasons for the burgeoning production of female self-portraits.

## **3. SELF-PORTRAITS BY LAVINIA FONTANA AND ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI**

### **3.1. Analysis on the self-portraits by Lavinia Fontana**

Lavinia Fontana, born and raised in the city of Bologna, provides a convincing point in this case. Fontana was trained by her father, Prospero Fontana. She learned from her father the flexible brushstrokes and the jewel-like details and coloring. During her teens

and twenties, Lavinia Fontana worked in her father's studio and worked on smaller commissions. Her earliest paintings mainly consisted of small-scale devotional paintings until she was able to develop her own artistic identity by presenting herself in the self-portraits. *Self-Portrait at the Spinet with her Maidservant* (1577) was initially made for her father-in-law, Severo Zappi. In this painting, Lavinia Fontana painted herself in the middle of her practice of the spinet, clad in delicate clothing and jewelry. Instead of focusing on the keyboards, Fontana is looking out and acknowledges her viewers. A maid stands behind her, holding a copy of the music score and learning toward her mistress with her eyes on the instrument. In the background of the painting stands an easel. The inscription in the upper left of the corner states that the Lavinia Fontana is a virgin and daughter of Prospero Fontana, and that the painter used a mirror for this painting. This self-portrait was interpreted to be "A self-aggrandizing painting that was meant to assert her place within a developing tradition of women artists" [5]. Here Lavinia intentionally imitated her predecessor Sofonisba Anguissola in painting herself playing the instrument accompanied by her maid. Being able to play the spinet, Fontana presented herself as an educated woman and the maid seemed to prove that she was not alone as she performed such artistic skills and thus virtuous woman, echoing Baldassare Castiglione's idealized imagery of a court lady in his *Book of the Courtier* (1528). However, Fontana took a step further with her work by adding an easel, an object that manifests Fontana's artistic capacity and identity. It is interesting that Fontana chose to paint herself with the instrument and left the easel in the background instead of the other way around. The painting was made portable for travel for Zappi and his son, Fontana's future husband, and in painting herself playing the spinet, Fontana prioritized her womanhood before her profession as an artist.

Lavinia Fontana married her husband Zappi in the same year as she created this piece of work. A few decades later she established her own art workshop in Rome and was able to reap profit from it to support not only her father but also her own family with children. Despite the progressive atmosphere in Bologna during the 17th century, women were still protected from the outside environment and were seldom allowed to solicit or negotiate with the patrons personally. Lavinia's husband, as a result, took up this responsibility and served as her promoter to the Bolognian and Italian society, finding clients and signing contracts. Two years later after this *Self-Portrait at the Spinet with her Maidservant*, Lavinia painted a new self-portrait that emphasizes another aspect of her identity. *Self-Portrait in a Studio* was completed in Prospero Fontana's art studio. Painted in a rather different context, Lavinia this time painted herself in the middle of writing or drawing. The title of the painting revealed the setting of the work

to be his father's studio and indicated that she maintained her female virtue by painting under her father's guardianship. This work, different from *Self-Portrait at the Spinet with her Maidservant*, highlighted the cultural influence in Bologna. The artist is surrounded by small sculptures that appear to be Venus and Mercury in order to show her education of Classicism. In the painting, Lavinia Fontana is again dressed in delicate clothing. Just like male artists used self-portraits to elevate themselves "from craftsman to gentleman" [4], Fontana echoed the idea of *gentildonna* by the detailed depiction of her clothing. Caroline Murphy acutely pointed out in her comprehensive study of the artist in *Lavinia Fontana: A painter and her Patrons in Sixteenth century Bologna* that this could be another example of Fontana trying not only to prove herself as a competent and professional artist like her predecessor Sofonisba Anguissola, but also further claims herself to be a scholar and antiquarian [2]. It is also notable that here she is wearing a cross to show her devotion to her religion. Fontana was therefore able to express the same quality through different depictions of herself. In both self-portraits, she successfully demonstrated her skills by showing intricate details of her clothes.

### **3.2. Analysis on the self-portraits by Artemisia Gentileschi**

Few female artists would exceed Artemisia Gentileschi in her comeback from being a victim of rape to a well-respected female artist. Gentileschi was not born in the humanistic society of Bologna, but that did not obstruct her way to establish herself as an artist. It was possible that Artemisia Gentileschi and her father learned of Lavinia Fontana's success and gained inspiration from the Fontanas' experience. Gentileschi's father, Orazio Gentileschi was a renowned Caravaggisti artist. His daughter, trained in his own studio, inherited the Caravaggisti style which was evident in her works. Gentileschi's talent became an asset for her father, so she was not immediately married off like other women of her time. In fact, her father intended for her to enter a convent before her maiden reputation was stained by Agostino Tassi, her father's partner in work. Although she won the case against all odds, she was forced to leave Rome and to make a fresh start in Florence, where she became the first female member of Accademia del Disegno and eventually married Pierantonio Stiattesi. In 1620, she moved back to Rome with her husband and her only surviving daughter. Gentileschi traveled within Italy and opened her own studio in Naples in 1630, until Charles I of England invited her to join her father for the commission for the ceiling of the Queen's House built by the English architect Indigo Jones. Although Gentileschi's work was less appreciated by early art critics, she emerged in recent years to be one of the

most representative female artists who strived for autonomy despite her tragic personal experience.

During Gentileschi's time in Florence, the Florentine connoisseurs even commented that she painted "as a man" and even better. This is most evident in her famous *Self-Portrait as La Pittura* (1630), where she depicted herself in the middle of painting, and in the image of the allegorical figure of painting set forth in Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*. The figure includes a golden necklace that stands for imitation, the unruly hair that shows the artist's zeal for her craft, and the special garment that testifies the painter's skills, as the expert on Artemisia Gentileschi, Marry D. Garrad observed in her published study of the painting *Artemisia Gentileschi's Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* [6]. The chain, which takes the shape of a mask, resembles the golden chain worn by a nobleman, which is "reminder of the rank conferred upon him by a ruler" [6]. Here in the painting, the golden chain naturally hangs around her neck and the artist is so submerged in her work that she pays little attention to the weight around her neck. She seemed to take the existence of the chain for granted and "the chain is hers by natural right" [6], confidently announcing to her viewer that she is equivalent to her male counterparts. Different from the two self-portraits discussed above by Lavinia Fontana, the painter herself in this painting does not engage with the viewers but instead is focused on her work. In the painting, she holds a color plate in one hand and a paintbrush in the other. She leans outward from the canvas as if checking her work. The strategy of foreshortening in her painting addressed the sense of motion in her painting. The light source of the painting, which seems to come from the left side of the painting and casts shadows on her clothing that reflects the light and demonstrates the artist's skill to depict light effects. Gentileschi made a powerful statement by imitating the figure of painting. Marry D. Garrad, like Gentileschi's Florentine contemporaries, gave her full credit and approved that in this particular portrait, Gentileschi accomplished something which even male artists could not through such allegorical allusion: Gentileschi, going beyond simply expressing her artistic identity, she took advantage of being a woman and combined these two features. Male artists, as Garrad pointed out, are fundamentally unable to incorporate both a reproduction of their own images and the figure of painting, which is defined as a woman [6]. On the one hand, Gentileschi is taking the same measure to combine both her femininity and artisanship as Lavinia Fontana did in her self-portraits; on the other hand, Gentileschi proudly affirms her female identity and demonstrated how being a woman not only does not contradict with her artistic profession, but these two identities were able to work together and claim her proficiency as a female artist.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

While *Book of Courtier* outlined an ideal woman's characteristic and acquiesced women's attainments in fine art, most female artists embarked on the artistic career not for individual reputation but as a solution to financial difficulties. However, such practical motivations does not in the least undermine their accomplishment in establishing female agency and autonomy. Cultivated by the humanitarian and antiquarian culture in Bologna, Lavinia Fontana and Elisabetta Sirani took different measures to applaud for female virtue and agential power. Similarly, Artemisia Gentileschi, although the appreciation came rather late, presented herself as a devoted painter and aligned herself with the historical and biblical female heroines, despite her unfortunate personal experience. These female Baroque artists acknowledged and advanced themselves as women living up to socially constructed gender roles by showing their female virtues in self-portraits and proved themselves as equivalent to their male colleagues by aligning themselves with the classical heroines.

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