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978-0-521-66496-7 - Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa: Women Artists and the Language of Art History and Criticism
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

A COLLAGE of voices, past and present, informs us that "the woman of the Renaissance is many women – mother, daughter, widow; warrior, manager, servant; nun, heretic, saint, witch; queen, martyr, seeker."[1] She is also an artist – painter, sculptor, engraver, embroiderer. Broadly speaking, this book is about Italian Renaissance women artists – who they were and what they did. More specifically, it is about what early modern writers say they were and about how the works they produced are described. It is, therefore, a study concerned with the critical language of art – the terms used to differentiate the artistic productions of women from those of men, the methods by which the female capacity to create was distinguished from that of the male, the syntactic strategies employed to draw a likeness between the female as maker and model, and the organizational principles used to delineate a history of art monopolized by *pittori* and *scultori* and visited only marginally by *pittrici* and *scultrici.* The intent here is not simply to identify Renaissance *virtuose* but to illumine the definition of the *virtuosa* as constructed in the early art historical discourse.

Today the names of Renaissance women artists are largely unfamiliar, their identities often unknown. But to their contemporaries they were worthy of recognition. Thus, in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century art and civic histories, biographies, and poems we find the names of *virtuose* recorded, their varying achievements assessed, and praise grudgingly or generously accorded them. Sadly, few of the works they created remain. Approximately half of the forty women artists discussed in this book survive only as a name on a printed page. In a significant number of cases, we have no images to associate with a name, no way to evaluate an artist's style, and no visual means of assessing critical pronouncements

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about a woman's artistic abilities. This lack of visual evidence determined the focus of this book. Texts, not images, are scrutinized. Rather than analyze how an artist depicted her subject, this study examines how the writer represented his, which is, of course, her.[2] The extreme but by no means unique example of Irene di Spilimbergo demonstrates the necessity of this methodological approach. Celebrated for her fluency with the pen and the brush by more than one hundred forty poets in more than three hundred Italian and Latin poems, Spilimbergo is unknown today as a painter. Therefore, if we are to appreciate this woman as a *virtuosa* we must turn to the texts that commemorate her. Only by this method can we understand who this Venetian *pittrice* was, and, more importantly, discover what the Renaissance *virtuosa* was and how she came to be.

An artist's inclusion in this study depends upon her having been active in Italy during the sixteenth century. This criterion is flexible only to the degree that her activity extended into the seventeenth century, as happened, for example, with Sofonisba Anguissola and Lavinia Fontana, or in the event that an artist's only known work date to 1600, as is the case with Isabella Parasole. (See Appendix One for a list of the artists and the relevant sources.) The sources utilized dates primarily from the sixteenth through the eighteenth century, though a few from the nineteenth century provided unique information.

The historical and geographical frame of this study is similarly the product of authorial intent. Art history as we know it has its origins in sixteenth-century Italy.[3] It was there and then that painting and sculpture ceased to be regarded as crafts and became *arti nobilissimi.* More to the point, it was during this era that the modern concept of the artist was forged. Not only did the *artisan* become the *artist;* he became the *virtuoso,* a man so outstandingly gifted that, to quote Vasari, "one can claim without fear of contradiction that . . . [such artists] are not simply men but, if it be allowed to say so, mortal god[s]."[4] Among the many artists privileged by this status was the sculptor Antonio Rossellino. Vasari's description of him paints a portrait of a man of "rare virtue." The description also illustrates the contextual elasticity of the word *virtù* as it relates to the definition of the *virtuoso.*

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> It has ever been a truly and laudible and virtuous thing [cosa virtuosa] to be modest and to be adorned with that gentleness and those rare virtues [rare virtù] that are easily recognized in the honorable actions of the sculptor Antonio Rossellino, who put so much grace into his art that he was esteemed by all who knew him as something much more than a man and adored almost as a saint for those supreme qualities that were united to his talent [virtù].[5]

When this and similar passages in Vasari's *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori,* 1568, are read in conjunction with Gian Paolo Lomazzo's *Trattato dell' arte della pittura, scoltura, et architettura,* 1584, which contains chapter titles such as "Della virtù del colorire," "Della virtù del lume," "Della virtù della prospettiva," the Renaissance concept of the *virtuoso* comes into focus. Ideally, but not necessarily, he is an ethical man who unequivocally possesses both inherent and learned artistic abilities.[6] He exhibits virtuousness in his demeanor and virtuosity in his art.

So what is a *virtuosa?* Early texts present us with several options. Giorgio Vasari's and Fra Serafino Razzi's writings about Plautilla Nelli, "a revered and virtuous sister [veneranda e virtuosa suora]" and a competent if unexciting *pittrice,* imply that a *virtuosa* is a pious painter. Descriptions of Marietta Robusti by Raffaello Borghini and Carlo Ridolfi replace piety with physical beauty and musical talent: "it is apparent that she combines many virtuous qualities (si vedero unite molte virtuose qualità)." Scores of writers recognized similar qualities in Irene di Spilimbergo. In fact, so great was her loveliness of body, manner, and voice that the virtuosity of this *virtuosa* was of little consequence. Almost all of the more than one hundred contributors to the memorial volume of poems written in her honor, *Rime . . . in morte della Signora Irene,* fail to mention her artistic abilities. Properzia De'Rossi, a *virtuosa* with "capricious talent (capriccióso ingegno)," is an intriguing variant. A beautiful and accomplished dancer, she was "excellent not only in household matters, like the rest of them, but also in many sciences."[7] She was, moreover, daring. Challenging tradition, this *virtuosa* reached for the chisel, a tool presumed to belong to the *virtuoso.* In De'Rossi's case, a *virtuosa* is, at least to some degree, a transgressor of gender barriers.

Although it can be argued that the *virtù* of the *virtuoso* included (in

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addition to artistic virtuosity) good looks and munificence,[8] the virtuous demeanor expected of the *virtuosa* challenged those who would praise her to put a square peg into a round hole. In sixteenth-century Italy, the terms "woman" and "artist" simply did not go together. In fact, the "feminine" virtues desired of one were the opposite of the "masculine" virtues expected of the other. Woman, by reason of being female, should be silent, passive, and private. But if the *virtuosa* acted in accordance with these standards, she could not fully engage in a profession that is all about expression and public exposure. Early writers found a twofold remedy to resolve the dilemma posed by the opposition. On the one hand, they divided stylistic virtuosity into two different and readily discernible types: masculine and feminine. On the other, they defined the *virtuosa* as a distinct and exceptional category of the larger class "female." Together, these strategies permitted that which is masculine (if not always male) to maintain a position of superiority, while still acknowledging something what could not be ignored: some women were artists.

Because the designation *virtuosa,* like *virtuoso,* appears fairly infrequently in early critical writings, understanding what the term signifies requires understanding what constituted, for these writers, feminine and masculine creativity and style. Organized around several themes, this book is designed to carefully consider conventional topoi, analyze the contextual meanings of aesthetic terms like *ritrarre, imitare, invenzione, fantasia,* and *grazia,* and illumine the classical and contemporary writings that informed concepts of *artiste femminile* in general and that of the *virtuosa* specifically.

Chapter Two, "Problems of Praise and Pythagorean Contrariety," establishes the theoretical frame within which diverse concepts of art, the artist, and aesthetic evaluation can be examined. It is within this frame that a definition of the concept of *virtuosa* is put forth. This chapter also considers the development of the history of art and woman's place within that history as established by certain conventional analogies or comparisons. Chapter Three, "(Pro)creativity," looks at the language of artistic production, considers the conventional assumption that it resembles biological generation, and examines how Renaissance criticism reflected this comparison, to the detriment of women artists.

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But concepts of (pro)creation provided only a partial picture of what was thought to constitute creativity. Chapter Four, "Melancholia," fills in the missing details. A hallmark of genius, the melancholic temperament came to be recognized by writers of the Renaissance to Romantic eras as the defining trait of the divinely inspired mind. Yet, like all else, melancholia was gendered and subdivided into two kinds: productive and unproductive. In contrast to the potential for heightened and enlightened creativity associated with male melancholia, the feminine variant of the condition, defined as erotic melancholia, was thought to lead to depression and stasis. Focusing on, but not restricted to, three and a half centuries of writings about the Bolognese sculptor Properzia De'Rossi, Chapter Four demonstrates how this form of differentiation was advanced and to what effect.

Chapters Five and Six, "*La Donnesca Mano*" and "Misplaced Modifiers," shift the focus from the process of artistic production to the aesthetic evaluation of the produced image. In contrast to concepts of artistic creativity, which were defined primarily on the basis of sex, issues of style – "the feminine hand [la donnesca mano]" – reflect expectations based on culturally constructed notions of gender. Criticism of women's work is rife with terms such as "diligence," "sentimental," "affected." Often these terms are qualified – "feminine affectation [femminilità affettiva]," "womanly grace [donnesca grazia]." Here, as elsewhere, categories of classification derived from the dualist scheme of Pythagorean contrariety place woman and art in dialectical relation to one another. They do so by stressing experiential difference and feminizing both practice and style.

Chapter Six carries the examination of aesthetic language in another direction. Whereas Chapter Five concentrates on the relationship of style to practice, "Misplaced Modifiers" looks at the relationships between artist, model, art object, and viewer, using the term *grazia* as a point of departure. While several art and literary historians have considered this issue in relation to conventionalized neo-Petrarchan descriptions of feminine beauty and portraits of unknown beautiful women, this study looks at the specific rather than at the generic, at the identified woman who produces objects rather than at the unknown woman who herself is the object. As a woman and as the maker of art,

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the Renaissance *virtuosa* provided early writers with the perfect vehicle for blending the conflicting definitions of each. By sleight of pen, critics left intact an aesthetic that associated stylistic *grazia* with masculine mastery of the medium. In this chapter the female response to such verbal messages is examined in women's self-portraits or, as the case may be, a woman's refusal to fulfill a man's request for such a self-image.

Chapter Seven, "*Femmina masculo e masculo femmina,*" borrows its title from Mario Equicola's *Libro di natura d'amore,* 1526. Returning to the structure of Pythagorean contrariety, this chapter considers concepts of the woman artist as belonging to an intermediate, or exceptional, class of being that falls between a pair of opposites.

To the extent that it is possible, Renaissance critical commentary is juxtaposed with representative images by each artist. In some cases these images are familiar. In others, such as the lace patterns and botanical illustrations by the Roman *intagliatrice* Isabella Cattani Parasole, the images have not appeared outside of their original texts (1600, 1614, and 1628). But, as noted, matching image to artist and art historical text is not always possible. Thus, we must make use of what we have: texts, art, civic, and church histories; treatises on the ideal woman; eulogies; *canzoni* and *rime.* We must do so with the express goal of acquiring what Michael Baxandall has called "the period eye," an adjustment of our views to past visions. Only in this way can we understand the definition of the woman artist and the perception of feminine style that has been passed on to us. To this desired end, the writings about artists and art in Appendix II as well as those appearing throughout the study enable early authors to speak for themselves. The images illustrating the text allow the artists to respond. Although the book provides commentary on the dialogue, it is left to the reader to assess the eloquence of each.

Obviously, the best scenario is when the artist through her own work speaks for herself. This, however, is now possible for less than 50 percent of Renaissance *artiste femminile.* No works, for example, can be attributed to Lucrezia Quistelli, who, says Vasari, "learned to draw from Alessandro Allori, the pupil of Bronzino."[9] We do not fare much better with Plautilla Nelli, prioress of the Dominican convent of Santa Caterina da Siena, Florence. Although she, like Sofonisba Anguissola, enjoyed international fame, she and her works, unlike Anguissola and

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many of her paintings, have all but been lost to the vagaries of time. Despite early recognition and regardless of the considerable appeal of her paintings among Florence's nobility, as reported in the sixteenth century by both Vasari and Francesco Bocchi, only two of her images are, to my knowledge, extant. As for the images and objects produced by Nelli's "discepole" – Prudenza Cambi, Agata Trabalesi, and Maria Ruggieri – none have been identified, even though Razzi recorded their popularity throughout Italy.[10]

Sadly, detailed descriptions of paintings and specific references to their locations do nothing to help revive a memory or assist in the rediscovery of an oeuvre. Santa Lucia in Pistoia was, we are told by Vasari and Razzi, the home of Nelli's Madonna and Child with Saints Thomas, Augustine, Mary Magdalene, Catherine of Siena, Catherine of Alexandria, Agnese, and Lucy. Today this "chiesetta" is a small apartment building identified as Via de'Rossi, 3, and distinguished only by its brimming flower boxes. One can only guess what happened to its contents. They – or at least Plautilla Nelli's painting – did not make it into the parochial church of Santo Spirito or into the collection of the Museo Civico di Pistoia. The same fate befell Mariangiola Criscuolo's *Assumption of the Virgin,* reported by Bernardo de Domenici in 1742 to be in a lunette over the door leading into San Giuseppe Maggiore in Naples.[11] When the church was demolished in 1934, its contents were destroyed or dispersed to places unknown.

Although (or possibly because) there is so little artifactual evidence to counter critical commentary, the desire to "correct" the art historical record is great. But to do this would be to replace one filtering voice for another. Thus this study, while not attempting to speak for lost images in order to celebrate their makers, admits to speaking on their behalf. It does so by critiquing the language of the critics, by examining how context defines a word like *virtuosa,* and by examining how analogical and metaphorical associations establish otherness as secondary.

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CHAPTER TWO

Problems of Praise and Pythagorean Contrariety

> L. Paulus Aemilius and not a few other Roman citizens taught their sons painting along with the fine arts and the art of living piously and well. This excellent custom was frequently observed among the Greeks, who, because they wished their sons to be well educated, taught them painting along with geometry and music. It was also an honor among women to know how to paint.
>
> —Leon Battista Alberti

GIORGIO Vasari's *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori et architettori,* 1568, is variously described as "a forerunner of the most common genre of modern art history," the book that "form[ed] a canon that was long unquestioned."[1] Among its parts – a preface to the work as a whole; biographies of Renaissance artists, beginning with Cimabue and ending with Vasari's account of his own life; and prefaces preceding each of the three eras or stages into which the biographies are grouped – the second and third prefaces are said to be "probably the most famous texts in the entire history of art."[2] It is here that the idea of rebirth (*rinascita*), which is referred to at the conclusion of the first preface, is ingeniously developed. Paraphrasing a passage in Cicero's *Brutus,* evoking another in Aristotle's *Poetics,* and citing a well-known litany of names in Pliny's *Natural History,* Vasari sketches a tripartite history of art that parallels the three-stage development of the individual – from infancy, to childhood, to adulthood. Putting aside, for the moment, the biological implications of this metaphor, the analogies illustrating the rebirth of the visual arts are of critical importance to the definition of *virtuosa.*

Implicit in the concept of rebirth is that of lineage, an idea conveyed

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by Vasari's designation of the great modern painter or sculptor as the "new Apelles" or the "new Lysippos." The significance of an appellation of this kind becomes apparent when considered in the context of the historical sequence described in the prefaces to the *Vite.* If Apelles and Lysippos were at the pinnacle of ancient artistic achievement, then their modern counterparts logically may be understood as occupying a similarly lofty position in the *rinascimento,* since, as is argued in the preface to Part II of the *Vite,* artists of Apelles' caliber produced works of art "perfect in every detail."[3] This approach raises two questions for the present study: (1) Are the analogies advanced in early writings in art gender specific? (2) To borrow Plutarch's phrasing, "If . . . we asserted that painting on the part of men and women is the same, . . . would anybody reprehend us?"[4]

Although Renaissance answers to Plutarch's question are implicit in the analogies put forth to define the Italian Renaissance as a *rinascita,* a clear understanding of the concept of artistic virtuosity as it relates to gender requires us to acknowledge four things. First, the traditional etymology of the Latin term *virtus,* meaning moral goodness, or goodness of anything in its kind and efficacy, traces it to the word *vir,* meaning "man." Second, the different meanings of the Latin *virtus* carried over to the sixteenth century, thus allowing the Italian word *virtù* to refer to both virtuous behavior and virtuosity with the brush or chisel. Third, the classical texts informing Renaissance concepts of artistic virtuosity were not restricted to those about the visual and literary arts. Treatises on *virtus* in the sense of moral goodness also came into play.[5] Vasari's alternating use of the word *virtù* to connote moral goodness and/or artistic excellence points to this double signification. Finally, virtue had long been described as being of two types. In accordance with the Pythagorean system of classification, which defines one thing in contrast to its opposite, virtue, as some aspect of human personality, was described as being of two distinctive kinds: masculine and feminine.[6] This brings us back to Plutarch's query and the implications of analogical constructs. If *virtù* as moral goodness is gender specific, then it follows that *virtù* as goodness of anything in its kind, such as artistic virtuosity, is also gender specific. At issue is whether one type of *virtù* (moral goodness) can be separated from another kind of

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virtù (goodness of anything in its kind) and, if such a division is possible, whether it is permissible to praise the *virtuosa* as the equal of the *virtuoso.* In grappling with these issues, writers of the *rinascimento* considered the opinions of their ancient forebears. Among the more influential texts affecting Renaissance thought was Plutarch's *Mulierum virtutis,* a book dedicated to commending and commemorating exceptional women for acts of valor.

Like the hero, the heroine is worthy of public recognition, or so Plutarch argues in his moralizing essay. In order to defend this ideological position, Plutarch changes the criteria according to which women are praised. He does so, however, without disturbing a deeply entrenched value system that recognized the masculine as superior to the feminine.[7] Rather than define the virtuous woman as the chaste and attentive wife or honor her as the good mother who dutifully minds the home and nurtures her husband's children, Plutarch designates as worthy of praise the female, Cloelia for example, as one who demonstrates "strength and daring as above that of woman."[8] For him a virtuous woman is one who acts like a virtuous man. Conversely, less than meritorious males, such as the Argive men, are those who slide into behavioral patterns perceived *in genera* as feminine. Accordingly, Plutarch commends the young women of Argos for defending their city against Spartan invasion but mocks the cowardly retreat of their male compatriots. "Even to this day," he observes, the Argive victory is celebrated as "the 'Festival of Impudence,' at which they clothe the women in men's shirts and cloaks, and the men in women's robes and veils."[9] Admittedly, the cross-dressing of the "Festival of Impudence" makes this more of an example of gendered role reversal than one of encomiastic parity, yet it is precisely for this reason that it makes clear Plutarch's position on two fundamental issues. First, to be masculine, if not male, is better than to be feminine. Second, in deed, if not body, women can rise above the condition of their sex.

Although Plutarch's *Mulierum virtutis* was not the sole classical source informing the Renaissance about the presumed nature of woman, it was one of the texts most frequently and prominently cited by sixteenth-century authors of *discorsi, dialoghi,* and *difesi* written for and about women.[10] Among the many writers commenting on the ideas espoused by Plutarch was Torquato Tasso.[11] In his *Discorso della virtù femminile e*

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