

Dove sono le donne artisti?...and Other Questions Regarding Revisionist Art History and Italian Women

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Not unlike Linda Nochlin's pivotal essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" of 1970, this contribution is also an analysis that poses more questions and possible theories than definitive answers (Nochlin, 1988, 147-158). The following discussion of differences between the art historical and museum climates of the United States and Italy, with specific attention paid to the study and exhibition of works by women artists of the Italian Renaissance and Baroque periods as well as feminist-inspired research, acknowledges the limitations from which the original idea stemmed. Taking undergraduate-level students to three Italian cities in one week is by no means an exhaustive treatment of our studied subject. However, this essay is written with those students' experiences in mind, to perhaps more accurately assess the novice traveler's perceptions of seeking out the works of a particular class of artists amidst the vast amount of art shown in Italian exhibition spaces.

Students, faculty and friends of Brenau University of Gainesville, Georgia, embarked on a trip to Italy during their so-called Spring Break in the first week of March, 2004. A significant number of these travelers had never been to the country, much less Europe, so they were naturally excited to visit the famous sights of Rome, Florence and Bologna. A smaller fraction of the group of thirty-five was more uniquely prepared than the rest: these students had been studying the art of Italian women in a Special Topics in Art History class for eight weeks prior to the trip. Course content included women as art makers and as art subjects in the Renaissance and Baroque eras, with substantial focus

given to the works of artists Sofonisba Anguissola, Lavinia Fontana, Giovanna Garzoni, Artemisia Gentileschi, Barbara Longhi, Properzia de Rossi and Elisabetta Sirani.¹ We closely examined the biographies and careers of these groundbreaking, professional women artists of the Western world. We made careful notes on respective Italian museum collection holdings, and we left for our trip with grand expectations to view works of art that were so celebrated in English language textbooks, journals and articles. The results of our forays in search of ‘the women’ were both exhilarating and disappointing for the same reason: it is very difficult to locate them, and if and when they are located, the seeker must bring their own fanfare.

A number of explanations for this challenge were supplied well before embarking upon the physical search. Named women artists of the preceding historical periods are very few in number, and even though their ranks swelled in the Renaissance and Baroque eras thanks in large part to the uniquely progressive attitudes towards the education of upper-class women, there is but a handful who lived long enough and were productive enough to leave behind a substantial body of work. The historical rarity of these women artists is compounded by history’s treatment and recognition of them: they have been forgotten, overlooked, downplayed - and because of societal restrictions on their education, subject matter and financial freedoms – they have been undervalued. In the last thirty years, research, restoration and conservation efforts to correct this problem have been significant, if not arduous.

¹ Please see the addendum of working bibliography sources for the course.

Present-day art historical scholarship continually strives to correct serious misattributions of women artists' works to their more visible male contemporaries.² With the establishment of ever-mounting information on (and the ever-growing renown of) these artists, researchers are now faced with an additional, reversed problem of connoisseurship: newly emerging works of art transferring from private ownership to more public collections may arrive as wrongly attributed to women artists.³ Numerous pieces which have been finally, properly attributed to their female authors may have sustained physical damage while they lingered in improper storage facilities or hung neglected in less-than-ideal conditions. Current attempts to restore such works remain expensive and time-consuming, therefore requiring removal from public view while they either await or undergo restoration. Some paintings and drawings remain too fragile and beyond the scope of proper repair; they too rest in the dark recesses of collection storage units and may only receive attention from the inquirer who must make special arrangements with an institution to view an object for a brief period of time. Finally, there remain the women artists' works in less-frequented Italian churches. Sometimes properly identified, labeled and on display in the settings for which they were perhaps originally designed, these darkening and sometimes damaged paintings have yet to

² And scholars continue to disagree over attributions, particularly in the case of artists whose work is understood to be uneven in quality, such as that of Elisabetta Sirani (1638-1665), a woman who was known to create pictures with record speed, which may have aided in her moneymaking capacities, but may not have resulted in stylistic consistency.

³ A case in point: the Brenau University Permanent Art Collection received a 17th century oil painting of the Madonna, Child and an Angel from Dr. and Mrs. Roy A. Varner in 2001. A plaque on the lower frame reads: *Elisabetta Sirani (1638-1665), Madonna, Child and Saint*. My research of this painting – which included consultations with scholars Babette Bohn of the United States, Sir Denis Mahon of England and Adelina Modesti (who published a monograph on Sirani in November 2005: *Elisabetta Sirani: A virtuous Woman of the Bolognese 17th Century*, Bologna: Editrice Compositori) of Australia has yielded a different identification of the artist in question. Based on favorable comparisons, I agree with Modesti's assertion that the image is, pending restoration, most likely by Girolamo Donnini (Correggio 1681-Bologna 1743).

receive the attentions of a restorer for any number of reasons, the greatest of which is probably the need for funding.⁴

All of the aforementioned problems with the scholarship on women artists of the Italian Renaissance and Baroque eras were discussed in the Special Topics class prior to the trip. Since it is virtually impossible to discern what a given Italian institution will or will not have on display during a visit,⁵ students were made aware of the potential for disappointment. The chance to view certain major works was all we could realistically anticipate. However, there is no complete way to prepare 21st-century American students for the experience of cultural difference in museum practices. They have been uniquely conditioned to consider the ‘other’ in most aspects of life, and they expect that consideration to bear out in institutionalized displays of art and culturally significant objects.

Guided by revisionist historical practices, United States art exhibitions featuring the works of women, African Americans, Latino Americans and other minorities have been staged since the 1970s. Numerous books, articles and journals inspired by or in support of these exhibitions continue to be published. Our nation’s capital hosts whole museums dedicated to the historical and contemporary works of exclusive factions of our

⁴ On our trip, we did happen to notice a large painting by Teresa Muratori in the chapel complex of San Stefano in Bologna. A very large, altar-sized painting situated on a left-side wall close to a vestibule, the darkening painting is additionally very difficult to see in the murky depths of the building. It is even more difficult to uncover much information on the artist.

⁵ Consulting museum websites is sometimes helpful. The Uffizi Gallery of Florence maintains a very good website that does update information on what is on display room by room as well as temporarily closed rooms. Bologna’s Pinacoteca Nazionale also has a website, but it does not exhaustively list or feature illustrations of works by room. While this is frustrating, it is understandable as the digital photography of every work of art in a large collection is time-consuming and expensive to accommodate in terms of bandwidth. Smaller Italian galleries and museums may have an introductory website only, which includes entry fees, hours of operation and the announcements of special exhibitions. Yet, while sites such as that of Casa Buonarroti in Florence include a color-coded map and some descriptions of works in various rooms, this does not aid in the location of the Artemisia Gentileschi painting of *The Inclination* (1615-1616), as it is pictured as being part of the collection but not placed in any specific room.

population.⁶ Such reflections of this country's multiculturalism make for a unique tourist experience, with many opportunities for concentrated exposure and focused study. The endeavor to serve audiences of various interest levels (from the introductory to the more specialized) also appears in the form of guided tours (either with a live guide or an audiocassette player) and sometimes copious amounts of wall text. Both forms of directed observation and engagement with particular works of art ensure that the novice museum-goer finds that which is deemed important; the can't-miss works of art therefore receive due attention. While this practice has become more common in museums around the world, Italy's unique slice of Western art and its museum policies still make for a more challenging experience.

Despite the fact that Italy boasts this rare group of women artists from centuries that saw so few of them in the rest of the Western world, it has no museums exclusively dedicated to them or later generations of women artists. As for the former collective, there are, quite possibly, too few of their works in Italy to comprise a museum collection. With the aforementioned reasons for that limitation in mind, yet another factor bears mentioning: the Renaissance or Baroque Italian woman artist may have traveled to seek work, as in the case of Artemisia Gentileschi (who spent time working in England with her painter father Orazio)⁷; or she may have sold commissioned works to collectors in other countries. Before Sofonisba Anguissola went to Spain to work in the court of

⁶ These include (but are not limited to) the National Museum of Women in the Arts (opened in 1987), The Smithsonian's Anacostia Museum and Center for African American Art (opened in 1967) as well as The National Museum of African Art, the Black Fashion Museum (founded in 1979), and the very recently inaugurated National Museum of the American Indian.

⁷ For instance, without knowing the provenance of Artemisia's *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (1638/9), one could speculate that the Royal Collection of England acquired it while the painter lived and worked in that country. Charles I has been documented as one of her patrons at this time.

Philip II,⁸ she fulfilled self-portrait requests from various foreign collectors who specifically aimed to acquire a painting made by such an unusual creature as a woman artist. For these reasons – as well as the more obvious fact that art frequently changes hands in the global market – scholars looking to uncover the heretofore unpublished Anguissola or Fontana must search the entire world. Locating and viewing works of art by women already published in Italian collections presents further challenges.

As evidenced in the Brenau University 2004 trip to Italy, the few works of art by women on view in major museums of Rome, Florence and Bologna receive little special attention. Museum literature, such as maps, exhibition materials and collection guides, do not spell out where these unique works are located within the exhibition spaces. Typically found in the midst of other chronologically ordered works of similar styles, they silently await discovery. Wall text – in any language - on a singular work is extremely rare. While museum-goers in a few of these major institutions could be seen wearing rented headphones plugged into audiocassette players, no telltale headphone icons – intended to bring attention to specific discussion on the recording – rested above the label information of works by women artists. As might be imagined, our American “blue-light special” predisposition met with serious frustration.⁹ The most dedicated seekers of our group resorted to methodical search tactics, examining each work of art for any familiarity with previous study. They painstakingly read all labels.

⁸ Unfortunately, many of Sofonisba’s paintings from her Spanish period were destroyed by a fire in the 17th century.

⁹ I refer here to the old sale strategy of Kmart stores, in which a flashing blue light – similar to the red lights atop police cars – was placed in a particular aisle in order to advertise the extremely short-term sale of specific merchandise. Shoppers would be told over the store loudspeaker that a blue light special was underway for the next several minutes in a specific location.

Perhaps the Italian mode of museum exhibition design (or a lack thereof) discourages the impatient American viewer. Still, the value of this experience rests with a number of points up for consideration. We learned a lot about ourselves and the ways in which a museum can be a surprisingly exciting place to visit.

Such painstaking search yielded a great deal of exposure to everything in the exhibitions. We all saw much more than we might have otherwise seen. If someone in our group made faster progress through the exhibition, they returned to the remainder of the group with advance reports on what was ahead. Had one of our savvy students not exhaustively looked into all of the Pitti Palace collection's nooks and crannies, we might have missed a glass-shelved room with a dozen or more Giovanna Garzoni (1600-1670) still life paintings first commissioned by the Medici family for their historically famous library. A greater sense of joy in discovery came about from this repeated experience of stumbling upon something rewarding. Such an exercise in museum exploration instilled a measure of excitement that just might be lacking in American institutions, where so much of a display is mapped and accompanied by written and spoken text that the viewer has no choice but to acknowledge what he or she is *told* to recognize as "important."

As has been mentioned, acute curiosity led us into spaces we might not have otherwise ventured. In one case this practice proved to be even more rewarding than the Garzoni images in the Pitti. After an early visit to the Vatican Museums and Saint Peter's Cathedral in Rome, members of our group walked from our hotel to the medieval neighborhood of Trastevere in search of Stefano Maderno's marble effigy of Saint Cecilia (1600). Navigation of the narrow cobblestone streets led to the church of Saint Cecilia, fronted by an open courtyard with a tinkling fountain. The city-noise of Rome

faded. We respectfully entered the darkening church to find what we sought, the marble ‘record’ of the incorruptible patron saint of music as she was reportedly found when her body was exhumed in 1599. We also admired the polychrome marble installed beneath the altar, the wonderful mosaics behind it and the paintings in the side aisles. As one might expect of student tourists, they frequented the church gift shop. There, they noticed a sign and a door: for two Euros, the visitor could descend into the crypt below the church. At least ten adventurous souls went downstairs to discover a room with a map in Italian. Our group’s guide began to translate the text, explaining that this site was ancient, the undermost layer of the church. A middle-aged, bespectacled man appeared, carrying a large ring of keys. He smiled and asked us in broken English if we wanted to know more about what we were seeing. Our *real* tour then began.

For the next hour and a half, we were treated to a thorough exploration and explanation of the legendary house of Saint Cecilia’s family, probably built in the second century AD. We were shown a room with rounded holes in the floor – intended for cold storage of food and wine. We saw the space of the family’s former, very modern lift (elevator). We viewed what was Cecilia’s bedroom and a beautiful, mosaic-encrusted wedding chapel (decorated in the 19th century). The complexity of the space seemed endless. Our impromptu guide would gesture to yet another locked room with his ring of keys, and we would nod yes, we wanted to see that, too. When we emerged from the so-called crypt, believing our tour had ended, we prepared to exit the church. The guide called to us that we had not yet seen the site of Cecilia’s martyrdom and the two Guido Reni paintings that decorated the space. Again, he gestured with keys to a gated door that led off of the main church interior. Again, we followed. We examined the calidarium of

her bath, where her persecutors attempted to suffocate her with hot steam (or scald her, depending on the source). We touched the stone slab upon which the saint's throat was slit three times after the hot steam failed to kill her. We squinted in the darkness at the two Reni paintings. We finally had to leave. As we bid our goodbyes, our accompanying tour guide remarked that the man with the keys had asked him a question in Italian as we moved from room to room in the crypt: why do Americans laugh so much?

Our accompanying guide tried to explain that we were simply happy. My answer was a bit more considered: we were laughing with joy at the mere experience of discovery. Thanks to a stranger armed with information and keys to more discoveries, we were further delighted to understand what we were seeing, whether or not the stories were more legend than fact. History –however it is interpreted – had come alive, and it was enchanting.

It occurred to us that we had been incredibly fortunate to receive our impromptu tour. We might have otherwise spent all of fifteen minutes in the crypt, not comprehending what we were seeing. Our willingness to thoroughly explore a given space yielded the 'blue-light special' experience we were more accustomed to receiving in American museums and galleries. After this and our additionally frustrating museum visits, looking high and low for the women artists, we began to flex our intellectual muscles of critical thinking: we wondered why these women artists received so little fanfare in twenty-first century Italy. One possible answer may rest with the state and character of feminism in that country. If American scholarly regard for minority factions of our population prompts the building and support of institutions that bring greater focus

to that scholarly regard, then what of our Italian neighbors' socio-cultural-political concerns and their resulting impact on museums and exhibitions?

The concept of Italian feminism may strike some as ironic, given the country's deeply Catholic (and therefore highly paternalistic) roots, which touch upon so many of its social constructs. Italian feminism has nonetheless developed in its own way and with its own unique character. The movement first achieved momentum in the 1940s as a political response to Fascist restrictions placed upon women in the workplace (Hellman, 1987: 31-33), and along with many other countries' feminist platform developments, gained further ground in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (Chiavola, 1986). The essential nature of Italian feminism parallels its American counterpart as it serves to promote women, their work and their disadvantaged position in society. However, contrasts arise in the recognition of gender diversity. In very simplistic terms, American feminism seeks societal regard for equality. Italian feminism acknowledges (and embraces?) the dissimilarity of genders, recognizing that regardless of the ambition for a more elevated position in society, women remain different from men.

As characterized by Lucia Chiavola, Italian feminism is unusual in its non-institutional basis, with interested parties coming from a variety of class backgrounds and pursuits who do not necessarily seek a formal unity under one group name or sanction by any authority. Chiavola's more general statements about the nature and practices of Italian feminists in academia further illuminate this case as well as strike some parallels with the historical presence of Italian women artists:

There are, of course, women in academia, many of whom have an interest in studying or teaching other women's work, or in bringing their lives as women to bear upon their subject disciplines and their modes of research. Instead of trying to institutionalize these issues, however, they manage to carve out a space in the curriculum

as it is. In this respect, they infiltrate and exploit the grey areas of academic organization....They have been intellectual commuters: traveling in and out of those domains of culture and politics where they mixed with men and became part of ‘the system.’ (Chiavola, 1986, 3-4)

Contemporary Italian women in academia mimic their historical, artistic counterparts in their more subversive methods of approaching the canon of their chosen field. They work and serve their own cause while abiding by standardized practices and traditions. They are quiet, unobtrusive renegades.

How this unique feminist outlook impacts Italian museum practices could possibly extend to that same quiet presence of the work of one 15th century woman artist among the many Caravaggios at the Uffizzi.¹⁰ Yes, Artemisia Gentileschi was a remarkable artist – but she produced her works in the highly male-oriented, competitive realm of Italian Baroque painting, adopting the established treatments of popular subject matter published by her masculine contemporaries *as well as* surpassing those traditions with new innovations. In her own letters we read about her bitter struggles to compete with men, yet her strategies for such competition involved ‘playing the game’ the way it had been played by men and for men. And so perhaps Italian feminists would advise that we can’t *not* appreciate her efforts and accomplishments against this particular backdrop. To give her the ‘blue light special’ treatment would be to remove her from the appropriate context.

Ultimately, my tour group’s combined states of exhilaration and disappointment in seeking and only occasionally finding a work of art by a woman artist of the Italian Renaissance and Baroque periods illustrates and reinforces the ‘other’s’ position in

¹⁰ Gentileschi’s *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1612-21) is exhibited (along with one or two of her other, lesser pictures) in a part of the museum that is undergoing construction. If one proceeds too quickly to what appears to be the end of the collection rooms, these paintings may be missed.

history, a case made all the more exceptional in the face of 21st century women's college students from America. Our magical experience in Saint Cecilia in Rome advances the notion that the demonstration of sincere interest can yield the reward of a private, privileged adventure. Unlike the typical art museum experience in America – where information is overtly conveyed and the visitor's encounter can be wholly controlled – the Italian version facilitates a more active and individualized pursuit of the subject. Indeed, the 'blue-light special' tour can be had for the asking. The essentially cultural differences between these two countries' museum practices rest with their respective approaches to modes of curiosity and kinesthetic learning. In a way, the American museum visitor desires a sort of "armchair" equivalency to their experience: they expect comfort and convenience. They dislike too much work for what they want to know. Yet this can make for too-rapidly gained – and ultimately lost – information. Should they adjust to the very different Italian museum experience and become absorbed in the business of true engagement with their subject, they may return home with renewed vigor for eschewing the rented headphones and audiotape in favor of seeking profound enrichment.

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