



Gender, Artistic Agency and Renaissance Culture: A Teaching Proposal Based on the Works of Sofonisba Anguissola, Lavinia Fontana, and Properzia de' Rossi

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Abstract:

The inclusion of women artists in art history curricula has significantly transformed the study of Renaissance culture and contributed to a more inclusive understanding of artistic production. While traditional narratives of the Italian Renaissance focused almost exclusively on male masters, recent scholarship has demonstrated that women actively participated in artistic and intellectual life despite considerable social and institutional restrictions. This article proposes a pedagogical framework for higher education courses in art history, cultural studies, heritage education, and gender studies through the examination of three Renaissance women artists: Sofonisba Anguissola, Lavinia Fontana, and Properzia de' Rossi. Drawing on feminist art history, gender theory, and visual literacy approaches, the article develops a series of classroom activities centered on three representative works: *The Chess Game* (1555) by Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait at the Spinnet* (1577) by Lavinia Fontana, and *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife* (c. 1520–1525) by Properzia de' Rossi. The proposed activities encourage students to explore the relationship between artistic production and gender, analyze the social construction of artistic authority, and understand how women negotiated professional identities within a patriarchal cultural system. Through visual analysis, collaborative inquiry, contextual research, and reflective discussion, students develop critical awareness of the historical conditions that shaped women's artistic careers and of the continuing relevance of gender issues within contemporary cultural institutions.

Keywords: Renaissance Women Artists, Gender Studies, Art History Education, Feminist Pedagogy, Visual Literacy, Sofonisba Anguissola, Lavinia Fontana, Properzia de' Rossi, Cultural Heritage Education.

Original Research

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INTRODUCTION

The Italian Renaissance occupies a privileged position in Western cultural history. The artistic achievements of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, and numerous other masters have long dominated scholarly narratives and educational curricula. For centuries, however, these narratives largely ignored the contributions of women artists, reinforcing the perception that artistic genius was primarily a masculine phenomenon (Parker & Pollock, 2013).

During the last fifty years, feminist scholarship has challenged this exclusion and has fundamentally altered our understanding of Renaissance artistic culture. Researchers have recovered forgotten biographies, reattributed works, and examined the social structures that shaped artistic production (Harris & Nochlin, 1976). These studies have demonstrated that women were not merely passive observers of Renaissance culture but active participants who contributed to its development despite substantial institutional obstacles.

The recovery of women artists is a matter of historical justice, but it also offers important educational opportunities. The study of Renaissance women artists enables students to explore broader questions concerning power, representation, identity, social exclusion, and cultural memory. Their experiences reveal how artistic achievement is influenced by individual talent but also by access to education, professional networks, and institutional recognition (Nochlin, 1971).

The present article proposes a teaching framework that employs the works of Sofonisba Anguissola, Lavinia Fontana, and Properzia de' Rossi as case studies through which students can examine the relationship between gender and artistic production in sixteenth-century Italy. These artists represent different artistic trajectories and professional experiences. Together, they provide a rich foundation for exploring how women negotiated opportunities and limitations within a patriarchal society.

Rather than treating gender as a secondary theme, the proposed activities place it at the center of historical inquiry. Students are encouraged to analyze artworks as cultural documents that reveal how social expectations, educational structures, and institutional practices influenced artistic careers and cultural recognition (Pollock, 1988).

Theoretical Framework: Gender, Art History, and Critical Pedagogy

The pedagogical approach presented here is grounded in feminist art history and critical pedagogy. The foundational text in this field remains Linda Nochlin's influential essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971). Nochlin challenged traditional explanations that attributed the scarcity of famous women artists to biological or intellectual differences. Instead, she argued that institutional structures systematically prevented women from accessing the training and opportunities available to men.

This perspective shifted attention from individual achievement to the social conditions of artistic production. Art historians subsequently began examining academies, workshops, patronage systems, educational practices, and

cultural norms that shaped artistic careers (Jacobs, 1997).

Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker further developed this approach by demonstrating that art history itself is a cultural construction. Canon formation, museum practices, and scholarly discourse have historically privileged male artistic achievements while marginalizing women's contributions (Parker & Pollock, 2013; Pollock, 1988). Consequently, studying women artists requires recovering forgotten biographies but also critically examining the mechanisms through which artistic value is established.

From an educational perspective, feminist pedagogy encourages active participation, dialogue, critical inquiry, and the inclusion of marginalized voices. Rather than presenting knowledge as fixed and objective, it invites students to question dominant narratives and examine how cultural meanings are produced (Hooks, 1994).

The proposed activities also draw upon constructivist learning theory. Bruner (1996) argues that learners actively construct knowledge through interpretation and social interaction rather than passively receiving information. Inquiry-based learning approaches similarly emphasize questioning, investigation, and evidence-based reasoning (Eisner, 2002). In art education, visual thinking strategies have been shown to support careful observation, interpretive reasoning, and collaborative discussion (Housen, 2002; Yenawine, 2013).

Within this framework, Renaissance artworks become valuable historical sources. Paintings and sculptures do not merely illustrate historical events; they actively participate in the construction of social identities and cultural values. Students learn to interpret visual representations as expressions of broader social structures, including those related to gender (Freedman, 2003).

Pedagogical Framework and Learning Objectives

The teaching unit is designed for undergraduate courses in art history, cultural management, heritage studies, museum studies, education, and gender studies. It can

be implemented across three to four class sessions or adapted for a longer module.

Learning objectives:

1. Understand the social and cultural position of women artists in Renaissance Italy.
2. Analyze visual artworks using gender-sensitive methodologies.
3. Examine the relationship between artistic production and institutional structures.
4. Develop visual literacy and critical interpretation skills.
5. Evaluate the role of gender in artistic education and professional development.
6. Recognize the contribution of women artists to Renaissance culture.
7. Reflect on the persistence of gender inequalities within contemporary cultural institutions.

The sequence follows a constructivist progression: observation, contextual inquiry, collaborative interpretation, comparison, and reflection. Each case study includes activities that move from close looking to historical analysis and then to broader cultural interpretation (Bruner, 1996; Hein, 1998).

Case Study I: Sofonisba Anguissola and The Chess Game (1555)



Sofonisba Anguissola, *The Chess Game*, c. 1555, oil on canvas, 72 cm × 97 cm (National Museum in Poznań, Poznań)

Historical Context

Sofonisba Anguissola occupies a unique place in Renaissance art. Born into an aristocratic family in Cremona around 1532, she

benefited from an educational environment that encouraged intellectual and artistic development. Her father, Amilcare Anguissola, recognized the talents of his daughters and actively promoted their education and artistic training (Perlingieri, 1992).

Unlike many women of her time, Sofonisba received professional artistic instruction and established connections with influential intellectuals. Her reputation eventually reached the Spanish court, where she served Queen Elisabeth of Valois and became one of the most respected female artists of the century (Perlingieri, 1992; Wilkins, 1969).

The Chess Game depicts three of the artist's sisters engaged in a chess match while accompanied by a servant. The work departs from conventional female portraiture and functions as a sophisticated statement concerning female education, intelligence, and social refinement.

Classroom Activity 1: Visual Analysis and Gendered Education

Students are divided into small groups and examine a high-resolution reproduction of the painting. Using observation worksheets, they identify visual evidence related to education, social status, and family identity.

Guiding questions:

1. What visual elements communicate education and refinement?
2. How are the young women positioned and represented?
3. Why might chess be significant within Renaissance culture?
4. What assumptions about women does the painting appear to challenge?

Students compare interpretations and discuss how visual choices communicate cultural values. The activity draws on visual thinking strategies that prioritize evidence-based observation before historical explanation (Yenawine, 2013).

Classroom Activity 2: Gender, Class, and Opportunity

Students read short historical excerpts concerning women's education during the Renaissance and compare them with the painting.

Discussion prompts:

1. Which women had access to education?
2. How did social class influence opportunities?
3. How did the Anguissola family contribute to Sofonisba's success?
4. What opportunities would have been unavailable to girls from lower social classes?

The discussion highlights that gender inequality intersected with class privilege. Students recognize that access to education represented a crucial condition for women's participation in artistic and intellectual life (Jacobs, 1997).

Case Study II: Lavinia Fontana and Self-Portrait at the Spinnet (1577)



Lavinia Fontana, Self-Portrait at the Spinnet, 1577, oil on canvas, 27 x 24 cm (Accademia Nazionale di San Luca, Rome)

Historical Context

Lavinia Fontana represents one of the most remarkable examples of female

professional success in Renaissance Europe. Trained in her father's workshop in Bologna, she developed a flourishing artistic career and became one of the most sought-after painters of her generation (Murphy, 2003).

Unlike many women artists whose production remained confined to private contexts, Fontana managed commissions, maintained a workshop, and achieved substantial economic independence. Her Self-Portrait at the Spinnet is especially significant because it presents a carefully constructed image of female artistic authority. Surrounded by books and artistic instruments while performing music, Fontana combines multiple forms of cultural accomplishment within a single composition.

Classroom Activity 3: Constructing Artistic Identity

Students analyze the symbolic elements of the self-portrait and create visual maps linking objects in the painting to concepts such as education, professionalism, virtue, and artistic identity.

Questions include:

1. Why does Fontana represent herself with both musical and artistic attributes?
2. What message is she communicating to potential patrons?
3. How does the painting balance professional ambition with social respectability?

Students are encouraged to consider how female artists needed to negotiate cultural expectations concerning femininity and public authority.

Classroom Activity 4: Comparing Male and Female Self-Representation

Students compare Fontana's self-portrait with a self-portrait by a contemporary male Renaissance artist.

Comparison categories:

Category	Fontana	Male contemporary
Posture	Seated, composed, cultivated	Varies; often assertive or workshop-oriented
Clothing	Elegant, emphasizing social respectability	Professional, courtly, or workshop attire
Artistic tools	Present but balanced with musical and literary attributes	Often foregrounded as markers of professional identity
Expression of authority	Indirect, mediated through learning and refinement	Frequently more direct and occupationally explicit
Relationship to the viewer	Controlled and decorous	Often emphasizes mastery, status, or authorship

Groups present their findings and discuss how gender influenced artistic self-fashioning. The activity illustrates that self-portraiture functioned as a strategy of professional negotiation rather than merely personal expression (Murphy, 2003; Pollock, 1988).

Case Study III: Properzia de' Rossi and Joseph and Potiphar's Wife (c. 1520–1525)



Properzia de' Rossi, Joseph and Potiphar's Wife, 1520-25, Marble (Museo de San Petronio, Bologna)

Historical Context

Properzia de' Rossi occupies a distinctive position in Renaissance art as one of the few documented female sculptors of the period. Born in Bologna around 1490, she achieved recognition in a field traditionally dominated by men. Her inclusion in Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* demonstrates the

extraordinary reputation she acquired among contemporaries (Vasari, 1998).

At the same time, her career reveals the challenges faced by women who attempted to enter highly demanding artistic professions. The relief sculpture *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife* provides an excellent opportunity to explore questions of gender, authorship, labor, and artistic legitimacy.

Classroom Activity 5: Gender and Artistic Medium

Students investigate differences between painting and sculpture during the Renaissance.

Discussion topics:

1. Physical and technical demands of sculpture.
2. Workshop organization and apprenticeship structures.
3. Access to training and materials.
4. Gender stereotypes associated with artistic media.

Students consider why sculpture was often regarded as particularly unsuitable for women and how these assumptions affected professional opportunities (Fortunati & Graziani, 2008).

Classroom Activity 6: Interpreting Gender Narratives

Students analyze the biblical story represented in the relief and examine how moral narratives encode gendered expectations.

Questions include:

1. How are male and female characters portrayed?
2. What social values are reflected in the narrative?
3. How might a female sculptor's interpretation differ from contemporary male representations?
4. What does the work suggest about women's participation in intellectually and technically demanding artistic production?

Students prepare short presentations connecting visual analysis with broader social attitudes toward gender, morality, and authority.

Comparative Workshop: Gender and Artistic Agency

After completing the three case studies, students participate in a collaborative comparative exercise designed to move from individual biographies to structural analysis.

Category	Anguissola	Fontana	Properzia de' Rossi
Family support	Strong	Strong	Limited/less documented
Artistic medium	Painting	Painting	Sculpture
Professional independence	Moderate	High	Moderate
Institutional recognition	High	High	Exceptional for a woman sculptor
Gender-related obstacles	Significant	Significant	Very high

Students identify recurring patterns and discuss the importance of family support, access to artistic education, strategies for professional recognition, and the relationship between gender and artistic specialization. The workshop encourages students to recognize that artistic careers were shaped by intersecting social, economic, and institutional factors rather than by talent alone (Nochlin, 1971; Jacobs, 1997).

Connecting Renaissance and Contemporary Culture

The final stage of the teaching unit invites students to connect historical analysis with contemporary realities. Working in groups, students investigate representation of women artists in museum collections, gender disparities in cultural leadership, market values of artworks by male and female artists, and contemporary debates concerning cultural inclusion.

Each group produces a short digital presentation comparing Renaissance and contemporary conditions. The assignment encourages transfer of learning across historical periods and promotes civic and cultural awareness. Inquiry-based learning research suggests that such activities

strengthen students' ability to apply historical knowledge to present-day issues (Eisner, 2002; Hein, 1998).

Assessment Methods

Assessment may include visual analysis reports, group presentations, comparative essays, reflective journals, exhibition proposals, and digital storytelling projects. Evaluation criteria should emphasize critical thinking, historical contextualization, visual interpretation, and the ability to connect artistic production with broader cultural processes.

Rubrics can assess four dimensions: accuracy of historical evidence, quality of visual analysis, integration of gender concepts, and clarity of argumentation. Such multidimensional assessment aligns with arts-based learning approaches that value interpretation and reasoning rather than simple factual recall (Eisner, 2002).

DISCUSSION

The educational study of Renaissance women artists offers opportunities that extend beyond the traditional boundaries of art history. The works of Anguissola, Fontana, and Properzia de' Rossi function as powerful

teaching tools through which students can investigate the social construction of gender, the distribution of cultural power, and the formation of artistic identities.

The proposed activities demonstrate that gender should not be treated merely as an additional topic within Renaissance studies. Rather, it constitutes a fundamental analytical category that helps explain access to education, professional opportunities, artistic genres, and historical recognition (Nochlin, 1971; Pollock, 1988).

Moreover, these artists challenge persistent assumptions regarding artistic genius and creativity. Their careers reveal that talent alone is insufficient to ensure success; institutional support, social networks, and cultural legitimacy play equally important roles. The classroom activities encourage students to recognize these dynamics and to understand art as a socially situated practice.

From a pedagogical perspective, the sequence integrates visual literacy, inquiry-based learning, collaborative discussion, and critical reflection. Students begin with close observation, move toward contextual investigation, and finally construct broader interpretations concerning gender and cultural power. This progression reflects constructivist principles that view learning as an active process of meaning-making rather than passive reception of information (Bruner, 1996; Hein, 1998).

Such an approach contributes to the development of critical historical awareness while promoting inclusive understandings of cultural heritage. It also aligns with contemporary museum and heritage education practices that emphasize participation, multiple perspectives, and dialogue (Freedman, 2003; Hein, 1998).

CONCLUSION

The integration of women artists into Renaissance art education represents both a scholarly necessity and a pedagogical

opportunity. Sofonisba Anguissola, Lavinia Fontana, and Properzia de' Rossi illustrate the diverse ways in which women participated in artistic culture despite significant social restrictions.

Through the analysis of *The Chess Game*, *Self-Portrait at the Spinet*, and *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, students gain insight into the relationship between gender, artistic agency, education, and professional recognition. The proposed teaching framework combines visual literacy, historical inquiry, collaborative learning, and critical reflection, enabling students to engage deeply with both artworks and their cultural contexts.

Ultimately, the study of Renaissance women artists contributes to a more inclusive understanding of cultural history while fostering critical perspectives on the continuing relationship between gender and artistic production. By treating artworks as both aesthetic objects and cultural documents, educators can help students develop historically informed, socially aware, and critically engaged approaches to the interpretation of visual culture.

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