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Italian Renaissance Artist

Sofonisba Anguissola

The period known as the Renaissance was dominated almost exclusively by patriarchal restrictions. These restrictions extended throughout society and governed every aspect of culture including literature, architecture, and art. Prevailing attitudes raised the worth of male artists to Masters, while dismissing the possibility of women's aptitude to achieve in the same field. Access to women was almost entirely unheard of and when it did occur it was usually through extraordinary circumstances. One artist that transcended the boundaries of the age was Sofonisba Anguissola. As stated by Ilya Sandra Perlingieri, "She was fortunate and blessed to have had an aristocratic and supportive family and managed to overcome enormous obstacles that the Renaissance patriarchal society imposed on its creative women." [[1]](#endnote-1) The influence of Anguissola's lifetime of achievements inspired the artists, both male and female, who succeeded her. Despite her contribution, she was long denied mention in mainstream art history, a slight which has only recently been addressed.

Born in the Italian city of Cremona prior to the Council of Trent, which required the keeping of such records, Anguissola's exact birthdate was unrecorded and remains an area of dispute. The date accepted by most scholars is 1532. This conclusion is related to the centenary celebration of her birth and the dedication of her tombstone in 1632. There were seven children in the aristocratic household of Amilcare and Bianca Anguissola. Six daughters preceded one son. The Anguissolas were committed to the education of their daughters and provided instruction in subjects which were most commonly available to only sons. Perlingieri elaborates, "Educated in the best Renaissance tradition, the Anguissola sisters learned to read and write, studied the Latin and Greek classics, the sciences... "*[[2]](#endnote-2)* In her very early teens Anguissola created two sketches that are now housed in the Uffizi Gallery, *Self Portrait with Old Woman* and *Self Portrait*. Even these early attempts highlight an expressive nature she would successfully capture throughout her career.

Anguissola's artistic talents were also fostered through unusual arrangements with two of Cremona's leading painters. Bernardino Campi painted largely in the Italian Mannerist style, incorporating elongated figures and slightly skewed proportions. Though Anguissola could not be a studio apprentice in a traditional sense, she and her sister Elena resided in the Campi home during three years of artistic instruction from 1546-1549.[[3]](#endnote-3) The effect of her studies with Campi can be seen the painting completed around 1550 titled *Pieta.* Though both the theme of the painting and its Mannerist figure style have apparently been taken from a contemporary work by Campi, Anguissola has made significant stylistic departures from her teacher. The most significant of these are the dramatic use of shadow and reduction of figures which shift all focus to the intensity between Mary and Christ. When her studies with Campi came to an end, her father arranged further instruction under the direction of Bernardino Gatti.

During this time Anguissola frequently used members of her family as subjects in her paintings. The expressiveness in her early sketches is also apparent in works like *Asdrubale Being Bitten by a Crab* and her painting of Elena titled *Portrait of a Nun*. Another notable development can be seen in the rich textural detail she applies to the treatment of fabrics. Around 1552 Anguissola painted a self portrait which now resides in the Vasari Corridor under the auspices of the Uffizi Gallery. The inscription translates as "Sofonisba Anguissola, Cremona, painted this at twenty."[[4]](#endnote-4) Another self portrait of this period is dated definitively by its inscription, "Sophonisba Anguissola Virgo Seipsam Fecit 1554."[[5]](#endnote-5) The self portrait would be a subject she returned to repeatedly throughout her career. In most she presented herself in simple clothing, unadorned with jewels. She often favors black with flashes of brilliant white at the neckline and cuffs.

Around 1554 Anguissola left Cremona and traveled to Rome with a chaperone and other attendants. Her studies there included drawing from ancient ruins and medieval churches. As stated by Perlingier, "Since she was working outside the *bottega* (workshop) that was available only to male artists, portraiture became her most important vehicle during this time"[[6]](#endnote-6) During her stay in Rome it is likely that she came into contact with Michelangelo. This supposition is reinforced by the existence of two letters written in 1557 and 1558 in which her father thanks Michelangelo for the support he has given Anguissola. There is also some evidence that her drawing, *Asdrubale Being Bitten by a Crab*, was a theme suggested by the older artist. Her talent was brought to the attention of Pope Julius III when Anguissola presented him with a self portrait. She would later paint a portrait of Pope Paul IV.

Upon her return to Cremona, she resumed paintings modeled on family life. Additionally, she began to travel in order to complete portrait commissions. Though many significant works succeeded in spreading her renown, possibly the best known of this period is *The Chess Game* (1555). It has been suggested by Mary Garrard that this presentation of "the new chess", with the queen holding utmost power, is also a statement about the nature of female capability, "To play chess, with its intellectual demands and strategies, is like playing a musical instrument or playing the game of art... "*[[7]](#endnote-7)* Anguissola's success in these years was a product of great skill and self promotion. She strictly controlled her image, careful to present herself as a serious artist, devoid of the fripperies associated with less studious women, sometimes signing her paintings with the title "virgo" to reinforce her chaste and honorable position. The narrow path she navigated during these developing years placed her in an unusual position and allowed for another significant advancement.

In 1559, at around age twenty-seven, Anguissola received an invitation to join the court of King Phillip of Spain. His newly crowned queen, Isabel, was the daughter of Catherine de' Medici and had been raised in palatial grandeur as a princess of France. She had a strong interest in art and music that would lead her to take lessons with Anguissola. In addition to tutoring Queen Isabel, Anguissola would continue to paint the expressive and detailed portraits for which she was known. In 1561, at the request of Pope Pius IV, Anguissola painted a portrait of Queen Isabel. She continued producing portraits of the royal family throughout her tenure in Spain. Full length and half length, they all shared her attention to costume and texture. Even after the death of Queen Isabel, Anguissola remained part of the court.

When she finally departed in 1571, it was to a marriage arranged by King Phillip. In her dowry documents he states, "Whereas we hold in high esteem the fine manner in which you, Sofonisba Anguissola, served the most serene Queen Dona Isabel... For this cause, we have had and now do have consideration to grant you with this document 3000 ducados... as capital benefice to your dowry and marriage."[[8]](#endnote-8) Anguissola would outlive her first husband and would later fall in love with a ship's captain. Their marriage would last to the end of her life. Her last self portrait was painted eloquently in 1620, despite her degenerating vision. It bears many of the elements of its predecessors, such as her simple clothing of black and white and a gaze that begs attention. As a final connection to her successors, Anguissola met with then twenty-five year old painter, Anthony Van Dyck. He painted the last images that exist of the aging artist, "When I drew her portrait, she gave me several hints: not to get too close, too high or too low so the shadows in her wrinkles would not show too much. She talked to me about her life and that she was a wonderful painter of nature."[[9]](#endnote-9)

1. Ilya Sandra Perlingieri, *Sofonisba Anguissola: The First Great Woman Artist of the Renaissance,* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 15 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ilya Sandra Perlingieri, "Sofonisba Anguissola's Early Sketches," *Woman's Art Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Autumn, 1988 - Winter, 1989), 10 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Perlingieri, *Sofonisba Anguissola*, 42 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Perlingieri, *Sofonisba Anguissola*, 60 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Mary D. Garrard, "Here's Looking at Me: Sofonisba Anguissola and the Problem of the Woman Artist," *Renaissance Quarterly,* Vol. 47, No. 3 (Autumn, 1994) 557 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Perlingieri, *Sofonisba Anguissola*, 65 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Garrard, "Here's Looking at Me", 569 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Perlingieri, *Sofonisba Anguissola*, 152 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Perlingieri, *Sofonisba Anguissola*, 204 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)