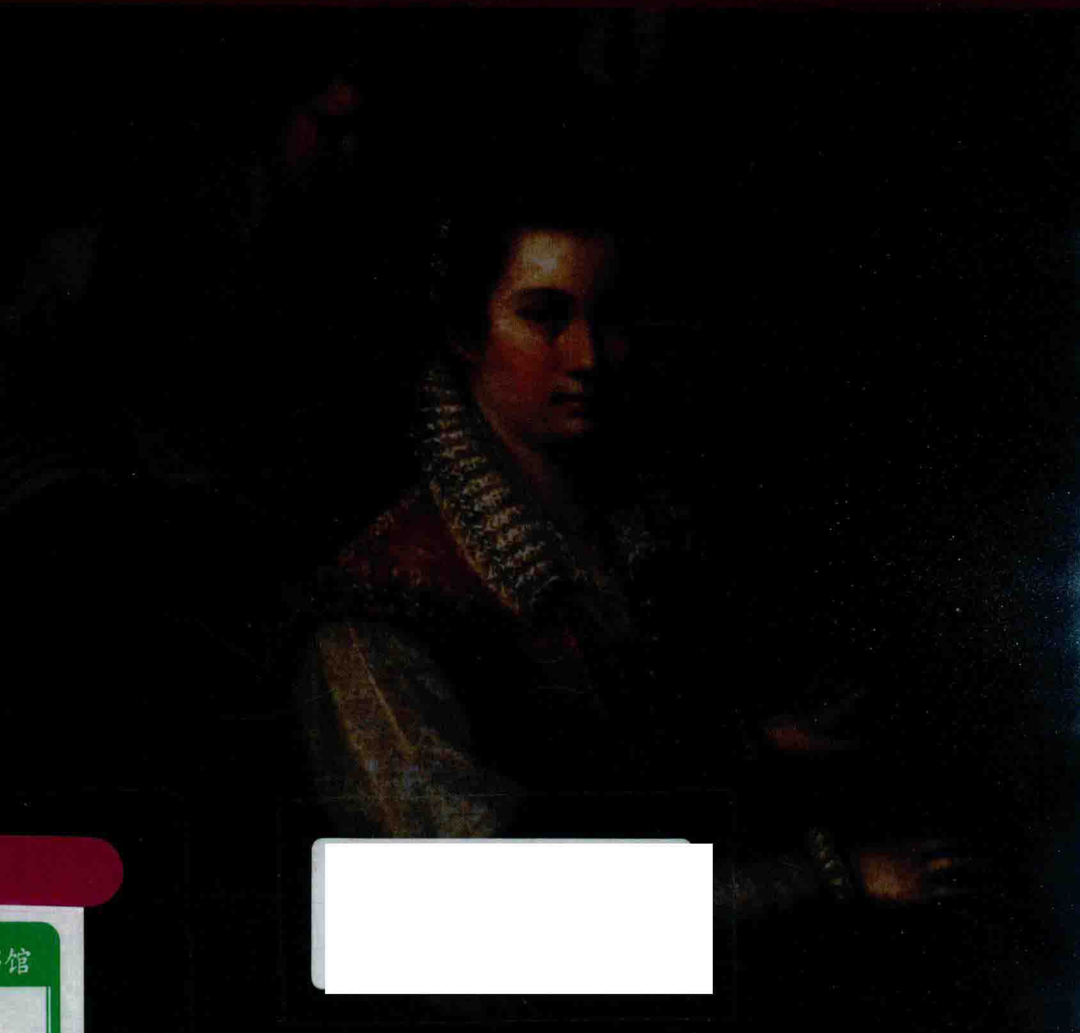
Defining the Renaissance *Virtuosa*

WOMEN ARTISTS AND THE LANGUAGE OF ART HISTORY AND CRITICISM



Fredrika H. Jacobs

Defining the Renaissance *Virtuosa*

WOMEN ARTISTS AND THE LANGUAGE OF ART HISTORY AND CRITICISM

Fredrika H. Jacobs

Virginia Commonwealth University

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521572705

First published 1997
First paperback edition 1999

Printed in the United States of America

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Jacobs, Fredrika Herman.
Defining the Renaissance virtuosa: women artists and the language of art history and criticism / Fredrika H. Jacobs
p. cm.
Includes biographical references and index
ISBN 0 521 57270 3 (hardbound)
ISBN 0 521 64496 9 (paperback)
1. Feminism and art - Italy. 2. Women artists - Italy - Biography - History and criticism. 3. Art, Italian. 4. Art, Renaissance - Italy. I. Title.
N72.F45J33 1997
704'.042'094509031-dc21 96-37798
CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-57270-5 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-66496-7 Paperback

Leonardo, Raphael, and Michelangelo are familiar names that are often closely associated with the concepts of genius and masterpiece. But what about Sofonisba Anguissola, Lavinia Fontana, and Irene di Spilimbergo? Their names are unfamiliar, and their works are literally unknown. Why?

Defining the Renaissance "Virtuosa" considers the language of art in relationship to the issues of gender difference through an examination of art criticism written between 1550 and 1800 on approximately forty women artists who were active in Renaissance Italy. Fredrika Jacobs demonstrates how these theoretical writings defined women artists by linking artistic creation with biological procreation and by asserting a connection between an artist's sex and her style. She also examines the ambiguity of these women as both beautiful objects and creators of beautiful objects. Jacobs's study shows how deeply the biases of these early critics have affected both subsequent reception of these Renaissance *virtuose* and modern scholarship.

Defining the Renaissance *Virtuosa*

For Paul and Jessica

But, what shall I say to them now,
  Our women, who assume this profession,
  Who adopt paint, pen, chalk
  And then explain the flight of their fame?

– Giulio Cornelio Gratiano,
Di Orlando Santo vita, 1636

I say that even later someone will
  Remember us . . .

– Sappho

Acknowledgments

A number of years ago I taught a course on aesthetics and art criticism. After about two-thirds of the semester had passed, several women in the class asked a simple and logical question. When, they wanted to know, would we be discussing critical writings on women artists? That question was the catalyst for this study. And so I thank my students for seeing what I had overlooked.

The endnotes to this study make clear my indebtedness to the scholarship of many, but especially that of Elizabeth Cropper, Mary Garrard, and David Summers. I am further grateful to Mary for her critical reading of an early version of this study and for her unfailing encouragement of this project.

I also thank Angela Federico, who spent a long weekend with me searching Naples for evidence of Mariangiola Criscuolo's paintings, and Fernando Magrini, who aided my search in Pistoia for Suor Plautilla Nelli's altarpiece for Santa Lucia. Although these efforts proved futile, the quest for Isabella Parasole's illustrated book of lace patterns was successful, thanks to the assistance of Sonia Giacopani at the Biblioteca Angelica, Rome.

My attempts to grasp the nuanced meaning of neo-Petrarchan verse and translate it fairly would not have been possible without the significant assistance of Mary Gallucci. I am most grateful to her for her knowledge and patience. My thanks also go to Liana De Girolami Cheney and Ingrid Rowland for their advice concerning the translations of several passages.

Finally, I thank Lynette Bosch and Bette Talvacchia for their encouragement; Carolyn Brown for helping me to cope with the computer age;

Camilla Palmer and Christie Lerch for their invaluable editorial expertise (and patience with my deficiencies in this area); my parents Frederick and Lucy Herman, who have always prompted me to look and encouraged me to question; my brother Bernard L. Herman, whose scholarly example I admire and whose opinion I treasure; Julian and Bettie Jacobs, for keeping the home fires burning during my absences to search for evidence of Renaissance women artists; and Martha and Becky for everything. Above all, I thank my husband Paul and daughter Jessica. Their support and loving encouragement made this book possible.

Contents

Illustrations

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 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.*

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 (capricciósо 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 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.