

Lavinia Fontana and 16th and 17th century Bolognese artists

Original Italian by Donatella Franchi, 2005

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Responding to your invitation, I asked myself what Lavinia Fontana meant to me and what her art can tell us today.

I won't speak about her art as a critic or an art historian, but as a woman who is passionate about art, who uses visual language to express herself, and who has found her genealogy in the creativity of women of the past.

The title I gave our meeting emphasizes Lavinia Fontana as a painter linked to the city of Bologna, where I attended university, and where I was part of the women's movement of the 1970s.

The experience we live in the present determines the way we live the past. I had lived in Bologna quite a while unaware of the women artists from the past around me; it was feminists who brought them to life for me. We developed our own awareness of ourselves as artists and holders of our unique creativity independent of male traditions. Women who have traversed feminism have sought out the art of two different cultures--female and male--and not of a universal neutral subject.

What this has accomplished is the undoing of antiquity's certainties. It has disrupted the canons on which the narrative of history was modeled and opened new horizons of meaning. It has enriched modes of expression and opened new avenues of research that have uncovered as if by magic the presence of women creators from the most remote ages. "The only places where we have not found women artists are those where we have not yet looked," wrote scholars Karen Petersen and J.J. Wilson in their book *Women Artists*. [1]

"The subject does not seek the thing she needs, but brings it into existence. I have encountered this with feminism." [2] These are the words of Carla Lonzi, whose thinking has been foundational to my reflections on art and my approach to combining my political and artistic practices. As a feminist I am committed to bringing women artists from the past into existence. To this end, the research of North American and Anglo-Saxon scholars beginning in the 1970s has been invaluable to me.

The research that has flourished due to feminism has made possible the discovery and reevaluation of a vast "hidden legacy" [3] of art produced by women. Three paintings by Lavinia Fontana were featured in the first major historical exhibition on women painters entitled *Women Artists, 1550-1950*. Organized in New York and Los Angeles by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, it ran between 1976 and 1977. [4]

I was then able to recognize, for example, on the portals of the Basilica of S. Petronio in the heart of Bologna, the work of female hands, those of Properzia de' Rossi, who in the first half of the 16th century sculpted sibyls and angels in marble. I was able to appreciate in the shadows of the churches the altarpieces in which Lavinia Fontana narrated the world of affection.

Properzia de' Rossi, capable of working with the hardness of marble [5] using her "delicate feminine hands," was not therefore an extraordinary exception born out of nothing, as Giorgio Vasari might have us believe in his book *The Lives of Artists*. [6] She thrived within a cultural and artistic context where since the

Middle Ages women had expressed themselves culturally: as miniaturists and masters in the art of etching and woodcuts, as painters and writers, and even as university professors. Between the 16th and 17th centuries there were at least twenty-three active women artists in Bologna. [7]

The city also boasts a saint, Caterina de Vigri, musician, writer, painter and miniaturist beatified in 1542 who became a model of spirituality and female creativity also for Lavinia Fontana born herself in Bologna in 1552. [8]

Lavinia's creativity therefore developed in the presence of women in the arts and culture of Bologna where they nourished each other and created tradition enabling some to achieve excellence. The discovery of Lavinia Fontana along with that of many other women artists via the research of feminist scholars triggered a shift in my perception of the history of the city I live in. [9]

The presence of women in important roles since the beginning of the 1500s is a well-established fact of European history. Courts often revolved around cultured women from Isabella d'Este in Ferrara to Caterina Cornaro in Asolo, from Elisabetta Gonzaga to Margherita di Navarra [10] who created an academy of learned ladies at her court. A correspondence between Margherita of Navarra and Partenia Gallerati, a Cremonese woman of letters, educated by her humanist father, represents an example of how fathers cultivated the artistic potential of their daughters, a model Sofonisba Anguissola's father Amilcare espoused. Moreover, at the courts of princes women mystics exerted a great spiritual influence. [11] And in many Italian cities from Brescia to Naples women poets were revered.

Artistic traditions: from fathers to daughters, self-portraits and genealogy

I don't think it's useful to create a history of women's art parallel to that of men's. Instead I find it indispensable to research the ways in which women have interacted with an artistic tradition that excludes them, or isolates them in an aura of almost miraculous exceptionality and thereby abstracting them from the contexts they themselves have contributed to creating.

Women artists have also influenced male artists, an exchange that became evident only towards the end of the 20th century when researchers began investigating it. In an essay Flavio Caroli wrote for the catalog of the first exhibition on Sofonisba Anguissola and her sisters held in Cremona in 1994, the scholar traced the roots of Expressionism to a drawing of Sofonisba's done when she was little more than twenty: *Child bitten by a lizard*, 1554 (Naples, Museo di Capodimonte). According to Caroli, this sketch of which Michelangelo Buonarroti, by then very old, came into possession, "constitutes the only point of human contact between the two immense Michelangeli who pass the baton of modern art: Michelangelo Buonarroti and Michelangelo da Caravaggio," who in his youthful years, "steeped in Lombard culture, takes up directly the Anguissolian invention in the *Child bitten by a lizard*." [12]

In the 1500s and 1600s, painting and sculpture more than writing belonged to the public sphere: a male domain. To be an artist a woman either had to live in a convent, where her art was perceived as a kind of meditation, or be the daughter of an established artist, whose studio she became a member of. The Anguissola sisters were an exception; all six of them painted. Their father Amilcare Anguissola was not an artist but a cultured aristocrat with broad views on the education of women and a remarkable entrepreneurial spirit. He sent his two oldest daughters Sofonisba and Elena to train in the studio of a well-known Cremonese painter.

The tradition of daughters of artists becoming artists was widespread in Flanders; for example, Catharina van Hemessen was daughter of the well-known artist Jan Sanders van Hemessen. Moreover, the

portrait of her sister sitting at the spinet and a self-portrait at the easel (1548), inspired Sofonisba's first self-portrait at the spinet (1556-57), a portrait of her sister Lucia (1557-58) and her self-portrait at the easel.

Indeed, Lavinia Fontana continued the practice in 1577, using Sofonisba's spinet self-portrait as her model. From Catharina to Sofonisba to Lavinia, and from Flanders to Bologna we see a sequence of reciprocal references into which other artists will be placed in the future. The self-portrait is a means through which artists present themselves to the world as authors. These women artists created a tribute to themselves with their conscious, absorbed faces and hands at work either at the easel or at the spinet.

What emerged from these reciprocating sequences of self-portraits was a conscious quest to represent themselves as women artists and as educated women. This awareness allowed them to express their own experience and to embrace their subjectivity. This also meant they would leave behind imitating their fathers, men who were usually famous and charismatic artists like Lavinia's father, Prospero.

In the wake of Sofonisba's early self-portraits, the self-portrait Lavinia presented was that of a cultured gentlewoman and artist. It is a small oil on canvas (27x24 cm., Rome, Accademia di S. Luca) in which she is seated at the spinet in her studio dressed in luxurious clothes detailed in lace and ornaments. Behind her the housekeeper hands her a musical score and in the background is her easel symbolically illuminated by the light filtering through the window. At the top left on the dark wall of the room, is written in gilded lettering: "LAVINIA VIRGO PROSPERI FONTANAE / FILIA EX SPAECULO IMAGINEM / ORIS SUI EXPRESIT ANNO / MDLXXVII". These are the words the painter used to underscore the paternal lineage of her art as well as the female genealogy of self-portraits.

She was reaching back to the mythical female painters of the classical world, in particular the virgin Marzia, who Pliny the Elder mentioned in the *Naturalis Historia* and Boccaccio in *De Mulieribus Claris*. [13] In the 15th century miniature appearing in the Boccaccio text, preserved in the National Library in Paris, there are three faces of the young Marzia: the real one, the reflected one, and the portrait.

And in her very first self-portrait at the age of nineteen and in the medallion dedicated to her father, Sofonisba signed "Sophonisba Anguissola Virgo." She was referring to this same miniature, the origin of the archetype of the mirror and virginity in which 16th century artists [14] recognized and presented themselves to the world. Understood in today's currency, *Virgo* symbolized one's autonomy as a woman and an artist in a world in which women were solely spectators and objects of male artistic expression.

The woman who is about to create finds herself face to face with an image of woman rendered by man and therefore does not find herself at all. History is full of these images. As Carla Lonzi has pointed out, the most powerful female archetype men have invented is that of woman as spectator. [15] This may explain the particular predilection of many female artists for self-portraiture.

Through it they searched for themselves referencing each other, from the miniaturists in convents to the Flemish painters, to those of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. I'm reminded of the 18th century Rosalba Carriera who painted self-portraits from youth to old age, of Frida Kahlo whose self-portraits explored her diverse subjectivities, and up to the present: women have transformed the female body into an investigation and expression of self in an uninterrupted flow of gazes.

Two years had passed between Lavinia's first and the second self-portraits, bringing us to the second part of her story. The second portrait, dated 1579 and preserved in the Uffizi, is an oil on copper in which the painter portrays herself inside her studio. She is sitting at her work table, dressed in refined and jeweled clothing, with pen in hand about to draw. The two ancient statues on the desk and the archaeological fragments arranged on the shelf, testify to her love for humanistic culture. This is the image of herself she wants to make known in Europe. The self-portrait was requested by a patron of great prestige,

an erudite Spanish collector who already owned one of by-then legendary Sofonisba Anguissola in his gallery of portraits of famous people. He would also make the portraits public as prints. [16]

The background of this portrait alludes to a learned woman, recalling the education she received from her father, Prospero Fontana, a prominent artist and man of culture in the Bologna of the Counter-Reformation. Lavinia had by then inherited her father's role in Bolognese artistic circles. [17] In this self-portrait she declares her new social status: her signature appears on the edge of the table in gilded letters. Next to her father's name, she added her husband's surname Zappi. Giovan Paolo Zappi was a man chosen for his practical rather than intellectual or artistic expertise, who became Lavinia's manager, organizing the studio and dealing with clients. [18] In this painting Lavinia presents herself as a daughter and a wife, but above all as a self-assured woman in control of her destiny.

This painting is also part of that sequence of glances women artists had begun to exchange a century before, recalling the thoughtful beauty of Sofonisba's self-portrait (1556) with the same position of the face, the same light reverberating on the forehead, the same softness of the cheek, chin and lips.

Towards self-expression

With a tradition of female artists to look to, Lavinia moved away from imitation and towards expressing her particular point of view in an era in which the Catholic church rigidly controlled artists. It was Counter-Reformation and in Bologna, one of the Papal States, she still succeeded in appropriating male (i.e., her father's) artistic traditions to her own expressive ends without transgressing codes of morality or language. Those in which her experience of relationships and affections, of motherhood and of her own body were intrinsic to her artistic endeavors.

I remember how impressed I was by the altarpiece *Madonna Assunta di Ponte Santo* (Imola, Pinacoteca Comunale), when I saw it in the first monographic exhibition held in Bologna in 1994. It was her first altarpiece and a work of sumptuous beauty for its chromatic splendor. In the compositional scheme of this complex work of the impressive size of 252 x 162 cm/100 x 64 in., Lavinia followed the most current guidelines of the Counter-Reformation while managing to tell us something astonishing about the female body. The Madonna, standing on a crescent-moon, is silhouetted against an almond-shaped incandescent light which fades from yellow into various shades of orange and red. Painted with extraordinary realism and power, it appears to us as a veritable symbol of a vulva.

In the altarpiece *The Birth of the Virgin* (Bologna, Church of the Holy Trinity), Lavinia, by now the mother of many children (she would have eleven) represented with great sensitivity the commonplace yet extraordinary event of birth. The space opens from below, diagonally as if to make room for the viewer witnessing the scene. St. Anne is eating an egg sitting on the bed, while the midwife with her strong neck and arms washes the newborn in a copper basin next to the fire. Also in the foreground we see a woman drying a cloth and a little girl handling bandages, distracted by a dog and cat playing. Skillfully orchestrating the lighting which illuminates the various scenes from the fire to the luminous egg in St. Anne's hand, to the emotive facial expressions, she transformed the worldly into the sacred.

Lavinia's meticulous realism imbued with an extraordinary affection enlivens objects and reveals the souls of the people, children and the saints she portrayed. We see this in the numerous portraits for which she became famous; the sacred and the profane blended together in the fabric of relationships and emotions, of everyday life and daily experiences.

In *Portrait of a Gentlewoman with Child* (Bologna, Pinacoteca), the painter used the iconography of the sacred couple of St. Anne and Mary to represent everyday life while infusing solemnity into the mother-daughter relationship. The reference to St. Anne with the child Mary is evident. St. Anne, an immensely popular figure in Western Europe since the Middle Ages, was very often depicted with a book in her hand, alone or in the act of teaching her daughter. The gentlewoman, in a dark dress, adorned with a wide ruffle of white lace, proudly shows off her young daughter, who dressed like her mother looks at us with a composed and astonished expression. The focal point of this double portrait is the little red book, open between the hands of the mother and her daughter. Two hands united by the book like two rings of a chain are a powerful representation of the mother's genealogy, of her passing down not only an inheritance of affection but of language, knowledge and ways of expressing oneself.

After the Council of Trent, depictions of St. Anne as the earthly ancestor of Christ and the bearer of knowledge were muted and replaced by those depicting a devoted educator or the sweet, harmless grandmother of the sacred child. [19] In this double portrait, Lavinia Fontana returned to the mother the ancient power of the Saint and renewed the exchange of knowledge between generations.

"All the ladies of the city vied for her attention. Offering invitations and demonstrations of extraordinary love and respect, they considered themselves fortunate to be seen out and about and at gatherings in the company of the young virtuoso; they wanted nothing more than to be portrayed by her, rewarding her in such a way that a greater price has not been used for a van Dych in our day...."[20]

To imagine these amusing, persnickety, perhaps a bit gossipy type of "ladies" all we have to do is look them in the procession in *The Visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon* Lavinia painted around 1600.

She reciprocated their admiration by establishing an intense dialogue with them on the canvas, capturing their gazes often melancholy, thoughtful and questioning as in the beautiful portrait of the *Gentlewoman of Baltimore*. Sometimes Lavinia indulged their game and gave their faces a heroic light, as seems to have happened with *Judith* (Bologna, Davia Bargellini Museum) which could be the portrait of the noble client. [21] It was a game of glances between the painter and her clients which we come across again and again, now able to recognize it.

In the *Family Portrait of Brera* the characters are gathered around a table in two distinct groups: three generations from childhood to old age of men and women. The painter highlighted the difference between the male and the female genealogies: "In the visual field of the painting, the female world is separate from the male, the mother in three-quarter view with her back to the men closes her triad." [22] The little girl with an open book, between her mother and grandmother represents feminine culture and references St. Anne. All this suggests a deliberate psychological probing of the artist's conception of the familial microcosm, seeing it as consisting of distinct albeit coexisting subjectivities.

Lavinia Fontana's destiny was similar to that of many outstanding female artists of the past, very famous in life and then devalued if not completely cancelled by art historians' focus on male artists.

About sixty years after the artist's death in 1614 in Rome, where she had been commissioned to paint important public works, the Bolognese historian C.C. Malvasia celebrated her fame, projecting it into an almost mythical light: "She also served Pontiffs and was the painter of Pope Gregory XIII and of the whole house Boncompagni, who always honored, benefited and protected her, and so great was the esteem in which she was held, that when she went to Sora, Vignuola and elsewhere invited by those Excellencies ... she was received like princess"[23]

Her fame also spread beyond Italy, and when she was still alive a medallion was coined in her honor. On one side bears her profile and on the other the image of Lavinia as the allegory of painting sitting at her easel with her hair waving in a whirlwind of inspiration. This figure, fascinating for its energy, is surrounded by a hendecasyllable that runs along the edge of the medallion, encircling the artist: "Per te stato gioioso mi mantene" "It is for you I keep this joyous state." The phrase alludes to the state of mind of the painter as well as the painting's viewer: words and energies reciprocating an endless exchange of eager glances.

Works of art can live only at the intersection of gazes; they are meeting places that must be continually recreated. This is why the work of the past artists reappeared in the 1970s when the passionate research of women gave it new life. This is how we were able to re-encounter the gaze of Lavinia Fontana, who bears witness to the genealogy of female artists four centuries later.

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- [1] Karen Petersen, J.J. Wilson, *Women Artists*, The Women's Press, London 1978. This book was translated into Italian by the Savelli publishing house in 1979.
- [2] Carla Lonzi. *Taci, anzi parla, Scritti di Rivolta femminile*, Milan 1978, 44.
- [3] Eleanor Tufts calls her study *Our Hidden Heritage, Five Centuries of Women Artists*, Paddington Press, New York 1974. See Maria Teresa Cantaro, *Lavinia Fontana bolognese*, Jandi Sapi Editori, Milan, Rome 1989, 25.
- [4] I refer in particular to the catalog *Le grandi pittrici 1550-1950 (The Great Women Painters 1550-1950)*, by Ann Sutherland Harris and Lin-da Nochlin, which accompanied the first major exhibition on art produced by women held first in New York and then in Los Angeles in 1976-1977, ed. it. Feltrinelli, Milan 1979.
- [5] Those same hands had patiently carved figurines of martyrs and saints and tiny heads on peach and cherry stones, transforming them into jewelry. In the Basilica's museum, there is also the whirling bas-relief with Putifares' wife trying to seduce Joseph, almost a symbolic self-portrait of this transgressive artist, who had the courage to measure herself against her own desires. Vera Fortunati wrote an essay on Properzia de' Rossi in the magazine *Il Carrobbio*, Bologna 1981.
- [6] Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of Artists*, 1998
- [7] Luigi Crespì, *Vite de Pittori Bolognesi*, 1769, quoted by Whitney Chadwick in *Women, Art and Society*, Thames and Hudson, New York 1996.
- [8] Vera Fortunati, "Lavinia Fontana, una pittrice nell'autunno del Rinascimento," in *Lavinia Fontana (1552-1614)*, edited by Vera Fortunati, Electa, Milan 1994.
- [9] See the short essay "Una pittrice singolare" written by me in the number 0 of "Elle Effe", Bologna, April 1993.
- [10] Valerio Guazzoni, "Donna, pittrice e gentildonna. La nascita di un mito femminile del Cinquecento", in *Sofonisba Anguissola e le sue sorelle...*, 57.
- [11] *op. cit.*, p. 57.
- [12] Flavio Caroli, "Ritratti di famiglia in un interno, un fanciullo, un crachio e la Fisiognomica nel Cinquecento", in *Sofonisba Anguissola e le sue sorelle*, Leonardo Arte, Milan 1994, pp. 48-49.
- [13] Angela Ghirardi, "Lavinia Fontana allo Specchio. Female Painters and Self-Portraiture in the Second Half of the Sixteenth Century," in *Lavinia Fontana 1552 - 1614...*, 37-50.
- [14] See Angela Ghirardi..., 39-40.
- [15] Carla Lonzi, "Woman's Absence from the Celebratory Moments of Male Creative Manifestation," March 1971, in *Spit on Hegel, Writings of Female Revolt*, Milan 1974. Carla Lonzi's thoughts on art can be found expressed in all her works.
- [16] Angela Ghirardi..., 44.
- [17] Vera Fortunati..., 27.
- [18] Prospero's investment in his daughter's artistic career is reminiscent of Amilcare Anguissola's intelligent strategy. Both, however, made references to the principles on the education of women spread by the Cortegiano (1528) of Baldassar Castiglione in the first half of the 1500s. In his treatise, Castiglione had recorded the emergence of women in important roles at the beginning of the 1500s. The debate over the education of women had begun much earlier, stimulated especially by Christine de Pizan in her *City of Ladies* (1404-05).

[19] A beautiful and profound analysis of the iconography of St. Anne can be found in Estrella Ruiz - Calvez's essay, "Religion De la Mère. Religion Des Mères" in *La religion de ma mère. Le rôle des Femmes dans la transmission de la foi*, (edited by Jean Delumeau), Les Editions du Cerf, Paris 1992.

Masaccio in *his St. Anne with Virgin and Child*, c. 1425, Uffizi, puts great emphasis on the matrilineality of Christ.

[20] C.C. Malvasia, *Felsina Pittrice, Bologna 1678*, Bologna 1971, 146.

[21] Costanza Bianchetti, widow of Galeazzo Bargellini. See catalog 1994..., 205.

[22] Vera Fortunati..., 30.

[23] C.C. Malvasia..., 146.