works by Anguissola, like the late *Virgin with Child*, reveal her closeness to Correggio and Luca Cambiaso, as well as the circle of the Campi.

Amilcare Anguissola's decision to dedicate his daughter to art set a precedent. Other Italian artists took on female pupils, and the introduction to a collection of poems assembled on the occasion of the death of Titian's pupil, Irene di Spilimbergo, records that, "having been shown a portrait by Sofonisba Anguissola, made by her own hand, presented to King Philip of Spain, and hearing wondrous praise of her in the art of painting, moved by generous emulation, she was fired with a warm desire to equal that noble and talented damsel." Anguissola's invitation to the court of Philip II was the precedent for many other women artists who, excluded from institutional help—academic training, papal and civic patronage, guilds and workshops—found support in the courts of Europe between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Her work also directly influenced that of Lavinia Fontana, one of a group of important women artists produced by the city of Bologna in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The Other Renaissance

Art history's conception of the Renaissance as an historically, geographically, and culturally unique period is based on the lives and achievements of men. The history of women's contributions to visual culture does not necessarily fit neatly into categories produced by and around men's activities, and accepting the concept of the Renaissance as a frame carries with it inherent risks for a feminist history. There is, on the one hand, a danger of rewriting women's production in ways that "fit them into" preexisting categories; and on the other, the risk of trivializing women's achievements by seeing them through the lens of sexual difference. Women artists such as Properza de' Rossi, Lavinia Fontana, Elisabetta Sirani, Diana Mantuana (also called Diana Scultori), and Artemisia Gentileschi achieved a remarkable degree of public visibility and renown during their lifetimes. Their achievements were cited as evidence of what *a woman* could do, but male writers often followed Boccaccio's example and asserted that famous women were miraculously endowed with the qualities that enabled them to succeed and thus could not serve as models for ordinary women.

Without exception, the artists mentioned above are identified with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries rather than the fifteenth. And with the exception of Anguissola (discussed in the previous chapter) and Gentileschi—whose fortunes are identified with Rome, Naples, and Florence in the seventeenth century—all were part of the intellectual and artistic flowering that took place in Bologna, a city geographically displaced from the centers of early Renaissance culture. Our knowledge of their careers is far from complete, and although they are but a few of the many names scattered through the literature of this period, their achievements deserve serious study.

Bologna was unique among Italian cities for having both a university which had educated women since the Middle Ages and a female saint who painted. By the fifteenth century the organization of the guilds under the spiritual protection of specific saints had established St. Luke, who was believed to have painted miracle-working icons

including one of the Virgin Mary, as the patron saint of painters. Painters in Bologna, where the guilds remained powerful long after they had lost political and economic effectiveness in the rest of Italy, had their own saint.

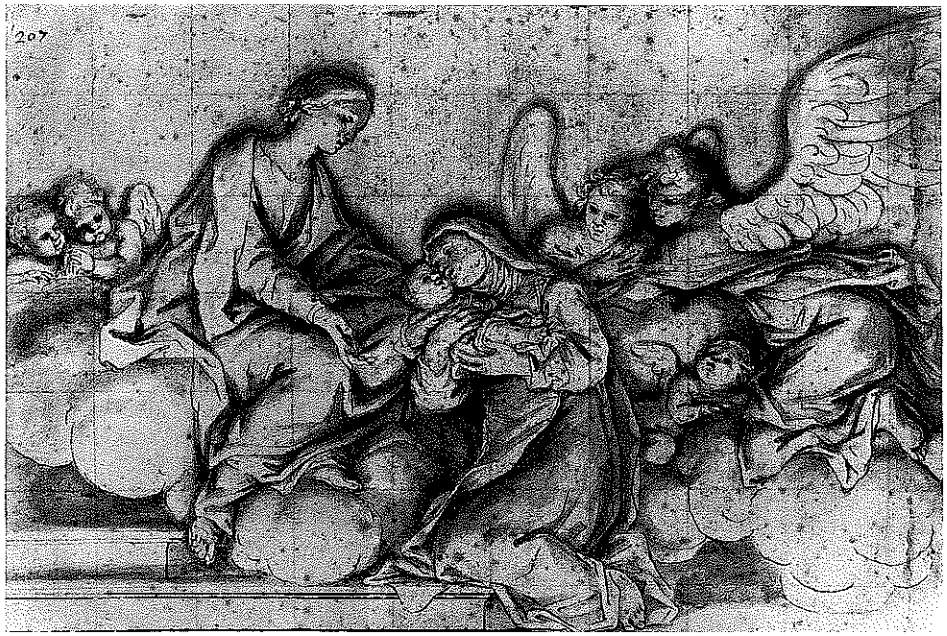
Caterina dei Vigri (St. Catherine of Bologna, canonized 1707), whose cult flourished in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is another example of the transmission of learning and culture by women in convents. Born into a noble Bolognese family in 1413 and educated at the court of Ferrara, she entered the Convent of the Poor Clares there after her father's death in 1427. She was known for her Latin and skill in music, painting, and illumination. Elected abbess soon after the Poor Clares moved to Bologna in 1456, her reputation as a painter grew swiftly. According to accounts by her friend and biographer, Sister Illuminata Bembo, she "loved to paint the Divine Word as a babe in swaddling bands, and for many monasteries in Ferrara and for books she painted him thus in miniature." The best known of her writings, *The Seven Weapons*, recounts the spiritual battles of a religious woman who saw her intellect and will in conflict with the submission and obedience demanded by the Church.

Although references to Caterina dei Vigri's painting enter the literature in the sixteenth century, attempts by feminist scholars to assemble an *oeuvre* for her have proved disappointing. The small group of works preserved in the Convent Church, the Corpus Domini of the Order of Santa Caterina dei Vigri in Bologna, show a naive and untrained hand, or hands, at work. X-rays taken in 1941 of the most famous of her paintings, a St. Ursula now in Venice, reveal an indecipherable inscription underneath her signature. Nevertheless, although we know all too little about her achievements, the significance of a woman painter, saint, and patron of painters to sixteenth-century Bologna, whose civic pride and ecclesiastical authority then reached new heights, should not be underestimated.

St. Catherine of Bologna's cult, stimulated by her miracles and her mystical autobiographical writings, dates from the exhumation of her perfectly preserved body (now enshrined in the church of the Corpus Domini) shortly after her death in 1463. Pope Clement VII formally authorized her cult in 1524 and in 1592 the title *Beata* was conferred on her. The cult, enormous and ideally suited to the pietistic temper of Counter-Reformation Italy, flourished through the seventeenth century along with her reputation as a painter. Malvasia mentions her among a group of painters active in Bologna between 1400 and 1500 and a representation of her playing her violin to an assembled

33 (*right*) Giovanni Benedetti, "S. Caterina de Vigri," *Libro devoto* 1502

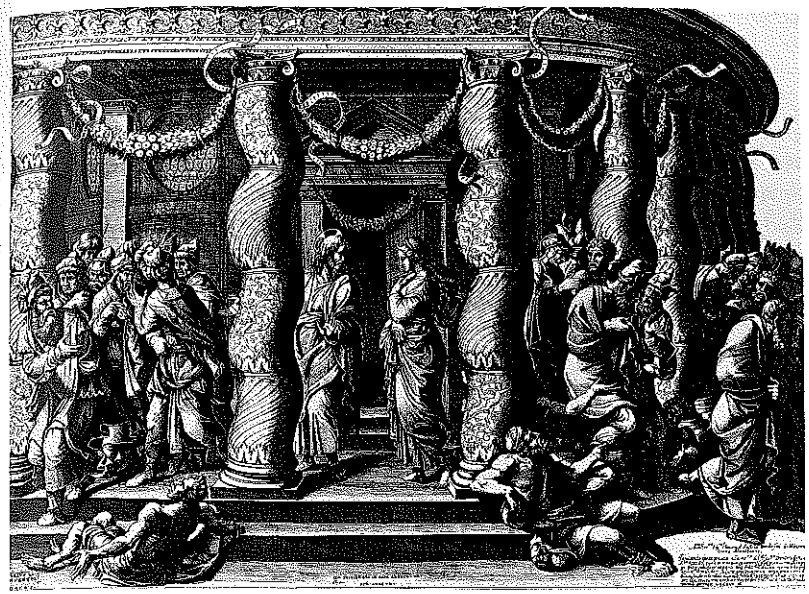
34 (*below*) Marcantonio Franceschini *S. Caterina Vigri* seventeenth century



Heavenly Host of musical angels and plump putti appears in a
34 preparatory drawing by Marcantonio Franceschini for his fresco cycle illustrating events from her life in the Corpus Domini.

The presence of St. Catherine's cult in Bologna was only one of a number of factors that worked to create an unusually supportive context for educated and skilled women in that city. After the Church, the most important institution in Bologna was the university, founded in the eleventh century. By the time it began admitting women in the thirteenth century, it was Italy's most famous center of legal studies and was also widely known as a school of the liberal arts. The city prided itself on women learned in philosophy and law—Bettisia Gozzadini, Novella d'Andrea, Bettina Calderini, Melanzia dall' Ospedale, Dorotea Bocchi, Maddalena Bonsignori, Barbara Ariente, and Giovanna Banchetti, who all wrote, taught, and published.

The connections between the university and the arts in Bologna need to be documented, but we do know that the publishing houses that grew up around the university encouraged the rise of a group of miniaturists during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that, in addition to women lay miniaturists, included a Carmelite nun, Sister Allegra, and another woman identified only as "Domina Donella miniatrix." Diana Mantuana (c. 1547–1612), later given the name Diana Scultori by art historians and mentioned by Vasari in the 1568 edition of his *Lives*, was—as far as we know—the only female engraver of the sixteenth century to sign her prints with her own name. Shortly after moving to Rome in 1575, she obtained a papal privilege that protected her rights to produce images she brought from Mantua and gave her the right to print and sell works under the name Diana Mantuana (or Mantovana). This signature identified her with the Mantuan court and a printing tradition begun with Mantegna and continued through her family. The names of Diana Mantuana and Veronica Fontana, a famous seventeenth-century maker of woodcuts who illustrated Malvasia's *Felsina Pittrice* in Bologna, point to a still unwritten history of women in the publishing trade in Renaissance Italy. Social historians have noted that in Bologna at the beginning of the fifteenth century women outnumbered men, a fact which may well have encouraged their participation in trades like painting and printing which remained under guild control until at least 1600. Luigi Crespi's *Vite de Pittori Bolognesi* (1769) lists twenty-three women active as painters in Bologna in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; at least two of them—Lavinia Fontana and Elisabetta Sirani—achieved international stature.



35 Diana Scultori *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* 1575

Women artists in Bologna benefited from the civic and ecclesiastical patronage that accompanied the naming of the Emilian region around Bologna as a papal state in 1512 (culminating in the election of the Bolognese Ugo Buoncompagni as Pope Gregory VIII in 1572); the artistic competition that developed between Rome and Bologna, and the fact that the Renaissance ideology of exceptional women could be used to claim unique status for the city and its women.

Bolognese art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was an art of elegance and sensibility produced for learned and aristocratic patrons and imbued with the sentiments and moral imperatives of the Counter-Reformation attempt to reform the Catholic Church. The abundance of work available for artists must have eased women's access to commissions, despite the incidents of male jealousy and spiteful accusations that dogged the careers of de' Rossi and others. The Church served as an active patron throughout the sixteenth century and noble families, desiring to demonstrate their wealth and refinement, ordered frescoes and wall decorations for their palaces and furnished them and churches with chapels complete with elegant and

tasteful altarpieces. Encouraged to combine wealth with intellectual and cultural pursuits, members of Bologna's richest families joined literary and scientific academies; a self-portrait of the 1570s by the painter Lavinia Fontana places the artist firmly in the context of this learned and cultivated citizenry. She depicts herself as prosperous and scholarly, in the act of writing and surrounded by antique bronzes and plaster casts from her private collection. Although Fontana had no claim to noble birth, Vasari identifies her family with the educated elite of Bologna and her early self-portraits present the image of an educated woman. A *Self-Portrait* of 1578 repeats the conventions of Anguissola's *Self-Portrait* of 1561, showing Fontana at the keyboard of a clavichord with a female servant, barely visible in the background, holding her music. An empty easel stands in front of the window and an inscription identifies her as LAVINIA VIRGO PROSPERI FONTANAE.

That the women artists of Bologna were exceptional is without question. While their work relates more directly to that of their male contemporaries than to that of other women, and confirms the dominant artistic and social ideologies of its time and place, the extent to which Fontana and Sirani at least were integrated into the cultural life of Bologna deserves far more study. They are exceptions in a history of artistic production by women which forces us to confront women's tangential relationships to artistic institutions and systems of patronage. It remained for Artemisia Gentileschi in the seventeenth century to negotiate a new relationship to dominant cultural ideologies and her case is considered at the end of this chapter.

The building campaign intended to make the Bologna municipal church of San Petronio the largest in Italy after St. Peter's brought forward Properzia de' Rossi, Renaissance Italy's only woman sculptor in marble. A drawing pupil of Marcantonio Raimondi, de' Rossi first achieved recognition for her miniature carvings on fruit stones. Her ambitious shift from these to public commissions in the 1520s apparently brought her close to overstepping the bounds of "femininity" and Vasari, while assuring his readers of her beauty, musical accomplishment, and household skills, also relates that she was persecuted by a jealous painter until she was finally paid a very low price for her work and, discouraged, turned to engraving on copper.

De' Rossi was first commissioned to decorate the canopy of the altar of the newly restored church of S. Maria del Baraccano. She then submitted a portrait of Count Guido Pepoli as a sample of her work for the rebuilding at San Petronio and was commissioned for several

pieces. Records of payment indicate that she completed three sibyls, two angels, and "two pictures" before abandoning the work. The "pictures" probably refer to bas-reliefs of the *Visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon* and a *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife* (c. 1520), now in the museum of San Petronio.

Joseph and Potiphar's Wife perfectly expresses the persistence of the classical ideal in sixteenth-century Bologna, combining it with a notion of elegance derived from the work of the major figures of Emilian art of the period: Correggio and Parmigianino. The Biblical story of Joseph fleeing from his seductress was a popular one in the early days of the Counter Reformation. The balanced and muscular bodies, as well as their classical dress, reveal de' Rossi's familiarity with antique sources, while the energy of the figure in motion points toward Correggio's exuberant figural groups. De' Rossi died in 1530, still a young woman, four years after the last recorded payment for her work at San Petronio. The city of Bologna continued to pride itself on having produced her, but it remained for her followers to develop the anti-Mannerist tendencies of Bolognese art under the spiritual influence of the Counter Reformation and the artistic influence of the Carracci and Guido Reni. 9

Lavinia Fontana began painting around 1570 in the style of her father and teacher, Prospero Fontana, whose work combined Counter-Reformation pietism, Flemish attention to detail, and a growing northern Italian interest in naturalism. The diverse strands of classicism, naturalism, and mannerism were united in Prospero Fontana's desire to produce religious art that was clear and persuasive in accordance with the teachings of Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti, Bishop and later Archbishop of Bologna, whose influence was widely felt in the arts. Prospero Fontana's pupils—Lavinia Fontana, Ludovico Carracci, and Gian Paolo Zappi—inherited these tendencies.

Fontana's early self-portraits, and the small panels intended as private devotional pieces, combine the influence of her father with the naturalism of the late Raphael and the elegance of Correggio and Parmigianino. Although Fontana became best known as a portraitist, she also executed numerous religious and historical paintings, many of them large altarpieces. Paintings like *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* (1579) and the *Noli Me Tangere* (1581) adhere closely to the religious ideology of spiritual and social reform expressed through prayer, devotion, and contemplation. "Popularized" religious paintings such as Fontana's *Birth of the Virgin* (1580s) and her *Consecration to the Virgin* (1599) often incorporate domestic motifs or familial pieties, 36, 41

reinforcing Paleotti's desire to extend pastoral care to individual families through prayer and instruction.

The *Birth of the Virgin* is closer to a genre scene of family life in Bologna than to its Biblical source, despite its outdoor setting and nocturnal illumination. It balances a sense of monumentality and decorum with a naturalism close to that of the Cremonese school, and was influenced by Anguissola, whose work Fontana knew and admired and who no doubt provided an important artistic model for her. Fontana's *Consecration to the Virgin*, originally intended for the Gnetti Chapel in S. Maria dei Servi in Bologna, combines figures elongated according to Mannerist conventions with greater naturalism in the treatment of the children's figures. Prospero Fontana's influence continued to be felt in Fontana's later religious paintings, as did that of Paleotti, for links between the Bishop and the painter's family remained strong.

By the late 1570s, Fontana's fame as a portraitist was firmly established. Despite her adherence to the principles of naturalism advocated by the Carracci family, she was prevented from joining the Carracci academy, founded in the 1580s, because of its emphasis on drawing from the nude model. Her *Portrait of a Gentleman and His Son* (1570s) recalls Anguissola's *Portrait of a Young Nobleman* (1550s) in its straightforward pose and in the quiet dignity of the figures. At the same time, the painting reveals the calculated mix of moderate social responsibility espoused by Paleotti and the worldly pretensions of the Bolognese aristocracy which insured Fontana's success as a portraitist. The elegant, elongated fingers and the brilliance of the rich detail on the sitter's garments oppose their monumentality and social rank to the sober space they inhabit.

Fontana's marriage to Gian Paolo Zappi in 1577 was contracted with a provision that the couple remain part of her father's household; her husband subsequently assisted her and cared for their large family. When the Bolognese Cardinal Buoncompagni succeeded to the papacy in 1572 papal patronage for Bolognese artists increased. Prospero Fontana had enjoyed the patronage of three previous popes; Fontana received her first papal commission and a summons to Rome from the local branch of the Pope's family. It is a sign of her status as a painter that she was able to postpone moving to Rome until the papacy of Clement VIII, which did not occur until after her father died. She left for Rome around 1603, preceded by her husband and son and a painting, a *Virgin and St. Giacinto*, commissioned by Cardinal Ascoli. The painting created a demand for her work in Rome. Working in the

36 Lavinia Fontana
Birth of the Virgin 1580s

palace of Cardinal d'Este, she painted a *Martyrdom of St. Stephen* for the basilica of San Paolo Fuori le Mura. The painting, destroyed in a fire in 1823, is known today only through an engraving of 1611 by Callot. Baglione reports that the work was a failure with the Roman public and that Fontana, in despair, renounced public commissions and returned to portrait painting.

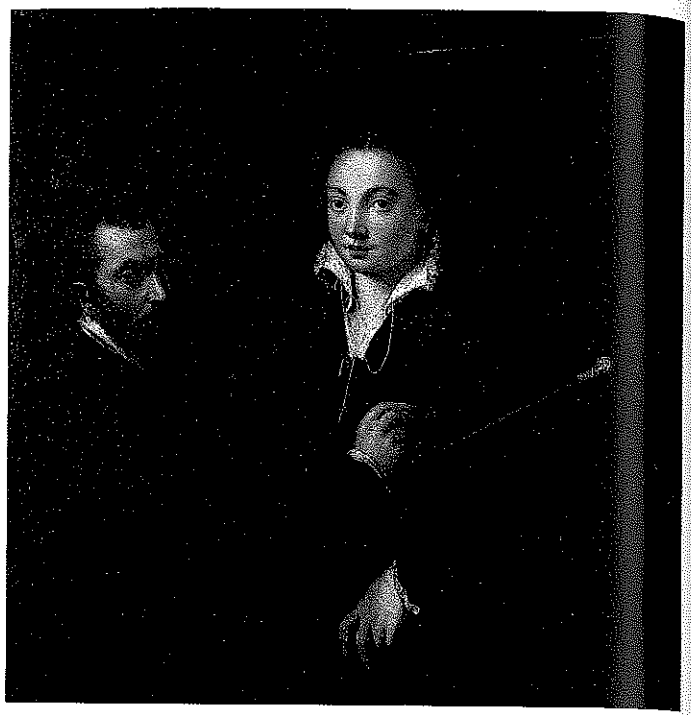
Late portraits, like the *Portrait of a Lady with a Lap Dog* (c. 1598) are worldly and sophisticated. The exquisite details of costume and furnishings isolate the sitters against a space rendered in a broad and simplified manner. Prices for Fontana's portraits soared with her election to the old Roman Academy, allowing her to pursue her interest in collecting art and antiquities. Contemporaries report that she executed portraits of Pope Paul V, as well as those of ambassadors, princes, and

37 Felice Casoni *Lavinia Fontana* 1611

cardinals, a testament to the continuing patronage of women artists by aristocrats and ecclesiastics. Her reputation continued to grow and in 1611, shortly before her death, a portrait medal was struck in her honor by the Bolognese medallist Felice Antonio Casoni. The face contains a dignified portrait and an inscription identifying her as a painter. On the reverse, an allegorical female figure in a divine frenzy of creation sits surrounded by compasses and a square, as an earlier Renaissance emphasis on mathematics and inspired genius belatedly modifies the ideal of the Renaissance woman artist.

Women artists like de' Rossi and Fontana set an important precedent for women of seventeenth-century Italy, particularly in the area around Bologna. Yet the work of the two best known of those women—Artemisia Gentileschi (c. 1593–1652), born in Rome but active in Florence, Naples and London, and Elisabetta Sirani (1638–65), whose short life was spent entirely in Bologna—was even more powerfully shaped by the pervasive influences of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio and Guido Reni. Caravaggio's insistent naturalism, shallow pictorial space, and dramatic use of light generated among his followers a large body of paintings characterized by unidealized, boldly illuminated figures placed against dark, mysterious backgrounds. Guido Reni, who inherited the mantle of the Bolognese school from the Carracci at whose academy he was trained, blended elegant refinement and naturalistic expression. In character and personality, these two influential figures could not have been more

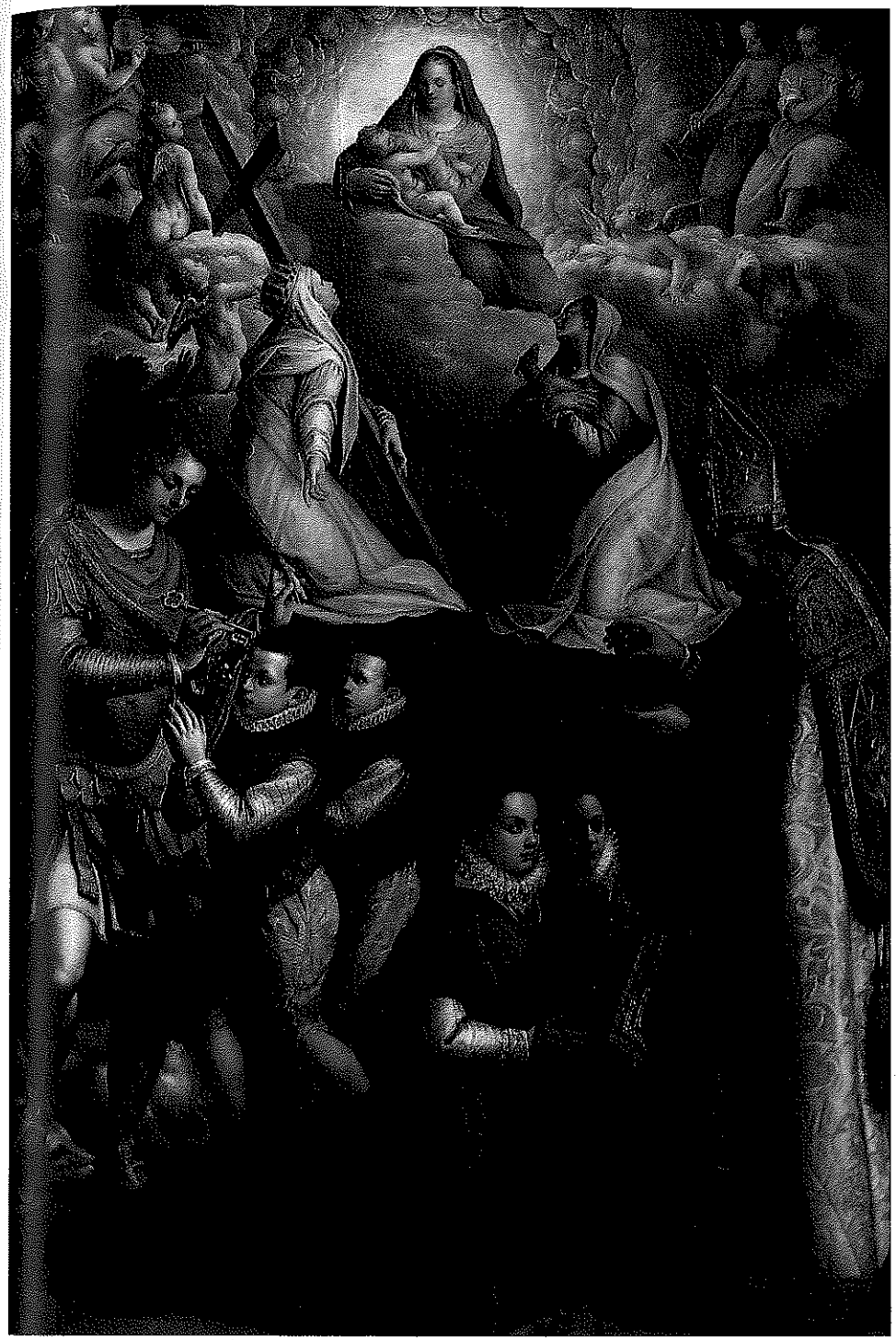
38 Elisabetta Sirani *The Holy Family With a Kneeling Monastic Saint* c. 1660



39 (*above*) Sofonisba Anguissola
Bernardino Campi Painting Sofonisba Anguissola late 1550s

40 (*left*) Elisabetta Sirani
Portrait of Anna Maria Ranuzzi as Charity 1665

41 (*opposite*) Lavinia Fontana
Consecration to the Virgin 1599



different: Reni, educated and cultured, perpetuated the image of the gentleman artist; Caravaggio, rebel and outlaw, epitomized a new role for the artist as bohemian.

Like many women artists of the time, Gentileschi and Sirani were the daughters of painters. Orazio Gentileschi was one of the most important of Caravaggio's followers; Giovanni Andrea Sirani a pupil and follower of Reni, and an artist of considerably less interest than his daughter. Gentileschi is the first woman artist in the history of Western art whose historical significance is unquestionable. In the case of Sirani, her early death has prevented a full evaluation of her career despite her evident fame during her life. Sirani's father took all her income from a body of work which she herself, following a cus-
38 tom gaining favor during the seventeenth century, catalogued at 150 paintings, a figure now considered too low. Despite her catalogue, no monograph exists and her reputation has suffered from an over-attribution of inferior works in Reni's style to her. As Otto Kurz notes: "The list of paintings to be found under her name in museums and private collections and the list of those paintings which she herself considered as her own work, coincide only in rare instances."

Sirani has frequently been dismissed as one of several insignificant followers of Reni in Bologna, and a painter of sentimental madonnas. But the subtlety of her pictorial style, and the graceful elegance of her touch, have prompted recent reevaluations of her significance in relation to that of contemporaries in Bologna like Lorenzo Pasinelli,
40 Flaminio Torre, and the Fleming Michele Desubleo. Sirani's *Portrait of Anna Maria Ranuzzi as Charity* (1665) is an outstanding example of Bolognese portraiture in the second half of the seventeenth century.

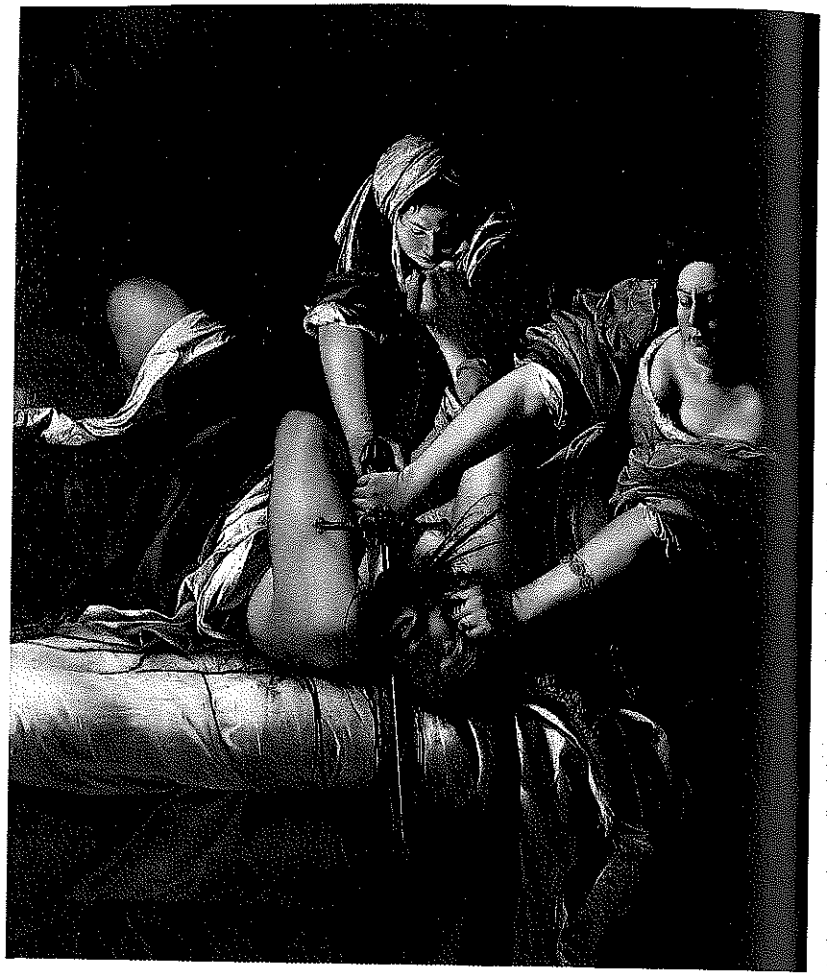
The proud gaze of Madame Ranuzzi, the younger sister of Count Annibale Ranuzzi, who commissioned the painting, and the wife of Carlo Marsigli by whom she had two sons, is intensified by concentrated brushwork. Lively touches of red and blue illuminate the overall color scheme of grays, lilacs, and browns and set off the rich purples in garments and background which envelop the figures. Despite the virtuoso brushwork and richness, the emphasis in the work is on Ranuzzi's maternity rather than her social rank.

Sirani's *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore) is perfectly in keeping with the grace, elegance, and pictorial refinement which secularized the subject for wealthy Bolognese patrons. Yet it also suggests that Sirani shared the seventeenth century's interest in female heroines; Sirani and Gentileschi produced numerous paintings on the theme of the heroic woman who triumphs by her

42 Elisabetta Sirani *Portia Wounding Her Thigh* 1664

virtue. In addition to several Judiths, both women painted penitent Magdalenes and monumental sibyls. In addition, Gentileschi offered several allegorical female figures, St. Catherine, a Cleopatra, and a Lucretia, among others, while Sirani supplied a *Timoclea* (1659), unusual in its depiction of the defiant heroine, and a *Portia Wounding Her Thigh* (1664). The latter was commissioned by Signore Simone Tassi and intended for an overdoor in a private apartment. The subject belongs with a group of themes, including the rape of Lucretia, which explore the relationship between public political and private, often sexual behavior.

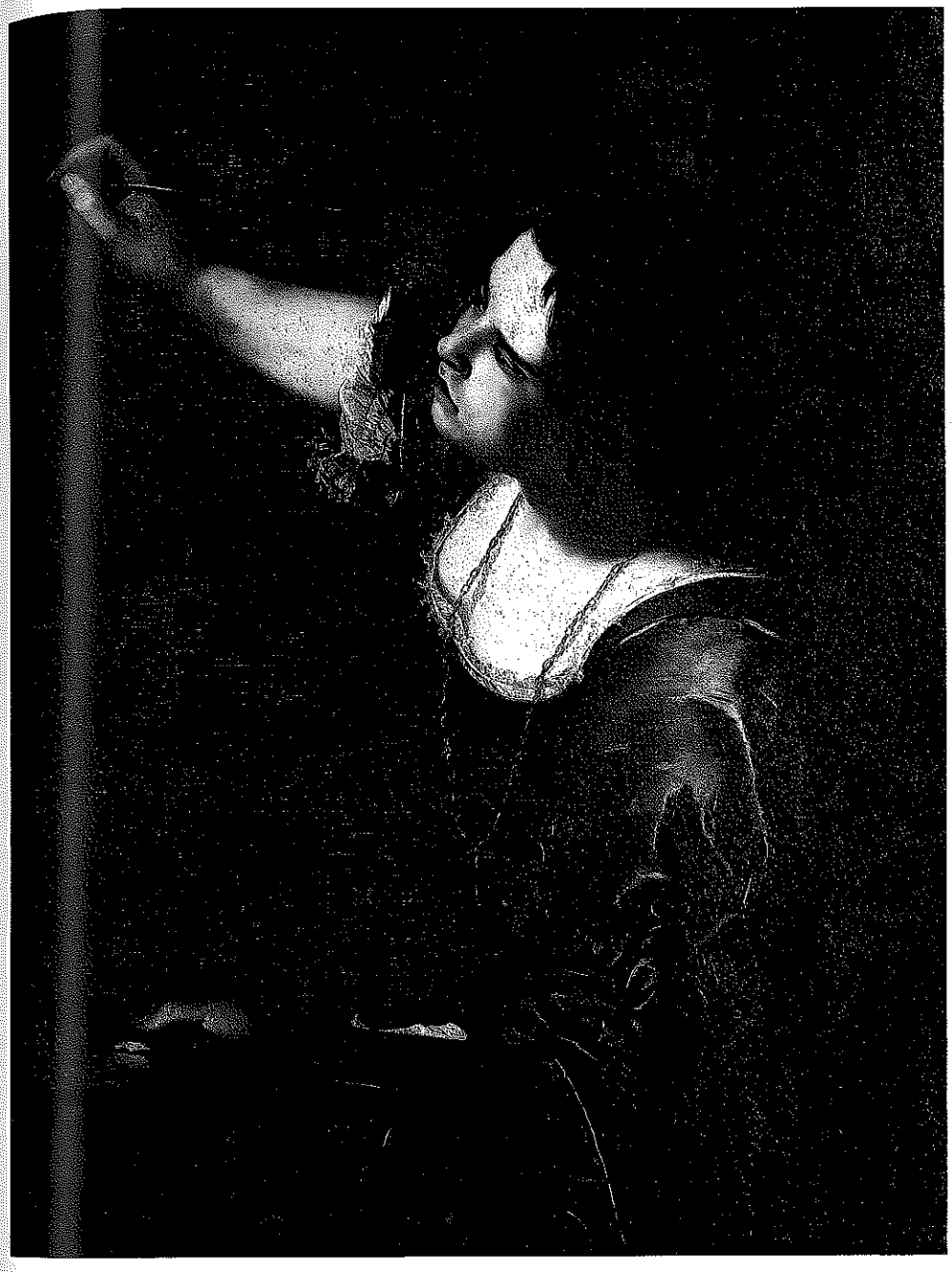
Sirani chose the moment at which Portia wounded herself to test her strength of character before asking Brutus to confide in her. The work's sexualized content is evoked through the titillating image of female wounding and the figure's almost voluptuous disarray, but its other meanings are more complicated and return us to the issue of how sexual difference is produced and reinforced. Stabbing herself deeply in the thigh, Portia has to prove herself virtuous and worthy of political trust by separating herself from the rest of her sex—in Plutarch's words: "I confesse, that a woman's wit commonly is too weake to keepe a secret safely: but yet, Brutus, good education, and the company of vertuous men, have some power to reforme the defect of



43 Artemisia Gentileschi *Judith Decapitating Holofernes* c. 1618

nature. And for my Selfe, I have this benefit moreover: that I am the daughter of Cato, and wife of Brutus."

The composition reinforces Portia's removal from the world of women. She is physically separated from the women who spin and gossip in another room, betraying their sex by talk. Presenting woman as a "defect" of nature, Christian doctrine often used the volubility of woman as a metaphor for her uncontrolled desires. Removed from the private world of women to the public world of men, Portia must assert



44 Artemisia Gentileschi *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* 1630s

her control over speech before she can claim exceptional status. She demonstrates, finally, that women who prove their virtue through individual acts of bravery can come to be recognized as almost like men. Yet the emphasis on bared flesh and self-mutilation eroticizes the act of valor. The signs of female sexuality are reconfigured within the conventions of representations of the threatening *femme fatale* in a manner no doubt designed to appeal to the tastes of a new class of secular private collectors. The rich colors and the confident brushwork displayed by the hand of a woman established Sirani's reputation in Bologna as a phenomenon.

Sirani's skill and the speed with which she worked led to gossip that her father was claiming her work as his own in order to exploit the publicity value of a female prodigy in the workshop. In order to repudiate the all too familiar allegation that her work was not her own, she became accustomed to working in public. Around 1652, she opened a school for women artists in Bologna. There she trained a number of younger women artists who, for the first time, were not exclusively from families of painters, as well as her two younger sisters, Anna Maria and Barbara, who eventually produced their own altarpieces for local churches.

Sirani's death in 1665 was followed, on November 14, by a massive public funeral in the Dominican church attended by a large and distinguished crowd of mourners. The funeral announcement described her as PITTRICE FAMOSISSIMA and the lavish scheme of decoration for the ceremony was supervised by the artist Matteo Borbone. A catafalque, intended to represent the Temple of Fame, was erected in the middle of the nave. The octagonal structure of imitation marble, its cupola-shaped roof supported by eight columns of pseudo-porphyry, had a base decorated with figures, mottoes, and emblematic pictures and, on a platform, a life-size figure of the dead artist painting.

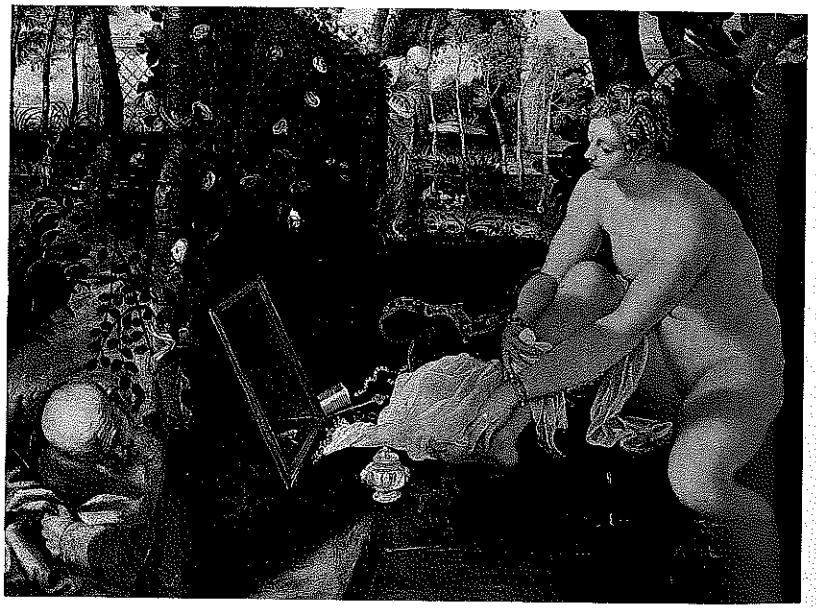
Sirani was eulogized in a funeral oration which was also a rhapsody of civic pride in the city of Bologna. Her funeral, the final identification of her fame with that of the city which had produced her, was comparable to the funerals of other well-known sixteenth- and seventeenth-century artists in that they were accorded the privileges of other distinguished citizens. In the fifteenth century, Ghiberti had requested that his body be interred in Florence's Santa Croce in the company of the noblemen to whose position he aspired as an artist. Less than a hundred years later, Michelangelo's body was transported from Rome back to his native Florence in 1564, where a sumptuous catafalque was erected in the Medici family basilica of San

Lorenzo. In Bologna, Reni's funeral in 1642 was also treated as a public event with masses offered for him in towns surrounding Bologna, and as far away as Rome. His body was carried to San Domenico with great pomp and honor past huge crowds in the streets. Upon Sirani's death, Bologna's two most famous artists of the seventeenth century were laid to rest side by side in the ancestral tomb of the wealthy Bolognese, Signor Saulo Giudotti. A testament to their public civic status as artists, the internment was also deeply ironic; during his life, the eccentric Reni had refused to have anything to do with women, barring them from his house in fear of poison or witchcraft at their hands.

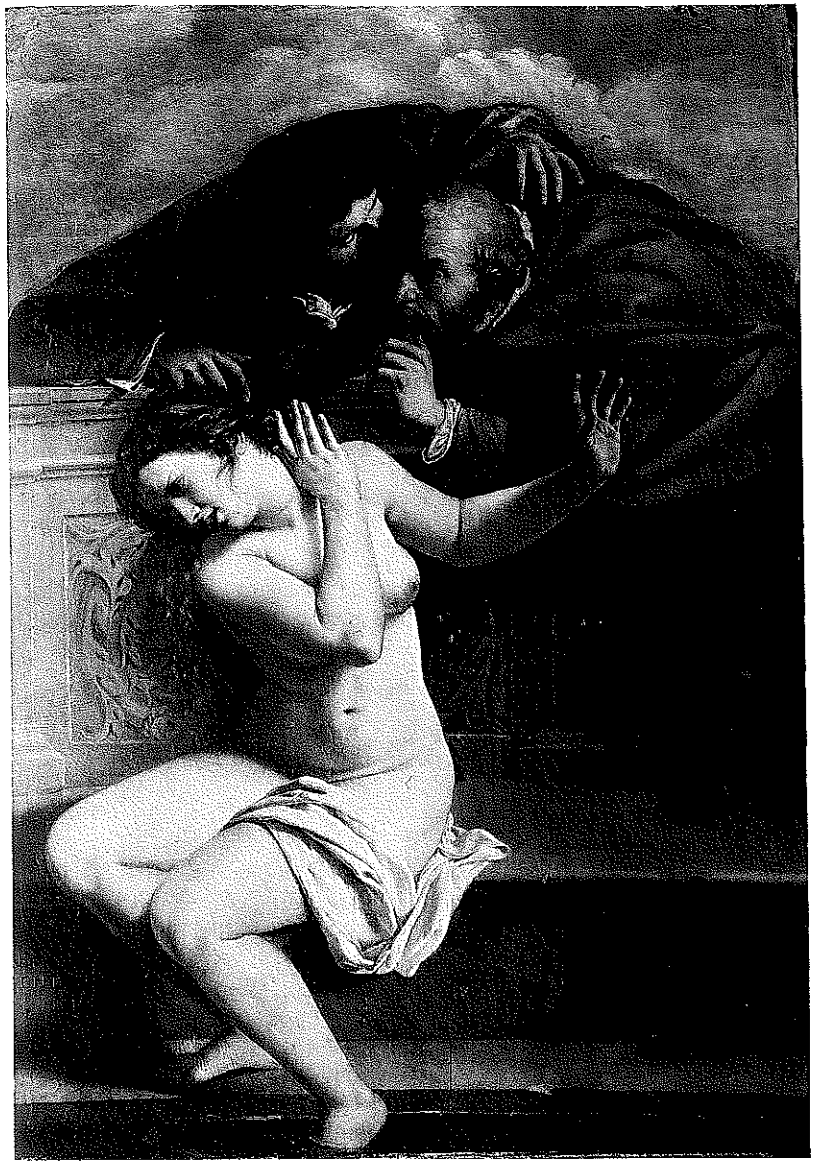
The fame of Sirani in Bologna during her lifetime was rivalled by only one other woman artist in Italy: Artemisia Gentileschi, a painter whose life and work are a challenge to humanist constructions of feminine education and deportment. In May 1606, Caravaggio fled Rome, accused of stabbing a young man to death. Among his followers in Rome were Orazio Gentileschi, a founder of the style that came to be known throughout Europe as Caravaggism, and his daughter Artemisia, whom Ward Bissell has identified as one of the two most important Caravaggisti to reach maturity between 1610 and 1620. Caravaggio and the Gentileschi family (which included a son as well as the daughter born in 1593) were far removed in lifestyle and temperament from the learned painters of the Bolognese school with their emphasis on piety and refinement. Historical accounts of the lawless bohemian artist, whose hands were as skilled with the dagger as with the paintbrush, and in whom a revolutionary style of painting commingled with unrestrained passions, usually begin with Caravaggio, though Rudolph and Margaret Wittkower have skilfully traced its prototype to the sixteenth century. Archival research on the Gentileschi family has produced a history rich in court orders and libels, as well as the famous trial in 1612 of Orazio's assistant and Gentileschi's teacher, Agostino Tassi, on charges that he had raped the nineteen-year-old girl, withdrawn a promise of marriage, and taken away from the Gentileschi house paintings that included a large *Judith*. The truth of the matter remains buried under conflicting seventeenth-century documents and modern readings of those documents which have often imposed anachronistic attitudes on seventeenth-century sexual and matrimonial mores. At its heart, the trial had less to do with Artemisia Gentileschi's virtue than with Tassi's relationship to Orazio Gentileschi's legal property, which included his daughter. Germaine Greer's argument, that the trial, and the publicity

which accompanied it, removed the remaining traditional obstacles to the development of Gentileschi's professional life, is convincing up to a point. But it ignores the equally favorable confluence of Orazio Gentileschi's defiant reputation and his unswerving support of his talented daughter. Mary Garrard's recent monograph on the artist, which also brings together for the first time in English all the documents relating to the artist, as well as the complete transcripts of the rape trial, has convincingly shown how this public scrutiny of female sexuality reshaped those issues of gender and class relevant to Gentileschi's subsequent emergence as a major artist.

The growth of naturalism in the seventeenth century led to a new emphasis on the depiction of courage and physical prowess in representation. Images of heroic womanhood, qualified by the moralistic rhetoric of the Counter Reformation and well suited to the demands of Baroque drama, replaced earlier and more passive ideals of female beauty. This new ideal, traceable in the work of the Carracci and Reni circles as well as in the followers of Caravaggio, coincided with expanding roles for the artist which admitted a wider range of behavior and attitudes, and assured even the unconventional Caravaggio of the continuing patronage of the powerful cardinal, Scipione Borghese. However colorful Gentileschi's life, and accounts vary widely, it was marked by a sustained artistic production (despite the fact that she married and had at least one child) equalled by few women artists.



45 (*opposite*) Tintoretto *Susanna and the Elders* 1555–56



46 Artemisia Gentileschi *Susanna and the Elders* 1610

46 Among Gentileschi's earliest works is a *Susanna and the Elders*, inscribed ARTE GENTILESCHI 1610, which already displays precocious evidence of her later development. The opportunity to examine the work (long inaccessible in a private collection), when it appeared in the exhibition, *Women Artists 1550–1950*, in 1977 led to its attribution to Artemisia rather than Orazio, despite a formal and coloristic debt to the older Gentileschi. The painting's inclusion in the 1991 exhibition of Gentileschi's work held at the Casa Buonarroti in Florence moved at least one art historian to argue for the work as a collaboration between the daughter and a father, "who, in an understandable reversal of workshop tradition, proudly encouraged his daughter-assistant to take the credit." Issues of content as well as attribution continue to surround the painting, and Mary Garrard's feminist readings have been challenged by other Renaissance and Baroque scholars, among them Richard Spear and Francis Haskell.

The painting, executed in Rome only a year after she began her career (if we are to believe Orazio's testimony at the trial), has sources in similar representations by members of the Carracci circle, as well as a *David and Goliath* (c. 1605–10) by Orazio. The Apocryphal story of the attempted seduction by the two Elders of Joachim's wife, Susanna, was extremely popular in Italy by the late sixteenth century. Garrard points out the many interpretative traditions within which the theme has figured. The figure of Susanna has symbolized the Church, conspired against by Elders representing pagans and other opponents. She can also signify deliverance (the young Daniel cleared her name and saved her life), or a female chastity that would rather die than bring dishonor on a husband. During the Renaissance, focus on a single dramatic moment that emphasized the more violent and voyeuristic aspects of the theme, replaced broader narrative themes. This focus also served to provide a Biblical occasion for the painting of an erotic nude. The drama is played out in terms of the sexual dynamics of looking, and the interplay of male aggression and female resistance. Male possession of the female body is initiated through a look which surprises the unsuspecting and defenseless woman at her bath. "The nude's erotic appeal could be heightened," Garrard argued in an important article on the painting, "by the presence of two lecherous old men, whose inclusion was both iconographically justified and pornographically effective." The frequency with which Susanna is assigned a complicitous role in
45 this drama of sexualized looking, as we see in Tintoretto's version of 1555–56, points to the theme as reinforcing social ideologies of masculine dominance and female subordination.

Gentileschi's version departs from this tradition in significant ways. Removing Susanna from the garden, a traditional metaphor for the bounteous femininity of nature, Gentileschi isolates the figure against a rigid architectonic frieze which contains the body in a shallow and restricted space. The awkward twist and thrust of the body with its outflung arms, transforms the image into one of distress, resistance, and awkward physicality very much at odds with representations by Tintoretto, Guido Reni, and others who choose to position the female figure within attitudes of graceful display. Other representations of the subject in Italian painting, including those by the Carracci circle and Sisto Badalocchio (c. 1609) reinforce the masculine gaze by directing both looks toward the female body. The conspiratorial glance of one Elder toward the viewer in Gentileschi's painting may be unique. It also produces a more disturbing psychological content, as the triangle inscribed by the three heads, and the positioning of the arms, not only focuses Susanna as the object of the conspiracy, but also implicates a third witness, a spectator who receives the silencing gesture of the older male as surely as if "he" were part of the painting's space. The figure of Susanna is fixed like a butterfly on a pin between these gazes, two within the frame of the painting, the other outside it, but implicitly incorporated into the composition. Abandoning more traditional compositions in which Susanna's figure is off-center, along a diagonal or orthogonal line which allows the spectator to move freely in relation to the image, Gentileschi moves the figure close to the center of the composition and uses the spectator's position in front of the canvas to fix her rigidly in place.

Gentileschi's biography has often been read in her representations. More remarkable for her development as a painter, however, is the sophistication of this early intuitive and empathetic response to a familiar subject. *Susanna and the Elders* offers striking evidence of Gentileschi's ability to transform the conventions of seventeenth-century painting in ways that would ultimately give new content to the imagery of the female figure.

Tassi's eventual acquittal at the celebrated trial in Rome, which included Gentileschi's torture by thumbscrew in an attempt to ascertain the truth of her statements, and Gentileschi's subsequent marriage to a wealthy Florentine were followed by several years in Florence where she enjoyed an excellent reputation as a painter, executed several of her most important works, and joined the Accademia del Disegno, the archives of which include several references to her between 1616 and 1619. The Florentine period, which ended with

47 Orazio Gentileschi
Judith with Her Maidservant c. 1610–12

her return to Rome in 1620 according to Bissell's chronology, seems to
43 have included the *Judith With Her Maidservant*, the *Judith Decapitating Holofernes*, and an *Allegory of the Inclination* commissioned in 1617 for the salon ceiling in the Casa Buonarroti in Florence.

Gentileschi's *Judith With Her Maidservant* is the first of six known variations on the popular theme from the Old Testament Apocrypha which relates the story of the slaughter of the Assyrian general, Holofernes, by the Jewish widow, Judith, who crept through enemy lines to seduce and then decapitate the sleeping general. The monumental composition, naturalistic rendering and strong contrasts of light and shadow, and use of contemporary models, are all indicators of Gentileschi's adherence to the principles of a fully developed Caravaggism. In this painting, as in the earlier *Susanna and the Elders*, she emphasizes the psychological complicity of the two figures by squeezing them into the same space, mirroring their bodies, and repeating the direction of the two, in this case female, gazes. The focused intensity of Judith's action, reinforced by the clenched hand that clutches the sword hilt, is a radical departure from Orazio Gentileschi's version of the same subject (c. 1610–12). In the latter, the stability of the pyramidal composition created by the positioning of the bodies of the two women emphasizes the figures' passivity, while the directing of their gazes outward in different directions works to defuse their intensity and commitment to a shared goal—the death of the enemy leader. In yet another version of the same subject, Giovan Giosefa dal Sole's *Portrait of a Woman as Judith*, executed at the end of

48 Artemisia Gentileschi *Judith with Her Maidservant* c. 1618

the century, the presence of Holofernes's head lends a merely anecdotal touch to the languid figure of Judith, an image of sensual pleasure who, with breasts bared, turns toward the spectator.

Yael Evan has traced the prototype of the female hero who approximates a triumphant man in stature to Mantegna's (or his followers') drawing of *Judith* (1491), one of the earliest depictions to invoke the textual portrayal of the original Vulgate Judith who is said to have "behaved like a man." Tracing the changing image of Judith through the Renaissance and Baroque periods, Evan and others have shown how the iconography of Judith was gradually transformed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and have pointed out Gentileschi's considerable role in constructing a female hero who transcends the female norm by displaying a capacity for moral behavior in the public realm that is normally denied to women.

The most insistent feature of Gentileschi's *Judith Decapitating* 43
Holofernes—the ferocious energy and sustained violence of the scene—has attracted extensive critical commentary, often by writers who have found intimations of Gentileschi's personal experience as the recipient of Tassi's sexual advances in the scene. Yet the naturalistic details—the choice of the moment of the decapitation and the blood which jets from the severed arteries—are present in several other seventeenth-century versions, including those of Caravaggio and Johann Liss, whose *Judith in the Tent of Holofernes* (c. 1620) rivals Gentileschi's in lurid detail. A more relevant source for Gentileschi's representation may be a lost work by Rubens, known today only through an engraving by Cornelius Galle I (1576–1650), which sheds light on the painting's iconography as well as its gruesome nature. Rubens's work provides a possible source for the powerful female figure with its muscular arms, neck, and upper torso, but is significantly different from Gentileschi's rendering in its attention to the graceful and revealing swirl of drapery around the female body. Despite pictorial sources in Caravaggio, Rubens, and Orazio Gentileschi, there is nothing in the history of Western painting to prepare us for Gentileschi's expression of female physical power, brilliantly captured in the use of a pinwheel composition in which the interlocking, diagonally thrusting arms converge at Holofernes's head. It is not the physicality of the female figures alone, however, which makes it unusual, but its combination with restructured gazes. The coy glances and averted gazes of Western painting's female figures are missing here. The result is a direct confrontation which disrupts the conventional relationship between an "active" male spectator and a passive female recipient. Although

Gentileschi's work shares subjects and female heroines with that of a great many other seventeenth-century painters from Francesco del Cairo and Valerio Castello to Guercino, Carlo Saraceni, and Guido Reni, and active, muscular male figures appear in works like Bartolomeo Manfredi's *Mars Punishing Amor* (c. 1610), its celebration of female energy expressed in direct rather than arrested action was profoundly alien to the prevailing artistic temper.

The theme of Judith and Holofernes is repeated in the work of other seventeenth-century women artists, but theirs contain none of the characteristics that distinguish Gentileschi's. A *Judith and Her Handmaiden* painted by Fede Galizia, the daughter of a miniaturist from Trento, at the end of the sixteenth century, reiterates the conventions of refined female portraiture in combination with the stern, moral message of the severed head. Sirani's *Judith*, despite following Gentileschi's chronologically, is closer to the mannered elegance of Bolognese painting than to the new pictorial ideals of the Gentileschi family.

By the time Artemisia Gentileschi arrived in Naples in 1630 she was a celebrity, living magnificently and enjoying the patronage and protection of the nobility. An allegorical figure of *Fame*, dated 1632, and a *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (1630s) are important works 44
which signal her transition to a more refined later style. *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* has been thoroughly analysed as a sophisticated commentary on a central philosophical issue of later Renaissance art theory, and an audacious challenge to the core of artistic tradition in its creation of an image unavailable to any male artist—an allegorical figure which is at the same time a self-image. Following Ripa's description of the image of *Pittura*, Gentileschi has given herself the attributes of the female personification of Painting: the gold chain, the pendant mask standing for imitation, the unruly locks of hair that signify the divine frenzy of artistic creation, and the garments of changing colors which allude to the painter's skill. The richly modulated colors—red-browns, dark green, blue velvet—are repeated in the five patches of color on the palette. The work belongs to a tradition in which painting is identified as one of the liberal arts, but here artist and allegory are one. Unlike the self-portraits of Anguissola discussed in the previous chapter, here, for the first time, a woman artist does not present herself as a gentlewoman, but as the act of painting itself.