

Chiara Varotari and Alessandro Varotari: A Sister as Muse and Other Sibling Narratives*

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The relationship between Chiara Varotari (1584/1583-after 1663) and her brother Alessandro Varotari (1558-1649, *Il Padovanino*) offers a particularly revealing case through which to reconsider authorship as a relational rather than solitary construction. While traditional narratives have privileged Alessandro's position within Venetian artistic culture, archival and museum records increasingly allow Chiara's artistic presence to emerge with greater clarity. Surviving portraits attributed to Chiara, preserved in Padovan collections and documented in modern catalogues, demonstrate an independent engagement with portraiture characterized by careful attention to the texture and colors of textiles, controlled gestures, and direct visual exchange with the viewer. This dynamic becomes especially visible when considered alongside the siblings' self-portraits. Alessandro's *Self-Portrait* constructs artistic identity through mediation: his gaze is diverted, and objects associated with learning, artistic lineage, and intellectual authority structure the composition around him. Artistic identity appears externalized through cultural signs. By contrast, Chiara's *Uffizi Self-Portrait* (1630-1635) presents a more immediate encounter. Through her direct gaze and use of the mirror, she simultaneously establishes herself as both image and maker. The mirror reflection does not simply affirm her beauty but functions as a declaration of pictorial authority. Read together, these works suggest that sibling relationships in artistic families could operate not merely as systems of transmission but as spaces of reciprocal self-fashioning, in which sisters actively participated in shaping the artistic identity of their sibling. Within this context, the idea of the sister as muse acquires a more complex meaning. Chiara does not appear as a passive source of inspiration but as an artistic interlocutor whose presence contributed to the visual and conceptual formation of authorship itself. Her example provides a framework through which to view Barbara Longhi (1552-1638) and her brother Francesco (1544-1618); Sofonisba Anguissola (1532-1625) and her brother Asdrubale Anguissola (1555?-1630?); along with Marietta Robusti, *La Tintoretta* (1560-1590) and her brother Domenico Robusti (1560-1635).

Keywords: Anguissola, Longhi, Robusti, Varotari, sibling affection, modeling muses, self-portrait, Italian Renaissance iconography, emblematic symbolism

* **Acknowledgement:** This study was presented virtually at the AWIC International Conference in Rome on 27 October 2024. I sincerely thank Professors Consuelo Lollobrigida and Adelina Modesti for their kind invitation. I also appreciate the valuable suggestions from Professors Alicia Faxon of Simmons College (emerita), Yael Even of the University of Missouri at Saint Louis, MO (emerita), and Dr. Brendan Cole, an independent scholar in Rhodes, South Africa. I also thank the Comune di Padova, Musei e Biblioteche, for providing data and images that supported my research, as well as for granting permission to reproduce works by Chiara and Alessandro Varotari. Additionally, I appreciate the Fondazione Biblioteca Capitolare di Verona for allowing the use of Barbara Longhi's *Self-Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria* from their collection.

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Introduction

Chiara Varotari (1584/1583-after 1663), a Padua painter, devoted her career to supporting her brother Alessandro's artistic endeavors (1588-1649).¹ She modeled as his muse and assisted him in his *bottega* in Padua and Venice. Chiara and Alessandro were the children of the painter Dario Varotari the Elder (1539-1596).

This sister's dedication mirrors the actions of the Ravennate artist Barbara Longhi (1552-1638) towards her brother Francesco (1544-1618). Both were offspring of the painter Luca Longhi (1507-1580). Barbara also contributed to her family's studio and oversaw their farming and estates in Ravenna. Interestingly, these female artists chose their brothers as both models and inspirations for their own artwork.

The collaborative and caring dynamics in the Longhi and Varotari families contrast with the discord in the Anguissola and Robusti families. Unlike Chiara and Barbara, the Cremonese painter Sofonisba Anguissola (1532-1625) did not come from a family of artists, and her strained relationship with her brother Asdrubale is a well-known tale of family strife. Despite Sofonisba's efforts to provide for his care and needs after their father's death, he attempted to block her second marriage and created havoc in her artistic career. The Robusti sibling's artistic competition was for parental approval and support as well as personal individual recognition for their achievements, as Marietta was also an accomplished musician and had a beautiful voice.

Love and creation of art serve as a metaphorical bond that unites these families, however certain salient differences can be identified. The Varotari family was deeply involved in the intellectual circles in Venice, particularly the Accademia dei Incogniti [Academy of the Unknowns], a prominent Venetian intellectual society that championed radical philosophies, artistic experimentation, and freedom of thought.² Dario, Chiara's father, was an official participant in the Accademia; her brother, Alessandro, was often commissioned by these members to paint mythological and erotic paintings based on ancient classical works such as Homer's *Iliad*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and in particular Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as illustrated in his paintings of *Orpheus and Eurydice*, *Orpheus Enchanting the Animals*, and the *Abduction of Proserpine*, today in the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice. Undoubtedly, Chiara assisted her brother and served as his muse in these and other mythological paintings. Alessandro traveled to Rome multiple times between 1610 and 1625 to study classical antiquities. Additionally, Chiara, herself a highly cultured woman, moved within these humanist and academic circles, as evidenced by portrait commissions from distinguished patrons and by professional student followers.

In contrast, the Longhi and Robusti families were predominantly associated with patrons from religious and monastic orders, producing religious paintings and portraits commissioned by merchant and noble classes. The Robusti family also participated in decorating the palaces of the Doges. The Anguissola family

¹ Carlo Ridolfi, *Le meraviglie dell'arte, ovvero le vite degli illustri pittori veneti e dello stato* (Venice: Gio Battista Sgava, 1648, Two parts in One), Part II, pp. 75-84, <https://archive.org/details/lemarauigliedell00rido/page/78/mode/2up>, pp. 78-84. Alessandro was also known as an architect. See also Raffaele Zampini, *Delle donne illustri padovane* (Padua: Tipografia del Seminario, 1834), section on Chiara Varotari; Pier Luigi Fantelli, "Chiara Varotari, sorella del Padovanino e i suoi quadri al Museo Civico," *Padova e la sua Provincia*, 19, 1 (1973), pp. 6-11; Elisabetta Gastaldi, "Chiara Varotari," in *Ladies of Art: Stories of Women in the 16th and 17th Centuries*, ed. Annamaria Bava, Gioia Mori, and Alain Tapié (Geneva: SKIRA, 2021), pp. 319-320; and Diana Gisolfi, "Chiara Varotari (1584/1585-after 1663)," in *Women Artists and Artisans in Venice and the Veneto, 1400-1750*, ed. Tracy Cooper (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024), pp. 137-152, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048559725-008>.

² Monica Miato, *L'Accademia degli Incogniti di Giovan Francesco Loredan: Venezia 1630-1661* (Florence: Olschki, 1998).

distinguished itself from other families by being of noble origin, with only female artistic descendants, notably Sofonisba, pursuing the artistic disciplines of drawing and painting in Italy and in the Spanish court.³

The initial section of this essay focuses on the Varotari family, then compares the Longhi and Anguissola families and briefly discusses the complex relationships among the siblings of the Robusti family. To prevent confusion with siblings or parents, I use the female painters' first names instead of their family names.

The Varotari Family

In *Le meraviglie dell'arte*, the historian Carlo Ridolfi noted that the Varotari family originated in Germany.⁴ Dario Varotari, the Elder (1539-1596), relocated his family to Verona in 1539 to study with the renowned painter Paolo Veronese (1538-1588). He then moved them to Padua around 1580, where he established a family artistic workshop, or *bottega*. Dario's first child, Chiara, was born in Padua in 1584. From a young age, she received artistic training from her father as well as her mother, Samaritana Ponchino (no dates), who also hailed from a family of artists; her father was the painter G.B. Ponchino (no dates). Undoubtedly, her mother also played a significant role in shaping Chiara's artistic development.

Dario's second son, Alessandro, was also a painter known as *Il Padovanino*. He married Caterina Mesa in 1612 in Padua and had one son, named after his father, hence known as Dario Varotari the Younger, who also became a painter. In *Le meraviglie dell'arte*, Ridolfi praised *Il Padovanino*: "Alessandro demonstrated his genius through his creations in the realm of painting" ("Alessandro ... dato saggio l'ingegno suo colle [cose delle] pitture").⁵

After their father's untimely death in 1596, Dario's collaborator, Damiano Mazza, took over the workshop and continued to train his children. Chiara's strong dedication to art was evident in her life choices; she remained unmarried and devoted herself to assisting her brother in his studio and with his commissions. This selfless devotion led them to move to Venice in 1614 to expand the family artistic business. In 1625, they established a workshop and an art school, which became renowned for its innovative and creative work. The influence of Chiara's art education is evident in the artistic achievements of her talented students, such as Caterina Tarabotti (1615-1693) and Lucia Scaligeri (1637-1700), who made notable contributions to Venetian art as well as to literature.⁶

Chiara was a professional portrait artist and was highly regarded for this skill during her lifetime. In *Le meraviglie dell'arte*, Ridolfi wrote:

[Chiara] of this valiant woman we admire many beautiful and similar portraits, and other praiseworthy works; so that in her we have seen the memories of the illustrious women praised by ancient writers renewed; who has always wanted to live with her brother, refusing any honorable marriage, employing her work in the service of her father's house.⁷

³ Ilya Sandra Perlinghieri, *Sofonisba Anguissola: The First Great Woman Artist of the Renaissance* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), Introduction and Chapter One.

⁴ Ridolfi, *Le meraviglie*, Part II, pp. 75-84, <https://archive.org/details/lemarauigliedell00rido/page/78/mode/2up>, pp. 78-84.

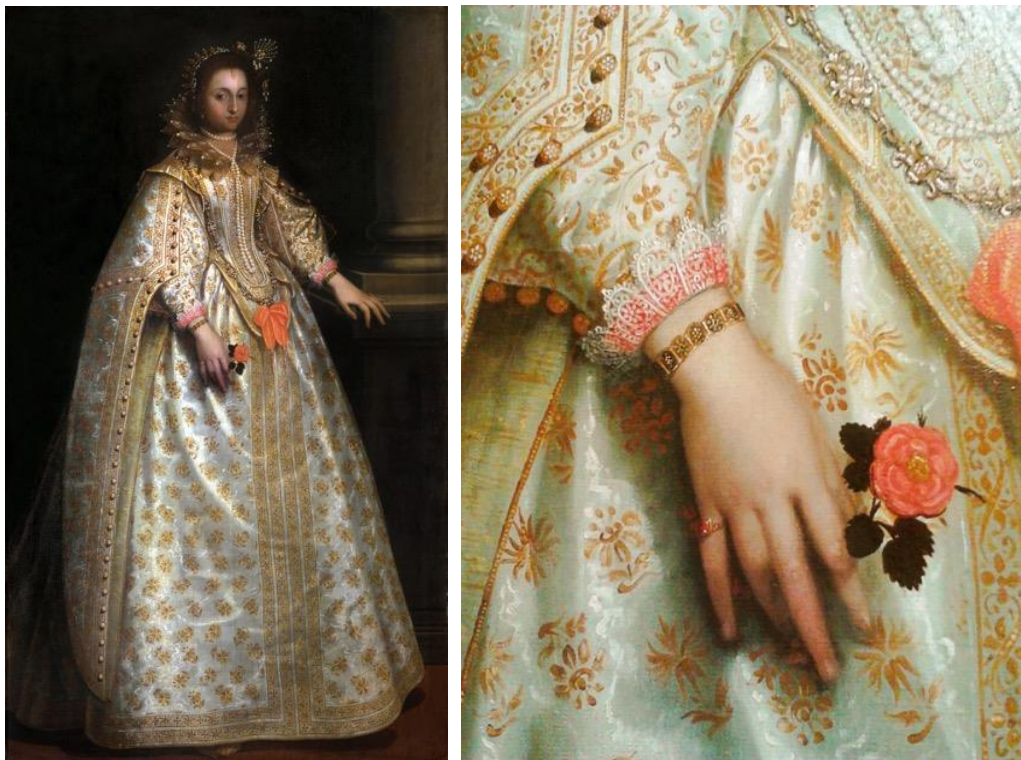
⁵ Ridolfo, *Le meraviglie*, II, p. 83, <https://archive.org/details/lemarauigliedell00rido/page/82/mode/2up>.

⁶ Georgios E. Markow, "Caterina Tarabotti Unveiled," in *Women Artists and Artisans in Venice and the Veneto, 1400-1750*, ed. Tracy E. Cooper (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024), pp. 197-212.

⁷ Ridolfo, *Le meraviglie*, p. 83: "[Clara] di questa valorosa donna si ammirano molti belli, e somiglianti ritratti, ed altre lodevole fatiche; onde in lei habbiamo veduto rinnovare le memorie delle donne illustri decantate dagli antichi scrittori; la quale sempre mai ha volute vivere col Fratello, rifiutando ogni onorevole accasamento, impiegando l'opera sua nel servizio della casa paterna."

The exact date of her death is unknown. According to the recent research of Diana Gisolfi on Chiara Varotari, it was after 1663.⁸

When Chiara was not tending to her brother's artistic and business needs, she primarily painted portraits that emphasized her subjects' social status. Most of Chiara's paintings are located in the Civic Museum in Padua or in private collections.⁹ Her subjects were typically wealthy members of the bourgeoisie who wanted to display nobility and social standing. Chiara achieved this style by accurately reflecting the period's fashion trends, with meticulous attention to clothing, jewelry, and intricate hairstyles. Her artistic method was characterized by precise reproduction of fabrics and ornaments, as seen in the *Portrait of a Lady from the Capodilista Family* of 1620 (**Figures 1 and 1a**). The portrait depicts Italian hair jewelry, jeweled necklines, draped necklaces, ruffs, lace lining, tapered undersleeves, and bracelets. It also depicts caps and Basque-style bodices—a snug bodice or jacket style that extends beyond the waist and over the hips—high-V necklines, jeweled ruffs, tabbed sleeves, jeweled oversleeves, elongated full tapered undersleeves, lace-contrasted back-flared cuffs, and bracelets. Noteworthy innovations comprise Basque waistlines, jeweled bodice embellishments, bows, full skirts, and trains. The hanging sleeves have evolved into wrappers featuring wide slits surrounding the false sleeves, which have been significantly shortened.



Figures 1 and 1a. Chiara Varotari, *Portrait of a woman from the Capodilista family*, 1620, oil on canvas. Civic Museum, Padua.
Photo credit and courtesy: Comune di Padova, Musei e Biblioteche.

⁸ Gisolfi, "Chiara Varotari," pp. 137-152, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048559725-008> and <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9789048559725/html>. See also Francesco Sansovino and Giustiniano Martinioni, *Venetia città nobilissima e singolare* (Venice: Stefano Curti, 1663), appendix, where Chiara is listed as living in 1663.

⁹ Fantelli, "Chiara Varotari e i suoi dipinti al Museo Civico," pp. 6-12.

In other portraits of bourgeoisie families, the *Portrait of a Lady* of 1630 further elaborates on the flowery details and arrangements of the gown and coiffure (**Figures 2 and 2a**). Chiara captures the preciousness of the children's attire and fashion in the *Portraits of a Young Girl* and *Portrait of a Young Boy* of the 1640s (**Figures 3 and 3a**). The doll-like quality of the children is similar to that of the adults depicted.



Figures 2 and 2a. Chiara Varotari, *Portrait of a Lady*, 1630s, oil on canvas.
Civic Museum, Padua. Photo credit and courtesy: Comune di Padova, Musei e Biblioteche.



Figures 3 and 3a. Chiara Varotari, *Portrait of a Young Girl* and *Portrait of a Young Boy*, 1640s, oil on canvas.
Civic Museum, Padua. Photo credit and courtesy: Comune di Padova, Musei e Biblioteche.

Her social portraits highlight the details of the subjects' clothing and accessories while downplaying their psychological aspects. She also painted self-portraits, with a prominent example from 1630 displayed at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence (**Figure 4, 4a-c**). This self-portrait reveals profound psychological depth while simultaneously conveying sensuality and somberness. This differs from the superficial, ornamental portrayal of her sitters' social portraits. An iconographical interpretation of the *Uffizi Self-Portrait* is analyzed in the Coda of this essay.



Figure 4. Chiara Varotari, *Self-Portrait*, 1630, oil on canvas. Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 4a. Chiara Varotari, *Brushes and Arrow*, det., *Self-Portrait*, 1630, oil on canvas. Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 4b. Chiara Varotari, *Breast and Pierced Arrow/Brush, det., Self-Portrait*, 1630, oil on canvas. Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 4c. Chiara Varotari, *Face and Poppy Flower, det., Self-Portrait*, 1630, oil on canvas. Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence.

Alessandro *Il Padovanino* often used his sister as a model for many of his heroines' portraits, especially those depicting brave women from the Old Testament, such as Judith. He portrayed the biblical heroine as a beautiful woman of faith who courageously defends and saves the people of Israel. He created numerous paintings on this biblical subject, with his sister as the central figure. He captured Chiara's sensuality in the depiction of Judith as an audacious woman who used her beauty and sexuality to rescue her people. Alessandro composed dramatic versions of *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* between 1630 and 1640, done in oil on canvas,

now in Private Collections and at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (**compare Figures 5 and 5a with 4**). The figure of Judith is shown in a three-quarter length, frontal view, emerging from the tent with the sword and the severed head of Holofernes. Her exotic ancient Jewish attire consists of a white silk chemise, which partially covers one breast while revealing the other, complemented by a white and orange striped skirt. A brown mantle drapes over her shoulders, secured with a golden chain at the waist. Beautiful jewelry adorns her hair, ears, and wrist, while a long gold necklace with a precious stone dangling between her breasts accentuates their voluptuousness. Judith's array of vibrant and dramatic clothing in browns, golds, oranges, and white reflects the evening's pink sunset, complemented by a blue-tinted, billowing-cloud background. Judith's pensive and victorious gaze contrasts with Holofernes's rigid, lifeless head. Alessandro, like his sister, combined visual coloration with the protagonist's psychology in their depiction.



Figure 5. Alessandro Varotari, *Judith and Maid Servant*, 1630-1640, oil on canvas. Private Collection. Photo credit: ©Bridgeman Images.



Figure 5a. Alessandro Varotari, *Judith with the head of Holofernes*, 1630-1640, oil on canvas. The Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Photo credit: ©Bridgeman Images.



Figure 4. Chiara Varotari, *Self-Portrait*, 1630, oil on canvas. Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence.

Venetian Baroque writers and modern scholars—cited earlier—have claimed that throughout her life, Chiara consistently showed a strong commitment to issues related to gender differences. It is also claimed, although without solid evidence, that she wrote a treatise called *Apology of the Female Sex*, in which she supported women's rights and recounted the history of female painters from ancient times. Verification of this claim is problematic, however. Although the literature mentions the treatise without providing sources, the manuscript remains missing. Recent research by Georgios E. Markou on the Venetian painter Caterina Tarabotti (1615-1693) has suggested that Caterina Tarabotti, Chiara's student, probably authored this manuscript.¹⁰

The Longhi Family

Both Longhi children, Barbara and Francesco, were trained by their father, Luca, and they collaborated with him on various commissions, notably the 1570 fresco of the *Deposition* in Saint Andrew's Chapel in Ravenna

¹⁰ Markou, "Caterina Tarabotti Unveiled," pp. 197-212.

(**Figure 6**). Barbara's brother Francesco (1544-1620) was a painter and poet. He married Giustina Merlini and had two daughters, Felicia and Isabetta. Following their father's passing in 1580, Barbara moved from her father's home into her brother's house, as was the tradition.¹¹ She was very attached to her nieces and was devoted to caring for them. She was very fond of her sister-in-law, Giustina, whom she often depicted in many of their religious paintings of *Saint Justina of Padua* (**Figures 7 and 7a**).¹² Her brother Francesco was inspired by Barbara's piety, using her as a model for Mary, the Mother of God, as seen in his painting *Crucifixion with SS John, Apollinaire, and Vitale* (**Figures 8 and 8a**). In a poignant devotional scene on Mount Golgotha, the Crucifixion unfolds. Christ is encircled by His Mother and the saints. Mary, in morning attire and orans posture, stands behind the kneeling Saint Apollinaire—the first bishop and patron saint of Ravenna. He kneels in orans posture before Adam's skull at the cross's base, setting down his miter and crozier. Opposite them, Saint Vitalis (Vitale), a legendary second-century Christian martyr, kneels in full military attire, holding a banner bearing Christian victory symbols: a white field with a red cross. Behind him, Saint John the Apostle stands with his arms crossed over his chest, devotionally gazing at Christ's sacrifice. Francesco artistically portrayed a scene in which heaven opens, with golden and white clouds, to welcome the Son of God, who has just given his own life to atone for humanity's sins.



Figure 6. Luca Longhi and children, Barbara and Francesco, *Deposition*, 1570s, fresco. St. Andrews Chapel, Museo Archievescovile, Ravenna.

¹¹ Liana De Girolami Cheney, *Barbara Longhi of Ravenna: Art, Grace, and Piety* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022/2024), Appendices: Testaments.

¹² See Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Barbara Longhi's Saint Justina of Padua: Pagan Symbolism and Christian Martyrology," *Journal of Cultural and Religious Studies*, 10, 9 (September 2022), pp. 463-499.



Figure 7. Barbara Longhi, *Madonna and Child with Justine of Padua*, 1590s, oil on canvas. Galleria Franchetti, Ca' d'Oro, Venice. Photo credit and courtesy: ©Galleria Franchetti, Venice.



Figure 7a. Barbara Longhi, *Nursing Madonna with Justine of Padua*, 1590s, oil on canvas. Private Collection. Photo credit and courtesy: ©Piguet Hôtel des Ventes, Genève.



Figures 8. and 8a. Francesco Longhi, *Crucifixion with Mary and SS John, Apollinare and Vitale*, 1620s, oil on canvas. Originally in the Church of San Vitale, now in the Ravenna Art Museum, Ravenna.

Francesco portrays Mary with his sister Barbara's features (**Figure 8a**). The Mother of God is positioned alongside her Crucified son, facing the viewer, engaged in prayer for God's forgiveness for human cruelty and interceding on behalf of humanity. Francesco constructs a moving and vivid religious scene.

Barbara took pride in sharing in her testimonies that she was the daughter of Luca Longhi, a "renowned painter" and a notable citizen of Ravenna.¹³ She had always been a model and a muse for her father, as depicted in the large fresco *The Marriage at Cana*, and she continued to fulfill this role for her brother.¹⁴ Both siblings intriguingly portrayed themselves as saints: Francesco depicted the Virgin Mary in the image of his sister Barbara (**compare Figures 8a and 9**). In turn, Barbara depicted her brother Francesco as St. Joseph in the altarpiece of the *Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*, oil on panel, signed in the lower right as BARA DI LUG ONG (**Figures 10 and 10a**). Inventively, Barbara also portrayed herself as a holy figure in her depiction of *St. Catherine of Alexandria* (**Figure 9**). The Counter-Reformation influence likely shaped the iconography of these religious motifs in the works of the Longhi siblings.¹⁵



Figure 8a. Francesco Longhi, *Crucifixion with Mary and SS John*, Apollinare and Vitale, 1620s, oil on canvas. Originally in the Church of San Vitale, now in the Ravenna Art Museum, Ravenna.



Figure 9. Barbara Longhi, *Self-Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, 1590s, oil on canvas. Fondazione Biblioteca Capitolare di Verona. Photo credit and courtesy: ©Fondazione Biblioteca Capitolare di Verona.

¹³ Cheney, *Barbara Longhi of Ravenna*, p. 155, Appendix A.

¹⁴ For the image, see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nozze_di_Cana_-_Luca_Longhi.jpg.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Lev, *How Catholic Art Saved the Faith: The Triumph of Beauty and Truth in the Counter Reformation* (Nashua, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2018); John W. O'Malley, *Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).



Figures 10. and 10a. Barbara Longhi, Her Brother Francesco as St. Joseph, det., *Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*, oil on panel. Signature lower right (strengthened): BARA DI LUG ONGH. Private Collection.
Photo credit and courtesy: ©Dorotheum Auction House, Vienna, Austria.

The Anguissola Family

The amicable relationship between the siblings of the Varotari and Longhi families was not observed with the Anguissola family. Furthermore, Anguissola's brother was not a painter but a musician, poet, and Latin scholar. There is limited information about Asdrubale Anguissola, Sofonisba's brother (**Figures 11, 12 and 12a**).¹⁶

In 1576, after the death of her first husband, Fabrizio Moncada, while residing in Palermo, Sofonisba wrote to her brother in Cremona, requesting his assistance with her journey from Palermo to Cremona, as well as with legal inheritance matters concerning the Moncada family. In *Signora della Pittura*, Daniela Pizzagalli observed that during this period, it was considered unsafe for a woman to undertake such a lengthy journey without a male escort; hence, Sofonisba requested her brother's assistance in traveling.¹⁷ After twenty years of not seeing her

¹⁶ Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Self-Portraits of Renaissance Women," *Visual Resources Association Journal* (Getty Publications) (Fall 1996), pp. 67-74; Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Concealments and Revelations in the Self-Portraits of Female Painters," in *Forum Public Policy* (Oxford Papers) (November 2011), pp. 1-21; Liana De Girolami Cheney, Alicia Faxon, and Katherine Russo, *Self-Portraits of Women Painters* (Aldershot UK/ Brookfield, VT: Ashgate/Scolar Press, 2000; repr. Washington DC: New Academia, 2009), on Sofonisba, pp. 38-66, esp. 51-52; and Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Sofonisba Anguissola's Ponce Portrait of a Young Man," *SOURCE: Notes in the History of Art*, 34, 4 (Summer 2015), pp. 39-47.

¹⁷ Daniela Pizzagalli, *La Signora della Pittura: Vita di Sofonisba Anguissola, gentildonna e artista nel Rinascimento* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2003), pp. 168-169. Legal documents from 1576 testify to Orazio's economic status: he is absolved of legal payment because "he is a poor gentleman living in utmost poverty."

brother, Asdrubale visited her in Palermo before their journey to Cremona.¹⁸ There, their relationship was far from cordial. For her journey from Palermo to Cremona, she hired the services of the Genovese naval captain Orazio Lomellino to facilitate her maritime travel aboard *La Patrona*. During the voyage, additional disagreements arose when she informed her brother of her intention to marry Orazio, a man of lower social standing who was fifteen years her junior. To avoid additional disputes and secure her union with Orazio, Sofonisba pretended to be ill, which compelled her to disembark from the ship in Leghorn. Later, she altered her course and sailed to Pisa, where she found refuge at the San Matteo convent. From there, she traveled to Genoa with her new husband. Disheartened, Asdrubale returned to Cremona alone after his unsuccessful attempts to prevent his sister's second marriage. In 1589, however, Sofonisba visited him in Cremona. The recent death of their mother and the legal proceedings concerning the transfer of her pension to her brother's bank made this journey necessary.¹⁹

Sofonisba's brother had been her muse in her paintings since he was a young boy, as seen in her amusing pencil drawing of *Asdrubale Bitten by a Crawfish* of 1554 at the Museum of Capodimonte in Naples²⁰ and a portrait painting of Asdrubale in the Ponce Museum in Puerto Rico (**Figures 12 and 12a**).²¹ Nevertheless, Sofonisba's relationship with her brother markedly differs from the reversed dynamic observed between Chiara and Barbara and their artistic brothers, Alessandro and Francesco. Chiara served as muse of inspiration for Alessandro, whereas Barbara's brother, Francesco, was the muse in her artworks.

¹⁸ Flavio Carioli, *Sofonisba Anguissola e le sue Sorelle* (Milan: Mondadori, 1987), p. 67; Pizzagalli, *La Signora della Pittura*, p. 169. There are three legal documents connected to the Asdrubale visit. Pizzagalli refers to one dated 5 September 1576, which asserts his noble status and kinship with Sofonisba.

¹⁹ Carlo Bonetti, "Nel Centenario di Sofonisba Anguissola," *Archivio Storico Lombardo*, 3 (1928), pp. 298-299, for a document dated 13 May 1589, from notary Raffaele Tartesio, noting that Sofonisba is granting her brother an annual pension of 800 lire. Asdrubale, still unmarried, resided near the Church of San Vincenzo in Cremona.

²⁰ Richard Stemp, "Sofonisba and Michelangelo: A Second Bite," <https://drichardstemp.com/2022/12/13/sofonisba-and-michelangelo-a-second-bite>.

²¹ Sofonisba depicted her brother with the family several times. For the images, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portrait_of_the_Artist%27s_Family_%28Sofonisba_Anguissola%29#/media/File:Sofonisba_Anguissola,_Portrætgruppe_med_kunstnerens_fader_Amilcare_Anguissola_og_hendes_søskende_Minerva_og_Astrubale,_ca._1559,_0001NMK,_Nivaagaards_Malerisamling.jpg; and https://www.1st-art-gallery.com/Sofonisba-Anguissola/Two-Sisters-And-A-Brother-Of-The-Artist.html?srsId=AfmBOoo-P90PWRxJVZ_9j0QWeH94Lkyk6RX9zpyvDgyGY1NyrgaJt7L.



Figure 11. Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait*, 1554, oil on panel. The Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



Figure 12. Sofonisba Anguissola, *Asdrubale Bitten by a Crawfish*, 1554, pencil, charcoal, and black chalk drawing. Museo di Capodimonte, Naples.



Figure 12a. Sofonisba Anguissola, *Asdrubale*, brother, 1580s, oil on canvas.
Ponce Museum, Puerto Rico. Photo credit: Liana De Girolami Cheney.

The Robusti Family

Another intriguing sibling collaboration is that of the Venetian artist Marietta Robusti, *La Tintoretta* (1552-1590)²² and her brother, Domenico Tintoretto (1560-1635).²³ While data on this matter is somewhat limited, it is established that their father, Jacopo Tintoretto, collaborated with his children in composing monumental decorations for churches and palaces, similar to the artistic collaboration of Luca Longhi and his children, Barbara and Francesco. Tintoretto's *Paradise* in the Hall of the Great Council at the Doge's Palace in Venice exemplifies the collaborative efforts of family members. Several canvases were painted in oil and assembled between 1588 and 1599 to create this remarkable visualization of the celestial heaven (**Figure 13**).²⁴

²² Ridolfi, *Le meraviglie*, pp. 258-261, Fig. 258, <https://archive.org/details/lemaravigliedell02rido/page/n273/mode/2up>.

²³ Ridolfi, *Le meraviglie*, pp. 501-510, <https://archive.org/details/lemaravigliedell02rido/page/n539/mode/2up>.

²⁴ Ridolfi, *Le meraviglie*, p. 50, <https://archive.org/details/lemarauigliedell00rido/page/50/mode/2up>.



Figure 13. Jacopo Tintoretto and children, Marietta and Domenico, *Paradise*, 1588-99, oil on canvas. Hall of the Great Council. Doge's Palace, Venice.

Marietta was born in 1552, as a result of Tintoretto's earlier romantic liaison, while his son was born from a marriage in 1560.²⁵ In *Il Riposo*, the humanist and poet Raffaello Borghini (1537-1588) described her as "Marietta, known as *La Tintoretta*, besides her beauty and grace, she was skilled in playing the harpsichord, the lute, and other instruments."²⁶ Her daring brother, Domenico, featuring her image, created an erotic allegorical painting of Spring, *Flora*, c.1590, oil on canvas, now at the Museo del Prado in Madrid (**Figure 14**). In *Search of Marietta Tintoretta*, Robert Echols and Frederick Ilchman showed that Giacomo Piccini's engraving of Marietta in Ridolfi's *Le meraviglie dell'arte* depicted an actual portrait of the painter, *La Tintoretta*.²⁷ When comparing Piccini's engraving to Domenico's painting, it reveals a striking resemblance, showing that Marietta was her brother's muse (**compare Figures 14 and 14a**). Domenico's portrait of his sister, as a personification of Flora in alluring attire favored in the Venetian court, accentuated her nude neckline and rich jewelry and may imply more insinuating connections.

²⁵ Moderata Fonte, *Il Merito delle Donne* (Venice: Domenico Imberti, 1600), repr. ed. A. Chemello (Milan: Edios, 1988); repr. trans. Virginia Cox (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

²⁶ Raffaello Borghini, *Il Riposo* (Florence: Giorgio Marescotti, 1548), p. 558, <https://archive.org/details/ripodosdiraffaell00borg/page/558/mode/2up>.

²⁷ Robert Echols and Frederick Ilchman, "In Search of Marietta Tintoretta," in *Women Artists and Artisans in Venice*, ed. Tracy Cooper (London: Routledge, 2024), pp. 55-92; Ridolfi, *Le meraviglie*, <https://archive.org/details/lemarauigliedell00rido/page/70/mode/2up>, pp. 70 and 72, fig. 70.



Figure 14. Domenico Tintoretto, *Flora*, 1590, oil on canvas. Museo del Prado, Madrid.



Figure 14a. Giacomo Piccini, Marietta Tintoretta, in Carlo Ridolfi, *Le meraviglie dell'arte* (1648), 70-71, engraving. Photo credit and courtesy: ©Biblioteca della Fondazione Giorgio Cini.

The personification of Spring, Flora, is depicted in a waist-length portrait, placed in a partial three-quarter view within the picture plane. The image reveals a beautiful Venetian *donna nobile*, whose linen-white chemise, designed with curvilinear edges, is supported by a blue bodice adorned with shoulder straps decorated with pink and blue precious stones. This high-waisted, closed-front bodice features a boldly low décolleté front. To conceal the exposed upper part of the breasts, a transparent lace veil encircles her shoulders, resting just above her breastline. This delicately woven lace features detailed plant motifs that evoke the essence of Spring. Curiously, Domenico placed a cluster of laurel leaves between her breasts; this evergreen foliage symbolizes the eternal renewal of a season and is also an attribute of Flora.²⁸ Along with laurel leaves, Domenico added a bouquet of pink roses, a symbol of love associated with Venus, held in her hand, whose color matches the pink stone on the strap of her shoulder.²⁹

In *Le meraviglie dell'arte*, Ridolfi noted Domenico's fascination with roses: "He was a prolific and inventive artist and thinker, known for writing numerous stories, poems, and moral subjects. He studied literature in his youth, drawing notable inspiration from Ariosto [epic poet Ludovico Ariosto, 1474-1533], particularly in themes such as the rose. He created paintings depicting charming gardens with hedges of roses."³⁰ Domenico further adorned the figure of Flora with a pearl necklace and earrings. The wearing of a string of pearls was

²⁸ Mirella Levi D'Ancona, *The Garden of the Renaissance: Botanical Symbolism in Italian Paintings* (Florence: Olschki, 1977), p. 203.

²⁹ D'Ancona, *The Garden of the Renaissance*, p. 330.

³⁰ Ridolfi, *Le meraviglie*, pp. 501-510, <https://archive.org/details/lemeravigliedell02rido/page/n539/mode/2up>.

considered a tacitly prohibited accessory; however, Venetian noblewomen of the period invariably wore them.³¹ Piccini's engraving of Marietta also shows her wearing a choker with large pearls and revealing a low décolleté with plump breasts.

Domenico's sensual and mythological portrayal of Flora as his sister Marietta is similar to Alessandro's sensual depiction of the Jewish heroine *Judith* as his sister Chiara, whereas Francesco's depiction of his sister Barbara as the Virgin Mary is devotional and pious.³²

The constraints on female freedom during this period were complex and limiting, even for talented artists. *La Tintoretta*, despite her skills, was unable to marry her music tutor—the man she loved—because she needed to care for her father earlier in life. Her remarkable portraiture talent, however, led to an invitation to work at the Spanish court for Philip II, unlike her brother Domenico. Yet, her father declined the offer so she could remain close to him. In 1578, he arranged her marriage to Venetian jeweler Mario Augusta, and they lived nearby. Robert Echols offered additional insights on this subject.³³ *La Tintoretta's Self-Portrait* of 1578, an oil on canvas now at the Gallerie degli Uffizi, depicts her in three-quarter view, with a sideways look and a subtle turn, and an intense gaze that suggests she is painting herself while looking in a mirror (**Figure 14b**).³⁴ She is elegantly dressed as a noble lady, wearing a cream-white pleated dress accented with Venetian lace at the shoulders and a string of pearls around her neck. Her golden locks are rolled up and secured with a velvet band. She stands in front of a beautifully designed harpsichord, one hand touching the keys and the other holding an open music book. The notes on the sheet of music are legible and indicate that the madrigal, “Madonna per voi ardo” [My Lady, I burn with love for you], was composed in 1533 by the French composer residing in Venice, Philippe Verdelot (c.480-c.1540). Marietta's self-imaging presents her as a cultured noblewoman, celebrated for her talents as both a musician and a painter.

³¹ On the use of pearls in Venice during the Renaissance, see Cesare Vecellio and Cristoforo Krieger, *De gli habiti antichi et moderni di diverse parti del mondo libri* (Venetia: Damian Zenaro, 1590), digitized via the Getty Research Institute, https://archive.org/details/gri_33125012247702; *Mores Italiane*, Beinecke MS 457, digitized via Yale University Digital Library, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2003570>; Maria Blake de Maria, “Multifaceted Endeavors: Jewelry and Gemstones in Renaissance Venice,” in *Reflections of Renaissance Venice*, ed. M.E. Frank and Blake de Maria (Milan: 5 Continents, 2013), pp. 119–131, esp. 126, https://www.academia.edu/3066888/Multifaceted_Endeavors_Jewelry_and_Gemstones_in_Renaissance_Venice; and Marin Sanudo, *Venice: Città eccellentissima: Selections from the Renaissance diaries of Marin Sanudo*, ed. Patricia H. Labalme and Laura Sanguineti White, trans. Linda L. Carroll (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 305, and 264–265, <https://archive.org/details/venicecitaexcele0000sanu>.

³² This art historical essay does not cover the psychological and sexual gender issues among siblings.

³³ Echols and Ilchman, “In Search of Marietta Tintoretta,” pp. 55–92.

³⁴ Cheney, Faxon, and Russo, *Self-Portraits of Women Painters*, pp. 64–66.



Figure 14b. Marietta Robutti, *La Tintoretta, Self-Portrait with a Madrigal*, 1578, oil on canvas.
Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence.

Female painters were often portrayed as muses in their fathers' paintings, with one notable exception: Sofonisba, whose father was not an artist. Often, the artists' brothers selected their sisters as muses and models for their paintings, including *Il Padovanino*, Francesco Longhi, and Domenico Robusti. Numerous female painters, such as Chiara and Barbara, chose not to marry, in order to dedicate themselves to familial responsibilities and pursue their own artistic endeavors. In contrast, Sofonisba and Marietta balanced both marriage and their artistic careers. Chiara, Barbara, and Marietta competently managed their family's *bottega*, or artistic workshops and also oversaw family farms and estates. Sofonisba was engaged in esteemed royal courts. Importantly, all attained success as painters, muses, and creators of inspiring and beautiful artworks that serve both spiritual and visual reflection.

Coda: The Varotari Siblings' *Self-Portraits*

Chiara Varotari's *Uffizi Self-Portrait*

The *paragone* between the self-portraits of the Varotari siblings signifies a reverence for creativity and knowledge (**Figures 15 and 4**). The aspiration for a personal interpretation of the self and identity is depicted through the mirror's reflection seen by the viewer, as well as through the self as an observer. This brief comparative study focuses solely on specific observations regarding these two siblings.



Figure 15. Alessandro Varotari, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1600, oil on canvas. Civic Museum of Padua.

Photo credit: ©Fine Arts Images/Bridgeman Images.



Figure 4. Chiara Varotari, *Self-Portrait*, 1630, oil on canvas. Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence.

In the *Uffizi Self-Portrait*, Chiara depicted herself in a bust-length portrait, seated at a table, whose corner reveals a cushion bearing a bright tassel. She is observing herself in a mirror resting on the table, which is not visible to the viewer but is indicated by her pose and intense gaze (**Figures 4 and 4a-c**).³⁵ The oil painting is dated between 1630 and 1635. In her self-portrait, Chiara reveals several symbolic allusions that attest to her artistic and intellectual heritage, as well as to her persona.

The *Uffizi Self-Portrait* depicts Chiara holding a palette with paint and brushes, symbolizing her role as a painter. Two veils drape over her bare shoulders and bust, enhancing her allure. The veil, with a reddish tonality, encircles the lower part of her pectoral region, while the other veil, in green tones, envelops part of her bare shoulders and shapely breasts. Chiara articulates her passion for artistic expression through the erotic exposure of her voluptuous breast, emphasizing her nipple, which serves as a metaphorical allusion to Venus, the ancient goddess of Love and Beauty. Chiara holds a bunch of paintbrushes that allude to various symbols used in compositional design. The bundled paintbrushes reference the arrows used by the deity of Artistry and Sensuality, Eros (Cupid), the child of Venus, serving as another symbol of love.

Nearly imperceptible, on the left side of her veiled breast, is a paintbrush detached from the bundle, bent and directed towards her breast near her heart, reminiscent of an arrow (**Figures 4a and 4b**)—an allusion to Cupid's

³⁵ S. Meloni Trkulja, *Gli Uffizi. Catalogo Generale* (Florence: Centro D, 1979), Entry, A987, discusses the painting and attributes it to Chiara. Previously, the Inventory of the *Catalogue of the Royal Uffizi Gallery*, ed. Caesar Rigoni (Florence: Cooperative Printing Association, 1890), Entry 2037, attributed the painting to the Florentine painter Giovanni Martinelli (1600-1659), with the title of *Allegory of Painting* or *Allegory of Vanity*. This essay will not address the allegorical interpretation or symbolism of *Vanitas*, as the imagery conveys other significant meanings.

arrow of love, serving as a metaphor for her being struck by love. In Chiara's quick perception, she is described as being "pierced by the love of painting." This type of metaphorical love connection is often seen in paintings of Venus and Cupid, such as the Venetian painter Titian's *Venus and Cupid* of 1515, oil on canvas, now in the Wallace Collection of London (**Figure 16**). The scene depicts a beautiful pastoral meadow at sunset, with Cupid and Venus resting under an oak tree. Winged Cupid playfully aims his single arrow to pierce Venus with love, but she stops him by holding his arm. Other arrows are scattered on the ground, along with his bow, arrows, and a quiver filled with arrows. Another version was created by the Bolognese Mannerist painter Lavinia Fontana (1552-1614) in her 1592 oil on canvas, *Venus and Cupid*, now housed in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen (**Figure 17**).³⁶ This interior scene, probably a bedroom, shows Venus at bust length, adorned with jewels, with her voluptuous breasts visible through a sheer veil. She is seated, holding an arrow, while Cupid, standing behind her with a bow, appears to ask why he was denied the tool of love's piercing.



Figure 16. Titian, *Venus and Cupid*, 1515, oil on canvas. The Wallace Collection, London.

³⁶ Liana De Girolami Cheney, *Lavinia Fontana's Mythological Paintings: Art, Beauty, and Wisdom* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020, repr. 2024), pp. 70-104, esp. 92-94. The sitter is also her patron Isabella Ruini, a cultivated and elite Bolognese noblewoman.



Figure 17. Lavinia Fontana, *Venus and Cupid*, 1592, oil on canvas.
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen.

Emblematic References

This love symbolism appears in many love emblems. Inspired by humanist philosophy, classical translation, and art since the Renaissance, printing presses in Venice, Antwerp, and Lyon thrived, focusing on publishing emblems and mythological books. Cupid's arrow frequently appeared as a motif in love-themed emblem books, highlighting the potency and potential danger of love. For example, Otto van Veen (1556-1629), a Belgian humanist and painter, designed several emblem books, such as *Amorum Emblemata* [*Emblems on Love*], published in Antwerp in multiple languages in 1608, focusing on Ovid's love poems, as seen in *Happy Fights*, where Amor pierces the heart of the lover with an arrow (**compare Figures 4b and 18**). Another notable engraver was the Dutch printmaker Hendrick Goltzius (1558-1617), whose *Venus and Amor* of 1596 is part of the Rijksmuseum's collection in Amsterdam (**compare Figures 4b and 19**). The print features an intricate geometric design, with vignettes surrounding Venus and Amor, alluding to complex symbolism. A square design whose corners are decorated with hearts and roses—symbols of love and attributes of Venus—encloses an oval, within which the scene depicts an allegorical landscape. This scene is filled with small cameos surrounding a statuesque nude Venus, elegantly reclining on her mantle among roses. She interacts playfully with Amor, who mischievously pierces an arrow above her left breast, near the heart. He has dropped his bow and quiver to focus on this act of indiscreet love. The emblematic print is rich with symbols linked to Venus and love, such as the pair of kissing turtle doves, birds considered sacred to Venus. A long inscription at the bottom of the engraving, in translation, describes the power of Amor's action: "Our immense power is evident throughout the world, and my

fire has widespread potency. Neither any god nor any man escapes my arrows, each bearing feathered wings” (Figure 19).



Figure 4b. Chiara Varotari, *Self-Portrait, Brushes and Arrow, det.*, 1630, oil on canvas. Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 18. Otto van Veen, *Combat heureux (Happy Fight)*, engraving from *Amorum Emblemata* (1608), Antwerp.



Figure 4b. Chiara Varotari, *Self-Portrait, Brushes and Arrow, det.*, 1630, oil on canvas. Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 19. Hendrick Goltzius, *Venus and Amor*, 1596, engraving. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Photo credit and courtesy: ©Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Another emblematic and iconographic tradition involves the use of fasces, bundles of rods, or the gathering of a wheat bundle, all of which symbolize fullness, prosperity, and unity. This attribute is associated with the goddess of Harmony or Concord (*Concordia*).³⁷ The fasces, originally an Etruscan emblem of unity, were later adopted by the ancient Romans.³⁸ During the Italian Renaissance, the symbol was linked to references to ancient Greece, highlighting that a single rod is fragile, but a bundle of rods is resilient. This also conveyed messages of strength, will, and fortitude through unity, as described in the writings of the ancient Greek storyteller Aesop (620-564 BCE) in his classical fable of the moral lesson about the *Old Man and his Sons* or *Bundle of Sticks*, where an individual stick or stalk is easily broken, but when bundled together, they become unbreakable.³⁹

Paolo Giovio (1483-1552), the Italian Renaissance cleric, humanist, and historian who trained in medicine at the University of Padua (1498-1507), was acquainted with this classical text and incorporated some of the moral symbols into his writings, particularly within his emblems and imprese, as demonstrated in his Impresa 100, “Fortibus non deerunt” [The brave will not lack] in *Dialogo dell’imprese militari et amorose* (Lyon, 1555 and 1559) (**Figure 20**).⁴⁰ This intellectual foundation of emblematic theory and visual allegories influenced the scholar and iconographer Cesare Ripa (1555-1622) from Perugia. However, he did not include an image of Concord in his emblem (called *figurazione*) in his *Iconologia* (1593, without illustrations, and 1603, with illustrations).⁴¹

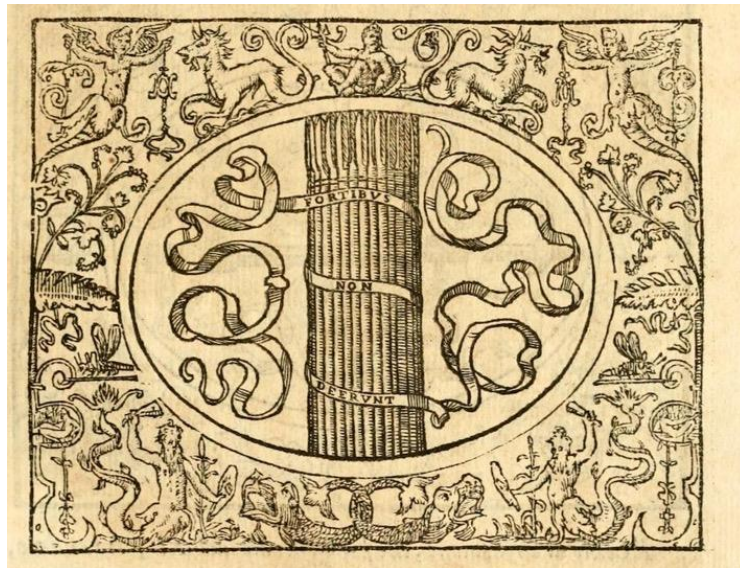


Figure 20. Paolo Giovio, Impresa 100, *Fortibus non deerunt* (The brave will not lack), engraving from *Dialogo dell’imprese militari et amorose* (Lyon: Guglielmo Roviglio, 1574), p. 95.

³⁷ T. Corey Brennan, *The Fasces: Ancient Rome’s Most Dangerous Political Symbol* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 3, <https://antigonejournal.com/2023/07/roman-fasces>; Paolo Giovio, *Dialogo dell’imprese militari et amorose* (Lyon: Guglielmo Roviglio, 1555/1559; rev. 1574), Impresa 100, p. 95. For the text, see <https://archive.org/details/impreseimilitarie00giov/page/n5/mode/2up>.

³⁸ Hans Biedermann, *Dictionary of Symbolism: Cultural Icons and the Meanings Behind Them* (New York: Meridian/Penguin Books, 1994), p. 126.

³⁹ Giuditta Cernigliano, *Leonardo’s Fables* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), pp. 1-20.

⁴⁰ Giovio, *Dialogo dell’imprese militari et amorose*, p. 95.

⁴¹ Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia* (Rome: Lepido Facij, 1603), pp. 80-82, <https://archive.org/details/iconologiaouerod00ripa>; Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, ed. Erna Mandowsky (New York: George Olms, 1994), p. 81.

Aware of these intellectual traditions through her family connections in Padua and Venice and her artistic education, Chiara inventively portrays herself holding a bundle near her heart, with paintbrushes in her left hand, resembling fasces. This illustrates how the brush supports her artistic endeavors, and the collection of brushes symbolizes her determination to paint, nurture, and teach the art of painting. With the bundle held near her heart, it also signifies her love for painting and her pursuit of harmonious success (**Figures 4a-b**).

Additional Mythological References

Chiara's self-representation also alludes to mythological figures: not only Venus, the goddess of Beauty and Love, but also Concordia and Diana. Chiara channeled Venus by adopting her traits in her pursuit of art and the creation of beauty. Holding a bundle of paintbrushes, she aligns herself with Concordia, the Roman goddess of Harmony, highlighting her artistic unity, mental strength, and purpose in painting. The paintbrushes, shaped like arrows, link her to Diana, the goddess of Nature. Diana values the natural world and uses arrows in hunting—an ancient, sacred, and nearly magical ritual—symbolizing the balance between humans and nature and the sacrifice of wild wilderness as an offering to deities. Thus, similar to Diana's use of arrows, Chiara employed brushes (metaphorical arrows) that resemble magical tools when applying colored pigments. These brushes help visualize a narrative on the canvas for a patron or a portrait of a patron, capturing the physical world.

In the *Uffizi Self-Portrait*, Chiara has highlighted her paintbrushes as a bundle of arrows, metaphorically appropriating the arrows of Diana, the goddess of natural forces, to symbolize human passion and intellect. Chiara used this artistic tool to harmonize her imagery and enhance beauty. The center of focus in her self-image is on herself, guided by this reference. Her dark brown hair is styled in an updo resembling a bonnet, accented with a reddish poppy flower positioned on the left side, the side where the brushes are held, as well as on the side of the heart (**compare Figures 4c and 21**). The red poppy flower in her tresses is complemented by a red sash at her waist, and bright coral lipstick echoes the poppy's hue (**Figure 4**).

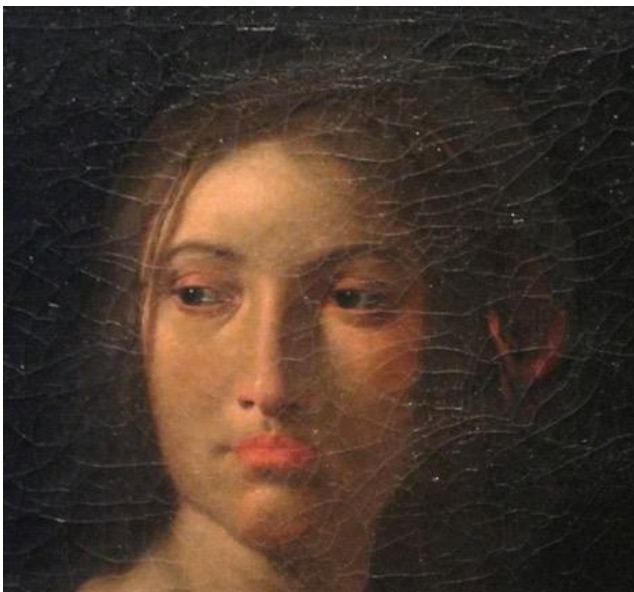


Figure 4c. Chiara Varotari, *Self-Portrait*, 1630, oil on canvas. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 21. Photograph of an actual poppy flower from the Veneto region.

Along with the rich symbolism and qualities represented by the goddesses in Chiara's *Uffizi Self Portrait*, there is an additional link related to the poppy flower. In ancient Roman mythology, Diana was regarded as a tripartite goddess embodying three aspects: the goddess of Nature and Hunting, comparable to the Greek Artemis; the Moon goddess, linked to Luna and the Greek Selene; and the goddess of the Underworld and Magic, similar to Hecate.⁴² Diana's traditional symbols include a bow, a quiver, and arrows, alluding to her hunting in Nature. The arrows also symbolize the moon's rays, complemented by the crescent moon, which signifies its cycles and nocturnal mysteries, as indicated by night, sleep, and associated themes of magic and mysticism (Diana as Luna, the Roman Moon Goddess, or the Greek goddess Selene). Diana, as a guardian and advocate of Nature, imparts wisdom on the symbolic significance of plants and flowers, particularly poppies, which are sacred to the goddess.⁴³ In the context of classical mythology, Diana assumes a different aspect, representing the Roman goddess Trivia, who resembles the Greek goddess Hecate and is associated with magical abilities and dominion over herbalism, including the chthonic thistle (*Helleborus*) and the opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*). The poppies associated with Trivia are connected to sedative and opiate effects that cause magical sleep and awe.



Figure 22. *Poppy Goddess*. Figurine from the sanctuary at Gazy, Crete, terracotta clay, 1400 BCE. Heraklion Archeological Museum, Crete.

⁴² Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, Books 1 and 2, ed. and trans. Robert A. Kaster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library 510, 2011), 1, 9, pp. 8-9; and 2, pp. 306-307, 470-471; Arthur E. Gordon, "On the Origin of Diana," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 63 (1932), pp. 177-192, explaining that Diana is of Italian origin, a cult brought to Rome from Aricia around 550 BCE; Tobias Fischer-Hansen and Birte Poulsen, eds., *From Artemis to Diana* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), Acta Hyperborea 12, chaps. 3 and 4; C.M.C. Green, *Roman Religion and the Cult of Diana at Aricia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; reissued New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

⁴³ Ruth Binney, *Plant, Lore, and Legend* (New York: Dover Publications, 2018), p. 29.

The association of the poppy flower with divinity is often illustrated in ancient art. Images of the Poppy Goddess—a Mother Goddess of Earth—appear in Minoan and Mycenaean religious cultures. A Minoan terracotta figurine of the goddess of 1400 BCE, from the sanctuary at Gazy in Crete, is now the collection of the Heraklion Archeological Museum in Crete (**Figure 22**). The goddess is depicted in an orans pose, with her long hair arranged as a bonnet and topped with a diadem adorned with three emerging poppy seed pods. Another instance of this cult is illustrated by the incised imagery on a gold Mycenaean ring, showing the Poppy Goddess or a similar Mother Goddess of the Earth, sitting in an open landscape beneath a blooming poppy tree (*bocconia arborea*). She holds three poppy seed cases, while three other standing figures present her with clusters of poppies and wheat offerings. Notably, the Minoan labrys, or double-axe, symbol is shown suspended at the top center of the ring, perhaps alluding to Minoan and Mycenaean royal connections (**Figure 23**).⁴⁴



Figure 23. *Poppy Goddess*, 1450 BCE, gold ring. Mycenae Grave Circle A. Museum Archeological Museum, Athens, Greece.

This form of worship of the Poppy Goddess, originating in a Cretan cult, spread to Mycenae and beyond the ancient world through the Eleusinian Mysteries in classical Greece, later influencing Roman religious practices.⁴⁵ Of note is a Roman coin, a silver denarius minted by Publius Accoleius Lariscolus between September and December 43 BCE, showing a portrait of Diana Nemorensis [Diana of the Woods] in front and Diana as Artemis, Hecate, and Selene on the back (**Figure 24**).⁴⁶ The Roman cult of Diana as Diana Nemorensis originated among the Etruscans. The Roman Republic adopted it and associated Diana with Aricia, an ancient Roman commune overlooking Lake Nemi; hence, another appellation for Diana of the Woods is Diana of Nemi.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 2 vols. (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1955), 1:14.15, p. 96; Patrick Hun, "A Selective History of the Sacred Poppy," *Paleobotany* (February 2024), <https://www.electrummagazine.com/2024/02/a-selective-history-of-the-sacred-poppy>, with an extensive bibliography of the subject.

⁴⁵ Jessica Hundle, ed., *Plant Magic* (Cologne: Taschen, 2025), p. 156.

⁴⁶ See <https://en.numista.com/catalogue/pieces66734.html>.

⁴⁷ Andrea Alföldi, "Diana Nemorensis," *American Journal of Archaeology*, 64 (1960), pp. 137-144, esp. 141.



Figure 24. Denarius of Publius Accoleius Lariscolus. Roman silver coin, 509 BCE.
 Verso with *Diana Nemorensis* (Diana, Hecate, and Selene).
 Photo credit: ©Numista, <https://en.numista.com/66734>.

The front of the denarius features a profile bust portrait of Diana. The verso of the coin shows her as a *diva triformis* [a three-form goddess], a term introduced by the Roman lyric poet Horace (65-68 BCE) in one of his *Odes* (*Carmina* 3:22-24).⁴⁸ The composition features three similar female figures facing forward, standing on a beam. Behind them, a row of five cypress trees alludes to various legends, including the story of Gaea, the Mother Goddess of Earth, who transformed Eteocles's daughters, skilled Greek dancers, into beautiful cypress trees to protect them.⁴⁹ Thus the theme is linked to both physical and metaphysical references to Nature, highlighting the significance of natural protection through Diana's natural and supernatural role as the guardian of Nature.

These female figures raise their arms, holding some of the deity's attributes; in turn, they symbolize the deity's nature and cosmic significance across the triple realms. From left to right, the first figure represents Artemis (Diana), the goddess of the Hunt, holding a bow in one hand, symbolizing her role as a hunter. The central figure, Hecate (Trivia), the goddess of Magic, perhaps holding a snake, has her hands joined with the others, signifying Diana's divine protection and loyalty. The final figure, as Selene (Luna), the goddess of the Moon, features a poppy, representing her connection to natural powers and nighttime pursuits such as sleep.⁵⁰

This comparative analysis of Diana's imagery and Chiara's painting reveals that Goddess Diana's metaphysical symbolism parallels that of the mortal Chiara. Diana was known for her purity, devotion, and deep love for her brother Apollo, the Sun god. These traits align with those of Chiara, who chose to remain unmarried and to support her beloved brother Alessandro in his career. Furthermore, Chiara's connection to the Poppy

⁴⁸ David West, ed. and trans., *Horace Odes III: Dulce Periculum* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), Book 3: 22-24.

⁴⁹ D'Ancona, *The Garden of the Renaissance*, p. 120, on the symbolism of the cypress tree.

⁵⁰ See <https://www.harneycoins.com/post/diana-nemorensis-and-the-bloody-king-of-the-wood>; for the image, see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Diana_Nemorensis_denarius2.jpg.

Goddess, or to poppy symbolism, develops from her environmental ties to the region's landscape and the flower's symbolic meaning.



Figure 25. Photograph of an actual path of poppies along the area of the Veneto.

Chiara, well acquainted with the flora and landscape of the Paduan and Veneto regions where she grew up and resided, intentionally chose the poppy, a flower that naturally thrives in fields, along roadsides, at edges, and on rural paths within these areas (**Figure 25**). She was especially familiar with the Paduan region, not only because she was born there in 1584 but also because her family had close ties to Padua. Her father trained under Paolo Veronese, and her brother's early success and love for Padua earned him the nickname *Il Padovanino*. She was probably aware of Paolo Veronese's *Portrait of Daniele Barbaro*.⁵¹ Barbaro (1514-1570) was a Venetian cleric, architect, and humanist who had designed for the University of Padua's botanical gardens (Orto Botanico di Padova), a historical site for cultivating various poppy species for medicinal purposes as a *horto medicinale* or *hortus simplicium* (**Figure 26**). The Padua botanical gardens served once as an original cultivation area for medicinal herbs and plants, including poppies, managed by the Benedictine monks of the Basilica of Santa Giustina and the Palazzo Po, near the Basilica of Saint Anthony in Padua.⁵²

⁵¹ For the image of Paolo Veronese's *Portrait of Daniele Barbaro*, 1556, oil on canvas, now at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portrait_of_Daniele_Barbaro#/media/File:Daniele_Barbaro.jpg.

⁵² Alessandro Minelli, ed., *The Botanical Garden of Padova (1545-1995)* (Venice: Marsilio, 1995), Part 1, Foundation, and Part 2, the Botanical Garden in the Late Sixteenth Century.

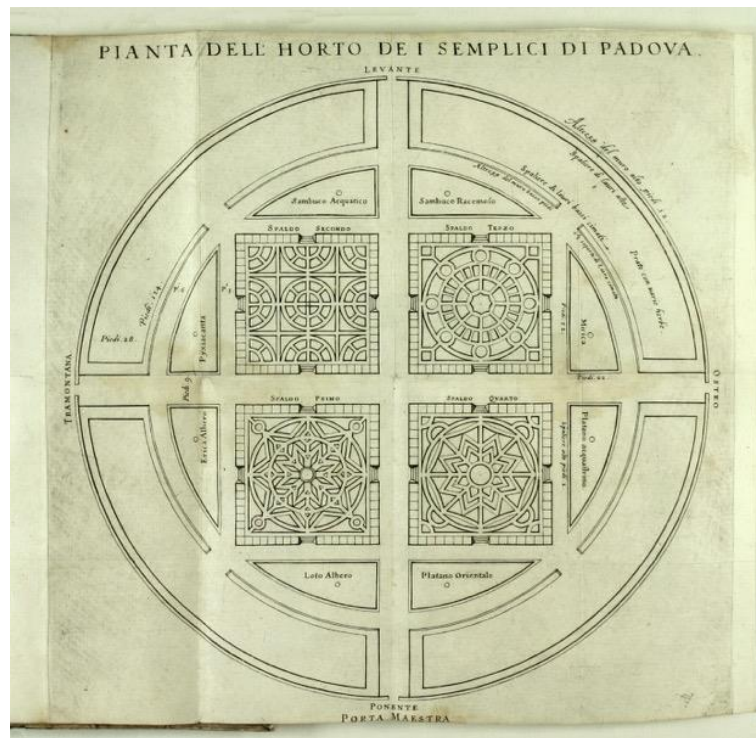


Figure 26. Daniele Barbaro, Diagram of the *Botanical Gardens (Orto Botanico di Padova)*, 1545.
University of Padua, Padua.

In 1545, Barbaro played a key role in helping physician Francesco Bonafede (1474-1558), botanist Luigi Squalermo (also known as Anguillara), and architect Andrea Moroni expand the Benedictine cultivated garden.⁵³ He was involved in designing, funding, and supervising the construction of the University of Padua's botanical gardens. This medicinal garden was shaped like a compass, with the titles of the four winds inscribed in the outer rim of the circle: North (Tramontana), East (Levante), South (Ostro), and West (Ponente). The design expanded into a large circular walking path and a second enclosed circle surrounded by trees. This design pattern symbolizes the natural world. Inside this large circular area, four square units were laid out, each featuring unique, intricate horticultural patterns for growing various medicinal plants, including poppies. The four squares were arranged according to the cardinal points connected with the four winds. Barbaro's diagram reveals a central, concentric design resembling the internal structure of flowers, with rotational polygonal rings reminiscent of the poppy's radial symmetry (actinomorphic). Geometrically, it also evokes the poppy seed pouch as bowl or saucer shape (*crateriform*), with poppy petals arranged in concentric and quadrilateral patterns (**Figure 26**).⁵⁴

Chiara's *Uffizi Self-Portrait* uses the poppy as a symbol with both physical and metaphysical meanings. The fleeting natural beauty of poppies—watching their velvety green buds slowly open into red flowers—is regarded as a kind of natural magic. The petals, which resemble crepe paper or silk, show soft ruffles and wrinkles. Their bowl or cup-shaped flowers rest on slender, graceful stems above vibrant green leaves. Usually, the petals stand

⁵³ Francesco Barison, Ilaria Calonego, Anna Tazorioi, “Cortusi’s L’horto de I Semplici di Padova 1591,” translation and exercise-book layout of the Botanical Garden of Padua (December 2019), <https://phaidra.cab.unipd.it/o:415920>.

⁵⁴ For the image of Paolo Veronese's *Portrait of Daniele Barbaro*, 1556, oil on canvas, now at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portrait_of_Daniele_Barbaro#/media/File:Daniele_Barbaro.jpg.

out against dark, striking centers and bright yellow stamens. The flower's beautiful composition and color have long been admired. In nature, the poppy flower and plant have been regarded as a "happy plant" since ancient Roman times. Culturally and mythologically, the poppy was significant, symbolizing Diana, the goddess of Nature, who was associated with both the plant and the Moon. The poppy flower's spiritual symbolism was connected to Diana's lunar, nocturnal, and sleeping aspects, and consequently to Hypnos, the deity of eternal sleep, who is intimately associated with sleep and the realm of dreams.⁵⁵

Additionally, metaphorically and metaphysically, the poppy's red color was associated with blood and symbolically tied to human imagination. It also represented the cycle of life, relating to intellectual fertility and everlasting memory, owing to its hypnotic qualities.⁵⁶ This symbolic connection, which sparks creativity, was a crucial aspect for a painter such as Chiara. The magical poppy plant (*papavero*), which blooms in Italian meadows, also symbolizes immortality and remembrance, not by coincidence but as an indirect reference to the memory of Chiara as an accomplished painter. Hence Chiara's desire and determination to be immortalized in her portrait highlight her dual role as an artist and muse. Her self-portrait, featuring her head crowned with the essence of intellectual creativity and a poppy placed in her hair, serves as an allegory exploring themes of painting and love. It also exemplifies the enchanting power of imagination, which fuels the artist's creative process.



Figure 27. Felice Antonio Casoni, Portrait medal of *Lavinia Fontana: An Allegory of Painting*, 1611, cast lead metal. British Museum, London.

Photo credit: ©The Trustees of the British Museum.

Sentiments similar to Chiara's about the love of painting were also captured in Felice Antonio Casoni's 1611 medal of *Lavinia Fontana: An Allegory of Painting*, now at the British Museum in London, where he immortalized the Bolognese painter Lavinia Fontana (**Figure 27**). The motto on the medal's verso states

⁵⁵ [Miss] Carruthers, *Flower Lore, the Teaching of Flowers: Historical, Legendary, Poetical, and Symbolical* (London/Dublin: McCaw, Stevenson and Orr, 1879), p. 140. She cited Girolamo Fracastoro (1478-1553), a Renaissance polymath from Verona, a physician and poet who authored a poem mentioning the poppy flower, Diana, and Hypnos: "To Somnus [Hypnos] poppy-flowers—'There poppies white, and violets,/ Alcippus [Danae chrysippus alcippus] on the altar sets/ Of quiet sleep, and weaves a crown/ To bring the gentle godhead down'." <https://archive.org/details/cu31924074094412>.

⁵⁶ Binney, *Plant, Lore, and Legend*, p. 29; Green, *Roman Religion and the Cult of Diana at Aricia*; Richard Folkard, Jr., *Plant Lore, Legends, and Lyrics* (London: Folkard and Son, 1884), Part One: Chapter X on magical plants, Chapter XIII on imagination, and Part Two, on Encyclopaedia of Plants, section on Poppy.

Lavinia's love for painting: "Per il stato giocoso mi mantene" [It is through your joyful state that I find my sustenance or Through you [painting], a joyous state, I maintained].⁵⁷ Sofonisba Anguissola also composed a self-portrait that depicts her holding a large medallion that honors her as a painter from Cremona, as well as a family rebus consisting of initial letters associated with her siblings' names, her family name, and the city of origin. The 1556 miniature medal is depicted in oil on parchment and is now housed at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, MA.⁵⁸ Therefore, we see Chiara continuing to emulate her "artistic sisters'" passion for painting.

Optical Observations

In Chiara's *Uffizi Self-Portrait*, the mirror is placed on a velvet cushion with a tassel, whose corner is visible on the table (**Figure 4**). This is an aesthetic plush that not only symbolizes her recognized material wealth and social status as an accomplished painter but also highlights the luxurious quality of the fabric used in the attire of the noble women she portrayed. Ripa's comments suggest that luxury materials such as velvet (*velluto*) or cushions (*cuscini*) not only symbolize human indulgence in wealth but also allude to the intellectual ability of the person using them as representing the "stability of a wise person" ("stabilità of a savio")⁵⁹ and further allude metaphorically to the artist's intellectual labor of self-imaging rising from the physical labor of using paints and brushes. The mirror's implied display also highlights its role as a reflective tool for the painter, serving as "the eye of the artist."⁶⁰ Its placement on a velvet surface, like an object on a throne in the artist's vision, embodies not only the visual reflection of herself (*mimesis*) as an object of beauty, in this case, but also, through the optical illusion, Chiara's validation as a creative intellect.

Alessandro Varotari's *Self-Portrait*

In her *Uffizi Self-Portrait*, Chiara depicted herself as a painter in contrast to her fellow artists. Sofonisba preferred to portray herself as either a reader or a musician.⁶¹ Meanwhile, Barbara decided to impersonate a saint—Saint Catherine of Alexandria (**compare Figures 4, 9, 11, and 14b**). The visual representations become more distinct when comparing Chiara's *Uffizi Self-Portrait* to her brother Alessandro's *Self-Portrait*. He does not portray himself as a painter with paintbrushes and a palette like his sister but as a scholar, a humanist surrounded by philosophical texts, such as those by Boethius, Plutarch, and Dante, classical sculptures, an armillary sphere, and a book on artistic proportions (**Figure 15**).

⁵⁷ Cheney, *Lavinia Fontana's Mythological Paintings*, pp. 32-58, esp. 54-56 on Caso. For the image, see: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_G3-IP-370.

⁵⁸ Cheney, Faxon, and Russo, *Self-Portraits by Women Painters*, p. 48, for the first decoding of the letters. See subsequent exhibition and catalogue by Leticia Ruiz Gómez, ed., *A Tale of Two Women Painters: Sofonisba Anguissola and Lavinia Fontana* (Madrid: Museo del Prado, 2019), p. 95.

⁵⁹ Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia* (Padua: Donato Pasquardi, 1630), *figurazione* on Magnificence, Part One, pp. 453-454, and Part Two, pp. 1114-1115, Nobility, "Adorned with rich garments ... velvet or gold drapes signify honor, authority, and the sublimity of the soul."

⁶⁰ Leonardo da Vinci, *Trattato della Pittura* or *Libro di pittura*, compiled by his student Francesco Melzi between 1530 and 1540. Now as Codex Urbinas lat, 1270 in the Vatican Library, Chapter 402, "Come lo spicchio e il maestro dei pittori" [How the mirror is the teacher of painters]: "To judge whether your finished painting faithfully conforms to nature, capture the reflection of your living subject in a mirror. The reflected image should reflect the living object in it. Compare the reflected object with your painting and consider carefully whether the subject of both figures conforms." See *Leonardo da Vinci and His Treatise on Painting*, Introduction, © 2012 Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia by the Author Francesca Fiorani, <https://www.treatiseonpainting.org/cocoon/leonardo/mssFront/vu>.

⁶¹ Cheney, Faxon, and Russo, *Self-Portraits by Women Painters*, pp. 63-66, on Marietta Robusti as musician.



Figure 4. Chiara Varotari, *Self-Portrait*, 1630, oil on canvas. Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 9. Barbara Longhi, *Self-Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, 1590s, oil on canvas. Fondazione Biblioteca Capitolare di Verona. Photo credit and courtesy: ©Fondazione Biblioteca Capitolare di Verona.



Figure 11. Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait*, 1554, oil on panel. The Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



Figure 14b. Marietta Robutti, *La Tintoretta, Self-Portrait with a Madrigal*, 1578, oil on canvas. Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 15. Alessandro Varotari, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1600, oil on canvas. Civic Museum of Padua.
Photo credit: ©Fine Arts Images/Bridgeman Images.



Figure 28. Titian, *Self-Portrait* (flipped), 1567, oil on canvas.
Museo del Prado, Madrid.



Figures 15a and 15b. Alessandro Varotari, *Red Stand* (flipped), forming the letter V for Varotari and the letter A for Alessandro, det., *Self-Portrait*, 1645, oil on canvas. Civic Museum of Padua.
Photo credit: ©Fine Arts Images/Bridgeman Images



Figure 15c. Alessandro Varotari, Armillary Sphere, det., *Self-Portrait*, 1645, oil on canvas. Civic Museum of Padua.

Photo credit: ©Fine Arts Images/Bridgeman Images.

In his *Self-Portrait*, oil on canvas, c.600, in the Civic Museum of Padua, Alessandro portrayed himself in a three-quarter-length portrait, dressed in a philosopher's garb, wearing a brown outfit with a white collar that matches the edges of the sleeves (**Figures 15 and 15a-c**). He turns his head to his right to admire a marble bust portrait resting on a red pedestal. His alert expression, which enhances his attractiveness, features an aquiline nose, a mustache, a trimmed goatee, and a short beard. His long, chestnut-colored hair matches the color of his mustache and goatee. Alessandro raised his index finger in a classic gesture to demand attention to the pedestal effigy.⁶² On a bright red pedestal rests a marble bust portrait. There is an ambiguity regarding the nature of the portrait, which has traditionally been considered an effigy of the Venetian painter Titian (1488/1490-1576) (**compare Figures 15 and 28, flipped image**). Still, it can be seen as a portrait of the classical philosopher Plato (428/233-348/347 BCE), the eminent Greek thinker (**compare Figures 15 with 29 and 29a**).

⁶² Michel Coughlin, *A Theory of Hands: The Semiotics of Faith in Early Modern Art*, <https://michaelscoughlin.ca/theory-of-hands> (July 2025).



Figure 15. Alessandro Varotari, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1600, oil on canvas. Civic Museum of Padua. Photo credit: ©Fine Arts Images/Bridgeman Images.



Figure 29 and 29a. Vincenzo Grandi, attr., *Plato and Aristotle*, 1550, marble reliefs, Museo del Prado, Madrid. Photo credit and courtesy: ©Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.

Between 1533 and 1546, the antiquarian, humanist, and philosopher Diego Hurtado de Mendoza (1503-1575), while serving as an Imperial Spanish ambassador in Venice, commissioned marble bust portraits of Aristotle and Plato in profile.⁶³ These marble reliefs were part of his art collection and were probably created by the renowned sculptor from Vicenza, Vincenzo Grandi (1493-1577).⁶⁴ Plato's plaque at the top bears Greek inscriptions that translate to "Plato's son of Ariston," while Aristotle's reads in translation "Aristotle's son of Nikomachos" (**Figures 29 and 29a**). Mendoza donated these sculptures to King Philip II of Spain. Now, both bust portraits are part of the Royal Collection in the Museo del Prado in Madrid.

These marble reliefs are copies of fifteenth-century Florentine bronze reliefs, created by an anonymous artist and were well known in Venice during the sixteenth century through the collection of the humanist Cardinal Pietro Bembo (1470-1547). He also collected artworks made from engraved hardstone, gems, and medals by Valerio Belli, known as Valerio Vicentino (1468-1546), who, like Grandi, was from Vicenza.⁶⁵

Mendoza was both a patron of classical art and a scholar passionate about the works of Aristotle and Plato. In his private library, he owned many works on Aristotle and commentaries written in Greek, Latin, and Arabic, one of which was his translation of Aristotle's *Mechanics*, where he noted: "*My principal aim has been to occupy my time [...] in studying and identifying the works of Aristotle through the interpretations and texts that have come into my hands.*"⁶⁶ Therefore, Alessandro's placement of the books by Dante, Boethius, and Plutarch

⁶³ Rosario Coppel, *Esculturas del Renacimiento italiano en el Museo del Prado: La colección de Don Diego Hurtado de Mendoza* (Rome: Accademia Spagnola di Storia, Archeologia e Belli Arti, 1996), pp. 95-97; Massimo Negri, *Vincenzo e Gian Gerolamo Grandi. Scultori di pietra e di bronzo nel Cinquecento Veneto* (Trento: Provincia autonoma di Trento, Soprintendenza per i beni culturali, 2014), pp. 214-215.

⁶⁴ Coppel, *Esculturas del Renacimiento italiano en el Museo del Prado*, pp. 95-97.

⁶⁵ Miguel Falomir, ed., *El retrato del Renacimiento* (Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado, 2008), p. 301; John Pope-Hennessy, assisted by Ronald Lightbown, *Catalogue of Italian Sculpture in the Victoria and Albert Museum*, 3 vols. (London: HMSO, 1964), 1:488-489, Cat. 517.

⁶⁶ Falomir, *El retrato del Renacimiento*, p. 301.

beneath the classical effigy's pedestal is significant because the Platonic and Aristotelian ideals influenced these humanist poets and philosophers.

In the *Self-Portrait*, Alessandro is also sitting in front of a marble table with a frieze-like top (**Figure 15**). In the foreground, the objects displayed on a horizontal marble platform serve as an intriguing rebus for the viewer. These include closed books, a sculptural model of a nude male body, an open book with a perspective diagram, and a Renaissance-style brass armillary sphere. Overall, these items constitute an innovative and enigmatic rebus that investigates the confluence of knowledge, art, and science.

From the far left of the platform, three notable historical books are displayed: Plutarch, Boetius, and Dante. These books are perpendicularly placed in front of the red pedestal supporting the bust imagery. Historically, the Greek historian, biographer, and writer Plutarch (active 46-120 CE) is renowned for his many works, including *Parallel Lives*, a curated collection of biographies of eminent Greek and Roman personalities, and *Moralia*, a compilation of essays addressing ethical, political, and literary subjects. Boetius (d. 524) was a Roman politician, historian, and philosopher of the Middle Ages known especially for his *Consolation of Philosophy*, which discusses the concept of happiness. The last book on the pile is marked Dante (1265-1321), the renowned Italian poet and philosopher, who authored the monumental epic poem the *Divine Comedy*, written in the Tuscan dialect, which eventually influenced the development of the Italian language. These historical, literary, and philosophical texts are intentionally associated with the classical effigy positioned above them.



Figure 15. Alessandro Varotari, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1600, oil on canvas. Civic Museum of Padua. Photo credit: ©Fine Arts Images/Bridgeman Images.



Figure 30. Michelangelo, *River-God* (flipped), 1525, unbaked clay. Casa Buonarroti, Florence.

In the prominent foreground, next to the humanist books, is a reclining nude male figure. It is a painted copy of a recumbent statue of a River God created by Michelangelo in 1525 as an unbaked clay model for the base of the Medici tombs in the New Sacristy of the Church of San Lorenzo in Florence (**compare Figures 15 and 30**,

flipped).⁶⁷ Michelangelo's sculpture was never finished. It is uncertain how the model came to be owned by architect and sculptor Bartolomeo Ammanati (1511-1592), who donated the clay torso to the Florentine Accademia del Disegno in 1583. It was copied and served as an inspiration for many artists over the years. Later, in 1965, it became part of the Casa Buonarroti collection.

In Alessandro's painting, behind the sculpture is an open book with illegible writing, but it features a drawing of an acute triangle, hinting at perspectival studies. This design echoes Leonardo da Vinci's triangular drawings from the Codex Arundel (1458/1500, fol. 218v),⁶⁸ as well as Leon Battista Alberti's theoretical book on painting and perspective, *On Painting* (1435).⁶⁹ Thus Alessandro in his painting refers to his understanding of both practical and theoretical art.



VENETIAN

Figure 31. Frate Vespasiano Amphiareo, Venetian Letter Font from *Opera nella quale s'insegna scrivere* (Venice: Gabriel Giolito di Ferrari et Fratelli, 1554; Bindoni, 1596).



Figure 15a and 15b. Alessandro Varotari, Red Stand (flipped), forming the letter V for Varotari and the letter A for Alessandro, det., *Self-Portrait*, 1645, oil on canvas. Civic Museum of Padua. Photo credit: ©Fine Arts Images/Bridgeman Images.

As Alessandro rests his hand on the red stand, he subtly points at himself with his index finger. The stand's design creates the letter A, representing his name, Alessandro, and the letter V of his last name, Varotari, when flipped upside down (**Figures 15a and 15b**). Alessandro's simulated letters A and V resemble decorative font letters A and V chosen from the Ferrarese engraver Frate Vespasiano Amphiareo, also known as Anfiareo (1490/1500-1563), who published *Opera nella quale s'insegna scrivere* (Venice: Gabriel Giolito di Ferrari et Fratelli, 1554; Bindoni, 1596) (**compare Figure 31 with 15a and 15b**). Amphiareo's book examines two main aspects of writing. First, the evolution of different letter styles and fonts, with a particular focus on those considered less well-designed or inferior in form, which he rediscovered through his innovative methods. Additionally, he demonstrated how to produce the darkest ink with ease, enabling individuals of all skill levels to

⁶⁷ H. Chapman, "Michelangelo Drawings: Closer to the Master," in exhib. cat., BM, 43 (2005), pp. 175-176. For the image of the drawing, see https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1859-0625-544.

⁶⁸ Sylvie Duvernoy, "Leonardo and Theoretical Mathematics," *NexusNetworkJournal*, 10 (2008), pp. 39-50, DOI 10.1007/S00004-007-0055-9, <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s00004-007-0055-9.pdf>.

⁶⁹ For the text, see <https://archive.org/details/onpainting0000albe>.

acquire this knowledge. Moreover, he elucidated the processes of grinding and striking ink, as well as the proper techniques for writing with a pen in black, blue, and cinnamon ink. He regarded this knowledge as essential for daily human activities.⁷⁰

Alessandro deliberately linked the symbolism of letters and typefaces to the typeset letters from books by renowned humanists, displayed at the stand's base using different font styles and inks for their titles. This approach is akin to a painter experimenting with various colors and shapes to convey the essence of art in his paintings.



Figure 32. Botticelli, *Saint Augustine in His Study*, 1480, fresco.
Church of Ognissanti, Florence.

Furthermore, in the *Self-Portrait*, Alessandro's right hand, adorned with a beautiful gold ring featuring a blue precious stone (likely aquamarine or lapis lazuli), rests on a brass armillary, a historical astronomical and mechanical device used to measure both celestial and terrestrial spheres (**Figure 15c**). The concentric rings encompass a globe, likely representing the Earth, within the geocentric model of the universe articulated by the ancient astronomer and mathematician Ptolemy (100-170 CE). Numerous armillary spheres were created and featured in portraits of humanists and philosophers, symbolizing their knowledge and cultural status, as depicted

⁷⁰ For original publication in 1554, see <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Search/Home?lookfor=%22Vespasiano+Amphiarco+da+Ferrara%2C+frate+1500+or+1-1563.%22&type=author&inst/>. In 1950, the Gilles Le Corre (GLC) Foundry in Nantes, France, photographed and engraved this manuscript, promoting it through Creative Market and replicating the Venetian style fonts, <https://creativemarket.com/GLC/3604701-1565-Venetian>.

in Botticelli's 1480 fresco *Saint Augustine in His Study* in the Church of Ognissanti in Florence (**Figure 32**).⁷¹ The goal was to view the painter as a microcosm reflecting the broader universe, a macrocosm, representing a shared view at this time of the Neoplatonic concept of the physical and metaphysical connection between the individual and the cosmos.⁷² Thus, in Alessandro's *Self-Portrait*, the armillary sphere is situated adjacent to a theoretical art book, underscoring its association with measurement and precision in both scientific and artistic domains and highlighting Alessandro's creative and cultural heritage.

In sum, Alessandro's *Self-Portrait* constructed an identity through mediation, restraint, and the strategic enclosure of the self within objects that both signify and substitute presence. Rather than meeting the viewer in a reciprocal exchange of gazes, he withdraws into a carefully composed field of paraphernalia—artistic instruments, accouterments, books, and emblematic props—that function as external anchors of meaning. These elements do not simply describe his profession; they operate as a visual language through which the self is rendered legible yet also held at a deliberate distance.

Read philosophically and symbolically, this mode of self-representation aligns with a tradition in which the self is understood as something constructed through external legibility rather than internal transparency. The subject becomes a curated surface of meanings, where presence is stabilized by objects that both conceal and articulate identity. Yet this strategy also introduces a subtle paradox: the more the self is surrounded by paraphernalia meant to signify mastery and status, the less accessible its interiority becomes. The portrait thus oscillates between assertion and withdrawal, suggesting that selfhood is not directly disclosed but negotiated through signs that inevitably defer full disclosure.

What is crucial here is the way reflection is displaced. Unlike a mirror that returns the self in immediacy, Alessandro's identity is refracted through material culture: the tools and objects around him become indirect mirrors, offering not likeness but interpretation. The self is thus not encountered in a single reflective surface but dispersed across signs that require reading rather than recognition. This produces a subjectivity constructed through accumulation and mediation, in which presence is affirmed precisely by avoiding unmediated reflection.

Chiara's *Self-Portrait*, by contrast, introduces the mirror's reflection as both device and epistemology (**Figure 4**). Her engagement with her reflected image establishes a circuit of recognition in which seeing and being seen converge. The mirror, employed as an artistic instrument, does not merely reproduce appearance; it becomes a philosophical instrument of self-awareness, staging identity as an encounter rather than a system of signs. Her direct address to the viewer extends this logic outward: the mirror's immediacy is carried into the pictorial space, dissolving the boundary between reflection and presentation.

The contrast, therefore, is one not simply of temperament or gendered representation but of two distinct regimes of reflection. Alessandro's image disperses reflection into objects that signify indirectly, producing a self that is mediated, curated, and partially withdrawn from immediacy. Chiara's beautiful image consolidates reflection into a visible act of recognition, where the mirror affirms identity as presence rather than reconstruction.

⁷¹ Botticelli's fresco painting for the Church of Ognissanti, Florence, was moved to the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. See Ronald Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli: Life and Work* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), pp. 73-78, image at https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/29/Sandro_botticelli%2C_sant%27agostino_nello_studio%2C_1480_circa%2C_dall%27ex-coro_dei_fratelli_umiliati%2C_01.jpg.

⁷² Ernest Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), <https://archive.org/details/individualco00cass>.

Between these two modes, portraiture reveals itself as a philosophical field in which the self is never simply depicted but is continuously negotiated among reflection, mediation, and the gaze of others.

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