

SOFONISBA ANGUISSOLA: A TALENT THAT TELLS THE TRUTH ABOUT WOMEN

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Due to scientific theories about reproduction, women during the sixteenth century were thought of as inferior to men, unable to create, and unequipped to create new and unique artwork (Jacobs, 1999). During the sixteenth century, Sofonisba Anguissola was one of the first women to raise awareness about the falsity of these ideas. Her artistic talents impress male artists such as Giorgio Vasari and Michelangelo (Jacobs, 1999). Even more significantly, she is credited by Vasari for creating work that is “truly lifelike” (Jacobs, 1999). Sofonisba’s talent gives her status among other male artists and gives the women around her hope for gaining an equal status among men.

Since the beginning of art history women have struggled to find equality in the world, including equality in the practice of art making. Due to scientific theories about reproduction, women have been thought to be inferior to men, unable to create, and unequipped to create new and unique artwork (Jacobs, 1999). During the sixteenth century, Sofonisba Anguissola was one of the first women to raise awareness about the falsity of these ideas.

In the first art history class I ever took we discussed the beautiful expressionist paintings of Monet. We analyzed the brilliant ideas behind Picasso’s cubism. We gazed in awe at the carvings of Michelangelo and admired his fresco ceiling. These brilliant men crowded our art history textbook, but where were the women artists while all of this history was being made? Among all of these talented men I knew there must be some women to match them. So, why don’t we hear more about women artists throughout history and were those who did exist at all significant?

Surprisingly, I found that science was a driving factor in the oppression of women artists during the sixteenth century. Thoughts about the inferiority of women were guided by Aristotle’s theory about reproduction. Aristotle says that there are four causes involved with reproduction (Jacobs, 1999). Here are the causes that he brings up: “The efficient cause, or the impetus to the making of that thing, the formal cause, or that which gives form to matter, the material cause, or matter that receives the form; and the telic cause, or goal it endeavors to reach” (Jacobs, 1999, p.31). The efficient, formal and telic causes each deal with the role of the male. During reproduction, these include the creation of sperm and the passing of sperm from the male to the female. The man is therefore thought of as a giver and creator of life.

The material cause, on the other hand, is the one and only cause attributed to the female (Jacobs, 1999). This cause puts emphasis on the passiveness of the woman. She is the one who is given the sperm by the male and passively accepts it into her body (Jacobs, 1999). Her only role is to give it protection during the creation of a child. Basically, Aristotle is saying that the man is in control of the reproductive process and, unlike women, can create and give life to new beings.

Unfortunately, Aristotle's theories about reproduction are applied to other aspects of life as well. For example, at this time women are very restricted with what they are allowed to do in the world of art. For the most part, art is thought of as a man's profession as it involves the act of creating, something Aristotle says is not a woman's activity; in fact women do not even possess the ability to create (Jacobs, 1999).

However, during the sixteenth century, when women did insist on picking up the paintbrush, there were additional restrictions that they were expected to follow. For example, painting the figure was absolutely prohibited. It was certainly not proper for a lady to use nude models, which was a necessity in order to learn how to paint the figure (Chicago & Lucie-Smith, 1999). Therefore, it was also rare to have a woman painting portraits because this was also a form of figure painting (Chicago & Lucie-Smith, 1999).

The most forbidden painting genre among women was the highest-ranking form of figure painting, called history painting (Chicago & Lucie-Smith, 1999). These paintings tended to be highly complex images, loaded with detail of narrative and full of religious content (Chicago & Lucie-Smith, 1999). Lower-ranking forms of art such as landscape painting and still-life painting were the most accepted genres among women artists (Chicago & Lucie-Smith, 1999).

However, Sofonisba Anguissola, knowing the set conventions for women artists and aware of Aristotle's theories, overcomes and challenges these obstacles through her subject matter and her level of skill. One painting from the 1550's, called *Pieta*, shows that Sofonisba is quite able to be creative (Fig. 1) (Perlingieri, 1992). She copies *Pieta* from a painting that her teacher has already made with the same title (Perlingieri, 1992). Then, a man named Lionello Venturi comes across these two paintings at their original exhibition in Milan (Perlingieri, 1992). He says:

In a small room of the same gallery, with a similar background of gloomy cliffs, the central group of Bernardino Campi's *Pieta* was copied by Sofonisba Anguissola. The luminous close-up imagery and *sfumato* [a smoky shading and coloring from light to dark] of the countryside, on the right, is thus enhanced (Fig. 1). Her teacher's work is scrupulously and truthfully copied. But Sofonisba shows more signs of Parmigianesque influence than Bernardino, in the pointed hands of the Virgin, in the golden color, in the delicacy of the pointed face and tiny features (Perlingieri, 1992, p.47).

Venturi describes Sofonisba's work as having a higher quality and better usage of techniques such as *sfumato* and detailing than even her own teacher who was, of course, a male. Sofonisba's *Pieta* (Fig. 1) is an exact copy of her teacher's painting of the same title;

however, she drastically alters it to make it even more successful than the original (Perlingieri, 1992).



Fig. 1: *Pieta*, by Bernardino Campi, 1550's on left and *Pieta*, by Sofonisba Anguissola, 1550's on right.

Sofonisba's talents are even able to impress the famous sculptor and painter, Michelangelo. Receiving recognition and guidance from this master alone speaks volumes about Sofonisba's abilities. Furthermore, after seeing Sofonisba's drawing of a girl smiling, Michelangelo requests that she should also draw a boy weeping (Jacob, 1999). Although impressed by her first drawing, Michelangelo believes that this would be a much more difficult task (Jacobs, 1999).

Sofonisba then accepts this challenge and creates a drawing called *Asdrubale Bitten by a Crayfish*, in 1557 (Fig. 2) (Jacobs, 1999). Author Fredrika Jacobs describes the level of difficulty involved with creating such a drawing:

Anguissola's drawing of her tearful brother and smiling sister may also be seen as a successful resolution of the problem of differentiating responses that, while generally expressive of opposite emotions, are strikingly similar in their physiognomic manifestations (Jacobs, 1999, p.57).



Fig. 2: Sofonisba Anguissola, *Asdrubale Bitten by a Crayfish*, 1557.

He explains that the facial differences between laughing and weeping can be very hard to distinguish for an artist (Jacobs, 1999). The slight differences that appear on the face are hard to differentiate; therefore, it is a huge accomplishment to create each of these facial expressions.

Upon seeing Sofonisba's paintings, another artist, Giorgio Vasari, in addition to Michelangelo, was also impressed by her talent. After reviewing Sofonisba's work, he says that "If women know so well how to make living men, what marvel is it that those who wish are also so well able to make them in painting" (Jacobs, 1999, p.38)? He is actually crediting Sofonisba as being able to give life to men as well as her paintings. Her painting, *The Chess Game*, from 1555 is an example of her ability to give life to painting (Fig. 3) (Perlingieri, 1992).

Perlingieri, the author of *Sofonisba Anguissola: The First Great Woman Artist of the Renaissance*, describes this painting as "a complex and ambitious project" (Perlingieri, 1992, p.82). Sofonisba paints three of her siblings playing chess along with a woman that appears to be



Fig. 3: Sofonisba Anguissola, *The Chess Game*, 1555.

the maid. She creates an outdoor setting that was most likely constructed from her imagination using some elements from the city and landscape around her (Perlingieri, 1992). Similar to *Pieta*, here she uses sfumato in order to create a soft blue landscape in the background that nicely contrasts with the decorative and elaborate clothing of the foreground figures (Perlingieri, 1992). Vasari, again, complements Sofonisba's work, explaining that "It was done with such diligence and quickness that they all seemed truly alive and only lacking in speech" (Perlingieri, 1992). He is referring to the figures in this painting as being lifelike, which is, again, a huge compliment for any woman artist to receive.

Furthermore, the interaction between the figures makes the game of chess seem real. The youngest sibling appears to be laughing at the sibling on the right as she raises her hand in defeat. Meanwhile, the oldest sibling looks out at the viewer as if asking for praise and congratulations as she holds her sisters black queen, indicating that she has won the game of chess (Gerrard, 1994). Perhaps these gestures and expressions are what cause Vasari to credit Sofonisba with the ability to create life.

The Chess game's main subject is also important to Sofonisba's message for this painting. Chess had undergone many rule changes as it was introduced and popularized in Italy in 1510 (Gerrard, 1994). The new game of chess, much like the kind played today,

gave the pawns new abilities. For example, in order to make the game move along faster, the bishop pawn gained the ability to move an infinite number of spaces diagonally, when previously it could have only moved one diagonal space at a time (Gerrard, 1994). Every other pawn also had its own new set of rules. The most significant rule change for Sofonisba's painting, however, belongs to the Queen. Author Mary D. Gerrard (1994) states that "The new status and power of the queen--now greater than that of the king himself--was evidently the most noteworthy result of the rules change..." As the oldest sister grasps her sibling's black queen in her left hand, she signifies more than the fact that she has just won the game; the queen, as a symbol, implies that the status of women should at least be equal to the status of men in society (Gerrard, 1994). As the status of the chess queen has risen, so should the status rise of all women in society.

Sofonisba did not create life-like paintings by accident. She knew that what she was doing was significant. In her *Self-Portrait*, from 1554, her pose and what she holds in her hand are important signifiers for her message (Fig. 4) (Perlingieri, 1992). She sits in a three quarter pose and gazes out at the viewer in a challenging stare (Perlingieri, 1992). She dresses in a simple, yet elegant gown adorned with lace at her collar and sleeve openings. Her dress is simple, but shows that her status in society is not of lower-class.



Fig. 4: Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait*, 1554.

The book that Sofonisba holds in her left hand is a sign of her intelligence and success (Chicago and Lucie-Smith, 1999). On it is written, “Sofonisba Anguissola virgo se ipsam fecit 1554 (Sofonisba Anguissola, the unmarried maiden painted this herself, 1554)” (Perlingieri, 1992, p.78). Here she makes a statement about having never been married. Therefore, she is also saying that she has never belonged to a man and never given birth to a child (Perlingieri, 1992). She detaches herself from the theories of Aristotle and in a way rejects them while also taking on some manlike qualities. She also writes in a very matter-of-a-fact tone which puts emphasis on the fact that an unmarried, childless woman painted the portrait.

Women during this time had trouble gaining the full respect from men that they may have deserved. In order to gain this respect, women who wanted to paint could either choose to paint with some restrictions, or paint on their own accord but gain no respect. Artist and author Judy Chicago and Edward Lucie-Smith (1999) describe the situation as follows:

Essentially a female artist could either elect to be a gentlewoman who painted, with the restrictions which this implied in terms of both daily conduct and longterm social mobility, or she could resign herself to being thought of as a not quite respectable outsider. A gentlewoman artist had access to a particular sort of patronage – she could become a favorite with the female members of a court or aristocratic circle. But this limited the scope of her art. This seems to have been the choice made by the gifted mannerist portraitist Sofonisba Anguissola (Chicago & Lucie-Smith, 1999, p.115).

The book that Sofonisba holds shows that she has joined this circle of intellect and sacrifices many freedoms in order for her work to be respected and well-known (Chicago & Lucie-Smith, 1999).

Sofonisba was one of the first women to begin the fight for equal rights among men and women. She fought for the right to be taken seriously as an artist in the same way that men were taken seriously as artists. Sofonisba turned her knowledge and determination into master works of art. Credited by Vasari as having “truly life-like” images, and praised by Venturi for improving upon her own teacher’s work, Sofonisba has accomplished more than art; she has helped rise the status of women to a position of equal importance as men (Jacob, 1999).

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