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Cole, Michael W. Sofonisba's Lesson: A Renaissance Artist and Her Work.

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Soldier, Erasmus explains the need to make the Turks convert to Christianity: “for though nothing else, they are at least human beings” (CWE 66, 10).

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Cole, Michael W.

Sofonisba's Lesson: A Renaissance Artist and Her Work.

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In his brief review of the art of the Cremonese Sofonisba Anguissola and her sisters, in *Le Vite de' piu eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori* of 1568, Giorgio Vasari asks rhetorically why we should marvel at women who paint convincing images of males when, by virtue of their gender, they create “living men.” Thus, he articulates a commonplace Renaissance explanation for female artistic ability. But since Linda Nochlin’s landmark article “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” of 1971, the women of whom Vasari and his contemporaries wrote have been revisited and their reassessment has become increasingly multi-faceted. Michael W. Cole extends this project by proposing that the character of Sofonisba’s practice, production, and biography may all be better appreciated through an explicitly pedagogical framework.

Straddling “teaching and learning” (13), pedagogy speaks to Sofonisba’s training, both in a household that unconventionally nurtured the erudition of its female members and in the studios of Bernardino Campi and Bernardino Gatti, with whom she studied painting beginning in the later 1540s. It encompasses the commentaries on cultural values that Sofonisba often embedded in the subject, iconography, compositional structure, and/or style of her imagery; *The Chess Game* of 1555 is an outstanding demonstration piece. Much of this was probably initially achieved with the assistance of her father, whose presence, Cole claims, is symbolically folded into her work through the 1550s. Pedagogy likewise defines Sofonisba’s relationships with patrons, sitters, and disciples, relationships that occasionally allow Cole to cast her as student and teacher simultaneously rather than simply sequentially. He suggests, for example, that

as a mature and well-recognized artist hired by the Spanish royal court in 1559 to teach the rudiments of art to Queen Isabel de Valois, she must also have had to learn to modify her own production to conform to the court's house style during the fourteen years she resided there. Even as a painted image, she could potentially play both roles at once—as Cole explores through *Bernardino Campi Painting Sofonisba Anguissola*, a double portrait of the late 1550s that may or may not be her work. Finally, pedagogy underpins Cole's position that the Anguissola family recognized the practice of painting as an intellectual endeavour, and the finished work a valuable source of knowledge.

Cole embellishes this pedagogical framework with assorted themes that insightfully link Sofonisba to current scholarship on Italian Renaissance art more broadly. These include the performativity of the painter's act as well as of her subject as rendered; the work of the hand as more than a demonstration of manual labour; the nuances of the language of art; and the virtuoso's desire to create outside of the commodified workshop system, thereby elevating the work to the status of "art object." Indeed, the latter gives Cole an opening to present Sofonisba as a sophisticated artist who, by working in this manner for sheer pleasure, was able to model what Michelangelo ostensibly craved but could not fully achieve. Whether this came about for Sofonisba by choice or circumstance—and this isn't clear—Cole's presentation is refreshing because it complicates the trope that sees Michelangelo only as a distant instructor who once advised her on picturing human emotion. Beyond all this, however, Cole adds two key themes to the mix: gender and authorship.

Feminist scholarship of the late 1980s and early 1990s has been especially significant in conveying Sofonisba's identity from the perspective of gender and difference, and Cole's account of the artist is informed by this literature. But he is equally concerned with the slippage between genders. This emerges most decisively in his discussion of why the family (minor and financially-pressed aristocrats) educated a young girl as a painter when painting was largely a man's profession and its place among the liberal arts uncertain. For Cole, its motivation may in part be rooted in the relation of Sofonisba's drawing and painting to other learned activities that engaged to varying degrees both women and men of the day: weaving, embroidery, music-making, writing, and chess-playing. When associated with activities perceived as belonging primarily to women, the artist and her art were domesticated and unthreatening to contemporaries; when associated with activities belonging primarily to men, they were transgressive.

Slippage also obtains when Cole concludes that what father and daughter most ardently pursued through her art was fame, traditionally male territory but in sixteenth-century Italy traversed by females whose success was confirmed by their appearance in the Renaissance portrait gallery. In fact, he maintains that some of Sofonisba's self-portraits—savvy exercises in self-fashioning—were executed for this setting.

Early biographers verify that Sofonisba was famous in her own day, as she is again today. Among Renaissance artists, she has received more attention from biographers, dealers, and art historians than any other woman. Yet her oeuvre remains under debate, containing relatively few works unquestionably by her hand. This is underlined by Cole's meticulously organized and copiously illustrated catalogue of 242 images surrounding Sofonisba's name presented in the second half of the book as a historiography of her production. More pointedly, however, the catalogue determines the works best consulted for visual evidence of Sofonisba's teaching and learning; it is the foundation of his narrative of her Spanish years, for which there is limited physical evidence of a practice though she was plainly active; and it bolsters the network of connections Cole posits between individual works, both by the artist and not.

That said, the catalogue may be put aside when it comes to Cole's effort to decipher the intent of the works that most interest him, because rather than produce a conclusive reading for each, he frequently advances readings that are deliberately contingent. Admittedly, meaning shifts depending on the questions posed, the visual acuity brought to bear, the availability of documentation, and the methodological context in which any scholar's reading of a given work takes place. However, each possibility here, usually gleaned across several chapters, is layered upon the previous one(s), as is notably the case for Sofonisba's *Boston Self-Portrait* of circa 1556. They pile up rather than replace one another, even when they periodically appear to be incompatible. While certain possibilities are left dangling, the effect of this kaleidoscopic approach is that it reveals the richness of meaning implicit in individual works and substantially expands the ways in which the artist's entire oeuvre may profitably be reconsidered. Perhaps this is the best lesson Cole tenders in exchange for Sofonisba's own.

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