Plautilla Nelli & Lavinia Fontana: Hidden Gems of the Italian Renaissance

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Abstract

Women of the Italian Renaissance faced extreme adversity and oppression from the structural sexism that limited their space to the domestic sphere. The female role was limited in the arts to menial tasks such as grinding paints, painting backgrounds and preparing canvases. Religion became the main pathway into the arts for women, which can be seen in the labor and accomplishments of Dominican Sister Plautilla Nelli. Not only did she teach herself how to paint, but she likely also taught her religious sisters. This act was critical to her success as she was able to form a workshop through which the nuns had a high output, and increased the convent’s revenue. Nelli completely removed men from the equation of art production, using them as conduits to ship works to their patrons. She innovated the field through her extreme organization, and her financial and entrepreneurial skills. Nelli paved the way for more female artists to rise to prominence through her independence and intellect. Lavinia Fontana’s success provides an alternative way for cinquecento women to rise to greatness. Through the assistance of her father, Fontana became a skilled artist whose work would be internationally known. To avoid the limitations of society, she married a man who helped her achieve her success and potential. After continued success, Fontana proved that there was space in the art world for more women like herself.

Key Words: Art History, Renaissance, Italy, Plautilla Nelli, Lavinia Fontana, Feminism
The Renaissance period is not known for its professional female artists as they were often ignored in the male-dominated field. Art history education is often completed with little recognition of women in the cinquecento as attention is unquestioningly given to their male peers. Women were consistently disadvantaged in their efforts to receive formal artistic training as such expenses were usually reserved for men. The lack of known female artists is not due to an absence, rather it is caused by the lack of continuity in the recording of history.\(^1\) It is easy to overlook the impactful roles of women artists as there are no woman-made equivalents to commissions like the Sistine Chapel. Although male artists may have been awarded attention grabbing commissions, men lacked the consistency of income that women garnered.\(^2\) Although not explicitly credited, European women during the Renaissance and Baroque periods assisted behind the scenes by painting backgrounds, grinding paints and preparing canvases.\(^3\) Female hands may have painted the work, but the signature is that of the male artist present, indicating the woman’s status as a nameless collaborator instead of an artist. Religious commissions and convent life served as perfect opportunities for women to join the male-dominated artistic sphere and have their talents fully recognized. Women worked to achieve financially lucrative commissions, while men fixated on notoriety. Two primary examples of female pioneers in the Italian Renaissance are Plautilla Nelli and Lavinia Fontana.

I began my research through an analysis of feminist philosophers like Linda Nochlin and Cynthia Freeland who questioned the commonly accepted ideas of women in the arts. Although they did not specifically mention Nelli or Fontana, they discussed the many barriers faced by

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\(^1\) Jordana Pomeroy, “Italian Women Artists from Renaissance to Baroque,” In Italian Women Artists: From Renaissance to Baroque, edited by Dorian Comerlati, 22.


women in their paths to becoming recognized artists. The Italian Renaissance contained over a dozen accomplished female artists, but I chose Nelli and Fontana due to their perseverance and shared religious tenacity. Instead of simply analyzing the works produced by each artist, I tried to take an approach of expanded research, and question-filled analyses. While drawing inspiration from Linda Nochlin’s 1974 essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, I studied both artists and their individual barriers to success. I was urged on through her statement,

But in actuality, as we all know, things as they are and as they have been, in the arts as in a hundred other areas, are stultifying, oppressive, and discouraging to all those, women among them, who did not have the good fortune to be born white, preferably middle class, and above all, male. The fault lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education.⁴

Women’s absence in the arts is not due to a lack of effort, rather it is an effect of the structural sexism and misogyny that is built into society. This imbued my research with an investigative quality as I worked to uncover how Nelli and Fontana maneuvered their ways to the height of Italian Renaissance artists. Nochlin focused on the main issue with gender inequality, causing readers to address their own internalized conceptions of greatness. From here, I was organically led to my main focus of Christianity and religious iconography to usher in a wave of female success. Religious scenes allowed for emotional expression in a way that was represed from the arts as overtly-feminine or substanceless. Through an embrace of such commissions, themes like motherly joy, familial love, and women supporting women became apparent.

Plautilla Nelli

At fourteen, Plautilla Nelli took her vows at the convent of Santa Caterina di Siena in Florence. As a Dominican nun, she taught herself how to paint and eventually gained commissions and contributed to the convent’s income. She acquired a large cache of drawings by Fra Bartolomeo that provided inspiration and, more importantly, instruction for the learning of line, shade, etc., illustrated by the fact that some of her works clearly imitate that artist’s style. This unconventional training continued the teaching of other nuns in the convent to paint so that together they became an assembly line based commercial painting workshop.

Although Nelli and her religious sister’s works were popular and in high demand, very few remain to speak of the artistic stylings of the convent. An oil on panel painting by Nelli from 1550 has survived, rendering Saint Catherine with a Lily (figure 1). Saint Catherine was the patron of Nelli’s convent, so she is the focus in a number of her surviving works. The saint is depicted with a fine oval halo over her downturned head, with her eyes cast down upon her crucifix. Tears rolled down her face with a deep sadness that inspired the daily devotions to the eternal sacrifice of Christ. Nelli not only is able to make a profit, but she is also provided a platform from which she can convey her love, warmth and devotion to Christ and the Creator. The lilies included refer to the Virgin Mary, channeling her chastity and purity into the iconography of Saint Catherine. Her stigmata are clearly shown in the foreground of the scene, with her hands crossed and gently splayed upon her chest, with the other clasping the crucifix. As the ultimate image of devotion, St. Catherine was admired for her often extreme bouts of holy

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fasting.⁶ Although the condition led to her early death at 33, she was believed to have been motivated by her religious devotion.

The rose tones that appear on her lips and cheeks are signatures of Nelli’s hand, as well as the structured approach to drapery found in the sister’s habit. The saint’s plain robes are painted with strong vertical and diagonal lines; eyes follow the motion into the golden glimpse of the heavens, aligning the saint with an earthly divinity. Nelli continues with the approach in her painting of *Saint Catherine in Prayer* (figure 2); shades of pink are used to lighten the scene, and allude to the chaste devotion that the sisters coveted. Remaining consistent with her color use, the saint’s face is highlighted in whites and pinks which are mirrored in the sunset and heavens shining through the dark clouds. The same tones appear in her tightly clasped hands, and in the pronounced stigmata that faces viewers.

Renaissance art historian Caroline Murphy illuminates the modernization of Nelli’s art and methods as she broke the mold of the nun as a producer of *Nonnenarbeiten* or art that loses its value outside of the specific convent where the sisters would understand and appreciate the individual, niche allusions in the iconography.⁷ Producing *Nonnenarbeiten* art garnered spiritual and sentimental worth rather than artistic or monetary value.⁸ Plautilla Nelli veered far from this standard as she created intricate religious works that garnered commissions, allowing her to contribute greatly to the income of the convent. The nun’s financial success was noted in the convent’s ledger, providing a reliable source for her output and their prices. The account books show a shift in revenue beginning on March 17, 1558 with the addition of sixty-three lire that was paid to Nelli for the commission of a painting of Santa Lucia for the prior of the church of

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⁶ “Saint Catherine in Prayer.” Advancing Women's Arts. advancingwomenartists.org/artists/plautilla-nelli/saint-catherine-in-prayer
⁷ Caroline Murphy, “The Economics of the Woman Artist,” p. 24.
⁸ Caroline Murphy, “The Economics of the Woman Artist,” p. 24.
San Bonifatio. Her growth as an artist can be seen through the gradual addition of more commissions, and larger payments.

Giorgio Vasari’s 1568 publication of the Lives of the Artists recognizes Nelli as a commercially successful and desired artist. Vasari notes, “she would have done marvelous things if she had enjoyed, as men do, opportunities for studying, and devoting herself to drawing and representing living and natural objects.” This unusually self-aware passage conveys the impact of the oppression of women in artistic production of the time. He does not “discredit their abilities, or blame their supposed deficiencies of intelligence or physical constitution,” instead he establishes a foundation that grounds women into the world of the arts. The 2008 translation of Vasari’s critical text distances itself from negative or misogynistic perceptions found in Gaston di C. de Vere’s translation. Vasari illustrates the scope of Nelli’s recognition as he notes that she was sending large scale works abroad, proving that her paintings were widely recognized outside of Florence. In Vasari’s attention to Nelli’s patrons, he points out a number of women who have commissioned works, signaling the entrance of female patrons into the art market. “The wife of the Spaniard, Signor Mondragone, has a large picture of the Annunciation, and Madonna Marietta de’Fedini has another like it.” Little further information has been recovered about these two female patrons, but the acknowledgement of their presence is a proto-feminist victory.

Suor Plautilla Nelli became a major contributor to the convent’s income as demand for her art continued to increase, and she earned 282 lire in a single year. The notes in the convent’s

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9 Caroline Murphy, “The Economics of the Woman Artist,” p. 24.
10 Caroline Murphy, “The Economics of the Woman Artist,” p. 24.
15 Caroline Murphy, “The Economics of the Woman Artist,” 24.
ledger underwent yet another shift, however, this was one of plurality. Nelli’s earnings had previously been referred to as those of the painter, or *depintora* until it suddenly switches to the pluralized form, le depintore.\(^{16}\) This asserts that more sisters were contributing to Nelli’s sold paintings, documenting the assembly-line nature of the workshop that increased the convent’s revenues.\(^{17}\) Nelli rose in rank among the sisters at the convent and was eventually elected Prioress in 1564; art historian Caroline Murphy asserts that “such positions were only granted to the sisters with the greatest practical and negotiation skills, who were unafraid to broker prices, and were adept in dealing with those who facilitated the transports of goods in and out of the convent.”\(^{18}\) Nelli was a prominent woman in the Renaissance arts as she managed to gain public respect for her artistic talent. Nelli and her sisters worked collectively to paint with speed and precision, enabling them to have a high output.

The efforts of Suor Plautilla Nelli and the Dominican sisters of Santa Caterina di Siena are all the more impressive through their recognized nearly total independence from men, outside of the father or priest who acted as their confessor and the banker Antonio Salvati.\(^{19}\) As the women were cloistered nuns, they could only do so much from inside the convent in Florence, so men were necessary only as what Murphy labels “conduits” in aiding buyers acquiring the nuns’ works.\(^{20}\) The near total female domination of the creation and marketing of these pieces signifies a shift in the expectations of women as painters and breadwinners. Although her path to success was not easy, Nelli managed to educate herself, earn an income, and then become a leader of the convent and within the art world.

\(^{16}\) Caroline Murphy, “The Economics of the Woman Artist,” 24.
\(^{17}\) Caroline Murphy, “The Economics of the Woman Artist,” 24.
\(^{18}\) Caroline Murphy, “The Economics of the Woman Artist,” 24.
\(^{19}\) Caroline Murphy, “The Economics of the Woman Artist,” 24.
\(^{20}\) Caroline Murphy, “The Economics of the Woman Artist,” 25.
Lavinia Fontana

During the Renaissance and Baroque periods, training women in the fine arts was typically an intimate act of bonding between fathers and daughters, exemplified by Lavinia Fontana (1552-1614) and her father Prospero Fontana. As a painter of portraits, he directed his daughter to follow the same stylistic direction. Prospero taught Lavinia out of economic necessity as they needed the financial support for the rest of their family. The Fontana family’s location in Bologna, a busy and artistically prevalent city, positioned her for success as she was able to receive training from the Baroque artist, Ludovico Carracci. Her impressive talent is further cemented in history as she was the first woman to attend l’Accademia Nazionale di San Luca in Rome. As she matured, a concern over maintaining her integrity in the public eye arose.

A young woman in a profession that shares nudity, erotic thought, and controversial approaches was sure to receive judgement if her purity was not guaranteed through a male superior. Women could not be in the presence of nude models or sex workers, so the ability to paint such forms was limited. The education that women received was narrow and censored as they were limited to painting traditional “female topics.” Portraiture and religious iconography became the dominant subject matter for female artists, allowing them to acquire consistent commissions. Religious commissions enabled women to work as individuals, separately from their fathers or husbands. Taught to paint by a father or other male superior, women mimicked the styles they learned without developing one of their own; that is, until they received outside

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commissions as these allowed them to progress their styles and modes of painting. Religion served as a vehicle for female artistic freedom as human forms and domestic scenes gained a widely held reverence.

The two common ways for women to gain momentum as artists were by joining a convent, or as a court painter. With an acute awareness of the limitations placed on single women, Prospero quickly arranged his daughter’s marriage. Prospero Fontana strategically selected a man who would not force her to move from her family home in Bologna and would allow her to progress in her career as an artist. In 1577, Prospero selected Gian Paolo Zappi; he was the son of Severo Zappi, a minor nobleman of the nearby town Imola. Severo Zappi consented to the marriage, and was particularly thrilled with the match due to Lavinia’s predicted earning potential. Gian Paolo’s relation to the neighboring town ensured that he would maintain ties in the area, while allowing Lavinia’s income to remain in Prospero’s home. He was also chosen as Prospero had previously trained him in painting, allowing Zappi to eventually help Fontana in the creation of her paintings, assisting in the painting of backgrounds, and the time-consuming details of drapery. Zappi would also go on to be a caring father and teacher to his and Lavinia’s eleven children, allowing her to maintain her successful career. Although he was not as skilled in the arts, he was a gifted speaker which enabled him to act as Lavinia’s agent.

Reproduction was more than a cooperative act between parents, it was a metaphor for the creation of images. Female power was limited and needed the support and potency of male ideas, leading to the concept of reproduction as a work of art formed from female ideas and male physicality. These beliefs were wildly popular as they appeared in mainstream literary works by

24 Caroline Murphy, “The Economics of the Woman Artist,” 26.
theorists like Thomas Aquinas and Plato. Although written centuries prior to Nelli and Fontana, the works shaped the beliefs of the educated and aristocratic members of society. Thirteenth century Italian philosopher Thomas Aquinas wrote that “In the arts the inferior art gives disposition to the matter to which the higher art gives form... the generative power of the female prepares this matter, which is then shaped by the active power of the male.” Female agency is lessened to a faint impulse as the emphasis is on the taming of produced ideas and shaping them into one of both male and female design. Similar concepts were expressed earlier by Plato in his Symposium, as “those who are pregnant in body go to midwives and beget children, while those “pregnant in soul” conceive and bear that which is proper to the soul.” The power is given to the male artist, while women are the producers of general concepts/matter that is shaped by men. The polarization of ideas and creation is based on the general belief in the inferiority of women; they were capable of providing brilliant ideas, but they were incapable of bringing them into fruition independently. The role of a man in Lavinia’s life and career may somewhat diminish her efforts, but it shows an example of how a woman could manipulate a male-dominated organization. This is furthered through the fact that Lavinia provided for her and Zappi’s eleven children while continuing to entirely support her aging parents.

Severo Zappi was crucial to Fontana's success as he helped her gain her first independent public commission in 1584 for the altarpiece of the chapel in Imola's Palazzo Comunale. The "Assumption of the Virgin with Saint Cassiano and Saint Peter Chrysologus" (Figure 3) is a glimpse into Lavinia’s style, undisturbed by the preferences of a patron. With the focus on a dominant central figure of the Virgin Mary floating in an ovular orb of gold light. She divided the composition into two sections, separated by clouds that progress upwards into the heavens.

27 Fredrika Jacobs, “(Pro)creativity,” 33.
28 Fredrika Jacobs, “(Pro)creativity,” 189.
The selection board for the chapel did not determine her price or pay her until after this was created, and it is this detail that shows us that this was still the beginning of her career.

Women could not sell their own art in markets, so all sales and promotions needed to be conducted in private, making familial networking and word of mouth essential. Lavinia Fontana’s career was spurred to greatness through the assistance of her father, and their ability to strategize an effective marketing practice. When she was twenty-five and at the start of her career, Lavinia and her father utilized a method of giving works away as gifts, or selling them at extremely low prices to influential individuals. They hoped that word would eventually spread, and that those receiving these paintings would return to purchase more, establishing Lavinia as a respected artist whose art would then increase in value and demand. She became popular with the Bolognese patriciate, particularly among the women members of the Peppoli, Gozzadini, Bargellini, and Boncompagni families.29

This practice did not last beyond the first decade of her career because her diplomacy was taken advantage of as sketches and paintings were solicited with no intention of payment. One such individual was Spanish clergyman Alfonso Ciacón; in 1579, he received three paintings from Lavinia for likely little to no money in payment. He sought her help in the completion of his collection of Bolognese uomini famosi, or famous men who he prized due to their scholarship.30 He continued on to solicit another portrait for the collection, as well as a self-portrait of Lavinia.31 This is where he claimed her financial return would come from as he promised that he would hang it in his collection alongside one of Sofonisba Anguissola, another prominent female Renaissance artist. The compensation would come through his intention to

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30 Caroline Murphy, “The Economics of the Woman Artist,” 26.
31 Caroline Murphy, “The Economics of the Woman Artist,” 26.
make prints of the self-portrait, which would then act as publicity for the artists. Unfortunately, Ciacón most likely never fulfilled in providing any substantial compensation for the many laborious paintings in his collection.

Although she was the hand behind many portraits of prominent men and women, she created very few of herself. Fontana’s 1579 *Self-Portrait in the Studiolo* is a strategically curated painting of an academic and virtuous woman (figure 4). Instead of presenting herself in her workshop, she is seated in her study at a desk. She is elegantly dressed, and although they have worn away, her wedding rings once adorned her left hand. A large cross rests on her chest as it was a gift from Alfonso Ciacón who patronized this work as well. It hangs from a pearl necklace, together alluding to her strong faith and virtuous qualities. Within the oil on copper *tondo* painting, she forms a triangular space reminiscent of classical rules of composition, which is furthered through her defined profile. Fontana’s gaze confidently invites viewers in to survey her studies, and her collection of plaster casts that fill the space. The casts are classical examples from which she would develop new artistic and intellectual concepts. Not only do they reflect her time spent studying such casts in Rome, but they also convey the importance of a classical foundation for the expansion of her art.

Beyond her high demand for portraiture, she was a skilled painter of religious iconography. Religious commissions brought with them a unique freedom as the divine artist was allowed to take creative liberties that would not be accepted in a private commission. Lavinia painted multiple devotional representations of the Holy Family, starting in 1575 with the Holy Family of Dresden. Each work shows growth and an evolution of style as she matures and becomes comfortable in her position as a revered artist. Fontana was commissioned to paint her

first public altarpiece in 1584 at the age of thirty-two, representing her full acceptance as a professional artist, valued for a style outside of that passed on by her father. A little over half a century later, Elisabetta Sirani would achieve wider acceptance and notoriety due to the path created by Lavinia Fontana’s prosperous career.

Women were required to ignore their passions and desires in the creation of art as they catered to the needs of the general public in hopes of gaining financial stability. Motherly love and warmth were unacceptable topics on their own, so in order to create works with such emotion, women turned towards depictions of the Virgin and Christ Child. Through a continuation of the fifteenth century *sacra conversazione* theme, Lavinia Fontana was able to allude to her emotions and struggles as a mother. The Holy Family proved to be valuable as it allowed for an artist to focus on largely static imagery that changes only in style and direction. The theme of blissful motherhood is often disregarded as mundane and unimportant, but when applied to the Madonna and Christ Child, it is widely respected.

The Holy Family took on a more intimate value for Fontana as it allowed her to express her feelings of motherhood, loss and intimacy. Fontana gave birth to eleven children between 1578 and 1595, yet only four managed to survive into adulthood. The loss she experienced is often excluded from history and analyses, but it is important to the understanding of her paintings. Art historian Liana Cheney focuses specifically on the scholarship of Lavinia Fontana, so a major facet of her study involves this sacred family. Cheney notes that the artist began to experiment with composition through the arrangement of figures in diagonal planes, and differing adjustments in location to show personal interaction. There is also a clear move away from the High Renaissance use of triangular compositions towards a more natural treatment of

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the space that is reminiscent of Baroque stylings. The Boston *Holy Family* (Figure 5) conveys a clear contemplation of the life of the Christ child through the funerary canopy behind the figures. Although not unique to this specific painting, the crib alludes to the child’s death through the likeness to a sacrificial altar. The way that the child’s body is lifted is interpreted by Liana Cheney as a gesture of blessing that conveys the redemption and salvation that can only be achieved through Christ’s resurrection.

The uplifted child is the focal point of the painting as diagonal lines are used once again to divide the scene into two parts. The left side of the painting contains the standing figure of St. Francis as he holds a crucifix and exposes his wounds of the stigmata on his palms. In front of him is St. Margaret as she kneels before the child with her attribute of the dragon’s head by her feet. This inclusion adds an extra dimension to Fontana’s piece as it refers to St. Margaret’s imprisonment due to her desire to remain a Christian virgin. Satan appeared to her in the form of a dragon and devoured her, yet through her prayer and a cross gripped in her hand, St. Margaret was able to burst out of the beast’s stomach. She gazes lovingly at the child, with her focus on his movement out of the crib alluding to his sacrifice of life and eventual resurrection. With her eyes downcast and her arms crossed in front of her, Fontana alludes to Margaret’s chastity and devotion to Jesus. Cheney points out that the virginal saint’s presence may have a healing effect, specifically toward controlling blood loss. This detail is a parallel to St. Francis whose pictured stigmatas are believed to have similar apothecarian effects.

The baby’s bed serves to “unite the two realms in the painting - natural and divine.”

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connecting it to the drapery seen in the background. Lavinia’s drapery gathered commissions as her “sophisticated colors and her ability to paint in detail their fine clothes and jewelry” pleased wealthy Bolognese families.\textsuperscript{42} This forms an interesting dialogue with the earlier works of Plautilla Nelli as Fontana’s drapery is fluid and full of vibrant detail, contrasting the intentionally structured saint’s habit. The table beneath the cot also supports a reading of it as an altar upon which the child was placed for his ultimate sacrifice.\textsuperscript{43} The positioning foreshadows Christ’s death while alluding to the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Cheney refers to this placement as an “axial movement that dramatizes” the positioning of the child in the center of the work.\textsuperscript{44} To the right is the Holy Family joined together in an intimate grouping that is reminiscent of a father watching adoringly over his wife and child. Mary holds Christ and raises him up in a fluid motion that shows the intention of placing him in the crib, while also allowing for a blessing. The child’s hand is raised with two fingers loosely extended upwards in the sign of the cross, blessing the praying St. Margaret. St. Joseph stands protectively behind Mary and Jesus, watching the scene unfold in front of him. The painting is unique through its separation of St. Francis and St. Margaret, but Lavinia made the crib a pivotal symbol for the narrative of Christ and the allusions to his sacrifice and purity.\textsuperscript{45} The presence of Saint Margaret and Saint Francis convey their importance to the holy trio, especially through their prized placement and detail.

Through the interpretation of the crib as a symbol of birth and death, the work takes on new meaning that perhaps underscores Fontana’s desire to voice her grief. St. Margaret’s presence has a deeper meaning when considering Fontana’s struggle with infant mortality. After bursting from the dragon’s stomach, the saint became the patron of pregnant women or those in distress.

\textsuperscript{44} Liana Cheney, “Lavinia Fontana, Boston \textit{Holy Family},” 13.
labor. In the year that this work was painted, Fontana carried two children who unfortunately
died not long after their births. The artist related to Mary as both a mother and a woman
mourning the significant loss of her child. This knowledge of the artist’s personal struggles adds
to the painting’s importance as it is a work to commemorate shared feelings of loss and grief.

Fontana moved her family to Rome in 1604 to complete commissions for Pope Paul V
(former Cardinal Camillo Borghese).\(^{46}\) Camillo became her patron and friend, and eventually the
godfather to her son Severo in 1592. While there, Lavinia received impressive support from male
patrons including Cardinals Ascoli and d’Este. One of her most impressive commissions was by
Pope Clement VIII; he wanted her to paint portraits of the Persian ambassador to Rome.\(^{47}\)
Although absent, a portrait of the king of Persia was also commissioned. Giulio Mancini’s
writings has preserved some of the details about this encounter, confiding that the Persian
ambassador became infatuated with Lavinia who was at the time a married mother of four. He
was incredibly impressed with her as he claimed that through “the naturalism of her brushwork
she could bring to life that which had only been described to her.”\(^{48}\) The complement was
eclipsed as he argued that she was so skilled at painting due to her own physical beauty.\(^{49}\)
Although he objectified her for her looks, Lavinia managed to make international connections
that spread the impact of her artistic legacy.

Fontana enjoyed the success of her religious works, but she eventually began toying with
the theme of mythology. The works focused on topics that were considered taboo for women,
including the nude female figures seen in her Minervas and Venuses that further developed the
style of Renaissance paintings.\(^{50}\) Fontana may have been the first female artist of the sixteenth

\(^{46}\) Life Stories of Women Artists, 1550-1800, 79.
\(^{47}\) Life Stories of Women Artists, 1550-1800, 79.
\(^{48}\) Life Stories of Women Artists, 1550-1800, 79.
\(^{49}\) Life Stories of Women Artists, 1550-1800, 79.
\(^{50}\) Liana Cheney, “Lavinia Fontana’s Nude Minervas,” 30.
century to study and paint the nude female body as seen in her 1613 painting, *Minerva Dressing* from the Galleria Borghese.\(^{51}\) She managed to find a loophole through societal constraints by choosing to paint nudity as an allegory instead of as eroticism. Although seemingly sensual, the painting speaks of peace and love. Minerva is also known as the Greek goddess Pallas Athena, goddess of war, peace, wisdom and the arts.

Fontana includes Minerva's attributes like the olive branch, an owl, military attire, a gorget, helmet, shield and lance, but her choice to leave the goddess nude makes the piece significant and unusual. With a composition that includes both the indoor and exterior setting, Fontana creates a linear painting that is dependent on rectangular divisions.\(^{52}\) This can be seen beginning on the left with the light-catching green and gold curtain that fill the first rectangle. On the table, a luxurious garment is handled by the goddess. The second rectangular section is in the center, containing the nude figure of Minerva, with her weight on her right leg, her body turned away with only her head turned back toward the viewer. A gilded cuirass lays at her feet as she handles her royal attire. In the third rectangle is Cupid who entertains himself with the plume of her helmet. Above him is an owl that is framed by olive branches as the bird peers in with a sort of hyper-vigilance. The owl is representative of one of Minerva’s other forms that is referred to as the *Athene noctua*.\(^{53}\) Since she is nude and disarmed, Minerva and Cupid move from war and erotic themes to Platonic love and peace.

Minerva’s helmet has been removed and replaced by a string of pearls emulating Venus as the Goddess of love. A disarmed Minerva personifies a reconciliation between "concord, love and peace through wisdom and prudence."\(^{54}\) Fontana did not depict the usual Pallas Athena as the

\(^{52}\) Liana Cheney, “Lavinia Fontana’s Nude Minervas,” 32.
\(^{54}\) Liana Cheney, “Lavinia Fontana’s Nude Minervas,” 35.
goddess of War, but instead as Minerva Pacifica, a bringer of peace and prudence. Liana Cheney astutely notes that “her paintings evoke the sentiment and concur with the moralistic attitude of the Counter-Reformation, as she depicted a nude Minerva, a virgin goddess, who, aware of her beauty as it is displayed for the viewer, prefers to remain pure and chaste.”55 The bold choice to explore mythology in such a time as a woman paid off as she was able to forge a new understanding of Minerva as a goddess of love and wisdom in the Renaissance arts.

Conclusion

Dr. Jordana Pomeray, eloquently questions and examines the process of gaining recognition as a female artist in the sixteenth century: “Did women painters have to work twice as hard as their male counterparts to succeed? To survive in a system inherently not in their favor, women artists of early modern Italy had to demonstrate that they had at least the same degree of talent as men, even while operating within a much smaller and guarded arena.”56 The ability to make an impact on the arts as a woman was nearly impossible during the Renaissance period. Religion proved to be the central force that unified women in the arts as churches, chapels, the papacy and individual clergymen were constant sources of commission for female creators.

Plautilla Nelli was able to use the nuns in her convent to create a commercial enterprise of religious works that would go on to influence other convents throughout Italy. Nelli used religion and the arts to progress her sense of self, and impact future female artists. Her story is even more impressive because she was entirely self-taught. Through her access to the convent’s collection of donated paintings and sketches, she was able to obtain an education and master the

art of depicting religious iconography. The convent enabled her to earn an income and to organize the buying and selling of her works. This involved gaining commissions, running the workshop of sisters, and organizing male conduits to aid in acquisitions. She developed a business model that created and sold numerous works, significantly increasing her convent’s revenue and setting precedence for other convents to follow.

Religion provided Lavinia Fontana with a format in which she could express her emotions as a woman, while continuing to profit through commissions. Since women were not allowed to market their art as aggressively as men, Lavinia sought a creative way around the issue with her father by utilizing sales and promotions as well as by giving works away as gifts. She acquired notoriety as her art was gifted and placed into the private collections of wealthy, high-status individuals. Although the idea of giving away a labor intensive and detail-filled painting is painful to consider, it benefitted the artist as word of mouth and familial networking were the main sources through which women could reach the art market. She managed to win highly competitive commissions over her male counterparts. Fontana lived an unconventional life as she was not only an accomplished artist, but she also was a mother of eleven who experienced severe loss, yet overcame it in her efforts to continue making art.

In an effort to continue this research, I would like to conduct research in Bologna’s University library, as well as the Art and History Library at San Giorgio in Poggiale. An interesting expansion of this research would include a thorough analysis of the letters exchanged between the artists and their patrons. The study hinges on the analysis of the original Italian as each translation shifts the meaning through the subjective nature of language. The personal journals and writings of Nelli and Fontana would also be excellent sources for an expansion on their renaissance acts of feminism. As Fontana was quite popular among the women members of
the Peppoli, Gozzadini, Bargellini, and Boncompagni families, these connections should also be expanded upon.\(^{57}\) As such a study would be expansive and time consuming, I hope to further it in my future graduate studies.

Over the course of my research I encountered some difficulties with allocating primary sources that spoke of the output, themes and general creations of Nelli and Fontana. I worked to remain consistent with Linda Nochlin’s philosophy through a questioning analysis of gender and privilege. As she states,

> The total situation of art making, both in terms of the development of the art maker and in the nature and quality of the work of art itself, occur in a social situation, are integral elements of this social structure, and are mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions.\(^{58}\)

The privilege of successfully making art is often understated, particularly when relating to women and the social constraints placed upon them. As a young girl cloistered in a Dominican convent, Plautilla Nelli managed not only to educate herself, but her sisters as well. Her works inherit divinity through the nun’s vows of solemnity, as well as through her strength as an adviser. She was an innovator both technically and entrepreneurially as she completely removed men from the equation of creating and selling art. Nelli is one of Nochlin’s great women artists as she forged a path forward through sisterhood and religious unity. Her struggle is crucial to the understanding of her work as well as her various breakthroughs. The same follows for Lavinia Fontana as she was a woman of the sixteenth century, emboldened by her talents and religious devotion.

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\(^{57}\) Fredrika Jacobs, “(Pro)creativity,” *Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa: Women Artists and the Language of Art History and Criticism*, 42.

\(^{58}\) Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists,” 11.
Images:

Figure 1: Plautilla Nelli, *Saint Catherine with a Lily*. Oil on wood panel (1550).

Figure 2: Plautilla Nelli, *Saint Catherine in Prayer*. Oil on wood panel. Date unknown.
Figure 3: Lavinia Fontana, *Assumption of the Virgin*. Oil on canvas, 1583.

Figure 4: Lavinia Fontana, *Self-portrait in the Studiolo*. Oil on canvas, 1579.
Figure 5: Lavinia Fontana, *Holy Family* (1578) Oil on canvas. Private collection, Boston.

Figure 6: Lavinia Fontana, *Minerva Dressing* (1613), oil on canvas, Galleria Borghese, Rome.
Works Cited:


“Saint Catherine in Prayer.” Advancing Women's Arts. advancingwomenartists.org/artists/plautilla-nelli/saint-catherine-in-prayer


