Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Representation, Societal Ideals, and Identity

By Eva Zhao

A central theme within the discussion on the lives of Renaissance women rests on that of subjugation; a woman was denied all political rights and considered the legal ‘object’ of her father or husband. However, the Renaissance is characterized as a period of rebirth, cultural development, and intellectual growth. The proliferation of art and art forms coming out of Renaissance Italian urban society embodied a growing appreciation for culture as a whole. As a result of this, Renaissance artwork came to define and symbolize society and culture—believed to act as mirrors that reflect the realities of Italy at the time. Despite this, the Renaissance was also a period that was characterized by a search for an ideal within nature and ultimately within society. Only through idealization and selecting “the best” from nature could one disqualify the imperfections of reality.¹ As Leon Battista Alberti, a humanist, writer, painter, and architect, wrote in his treatise, “The Painter is concerned solely with representing what can be seen” where paintings were representative of what is seen within the light.² In other words, paintings were reflective of the societal values and ideas at the time rather than the norms and realities. Women were the subject matter of most Renaissance artwork. With this in mind the question that arises is, are these paintings the direct representations of reality and what the painters saw? Or, is the portrayal of women in Renaissance artwork reflective of a standard ideal that all women were meant to adhere to? Until 1970, scholars did not assess the representations of women or had conducted little research on women in Italian Renaissance paintings. However, it is difficult to discredit the notion that women were completely excluded from the cultural revival of the Renaissance. Alternatively, women were able to participate within their limited social positions, but also in the ways that others portrayed them and their emergence into the public sphere through their presence within Renaissance art. Ultimately, women were a part of the Renaissance—the only difference was in the way that they did so, and in the ways they experienced it. Therefore, this paper hopes to discuss the representations of women in Renaissance art and the ways that various art forms reflect the society of Renaissance Italy. Areas of focus will include: the notions of nakedness and nudity; representations of women in furniture art forms and the development of individualism; the inclusion and exclusion of women from artistic genius in the pursuit of becoming a painter; and the standards of beauty. These areas will be centered on the role of gender and the ways that masculinity and femininity interact to

106
create this *ideal*. Thus, this paper hopes to demonstrate that images of women are neither the direct representations of reality, nor of what painters saw—instead they are the embodiment of particular sets of aesthetic and social ideals and values, which are shared by the artists and patrons who commissioned the artwork.

The representation of the nude figure is central to most, if not all Renaissance art. The nude woman embodied not only lust and erotic pleasure, but also of the antique past in recreating Greece and Rome, the platonic ideals of goodness and perfection, and the appreciation of surfaces and colors of paintings and artwork. Key examples of female nudes in Renaissance art are attributed to Titian and the portrayal of ‘Venus’ as the ideal woman, such as the so-called *Sacred and Profane Love*, which represents both platonic and sensual love as values that should be held. For artists, the best way for them to demonstrate their ability to improve upon nature was to show perfection in the body of the nude woman. This means that the skill of the artist was dependent on the depictions of well proportioned, graceful, slightly animated, and pleasingly coloured figures. As such, because portrayals of nude women were reflective of artistic talent, it helps to explain the proliferation of female nudity within Renaissance art. Clothing itself was a victim to the whims of stylistic fashion trends; but the artifice of nature and essentially nakedness was timeless. This meant that artwork was not subjected to period fashions, but could remain ‘in style’ and popular throughout time. Rather than reflective of societal values emphasizing public nudity, depictions of the female nude was a demonstration of artistic talent and their ability to select and create the best of nature as a means of invalidating the problems of the society at the time.

Depictions of nudity were especially prominent during periods of exploration and the discoveries and tales of natives. Within traveler accounts are revelations of the attitudes towards nakedness whereby all narratives speak of the ways almost all natives were naked. Unmarried women were said to go naked, giving no signs of shame; yet once they have known a man, would cover themselves. This notion is further reflective of Renaissance ideals regarding marriage whereby paintings depict nude single women, which shifts to clothed or covered married women based on societal values. In terms of the racialized ‘other,’ nudity was the mark of bestial passions of violence and sexual recklessness and presented not as an idealized nude, but in terms of an exotic animal. Nudity in Renaissance art in this sense was not only about covering the body, but also the implied lack of entre social systems relative to Renaissance Italy—whether or not they were physically clothed, natives were considered ‘naked.’
conveyed the loss of individuality as humans in the depictions of nudity with exotic natives as the subjects.\textsuperscript{11} However, depictions of nudity also indicated childlike innocence in terms of the lack of shame and pretension. Even in terms of the representation of Italian women such as Correggio’s \textit{Danae}, there is an undertone of innocence evoked by the nude figure.\textsuperscript{12} Ultimately, nakedness in Renaissance art signified the potential for the subjects to be clothed and, in turn, civilized.\textsuperscript{13} Images of the nude could be seen as a blank tablet that was waiting to be inscribed with meaning—a marker of something yet to come.\textsuperscript{14} For exotic natives, this meant the civilizing efforts of Italian society whereas for women, this meant ingraining her with the societal values of the period.

Nakedness and nudity symbolized the purity in spirituality—ultimately attributed to the nature of women’s roles within a marriage, but also indicative of civilization and society as a whole. The image of Venus acted as an epitome of the values and virtues of marriage, symbolizing not only love itself, but also the physical aspects as a metaphor for sexual intercourse.\textsuperscript{15} As such, this becomes the reason that nude paintings containing depictions of Venus were created primarily for the occasions of marriage. The nude Venus symbolized values of purity and chastity for women while at the same time, represented their roles as wives of virtue. It depicts the ways that women were considered to be naked, pure, and desirable before marriage, before becoming clothed in modesty as a virtuous wife. In essence, this was the reason why nude paintings were commissioned in a way to represent the period before marriage in celebration of the impending union. Venus herself personified aspects of love within marriage, hence why the location of these representations of the naked body tended to be within buildings dedicated to pleasure and relaxation.\textsuperscript{16} However, this does not mean that portrayals of the female body through the personifications of classical mythology resided in nude depictions. Instead, the inclusion of characters from classical mythology in Renaissance art were used to create a narrative to present the notion of the ‘ideal’ woman that did not solely come in the form of paintings or marble busts.

Alternatively, a proliferation of painting narratives embellished furnishings whereby feminine ideals did not exist in isolation, but as counterparts to male ideas in society. In other words, furniture paintings must be understood within a feminine frame of reference and seen through the female experience in marriage and the ways that their virtuous behavior was not separate from men.\textsuperscript{17} Generally, Renaissance classical mythology served as pretext for erotic painting and usually linked with male collectors or the humanistic language of art.\textsuperscript{18} These
classical images depicted the adventures of ancient heroes offering examples to males along with the sacrifices of ancient heroines as a way to provide admonition to females. With the growth of painted narratives on private furniture, the key theme was the emphasis on female suffering. Ultimately, these images portrayed the idealized female body as a counterpart of quiet suffering. The women represented in these art forms were defined in terms of external physical desirability as well as internal emotional turmoil. For example, in the narrative of Eurydice, she is depicted as a character with idealized physical appearance and gentle character juxtaposed with the ferocious nature of the serpent attack that kills her. As such, furniture painting embodies the ideal of the ability to endure internal suffering as a feminine virtue, utilizing ancient mythology as a basis to provide exemplars for both men and women in terms of marriage. In this sense, the idealized behavior for women was the way that loyalty to conjugal bonds was not a moral duty, but an opportunity for women to enact a heroic choice as mythical heroines had done.

Furniture art demonstrates an overlap between the private life and domestic activities most fully experienced by women who were already excluded from participation in civic life. With the changing family dynamics, women became increasingly restricted from more formal and public societal exchanges. Simultaneously, however, this meant that women had greater exposures with furniture painting within the home and through this medium, continued to experience the cultural developments in art. Furniture art was a part of an experience located within private domestic spaces, undifferentiated from other household practices and exchanges, and unmediated by emergent humanist discourse that explicitly defined it as an experience of art. Women were constantly surrounded by depictions of a womanly ideal in the form of everyday furniture. Through their exposure to these painted images of womanly ideals, women were also exposed to societal values regarding their own identity. This meant that furniture within the home was decorated with painted stories—narratives that presented ideal models of behaviour for women who were limited only within the private sphere. However, it is important to note that because women were generally confined to the private spheres—even within the home—this meant that women had the greatest exposure to furniture art. Furniture paintings help to make sense of the aspirations of the society, ideals, and attitudes towards the place of the family and the roles of men and women within marriage.

With the changing family relations of the urban elite, particularly with regards to marriage transaction and rituals, the roles of urban elite women also shifted in terms of the overall deterioration of legal rights and social autonomy. The shift to a centralized state meant
that women’s position in the practical exercise of power changed in terms of the ways that the state eroded the military and political powers of aristocratic families.\textsuperscript{25} The commodification of private leisure was central to the changes in family relations and particularly crucial for women whose status was primarily within the family unit.\textsuperscript{26} As the result of these changing circumstances for upper-class women, this not only meant a lesser role in the public sphere, but at times within the private realm as well. Ultimately, it was only through furniture art that women could continue to interact with the socio-cultural period of the Renaissance and the development of art.\textsuperscript{27} It is within these constant exposures to furniture art that an adherence to chastity and the institution of marriage can be seen as primary societal ideals and values are depicted. Furniture art presented and represented women in the image of the submissive, virtuous wife but also in terms of the seductive, haughty unmarried woman.\textsuperscript{28} These traits were seen as areas that society valued in women, but also set the standard for the ideal that women had to meet. At the same time, however, these contrasting images reasserted the regulation of female sexuality around marriage priorities in the same ways that nudity in Renaissance art had.\textsuperscript{29}

The Renaissance was a cultural revolution that strove to revive the greatness of Greece and Rome, particularly within the areas of art and literature. As classical art was known to encapsulate beauty, it comes as no surprise that Italian Renaissance art sought to do the same. For women especially, Renaissance paintings depicted a specific standard of beauty. However, the question then becomes how much of this portrayal of female elegance was the reality and how much was an ideal for women. Ultimately, however, the beauty of women was glorified as the physical evidence of spiritual perfection, since the body was believed to be the mirror to the soul.\textsuperscript{30} It is in this sense that the portrayal of women in Renaissance art can be said to represent the search for perfection within nature and the ways that this reflected the ideals of the society. Therefore this perception of beauty was based on the artists’ philosophical environments, their visual experience, the requests of the patrons, and the attempts at boosting their professional status as ‘creators.’

The physical aspects of female beauty were developed for the purpose of being represented in profile portraits. Painters focused, emphasized, and at times fabricated physical representations of beauty in their portrayal of women. This meant that within Renaissance art, particular physical attributes repeatedly idealized portraits of women as a ‘standard of beauty’ to be met.\textsuperscript{31} Women were depicted in having the same slender body structures, hair pushed back to her neck to reveal a domed forehead, and the elegance of the sitter in terms of her clothes,
ornaments, and jewelry. The standard of beauty Renaissance portrait paintings depicted for a woman’s facial appearance rested on having a high, round forehead and plucked eyebrows along with defined structures in her cheek and jaw. Beauty was prescribed as hair gleaming like gold, white skin similar to snow, marble, alabaster, or milk, with cheeks like lilies and roses and eyes like the sun and stars, lips to rubies, teeth to pearls, and breasts to apples. Although some individual peculiarities and unique qualities of women were given attention in order to distinguish one painting from another, these characteristics remained. For example, in the works by Pisanello and Alessio Baldovinetti, the qualities of having a slender build and facial features are near-identical. However, in Pisanello’s depiction, the woman has her hair tied up fashionably high, a slim downward nose, and wearing no jewelry, but sleeves embroidered with a vase richly decorated with pearls to portray her high-class status. In Alessio Baldovinetti’s painting, the woman is shown to have a distinctive crooked nose, lively, loose locks of hair falling from a scraped back style, more pronounced chin, an abundance of jewelry and puffed sleeves to indicate her social status.

A portrait illustrated the public face of one’s identity—one that was moulded by the ideals and values of the society in which the individual resided. As a result of this, portraits of “real” women still appeared through a screen of ideals from the society that they were produced in. This ultimately meant that portraits of women during the Italian Renaissance representing the invented ideal beautiful woman differed from portraits of actual individuals in terms of appearance, behaviour, and display. The characteristics of profile portraits in particular are seen as the embodiment of creating a representation of an ideal republican citizen controlled by reason and guided by moderation. Therefore for women, this meant the societal values of being virtuous, silent wives to republican citizens; but at the same time, desirable and cultured. For example, it is unknown whether the highly recognized portrait by Leonardo da Vinci, the Mona Lisa, is a portrait of an individual or the representation of an ideal for women. However, despite the ways that the painting depicts eyes that seemingly engage the viewer to elicit an emotional response without a voice, it lacks identifying characteristics that represent individual women. Instead, the portrait contains seemingly animated features and emotions that appear to imply impending change—potentially for the society in which they belong to. Within Italian Renaissance art, the beauty of women was ultimately the aspect that society deemed to be the ideal and valued. However, although this female ideal was something that could only be fully accomplished by a wealthy minority, all women were constrained by it.
The physical ideal for women was an area that could still be met and controlled by many women in order to meet the values of the society around them. Nevertheless, the notion of beauty during the Renaissance period was not solely in terms of physical beauty, but also in terms of women’s social status and behaviors. According to Renaissance author and Italian courtier Castiglione, a woman should in no way resemble a man in regards to her ways, manners, words, gestures, and bearing. Instead, he states that it was well for a woman to have a certain delicate tenderness, with an air of feminine sweetness in her every movement—essentially in her behaviors and the ways that she were to conduct herself in public and in private. This ultimately demonstrates the ways that ‘beauty’ was defined during the Renaissance period. The notion of what it meant to be a ‘beautiful woman’ was both a woman’s physical attributes as well as the way she conducted herself in terms of behaviors, mannerisms, words, and air; all of which reflected a societal ideal for women in terms of what they were expected to do and what could be considered as ‘beauty.’ A prime example of this is the bust of Marietta Strozzi by the sculptor Desiderio da Settignano. Strozzi was considered the most beautiful woman in fifteenth-century Florence whose beauty was immortalized in a marble bust. In the same way that Renaissance paintings portrayed women with hair scraped back to expose a high forehead, plucked eyebrows, and well-defined cheeks and jaw, sculptures were no different, and depicted the standard of beauty for Florence women. A biographical portrait of Strozzi’s life accompanies this marble bust: born to an elite family, becoming a notable young woman, and subjected to multiple marriage offers, Strozzi was the epitome of a high-class woman. She was first admired for her great physical beauty; but subsequently became synonymous with societal values of the ways that women should conduct themselves. With Strozzi being considered the most beautiful woman, it demonstrates the ways that her physical features were those that were valued by the society she belonged to, but also in terms of the way she presented herself and her social standing. ‘Beauty’ was not something that was purely physical, but in the ways that women fit the societal ideal of Renaissance Italy.

Within the ideological and social-structural context of the fifteenth century, women could not be considered as ‘artistic geniuses’ and were not recorded as painters until the sixteenth century. It was believed that female intellectual capacities were inferior to that of men and therefore, women were ill suited to overcome the difficulties of painting. Instead, some upper-class women may be educated to appreciate the products and to patronize artists as opposed to actually practicing it themselves. Despite this, Italian historian, writer, and painter Vasari praises
female artists as a ‘marvel of nature,’ remarking that women succeeded in all areas where talent and skill were required.\textsuperscript{49} Still, women were limited in their artistic pursuit to painting acceptable \textit{female topics} in the form of religious paintings, portraits, and self-portraiture.\textsuperscript{50} It was through this self-portraiture of the sixteenth century that the representation of women in art came to emphasize her occupation and presented her as an educated \textit{nobil donna}.\textsuperscript{51} For example, a notable female artist, Sofonisba Anguissola, portrayed herself in a self-portrait with the austerity of clothes and severity of her hairstyle as a way to highlight her role as an exceptional woman.\textsuperscript{52} Through such a portrayal, Anguissola stressed her education and noble birth, presenting her intellectual power as a painter in the patriarchal society.

Women could portray themselves as painters, musicians, cultured women, and also as collectors of art. This portrayal as collectors emphasized the importance of studying ancient works of art as a means of achieving fame as a painter. For example, Lavinia Fontana was a famous female painter trained by her father Prospero and the first female to be accepted at the old Roman Accademia di San Luca.\textsuperscript{53} Her artistic recognition documents her prolific career as a painter and manifests in her commitment to excel as an artist. In a self-portrait, Fontana depicts herself with cast collections in the background in a way that not only presents her as a collector, but also among great artists.\textsuperscript{54} Ultimately, her use of models and casts as a source for her paintings reveals her resourcefulness in coping with the artistic training of female painters at the time. Because women were not permitted to attend art classes or have access to nude models, their study was dependent on what their fathers taught them. However, Fontana was able to overcome this limitation by collecting casts and virtually learning from ancient artists.\textsuperscript{55} It is also through Fontana’s self-portraiture that it is possible to see the ways that female artists represented themselves in Renaissance art. Although still reflective of societal values regarding the place of women, female artists such as Anguissola and Fontana were able to use self-portraiture engrained with symbolism to create a new feminine identity. In Fontana’s case, endowed in her self-portrait are images of Venus and Mercury as a way to symbolize intellectual and physical power.\textsuperscript{56} Whereas Venus reflected Fontana’s beauty in her own realm, Mercury represented her intellectual powers as an artist.

The Renaissance was a period characterized by cultural development—in particular, within the areas of literature and art. However, women are believed to have not participated in the Renaissance. Despite this, women were the common subjects within Renaissance art forms. In this sense, it can be said that women both influenced and were influenced by the ideals that
were set in place within Renaissance artwork. Due to the ways that Renaissance art personified society and culture, it reflected the realities of Italy in a philosophical sense as opposed to a literal sense. This means that paintings and other art forms did not reflect the realities of Italian society, but mirrored the societal ideals and what was being valued at the time. Ultimately, the image of Renaissance women being represented in artwork is that of a virtuous, submissive wife with childlike innocence, yet at the same time, a desirable object. These images of women created an ideal in terms of behaviors and the physical attributes that women should have in order to be considered as beautiful enough to be immortalized. This paper focused on the key themes of nudity, representation in furniture art, notions of beauty, and the ways that female painters represented themselves in Renaissance paintings. Through this discussion, it can be said that women did participate in the Renaissance and had their own experiences in relation to it, albeit in different manners than the conventional understanding. Ultimately, this paper demonstrated that the portrayal of women in Renaissance art reflected idealism rather than realism. The representation of women in Italian Renaissance artwork served as an embodiment of particular sets of societal values shared by artists and the patrons who commissioned them, which mirrored the ideals within the society in which they belonged.

NOTES

5 Tinagli, *Women in Italian Renaissance Art*, 140.
6 Ibid.
7 Jill Burke, "Nakedness and Other Peoples: Rethinking the Italian Renaissance Nude," *Art History* 36, no. 4 (September 2013): 719.
8 Ibid., 724.
9 Ibid., 729.
10 Ibid., 726.
11 Ibid., 734.
13 Burke, “Nakedness and Other Peoples,” 720.
14 Ibid., 735.
17 Ibid., 35 – 6.
19 Ibid.
21 San Juan, “Myth of Eurydice,” 139.
22 Ibid., 133.
23 Ibid., 127.
24 Tinagli, Women in Italian Renaissance Art, 3.
26 San Juan, “Myth of Eurydice,” 128.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 135.
30 Tinagli, Women in Italian Renaissance Art, 50.
33 Tinagli, Women in Italian Renaissance Art, 50.
34 Ibid., 85 – 6.
37 Tinagli, Women in Italian Renaissance Art, 48.
38 Ibid., 4.
39 Ibid., 49.
41 Coonin " Most Elusive Woman in Renaissance Art,” 49.
42 Sydie, "Question of Women's Artistic Genius," 177.
45 Coonin " Most Elusive Woman in Renaissance Art,” 41.
46 Ibid., 44 – 5.
47 Sydie, "Question of Women's Artistic Genius," 199.
48 Tinagli, Women in Italian Renaissance Art, 12.
54 Ibid., 36.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid., 42.