· INTRODUCTION ·
WOMEN AND THE VISUAL ARTS: BREAKING BOUNDARIES

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The title of this volume, *Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, is deliberately ambiguous. It encompasses pictures of women, as well as women who picture, that is, women who create images either by their own hands or through the mediation of patronage. Also included in this rubric are women who picture images in the sense of viewing or visualizing them. Taking advantage of the flexibility of "picturing women" as a multi-valent term, the contributors to this volume consider all these permutations within the context of early modern Italian culture: women as the subject of art, producers of art, patrons of art, and viewers of art.[1] But the relationship of "women" to "art" is much more complex than such a list implies. While women did indeed play a role in the production and consumption of visual culture in this period, visual culture itself also played a role in shaping real women's lives and in constructing early modern ideas about the very concept of "woman."[2] All the contributors to this volume see the issue of gender as central to their research, both how it affects the images, objects, and buildings produced in early modern Italy, and how, in turn, gender as a social, political, and psychological category is affected by the visual culture of a particular time and place.[3]

To see how such a consideration of "picturing women" fits (or fails to fit) into the practice of art history, it is useful to look briefly at a few specific examples. To begin with, one could consider a painting in the National Gallery in London attributed on stylistic grounds to a sixteenth-century Italian artist, Lorenzo Lotto, which depicts a richly dressed young woman with an engaging outward gaze (Fig. 1).[4] The tilt of her head and her pointing finger direct the beholder's eye to a sheet of paper in her left hand on which is sketched a nude woman about to plunge a dagger into her breast. An educated sixteenth-century viewer would immediately recognize this drawing as an image of

[I] Lorenzo Lotto, *Portrait of Lucrezia Valier*, *c.* early 1530s

Lucretia, the young Roman wife who committed suicide in order to uphold her honor after being raped, an interpretation confirmed by the inscription on another piece of paper positioned beneath the drawing: "NEC VLLA IMPVDICA LVCRETIAE EXEMPLO VIVET" ("No shame lives in the example of Lucretia"). Based on the allusions to Lucretia and other surviving documentary evidence, scholars have suggested that the painting is a portrait of Lucrezia Valier, a woman from a well-to-do family who married Benetto Pesaro in 1533.

Most discussions of this image have focused on issues similar to those raised in the preceding paragraph: attributing the canvas by formal analysis, examining the painting's iconography, and attempting to identify the sitter. Although such questions have been and continue to be central to the practice of art history, they fail to address adequately one crucial aspect of the image, namely, the fact that the person portrayed is a woman. Even if unacknowledged, however, this fact has had a noticeable impact on twentieth-century

interpretations of the painting. For example, the juxtaposition of an elegant young woman with a drawing of Lucretia and a moralizing inscription has prompted several scholars to comment on the virtue of the sitter by implying that, unlike her Roman namesake, this woman's chastity and marital fidelity must have been in doubt. Bernard Berenson, for instance, stated that the portrait was "scarcely sympathetic. One cannot help feeling that the artist was not persuaded of the lady's sincerity."[5] Gallantly, another scholar defended the sitter by referring to her "presumably blameless marriage."[6] The official National Gallery cataloguer, however, revived Berenson's titillating implication that the references to the virtuous Lucretia of antiquity were actually an attempt to gloss over Lucrezia Valier's own lack of virtue. Although the cataloguer admitted that "there is not, so far as is known, any evidence that [the portrait] . . . was painted to counteract the impugning of the sitter's virtue," nevertheless he could not resist remarking that the " 'lady doth protest too much, methinks.' "[7] One would be hard pressed to find serious scholars engaging in a similar discussion about the sexual morality (or lack thereof) of a male sitter.

Idle speculation about Lucrezia Valier's sexual conduct is not an adequate substitute for a proper consideration of how gender is unavoidably implicated in the creation and interpretation (past as well as present) of such an image. Consider, for instance, the sketch that the sitter holds in her hand. When examining the drawing of Lucretia, most scholars have assessed it in iconographic or stylistic terms and have assumed that its "message" (whether chaste or titillating) is addressed to an implied male beholder. However, by allowing for the possibility that the author of the drawing may be the sitter herself or that its "message" may be intended for female viewers, new interpretations of the painting begin to emerge.[8] One of these new meanings lies in the decision to portray the sitter brandishing a representation of Lucretia that depicts this Roman matron in a heroic mode, thus defying current trends in both painting and print culture in which images of Lucretia (generally portrayed by male artists for male viewers) were given predominantly erotic interpretations.[9] By overtly assuming a position in favor of her namesake's virtue, the sitter was asserting Lucretia's suitability as a role model for women rather than using this subject as an alibi for erotic innuendo. Turning to the sitter's costume, one notes that most scholars have attended to it only as an aid for dating and attributing the painting. However, by assessing the sitter's clothes from the point of view of how gender intersects with a variety of cultural practices, very different questions are raised concerning the social,

[II] Lavinia Fontana, *Self-Portrait at a Clavichord with a Maid-Servant*, 1577

sexual, and economic implications of her choice of dress.[10] For instance, the type of costume chosen could imply that this image was meant to commemorate one of the key events (marriage, motherhood, widowhood) that shaped women's lives in this period.[11]

Another example of how the concept of "picturing women" can serve to challenge received notions about the relationship of women to art is provided by a self-portrait by the Bolognese artist Lavinia Fontana, who portrayed herself seated at a clavichord with a maid-servant (Fig. II). This painting is usually

discussed within the context of self-portraits by other women artists, such as those by Sofonisba Anguissola of Cremona and Marietta Tintoretto of Venice, which also depict the painters in front of clavichords.[12] Seen within this context, the Fontana self-portrait has usually been defined – and often dismissed – as a self-aggrandizing painting that was meant to assert her place within a developing tradition of women artists. While this may well have been part of her intent, recent archival research has revealed that there was much more at stake in this portrait since it also played an important role in the preparations made in anticipation of Fontana's marriage to an impecunious young man from a provincial aristocratic family.[13] This painting was executed by Fontana and sent to her future in-laws in Imola in order to assure them of her social graces, pleasing appearance, and many accomplishments, all necessary attributes for a bride intended for a gentleman of good breeding. Furthermore, this self-portrait served to convince her future husband that she fully intended to uphold her side of the marriage contract, which entailed supporting her spouse by means of her art. Whereas other self-portraits by women artists at the clavichord have dark and undifferentiated backgrounds, Fontana's includes an easel and a *cassone* (chest) – the one a tool of her trade, the other a piece of furniture generally associated with marriages and dowries.[14] Without a dowry herself, Fontana was thus demonstrating to her husband and his family by visual means that she possessed a valuable artistic talent that could stand in lieu of – and could even surpass – a cash dowry.

Both Lotto's portrait of Lucrezia Valier and Fontana's self-portrait use visual means to communicate complex personal and professional statements to male and female viewers. Yet another example of what one might call an "epistolary" use of painting by a woman is provided by the seventeenth-century painter Artemisia Gentileschi. In Rome in 1611, the eighteen-year-old artist sent a painting of Judith decapitating Holofernes to her faithless lover, Agostino Tassi, whose ruthless rape and broken promise of marriage had deprived Gentileschi of both her honor and her innocence. Still illiterate at this date, this young woman nevertheless used her artistic skills to communicate with consummate skill – and in no uncertain terms – her revised feelings with regard to her heartless lover.[15] Although the painting in question has never been identified, a *Judith Slaying Holofernes* painted a year or two after this event by Gentileschi may owe much of its originality and dramatic intensity to its author's personal experience (Fig. III).[16]

By engaging these three paintings from the point of view of women as

[III] Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, c. 1612–13

pictured and picturing, one gains a much more complex and sophisticated understanding of both the images themselves and the culture in which they were produced. The different uses of art by and for women also provoke new reflections on the specificity of women as creators, consumers, and subjects of visual culture.[17] In this volume, the contributors have sought to bring the gendered implications of such images to the forefront in order to allow them

to be openly confronted rather than denied, ignored, or trivialized by sexual innuendo and stereotyping disguised as scholarship. Although questions of attribution, dating, iconography, and patronage are not disregarded, the primary interest of the contributors has been to examine images produced by, for, and of "picturing women" in early modern Italy explicitly through the lens of gender.

The particular concerns of the contributors to this volume have been influenced by scholars working both inside and outside the discipline of art history.[18] A quarter of a century has elapsed since Linda Nochlin asked polemically "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", thereby launching a renewed interest in unearthing and reassessing previously ignored or marginalized women artists.[19] Within a few years of Nochlin's influential publication, a number of exhibition catalogues and survey books attending to women as producers of visual culture became available, a scholarly enterprise that continues to the present day.[20] However, the study of women artists *per se* has a much longer, if sometimes overlooked, history. Pliny the Elder, Boccaccio, Giorgio Vasari, and Malvasia all included the names of at least some women artists in their writings. From the mid-nineteenth century to the first years of this century, more ambitious books and exhibitions made new information available about ever-greater numbers of women artists.[21] Nevertheless, even the most recent wave of scholarly interest in women artists has yet to achieve the oft-stated goal of such projects, namely, the full and complete integration of the lives and works of women artists into the disciplinary fabric of art history.[22]

Already in 1971, Nochlin had suggested that a feminist approach to art history should in any case go beyond merely adding women's names to survey books or producing monographs on women artists for the shelves of research libraries. As Nochlin stated, "the engaged feminist intellect . . . can pierce through the cultural–ideological limitations of the time and . . . reveal biases and inadequacies not merely in dealing with the question of women, but in the very way of formulating the crucial questions of the discipline [of art history] as a whole."[23] Art historians have repeatedly resurrected Nochlin's challenge to critique or even dismantle the discipline, a challenge that many believe has been taken up too sporadically and usually with only limited success.[24] Scholars who have seriously considered Nochlin's project have often sought to combine feminist concerns with theories and methodologies originating

outside the discipline of art history in order to find the critical tools with which to unearth the field's underlying assumptions. Appeals to Marxism, structural anthropology, psychoanalysis, semiotics, poststructuralism, and new historicism have each, in turn, been greeted with equal degrees of enthusiasm and suspicion by scholars studying not only the visual arts, but also history and literature.[25]

In art history in particular, such methodological concerns have most often been the province of scholars working on images by and of women produced in Europe and North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Somewhat less attention has been paid to the theoretical implications of developing gender-specific approaches to the analysis of visual culture in the pre-modern period. Joan Kelly-Gadol's seminal article, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" (first published in 1977), alerted scholars interested in early modern Europe to the particular problems associated with studying women's lives and the representation of women in the art and literature of this period.[26] Since the publication of Kelly-Gadol's essay, questions about the construction of gender and its representation in early modern European culture have begun to attract significant and sustained scholarly attention, even if explicit debates about methodology have remained few and far between in comparison to those concerned with more recent historical periods.[27] The ways in which the traditional assumptions and methods of art history have been historically bound up in the study of Italian Renaissance and Baroque art in particular have undoubtedly had an impact on how scholars working on early modern Italy have incorporated (or failed to incorporate) a concern with gender into the study of visual culture.[28]

Until the present volume, no single collection of essays has yet been dedicated exclusively to examining women and the visual arts in early modern Italy, although a number of collective volumes have included relevant art historical studies along with essays on history and literature.[29] However, as Marilyn Migiel and Juliana Schiesari have recently argued, the diverse social, cultural, political, and economic situations of Italy's many individual city-states may actually allow for a more wide-ranging analysis of the representation and construction of gender than is possible by studying comparatively homogeneous and monolithic nation-states such as England or France.[30] It is precisely an interest in exploring the heterogeneity of women's contributions to, consumption of, and representation in the visual culture of early modern Italy that is the main concern of the present collection. Building upon the

ground-breaking research of art historians working on topics such as Italian women as artists and patrons, female portraiture, and visual representations of female archetypes (such as the Madonna or Judith), while simultaneously incorporating the work of social, economic, and religious historians, the contributors to this volume seek to expand and deepen our understanding of women and the visual arts in early modern Italy.[31]

The contributors to this volume not only reappropriate the methodological brief of earlier feminist art history, but also attend to a host of new interests and concerns. By making use of research and methodologies originating in fields such as social history, literary criticism, anthropology, and psychoanalysis, the authors contribute to an ever-expanding definition of what constitutes the art *histories* of women in early modern Italy. Moreover, the essays demonstrate how studying women and the visual arts within a broad, interdisciplinary context can enhance our understanding of the lives and status of women in early modern Europe in general.

Some of the chapters in this volume continue the original monographic project of feminist art history, but these studies are no longer defined solely by an overriding desire to prove that women artists deserve to be inserted into the canon of (male) artistic "genius," as was often the case in feminist scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s. Instead, the essays consider women artists primarily in the context of early modern social, cultural, and religious institutions, and in relation to the gendered roles constructed by these institutions for women artists and their viewer-patrons. Other chapters examine the complex ways in which women were represented in various manifestations of visual culture in early modern Italy. However, the contributors go beyond traditional iconographic analysis in order to explore how individual and collective female identity is constructed (and deconstructed) by the power of the male as well as the female gaze and to assess the cultural significance placed on the real and the metaphorical possession of the female body. Finally, several authors consider women as patrons and viewers of visual culture ("high" as well as "low"), with particular attention paid to how art objects and related practices not only depict women's life experiences but may actually help to shape them.

As a whole, the collection explores visual culture produced in Italy from the later fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries as well as considers all major artistic media including sculpture, painting, fresco, prints, and architecture. Most of the images and objects discussed were produced in important urban

centers in central and northern Italy: Rome, Siena, Florence, Bologna, Parma, Milan, and Venice.[32] Although the contributors seek to approach the concept of "picturing women" from a wide variety of perspectives, nevertheless this volume does not pretend to be able to address more than a small fraction of the issues raised by this topic. At the same time, the essays do serve as important indicators of the increasing breadth and depth of historical and art historical scholarship concerned with exploring how gender is implicated in visual culture in the early modern period.

The nine chapters in this volume have been grouped into three parts, each of which addresses a key issue in the study of women and art in Renaissance and Baroque Italy. The first part, "Envisioning Women's Lives," examines the variety of roles played by art objects and architectural spaces in the representation and definition of women's lives.

Adrian Randolph looks at how the presence of women at sermons preached in religious buildings and on public squares could construct not only the social identity of women, but also the social meanings of ecclesiastical space. Specifically, he considers fourteenth- and fifteenth-century women in Florence and Siena as both viewers and viewing subjects, and he explores the power of the gaze, male as well as female, in defining or defiling sacred space. He uses contemporary poetry, literature, sermons, and images to determine the position (literal as well as metaphorical) of women in the public eye and examines the tensions that emerged when the profane interaction of women and men in ecclesiastical space contrasted with the ideal behavior advocated by priests and friars.

The power of the female gaze in the private sphere and its influence, via domestic art and artifacts, on women's lives, as manifested in practices related to motherhood and childbirth, are of particular concern to Jacqueline Marie Musacchio. Focusing especially on Renaissance Florence, Musacchio explores the talismanic functions of the images, objects, and rituals used to help conceive healthy (male) heirs and to lessen the dangers of the birth process. Her essay reveals a vast variety of images and objects made for mothers-to-be whose magical potency and efficacy were predicated primarily upon contemporary belief in the power of the maternal imagination. Her chapter also illustrates the continuum that exists between so-called "folkloric" rituals and the practices condoned by "official" patriarchal culture, as well as explores the relationship between "low" craft objects and "high" art with natalist themes.