Performing for the Court: Sofonisba Anguissola's Self-Portraits at the Easel as Court Gifts

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Sofonisba Anguissola (*c*. 1535-1625), the first woman to enjoy professional success as a painter in the Renaissance, shows herself "in the act of painting" in *Self-Portrait at the Easel* (Figure 1).[1] Wearing plain clothes of black and brown, she stands before her easel. She holds a maulstick in her left hand and her brush in her right, steadying it with the maulstick. A palette, knife, and other instruments sit on the edge of her easel, and she prepares to add the next brushstroke to the canvas. However, she pauses, turns, and looks out at the viewer, as if interrupted at her work. Her gaze is assured and poised. Perhaps the interruption is neither unwelcome nor unexpected. Momentarily distracted, she keeps her brush in position, ready to resume work on the image of the Madonna and Child on her easel. Surprisingly, the fictive easel painting displays a style quite distinct from the naturalistic manner of her self-portrait. Sofonisba has elongated the figures and gracefully posed them before a monumental structure and a golden landscape. Having positioned the nude Christ at his mother's side, she has shown the Virgin tenderly, almost sensually, holding his head in her hands and lifting his face to her own for a kiss. The intimacy of the gesture is highly unusual in representations of the Madonna and Child, but so too is the painting in which it appears. Before Sofonisba, no other Italian artist had pictured him- or herself working at the easel on a devotional image.[2] Rarely had artists painted images within their paintings with a style so dissimilar to their own, and few women of the sixteenth century had hazarded such a candid gaze or bold display of their abilities before the viewer.

Noting the unusual iconographic and stylistic features of *Self-Portrait at the Easel* and the two known copies after it, this paper argues that the artist utilized her self-portraits as court gifts, fashioning an image of herself as the ideal court painter.[3] Documenting the artist's self-promotion through the exchange of letters and works of art in the 1550s, the paper demonstrates Sofonisba's ties to prominent Mannerist artists such as Francesco Salviati (*c*. 1510-63) and Giulio Clovio (1498-1578) and argues that through the exchange she became acquainted with the court style of Mannerism and earned a reputation for *invenzione*, or invention. The discussion then examines the likely prototypes for her self-portraits in order to assert that the artist combined and modified her precedents to create novel images that advertised her artistic skill and *invenzione* to prospective patrons. Finally, employing Stephen Greenblatt's theory of self-fashioning to elucidate the description of the ideal court lady in *Il cortegiano* by Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1592), this paper offers an interpretation of Sofonisba's self-portraits

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1 Joanna Woods-Marsden has observed that Sofonisba depicts herself "in atto di dipingere." She argues that as a noblewoman Sofonisba was able to emphasize her manual dexterity without the "stigma of manual labor" because the terms "noble" and "manual" were simply incongruent in the sixteenth century, and she characterizes the painting as a "self-likeness as a craftswoman." Although I hope to show that the painting is more complex than this, presenting Sofonisba as an artist of both skill and intellect, I should acknowledge the influence of Woods-Marsden's work on this paper. See Joanna Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture: The Visual Construction of Identity and the Social Status of the Artist* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 204-10 and 234.

2 Scholars attribute the first self-portrait at the easel to Catharina van Hemessen in 1548 and generally recognize the figure of Saint Luke in Rogier van der Weyden's *Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin* (*c*. 1435; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) as a self-portrait, making it the first self-portrait showing the artist in the act of depicting the Madonna and Child. Sofonisba was the first to combine the two motifs. Her relationship to the precedents is discussed below.

3 The two known copies are *Self-Portrait at the Easel* (*c*. 1554; private collection, Italy) and *Self-Portrait at the Easel* (late 1550s; Federico Zeri Collection, Mentana). The version now in a private collection in Italy is attributed to Sofonisba. Bernard Berenson and Flavio Caroli accepted the version in the Zeri Collection as a replica, but Rossana Sacchi has convincingly argued that it is a derivation by another artist after Sofonisba. The close replication of the subject strongly suggests that Sofonisba and the circle around her utilized the paintings as court gifts and that the subject was met with approval, for there was sufficient demand for at least three versions. See Bernard Berenson, *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance: A List of the Principal Artists and Their Works with an Index of Places; Central Italian and North Italian Schools* (London: Phaidon, 1968), 1:13-14; Flavio Caroli, *Sofonisba Anguissola e le sue sorelle* (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1987), 106-7; and Gianna Lonza, Maurizio Cossu, and Donato Scala, eds., *Sofonisba Anguissola e le sue sorelle*, exh. cat. (Rome: Leonardo Arte, 1994), 198 and 200.

as self-conscious performances of her chosen identity as a court painter capable of working in the court style of Mannerism as in the fictive easel pictures in her self-portraits.[4]

Born into a noble family in Cremona around 1535, Sofonisba trained as a painter with Bernardino Campi (1522-91) and later Bernardino Gatti (*c*. 1495-1575).[5] A series of letters from the 1550s demonstrates that the artist and her father, Amilcare, began to circulate samples of her paintings and drawings as court gifts immediately after the conclusion of her apprenticeship in an effort to obtain a court position for the talented young artist.[6] A letter from the painter Francesco Salviati, whose work this paper argues influenced the conception of her self-portraits, indicates that works by Sofonisba were already circulating in Rome in 1554.[7] In 1556, Amilcare wrote to the duke of Ferrara, sending a self-portrait by Sofonisba as a gift to the duke's daughter and reminding the duke of two portraits that he had already sent to the court some years before.[8] Later that same year and again in the spring of 1557, he wrote to the duchess of Mantua. He thanked the duchess for her recent kindness to Sofonisba and her sister Elena, who had become a nun in the Dominican monastery of San Vincenzo in Mantua, and he sent a small picture to the duchess, asking her to kindly convey it to Eleonora Gonzaga (1493-1570), the Duchess of Urbino. Sofonisba, Amilcare explained, had promised it to the duchess during the artist's recent trip to Mantua.[9] Together, these letters indicate how quickly and widely father and daughter circulated her work in an effort to attract the favor of a court.

They also worked to gain the support of artists who were in a position to promote her career at court. In 1557 and 1558, Amilcare wrote to Michelangelo (1475-1564), the most influential artist of the day. He asked the artist to send one of his own drawings so that Sofonisba might faithfully finish it and return it, and later he wrote to thank Michelangelo for his praise of one of Sofonisba's paintings, word of which had reached Cremona.[10] Although no court appointment came from the interaction, the connection to Michelangelo was invaluable. A letter from the artist's friend Tommaso dei Cavalieri (1509-87) to Cosimo I de' Medici (1519-74) illustrates that the alliance brought Sofonisba's work to the attention of new and influential audiences and promoted her reputation among the cultural elite.[11]

With his letter to the duke of Florence, Cavalieri sent a drawing of Cleopatra by Michelangelo and *Boy Bitten by a Crayfish* by Sofonisba (Figure 2).[12] He related how Michelangelo, having seen a drawing of a youth laughing by Sofonisba, challenged her to try the more difficult subject of a putto crying. She responded by sending *Boy Bitten by a Crayfish*. Sending the drawing to the duke some years later, Cavalieri declared it to be not only beautiful but also inventive, and thus he recommended the artist to the duke in no uncertain terms. By crediting her with the conquest of a difficult subject, he implied that she exemplified *virtù*,

4 See Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Baldesare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier: The Singleton Translation; An Authoritative Text Criticism*, ed. Daniel Javitch (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005). For the application of the theory of self-fashioning to Renaissance art history, see especially Stephen J. Campbell, ed., *Artists at Court: Image-Making and Identity, 1300-1550* (Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2004); Mary Rogers, ed., *Fashioning Identities in Renaissance Art* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2000); and Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture*.

5 The exact date of Sofonisba's birth is unknown. Scholars place it around 1535, shortly after the marriage of her parents, Amilcare Anguissola and Bianca Ponzoni. Sofonisba was the eldest of seven children, including five sisters and one brother. Her father was likely motivated by his inability to dower so many daughters and by the more liberal attitude toward the education of women in the sixteenth century when he arranged to have his eldest daughters, Sofonisba and Elena, receive drawing and painting lessons from Campi. Knowledge of painting was among the talents of the ideal court lady. Thus, by encouraging his daughters to learn how to paint, Amilcare was following the century's prescriptions for the education of women and also positioning them for future court appointments, for the patronage of a court could provide sufficient income for the entire family and resolve the issue of an insufficient dowry. In 1546, Sofonisba and her sister's informal lessons were expanded into a full apprenticeship, and after Campi left for Milan in 1549, the sisters continued their training with Gatti. For the artist's training, see Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi (Florence: G.C. Sansoni, 1906), 6:498-502; Alessandro Lamo, *Discorso intorno alla scoltura et pittura* (Cremona, 1584), quoted in Rossana Sacchi, ed., "Fonti e stampa e letterarie, 1550-1625," in Lonza, Cossu, and Scala, *Sofonisba Anguissola* (see note 3), 406-8; Sylvia Ferino-Pagden, "Sofonisba Anguissola: The First Woman Painter," in *Sofonisba Anguissola: Renaissance Woman*, by Sylvia Ferino-Pagden and Maria Kusche, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1995), 10-11; and Caroline P. Murphy, "The Economics of the Woman Artist," in *Italian Women Artists: From Renaissance to Baroque*, ed. Elizabeth S.G. Nicholson et al., exh. cat. (Milan: Skira, 2007), 25.

6 In addition to the more lucrative opportunities available at court, the decision to pursue court patronage was most likely motivated by the limitations placed on Sofonisba as a member of the nobility. Male or female, it would have been inappropriate for a noble to work on commission. Thus, father and daughter worked to gain court patronage through gift-giving. However, as the visual evidence of her self-portraits at the easel suggests, her noble status did not require that she veil her claims to artistic skill with assertions of her nobility or womanly virtue, a common assertion which I aim to refute here. See Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, 3rd ed. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 79-85; Valerio Guazzoni, "Donna, pittrice, e gentildonna: La nascita di un mito femminile del Cinquecento," in Lonza, Cossu, and Scala, *Sofonisba Anguissola* (see note 3), 64-65; and Murphy, "Economics," 25.

7 Lamo transcribes the letter in his *Discorso*. See Lamo, *Discorso*, 408.

8 Rossana Sacchi, ed., "Regesto dei documenti," in Lonza, Cossu, and Scala, *Sofonisba Anguissola* (see note 3), 364.

9 Chiara Tellini Perina, "Documenti inediti riguardanti Sofonisba Anguissola," *Paragone* 509-11 (1992): 97-98.

10 Sacchi, "Regesto dei documenti," 364-65.

11 Ibid., 370.

12 For Sofonisba's drawing, see Andrea Bayer, ed., *Painters of Reality: The Legacy of Leonardo and Caravaggio in Lombardy*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), 199; and Lonza, Cossu, and Scala, *Sofonisba Anguissola*, 274.

or the ability to overcome difficulty with practice and ease. In describing the ingenious subject chosen by the artist, he suggested that she possessed *invenzione*.[13] Both were ideal qualities to be desired by any artist, but in a century in which creative powers were generally denied to women Cavalieri's attribution of them to a woman artist was especially great commendation.[14]

Evidence also suggests that Sofonisba earned the backing of the miniaturist Giulio Clovio, through whom she likely became acquainted with the court style of Mannerism, an awareness of which is apparent in the fictive easel paintings in her self-portraits. As documented by her father's letters, she was in Mantua in 1556.[15] There, or perhaps in an undocumented trip to Parma, she likely encountered Clovio, who was working for the Farnese in Parma and Piacenza at the time.[16] Although no sources directly link the two artists, circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that they were at least acquainted with each other's work. A 1578 inventory of Clovio's belongings records a work by Sofonisba in his possession at the time of his death.[17] Sofonisba's *Self-Portrait in Miniature* now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, exhibits Clovio's influence in its conception and execution.[18] In addition, scholars have widely accepted a portrait of Clovio to be the work of Sofonisba.[19] The likely interaction between the artists establishes an important link between Sofonisba and Mannerist artists such as Francesco Salviati, whose works Clovio studied and quoted in his miniatures.[20] It was likely Clovio who inspired Sofonisba to adopt the elongated forms, exceedingly elegant postures, and sweet but sophisticated handling of the Mannerist style in the Madonna and Child paintings depicted in her self-portraits at the easel.

When conceiving of her self-portraits, Sofonisba, as a woman artist in sixteenth-century Italy, had no direct model on which to rely. Instead, she had to draw on sources tangentially related to self-portraiture in order to create, for the first time in Italy, an image of the female self at work as a painter. To do so, scholars maintain that she likely drew on three prototypes: 1) Catharina van Hemessen's *Self-Portrait at the Easel* from 1548 and now in the Kunstmuseum in Basel; 2) representations of Saint Luke painting the Madonna and Child; and 3) images of female painters from antiquity named in Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*. However, this paper asserts that she neither slavishly copied her prototypes nor used them to veil her claims to artistic ability with references to her nobility and womanly virtue, as some would argue.[21] Instead, she inventively combined and modified her precedents to create an image that boldly advertised her artistic abilities to potential patrons.

In 1548, Catharina van Hemessen (b. 1528) painted what is believed to be the first self-portrait at the easel by an artist, male or female (Figure 3).[22] It is uncertain if Sofonisba was aware of her work. However, it is interesting to note how similarly the artists, who would both be invited to the Spanish court, represented themselves as painters.[23] Still, as

13 Sacchi, "Regesto dei documenti," 364-65.

14 Frederika H. Jacobs discusses the gendering of creative powers in the Renaissance and notes that Sofonisba was the only woman artist credited with *invenzione* by her male contemporaries. See Frederika H. Jacobs, *Defining the Renaissance 'Virtuosa': Women Artists and the Language of Art History and Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 51-59; and Frederika H. Jacobs, "Woman's Capacity to Create: The Unusual Case of Sofonisba Anguissola," *Renaissance Quarterly* 47 (1994): 74-101.

15 Tellini Perina, "Documenti inediti," 97-98.

16 Maria Kusche suggests that they met in Parma. Other scholars simply note that they were traveling and working in the same region in the period. See Maria Kusche, "Sofoniba Anguissola: Her Life and Work," in Ferino-Pagden and Kusche, *Sofonisba Anguissola* (see note 5), 46; Mina Gregori, ed., *I Campi e la cultura artistica cremonese del Cinquecento*, exh. cat. (Milan: Electa, 1985), 174; Caroli, *Sofonisba Anguissola*, 112; and Lonza, Cossu, and Scala, *Sofonisba Anguissola*, 194.

17 John William Bradley summarizes the items in the inventory. See John William Bradley, *The Life and Works of Giorgio Giulio Clovio: Miniaturist, 1495-1578, with Notices of His Contemporaries and of the Art of Book Decoration in the Sixteenth Century* (Amsterdam: G.W. Hissink, 1971), 375.

18 See Patrizia Costa, "Sofonisba Anguissola's Self-portrait in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts," *Arte Lombarda* 125 (1999): 54-62.

19 See Berenson, *Italian Pictures*, 1:14 and 3:plate 1970; Gregori, *I Campi*, 174; Caroli, *Sofonisba Anguissola*, 112; Maria Kusche, "Sofonisba Anguissola en España: Retratista en la Corte de Felipe II junto a Alonso Sánchez Coello y Jorge de la Rua," *Archivo Española de Arte* 248 (1989): 395; Illya Sandra Perlingieri, *Sofonisba Anguissola: The First Great Woman Artist of the Renaissance* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 40; and Lonza, Cossu, and Scala, *Sofonisba Anguissola*, 194.

20 Clovio and Salviati both worked for the Farnese around 1540, and Clovio's *Farnese Hours* and Salviati's *Alexander the Great* tapestry designs display striking similarities, which Clare Robertson attributes to Salviati's influence on Clovio. Clovio is also known to have copied the works of Michelangelo, Raphael, and Parmigianino in drawings that he kept for study purposes and bequeathed to Farnese at his death. See Clare Robertson, *'Il Gran Cardinale': Alessandro Farnese, Patron of the Arts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 34; and Bradley, *Giorgio Giulio Clovio*, 375.

21 See especially Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, 77-86; and Catherine King, "Looking a Sight: Sixteenth-Century Portraits of Women Artists," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 58 (1995): 386-94. My response to their interpretations is influenced by Mary D. Garrard's charge to "reclaim female agency." See Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, introduction to *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 1-25; and Mary D. Garrard, "Here's Looking at Me: Sofonisba Anguissola and the Problem of the Woman Artist," *Renaissance Quarterly* 47 (1994): 556-622.

22 King, "Looking a Sight," 386. For a fuller discussion of the painting, its prototypes, and its relation to Sofonisba's paintings, see Marguerite Droz-Emmert, *Catharina van Hemessen: Malerin der Renaissance* (Basel: Schwabe, 2004), 49-73 and 80-90.

23 The daughter of a painter, Catharina van Hemessen trained and worked in her father's workshop in the Netherlands until her marriage to the musician Chrétien de Morien in 1554. Two years later, the couple was invited to the court of Mary of Hungary in Spain. It is unlikely that van Hemessen used her paintings as court gifts, for she seems to have given up painting when she married and relied on her husband's

is often the case, the differences are perhaps more revealing than the similarities. In her self-portrait, van Hemessen shows herself painting at her easel, as Sofonisba would in the next decade. Sitting before an unfinished panel, she holds a palette, brushes, and a maulstick in her left hand and lifts her painting hand to the canvas, steadying it with the maulstick. Like Sofonisba, she turns and looks out of the painting, but unlike Sofonisba she does not look at the viewer. Instead, the composition implies that she looks into a mirror, for she appears to be painting a self-portrait.[24] Thus, she ingeniously creates a double portrait, depicting herself in the process of painting an image of herself.[25] It is certainly a clever conceit. However, it is less audacious than Sofonisba's. By avoiding direct eye contact with the viewer, van Hemessen maintains a decorous distance from her audience. Sofonisba, on the other hand, gazes directly out at the viewer without hesitation. Furthermore, Sofonisba considerably altered the meaning of the self-portrait at the easel type by showing herself painting not an image of herself, but rather an image of the Madonna and Child.

In portraying herself as the painter of a devotional image, she may have intended to evoke representations of Saint Luke painting the Madonna and Child. Although more popular in Northern Europe, images of Saint Luke as a painter were not uncommon in Italy.[26] The saint acted as a surrogate for the painter, and his legend as an allegory of the artist's divine inspiration. Scholars have interpreted Sofonisba's *Self-Portrait at the Easel*, like representations of the saint by male artists (Figure 4), as an image of the artist's *ingegno*, or creative idea, and by correlation her *invenzione*.[27] Like her male contemporaries, Sofonisba appropriates the saint's imagery. She shows herself painting the Madonna and Child, whose physical appearances, because they cannot be found in nature and copied from life, must be inspired by something beyond mere perception and visualized by the artist through invention.[28] In fact, one of her contemporaries, Giorgio Vasari (1511-74), praised Sofonisba for her *invenzione*, asserting that she understood not only how to paint from nature and after the work of others but also how to create rare and beautiful images by herself.[29] Looking out at the viewer from *Self-Portrait at the Easel* and displaying her inventive talents to him or her, Sofonisba laid claim to the mental skills and inspiration that Saint Luke embodied for sixteenth-century artists like Vasari.

Sofonisba may also have drawn on the prototypes available in Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*.[30] For Sofonisba's self-portraits, representations of Timarete supplied the most transferable model. Timarete was the daughter of a painter. Having rejected the tasks normally assigned to women, she practiced painting and earned the highest acclaim for a painting of Diana made for the Ephesians.[31] In the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the pagan painter was Christianized. In place of Diana, she began to paint the Madonna and Child, and in the process she transformed into something akin to a female Saint Luke.[32] For example, in an early fifteenth-century illuminated manuscript of Boccaccio's text from France, she sits in front of her easel in a well-equipped studio and paints a small panel of the Madonna

skill as a spinet player to gain court patronage. For her life and career, see Liana De Girolami Cheney et al., *Self-Portraits by Women Painters* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2000), 44; and Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists, 1550-1950*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1977), 105.

24 King, "Looking a Sight," 386; and De Girolami Cheney et al., *Self-Portraits by Women Painters*, 44.

25 Because she is shown sketching the first outlines of her self-portrait, the painting has also been interpreted as a commentary on contemporary debates as to the origin of painting in drawing. See De Girolami Cheney et al., *Self-Portraits by Women Painters*, 44.

26 One of the earliest surviving depictions of the subject is found in a Bolognese manuscript which dates to 1346 and in which the saint is shown painting an icon of the Virgin and Child in an illuminated initial. However, it was not until the fifteenth century, and then primarily in the North, that painters began to insert their self-portraits into images of Saint Luke painting the Madonna and Child. The most famous, and likely the first, example is Rogier van der Weyden's *Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin*. Simultaneously, images of the Virgin appearing to the saint in his studio, which doubled for the painter and his studio, became the preferred mode of representing the subject. In the next century, the iconography crossed the Alps, and Italian artists appropriated the saint's imagery in order to elevate the status of painting from craft to art by claiming to possess divine inspiration like the painter saint. See Christine M. Boeckl, "The Legend of St. Luke The Painter: Eastern and Western Iconography," *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 54 (2005): 15 and 29-31; Michael Levey, *The Painter Depicted: Painters as a Subject in Painting* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1982), 16-18; and Jean Owens Schaefer, "Saint Luke as Painter: From Saint to Artisan to Artist," in *Artistes, Artisans et Production Artistique au Moyen Age: Colloque international, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique Université de Rennes II, Haute-Bretagne 2-6 mai 1983*, ed. Xavier Barral I Altet (Paris: Picard, 1986), 415-16.

27 De Girolami Cheney et al., *Self-Portraits by Women Painters*, 53. For the image of Saint Luke painting the Madonna and Child attributed to Raphael and the problems of dating and attribution surrounding it, see Pico Cellini, "Il restauro del S. Luca di Raffaello," *Bolletino d'arte* 43 (July 1958): 250-62; and Zygmunt Waźbiński, "'San Luca che dipinge la Madonna' all'Accademia di Roma: un 'pastiche' zuccariano nella maniera di Raffaello?" *Artibus et Historiae* 6, no. 12 (1985): 27-37.

28 The distinction is between *ritrarre* and *imitare*, the perceptual and conceptual. For a discussion of the terms in relationship to Sofonisba's portraits, see Jacobs, "Woman's Capacity to Create," 87-93.

29 Vasari, *Vite*, 5:81.

30 For the author's influence on self-portraits by women artists, see Angela Ghirardi, "Lavinia Fontana allo specchio: Pittrici e autoritratto nel secondo Cinquecento," in *Lavinia Fontana, 1552-1614*, ed. Vera Fortunati, exh. cat. (Milan: Electa, 1994), 40-42; and Gunter Schweikhart, "Boccaccios *De claris mulieribus* und die Selbstdarstellungen von Malerinnen im 16. Jahrhundert," in *Der Künstler über sich in seinem Werk: Internationales Symposium der Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rom 1989*, ed. Matthias Winner (Weinheim: VCH, 1992), 119-21.

31 Giovanni Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, ed. and trans. Virginia Brown (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 230-33.

32 Ghirardi, "Lavinia Fontana allo specchio," 41.

and Child (Figure 5). In the background, an assistant grinds blue pigments for her to use on the Madonna's gown, and in the foreground, extra brushes and other instruments are neatly arranged for her use. It is the image of orderly practice and the master craftswoman and also a powerful synthesis of the pagan and the Christian, embodying painting from antiquity to the contemporary day in the single figure of Timarete.[33] Taking Timarete as her model with the figure's evocation of Saint Luke, Sofonisba may have conceived of her *Self-Portrait at the Easel*, and her own figure in it, as a personification of painting. She represented herself as a painter par excellence, displaying her artistic talents and inspiration to the viewer and—like the ancient painter—declaring herself worthy of fame and recognition.

In order to understand why Sofonisba chose to represent herself in this bold manner, one must understand the audience to whom she addressed her self-portraits. Sending her paintings as court gifts, she directed her self-representations to a competitive and sophisticated society in which life resembled art, and court members were expected to perform with style and grace for the pleasure of the court. In *Il cortegiano*, Baldassare Castiglione offers a vivid picture of the courts into which the artist hoped to gain entry through gift-giving in the 1550s. Most especially, his description of the ideal court lady captures the self-conscious performance required by the court. Above all else, he desires her to possess a "pleasing affability" so that she may "entertain graciously" the court and its members.[34] In order to be able to engage in agreeable conversation, she ought to have knowledge of many things, including letters, music, painting, and dancing, as well as exercises more fitting for a man like arms, horsemanship, and hunting.[35] However, in all of her actions, she must also maintain "a certain mean (difficult to achieve and, as it were, composed of contraries)."[36] Therefore, she must balance amiability with propriety, delicacy with activity, and modesty with grace, and thereby maintain an uneasy balance of opposites all the while presenting a charming, gracious, sophisticated, and decorous image of herself to the court.[37]

The self-consciousness demanded by this lifestyle gave rise to what Stephen Greenblatt terms "self-fashioning," or the idea that human identity could be shaped, molded, or crafted through human artifice.[38] The result was a greater awareness of the self and the belief that it could be modified. Thus, sixteenth-century courtiers and court ladies began to craft artfully designed identities, projecting them into the world as unique personalities as manifested in stylized manners and behaviors.[39] For the court lady, this meant carefully manipulating the conflicting forces operating on her and cleverly disguising the struggle to balance them. If she managed to conceal the effort while maintaining a "pleasing affability," she would achieve that easy nonchalance, or *sprezzatura*, that was the mark of a true courtier.[40] In essence, she became a performer on the court's stage, acting out her carefully fashioned identity while concealing the artifice behind it.

Sofonisba's self-portraits were an effort to project herself into this courtly milieu and to present herself to prospective patrons as a desirable court artist. With grace and poise, she declared herself to be not simply a noblewoman but also an artist, who like her male contemporaries possessed *invenzione*. Furthermore, she presented herself "in the act of painting," performing her art before the viewer's eyes. Although the simple background of her paintings does not betray her setting, the implication is that she is in her studio. Like Timarete, she is equipped with the instruments of a fully furnished studio. And like van Hemessen, she shows herself with her hands raised to the canvas, busy at work on her painting. Yet unlike both artists, she looks out at the viewer, engages his or her eye, and invites him or her to observe an artist at work. For Sofonisba, the invitation to watch her at work was particularly appropriate because, as Evelyn Welch notes, sixteenth-century courts were full of singers, jesters, and other "cultural performers" vying for the court's attention and the favors and rewards that would come with it.[41] Thus, Sofonisba showed herself ready to compete, refashioning her image as a painter into that of a performer. With that direct and uncompromising gaze, she invited the viewer to watch her in the act of painting, which as a prospective patron he or she might expect to do one day in her studio.

Finally, the curious image that she portrays on her easel merits closer scrutiny for—more than any element of the self-portraits—the image advertises her artistic skill and *invenzione*. The artist is known to have produced independent religious images only in her maturity, long after she had earned a position at the court of Philip II of Spain (1527-98). The few examples that survive bear little resemblance to the Madonna and Child on her easel and are known to have been copied after works by other artists.[42] And yet, schol-

33 Ibid.

34 Castiglione, *Book of the Courtier*, 151.

35 Ibid., 154-55 and 24-29.

36 Ibid., 151.

37 Ibid., 151-54.

38 Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 1-9.

39 Joanna Woods-Marsden, "Introduction: Collective Identity/Individual Identity," in Rogers, *Fashioning Identities* (see note 4), 1. For the use of the theory of self-fashioning in Renaissance art history, see note 4 above.

40 Castiglione, *Book of the Courtier*, 32.

41 Although Welch treats the facile execution of drawings as the painter's performance at court, I would argue that her self-portraits advertised her as a performer, promising the future performance of art at court. See Evelyn Welch, "Painting as Performance in the Italian Renaissance Court," in Campbell, *Artists at Court* (see note 4), 20.

42 For example, see Lonza, Cossu, and Scala, *Sofonisba Anguissola*, 260-269.

ars have found no prototype for the fictive easel paintings in her self-portraits. This paper proposes that the stylized, almost sensual representation of the Madonna and Child likely derives from a lost drawing or painting by Francesco Salviati, recorded in a 1576 engraving by Diana Scultori (Figure 6).[43] In her self-portraits, Sofonisba worked in two distinct manners, the stylized elegance of Mannerism in her fictive easel paintings and the more naturalistic manner of her self-images. In doing so, she deliberately presented herself as the master of various styles, and in particular the most popular court style of the period, Mannerism. At a time when inventive powers were often denied to women, Sofonisba unhesitatingly performed her art and advertised her artistic talents to the viewer.

To conclude, it is necessary to consider the success of Sofonisba's performance. In 1559, at the end of a decade in which the artist and her father had circulated her drawings and paintings as gifts in hopes of attracting court patronage, Philip II of Spain requested the artist's presence at his court in Madrid.[44] His young bride, Isabel de Valois (1545-68), had expressed an interest in learning how to paint, and Philip wished that Sofonisba would come to Spain in order to serve as lady-in-waiting and painting instructor to the queen. Sofonisba accepted the invitation and went on to serve the court for thirteen years, earning a degree of fame and recognition that surpassed many of her male contemporaries and marked her as the first professionally successful woman artist of the Renaissance. As a noblewoman from a provincial city in northern Italy, she could not have hoped to attract the attention of such a prominent patron, or to enjoy such success, without the promotion of her artistic abilities through gift-giving. In this context, a bold mode of self-representation was required. Therefore, in her self-portraits at the easel, Sofonisba unhesitatingly defined herself as a court painter. She performed her artistic talents and advertised her *invenzione*, and in this manner earned a place at court.

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[43] For the print, see Paolo Bellini, ed., *L'opera incisa di Adamo e Diana Scultori* (Vicenza: Pozza, 1991), 215-16.

[44] For the artist's years in Spain, see Maria Kusche's numerous publications, including: "Sofonisba Anguissola: Her Life and Work," 49-74; "Sofonisba Anguissola al servizio dei rei di Spagna," in Lonza, Cossu, and Scala, *Sofonisba Anguissola* (see note 3), 89-116; "Sofonisba e il ritratto di rappresentazione ufficiale nella corte spagnola," in Lonza, Cossu, and Scala, *Sofonisba Anguissola*, 117-52; "Sofonisba Anguissola retratista de la corte española," *Paragone* 509-11 (1992): 3-34; and "Sofonisba Anguissola en España."

Figure 1. Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait at the Easel*, *c*. 1556, oil on canvas, 66 x 57 cm. Muzeum Zamek w Lancucie, Lancut, Poland. Photo credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

Figure 2. Sofonisba Anguissola, *Boy Bitten by a Crayfish*, *c*. 1554, black chalk and charcoal on brown paper, 33.3 x 38.5 cm. Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples, Italy. Photo credit: Mondadori Portfolio / Electa / Art Resource, NY.

[*facing page, upper left*] Figure 3. Catharina van Hemessen, *Self-Portrait at the Easel*, 1548, oil on oak panel, 32 x 25 cm. Kunstmuseum Basel, permanent loan from the Prof. J.J. Bachofen-Burckhardt Foundation, 1921. Photo credit: Kunstmuseum Basel, Martin P. Bühler.

[*facing page, upper right*] Figure 4. Raphael (attributed to), *Saint Luke Painting the Madonna in the Presence of Raphael*, before 1590, oil on canvas, 220 x 160 cm. Accademia di S. Luca, Rome, Italy. Photo credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

[*facing page, lower left*] Figure 5. Story of Timarete (Thamar), from *De Claris Mulieribus* by Giovanni Boccaccio, early fifteenth century. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Fr. 12420, f. 86r. Photo credit: Art Resource, NY.

[*facing page, lower right*] Figure 6. Diana Scultori (after Francesco Salviati), *Virgin Kneeling and Embracing the Christ Child*, 1576, engraving, 22.5 x 16.7 cm. Photo credit: © Trustees of the British Museum.


FRANCESCO SALVIATI IN VENTOR
DIANA MANTOV ROMAE INCIDEBAT
QVEM MARE, QVEM TELLVS COELI QVEM MAXIMVS ORBIS
NON CAPIVNT, MATRIS CLAVDITVR ECCE SINV