

Sofonisba Anguissola: Marvel of Nature

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Abstract

Born in Italy during the Renaissance, Sofonisba Anguissola was the first internationally recognized female artist. This paper examines the events that advanced her career and the cultural situation in which she found herself competing as an artist.

Uniquely, during the Italian Renaissance arose a woman whose life story and oeuvre are unfolding again for modern day scholars. Sofonisba Anguissola became an exceptional painter and was recognized by Vasari, Michelangelo and Van Dyck during a period in history when women did not typically achieve recognition as artists. During the Renaissance, women were thought of as the object of representation rather than in the role of the subjective, thinking agent, or the artist. Sofonisba Anguissola was the first internationally recognized woman artist of the Renaissance, and she blazed a trail for other women artists to follow. Who was she, and how did she do it? How did she handle her career situation?

Sofonisba's birth into a noble family with liberally minded parents was one factor in her success. In the small, northern Italian town of Cremona, Sofonisba Anguissola was one of the few artists in the history of Western art to be born into a noble family. She was the eldest in a family of six sisters, who were all also artists, and one brother. Her birth is believed to be around the year 1532.¹ Her father, Amilcare, was ahead of his time by providing his daughters good educations as if they were sons of nobility. The Anguissola sisters were educated in the best Renaissance traditions. Learning to read and write, they studied the Latin and the Greek classics, the sciences, and had the customary lessons on the clavichord. At this time, artistic girls were traditionally taught only the needle arts, elegant dressing and music. It could be determined that, since Amilcare and his wife Bianca educated their daughters seriously in the arts, this demonstrates the high value they placed on artistic achievement.² However, the Anguissolas' real motives might have been more of a practical nature because they had six daughters for whom dowries had to be found. As proof we can note that their son, Asdrubale, was not instructed in the arts while the girls were encouraged to become accomplished at as many talents as they could find.³ Regardless of their motives, the Anguissolas produced some highly educated and capable young women. In 1568, the art historian Vasari heard of the Anguissola sisters and made a trip to visit them in their home. All subsequent biographical information written many years later by Baldinucci, Soprani, and Zaist, for example, comes from this visit from Vasari.⁴

¹Elsa Honig Fine, *Women and Art* (Montclair NJ / London: Allanheld and Schram / Prior, 1978), 9.

²Ilya Sandra Perlingieri, "Sofonisba Anguissola's Early Sketches" *Women's Art Journal* v9, no.2 (1989):10.

³Germaine Greer, *The Obstacle Race* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979), 182.

⁴Perlingieri, 11.

Sofonisba's teachers significantly influenced her work. Her first drawing master was Bernardino Campi, who was a Mannerist painter of portraits and religious subjects. Bernardino Campi's mature style is a reflection of what became known as northern Italian Mannerism.⁵

Zaist explained that, in 1546, Sofonisba and her sister Elena stayed in the Campi home in Cremona and that Campi was a patient, inspiring teacher. Sofonisba responded well to his instruction and delighted in conversation with his wife, Anna.⁶ Painting was purely a male dominated domain and aristocrats of either sex did not serve as apprentices. Since the Anguissola girls were aristocrats, they were treated as paying guests in the home, not apprentices. Amilcare Anguissola set an astonishing example by sending his two aristocratic daughters to study under Campi.⁷

Sofonisba painted her family continually, which improved her eye for gesture and facial expressions. Her skill improved for rendering the silk and fabrics of Cremona, which was well known as a textile center. She became famous for the relaxed settings in which she placed her family.⁸ The investment paid off for Amilcare because Sofonisba was able to earn a sizable living for herself while teaching her sisters Lucia, Europa, and Anna Maria.⁹

Bernardino Gatti, a follower of Correggio, became the girls' next instructor probably between 1547 and 1551. Zaist wrote that with Gatti, Sofonisba "became well versed to a greater perfection in art. Above all, Sofonisba...became such an expert that it was not a small wonder that she could render in her sketches original ideas in what she saw with greater freedom of hand."¹⁰

Sometime around 1554, Sofonisba left for Rome where she had contact with Michelangelo. While in Rome she made the acquaintance of Michelangelo, who showed her great kindness and encouraged her in drawing and design.¹¹ While kindness was an aspect of Michelangelo's personality, we should note that painting was a man's profession and Michelangelo would not have spent time with Sofonisba, especially during his old age, if she had not been gifted.¹²

It is during this time that Sofonisba's drawings changed from the elongated Mannerist forms of Bernardino Campi's to the well rounded, anatomically correct forms taught by Michelangelo. Her drawing of *Asdrubale Being Bitten by a Crab* (**Figure 1**) is a sketch of her brother Asdrubale, and her sister, possibly Minerva. With this drawing we begin to see the influence of Michelangelo. The tense pose of the child and his wild emotions produces sharp

⁵ Ilya Sandra Perlingieri, *Sofonisba Anguissola* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 34-36.

⁶ Zaist, *Notizie Istoriche de Pittori, Scultori, ed Architetti Cremonese Cremonesi*, (Cremona: Banco Popolare di Cremona, 1976), 22: quoted in Perlingieri, "Early Sketches", 11.

⁷ Greer, 180.

⁸ Perlingieri, "Lady in Waiting", 71.

⁹ Greer, 182.

¹⁰ Zaist, Cremonesi, 228: in Perlingieri, "Early Sketches", 11.

¹¹ Perlingieri, *Anguissola*, 67.

¹² Perlingieri, *Anguissola*, 69.

contrast with the calm posture of the sister. Opposing characteristics of this nature are typical of Mannerism, and Michelangelo explored contrast extensively.¹³

Figure 1. Sofonisba Anguissola, *Asdrubale Being Bitten by a Crab*.

Sketch, 13 1/8 x 15 1/8" Naples, Gabinettodi Disegni, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte



The manner and positioning of her sister's hands and especially Asdrubale's left hand is composed in a squared off "U" shape and typifies Sofonisba's work. The triangular arrangement of the two figures consists of focal points that lead the viewer's eyes from Asdrubale's pained face to his bitten hand and then to his sister's face in a compact composition. Characteristic of her work, too, is the informal family scene for which she became well known, instead of the extremely formal family portraits that were typical of the sixteenth century.¹⁴ Apparently the sketch of Asdrubale and her sister was in Michelangelo's possession, and was probably sent to him as fulfillment of an assignment. Two years before Michelangelo's death, Cavalieri sent this sketch along with one by Michelangelo of Cleopatra to Cosimo I (deMedici, grand duke of Tuscany) in Florence, writing that Sofonisba's work was "not only beautiful but also shows considerable invention."¹⁵ The sketches circulated about and, interestingly enough, the Baroque master Caravaggio saw Sofonisba's sketch. His painting circa 1597 of *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* (**Figure 2**) was inspired by her sketch.¹⁶

¹³ Perlingieri, "Early Sketches", 13.

¹⁴ Perlingieri, *Anguissola*, 73.

¹⁵ Perlingieri, "Lady in Waiting", 71.

¹⁶ Perlingieri, *Anguissola*, 74.

Figure 2. Caravaggio, *Boy Being Bitten by a Lizard*.
Ca. 1597.

Florence, Fondazione Roberto Longhi



Vasari had another copy of *Asdrubale Being Bitten by a Crab*, probably by Sofonisba's own hand, and he described it in the second edition of his artist's history after he made a visit to her home in Cremona. Sofonisba had already left for Spain at this time, but at her father's house Vasari was able to see her painting of her sister's playing chess (**Figure 3**). Vasari wrote, "The portraits were so life like that the figures seemed to breathe, and I was only surprised at their silence... The Lady, with such great excellence, was able to do more than anyone in art."¹⁷

Figure 3. Sofonisba Anguissola, *The Chess Game*
1555. 27 9/16" x 37"

Museum Narodowe, Poznan, Poland



As evidenced by *The Chess Game*, one of the significant things that Sofonisba Anguissola is credited with is inventing genre painting. One hundred years before it came into vogue, she was painting views of everyday life. Informally posed, she painted her family in everyday scenes, much like a family album. It was Sofonisba who first thought to paint the aristocracy in this actively engaged way. Her style drew notice and brought her commissions throughout Italy.¹⁸

¹⁷ Perlingieri, "Lady in Waiting", 71.

¹⁸ Perlingieri, "Lady in Waiting", 71.

In a strategic move, Anguissola moved to the Spanish Court. In 1559, after having his portrait painted by Anguissola, The Duke of Alba recommended her to King Phillip of Spain. Known as “the most Catholic of Kings”, King Phillip II was also a patron of artists, including Titian. In recognition of her status as nobility, she was appointed as a lady in waiting to his wife, Isabel of Valois. She became the queen’s friend and was made governess to their first daughter. Anguissola was also appointed as court painter and painted portraits for the palace and for use as state gifts. The King treated her with great esteem. During the twenty years she was there, she painted several portraits of the queen; one was for Pope Pius IV. The pope wrote that he was greatly pleased with her work and held her in high esteem.¹⁹

Outwardly it seems as if Sofonisba Anguissola should have been happy with her life, yet her gender was problematic for her career as an artist. To understand her position as a woman in a man’s field, we need to understand the general position of women during this time and how they were associated with art and creativity. In 1860, the respected European Renaissance historian Jacob Burckhardt said of the Renaissance, “To understand the higher forms of social intercourse in this period, we must keep before our minds the fact that women stood on a footing of perfect equality with men.”²⁰ Burckhardt based his assertion about gender equality on the premise of the “rediscovery of the freedom and dignity of man” during the Renaissance.²¹ It is doubtful that the women of the Renaissance would have agreed with this reasoning. The lack of female Renaissance artists is evidence that an art career presented problems for women.

Although the humanists began writing of equality for women in 1480 and some women seemed to be aware of this concept, women were not given an equal status with men.²² During the Renaissance, a male-based urban economy centered on commerce and the accumulation of capital, replacing the medieval system of feudalism in which women could participate and own land. Without the power and wealth based on ownership of land, women became dependent on men.²³

The idea of gender equality based on the rediscovery of the dignity of men submitted by Burckhardt in 1860 continued to be the norm in Renaissance writings until feminist scholars began to reject that way of thinking in the 1970’s. Linda Nochlin, Joan Kelly-Gadol, Margaret King, David Herlichy and Christine Klapisch-Zuber have written ground breaking feminist studies in this area. These studies have investigated such issues as artistic talent and the institutions that have nurtured it, ideals of feminine equality and feminine cultural ideology, forms of institutional control, and changing property relations.²⁴ These studies can help us understand why there were no great women master artists in the Renaissance comparable to

¹⁹ Perlingieri, “Lady in Waiting”, 71.

²⁰ Jacob Burckhardt, The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, (1860), in Women, Art and Society second edition, Whitney Chadwick (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 66.

²¹ Ibid.

²² “Defence of the Woman” (1480), in Sofonisba Anguissola: A Renaissance Woman, Sylvia Ferino-Pagden and Maria Kusche (Arlington, VA., The National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1995) 11.

²³ Wendy Slatkin, Women Artists in History (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice Hall, 1985), 34.

²⁴ Whitney Chadwick, Women Art and Society second edition, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 66.

Michelangelo, for example, but Whitney Chadwick points out that "... they stop short of exploring women's relationship to the new Renaissance ideals of pictorial representation."²⁵

During the Renaissance, there was a commonly held theory that the special connection between art and female beauty could be represented in a portrait of a beautiful woman. Renaissance women strove to recreate the ideal beauty portrayed by painters and poets of the time period. The most influential book of the time was *Il Cortegiano, or, The Book of the Courtier* (1528) written by the North Italian courtier Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529). Translated into many languages, the book described the ideal beauty of a court lady: naturally graceful, mannerly, clever and prudent.²⁶ The desirable female attributes were written down in an influential treatise by a monk and a lawyer, Agnolo Firenzuola (1493-1548):

...the hair must be long and fair, of a soft yellow turning brown, the skin light and clear, but not pale: the eyes dark brown, large and somewhat vaulted, their sclera shimmering blue. The nose ought not be curved, as aquiline noses do not suit women; the mouth should be small, the lips round, the chin round with a dimple, the neck rounded and fairly long, the Adam's apple not protruding...²⁷

In order to appear more intellectual, women broadened their brows by shaving their hair in front and piling it in the back. Other European courts copied the elaborate fashions of the Italian court. Many Renaissance female portraits have this look. If the women in these portraits all look similar to us it is because they wanted to be remembered as embodying this ideal.²⁸ Foremost of these portrait types is Titian's *la Bella* (**Figure 4**).



Figure 4. Titian. *La Bella*. Ca. 1636
Florence, Palazzo Pitti

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Fine,5.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Fine, 5.

Other paintings that have been singled out include Giorgione's *Laura*, Raphael's *La Fornarina*, and Parmigianio's *Antea*. These paintings have been perceived as generic images of beautiful women rather than specific individuals.²⁹ Idealized portraits of the sixteenth-century increasingly became more sexually charged. Whether they were generic archetypes or courtesans, they represented a type of male erotic fantasy that developed into a thriving business involving a sexual dynamic between the male artistic as creator, the model whose image is improved upon, and the patron who possesses the erotic fantasy of the ideal beauty.³⁰

Dr. Mary Garrard, professor of art history at the American University reminds us that in the writings of Pino (1548), Vasari (1568), Dolce (1557) and Boschini (1660), "colors were described as the body through which the painter was literally able to reproduce life."³¹ Furthermore, she goes on to say that,

The ascription to men of creative artistic powers virtually identical to the creation of human life found philosophical support in the Aristotelian dictum pervasive in Renaissance Italy that human procreation was in fact male-generated... Thus the male artist was presented as the creative shaper of the material model that he turned into art, just as a man was understood to inseminate women physically with his life force.³²

Sofonisba had a daunting task ahead of her as a female artist. How would she represent herself given the conventional representation of women and attitudes toward female artists? As a woman artist, Sofonisba was regarded as a phenomenon of nature. Mary Garrard states that the very existence of the woman artist threatened the myth of masculine artistic creativity, "for if only men possessed the creative spark, how could one explain the phenomenon of the woman artist?"³³

Strategies of defense employed by proponents of the masculine creative myth kept women artists in their place. One way was to explain them as marvels of nature; another was to liken them to other women by comparing their beauty and their virtue. Although men might have been characterized as miracles of nature, or virtuous, the meaning of the term was different for men, referring to heroism, bravery and cultural achievement, rather than chastity, purity and virginity³⁴

Occasionally, writers struggled with women's potential to create. An example is seen in Vasari, who wrote: "If women know so well how to make living men, what marvel is it that those who are also so well able to make them in painting."³⁵ Dr. Fredrika Jacobs, associate

²⁹ Mary Garrard, "Here's Looking at Me" *Renaissance Quarterly*, 47, no. 3 (1994), 568.

³⁰ Garrard, 570.

³¹ Garrard, 570-571.

³² Garrard, 538.

³³ Garrard, 573.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Vasari, in Fredrika H. Jacobs, "Women's Capacity to Create: The Unusual Case of Sofonisba Anguissola" *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1994), 78.

professor of art history at Virginia Commonwealth University asks, “Are we to understand that Anguissola’s ability to ‘make men in painting’ is to be expected given her (or any woman’s) capacity to bear children?”³⁶ Jacobs points out that this is particularly problematic in the case of Anguissola since she had no children and her images were her progeny. “If this is the case,” asks Jacobs, “then why are portraits by Anguissola’s hand the only works of a sixteenth-century woman privileged by this type of praise?”³⁷

Mary Garrard characterizes Vasari’s statement as a “double edged sword” and she states that Vasari implies “...that woman’s art-making is a natural anatomical function – thus less creative an act as man’s cerebral art-making – while at the same time situating Anguissola, at that time conspicuously an unmarried, non-mother, within her sex on the very terms in which she might be judged deficient.”³⁸

While we have no written words by Anguissola’s hand that describe her feelings about gender, she does firmly address the gender situation in a self-portrait, of 1554 (**Figure 5**). She emphasizes her dual representation as a painter and a model with the inscription in the book she holds, which reads, *Sofonisba Anguissola Virgo Seipsam Fecit 1554*. Translated this means: Sofonisba Anguissola Created by the Young Maiden Herself 1554³⁹ Mary Garrard sees this inscription as “...at once an identity tag and a signature...”⁴⁰



Figure 5. Sofonisba Anguissola. Self-portrait. 1554. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum

An unusual self-portrait by Sofonisba has gained recent attention of scholars. The painting in question, *Bernardino Campi Painting Sofonisba Anguissola* (**Figure 6**), has been considered in the feminist context. As discussed, the dilemma of differentiating herself from the role as object of depiction for the male artist to that of the subjective, thinking agent, or artist, was a basic obstacle for the Renaissance woman artist. This painting demonstrates Anguissola was aware she was a role model of feminine achievement. Dr. Whitney Chadwick, Professor of Art History at San Francisco University, asserts that by presenting herself as being painted by her former teacher Sofonisba was perhaps “...the first historical example of the

³⁶ Jacobs, 78.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Garrard, 574.

³⁹ Translated by the author of this paper.

⁴⁰ Garrard, 558.

woman artist articulating the multifaceted relationship between female subjectivity and agency, its positioning within patriarchal structures of knowledge, and the role of women as representation.”⁴¹

Figure 6. Sofonisba Anguissola. *Bernardino Campi*
Painting Sofonisba Anguissola.
Late 1550's. Siena, Pinacoteca



The painting is an example of what Vasari called a “breathing likeness.” There is a dark void from which two figures appear, modeled in warm light. They seem caught in a moment that seems intensified by their penetrating gazes at the viewer. This serves to draw us into their world psychologically. According to Garrard, the presence of Campi doubly distances the unseen Anguissola (the artist) from the painted Anguissola (the model) within the fictive realm because he is depicted as being more real than she is within the portrait.⁴² There is an active and a passive role played out between the two depicted characters: Campi paints, she is painted. This is exemplified by the placement of their hands: his are working and hers are at rest. Garrard examines the relationships within the painting:

In one sense, Campi himself is objectified, for his image is the product of the unseen artist's hand. But since the unseen artist is the model for the depicted painter, the fictive Campi (subject) is empowered while the living painter (object) is diminished in the larger real that expands beyond the picture plane. If subject and object are collapsed here, it is into object, since each of the three figures – Campi, painted Anguissola, and invisible Anguissola – is the object of another's scrutiny. We might well conclude that the painter who contrived this image has willingly relinquished the subject role.⁴³

How could she have deliberately constructed an image that demeaned her own position and undermined her worth as an artist? Before we dismiss Sofonisba as having internalized female inferiority, let us look again. There are clues within the painting. First, the image of

⁴¹ Chadwick, 78.

⁴² Garrard, 560.

⁴³ Garrard, 560.

Anguissola is larger than Campi's, which was fairly rare in pictures that depict artists painting. So, while Campi is depicted as the creative agent in one sense, he is diminished by the size of Anguissola. Second, Anguissola's image is placed higher in the design and is aligned with the central axis that is emphasized by the vertical stacking of the hands and head, which makes her more imposing. Third, Bernardino is seen using a mahlstick to steady his hand. The use of the mahlstick was sometimes associated with being an inferior artist. Fourth, the invisible Anguissola is both artist and subject. The invisible Anguissola is present because both Campi and the painted Anguissola look up to her in the painting. She paints both Campi and herself, while he paints only her.⁴⁴ Perhaps the painting could be seen as Sofonisba's painterly joke. The head of Campi is subtly expressive and painted in her best style, yet her version of his version of herself is blank and rather expressionless and larger than life.⁴⁵

Campi Painting Anguissola can be seen as a double portrait and significant to some because it shows the sitter, who may be regarded as Campi, as actively engaged in activity, rather than passively sitting with some sort of prop like a dog, or a book. This is true to Anguissola's style and this concept of action took sixteenth-century art in a new direction. Some see the painting as an act of homage to Anguissola's former teacher.⁴⁶

Mary Garrard differs in her opinion. There is no known portrait of Anguissola by Campi; therefore, Garrard believes the image on the easel likely represents an image by Anguissola herself. Here Anguissola constructs a deception, the artist Campi playing at painting an image Anguissola has already made. The image of Sofonisba on Campi's easel was not painted from life, and so too was the image of Campi not painted from life. Campi would not have been anywhere around Sofonisba at the date of the painting. The painting can be securely dated to nearly a decade after her education with Campi had ended. After Sofonisba's studies with Campi, he left Cremona and did not return until 1562, by which time Sofonisba had left for Spain. Mary Garrard remarks that it was curious that she would bring him back into the work at all and especially at this time when she did not need his validation.⁴⁷

What could have been her purpose? While some may believe it to be a tribute to her first teacher, Mary Garrard believes Anguissola's purpose was to react to two condescending letters written about her work. Annibale Caro had stated in a letter to Sofonisba's father that, "there is nothing I desire more than an image of the artist herself, so that in a single work I can exhibit two marvels, one the work and the other the artist."⁴⁸ This letter was dated December 23, 1558, a date that is close to the origin of the *Campi Painting Anguissola* double portrait. Another letter written by Francesco Salviati in the early 1550's to Bernardino Campi went like this:

My Magnificent Sir Bernardino,

⁴⁴ Garrard, 562.

⁴⁵ Greer, 181.

⁴⁶ Perlingieri, 49.

⁴⁷ Garrard, 56.

⁴⁸ Jacobs, 74-101.

From the works in front of me which are wonderfully painted by the beautiful Cremonese lady painter, I do understand what a great ability you must have. Moreover, you have acquired renown from your paintings of Milan. From this frame, which we are obliged to confirm, we know that when you were young, you were able to paint your city (Cremona) better than anyone else. Therefore do not think it surprising that I send you a sketch to show you my affection.

With warm regards.....Francesco Salviati, painter.⁴⁹

We can compare another painting by Anguissola for similar content. Dated to about 1556-57, it depicts Giulio Clovio holding a miniature portrait that has been identified as the portrait of the Flemish artist Lavinia Terlincks that Clovio owned and kept with him until his death. Although Clovio may have had an emotional attachment to Terlincks, his dedication to possession of the miniature demonstrates the same kind of double marvel that Caro wrote about.

We would be naïve to believe that Anguissola was apathetic or indifferent about her situation as a woman. Sofonisba and her sisters were educated women of a higher social class than most male artists. There were letters published by literate noble and middleclass women on the subject of women's rights in the 1550's and Anguissola could have read them if she had been so inclined. As an educated, unmarried, aristocratic woman she would have had time to pursue reading. Even if she did not read the letters, they represented the feelings of literate noblewomen in her day. With this in mind we can imagine how she felt. It is plausible to consider the Campi / Anguissola double portrait and the portrait of Giulio Clovio as commentary from a woman artist about the subject of women artists. Garrard considers these two responses to the prevailing attitudes about women artists due to the letters by Salviati and especially Caro. Garrard feels that Anguissola, as an educated woman in a gender conscious and critical age, may have felt negated by the attitudes displayed in the letter by Salviati where he describes her as Campi's product and in the letter by Caro where he refers to her as a marvel of nature. Garrard believes that if this is so, then the double portrait may have been designed to bring attention to the problem of the woman artist.⁵⁰ Garrard states, "The picture's very construction, with its built in contradiction, suggests that she intended to alert a thoughtful viewer to the issues."⁵¹

The way Anguissola portrayed herself in self-portraits demonstrated her perception of her place in society as an educated woman of nobility. She presents herself dressed austere and intellectualized, rather than as women did of similar status who tried to emulate the contemporary paragons of beauty. She dressed for success in a man's world wearing dark, conservative jackets and high collars with no jewelry, comparable to the woman's suit skirt and jacket seen in today's society.⁵² Her austere dress helped her to avoid falling into the "just a woman" trap, while the exaggerated virtuous reputation heaped upon her designated her as a

⁴⁹ Salviati, in Perlingieri, *Anguissola*, 70.

⁵⁰ Garrard, 579.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Garrard, 583.

marvel of womankind, or “not a woman.” The way Anguissola chose to depict herself was more masculine in nature so as to identify with male intellectual creativity, but not so virile as to offend. This mode of depiction can be thought of as “like a man”.⁵³

Because the outward appearances of the virtuous “not a woman” type and the intellectual “like a man” type are similar, they are ambiguous to the viewer. This ambiguity allowed for Anguissola to create dual meanings in her portraits coded for self-expression disguised as proper femininity.⁵⁴ For example, several of her portraits include a spinetta or virginal, instruments often associated with sexuality and the female body (**Figure 7**). It can be assumed that Anguissola used these instruments as a sign she was also proficient in music, as many young, noble women were. The inclusion of a virginal might appeal to Renaissance men as a beautiful young woman juxtaposed with music which could be thought of as admirable purity or erotic accessibility (both tropes that were connected during the Renaissance). Garrard states, “Simultaneously, it might be understood by many women as representing a female who manages her sexuality as competently as she performs upon the musical instrument that symbolizes her total creative potential”⁵⁵



Figure 7. Sofonisba Anguissola. Self-portrait. 1561. Althorp.

Anguissola’s paintings of herself and her sisters with musical instruments, pallets and brushes and books might be well examined for symbolic meanings. Anguissola’s most famous painting, *The Chess Game*, is one such painting (**Figure 8**). Long regarded as a Mannerist masterpiece for its contribution to genre and conversation pieces, the painting can be understood on feminist terms.⁵⁶ In this painting, three of the Anguissola sisters are gathered at a chess table as their nurse watches. The smallest of the girls, Minerva, looks to Europa (the loser (on the right with upheld hand), and gives her a mischievous grin. Europa looks to Lucia in concession that Lucia has won the game. Lucia shares her triumph with the spectator at whom she smiles, who can only be the painter of the picture, Sofonisba.

⁵³ Garrard, 588.

⁵⁴ Garrard, 589.

⁵⁵ Garrard, 596.

⁵⁶ Garrard, 597.

Figure 8. Sofonisba Anguissola, *The Chess Game*
1555. 27 9/16" x 37"
Museum Narodowe, Poznan, Poland



When interpreting the painting, it is important to know that the rules of chess had just undergone changes initiated in Italy in the late fifteenth century and were well established there by 1510. Called the New Chess by chess historians, this revolutionized the game and created its modern form. Among other changes, the queen became the most powerful piece on the board.⁵⁷ The game of chess had long been compared metaphorically with war because of its military and feudal imagery. It is significant then that Anguissola paints her sisters playing this intellectual game.

Are the girls merely playing a game? Could Anguissola be using the game as a metaphor for some other meaning? Mary Garrard points out that the girls both competed with each other in the art of painting and looked to each other as role models and teachers. Each girl within the dynamics of the painting looks to her role model. Europa (who became a painter) looks to Lucia, who has already completed her artistic apprenticeship under Sofonisba. Minerva, who is thought to be about seven years old, looks to Europa, her thought-to-be role model. The order of the gazes tells us something about the inner dynamics of the family. The meaning only becomes complete when we realize that the sequence of gazes leads from Lucia out of the painting to the eldest and most accomplished role model, Sofonisba.⁵⁸

In both *Campi Painting Anguissola* and *The Chess Game*, Anguissola – the invisible Anguissola, or the painter – controls the viewpoint on the subject since she is the only one with the total perspective of the whole scene. The painter in this case not only observes, but interacts in the narrative because she is included through her subject's gazes. The portraits are carefully composed to reveal more to those who know her situation. Therefore, she subtly invites the viewer to share in her paintings and collaborate on their meanings. We might assume from this that the primary audience for these paintings was her family, who knew the whole story; the rest of us are let into their world on their terms.⁵⁹ The painter has been

⁵⁷ Garrard, 600.

⁵⁸ Garrard, 604.

⁵⁹ Garrard, 604.

included as an unseen participant and commentator on the narrative in these paintings. In this sense, they can be viewed as self-images.

So what happened to Sofonisba Anguissola? She became lady-in-waiting to Queen Isabel of Spain and court painter to King Phillip II, as well as their child's governess. She was in a fortunate position and was well off financially. After Queen Isabella died, King Phillip arranged for her to marry a prince from Sicily. After his death, probably around 1579, she decided to return to Italy and, while on the voyage met, and fell in love with the ship's captain. They moved to Palermo, where his family was part of Sicily's nobility. Her Palermo household was said to have been the center of salons and artists gatherings.⁶⁰ She had become famous throughout Europe and the year before she died Sir Anthony Van Dyck traveled to Palermo to visit the ninety-two year old Anguissola. Van Dyck's sketchbook contains a portrait of the elderly Anguissola as well as his notes: "It was a great pleasure for her to have pictures placed in front of her...When I drew her portrait, she gave me several hints: not to get too high or too low so the shadows to her wrinkles would not show too much."⁶¹

Sofonisba Anguissola found herself dealing with an Aristotelian myth of male creativity. In her case, her birth into an upper class family helped open new possibilities because her parents held progressive ideas about education. The compliments bestowed upon Anguissola and her work held dual interpretations, as Mary Garrard remarked they were a "double edged sword."⁶² Remarks about her beauty and virtue helped to designate her as a woman. Remarks of this nature conjured up ideas of women's beauty as it has been currently objectified in art as a sexual possession of men. Remarks about her virtue were not considered to mean heroic as it was with men, but spoke of sexual chastity. All this served to categorize her as "just a woman". When she was labeled a marvel of nature, it classified her as being above the typical woman, a position that could be considered as "not a woman". As a marvel of nature she was considered a phenomenon and therefore not a role model for normal women.

We cannot know for certain how she felt about her situation as a woman artist. However, the visual commentary she produced is compelling in light of observations made by Mary Garrard, Germaine Greer, and Whitney Chadwick. It is clear then that she was aware of her precarious position as a woman artist and that she was setting a new precedent. As the compliments bestowed upon her were said to be a "double edged sword" so too could she execute the sword through the content of her paintings. As exemplified in the *Campi Painting Anguissola* double portrait, she was able to use dual interpretations to her advantage for a silent audience.

Anguissola chose to present herself as a modest young woman of refinement. She capitalized on her virtue and presented herself as a creative intellectual capable of competing with men, or as could be said "like a man". Because the outward appearances of "not woman" and "like man" are similar it was possible for her to imply this content without endangering her

⁶⁰ Garrard, 618.

⁶¹ Garrard, 604.

⁶² Garrard, 574.

career or social status. Her self-portraits reveal this message to modern viewers who now have the advantage of feminist studies. So, too, they probably revealed themselves to a select audience in her realm that knew her well.

While not suggesting that Anguissola was a feminist, it seems clear that she believed her work could compare favorably with male artists, which it did. She was not allowed the training that promising, young, male artists received in apprenticeship, nor was she allowed to study nudes or cadavers. Yet, she was credited with being able to imbue a breathing likeness to her portraits. It was her great artistic gift, her noble birth, hard work and perseverance that brought about her success. Sofonisba Anguissola is credited with developing genre scenes, but also of great importance is her contribution as a role model for other women artists.

Biography

Betsy Fulmer, a native of Arkadelphia, graduated from Ouachita Baptist University with a major in art. She received her Master of Science in Education with a concentration in art from Henderson State University. She has continued her postgraduate studies in art history at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. She is currently enrolled in Ph.D. coursework at Union Institute and University in Cincinnati, Ohio. She is pursuing interdisciplinary studies in art history and southern studies of the United States.