

Sofonisba Anguissola, Renaissance Painter, Renaissance Woman

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Sofonisba Anguissola is sometimes thought to have been an obscure and unimportant artist from the Renaissance era. This view contradicts the evidence from her own lifetime, the secondary sources, and the paintings by her hand. Anguissola was considered a great and talented artist during her life and there are many primary sources to support this. The evidence shows that great leaders and influential individuals, including Michelangelo, King Phillip II, Pope Pius IV and Giorgio Vasari, all admired and respected her work. Being a female artist Her achievements were even more extraordinary considering the social attitudes of her time to the notion of a female as artist. Perhaps even more surprisingly, the passing of time has seen her life and works still studied and her influence increasingly admired.

Not only was Sofonisba Anguissola influential within her community, but she was one of the first female artists to receive international renown. Word of her talents spread when she was being taught by one of the most influential artists of the Renaissance, Michelangelo himself. The evidence showing that Michelangelo helped Sofonisba lies in primary sources. For example, a letter from Sofonisba's father, Amilcare Anguissola, to Michelangelo thanks him for the "honourable and thoughtful affection that you have shown to Sofonisba, my daughter, to whom you introduced to practice the most honourable art of painting"... 7 May 1557. (Buonarroti Archives, Florence. From Perlingieri, I. S, 1992, p.67).

Not only is there evidence of their relationship but another letter from Amilcare supports the idea that Michelangelo saw Sofonisba as talented. This is indicated when Amilcare thanks Michelangelo for being "kind enough to examine, judge, and praise the paintings done by my daughter Sofonisba" (15 May 1558, Buonarroti Archives, Florence. From Perlingieri, I. S, 1992, p.67-68). For Michelangelo himself, to have praised her paintings shows how talented she was. Many secondary sources also argue that she was the first female artist to receive international renown. Two of the sources examined were collections of biographies of many female artists, and of all the artists in both texts she was given this title. During her stay in Rome word of her talents spread as far as Spain. Knowledge of any other female artist receiving this sort of renown at an earlier date is unknown (Vigue, J, 2002 and Fine, E, H, 1978, p.10).

The knowledge of her talent reaching Spain resulted in her appointment to the court of King Phillip of Spain in 1559, to work as a court painter for his new wife Elisabeth de Valois, daughter of the French Henry VII and Catherine de' Medici. This is perhaps one of the strongest examples reflecting Sofonisba's importance and obvious talent and renown. She was to serve under a powerful ruler of Europe at that time, King Phillip II, interestingly a man who had a reputation for not liking women (Perlingieri, I, S, 1992 p.119). However this assumption of him not liking women must not be accepted as fact as this is one individual's perception of his failed marriages. Other than payment details from the King and Queen to

Sofonisba found in the Milan, Archivo di Stato, and paintings of the Spanish royal family members by her hand, further evidence of her appointment to the King is found once again in letters from her father Amilcare.

Sacred Royal Catholic Majesty

The Duke of Sessa and Count Broccardo have asked me on your behalf to allow Sofonisba, my eldest child, to enter the services of her Serene Highness the Queen, your wife. As your devoted and obedient subject, I willingly have obeyed... from Milan, 6 September 1559.

Your humble, faithful servant and vassal,

Amilcare Anguissola

(Simancas. Archivo General de Simancas. Papeles Estado Milano, Leg. 1210, f. 190. From Perlingieri, I. S, 1992, p.112)

This is a clear reflection of just how talented and successful Sofonisba was. An unimportant and obscure artist would not be requested by a powerful leader to come and live in his court and paint for his Queen.

During her time serving Queen Elisabeth, who became Queen Isabel, another very influential leader, Pope Pius IV, also recognised Sofonisba's great talent and requested a portrait by her hand. For such an important person to have heard of her unique and defined skills it is obvious that she was very well known and was held in high regard by many. The evidence of this request lies in a letter from Sofonisba to the Pope.

Holy Father

I have learned from your Nuncio that you desire a portrait of my royal mistress by my hand... Madrid, 16 September 1561.

Your Holiness's most humble servant

Sofonisba Anguissola

(Lancetti, 254; Vasari (Milanese edition, 1878), 500; and Baldinucci, vol III, 628. From Perlingieri, I. S, 1992, p.122)

This letter has been mentioned in three separate secondary sources showing that it is considered to be a reliable piece of evidence, especially the mention given by Vasari and Baldinucci who were alive during Sofonisba's lifetime. Vasari also claims in his *Vite* that the Pope, after receiving the portrait of Queen Isabel, sent gifts and the following letter.

Pius Papa IV. Dilecto in Christo filia.

We have received the portrait of our dear daughter, the Queen of Spain, which you have sent... We thank you and assure you that we shall treasure it among our choicest possessions, and commend your marvellous talent which is least among your numerous qualities... Rome 15 October 1561.

(Vasari (Milanese edition, 1878), 500. From Perlingieri, I. S, 1992, p.123)

Vasari is considered by many as a credible source as he was alive during the lifetimes of the artists he wrote about, and was alive when the letter was sent. This evidence is strong despite the letters no longer remaining, to our knowledge. Someone who was not recognised by

society as an artist of talent would not be requested by the Pope, to paint a portrait for his collection. Nor would someone who was unimportant and obscure be thanked and praised by the Pope.

Vasari, who is famous for his biographies on the most prominent artists of the Renaissance, did not write a biography on Sofonisba although he does mention her on numerous occasions. He described her as having:

done more in design and more gracefully than any other lady of our day, for not only has she designed, coloured and drawn from life, and copied the works of others most excellently, but has produced rare and beautiful paintings of her own.(Vasari, *Vite*, 207. From Fine, E, H, 1978, p.9)

Vasari also described a painting by Sofonisba of a chess game as:

most carefully finished, representing her three sisters playing at chess, in the company of an old lady of the house, making them appear alive and lacking speech only (Vasari, *Vite*, 207. From Fine, E, H, 1978, p.10).

This is a great compliment from someone who researched and wrote about only the most brilliant and gifted of artists. While he did not write a biography on her she is mentioned quite a bit, which is significant as he only wrote a biography on one female artist. Also the first edition of his book was published in 1550, while Sofonisba was still learning the art of painting and before she had yet received extensive international renown.

Being a female painter was a great disadvantage in the social conditions of the time, making her achievements all the more significant and the fact that she was appreciated even more impressive. A female artist not only had to be a talented artist but she also had to be beautiful, pious and polite (Fine, E, H, 1978, p.5 and Greer, G, 1979). Many secondary sources discuss the issue that female artists at the time, including Sofonisba, were often reported on regarding their piety and humility rather than their innovative techniques. This is demonstrated in the letter from Pope Pius IV that identifies her painting talents as “least among your numerous qualities”. This implies that her qualities as a woman were more important than her qualities as a painter. It can be inferred from this that it was difficult for a female artist to have her artwork taken seriously and respected for its exquisiteness. Another disadvantage was that it was deemed inappropriate for a female to view a naked model, which consequently meant a female could not study the human anatomy to the same extent a male artist could (The Grove Dictionary of Art, 2000). Sofonisba was recognised and respected in a society that judged women very differently to men, which was an impressive achievement.

Sofonisba was not only appreciated in her own lifetime but continues to be appreciated in modern society. The praise and renown she and her paintings received from highly respected members of society in her own time is clear evidence to show that she was neither unimportant nor obscure. Over the past 20 years or so more and more individuals, particularly women, have been uncovering the lives and careers of female’s artists of the Renaissance who have long been forgotten. While many other women may be worthy of study and

recognition, Sofonisba is an exceptional example, as there is still so much evidence remaining, which highlights and indicates her many talents. Her greatness is also proven by the artwork that remains today, and substantiates her painting ability. There is enough evidence surrounding Sofonisba to form a framework for her life and career and an extensive collection of her artwork remains. Lastly many of her paintings are displayed all over Europe to this day. If her paintings were not beautiful, unique and exquisite and if such a talented artist had not created them, then they would not still be on show for the whole world to observe and remember.

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