



Women of WAM

Depictions of Femininity in Early Modern Europe



WORCESTER ART MUSEUM

The Worcester Art Museum's collection of European art contains many paintings and sculptures depicting female saints, mythological subjects, and members of elite society. In this self-guided exhibition, you will have the opportunity to reflect on how these works both embodied and reinforced the idealized notions of femininity in Early Modern Europe. Come experience the psychological "double bind" such often contradictory depictions reinforced for those who hoped to emulate both the piety and sensuality they saw in art.

SAINT OR SINNER?

Images of the Virgin Mary embodied many of the ideals of European femininity during the period of 1400–1700, including compassion, faith, and obedience. In this exhibition, the *Virgin and Child* attributed to Domenico di Paris (ca. 1470), the *Mater Dolorosa* (Sorrowful Mother) by the Master of the Magdalen Legend, as well as *Saint Catherine* by Giulio Procaccini represent female saints venerated by women and men. Yet, the subjects' supernatural or mystical qualities contradicted what was possible for actual women. For example, the Virgin Mary was upheld for both her virginity—a heroic and life-long virtue—as well as her maternity, having brought into being Jesus Christ—the redeemer of humanity according to the Christian tradition. She remained a model of purity and chastity unachievable by humans.

Feminine chastity was upheld as a virtue within the male-dominant society in order to control the behavior and movements of women. For example, the late fourteenth-century writer Paolo da Certaldo recommends that young women wanting to follow the Virgin Mary's model should stay: "enclosed and locked up in a hidden and honest place [so that they will be]... acceptable to God and to their husbands, and to other persons with whom they converse."¹ Amid such views, it is not surprising that the women we see depicted in the Museum's Renaissance and Baroque galleries are represented indoors, generally in private settings.

Treatises and conduct manuals suggested ideal feminine behavior was performed inside the home—sewing, maintaining the house, and caring for children were common examples—and not in public spaces. Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) expressed this common view in his treatise *On Family* when he wrote: "the woman, as she remains locked up at home, should watch over things by staying at her post, by diligent art and watchfulness. The man should guard the woman, the house, and his family and country..."² In many Renaissance cities, women who appeared in areas such as Venice's commercial center, the Rialto, without their husbands were judged to be sinners. Noblewomen appearing unchaperoned could be branded harlots or wanton women of Venus.

The celibate life of nuns provided some women with an alternative to marriage and motherhood. In convents, they could devote their lives to study. Whether women chose the convent or were placed there, celibacy was accompanied by limitations in where they could go. Mobility restrictions varied greatly depending on which religious order a nun joined and even in which European city she lived: Venice, for example, allowed more movement than did Florence because of the geographic layout of canals and waterways limiting pedestrian travel.³ The religious reforms enacted at the Council of Trent (1545–1563), a series of convenings intended to reassert the strength of the Catholic Church in response to the Protestant Reformation, led to more stringent rules for many European convents. These generally reduced visitation and the movements of their members.



Attributed to Domenico di Paris (Italian, about 1470), *Virgin and Child*, late 1400s, Museum purchase, 1916.102



Master of the Magdalen Legend (Flemish active 1483–about 1530), *Mater Dolorosa*, late 1400s–early 1500s, Theodore T. and Mary G. Ellis Collection, 1940.43

1 Sandra Weddle, "Women's Place in the Family and the Convent: A Reconsideration of Public and Private in Renaissance Florence," *Journal of Architectural Education* 55, no. 2 (November 2001): 64.

2 Leon Battista Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence*, trans. Renée Neu Watkins, [1st ed.] (University of South Carolina Press, 1969), 207–8.

3 Weddle, 64-70.



Giulio Cesare Proccacini (Italian, 1574–1625), *Saint Catherine*, early 1600s, Charlotte E.W. Buffington Fund, 1971.113

Women who devoted their lives to study, whether in a convent or at home, found themselves in a different kind of “double bind” as writers. They had access to the tools of knowledge but were denied public recognition as thinkers. For example, the well-educated Cassandra Fedele (1465–1558) and Laura Cereta (1469–1499) encountered resistance to publishing their works of poetry and Latin philosophical tracts despite praise from several leading humanists. They lived in a world that declared writing and wisdom to be manly pursuits. In the 1490s, Cereta had to defend her work by addressing one of her attackers directly, “...you say publicly and quite openly that you are not only surprised but pained that I am said to show this extraordinary intellect of the sort one would have thought nature would give to the most learned men....”⁴ By the late 1600s in Protestant Holland, the education of women had improved when compared to the situation in Italy the previous century. Holland’s burgeoning mercantile class resulted in many more women attaining literacy, sometimes helping their husbands and fathers in business and book keeping. Signs of these changed circumstances are evident in Nicolaes Maes’ *An Old Woman Praying*, in which the sitter is shown surrounded by books, having set down her reading spectacles and quill.

Bookish female saints, such as Catherine of Alexandria, are only rarely depicted reading or writing at a desk within a study. The *Saint Catherine* by Giulio Cesare Proccacini, for example, reflects a more dramatic portrayal of the saint in 17th-century Italy, drawing from Voragine’s *Golden Legend* (ca. 1266) and other early sources that record Saint Catherine as a beautiful and eloquent woman whose faith converted hundreds of pagans. In these narratives, however, Emperor Maxentius remained unmoved by her words. Struck by her beauty, he instead sought to marry her, but had her killed when she refused. Proccacini’s *Saint Catherine* depicts Catherine’s moment of martyrdom without any of her intellectual attributes. Rather, the tortuous portrayal corresponds with the emotional vividness and clarity called for by the Catholic Church during the Council of Trent (1545–1563). The Council decreed religious artworks be pious, engaging, and clear in order to instruct the masses in appropriate virtues and to inspire the faithful. Proccacini’s *Saint Catherine* gazes heavenward during the dramatized violence of her execution. In both story and image, the pagan ruler is unable to control her through marriage, nor can he break her Christian faith.

PRESSURE TO MARRY AND HAVE CHILDREN

Brides in Europe during this period (1400–1700) could rarely refuse the marriages arranged for them by their families. Girls were eligible for marriage as early as the age of twelve, usually marrying men who were twice their age. Men were encouraged to establish themselves in business so that by the time they married they were ready to have children. Like today, gifts were exchanged during courtship. Wedding gifts prepared the elite couple for married life after the ceremony. The *cassone* (wedding chest) from Northern Italy was likely such a gift, as these “hope chests” were often commissioned for the bride during the betrothal period. The allegories carved on this chest display feminine virtues, such as charity and fortitude, appropriate for a young bride (see label).



Cassone, about 1430, Northern Italy, possibly Bologna, Austin S. and Sarah C. Garver Fund, 1949.39

During the wedding festivities, brides were often given a “holy doll” to cradle in their arms.⁵ The dolls would be dressed up to represent a saint or even the infant Jesus, in the hope of magically encouraging any future children to have the same virtues as the depicted saint. Moreover, holding dolls encouraged young women to practice maternal attitudes. Combined with the encounter of sculptures and paintings of the Virgin and Child in private chapels and churches, these practices reinforced the virtue of motherhood.

⁴ Laura Cereta, *Collected Letters of a Renaissance Feminist*, trans. & edited by Diana Robin (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997), 74-75.

⁵ Zuzanna Sarnecka, “And the Word Dwelt amongst Us”: Experiencing the Nativity in the Italian Renaissance Home,” in *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 2019): 163-184; Yassana C Croizat, “Living Dolls”: François Ier Dresses His Women,” *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Spring 2007), pp. 94-130

Young brides felt immense pressure to have children. Even the clothes women wore were believed to have an impact on their fertility and were sometimes represented in their portraits. In the *Portrait of Queen Eleanor of Austria* by Jan Gossaert, the sitter clutches what appears to be the fur of a marten or similar animal in her garment. According to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (ca. 8 C.E.) weasels and martens became impregnated auditorily, a report Christians later connected with the Virgin Mary, who in the Bible became pregnant when she heard the words of the Archangel Gabriel.⁶ The fur was at once a symbol of the female sitter's wealth and access to fine materials as well as her fertility. In her marriage to King Manuel I of Portugal, a political alliance arranged by her brother, Queen Eleanor succeeded in giving birth to Charles (b. 1520) and Maria (b. 1521). In European societies in which the first-born son stood to inherit the family name and most of the wealth, male children were more desirable than females, and childbirth-related objects in artwork often featured baby boys or the infant Jesus.



Jan Gossaert (Netherlandish, about 1478–1532), *Portrait of Queen Eleanor of Austria*, about 1516, anonymous loan, 83.84.1



School of Fontainebleau, *Woman at Her Toilette*, 1550–1570, Museum purchase, 1932.23

MYTHICAL FEMININE BEAUTY

The School of Fontainebleau *Woman at Her Toilette* (ca. 1580) depicts a nearly nude woman surrounded by objects that allude to Venus, the Roman goddess of Love. The sitter is thought to have been a mistress of the French King.⁷ “Toilette” paintings placed female sitters in private chambers in the act of dressing. They became a popular subject at the French royal palace and hunting lodge at Fontainebleau (1528–1610). In the Worcester painting, the sitter is surrounded by attributes of Venus: the roses on the ledge, pearls in her hair, and mirror flanked with shells and a coral cupid.

Paintings of Venus provided examples for viewers of mythical female beauty. Paolo Veronese's *Venus Disarming Cupid* (ca. 1555) shows the goddess with thick, blond locks plaited atop her head, a body that was curvy and proportionate, pale skin, luscious eyelashes, and lips the shade of pink coral. In Venice at the time of

Veronese's painting, *libri segreti*, or so-called secret books, circulated among women with recipes for dying one's hair blond and making one's own makeup. Prostitutes often sought the same ideal beauty as young noblewomen, so well-respected women navigated a delicate line of class and status when they sought to rival Venus's good looks.⁸ In fact, Venice's courtesans included the blond Veronica Franco, an active poetess whose oxymoronic Venus-Virgin self-fashioning became infamous. During a state visit to Venice in 1574, the French King Henri III requested an audience with her.⁹ The beauty of Venice's courtesans was celebrated by many foreign visitors and writers. Venus and Venice were linked by more than just a shared phonetic root—the identification of March 25th as the birthday of Venice corresponded with the astrological ascendancy of Venus (and also the Annunciation, when the Virgin Mary was believed to have received news that she was pregnant). Paintings in the Doge's Palace celebrate the Venice-Venus connection, and poets spoke of both the goddess and the city as being “born from the sea.” In Venice, perhaps more than any other city, representations of Venus affected noblewomen, courtesans, and even depictions of the body politic.



Paolo Veronese (Italian, 1528–88), *Venus Disarming Cupid*, 1550–55, Gift of Hester Diamond, 2013.50

6 Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, “Conception and Birth,” in *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, ed. M. Ajmar-Wolheim and F. Dennis (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2006):130.

7 Daniel Catton Rich, *European Paintings in the Collection of the Worcester Art Museum* (Worcester: Worcester Art Museum, 1974): 242.

8 On this and other contradictions in Venice, Jutta Sperling, “The Paradox of Perfection: Reproducing the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41:1 (Jan., 1999): 3–32.

9 Margaret Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan: Veronica Franco Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth-Century Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 102–110.

However, Venus as feminine exemplar was problematic within Christian society. Authors sought to justify the carnal desire enflamed by Venus while realizing that clergy routinely warned of the sins of the flesh. In 1556, Vincenzo Cartari tried to reconcile the contradictions of the goddess by declaring:

Venus was, according to the fables, the goddess of lust and lechery; she planted lustful desires and lecherous appetites within the hearts of mortals, and then gave them the help they needed to reach the consummation they desired...And besides Hymen and Juno, the ancients also gave the responsibility for the marriage ritual to that goddess; for a marriage is performed so that sexual intercourse can take place afterwards, and children are born as a necessary consequence of that act.¹⁰

Cartari and other Renaissance authors sought to explain pagan images in ways tolerable to their male-dominated, Christian audience. Sensual feminine allure remained a power only declared virtuous when it served marriage and child rearing.

Female art patrons could choose how they wanted an artist to represent a mythological subject, although studies of the few surviving artist's account books from Italy during the 15th and 16th centuries suggest perhaps only one in ten artworks there were commissioned by women.¹¹ Data is similarly lacking about female patronage in other parts of Europe. When Paola Gonzaga (ca. 1504–1550) commissioned the artist Parmigianino to paint frescoes at her castle of Fontanellato in 1524, she chose images of the chaste goddess Diana—shown sometimes nude and in other scenes armed and powerful as a huntress. The Marchioness of Mantua, Isabella d'Este (1474–1539) decorated her *studiolo* (private study) with paintings of both beautiful, nude Venus and powerfully armed Athena, the warrior goddess. Isabella's selection of mythological subjects matched her sense of beauty and power, since she sometimes ruled the duchy in her husband's absence.

Even if paintings could be commissioned by female patrons, *Women of WAM: Depictions of Femininity in Early Modern Europe* reminds us of how artwork reinforced the idealized, and often contradictory, notions of femininity. Feminine roles were constantly shifting with societal changes, and looked very different according to age and rank. For example, the aristocratic cassone wedding gift with its religious female allegories of virtue at the start of this exhibition appealed to a different audience than Nicolaes Maes' *An Old Woman Praying* intended for a middle-class, Protestant clientele in the Netherlands. Yet, as the labels in this exhibition point out, some paragons of femininity were shared throughout Europe from 1400 to 1700 and these paintings and sculptures provide a tangible link to those beliefs.

AN OVERLOOKED DUTCH MASTER

The exhibition ends with the only female artist in the show, Judith Leyster. If the beginning involved aristocratic patronage, Leyster's example concludes with middle-class clients and a woman trying to make inroads into a traditionally masculine vocation. As mentioned earlier, a burgeoning Dutch economy created opportunities for female education that were not available to most European women in previous centuries. Leyster was born in 1609 to parents connected with the linen-weaving trade, and her father purchased a brewery in 1618. At this time, they could afford to educate even Judith, their eighth of nine children. Samuel Ampzing's *Description and Praise of Haarlem* (1628) mentions her as "painting with good and bold sense" in the workshop of Frans Grebber, alongside Grebber's daughter Maria.¹² Leyster's parents fell into bankruptcy in the 1620s, however, and in shame moved to Vreeland outside of Utrecht, Holland. By that time, she seems to have already embarked on a painting career that would provide the means of self-sufficiency. Leyster joined the Haarlem Guild of St. Luke in 1633. Out of



Judith Leyster (Dutch, 1609–60), *Self-Portrait*, about 1630, Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss, 1949.6.1

¹⁰ Vincenzo Cartari, *Le Imagini con la Spositione dei Dei degli Antichi* (1556), trans. John Mulryan, 405.

¹¹ Jaynie Anderson, "Rewriting the history of art patronage," *Renaissance Studies* Vol. 10, No. 2, Women Patrons of Renaissance Art, 1300–1600 (JUNE 1996): 131.

¹² Frima Fox Hoffrichter, *Judith Leyster: A Woman Painter in Holland's Golden Age* (Doornspijk: Davco, 1989), 81.

the Guild's thirty artists she was likely the only female painter, and—unlike the norm for female artists—she was not an artist's daughter. Leyster was the lone female member of the painters' guild known to have a workshop of her own, allowing her to work professionally like male artists. Her painting, *A Game of Tric-Trac*, depicts a type of genre scene that engages viewers in the subject of moral choice (discussed in the label text).

Judith Leyster's work was largely ignored by art historians until her signature was found under a forged signature of the Dutch Master Frans Hals (1582–1666) on *The Jolly Companions* (Musée du Louvre, Paris) in 1893. Until that time, Leyster's work had been attributed to Hals and to her husband, painter Jan Miense Molenaer (1610–1668). Once she married in 1636, Leyster helped promote her husband's career and raised their children. She painted fewer works and her own career languished. In her world, the expectation for women to tend to the home appears to have outweighed her capacity to work as an artist. Although Leyster's professional career peaked early and then declined after marriage, more and more 17th-century women were pursuing educational and vocational opportunities. In the Netherlands, France, and elsewhere, women would continue to practice their art despite restrictive views about artists and femininity.



Judith Leyster (Dutch, 1609–60), *Game of Tric-Trac*, about 1631, Gift of Robert and Mary S. Cushman, 1983.58

ABOUT THE CURATORS



Emma Dinnerstein graduated in 2020 as a political science major at Clark University.

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Collaboration between Clark University and the Worcester Art Museum made this exhibition possible.

Clark University students chose the theme, selected the works and wrote the special labels and brochure. Funding was provided in part by the Art History program, Visual & Performing Arts, Clark University, and seeded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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Cover details, top row, left to right: School of Fontainebleau, *Woman at Her Toilette*, 1550–1570, Museum purchase, 1932.23; Giulio Cesare Proccacini (Italian, 1574–1625), *Saint Catherine*, early 1600s, Charlotte E.W. Buffington Fund, 1971.113; Master of the Magdalen Legend (Flemish active 1483–about 1530), *Mater Dolorosa*, late 1400s–early 1500s, Theodore T. and Mary G. Ellis Collection, 1940.43; bottom row, left to right: Nicolaes Maes (Dutch, 1634–1693), *An Old Woman Praying*, about 1655, Museum purchase, 1924.14; Paolo Veronese (Italian, 1528–88), *Venus Disarming Cupid*, 1550–55, Gift of Hester Diamond, 2013.50; Jan Gossaert (Netherlandish, about 1478–1532), *Portrait of Queen Eleanor of Austria*, about 1516, anonymous loan, 83.84.1