ADVANCING
WOMEN
ARTISTS

A Lasting Legacy

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What is Advancing Women Artists?

Myriad paintings and sculptures by groundbreaking women artists have been overlooked for centuries, and many of these works are currently in need of restoration or maintenance. Advancing Women Artists (AWA), a not-for-profit US organization based in Florence, is committed to identifying, restoring and exhibiting artwork by women in the museums, churches and storehouses of Florence and Tuscany. Compelling artistic treasures continue to be a silent, undiscovered part of the city's creative heritage. Since its founding in 2009 by US philanthropist and author Jane Fortune, AWA has restored 67 paintings and sculptures by women, from the 1500s to the 1900s, in venues such as the Uffizi, the Accademia Gallery, the Palatine Gallery, Palazzo Pitti's Modern Art Gallery, Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella Museum.

Through research and education (books, seminars, and conferences and study programs) and by exhibiting the restored artworks in Florence, AWA works to salvage this vital cultural legacy and to promote its importance in Italy and to the world. AWA works with Florence's museum directors who oversee each project from its conception to completion. Restoration begins with preliminary diagnostic analyses and complete photographic documentation. Expert women conservators painstakingly carry out the necessary cleaning and restoration using techniques appropriate for the age of the artwork and the medium in which it was created. In addition, AWA funds and creates professionally-produced videos and television specials, which document all phases of each restoration project.

EARLY WOMEN ARTISTS REACHING BEYOND THE LIMITS OF SOCIAL CONVENTION

For centuries, the creation of art by women around the world was thwarted by social constraints, limited formal training or education, and laws that prevented women from joining professional associations that controlled the practice of art as a commercial activity. Within the Italian context, Florence has proven itself an exceptional artistic environment, engendering and supporting women artists since the mid-sixteenth century.

The prevalence of Florentine nun-painters, the liberalism of Medici commissioners who supported both male and female court artists, the far-reaching patronage of Tuscan noblewomen who selected women painters as their protégées or teachers, and the Uffizi's acceptance of women copyists all contributed to the city's emergence as an authentic center for women in the arts. The Medici taste for portraiture, self-portraiture and still life genres was also a driving force behind the variety of works by women artists present in the Medici collections.

PLAUTILLA NELLI (1524–1588)

A self-taught artist and Renaissance woman in every way, Plautilla Nelli tackled large-scale commissions despite the social conventions of her era. At the time, women were ineligible for guild membership, and thus could not be paid for the practice of their craft.

Cloistered nuns, on the other hand, could fulfil artistic commissions obtained by their orders. Nelli trained other women painters in her self-sufficient convent-bottega; she was 'the artistic heir' to Fra' Bartolomeo of the San Marco School, whose 500 drawings she inherited.

Nelli's works are present in Florentine collections including San Marco Museum, San Salvi and Palazzo Vecchio. Painting was a source of income for these women and a practice that even bonfire-of-the-vanities friar Savonarola supported, as he said it kept women from 'becoming slothful'.

As Giorgio Vasari writes in his famed *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*: "She made so many paintings for the homes of Florentine gentlemen that it would be tedious to list them all here". Florentine nobles believed that art works by religious women were imbued with an aura of spirituality that made them highly sought-after for private family chapels.

Plautilla Nelli's *Last Supper* (1570s) is one of the most important paintings in the history of art by women. It is the first representation of a Last Supper by a female hand. With a length of 21 feet, it is also the largest painting ever authored by an early woman artist.

Nelli chooses to portray the dramatic moment in which Christ announces his betrayal and, in a world where women did not paint the male figure, she paints 13 of them, within a single, complex composition.

ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI (1593–1654)

Artemisia's *David and Bathsheba*, at the Palatine Gallery, decorated the Grand Duke of Tuscany's apartment in 1662. Its restoration aimed at improving the composition's legibility, and focused on stabilizing the painting to prevent further deterioration.

The conservators' task was to recompose the image, without adopting invasive techniques or relying on extensive repainting. Their aim was to avoid reconstruction, which would ultimately alter the authenticity of the original work.

"Anybody who came to the studio after we'd done all the filling was rather shocked, because they hadn't expected to find as much damage as we did. In all 38 years of my career, this is the first time I have ever restored a painting by a female artist," says Florence-based British conservator Nicola Ann MacGregor.

In the final weeks of the two-year project, the conservator and her team would rediscover the painting's co-protagonist—the tiny figure of David, barely visible in the upper loggia. Artemisia painted at least six versions of the biblical story of the king spying the wife of Uriah from the loggia of his palace.

It is thanks to David's union with Bathsheba that Jesus Christ's lineage can be traced to the House of David. *David and Bathsheba* was unveiled in November 2008. During a six-week exhibition, entitled *A Christmas Gift to the City of Florence*, it was shown alongside its tapestry reproduction by Pietro Févère (1594-1669), the Medici's chief weaver.

Artemisia's painting is still not on permanent public display in the Palatine Gallery; it has been exhibited temporarily to replace another work on loan.

VIOLANTE SIRIES CERROTI (1709–1783)

In 1770, Violante Siries Cerroti became the first woman ever to be granted permission to copy at the Uffizi Gallery. Though Violante and the women who followed her were asked to paint in private rooms, the Uffizi became known as a 'liberal' venue compared to its more conservative counterpart, the Louvre, where women could only paint under the protection of a bodyguard.

The daughter of French cameo engraver Luigi Siries, Violante would become one of Florence's most important female copy artists working for Grand Tour travellers, who were anxious to take home a work of Florentine art, in a world still devoid of photography.

Her masterwork, *The Virgin Mary Presents the Baby Jesus to Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi*, restored in 2014, resides in the sacristy of the church of Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi. It honors the miraculous visions of a local Florentine saint and is a magnificent copy of Luca Giordano's earlier work displayed in the church's main chapel.

Painted post 1767, it represents one of Florence's few examples of a large-scale devotional canvas by a woman. An early student of Medici Court artist Giovanna Fratellini, Siries Cerroti was a teacher of other professional female painters including Anna Piattoli, Maria Hadfield Cosway and Violante Ferroni.

Their creative circle helped establish Florence as a center for women in the arts. Each was honored with membership of Europe's first drawing academy, the Accademia delle Arti del Disegno, following the path Artemisia had forged in 1616.

VIOLANTE FERRONI (1720–post 1762)

Born in 1720, Ferroni was a student of Violante Siries Cerroti. Later, she would work in the bottega of Gian Domenico Ferretti, who dominated the Florentine art scene during much of the 1700s.

Ferroni was accepted as a member of the Accademia delle arti del Disegno in 1736 and she exhibited at the Accademia di San Luca and the Uffizi Gallery. Like many female painters of her day, she was both maker and muse, posing as a model for Ferretti's *Portrait of a Lady dressed as Diana*.

Like Artemisia, Ferroni painted large works featuring traditionally 'masculine' subjects: full-length figures and historic scenes with spiritual undertones. Her painting, *Saint John of God Heals Plague Victims* is one of two restorations by conservators Elizabeth Wicks and Marina Vincenti, scheduled for completion in December 2020.

The other, *Saint John of God Feeds the Poor*, will be studio-bound in mid-March. Part of a project known as 'The Art of Healing', this restoration aims to bring attention to an important Florentine ideal: art and beauty as a fundamental instrument of physical and spiritual well-being.

The paintings' home, the historic hospital of San Giovanni di Dio, was founded to treat victims of the Black Death, which claimed the lives of almost 25 million Europeans.

Ferroni was awarded the commission for the two ovals in the mid 1700s when the hospital's atrium was refurbished (it also doubled as a chapel for patients). True to its history, the building is soon to become the headquarters of The Council for the Right to Health and Welfare.

In addition to AWA, conservation partners include the Robert Lehman Foundation and Florida State University in Florence.

IRENE PARENTI DUCLOS (1754–1795)

In the eighteenth century, women artists were commonly commissioned to paint still lifes or portraits featuring fully clothed sitters in detailed costumes. More physically demanding, large-scale paintings representing religious or historical themes were considered inappropriate subjects for women.

Irene Parenti Duclos's 1775 *Copy of the Madonna del Sacco by Andrea del Sarto* is an interesting exception to this rule, which may be one of the prime reasons behind Grand Duke Pietro Leopoldo's eagerness to purchase the work when it was offered to him in 1781.

Studies conducted during the restoration of the Duclos *Madonna del Sacco* revealed that the artist had climbed up the scaffolding at the Church of Santissima Maria Annunziata (in her hoop skirts!) and, using a technique described in Vasari's *Lives*, traced the original del Sarto fresco.

This would have been an amazing feat considering the fresco's size and dizzying height. The two paintings match almost exactly, with the exception of a few details. Copying was a common practice for both male and female painters as a source of training and income—they could often garner a price similar to that of the original and the practice did much to increase the marketability of art.

The only woman artist permanently exhibited in the Accademia Gallery collection, Irene Parenti Duclos was painter, teacher and poet—and she frequently participated in the literary salons typical of the Age of Enlightenment.

She was admitted not only to Florence's Accademia delle Arti del Disegno, but to comparable institutions in Rome and Bologna. Her painting, restored in 2011, hangs in the Salone dell'Ottocento amidst 'memories' of Canova and Bartolini.

FELICIE DE FAUVEAU (1801–1886)

Felicie de Fauveau was one of the first female sculptors to make a living from her art. Her high-ranking extended family had withdrawn their economic support for her artistic pursuits when the regime took the view that a woman who sought commercial commissions was committing a punishable act of 'insolent pride'.

De Fauveau had responded to such accusations with fiery conviction, 'Give up my dignity!' the artist exclaimed, 'Know that an artist, such as I am, is a gentleman.' Felicie de Fauveau's realistic marble tribute to her mother (and most loyal supporter), Anne de la Pierre, was completed in 1859.

In Paris in the 1820s, de la Pierre's reputation had facilitated her daughter's debut as a high-society artist. Some years later, when Felicie was convicted for her insurrectional activities in support of the restoration of the Bourbon Monarchy, Anne went to Vandea to share in her daughter's destiny, and the pair lived for months in the same prison cell.

Together they later settled in Florence and established Felicie's studio in Via degli Serragli, not far from the Church of Santa Maria del Carmine where the sepulchral monument to Anne still stands today in the ancient cloister.

When she moved to Florence in 1833, in self-imposed exile, her friends included sculptor Lorenzo Bartolini, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Antonio Marini and Caroline Bonaparte. She was embraced by the international intellectual community and received many commissions, including those from Prince Anatolio Demidoff and Czar Nicholas I.

De Fauveau's sculpture of her mother, damaged by a Nazi bomb launched during the occupation of Florence in 1944, was restored in 2012.

ELISABETH CHAPLIN (1880–1982)

The youngest-ever artist to have her self-portrait in the Uffizi's self-portrait collection, Elisabeth Chaplin was mostly self-taught. During the 1920s, she exhibited with Cezanne, Matisse and Van Gogh, showing her work twice at Venice Biennale, in 1924 and 1926.

In 1937, Chaplin received the gold medal at Paris's World Fair. Amongst many artistic trends and movements, Elisabeth Chaplin stayed true to her own style while cultivating a link to European Symbolism.

Restored in 2014, her painting *The Three Sisters* depicts an evening scene with Yvette, Elisabeth and Nenette Chaplin. With over a dozen of her paintings on permanent exhibition in the Uffizi's Gallery of Modern Art, Chaplin is the female artist with the most paintings on public display in Florence.

She gifted more than 600 of her works to the City of Florence in 1974 on the condition that artists could independently use and exhibit her paintings during her lifetime. Chaplin's Florentine donation also included works by her uncle, painter Charles Chaplin, and her mother, sculptor Marguerite Bavier-Chaufour.

Elisabeth exhibited widely in Italy before moving to Paris in the late 1930s, where she created large-scale public works at the churches of Notre-Dame du Salut and Saint Esprit and was awarded the French Republic's Legion of Honor.

Later in life, the artist settled in Fiesole and was honored with shows in Florence's most prestigious venues such as Palazzo Strozzi, and a posthumous exhibition in Palazzo Vecchio.