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Women's portraits of the self

Introduction

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Introduction

Caroline Trotot

Translation : Colin Keaveney

1 The articles[1] in this issue are the fruits of research carried out by scholars from a variety of disciplines (literature, history of the arts, sociology, and philosophy) in Europe and the United States. They are the product of several related ongoing projects: a series of literature seminars at the Université Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée and of art historical seminars at the INHA[2], a symposium at the University of Southern California[3], and another series of lectures at the Louvre[4]. We are very grateful to all the institutions that have supported these projects and to the French embassy in Washington for financing the Los Angeles gathering. While eschewing any claim to comprehensive coverage, these articles take on important issues and questions that appeared during a period stretching from the sixteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century. The volume as a whole takes a cross-disciplinary approach to phenomena that are often poorly understood and underestimated, and the authors collectively employed a wide range of available methods in an effort to better reflect human diversity and speak to the broadest possible audience[5] . The fragmentary nature of these contributions is emblematic of the place often reserved for women in these fields. Too regularly, only a few early modern women receive any critical attention, as the focus of random exhibitions[6] and publications[7], despite the existence of twenty years of very solid research[8]. Thus, the collection works to make visible what we might not see, even though it is right before our eyes.

2 Women -their knowledge and their skills- still remain all too often invisible, to such an extent that their absence from contemporary historical accounts is often thought to reflect the real state of affairs in bygone centuries. The common belief that there was no literature by women in this period is based on the contempt with which female scholars were treated and their exclusion from centres of scholarly training and progress. Likewise, the belief that there were no female painters stems from the fact that they were not permitted to paint male nudes, models used in history painting, and that they were refused access to academies of painting. Investigating the ways in which women got around these and other limitations avoids somehow perpetuating them and thereby

excluding women once again from the common cultural narrative - the mirror in which today's men and women look for guidance in the process of working out who they are. Yet, when scholarly research is directly linked to current social issues, even as it attempts to reconstruct a richer sense of the past, it can be suspected of harbouring a militant agenda. While women were often shut out from the production of knowledge in the past, it is now sometimes suggested that they are not in fact worthy of study. Moreover, although it is easy to believe that women of the past receive fuller consideration today than in their own times, the reverse is often true: some of these women artists were major figures in their own periods and are today largely forgotten, absent from textbooks and museums, especially in France. In order to gain a better understanding of the way representations of women's knowledge are produced and disseminated, we have chosen to study how women depicted their learning and used it in their art in order to create an identity for themselves. What was their role in the development, shaping and transformation of different forms of knowledge? Through their writing and painting, how did they conceive of their relationship - structured by desires as well as prohibitions - with knowledge as a field? How do these women, who lived at the dawn of modern epistemology, help us, as women and men of the twenty-first century, understand how representations of the self shape the possibilities for self-making available to us?

Reversing the Mirror. Reflexivity, from Absence to Presence

3 Studying female self-portraits from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century involves turning absence into presence. Revealingly, the term *self-portrait* did not appear before the twentieth century[9], even though the phenomenon obviously existed in painting[10]. Our interest in self-portraiture - a less prestigious genre than that of history painting, and perhaps even than the portrait, since it was often the result of the artist's inability to find a model - is doubtless a product of our shifting preoccupations today. Applying the category to a period preceding the coining of the word runs the risk of retrospectively creating an illusion. We shall attempt to avoid making this mistake not by trying to write a history, but by considering together works that display similar features, the better to describe and then interpret them.

4 Interestingly, the term self-portrait applies to both literature and painting. It is a category with uncertain limits[11]. The variability of the term thus permits us to revisit the history of literature and the arts with an attention to their mutual unfolding. In the period under examination, relations among the arts were marked by the influence of the analogy *ut pictura poesis*[12], which led to many reciprocal creative exchanges and a metaphorically unified collective imagination. Considering the works under discussion here as self-portraits (whether literary or artistic), we examine the similarities between these two areas of creation, and we explore what a more extensive knowledge of works produced in adjacent arts, countries, and periods allows us to glean about the meaning of self-representation for these women. Therefore, in what follows, we shall examine the systems of literary and pictorial signification that make up these works, what they tell us about these women as individuals and as a group, and how they relate to one another, in order to allow us to understand what is today referred to as the "woman creative artist" and the "woman intellectual"[13].

5 Art history has taught us the usefulness of inventories. The Louvre does not know how many paintings by women it possesses; estimates suggest a number around 300, but the inventory is not without ambiguities. Certain works are out on loan to regional museums because they were judged of secondary importance; others had their attributions changed in the nineteenth century. Questions of attribution are vital, for the accreditation of the artist's talent is closely linked to her authorship being recognized. Women artists are still prevented from receiving the credit they deserve, according to a circular logic that has been exposed as such by feminist critics. The prevailing prejudice is that there were no women artists because we do not know of any; we do not know of any, because if any do exist, what they created is of minor interest. The work in this volume postulates a different reality: there are women creative artists in painting and literature, but the way we construct knowledge and conduct analysis has resulted in their neglect. Their works are underrated, even at a time when more and more attention is being paid to minor artists, and when micro-history is being prioritized. Both the inventory itself and the principles that led to the exclusion of these works must be changed. This kind of reassessment has been the goal of our colleague Anne Lafont, with whom this project was conceived. On her arrival at INHA a few years ago in order to participate in writing a dictionary of art historians, she was astounded to see that out of the 400 planned entries, only one and half were dedicated to women (one of whom shared an entry with her husband)[14]. In other words, the dictionary presumed that there were no women art historians. Along with Melissa Hyde – another contributor to this volume - and Mechtild Fend, Anne Lafont has edited a large volume of texts by women art historians entitled *Plumes et pinceaux*[15]. It is no longer possible to say there were no women art historians during the period 1750-1850. Working on early modern women's artistic production is, in a way, uncovering a previously invisible object, whose existence until now has been forgotten by many of us.

6 Indeed, women who painted themselves or wrote about themselves, or their experience, were engaged in a similar kind of excavation. They gave objective form to what appeared not to exist. Books allow voices to be heard, and paintings make their presence felt[16]. The painted self-portrait shows above all the worth of a secondary genre, i.e. the portrait, in which women have since the sixteenth century enjoyed some famous successes. Sofonisba Anguissola and Lavinia Fontana thus mirror their working practice in an act of public display, which exhibits their knowledge and abilities. The musical instruments they portray show the range of their artistic talents. The presence of musical scores appears to emphasise the intellectual and scholarly range also evident in other details such as the books or even the chessboard in the self-portrait of Sofonisba Anguissola and her sisters[17]
.

Sofonisba Anguissola, *The Chess Game (Portrait of the artist's sisters playing chess*), 1555

[Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

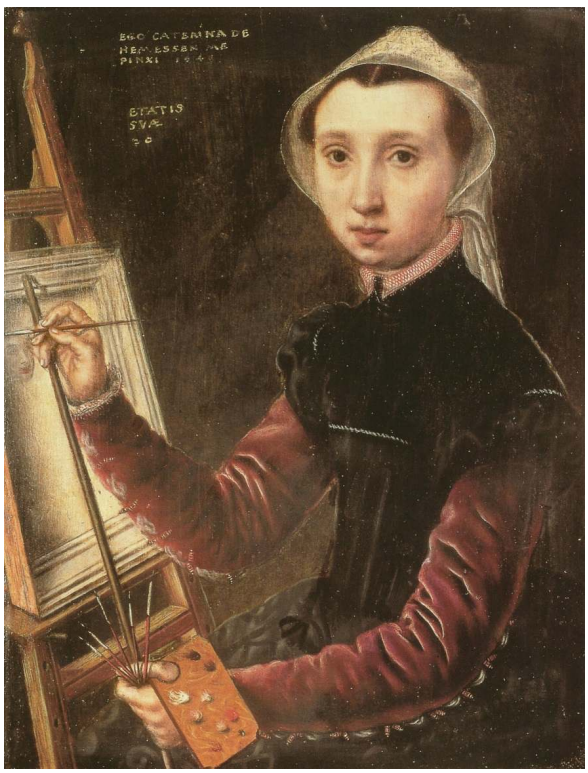
7 In these self-portraits, the artists lay bare their own capacities for intellectual reflection and self-awareness. In the book she is holding open, Sofonisba Anguissola has written her signature in this way: *Sofonisba Anguissola virgo seipsam fecit anno 1554*[18].

Sofonisba Anguissola, *Autoportrait*, 1554

[Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

8 Not only is she turning herself into an object of her own art, but she is emphasizing the existence of the self-portrait to assert her status as creator: this status is related both to what she has drawn and to her knowledge, as well as to the book in which that knowledge is contained. Given that the self-portrait has effectively been a signature[19] for artists since the Middle Ages, particularly in renderings of fictional characters, but also in illuminations where women have inserted self-portraits[20], the viewer is here encouraged to recognize this phenomenon and, beyond it, to consider the foundations of authorship, and the relationship between the work, the author and the person – figured here as the self-portrait, the signature and the *virgo*). Sofonisba also shows how painting and literature were related during the period that is of interest to us. Notwithstanding the rivalry between the arts, painting took inspiration from literature, while literary commentary immortalised painting. From Pliny the Younger to Vasari, painting had been presented in anecdotal accounts as an activity that revealed the relationship between representation and reality. By surrounding themselves with objects whose function was metonymic, women painters depicted themselves as artists and expressed what painting was for them: a scholarly and structured pursuit that allowed them to extract from the world their own ideas about art and to offer new models to this world, within the constraints that they were forced to endure. They used self-portraiture as a "*mise en abyme* of an art of illusion", to use Robert Fohr's expression[21]: while apparently depicting their reality, they were actually creating it.

9 These women thus drew from real life allegories for the unique way they took part in modern Western painting. Catherine de Hemessen gave us what is considered to be the first self-portrait of an artist at work[22].



Catherine de Hemessen, *Autoportrait*, 32 × 25 cm (12.6 × 9.8 in), 1548

[Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

She uses her clothing, her demeanour, and the tools of the painting trade as sign to project her "professionalism", while at the same time depicting herself as a "respectable woman"[23]. The canvas on her easel is still only a sketch: a face with red lips. It is impossible to tell whether it is she or someone else, a man or a woman; it is not even clear if it is a portrait. Unless, of course, she is painting her own audience, since she is, after all, looking at us? In self-portraits, women affirmed their existence within communities that were reluctant to include them and, in the process, they invented their own models. They subverted efforts to isolate them, suggesting that everyone see "oneself as an other"[24]. The issue of models, in all the different senses of that term, is a crucial one. These women artists transposed the lessons they took from the masters in order to become their own models. Their works refer us back to this reflexivity – a dynamic at the heart of modernity that connects us creatively to the world by imagining and transforming it.

10 In this sense, painting became in its turn a model for understanding the processes involved in the other arts. Women appeared in the works they themselves had fashioned by adapting the knowledge they had acquired in order to construct a self-image freed from the bonds imposed upon them by the constraints of real life.

Knowledge, Representations and Creations

11 The topic of painting's relationship to knowledge is thus a particularly rich one. Indeed, while there is perhaps a tendency today to oppose knowledge conceived as a handing down of something pre-formed and creation conceived as a new act that opens up the future- the early modern period offers a different vision. In humanist epistemology, knowledge is *inventio*, a discovery of something ignored, hidden, or even lost until now. In the great period of innovation that was the Renaissance, invention meant rereading the ancient texts that had been lost while measuring them against a real world that was not limited to the external appearance of things. Anatomy is a good example of this approach. The great work of Vesalius, with its plates illustrating human dissections, was entitled *On the Fabric of the Human Body;* the images included in the work are known for their aesthetic features as well as for their didactic function. It should also be noted that the illustrations contributed as much as did the text to the progress of knowledge. Visual representation was linked to the promotion of observation as a means of learning, in the natural sciences among other fields, as we see in the work of Madeleine Basseporte, who contributed to the botanical understanding of the species cultivated in the *Jardin du Roi*. Women observed what they could: plants or insects[25], as well as their own surroundings and the books they were offered, not to mention themselves. They were part of the humanist enterprise of creation through imitation, to be understood in the double sense of an imitation of nature *and* of the Ancients. Knowledge in the Renaissance progressed by measuring books against experience, as well as by rewriting these books. Works of art were created through imitating the masters of *mimesis*.

12 This is the context in which self-portraits by women were produced. By depicting themselves, women created works that displaced inherited knowledge and invented new forms of learning through formal innovation. Their work testifies to their erudition.

Marguerite de Valois knew her Plutarch, Machiavelli and Aristotle. Catherine des Roches was steeped in Neo-Platonism. Mary Stuart was familiar with the accounts of saintly martyrdom found in Ravisius Textor's[26] *De officina*, for they were the daily bread of her Latin studies at the French court. Lucy Hutchinson was so expert in Latin that she made the first - and perhaps the best - complete English translation of Lucretius, *De natura rerum*. Elizabeth of Bohemia conducted a correspondence with Descartes on the topic of philosophy. Marie-Catherine Homassel-Hecquet knew the arguments used in the theological disputes with the Jansenists. Marguerite-Jeanne de Staal-Delaunay was introduced by her sister as someone who knew "all there was to know"[27] and Madame de Genlis explored numerous fields of inquiry and gave thought to how they might be taught. There were some female members of the French Academy including Sophie Chéron, Rosalba Carriera, and Adélaïde Labille-Guiard. Madeleine Basseporte's practice of drawing served, first and foremost, a scientific purpose.

13 Armed with learning, women produced singular works that extended the frontiers of knowledge. Like painted self-portraits, literary memoirs allow a better understanding of historical facts and social and political mechanisms, even as they offer psychological insights to the reader. In this volume, Marguerite de Valois, Lucy Hutchinson, Jeanne-Marie Roland, and Madame de Genlis all, attest to this fact. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, women offered their perspectives through genres in which they had particular influence. Their aesthetic choices reflect their social and historical status as well as the paradoxical nature of the access they managed to eke out for themselves in the public sphere. Whether in letters (real or fictional), memoirs, poetic works, or portraits, they transformed received forms, placing their own stamp upon them, and they constructed a space for interaction with the world, one in which indirection, and even absence, had their place. The case of Lucy Hutchinson, as analysed by Michael Soubbotnik, is one model for women's relationship with learning, creativity and sociability. Lucy Hutchinson thus recounted in her *Memoirs of the life of colonel Hutchinson* how her husband fell in love with her upon seeing her Latin books on the shelf, even though he had never set eyes on her. The literary and artistic creations of women, who were educated against all odds,were enriched by these paradoxes: their works both allowed them to show who they were and to denounce the fact that they were being overlooked, even if they were partially resigned to this fate. Similarly, Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari demonstrate how, by revealing the morphology and function of plants in scientific illustration, Madeleine Basseporte managed to display her own artistic talent and become known as a woman artist, something which would otherwise have been difficult if not impossible. Thomas Carr explores the tensions highlighted in the writing of Marie-Catherine Homassel, who provides an extreme case of hidden learning and self-affirmation in texts that, while appearing impersonal, are in fact emblematic of how knowledge was seized upon as an act of resistance, and how resistance could be undertaken in the name of knowledge.

14 Thanks to their creativity, the women studied in this collection used their learning as leverage in order to create works that opened up new opportunities for them and others. In her depictions of herself in the process of painting a Virgin and child in 1556[28], Sofonisba Anguissola not only shows that she can paint works other than portraits; she takes the place of the male painters who had represented themselves as Saint Luke depicting the Holy Virgin, such as Maerten van Heemskerck (1498-1574), who foregrounded Greek works by Galen as a reminder that Luke was a physician[29]. In

Anguissola's image, her canvas depicts the Virgin kissing a nude baby Jesus. This can be seen both as a symbolic depiction of incarnation set within a maternal scene, as in the act of breastfeeding that appears in the painting by Roger Van der Weyden, and as a representation of the Church's love for mankind, thereby situating the painting within the aesthetic tradition of the Counter-Reformation. At the same time, the naturalistic simplicity of the baby's kiss, a scene rarely depicted in religious iconography[30], brings the painting closer to the genre painting of which Sofonisba Anguissola has been considered one of the inventors, because of her depiction of a chess game with her sisters. In any case, Anguissola pushed the formal boundaries of representation, referencing modes of knowledge in order to show how they animated her life as an artist and as a woman. What is more, she wrote on her painting that she was a modern-day Apelles, thus suggesting how important literature had been to the forging of her identity as an artist[31]. With the benefit of several centuries hindsight, it is clear how important the sibling relationships in the Anguissola household were; the boys and girls learned and played together, vying with one another to live up to the ancient first names their parents had given them; reality found meaning through representation. In many of the works studied in this volume, as in Anguissola's paintings, new aspects of reality were found worthy of being depicted, observed and studied: these included women and children, as well as what is hidden from the eye, whether because of its smallness or because its material existence escapes our view - such as the reproductive organs of plants, hidden emotions, or the interior of the body. Furthermore, excluded from knowledge by the obstacles put in their way, these women questioned the very bases of that knowledge, and the acts of knowing that were denied them, by turning the focus back on the driving force behind knowledge: the individual subject.

The Self-Portrait as *speculum*

15 The women under discussion here were often active in promoting knowledge of the individual embodied subject. Through a depiction of their female bodies in all their specific details and the constraints they were forced to endure, they uncovered the role played by the body, not only in the social arena, but also in the field of knowledge more generally. Descartes' correspondence with Elizabeth locates the abstract Cartesian subject in a particular body, and as a result establishes a link between philosophy, medicine and self-knowledge. The female body, which was subjected to society's aesthetic constraints (among other limitations), and was meant to be an image for others to look upon, became host to a paradoxical tension between physical and psychological interiority on the one hand and, on the other, an exteriority that could become the stuff of objective knowledge. Women were defined by the functions of a hidden body. This body, presented within the gendered limits of modesty and decency, was nonetheless crucial to their status as reproductive vessels and, transformed by clothing, exhibited their value as objects of desire. By means of the self-portrait, women redefined this fraught relationship between interior and exterior. In the external sphere of the text or painting, they brought out inner selves endowed with intelligence, feelings, judgements – and even spirituality. Behind the beautiful exterior, they uncovered intellect and creativity. They thus contributed to the advancement of the notion of the individual subject and to progress in the knowledge of this subject's inner workings. At the end of the period under study, the writings by women that Catriona Seth has edited and analysed show the richness of their

examination of the relationship between appearances and the inner life of the individual. And Thomas Carr allows us to appreciate not only the role played by spiritual literature in this developing understanding of the individual's inner life, but also the role of knowledge in the assertion of the value of this intellectual and spiritual space.

16 Women's self-portraits thus give us an understanding of the links between the self-portrait and the mediaeval *speculum*, as well as the latter's relationship with the encyclopaedia studied by Michel Beaujour[32]. Beaujour explains that the *I* of the self-portrait confers meaning on the *res* of the world, which is seen as a space in which the macrocosm is analogically reflected and in which meaning can thus appear:

> L'autoportrait est une prise de conscience textuelle des interférences et des homologies entre le JE microcosmique et l'encyclopédie macrocosmique. C'est en ce sens qu'il faut voir dans l'autoportrait un miroir du JE répondant en abyme aux grands miroirs encyclopédique du monde[33].

17 The self-portrait is the site of a *mise en abyme* of the relation of the subject to the *res*, the site of its representation. It marks the emergence of a self-recognition that allows the individual to depict herself in her capacity as a being in the world, and to reveal the nature of consciousness in its potential and its limits. By replacing the observed object with the observing subject, the self-portrait depicts the way in which we look upon the world and allows us to see ourselves in the act of observation. For Louis Marin, the *I* of the self-portrait is thus one of the "*personae* of the autoptical current in epistemological fiction"[34]. It allows for depictions in which the subject is both viewer and protagonist. It depicts the very act of looking, referred to during the Renaissance as autopsy - the act of using one's own powers of observation in order to acquire knowledge based on experience. The various transformations in meaning undergone by the word autopsy remain murky for lexicographers. Still, they generally tend to refer to the use of one's own eyes and the act of examining what lies within another self. Indeed, medicine adopted as its own the phrase "know thyself". The self-portrait permits distinct domains of knowledge to be linked to one another - objective and subjective, those that are noble and those that are not, body and mind - in a self-reflexive move that reveals what cannot be seen by normal means. The self-portrait amounts to a trick or a fiction that allows us to go beyond natural limits in order to obtain knowledge about the embodied subject.

18 Women's self-portraiture thus throws a particularly intense light on the relationship between gender and knowledge about the body and nature. The Pauline ban on women studying theology provided a justification for their exclusion from access to learning and the mastery of nature that accompanied knowledge within Western culture. By overcoming this ban, women were thus refusing to submit any longer to what was considered natural - their female reproductive role - and what was in reality a social, and perhaps even primarily religious - way of framing nature, one in which propriety was the most powerful instrument of control. In the field of painting, the ban on live models was emblematic of the way in which attempts were made to limit women's access to knowledge about nature and the consequences that flowed from such learning. Women were not allowed in workshops for reasons of propriety. They were allowed access to moulds of bodies for the purposes of studying anatomy, but not to real bodies. They were obliged to depict themselves according to dress codes that indicated their good character as well as their social status, and hid anything deemed immodest while still displaying desirability. What is more, we know that knowledge of gynaecological anatomy made advances in the sixteenth century, but that women's genitalia were often described as an

inverted version of those of men[35]. The interior of the female body was thus fictionalised in order to turn it into a male preserve given over to reproduction since, in the Aristotelian scheme, women's role in procreation was fundamentally a passive one. The depiction of an intellectual inner life linked to an individualised body was thus an act of reversal that could be described as obscene, and that was essential in overturning the view that only men had an active and creative purchase on nature through learning. By including references to their virginity and creativity Sofonisba Anguissola and Catherine Des Roches were, on the surface, conforming to propriety, but in fact were subtly subverting the norms governing women's behaviour. The body was both displayed for everyone to see and hidden – intact, eroticised and disguised. The body in the self-portrait appears as the simulacrum of a real body, which is elsewhere, breathing life into the painting. The self-portrait refers to a body that has changed function, to become the living wellspring of the individual, the mysterious anchorage of personality[36].

19 Beginning in the sixteenth century, the *querelle des femmes* allows women writers to show the decisive role they were playing in the advancement of knowledge by studying the paradoxes of their female "nature". Marie de Romieu thus wrote that women had gone "as far as to invent the human sciences" even as she compares this powerful role in the establishment of knowledge to women's powers of procreation: "comme d'elles naissent/ Les hommes, et encore par leur moyen accroissent, / Les sciences aussi qu'on dit d'humanité"[37]. The associations usually advanced in order to justify the sidelining of women when it came to learning are here redeployed for another purpose. Marie de Romieu put the root of knowledge in the biological function that was exploited socially to imprison women in the role of child-bearer, i.e. in the reduction of the body to this role. She subverted this imprisonment by turning this very function into the source of knowledge - a profane knowledge of the human condition in which her own inner life was at issue. This radical view found expression in her elaboration of a theory that posited a new origin for the sciences and a new way of describing the relationship of humankind with nature.

20 Taking themselves as their own objects of study, little by little women uncovered elements of nature and often developed a particular type of aesthetics that marked the sudden emergence of a part of reality, which had until then received scant attention, but, thanks to their efforts, became vividly present[38]. This was the aesthetics of the memoir as it came to be written in the wake of Marguerite de Valois, and of the complex dialogues produced by Catherine Des Roches; in painting, it was the art of genre painting, of still life, and above all of the portrait, not to mention their lively botanical and zoological illustrations[39]. The self-portraits by women artists show just how aware they were of their own innovation, as they invented ways to depict themselves as creators of works of art and of children; and, finally, as both teachers and recipients of an artistic legacy and education.

21 This subversion of the coquette's mirror, turning it into an instrument of self-knowledge is emblematic, and reflects the ambiguity of the injunction to "know thyself" (as Catherine des Roches explicitly puts it) during the Renaissance, when it referred partially to instrospection, but more often to a moral understanding of our social being. This specular mode involves the kinds of exchanges analysed by Cathy Yandell in her article on Des Roches. Physical appearance functioned as the interface between what women were and what they were supposed to be, how they viewed themselves and how others viewed them. In their works, women created characters intended for the eyes of others

and were attentive to the ways others viewed them. In this context, they set up an exchange between the viewer and the figures in the work, and encouraged a critique of appearances – and a re-evaluation of reality with all its paradoxical tensions. Not only did they use their knowledge, but they showed its power to cut across divides and free the individual from external constraints.

"The Inner Viewer" and irony

22 Thanks to their creations, these women retook possession of nature, and demonstrated the multiple forms beauty could possess, thereby placing a focus on individual uniqueness and the particularities of history and lived experience. In these mirrors of sisters, mothers and teachers, and in many self-depictions, each woman fashioned her identity, which involved finding a balance between resemblance and difference, between the collective and the individual. Through this playful self-referentiality enabled by self-portraits, women were able to explore many different ways of viewing themselves, and they offered their point of view to those who looked at them. The object became a subject and the play on points of view created a *mise en abyme* in which the viewer's motives for looking were called into question. As Melissa Hyde shows in her essay, from Sofonisba Anguissola to Hortense Haudebourt-Lescot, women created images that drew on preexisting models and inserted themselves in their work in a concerted and conscious manner, thereby upending expectations, with the pupil now taking the place of the teacher in order to demand recognition for the abilities she had acquired and for the ways she was developing as an artist in her own right.

23 These images objectify and concretize the private experience of coming to understand oneself and the world, in a manner that counters the notion of the body as an invariably decorative object for others to contemplate. These were figures depicting the influence of other artists or of aesthetic education. We find among them many portrayals of women that departed from the aesthetic rules of the day, notably images of older women – in the fictional guise of an aged narrator such as Madame de Genlis – or of "ugly" women, as in the case of Rosalba Carriera. Marguerite de Valois thus opens her *Mémoires* by saying that she does not recognise the mirror of Brantôme's text and that she is like an old woman who cannot equate the image offered by the external object with the internal image preserved in her memory. Sofonisba Anguissola as an old woman bears an uncanny resemblance to the servant in her "*virgo*" paintings[40].

Sofonisba Anguissola, *Autoportrait*, 1610

[Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

24 Now her own chaperone and guarantor, she is the *auctor* whom Van Dyck comes to meet. Madame de Genlis repeatedly referred in her writing to her own works, lending cohesion to a universe built on personal testimony and experience, while still maintaining the distance required by decorum. Marie-Catherine Homassel wrote five professions of faith, which are nothing less than testimonies in which emerges an ever-clearer statement of her theological learning. As mothers, educators, and even girls, they showed how time facilitated the precious acquisition of learning, a process that allowed women to exist socially independently of their looks. They escaped from a conception of nature designed to stifle them into silent reproduction, and they depicted the unique ways in which nature found expression within individuals, with the changes wrought by the passing of time.

25 From professional painters to female politicians, these women displayed their own self-mastery as well as their mastery of an art that worked to constitute their identity and allowed them to assert themselves (even if it does not give us the opportunity to see the "real" self in question). Thus, while early modern self-portraiture perhaps gave the world "une réflexivité qui ne se définit manifestement pas encore tout à fait en termes d'introspection, mais se présente plutôt sous les traits d'une mise en scène de soi à travers la figure d'autrui"[41], and while we are faced with *personae*[42] rather than inner selves, we are encouraged to connect these depictions to a conscious being who is indicating she is present, and who is rendered as the site of a self-representation that differs from the one offered by society, a site resistant to the shaping forces of the outside world. Society under the Old Regime was one of appearances, on which French absolutism was built – a regime under which being was utterly bound up with representation[43]. Yet,

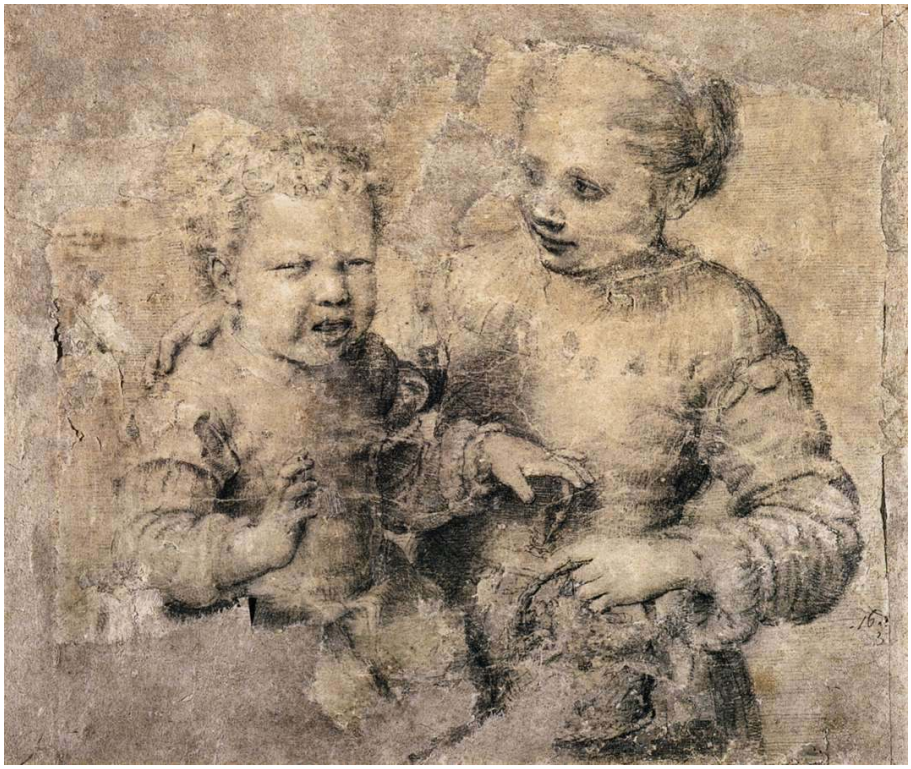
one could discover an opposing dynamic at work in the area of social mores, a dynamic corresponding to the celebration of the individual described by Burckhardt, and perhaps even more to the separation of public and private spheres, which opened up real spaces where the distinction between inside and outside meant something. The word "conscience" appeared in French in the sixteenth century, in a religious context, and referred to that part of the individual mind engaged in resistance; there was talk of conscience being coerced, and conversely of freedom of conscience, and it is this latter usage that we find in the texts quoted by Thomas Carr. This conscience was the locus of faith, as opposed to the outward social trappings of religious custom; the locus of our intimate choices about belonging, choices in which women played a special role and the space where these choices were safe from external attacks. This inner space was inaccessible to the viewer, but was referenced via the diffraction of images and utterances, whose paradoxes were reconciled within the individual inner self, that peeked out from behind the author's mask.

26 For example the many images that showed Providence coexisting with Lucretian simulacra in the work of Lucy Hutchinson, were a way of avoiding being hemmed in even by doctrine. The multiplicity of different images in self-portraiture allowed for an unprecedented freedom to indulge in games of smoke and mirrors. In the case of politically active women like Marguerite de Valois or Madame de Genlis, the use of multiple angles was a way of exercising prudence (a virtue whose emblem was the mirror). This prudence allowed a distinction to be made between outer appearances and what lay within and enabled the depiction of women's lives over time[44]. Life in society was a theatrical affair, in which one learned to play roles from childhood on without ever being fooled into believing they were real. And in the work of many of our creative artists, the play with mirrors was accompanied by an ironic remove, a humour that signalled a freedom from the constraints of reality, the ability to find space and freedom to move and to confront existing norms. The contributors stress that Catherine des Roches, Marguerite de Valois, Lucy Hutchinson, Mme de Genlis and Rosalba Carriera use irony. But it can be said of all these women that they took the modes of expression addressed to them and turned them to their own discourse, producing an impression that they were quoting (which sometimes makes it difficult to know how to approach their writings). And painting is also another case in point, inviting us to compare similarities and differences among images in order to make sense of them. Among the many forms these ironic confrontations took, one of the most striking is the one pitting man against woman in cases where a female figure was inserted to replace what had been a male figure in the original work upon which the painting was modelled, or, the tension between the real and symbolic in the maternal scenes painted by Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, for instance. Sofonisba Anguissola led the way emblematically with her self-portrait with Bernardo Campi[45] in which we see that smile, a smile that is the same smile as that of the young girl in the chess game and in her first self-portrait as a child[46].

Bernardino Campi, *Painting Sofonisba Anguissola*, 1550

[Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

27 Vasari recounts that, upon seeing this drawing, Michelangelo apparently said he would have preferred a boy crying. In response Sofonisba Anguissola apparently made a drawing, which has become very famous, showing her little brother crying because a crab was pinching his finger as his big sister looked on with a faint smile on her face[47].



Sofonisba Anguissola, *Asdrubale Bitten by a Crawfish*, 1554

[Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

28 In this way, she appears to have ironically responded to the request of the humanist painter in order to subvert the hierarchy of passions, artistic genres, and genders, inventing in the process the genre scene. Self-portraits show that women were capable of enjoying a type of intellectual humour that plays with knowledge and conventions in order to create a social space where the energy they carried within them could emerge.

29 Over the period under investigation, this space took shape and reflected an inner space of which they became the "inner viewers", as Suzanne Necker put it[48]. They became more and more visible, and the articles by Séverine Sofio, Melissa Hyde and Catriona Seth point to collective trends that these women would go on to utilise in order to conquer a new position in society. While they were always faced with resistance in their capacity as intellectual figures, their portraits were accepted, and even met with unprecedented success in France. The way in which they were received, however, shows how ambiguous this success really was. They could teach, i.e. pass on their knowledge, and it was by this means that they could reach out to one another and construct a collective image, that freed them from limitations. This volume is thus partially chronological, proceeding from the works from the second half of the sixteenth century to those dating from the eighteenth. But the same principles have been applied across the whole period. In the first part, we find a picture of women overcoming difficulties in order to take possession of humanist learning and use it to shape their identity through writing, as well as to have an impact on developments in the arenas of epistemology and politics. They used this learning to resist models of uniformity imposed by the powerful. In political and religious acts of resistance, we can detect the expression of another difference, i.e. feminity and irreducible individuality. In the second part of the issue, it becomes clearer that, when

women became more visible collectively as a group, they developed complex abilities and strategies allowing talented individuals to be recognised in their own right. But the approaches remain the same for all the individual cases studied here, and elements of the titles of the individual articles could even serve as a list of the components of women's self-depiction as a whole. We are prompted to recognize and account for the rich and ironic paradoxes in these images, and not to reduce them to the paradoxes of mere imitation, as has often been the case.

30 Indeed, these women succeeded in transforming mimetic genres through creative use of their learning. In this sense, they are part of the poetic humanist project, and they belong to the world of classical aesthetics. But their intelligence and inventiveness has often been denied, and their work seen as merely repetitive. At the end of this period, Chapelain's report noted: "elles excellent dans tout ce qui est imitative"[49] and this criticism continues to echo through time. Yet, imitation has been fundamental to learning and the arts since Aristotle and Quintilian. And one need look no further than the learned creations of Sofonisba Anguissola in order to see that she was already reflecting on the conditions of representation-as-imitation long before Vélasquez's *Las Meninas*. Turning the mirror on themselves in order to describe themselves in the world, women took possession of learning in order to outline the space where their identity could be displayed. They created the places in which they could fashion an authorial identity, an oblique reflection of their real selves, that was in turn linked to collective identities. The studies in this issue, by giving a voice back to these works, are an attempt to uncover the extent of the learning that went into them and to serve as testimony to the uniqueness and energy of the women who created them.

NOTES

1. My thanks go to Natania Meeker and Hélène Bah-Ostrowiecki for their precious advice in the writing of this text.

2. « Savoirs, identités et représentation des femmes à l'époque moderne, Autoportraits, autofictions XVIe-XVIIIe », 2013-2014, organised by Anne Lafont (INHA et UPEM) and Caroline Trotot (UPEM), in connection with the seminar on gender at the INHA, co-organised by Anne Lafont and Frédérique Desbuissons (INHA).

3. Portraits and Fictions of the Self: Representations of Women's Knowledge in the 16th-18th Centuries, February 2014, organised by Béatrice Mousli-Bennett (USC) and Caroline Trotot (UPEM).

4. Artistes Femmes, 2014, organised by Marcella Lista.

5. The articles that appear in this online issue (in English) will also be published in French as part of the Garnier series entitled *masculin/féminin*.

6. The considerable role played by the 1977 exhibition "Women artists 1550-1950" organised by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin at LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art) and the accompanying catalogue is generally acknowledged: Ann Sutherland Harris & Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, Los Angeles / New York, LACMA / Knopf,1976, French trans., Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Femmes peintres, 1550-1950*, Paris, éditions des Femmes, 1981.

7. The scholarship on women artists and scholars of the early modern period to which we owe a debt, especially in the field of literature, is far too extensive to summarize here. Please go to the SIEFAR website, which has an extensive list of references: http://siefar.org/event/ag-siefar-2016/, accessed on 17 February 2016.

8. On the topic of knowledge among women in the early modern period, please see in particular *Femmes savantes, savoirs de femme: Du crépuscule de la Renaissance à l'aube des Lumières*, Actes du colloques de Chantilly (22-24 septembre 1995), Colette Nativel ed., Genève, Droz, 1999.

9. See Hannah Williams, « Autoportrait ou portrait de l'artiste peint par lui-même? Se peindre soi-même à l'époque moderne », *Images Re-vues* [Web], 7/ 2009, posted on 1 September 2009, accessed on 8 June 2015, URL : http://imagesrevues.revues.org/574.

10. Pascal Bonafoux, *Les peintres et l'autoportrait*, Genève, Skira, 1984; Omar Calabrese, *L'art de l'autoportrait*, Paris, Citadelles et Mazenod, 2006.

11. On this question in literature, Michel Beaujour, *Miroirs d'encre*, Paris, Seuil, 1980; *Poetics of the Literary Self-Portrait*, transl. Yara Milos, New York, New York University Press, 1991. On the links between self-portraiture and autobiographical fiction, Vincent Colonna, *Autofiction & autres mythomanies littéraires*, Auch, Tristram, 2004. On these questions, as well as the relationship between literature and painting, Louis Marin, *L'écriture de soi*, Paris, PUF, 1999.

12. Rensselaer Lee, *Ut pictura poesis, Humanisme et théorie de la peinture XVe-XVIIIe siècles*, Paris, Macula, 1988.

13. We are aware that these terms are also anachronistic when applied to men, which only makes things even more complicated, and shows that the questions we ask about works by women are not limited to them, but apply to artistic works as a whole. With regard to women artists, see the *Dictionnaire universel des femmes créatrices*, Béatrice Didier, Antoinette Fouque, Mireille Calle-Gruber eds., Paris, Des femmes, 2013.

14. Mechthild Fend, Melissa Hyde, Anne Lafont, ed., *Plumes et Pinceaux. Discours de femmes sur l'art en Europe (1750-1850)*, 2 volumes, Paris, Presses du Réel/INHA, collection « Œuvres en société », 2012, p. 12. A similar observation also lies behind the *Dictionnaire universel des femmes...*, *op. cit.*, Antoinette Fouque, p. XIX : "*In the Panorama des idées contemporaines de Gaëtan Picon* (1957), there are only four women among the 212 revolutionary thinkers who represent 'the unprecedented change' that took place in the post-war period."

15. *Ibid.*

16. They can be viewed in Frances Borzello, *Femmes au miroir, une histoire de l'autoportrait féminin*, Paris, Thames and Hudson, 1998, translation of *Seeing Ourselves: Women's Self-Portraits*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1998, in which all the factual information included here about women's self-portraits can also be found. See also Liana De Girolami Cheney, Alicia Craig Faxon, Kathleen Russo eds., *Self-Portraits by Women Painters*, Washington, New Academia Publishing, 2009.

17. On these various issues, see Mary D. Garrard, "Here's Looking at Me: Sofonisba Anguissola and the Problem of the Woman Artist Author(s)", *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Autumn, 1994), p. 556-622, Published by: on behalf of the University of Chicago Press Renaissance Society of America http://www.jstor.org/stable/2863021 Accessed: 08-02-2016, particularly p. 597 ff. Sofonisba Anguissola, see also Omar Calabrese, *L'art...*, *op. cit.*, p. 226, and Sofonisba Anguissola, *The Chess Game (Portrait of the artist's sisters playing chess),* 1555, 72 × 97 cm (28.3 × 38.2 in), Poznan, National Museum https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Chess_Game_-_Sofonisba_Anguissola.jpg, accessed on 6 May 2016.

18. Sofonisba Anguissola, *Autoportrait*, 1554, 19.5 × 12.5 cm (7.7 × 4.9 in), Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sofonisba_Anguissola_002.jpg, accessed on 6 May 2016.

19. On signatures, André Chastel, "L'art de la signature", *Revue de l'art*, n° 26, 1968 and Charlotte Guichard, *La signature dans le tableau aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles : identité, réputation et marché de l'art* https://www.cairn.info/revue-societes-et-representations-2008-1-page-47.htm, Omar Calabrese,

L'art..., *op. cit.*, chap. 1 "L'artiste-signature, le problème de l'identité, de l'Antiquité au Moyen Âge", p. 28-47.

20. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, « Guda et Claricia: deux "autoportraits" féminins du XIIe siècle », Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire [Web], 19 | 2004, published on 27 November 2006, accessed 3 February 2016, http://clio.revues.org/1602; DOI : 10.4000/clio.1602.

21. Robert FOHR, "AUTOPORTRAIT, peinture", *Encyclopædia Universalis* [Web], accessed 3 February 2016, https://www-universalis--edu-com.fennec.u-pem.fr/encyclopedie/autoportrait-peinture/, accessed 6 May 2016.

22. Catherine de Hemessen, Autoportrait, 32 × 25 cm (12.6 × 9.8 in), 1548, Kunstmuseum, Basel, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hemessen-Selbstbildnis.jpg, accessed 6 May 2016.

23. Frances Borzello, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

24. This expression is borrowed from the title of Paul Ricœur's book, *Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris, Seuil, 1996.

25. Before Madeleine Basseporte's work, one of course thinks of Maria Sybilla Merian. See Natalie Zemon Davis, *Juive, catholique, protestante, trois femmes en marge au XVIIe siècle*, Paris, Seuil, 1997 and Ella Reitsma, *Merian and Daughters : women of Art and Science*, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2008.

26. See *infra* Colette Winn, and Sylvène Edouard, « Un exercice scolaire et épistolaire : les lettres latines de Marie Stuart, 1554 », Paris, Cour de France.fr, 2013, published on 1st janvier 2013 (http://cour-de-france.fr/article2597.html), accessed 2 February 2015.

27. Catriona Seth, *La fabrique de l'intime*, Paris, Robert Laffont, coll. Bouquins, 2013, p. 95-96.

28. Reproduction dans Borzello, *Femmes...*, *op. cit.*, p. 44. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sofonisba_Anguissola#/media/File:Self-portrait_at_the_Easel_Painting_a_Devotional_Panel_by_Sofonisba_Anguissola.jpg, accessed 6 May 2016.

29. See https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Saint_Luc_peignant_la_Vierge_%28Maarten_van_Heemskerck%29.jpeg ou http://www.mbar.org/services/ressources/dossier_pedagogique_hh.pdf, accessed 6 May 2016.

30. Michelle Bianchini, « Les autoportraits de Sofonisba Anguissola, femme peintre de la Renaissance », *Italies* [Web], 3 | 1999, published on 27 March 2010, accessed 3 February 2016, URL : http://italies.revues.org/2600.

31. Quoted by Omar Calabrese, *L'art...*, *op.cit.*, p. 226.

32. Michel Beaujour, *Miroirs d'encre*, *op. cit.*, p. 29-41.

33. "The self-portrait is a textual coming to terms with the interferences and homologies between the microcosmic *I* and the macrocosmic encyclopaedia. It is in this sense that the self-portrait should be seen as a mirror of the *I*, containing a *mise en abyme* of the great encyclopaedic mirrors of the world", *Ibid.,* p. 30.

34. Louis Marin, *op. cit*, p. 10.

35. Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex, Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1990. See also Dominique Brancher, *Équivoques de la pudeur,* Genève, Droz, 2015, p. 273 "[...] de par l'introversion de ses organes génitaux, thèse que Galien insuffle à la médicine occidentale, le corps féminin constitue par excellence 'l'espace du dedans'", Marie-Christine Pouchelle, *Corps et chirurgie à l'apogée du Moyen-Âge*, Paris, Flammarion, 1983, p. 224.

36. The interest during the Renaissance for the dramatic trial of Martin Guerre is well known thanks to the account of Jean de Coras. Nathalie Zemon Davies, *Le Retour de Martin Guerre*, Paris, Taillandier, 2008, "coll. Texto". On the relationship body/person, see also, Marie-Clarté Lagrée, "*C'est moy que je peins*" *Figures de soi à l'automne de la Renaissance*, Paris, PUPS, 2011, p. 63-71.

37. "Since from them are born/ Men, and what is more thanks to them grows,/ The knowledge we call the humanities". Marie de Romieu, "Brief Discours Que l'excellence de la femme surpasse

celle de l'homme..., in Les Premières Œuvres Poétiques (1581)", A. Winandy éd., Paris, Droz, 1972, v. 227-237.

38. See also Vasari's comments, upon coming across Sofonisba Anguissola's chess game, about its power as a picture, as well as his remarks about women as creators: "Ma se le donne sì bene sanno fare gl'uomini vivi, che maraviglia che quelle che vogliono sappiano anco fargli sì bene dipinti ?" G. Vasari, op. cit., (Vita di Benvenuto Garofalo), p. 1090, quoted by Michelle Bianchini, "Les autoportraits de Sofonisba Anguissola, femme peintre de la Renaissance", previously cited article. On the issue of women painters and their depiction of the role of biology, see especially Mary Garrard, p. 574.

39. With regard to Madeleine Basseporte, see for example: http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b69550869/f27.item.

40. Sofonisba Anguissola, *Autoportrait*, 1610, taille et localisation inconnues, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Self_portrait,_1610.jpg, accessed 6 May 2016, Ilya Sandra Perlingieri, *Autoportrait* vers 1610, Berne collection Gottfried Keller, p. 192 et *Autoportrait au clavecin*, 1561, 83 x 65, Zarl Spencer Collection, Althorp, reproduit dans Borzello, *Femmes*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

41. "... a reflexivity that did not yet unequivocally define itself in terms of introspection, but rather in the form of a depiction of oneself in the guise of someone else", Jean-Philippe de Beaulieu, Diane Desrosiers-Bonin, "La réflexivité en question", *Dans les miroirs de l'écriture, la réflexivité chez les femmes écrivains de l'Ancien Régime*, Jean-Philippe de Beaulieu, Diane Desrosiers-Bonin eds, *Paragraphes* vol. 17, Montréal, Université de Montréal, 1998, p. 8.

42. C'est à la *persona* à la fin de la Renaissance qu'est consacrée l'étude de Marie-Clarté Lagrée, "C'est moy que je peins", *op. cit.*

43. The work of Louis Marin comes particularly to mind, but also that of Denis Crouzet and Nicolas Le Roux, *Le Roi, la cour, l'État*, *De la Renaissance à l'absolutisme*, Seyssel, Champ vallon, 2013.

44. See my article below.

45. See Borzello, *op. cit.*, p. 43, and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sofonisba_Anguissola#/media/File:Self-portrait_with_Bernardino_Campi_by_Sofonisba_Anguissola.jpg

46. See Borzello, *op. cit.*, p. 40, and http://www.rivagedeboheme.fr/pages/arts/peinture-15-16e-siecles/sofonisba-anguissola.html title: L'alphabet.

47. See https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sofonisba_Anguissola#/media/File:Sofonisba_Anguissola_-_Asdrubale_Bitten_by_a_Crawfish_-_WGA00698.jpg

48. See the article by Catriona Seth below.

49. "They excel in all things imitative". See below, Séverine Sofio, Rapport Chapelain, séance du 5 floréal an IV [25 avril 1796], text reproduced in Lacroix, "Les femmes exclues de l'enseignement des beaux-arts par la République française", *Revue universelle des arts*, n°17, 1863, p. 55-61.