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Invisible Networks: Women, Art, and Political Belonging in the
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Introduction

In the late 2022 I conducted research for a seminar project about women in the Republic of Venice, initially focusing on politically influential women but expanding to include artists and writers, as the narrow political sphere had clear rules of who is in and who is out. In my exploration, I noticed a common perception that many of these women worked in isolation, which led me to question the possibility of hidden networks and relationships among them, as well as with others outside their immediate circles.

In November 2024, I was lucky to attend a speech at the KNIR, the roman royal dutch scientific institute. Here I remained stunned by the passion and dedication the director of the Galleria Borghese, Dr. Francesca Cappelletti, applied to her most recent research on noblewomen in seventeenth century Rome and the ways they could wield power through strategic marriages, estate management, and cultural influence. The director presented her book *Le belle. Ritratti femminili nelle stanze del potere* (Cappelletti 2024), in which she traces both their representations in art and their real agency, mediated through family and professional networks. Dr. Cappelletti's enthusiasm left a spark on me, and I started to dedicate myself to my already begun research again.

In the following research I show that women in the Republic of Venice had a social and political impact that goes beyond individual, singular peculiarities. This assumes, for instance, that there were women artists who engaged in exchange with their surroundings, who were known, and who were productive members of society—not merely reproductive ones. I begin with seven women: painters, writers, musicians, and the relationships they cultivated. I also reference existing research on women in Bologna and Rome, as well as other cities in the region. In essence, this is a response to the claim that "there were no women back then," to the male "genius" narrative, and the idea that some women were only trained if their father was an artist. I situate my understandings within the statement of Parker and Pollock, who contest "the ideal of the autonomous, self-determining artist as genius and the notion of the autonomy of art free from all social and historical determinations." (Parker and Pollock 2020:28)

My geographical focus on the Republic of Venice is intentional, as I aim to highlight its unique political and social structures, in contrast to the conditions faced by women artists in other territories of governance as for example in Italy Rome or Bologna. (Bohn 2021) Nevertheless, literature on those territories helps to consider similarities and shared struggles and potential. Furthermore, some of the protagonists were also moving from one area to the other and therefore being artists in the different governmental areas. The period I will examine is primarily the late Venetian Republic, though I am not strictly bound by dates, but rather by the geographical and societal factors such as gender roles, class affiliation, religious group belonging, of the time.

I will challenge the myth of the isolated "genius" and instead emphasize the importance of networks in the lives of these women, debunking the notion of solitary creators. I will explore informal circles, such as Sara Copio's salon, and consider the "Querelle des femmes." My research will examine social visibility, patronage networks and how knowledge has been acquired. I will investigate which networks arose around those subjects and how they interchanged with the social, political and cultural spheres. In what ways did these networks assist women in asserting agency in a male-dominated artistic landscape?

The structure of the thesis will then be as follows. The first part examines why I chose the specific topic, how it is politically and scientifically relevant. I will proceed to also introducing the state of the art on women artists at the time and space. In conclusion of the chapter, I will develop the research questions. In the second part I will dwell on the particularities of the time and space as well as on the theories that strengthen an analysis of women artists and possible networks. I will also portray the methodology I use to underline the effectiveness of researching through reading various sources on the Republic of Venice, on artists in Venice as well as art-historic analyses of the case studies presented. In the third part I will proceed with an in-depth account of women artists in the Republic of Venice in the early modern times, in order to then present three cases of women artists in the fourth part that will be discussed with the theoretical perspective explained before in relation to the circumstances of their time, the circumstances of their reception until now. I would like to analyse whether women artists can be said to have been a part of the Republic of Venice by showing in what ways they had contact and exchange with other contemporary citizens. I will conclude by integrating my research founding again to

the bigger picture of artists in Venice and in specific women artists and by creating an outlook on possible further research.

CHAPTER ONE

Invisible Networks: Women, Art, and Political Belonging in the Republic of Venice

Preface

“When we too are armed and trained, we can convince men that we have hands, feet, and a heart like yours; and although we may be delicate and soft, some men who are delicate are also strong; and others, coarse and harsh, are cowards. Women have not yet realized this, for if they should decide to do so, they would be able to fight you until death; and to prove that I speak the truth, amongst so many women, I will be the first to act, setting an example for them to follow.”

(Franco 1580: *Lettere Familiari* 1)

This extract from the *Lettere* by Veronica Franco emphasizes the extension of women’s agency and capacity for resistance: while challenging contemporary gender norms, this extract also serves as a powerful reminder of the broader, often overlooked, struggles faced by women in early modern Venice. Her words encapsulate both the potential for collective action and the persistent barriers that shaped the participation of women in the city’s artistic and cultural life. In fact, the contribution of women to the artistic and cultural history of early modern Europe has frequently been marginalized or erased altogether. Within the context of the Republic of Venice, this marginalization presents a particularly intricate case, shaped by both the city-state’s distinctive political structure and the pervasive dynamics of gender and power that characterized the era. As scholars like Parker, Pollock, and Nochlin have convincingly argued, women’s exclusion from the art historical canon is not merely a vestige of archaic prejudices but a consequence of deeply entrenched structural biases within the systems underpinning art history and its institutions.

This chapter critically examines these structural constraints, interrogating the longstanding dominance of patriarchal narratives and advocating for an inclusive and nuanced framework

for understanding artistic production. Employing an interdisciplinary approach that integrates insights from political science, gender studies, and art history, this analysis seeks to uncover the networks, relationships, and modes of agency that defined the experiences of women artists in Venice.

Rather than accepting traditional accounts that spotlight exceptional women as isolated figures who managed to overcome immense barriers, this study explores the broader possibilities of collective agency, shared spaces, and interconnected lives—dimensions often neglected or insufficiently documented. By doing so, it responds to ongoing calls for a critical reevaluation of historical frameworks, foregrounding women's active roles not just as creators of art but as pivotal participants in the cultural and political spheres of their time.

This work is located within broader scholarly conversations on visibility, recognition, and the construction of historical memory. Through a close examination of archival materials, biographical records, and contemporary studies, the chapter challenges reductive representations and contests the misconception that a lack of evidence necessarily signifies women's absence from significant cultural domains. Instead, it argues that invisibility often stems from deliberate exclusions, selective historical documentation, and the privileging of particular narratives at the expense of others.

In the end, this chapter aspires to illuminate the richly diverse roles women played in the Republic of Venice by examining how their artistic and intellectual contributions were both shaped by and instrumental in shaping the socio-political landscape of their era. Beyond recovering lost histories, it seeks to contribute critical perspectives to ongoing discussions surrounding gender, power, and representation. In pursuit of these aims, subsequent sections will review existing scholarship, highlight significant gaps in current understandings, and propose innovative approaches for reconstructing the interconnected lives and enduring legacies of Venetian women artists.

1.1 Political and Scientific relevance

The role of women in the historical context of art and culture has often been minimized or even completely denied. Parker and Pollock state that, “Art History structurally and actively

excluded women from being considered able to participate in the realm of art, and from being considered an artist.” (Parker and Pollock 2013:xxix) In this regard, it is necessary to critically examine that hegemonic and formalist Art History, with its exclusive canons, has historically sidelined women’s contributions. Nochlin calls it the “unstated domination of white male subjectivity as one in a series of intellectual distortions which must be corrected in order to achieve a more adequate and accurate view of historical situations” (Nochlin 2013:2), meaning that one must question the dominance of a masculine oriented lens on history in order to achieve a full picture of the past. According to Parker and Pollock (2020), such distortion, or exclusion, was not only the result of outdated prejudice but was actively shaped by modernist Art History and the modernist museum in the twentieth century. They argue for an, “opening [of] hegemonically formalist Art History and its exclusive canons to all forms of social, institutional and cultural factors shaping difference (be that class, race, gender or sexuality).” (Parker and Pollock 2020:28)

This shift is crucial for analyzing power dynamics, exclusionary practices, and the ways in which ideologies shape societal structures and institutions. My contribution in this context is to explore the relationships within those dynamics, focusing on emancipation, acts of resistance, and the untold stories of women. By doing so, I aim to rewrite historical narratives in ways that not only reflect the past but also offer critical insights for contemporary political and cultural discourses. As Vuillerod suggests in the context of Federici’s research on witch-hunting during the capitalist uprising, understanding the stories of the oppressed and moments of resistance is crucial for challenging misogynistic beliefs in the present. Therefore, we must revisit histories of resistance in order to find alternatives to contemporary gender inequalities, to write a ‘herstory’ rather than a sole ‘history’. (see Vuillerod 2022)

Therefore, this work aims at showing stories of subjects untold, in order to raise an understanding for a multifaceted society, that did not solely rely on the subjects already praised. In view of the previously mentioned fact that modernist art history shaped prejudice as well, it is necessary to “challenge the liberal vision of inevitable progress” (Parker and Pollock 2020:preface), by understanding that current times are not necessarily more progressed than before, the modern era can be analysed with a more open lens that seeks to visualise moments of progress that are not expected. Furthermore, this understanding of the active erasure of women artists further underscores the need to reconsider how art history has been shaped by

exclusionary practices, and how women artists have been deliberately hidden from the narrative.

Additionally, the Republic's unique political system could have fostered non-normative, non-church conform ideas, which, in turn, might have led to a lesser prevalence of misogyny compared to other contexts. Importantly, it may have created a space for women's involvement in artistic production and intellectual discourse. This opens up historical and contemporary avenues for exploring the role of women in art and their contributions to the cultural landscape and therefore, to the texture of the territory. As Babette Bohn writes in her book on the female artistic landscape in the early modern period of the City of Bologna, she wonders "whether future scholars will discover similar developments in other Italian cities." (see Bohn 2022:2017f) This work therefore aims to contribute to a discovery of the female artistic landscape of the Republic of Venice with a political lens.

In conclusion, by examining the intersections of power, politics, and culture in historical contexts like the Republic of Venice, this research contributes to a broader understanding of the role of women in art and therefore in the society. It highlights the importance of revisiting and rewriting the histories of marginalized groups, thus opening up space for new ways of thinking about gender, art, and politics. The idea is to avoid a "uncritical acceptance of "what is" as "natural" [as it] may be intellectually fatal" (Nochlin 2013:1) In order to make sure it is a contribution, the following chapter will explore already existing research and literature.

1.2 State of the Art

This chapter gives an overview on the existing research that has already been made regarding the presence of female artists in Venice as well as the cultural policies and landscape of the Republic of Venice. It also gives an overview to publications regarding women artists in Rome and Bologna, which serve as a reference to the research on Venice and as an exploration of what was happening at the same time in the close proximity. While a substantial body of research already exists on the subject, this study seeks to re-examine it through a new lens, offering a complementary perspective on the questions of women's contributions and their integration into the socio-political fabric of the early modern period. Whereas previous scholarship has predominantly approached the topic from an art historical standpoint, the

novelty of this work lies in its interdisciplinary engagement with political science and gender studies.

To date, no monographic study has been published that focuses in depth on “the use of and reliance upon networks by early modern women artists and/or patrons” (Kemp, Powell, Link 2021:289) despite two essays highlighting the promising insights such an approach could yield. Biographical entries, signed artworks, and local workshop customs have historically informed our fragmented knowledge of early modern Italian women artists. (see Bohn in Cooper 2024:36) However, these factors alone often leave key questions unanswered, particularly when biographical texts omitted artistic outputs or lacked detail, making attributions today difficult or even impossible.

The case of Marietta Robusti, daughter of the acclaimed Venetian painter Tintoretto, exemplifies this tension, she has been described as a “painter without paintings” (see Bohn in Cooper 2024:25), reflecting the invisibility created by insufficient documentation. The Republic of Venice itself presents a complex and sometimes contradictory picture. It was a major hub for printing and thus gave rise to a relatively high number of published female voices in literature, suggesting a “certain sympathy for women’s voices” (ibid.:23)) However, “notwithstanding the eloquence of their female compatriots on the printed page, professional training and success for Venetian women artists during the sixteenth century was elusive.” (ibid.) Still to date, isolated cases are known to Bohn as for example Irene di Spilimbergo, who reportedly studied first with another woman and later with Titian.

This thesis shall explore the possibility of more cases and whether to trust the narrative of isolation or not. Moreover, the prominence of Venice in early biographical dictionaries contributed to the canonization of at least one woman per region or city, however, often more as a token than through detailed recognition of their work. (Bohn in Cooper 2024:28) Recent research efforts have also expanded the archival focus. Maria Adank, for example, has explored how Venetian women artists and artisans appear in the records of elite patrons such as Dogressa Morosina Morosini, thereby linking female creative activity to powerful networks of civic and religious patronage at the turn of the sixteenth century. (see Adank 2024)

This shows that the assumption that there may have been more networks than known to date, and that visibility is not a garant for what there has been for real, could be a sustainable lead. This study positions itself within these ongoing debates, proposing that political and relational

perspectives are crucial for rendering visible the entangled lives and careers of women artists in Venice and beyond.

This chapter reviews existing scholarship on women artists in Venice and other Italian cities, highlighting the limitations of traditional art historical approaches and proposing a new interdisciplinary framework, grounded in political science and gender studies, to reassess their roles, networks, and visibility with the socio-political fabric of the early modern Republic of Venice.

The elimination of what we have considered traditional constraints for women artists' training is historically important, because this more open system played a key role in enabling more women to become artists." (Bohn in Cooper 2024:30)

1.3 What's missing?

As previously mentioned, I have already conducted research on the women of Venice. My aim was to discover whether there have been women in the Republic of Venice, who had any kind of political impact. Surprisingly, I couldn't find politicians, but I identified seven women in the 16th and 17th century who have had fame either by being painters, writers or musicians. This sparked my interest on whether they have known each other, how much they were known at their time (as by now they were unknown) and who they had conversations with. Therefore, this master thesis will try to cover for those missing information.

This holds more significance when one can claim that not only were women artists present, but that they were not solitary figures confined to their rooms, merely 'lucky.' Rather, they were actors, yes subjects, and participated in collective moments.

Furthermore, as Babette Bohn discusses regarding the distinctiveness of Bologna for women artists and their recognition, I believe that Venice, too, can be analysed as a fertile ground for the value of women artists. A contextualisation of the Republic of Venice in the early modern ages helps understanding the broader contexts of Italy and suggests that different regions may provide various fertile grounds. Ultimately, further research could analyse in what ways regardless of the nature of the terrain, women artists exist and have existed; the issue lies not in their absence but in their invisibility.

These women stand out in a certain way compared to the many housewives, of whom currently we know nothing. Even if they held a special role, we remain unaware of the contributions of those women artists, as they were not the male genius figure. Still, they had their assignments, their apprenticeship, their social circles and other means of being part of the territory. Therefore, I would like to unravel those networks, to examine those relationships and to find out in what ways we can argue that women back in the early modern age in the Republic of Venice have been an integral, productive part of the territory and not what was assumed they were back then and also in contemporary times.

In conclusion, this chapter has highlighted the persistent marginalization of women in the historical narratives of art and culture, particularly within the context of the Republic of Venice. By critically engaging with the ways in which traditional art history has excluded or minimized women's contributions, I have underscored the necessity of adopting interdisciplinary approaches that draw from political science and gender studies to offer a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the past. The evidence suggests that the invisibility of women is not a reflection of their absence, but rather the result of systematic exclusion and selective documentation, which has shaped the canon and our collective memory. The exploration of existing scholarship reveals both the progress made and the significant gaps that remain, especially regarding the networks and political relevance of women artists in early modern Venice.

The case studies and archival research discussed here demonstrate that women were not isolated anomalies, but active participants in the artistic and cultural fabric of their society, often operating within complex networks of patronage and collaboration¹. Recognizing these dynamics is essential for challenging the dominant narratives that have long privileged male subjectivity and for reimagining the possibilities of historical inquiry.

Ultimately, this chapter calls for a continued re-examination of art history through a critical and intersectional lens, one that seeks to recover the stories of those who have been rendered invisible and to appreciate the full diversity of artistic production in the early modern period¹. By doing so, we not only enrich our understanding of the past but also contribute to broader conversations about gender, power, and representation in both historical and contemporary contexts.

1.4 Theoretical framework

Knowledge is produced from a specific position within gendered, social and institutional structures that shape our views. This concept is called situated knowledge and was developed by the American scholar Donna Haraway. (see Haraway 1988) The researcher situates herself within critical theory, which views society and its order as contingent and characterised by struggles for interpretative sovereignty. (cf. Calhoun 1995) Within these theories, intersectional feminist theories in particular are used as a guideline for the approach in this work. These offer an understanding of emancipatory, feminist spaces and multiple identities of subjects: the intersectional approach makes it possible to consider various discriminations that come together as essential for understanding the practices of marginalisation on the one hand and the emancipation practices that arise from them on the other.

As Collins and Hilge put it in very simple terms: “Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experience.” (Collins and Hilge 2016: NN) It is a concept that was conceptualized by scholar Crenshaw when arguing against a distortion of discriminatory experiences of black women. It is a critique on categorizing “struggles [...] as singular issues.” (Crenshaw 1998:167) She argues that this framework of isolating struggles into separate, individual issues carries a perspective on society that ultimately uphold and legitimizes the existing social order. (cf. *ibid.*) In this analysis, the intersectionality framework permits a view on the subjects that is more complex. It adds itself to the idea of contextualization and of embeddedness and adds to an understanding of privilege and discrimination. For research, this implies that the heterogeneity of social groups must be given particular consideration. Individuals possess not only a gender identity, in this case: women will not only possess their identity as women, but are also younger and older, may belong to different religions or none at all, and have diverse sexual orientations. These dimensions of diversity, or as Crenshaw calls them: structural categories, do not exist in isolation from one another. They also do not accumulate like an additive or exclusive. Individuals’ experiences of privilege or discrimination are shaped by multiple, intersecting factors and complex, not one-dimensional. (see Walgenbach 2012)

Furthermore, this thesis approaches an interdisciplinary lens to study women artists in early modern Venice, as history often operates as a multi discipline between the social sciences and

the humanities. (see Colavizza 2017) The integration of perspectives from gender studies, art history, and political sciences enables a more comprehensive understanding of their professional and social networks.

When researching art history and women one cannot bypass one of the first statements on the subject in the last century, Linda Nochlin's "Why have there been no great woman artists?". She argues that in the early modern era, in fact, there have been no Michelangelo women because the conditions didn't permit women to study and practice art like the men could. (The citizens). It is not a result of capacity, but rather of the historical conditions that shaped access to artistic training and recognition. She points out that the art historical field has long avoided serious inquiry into the broader structural conditions that enable women to become great artists. (see Nochlin 1971:7).

One of the key distortions within traditional art history lies in its implicit privileging of white male subjectivity, "which must be corrected in order to achieve a more adequate and accurate view of historical situations" (Nochlin 1973:3) Parker and Pollock (2020) highlight that the erasure of women from the history of art was not an accidental oversight but was actively produced by the way modernist Art History constructed its narrative. They appeal to "opening hegemonically formalist Art History and its exclusive canons to all forms of social, institutional and cultural factors shaping difference (be that class, race, gender or sexuality)" (Parker and Pollock 2020:28).

This thesis contributes mainly to opening the gendered dimension and reassesses the role of women artists in the early modern republic of Venice. Therefore, it draws on Kate Nash's conceptualization of cultural politics, which expands the scope of political analysis beyond institutional frameworks and formal power structures. According to Nash, the "cultural turn" in social theory necessitates an understanding of politics as embedded in everyday social practices and the contestation of power relations across all aspects of life. This approach is particularly helpful for the study of women artists, whose contributions were often excluded from official histories yet were nonetheless deeply involved in the production and negotiation of social meanings. As Nash writes "all social life must be seen as potentially political where politics is the contestation of relations of power." (Nash 2001:77) This understanding builds on Michel Foucault's theory of power as diffuse, relational and productive. As he argues, "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from

everywhere” (Foucault 1978:93). From this perspective, power operates not only through institutions, but also through dispersed practices, discourses, and interactions – precisely the terrain in which early modern women artists operated. Their artistic practices, patronage relations, and modes of self-representation can therefore be interpreted as political acts, even if not overtly framed as such at the time.

Artistic practices and formal as well as informal networking can therefore be seen as a political act. Nash writes on the role of social movements and identity as cultural politics, even though this thesis doesn’t cover female artists in the early modern era of Venice as being a social movement it is still noteworthy that social relations are prefigured in the development of lifestyles. Therefore, being an artist, choosing to auto-portrait, choosing to do a nude can be considered political acts. Whether those women actively refused their “subordinated identities and [developed] life-styles and communities in which more egalitarian social relations are prefigured” (Nash 2001:86) or it happened by a will to express themselves can be further explored in the analysis. When analysing women in their non-reclusive potential, what I intend to include in my argument is to show that women were active in the sense that they were part of enabling the spreading of a culture. So they were engaging and not passive, even though invisible then. I won’t use the term agency as something specific, as Sewell criticises the focus on agency as a specific act. He states that agency is not a “heroic mode of action but [rather defines it as] a normal and essential ingredient to both the reproduction and the transformation, whether marginal or revolutionary, of structures.” (Sewell 2025:437) When debating the agency of women artists in the Republic of Venice this thesis adopts the approach. It seems fruitful to acknowledge that every person has an impact in some way on the territory and the question rises to the conditions the person is moving in and then in this how they live and act. As already stated, that results from a point of view of the political that extends beyond the mere constitution. By doing so it allows the researcher to operationalize the acts and lives of women in the republic of Venice and gives hints on seeing behind the apparently only written story. Sewell pleads to first analyse “the cultural, social, and material resources at their disposal” and then in this context “try to discern how [...] they lived with, suffered, and struggled to overcome, as individuals and as members of communities, the specific historical conditions that shaped their lives.” (Sewell 2024: 437f.) This paper follows this lens on the analysis of women as it first gave an introduction to the conditions of the time and space for women and

in the second part, after a presentation of the subjects of interest, continues to locate them and analyse them accordingly.

Finally, this framework challenges the old myth of the isolated male artistic genius. Köhne asks “ist es aus heutiger Sicht von Vorteil, den antiquierten Geniebegriff wiederzubeleben, indem weibliche Denkerinnen und Akademikerinnen als „Genies“ adressiert werden?” She then proceeds with arguing against this and stating that the recognition of female figures by contemporary scholars should be grounded in historical reflection and a conscientious self-positioning as a researcher who pursues inquiry autonomously and independently of political instrumentalization. This approach further requires attentiveness to the situated and inherently limited character of knowledge (D. Haraway) and a heightened awareness of the potential for renewed forms of marginalization. The categorization as genius should solely be on historical analytical purposes and to deconstruct applied beliefs. She concludes her essay saying that the idea of a genius should be left behind as a religious relict, no matter who it is. She argues that science should “die säkulare Religion des Geniegläubens (E. Zilsel) als historisches Relikt hinter sich lassen.” (see Köhne 2019) Therefore, this thesis does not seek to cast women into the spotlight by reinscribing them within the cult of genius.

Instead, this framework highlights how art is always shaped by the networks, communities, and conditions in which it is made. By combining insights from art history, gender studies, political science, and, cultural theory, I aim to offer a fuller, more honest picture of the lives and work of women artists in early modern Venice.

1.5 Methodology

To explore these questions, I use various methods drawn from different fields: art history, political science, gender studies, and history. My goal is to piece together the world in which women artists lived and worked, a world that is shaped both by opportunities and restrictions. At the heart of this research is the idea of networks. I look at the connections that linked women artists to others: family members, teachers, patrons, collaborators. These networks were often informal and sometimes invisible in official records, but I believe that they played a key role in shaping women’s artistic lives. As Celati reminds the researcher of networks, networks are not just lines on a map – they are living systems through which ideas, skills and support flow.

They can open doors, but they can also limit what is possible. The greatest part of this research work is reading the sources with care and a critical eye. Many of the records that are available to date, such as biographies and various documentations, were written in specific times and places which specific assumptions about women in arts and society altogether. Therefore, it is necessary to read not only what is said, but also what is not said. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. This approach follows recent feminist scholarship that urges the scholar, and the reader, to question the structures that shaped the historical record in the first place. (see Harding 1991)

The decision to focus on a small number of case studies in a very specific timeframe, before and after 1600, derives from the idea to see in detail how broader structures of power and culture worked rather than focus on the idea of the “exceptional woman” who somehow escaped the constraints of her time. Through those women’s lives, I try to understand how women navigated the world of early modern Venice: how they found space for their art, how they built relationships, and how they contributed to the cultural life of their city. Where possible, in some cases, I compare these Venetian stories to what was happening in other Italian cities, such as Bologna or Rome. This helps me see what has been distinctive about Venice, and where its patterns fit into wider trends. Finally, I treat artworks and writings not only as aesthetic objects, but as historical documents in their own right: as traces of how these women saw the world and left their mark on it. This way of working aims at recovering voices that have been hidden or forgotten, and to show the ways in which women’s artistic work has been part of the social and political fabric of their time.

CHAPTER TWO

The Republic's Foundation: Political Structure, Cultural Identity, and Social Order in Early Modern Venice

Preface

This chapter provides the historical, political, and cultural foundation for understanding the context in which early modern artists lived and worked in the Republic of Venice. It begins by outlining the unique institutional structure of the Venetian state, whose stability, balance of power, and civic ideology gave rise to what has been called the “Myth of Venice”. Against this backdrop, the chapter explores the Republic international relations, its relationship with the Catholic Church, and the social organization that included nobles, cittadini, popolani, and minority communities. The chapter then turns to the conditions of women in early modern Venice, investigating educational opportunities, legal rights, economic roles, and social mobility across class and religious lines. The theoretical and methodological framework presented at the end of the chapter positions the thesis with gender studies, cultural politics, and political science, proposing a network-based approach to reassess the women artists’ presence in the social texture of the early modern Republic around 1600.

2.1 The structure of the Republic

Since its beginnings, Venice developed as an independent polity due to its unique geographic position on small islands in the Venetian Lagoon, free from mainland dominion. This independence contributed to internal coherence and relative peace. Venice was not absorbed into the medieval empire or governed by imperial law, and it therefore did not transition from a medieval to a Renaissance state in the same way other regions did. Instead, it remained politically stable, with few revolutionary upheavals. Its political structure was defined by three main institutions, the Great Council, the Senate, and the Doge. (Bouwsma 1968:60ff) As

Bouwsma explains, "the Venetian aristocracy existed to serve the state" (ibid.:59). Laws were designed to prevent the Republic from devolving into an oligarchy.

The Great Council was considered the most representative body of the constitution's popular element, although this was limited in scope. Every noble had a vote, and the primary function of the Great Council became the election of other governing bodies (Bouwsma 1968: 61). Members of the Great Council were forbidden from receiving income from the Church, reinforcing the state's autonomy. The closure of the Council in 1297, known as the Serrata, meant that membership became hereditary. Nevertheless, a high number of inhabitants of the Republic remained involved in administrative tasks. Those were the *cittadini originari*. Defining their characteristics all in all is a complex task but Zannini gives us a principal definition based on "the 'social recognizability' of the individual as native, Venetian, and 'ancient' in the acceptance of their social role." (Zannini 1993:46) Bernante emphasizes the importance of this definition for understanding their cultural expressions, "especially artistic ones, that they pursued to convey their image as members of this elite" (Bernante 2023:53), that shows their interest in being seen as the class closest to the Patriciate. As a social class they were the ones who had access to notarial and chancellery positions.

The Senate served as the "general supervisory authority over all agencies of the state" (Bouwsma 1968: 61), comprising approximately 300 members. It elected the full College of the Senate.

The Council of Ten, although initially intended as a temporary body, proved advantageous due to its small size, which enabled swift and confidential decision-making, particularly during emergencies. From the fifteenth century onward, this concentrated power allowed for effective governance, as Machiavelli noted in *Discorsi* (I.34): "[...] ha riservato autorità a pochi cittadini che ne' bisogni urgenti, senza maggiore consulta, tutti d'accordo possino deliberare" (Machiavelli, 1531/2001, p. 170).

At the apex of Venetian government stood the Doge, whose powers were circumscribed under the "promissione ducale" to ensure he could not act unilaterally. The interaction of the Great Council, the Senate, and the Doge symbolised a mixed constitution: the Great Council represented the popular, though limited, element, the Senate the aristocratic, and the Doge the monarchical. Their balanced coordination of interests in service of the common good was regarded as foundational to Venice's political success. This happened as a process and in fact,

in the early stages, the city lacked a strong communal identity, and private ownership dominated civic life, as seen in donations that referred to the city as *patria*, a term without collective implications.

By the twelfth century, however, the term *comune Venetiarum* began to define Venice, signaling a growing sense of shared identity and common interest among its people. This ideological shift became institutionalized in the thirteenth century with the creation of offices like the *giudici del piovego*, tasked with regulating public infrastructure and curbing private encroachments. Such developments reflect a broader movement in Venice toward subordinating individual gain in favour of civic responsibility and communal welfare. (see Romano 1987:18 ff) Bouwsma concludes, "the relation of these [doge, senate and council of ten] agencies was seen as the basic secret of Venetian political success" (Bouwsma 1968: 64). This so-called "Myth of Venice" is addressed in the following section.

2.2 The Myth of Venice

As we have seen in the previous section, the political culture of the early modern Republic of Venice had a clear division of tasks for its people, albeit people signifying only certain men. It was profoundly shaped by a self-constructed and widely acknowledged myth of stability, balance, and institutional continuity. Known in scholarship as the "Myth of Venice," this narrative developed from the late Middle Ages and reached a coherent form by the end of the fifteenth century. It portrayed Venice as a *res publica perfecta*, an ideal republic characterised by harmonious governance, institutional stability, and civic virtue. As Weeber explains, "seit je her [...] hatte Venedig durch die institutionelle Verknüpfung von Doge, Senat und Grossem Rat sowohl den Einen, die Wenigen und die Vielen an der Herrschaft beteiligt und so Stabilität generiert" (Weeber 2023: 51). This balance was understood not only as a political but also a moral and symbolic order, distinguishing Venice from more volatile city-states such as Florence. External observers during the early modern period reinforced this image, describing Venice as a place of peace, legality, and rational rule. Over time, stability itself became both a political goal and a source of legitimacy. Rituals, civic representations, and symbolic figures such as *Venetia Vergine* helped reinforce the image of the Republic as divinely favoured. By

the fifteenth century, the ideal of justice in Venice was no longer seen solely as divinely ordained but increasingly as the "Resultat der klug eingerichteten institutionellen Strukturen des Gemeinwesens" (ibid.: 66). This rationalisation of governance allowed Venice to present itself as an archetype of republican harmony: a polity resilient against corruption and misfortune. However, critical voices also emerged, forming an "anti-myth" that adopted the same logic of the myth only to invert it. As Weeber notes, this counter-narrative questioned the legitimacy of the Republic by exposing its internal contradictions (ibid.: 78).

The stable constitution and the conditions that led to the Myth of Venice were supported by an educational system that changed little over the years being relatively stable.

The educational system of the Republic of Venice developed in three main phases. As Grendler shows in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, humanist ideals became very important and influenced the structure of Latin schools, which were supported by the state and offered a more unified curriculum focused on classical knowledge. Later, during the time of the Catholic Reformation, Venice followed a different path than many other Italian states. The Republic kept some distance from the Church's control in education—for example, by expelling the Jesuits in 1606 and limiting the power of other religious teaching orders. Finally, in the eighteenth century, Enlightenment ideas brought some reforms: the state began to replace religious teachers with lay instructors and promoted more practical subjects taught in the local language. These reforms were not radical, but they show that Venice tried to modernize its education system while still maintaining a cautious and independent approach. (Grendler 2002:675) The fact that the schooling before university didn't change much over 200 years is a sign for the reflection of Venetian values in education. Just as the Most Serene Republic stood on political, social, and institutional foundations that changed little over a thousand years, [...] the myth of Venice promoted the ideology of an unchanging constitutional state." (ibid.:696) However, scholars such as Romano and Martin suggest a new reading of the republic and the hierarchical, republican order but by drawing on historiography as well as music sciences and social analysis they argue for a more fluid organisation of Venice's political culture. (Martin and Romano 2000) This shall be considered later, when analysing the artists and their non-conformity.

This section tackled the reception of Venice's polity, and the next section will proceed with describing the relations Venice held with the other cities on the Italian territory, with the Catholic Church and Overseas.

2.4 International Relations

Machiavelli articulated a central principle of Venetian policy when he claimed, "the greatness of Venice had come from the sea and that her glory had lasted only for so long as she had kept her attention fixed on it" (Machiavelli in: Bouwsma, 1968, p. 68). While Venice's power was primarily maritime, by the late fourteenth century it had expanded over land due to strategic pressures and the need to complement trade routes. The 1425 alliance with Florence marked the end of Venetian isolation and the beginning of its role as a significant Italian power, increasingly involved in peninsula politics. This facilitated cultural and artistic exchange with other centres, including Rome and Florence. Venice was often criticised for acting in its own interests, allegedly weakening Italian unity in the face of foreign threats. Nevertheless, its terrestrial expansion was characterised by firm control: it "imposed a firm control over their governments" (Bouwsma, 1968, p. 70). This dual perception of external suspicion and internal cohesion underscores the importance of unity within the Republic.

As Stadtmüller (2019) demonstrates, Venice's political model was already unique in the way it managed its diverse territories. While the mainland dominions were governed with strict administrative oversight, the Republic's overseas possessions, enjoyed a degree of autonomy that resembled a Commonwealth structure. This allowed Venice to project influence while fostering local stability and loyalty.

The Venetian Church was notably independent from papal control. Its Eastern influences and close association with Saint Mark allowed it to function with relative autonomy. Episcopal appointments often remained within elite families. Bouwsma (1968) notes, "the upper clergy, both in Venice and their possessions, were generally in the first place Venetian nobles" (p. 76). Venetian cardinals were seen as representatives of the Republic rather than papal agents. As Giustiniani reminded them, "Venice was their true parent, the Church merely their stepmother" (Giustiniani in: Bouwsma, 1968, p. 77).

Venice subordinated the Church to civic authority, prioritising civic loyalty. According to Bouwsma (1968), "The Venetian Republic attributed to the pope a general spiritual leadership and a primacy of honor in the church, but little authority to administer churches outside of Rome, and none in politics" (p. 80). Venice even protected allied states like Florence from papal sanctions, dismissing such measures as politically motivated. "Papal censure was only an instrument of political ambition and therefore illegitimate: a spiritual penalty, Venice insisted, could not properly be invoked for temporal ends" (Bouwsma, 1968, p. 80).

This governance model relied on and worked out thanks to secrecy, diplomacy, and calculated disengagement from papal intervention. At the same time, religious life demanded high social responsibility. Reformers in Venice advocated for Church purification through increased spirituality, decentralisation, and greater lay involvement.

Such an environment, although unequal, could have created spaces outside Roman authority where women could exercise agency. Chapter 1.2 will explore these conditions further. Before delving on the role of Women in the Republic, the next section will describe the importance Venice gave to culture as meant in arts.

2.5 Culture and Politics in the Republic of Venice

Venice functioned as an anti-secular state, representing "to the Venetians a realm of unique and abiding values which it was their particular obligation to conserve and to transmit from generation to generation" (Bouwsma 1968: 65). Civic loyalty to the Republic was paramount. Venetian society promoted collective identity and discouraged public celebration of individuals. Biographical writing was rare; even prominent works such as the Lives of the Doges focused on political rather than personal narratives. Economic activity relied on family solidarity and collective ventures, not individual enrichment. Cultural and intellectual life likewise revolved around groups and circles rather than solitary genius. From around 1500 to 1623, "the advent of print" (Rey 2015:2) technology began to revolutionize the way scientific knowledge circulated through Europe. Education aimed to shape citizens who fit a civic archetype, not to cultivate individual distinction. Artistic life mirrored this collectivist ethos. Commissions often came from state institutions, and the arts served the Republic by visually

reinforcing its values. Unlike in Florence, where artists were freer to pursue personal innovation, Venetian commissions such as those for the Doge's Palace, were publicly funded and approved by civic bodies. (Bouwsma 1968: 135)

In summary, Venice's political structure, defined by the coordination of the Doge, the Senate and the Great Council, created a uniquely stable and self-governing republic. This stability fostered a civic culture rooted in collective identity that formed the basis of the Myth of Venice, as the most serene republic, the Serenissima. Despite Venice's avant-garde regarding its constitution and political system as well as international relations it has been observed that arts generally were not as valued as in other cities on the Italian territory. Still, as great artists evolved in the Republic of Venice the next chapter will describe the life for women in the Serenissima to then proceed to an analysis of the role and contributions of artists' women.

2.6 The Condition of Women in the Serenissima

The previous chapters introduced the Republic of Venice, from its beginnings to the early modern ages. This served as a contextualization of the period and space this analysis will cover and should therefore help to better understand the situation. This chapter will proceed with the contextualization and concentrate on the condition of women in the Serenissima. The reader can expect a chapter that first gives a general overview of the situation for women in Europe at that time and then proceed with Venice-specific insights. As outlined in Chapter 1.1, the Republic of Venice was politically distinctive. It is therefore plausible that the gendered dimension of its society also displayed unique characteristics. Participation in formal political life was strictly limited to the patrician male elite. Yet, as this thesis will argue, there could have been spaces of action and participation, even informal.

Whether the Early Modern age represents a period of improvement, or the Middle Ages offered better living conditions for women is a debate that scholars lead continuously. Joan Kelly and other scholars argue that the "early modern society was a more patriarchal, regulated and ordered one which accorded a limited space to women to intervene in the public sphere" (Dahiya 2022:631).

The Early Modern era was also the time where most of the witch hunting took place, which according to Silvia Federici is a misogynist act of eliminating women's knowledge in order to pave way for new orders. (Federici 2004). These statements lead to an understanding, that the public sentiment in Europe had a gendered view of society in which women were tendentially excluded, both in formal as well as in informal spaces of recognition. Currently, scholars of the Early Modern age are focusing on giving women credits and visibility, as previous studies hardly focused on gender, making this dimension invisible and therefore, not analysing women stories. So, the main belief is that there have been no women, but we will see in what ways there have been, as there is also the assumption that "women shaped their own destinies in a myriad of ways" (Chojnacka 2001: 16). As we have seen in chapter 1.1, the political context of the Republic of Venice was unique in its approach to inner coherence and freedom and therefore a close up look on the conditions of women in the Serenissima is needed. Even though numerous historians have demonstrated that premodern women consistently functioned within a patriarchal framework, that was upheld by theological doctrine, legal norms and institutions, and prevailing social conventions, within these constraints women in Venice navigated and engaged with a variety of social spheres. (see Chojnacka 2001:16)

2.6.1 Education

As a woman's life is preceded by a girls life, this paragraph will briefly introduce girls educational possibilities. According to Grendlers' research "girls did not attend state or church schools" (Grendler 2002:682) and only few girls had the means to attend independent schools "that taught elementary vernacular reading and writing." (ibid.) Some daughters, the number is unknown, of nobles, cittadini originari, and wealthy merchants were sent to be educated in monasteries and stayed there until they went back home to marry. These girls were called educande, and they started the stay as little as seven years old. They were taught reading and writing as well as some handicraft and singing. Recent scholars are discovering more on education for girls in convent, for example that they received a solid musical education in some cases. (see for example Tonelli 2022) Some educande decided to stay in the convent as nuns and continued their education, "nuns as a group were probably the best educated women in

Italy.” (Grendler 2002: 682) Still the Benedictine nun, Sister Arcangela Tarabotti, who had been forced into the convent and later found meaning and recognition through writing, criticized the deceptive charm with which fathers persuaded young daughters, already fated for sacrifice, to enter monastic life. However, the contemporary researcher Ambrosini states that this decision was not always an easy one for the parents and they either felt the social, financial or familiar pressure to take this decision. (Ambrosini 1997: 5)

In total, the literacy rate lies at 12 per cent to 13 per cent if including girls that attended formal schools outside the home and convent, plus the educande, plus girls “who acquired at least basic literacy at home or in catechism schools[...] if the school age is assumed to be 6 through 12, then the female literacy rate was higher.” (Grendler 2002:683) The only available quantitative record regarding teachers in the Venetian Ghetto, so reflecting the Jewish minority in Venice, comes from a census conducted in 1797, which identified eight male and six female educators among the 1,626 residents. However, this source does not provide any details about the students or the content of the instruction. Education in Venice likely depended on private instructors, and there were some women instructors recorded as well. (cf. *ibid.*: 694) Similar to Christian girls and women, it seems that only a small proportion of Jewish girls and women had access to formal education, which was typically limited and provided at home by private tutors or relatives. However, there were notable exceptions and some Jewish women acquired sufficient knowledge of Hebrew to take part professionally in the Hebrew publishing industry. (cf. *ibid.*)

Maritar o monacar: “to marry or take the veil” (Labalme 1981:131) were the apparent options on what happened after the educational prime year, when girls reached teen age. It seems that girls and women either married or went to the monastery. Probably as described before the choice depended more by coercion than by free will, “erano davvero [...] troppe le ragazze veneziane” (Ambrosini 1997:2) that were, financially, not in the position to choose whether to go to the monastery or not. The families felt their daughters being a burden “del quale era necessario sbarazzarsi nel modo più sensate e rationale.” (*ibid.*) Dowry was required by all social levels above the very lowest. It constituted “a most effective economic control on marriage.” (Ruggiero 1993:15) To begin with, a woman without a dowry faced significant difficulties in securing a husband. In essence, if no dowry could be assembled, the marriage was unlikely to have any real economic viability. However, there was a third or better fourth

solution to marriage, monastery or spinsterhood. Although not legally or religiously recognized, the status of concubine, living as a partner in a stable, exclusive relationship with one man, was, in 16th- and 17th-century Venice, so close to that of a lawful wife that it was not only tolerated but often fully respected. These encounters were often formalized with a secret marriage. Still, widowhood offered women the greatest autonomy. (see Ambrosini 1997) Chojnacka offers an alternative to the prevailing stereotype of a rigidly patriarchal society in which women were confined to the private sphere, demonstrating that in the context of Venice this view is not perfectly accurate. Charitable institutions, such as the case di carità, became spaces where women from different social statuses collaborated, spaces of “expansive female society” (Chojnacka 2000:135) extending their influence beyond the household and participating actively in city life. Women of the lower classes had more freedom of movement and economic independence than their noble counterparts, who were more confined by social expectations but often wielded power through patronage and cultural activities (Chojnacka 2000).

The usual strict class system was not really part of Venice, but we can still distinguish between “the patriciate, the citizen class, and the popolani. [...] The popolani were the largest class, comprising a wide range of wealth and status since the category stretched from merchants to beggars.” (Chojnacka 2000: 144) Some popolani married up and reached a different status than most. Romano separates the residents of Venice into five different categories: “nobles, clergy, cittadini, popolani, and slaves.” (Romano 1987: 25) Even though there are the categories and the classes, both scholars agree that there were significant differences inside the groups.

As we will see in the next chapter, when confronting a few case studies of female artists, the social class where women belonged was very relevant in determining their acting capacity and their role in certain networks and in society in general. However an analysis of the women artists will surely not be satisfied by only considering the social class and rather focus on the specific conditions of that subject and their surroundings.

2.6.2. Legal rights and boundaries

In early modern Venice, women's rights were notably more expansive than in many other European regions, yet they remained circumscribed by patriarchal norms and legal restrictions. The Venetian Republic offered women a unique social and economic space, especially compared to contemporaneous societies, but significant limitations persisted. Monica Chojnacka's research, *Working Women of Early Modern Venice* (2001), provides a detailed picture of women's lives in Venice during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, highlighting both their agency and the constraints imposed by the patriarchal society of the time.

Venetian women, especially those from the working-class *popolani*, enjoyed a surprising degree of economic autonomy compared to other Italian cities. They could own property, manage businesses, and engage in various trades independently, as puts it venetian women had "the possibility to follow the whole career path from apprentice to master, to enrol in a guild, set up their own workshop, and hire shop assistants." (Hohti 2020:NN) Chojnacki's archival research reveals numerous cases of women running shops, artisanal workshops, and even participating in the rental market for housing (Chojnacki 2001: 45). Widows, in particular, often inherited property and retained control over dowries, granting them financial leverage uncommon in many contemporary European contexts (Chojnacki 2001: 41f.). "Our youth," the senate stated in 1535, "no longer devotes itself to business affairs in the city, nor to navigation, nor to other praiseworthy industry, placing all its hopes in these excessive dowries." Correttori delle Leggi, B. 27, Stampa Rampazetto (N. 26) as cited in Bistort 1969: 111f.)

Moreover, women exercised influence in family decisions and social networks beyond the domestic sphere. Venetian women had specific rights within the family sphere that were exceptional for the time. Unlike most European women, Venetian mothers held parental authority over their children and could choose their children's teachers, reflecting a degree of autonomy within domestic life. Chojnacki assumes that this derives from the particular dowry regime. He states that, "from the beginning to the end of marriage and beyond, the Venetian dowry regime gave women a broad and long-lived set of relationships and economic influence within them." (Chojnacki 2000:78) This means, that women in the republic of Venice were allowed to possess money, as long as they had the dowry, they could decide over it and especially once as a widow had full power over this money. This potential Venetian women had will be further discussed in this chapter.

Contrary to stereotypes of women confined to the household, Venetian women were active participants in neighbourhood life, maintaining extensive social ties that included friends, neighbours, clients, and employers. New research of historians discovered “that early modern women were not necessarily restricted to either marry or enter a convent” (Horodowich 2002:340), in fact there have been more diverse options for “survival and prosperity” (ibid.) a woman could live.

Horodowich compares the view of scholars such as Romano to that of Chojnacki, the latter discovering more range of power of married women than assumed by Romano. (see Horodowich 2002: 343) While marital status influenced a woman’s opportunities, it was not the sole determinant of her identity or agency. Women’s roles were, indeed, multifaceted: they acted as daughters, wives, widows, but also as independent economic actors and community members. The household structure in Venice was often complex, with women sometimes living alongside natal family members even after marriage, which allowed them to maintain ties and exercise influence within both families (Chojnacki 2000: 13).

Chojnacka, moves her research especially to non-noble women in the early modern ages, she shifts the focus from traditional life stages to the broader social environments in which women lived and moved, such as the household, neighbourhood, city, and beyond. She argues that while a woman’s stage in life-such as being unmarried, married, or widowed-affected her opportunities and actions during the early modern period, marital status was not always the primary factor shaping those possibilities. Women’s identities were multifaceted and extended beyond their familial roles as daughters, wives, or widows. They also existed as friends, neighbours, business partners, clients, and employers, reflecting a rich diversity of female social roles across different spaces. She illustrates that women in early modern Venice frequently traversed neighbourhood boundaries and moved in and out of each other’s homes, sustaining what she describes as a “largely local female economy.” (Chojnacka 2001:51)

Drawing on a wide range of archival sources, including parish registers (*status animarum*), financial and notarial documents, tax records, charitable institution archives, Holy Office records, and witchcraft trial testimonies, Chojnacka’s chapters explore these varied female identities in depth. Her research highlights how women’s familial, social, and economic networks often transcended the boundaries of their immediate neighborhoods or even the city itself. This mobility and social interconnectedness provided women, especially those who

weren't nobili or cittadini in the Venetian sense, with broader horizons and opportunities than might be expected.

Moreover, charitable institutions established in sixteenth-century Venice, such as the Casa delle Zitelle, served not only as places of refuge but also as hubs of an expansive female society, bringing together women from different social strata and allowing them to extend their networks (see Chojnacka, 2001: 125). These institutions were integral to a wider female urban network that extended women's reach beyond their immediate communities and into broader city life. (see *ibid.*:135) She shows that the city was as much a space for women as for men. According to Martin this could have been due to the political situation of that time, he shows how the religious upheavals of the sixteenth century created a dynamic environment of public discourse, where members of the popular classes, men and women, engaged actively in debates about faith, morality and social order. (see Martin 1993) This perspective challenges the traditional stereotype of a strictly patriarchal society where women were confined to domestic roles. In fact, Chojnacka reveals that Venetian household resembled that of northern Europe more than the Mediterranean model of the extended family living under one roof." (Horowich 2002:343)

The value of a noble woman and her economic capacity was mostly represented by her dowry. Their legal status was shaped by patrilineal inheritance laws: a woman's dowry was often her sole claim on family wealth, and married women had limited control over property. Still, it was a claim women could have compared to not owning any dowry. Dowries are a highly studied topic among scholars of Italy and Chojnacki gives us an insight into the Venetian dowry regime and its implications for women. He argues that dowries played a role before matrimony in the negotiations as well as at the end of the matrimony, when the husband died, which happened often as the women were much younger. In particular "the Venetian dowry regime gave women a broad and long-lived set of relationships and economic influence within them." (Chojnacki 2000:78).

Once the marriage ended, the woman could take her dowry back from her husband's estate, "when that was insufficient, from the property of the persons who had guaranteed the dowry." (Chojnacki 2000:80). Still it can be seen as an act of control over the woman as Chojnacki states that Venetian men could have used the dowry so that the widows don't have the need to remarry. Another position in the frame of positive view on women is the one of Francesco

Barbaro, though he rejected the rising obsession with dowries, insisting instead that "the real wealth of wives was their capacity to conceive, birth, and rear children worthy of their heritage." As he argued, the success of the patriciate depended "ironically, on women: for they alone could ensure the biological, cultural, and spiritual reproduction of their marital lineage" (Barbaro, King & Chojnacka, 2017: 165–167). While his view still framed women primarily in reproductive terms, it nonetheless assigned them a vital, if circumscribed, role in sustaining the Republic.

Socially, women's mobility and visibility were circumscribed. Streets and public spaces were predominantly male domains, and women's presence was regulated by social norms and laws designed to control their behavior and reputation. For instance, "from 1589 onwards, laws governed the moral status of patrician brides, reflecting concerns about family honor and social order." (Cowan 2008:4)

In summary, the condition of women in early modern Venice was characterized by a paradox: they were excluded from formal political power and constrained by social norms, yet they exercised significant economic, cultural, and social influence. Venice's unique mercantile and cosmopolitan environment allowed women more agency than in many contemporary societies, making them vital contributors to the city's development and cultural life.

In conclusion, this chapter has demonstrated how the unique political stability, civic ideology, and international positioning of the Republic of Venice created a special environment that had an influence on the cultural expressions and social roles of the city. An insight into the dynamics that governed life in Venice has been given by examining the Republic's institutions, diplomatic strategies and educational structures and that laid the groundwork for the emergence of a civic identity rooted in public virtue and collective responsibility. It has been explored how these conditions have informed the lived experiences of women. This background sets stage for the next chapter on an exploration of the presence and influence of women artists, that should then serve as a basis for analysing selected case studies and their roles and networks.

CAPTER THREE

Towards An Empirical Understanding

Preface

The political culture of the Republic of Venice, as described in the previous chapter, was profoundly shaped by the ideal of the common good, fostering a civic understanding in which public interest was placed above private ambition. Venice's stable institutions ensured that governance was perceived as a shared moral responsibility rather than a platform for individual power. The most important were in the coordinated functions of the Doge, the Senate and the Great Council, constituting the most serene Republic. This political model cultivated an image of Venice as a harmonious and balanced republic, where loyalty to the state defined one's social role and legitimacy. Within this framework however, full civic participation formally remained the privilege of a narrow male class. Women, though excluded from formal political life, inhabited and influenced the same cultural and institutional structures that shaped the lived territory. While the Counter-Reformation climate of seventeenth-century Italy became increasingly restrictive toward women writers and intellectuals (Ray 2015:13), and broader European discourse began to question women's societal roles as their literary voices grew stronger (see Tennen 2014:14), women in Venice could have engaged the prevailing social order in their own ways.

This chapter will explore how the women engaged in the artistic production of the sixteenth and seventeenth century navigated, adapted to and challenged the social and political context of their time and space. It will be explored how those women contributed and were part of Venice's cultural identity.

The Republic of Venice, with its distinctive political structure and carefully cultivated self-image, created a social and cultural environment unlike any other in early modern Europe. As we have seen, the balance between the Great Council, Senate, and Doge—celebrated by contemporaries and later historians as the foundation of Venetian stability—reflected a deeper commitment to collective governance that prioritized the common good over individual

ambition. This political philosophy extended beyond formal institutions to shape social relations, educational practices, and cultural expressions throughout Venetian society.

The "Myth of Venice" served not merely as propaganda but as a powerful organizing principle that influenced how Venetians understood their place in the world and their responsibilities to the state. While modern scholarship has rightfully complicated this idealized self-portrait, recognizing the tensions and contradictions that existed beneath the surface of Venetian harmony, the myth's persistence speaks to its effectiveness as both a political tool and a cultural touchstone.

Venice's unique position—geographically, politically, and culturally—created distinctive conditions for its inhabitants. Its relative independence from papal authority, its cosmopolitan character as a trading center, and its complex social hierarchy all contributed to an environment where traditional boundaries, while still powerful, operated differently than in other Italian states. For women, these conditions created both constraints and opportunities that varied significantly across class lines and religious affiliations.

Understanding this context is essential for any analysis of artistic production in early modern Venice. The Republic's political culture, with its emphasis on collective identity over individual glory, shaped patterns of patronage and artistic expression. At the same time, Venice's commercial orientation and diverse population created networks of exchange that influenced artistic development in profound ways. As we turn to examine the specific experiences of women artists in this environment, we must keep in mind how the Republic's distinctive political, social, and cultural structures both limited and enabled their participation in Venetian artistic life.

By situating my analysis within this broader context, the reader gains a more nuanced understanding of how women navigated the artistic landscape of early modern Venice—not as isolated exceptions to male-dominated norms, but as participants in a complex social system whose unique characteristics created distinctive possibilities for female agency and expression.

3.1 Contextualizing Women artists Roles in the sixteenth and seventeenth-century Venice

As stated, the collective culture had direct implications for women artists. The relative lack of interest in individual fame, paired with the male-dominated workshop model, meant that women's artistic contributions were embedded in family or collaborative networks. As a result, individual recognition was rare, even when their work was significant. The case of Marietta Robusti, or "la Tintoretta," underscores this imbalance: far more is known about her father, Jacopo Tintoretto, than about her, despite her active artistic role. One of the first writers to "mention Marietta's remarkable skill" (Echols and Ilchman 2024:84) has been Moderata Fonte. A fellow female artist, a writer. Ray, 2015, quotes her 1581 published metaphor, that Echols and Ilchman describe as a comparison of her achievements to "buried gold" (Ray 2015 in Echols and Ilchman 2024:84) It says that Gold that remains concealed in the depths of a mine does not lose its value; even when hidden, it retains its worth. Once brought to the surface and refined, it proves to be just as precious and splendid as any other gold. "L'oro che sta nelle minere ascoso, / Non manca d'esser or, benché sepolto, / E quando è tratto e se ne fa lavoro / È così ricco e bel come l'altro oro" (Moderata Fonte, Tredici canti del Floridoro, IV, 3)

What happened to the stories of the women artists and which challenges did they face, what is that buried gold?

As this chapter begins to delve deeper into the analysis of women artists in the Republic of Venice during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it will focus on the specific challenges faced by women at the time, using a feminist lens and understanding. As scholar Labalme writes, in the seventeenth century, prominent women figures were notably scarce. This absence has been attributed either to a prevailing atmosphere of "spiritual mortification" or to the restrictive influence of conservative Spanish traditions. Unlike the vibrant cultural scene of the Italian Cinquecento, the period lacked female-led salons, visible women patrons of the arts or literature, and notable women writers of comparable stature. Intellectual women, when they did appear, were often met with skepticism and mistrust, they were "viewed with suspicion." (Labalme 1981:139) This could account for the development of anti-feminist writings, "Giuseppe Passi's virulently misogynistic *I difetti e mancamenti delle donne*" (Cox 1981:1) that was published in 1599. Against this background of roles and expectations, women's "achievement and [...] limitations can be clearly assessed." (Labalme 1981:129) The

discussion opens with the acknowledgement of the works of the above-mentioned writer Moderata Fonte and Lucrezia Marinella, who both published their arguments on the condition of women in the *Serenissima* around the year 1600, just a few months apart. Their “works, respectively, a polemical treatise, *La nobilta et l'eccellenza delle donne*, and a dialogue, *Il merito delle donne* [the latter is] a work [...] of considerable literary merit.” (Cox 2008:1) Their writings and the contextual analysis of their writings by scholars like Virginia Cox provide crucial insight into the contemporary discourse on women’s roles and possibilities in Venetian society and serve as an important foundation for understanding the broader cultural and political environment in which women artists lived and worked. The two feminist authors portray male dominance over women as a form of tyranny that legitimizes itself through unfounded assertions of male superiority. Once these essentialist claims are dismantled, the gender relationship is exposed as a power struggle in which men employ all available means to keep women in a position of subjugation. Central to this strategy is the deliberate exclusion of women from education, military training, and participation in public office. (see *ibid.*:5)

“I believe that Carrieri's status as an educated artist helped to fuel her professional ambition, a possibility that is overlooked by most scholars, who take pains to undermine her elite status as a highly educated woman by belittling an accomplishment they would trumpet had it been possessed by a male artist.” (Jenn 2016:25)

The aforementioned term of genius should be acknowledged in order to understand explicitly the difficulties women had to be understood as artists. The Geniekult was regarded as divinely inspired and, above all, marked as a Christian male prerogative. Women could not be creative therefore. In Venice, however, the emphasis on the common good was so important that it could have overshadowed the cult of the genius. This may have had a positive impact on the visibility and opportunities of women artists within the Republic. Köhne perfectly puts it by saying that: “Frauen wurden per definitionem Eigenschaften abgesprochen, die mich geistig Schöpferischem, Intelligenz, Originalität und Wissenschaftlichkeit assoziiert sind.” (Köhne 2019:4) Women had per definition no ability to be artists, to be creative. If this is the status quo then women who were artists had as a first step, no recognition.

3.2 Institutional Constraints and Life Paths: Convents, Spinsterhood and Marriage

What were the specific challenges women faced, and how can the artistic activity of women be contextualised within them? This chapter aims to answer that question by first examining the marriage policies of the time, which underwent a significant transformation and had direct consequences for women. The political economy of the Republic experienced a shift: from a system based on trade to one increasingly based on investment. As a result, family strategies changed: it was no longer seen as beneficial to have many children married off across different branches of the family. Instead, families began to concentrate their resources on a single male heir, leading to the custom of marrying only one son.

This shift had notable consequences for daughters. As the marriage of sons became the family's priority, dowries for daughters became increasingly inflated, and for many families, affording to marry off their daughters became financially impossible. As previously mentioned, the widespread alternative was the convent: daughters who could not marry were sent to monasteries. However, this practice eventually caused convents to become overcrowded, and the cost of entry also began to rise.

This situation had two important consequences. On one hand, convents became home to a very diverse group of women, not necessarily united by a genuine religious vocation, even though they were officially considered nuns. A kind of independent life emerged inside these institutions, prompting criticism. Voices began to raise concerns about the supposed freedom women enjoyed within monastic walls, and the Church began to call for reform of the monastic system. As Labalme writes on an analysis of St. Didiers asserting that "Venetian nuns preferred their convents to the paternal home because they could enjoy more liberty and see whomever they pleased." (Labalme 1981:137) The Venetian diarist Priuli remarked in 1509 that "some nuns were no better than "public prostitutes" for whom no other remedy would serve "but to burn down the aforesaid convents together with the nuns for the salvation of the Venetian State." (Priuli in Labalme *ibid.*)

Although even the Church intervened and either advocated for reforms or cautiously suggested them, the Venetian nobility resisted implementing such changes, likely out of concern that doing so would provoke significant unrest among those living in convents and their families.

(see Cox 1995: 13) A nuncio's report from 1580, written in response to Pope Gregory XIII's proposal to impose stricter regulations on convent life, highlights the Venetian Senate's apprehension that such reforms might exacerbate an already growing resistance among young noblewomen toward monastic life. The Senate feared that individuals who had previously entered convents reluctantly might, in the face of tighter restrictions, reject religious life altogether. This concern was not unfounded; the report observes that even the mere anticipation of reform had already emboldened some young women to boldly refuse to take the veil. Notably, the Senate's resistance led to a negotiated outcome: while inspections of Venetian convents were agreed upon, a subsequent report clarified that no further tightening of regulations would be implemented beyond existing norms. (Cox 1995:14 f)

On the other hand, as the cost of entering a convent increased, many families could no longer afford even this option. As a result, a third path became more common: the "secular spinster." (Cox 1995:13) These were unmarried women who did not enter a convent and remained officially single. They were often useful to their families, working or as they say: helping within the household or supporting their brothers, effectively taking on the role of unpaid servants. This figure of the secular, unmarried woman grew more visible in Venetian society, revealing new forms of social positioning.

In the midst of these developments, it is also possible to observe an emerging awareness among some members of the patrician class. Some began to understand the condition of women not simply as a product of biological destiny but as the result of social categorisation. Indeed, one patrician writer noted that if women had been born as men, they would have held political office and taken economic decisions. In 1629, Venetian Patriarch Giovanni Tiepolo defended his decision to relax the rules on convent discipline by appealing to the doge and the senate. He emphasized that the nuns in question came from noble families and had been raised in an environment of great luxury and sophistication. Given their social standing, Tiepolo argued, had they been male, they would have been appointed to positions of political authority and public responsibility. However, as women, they were instead required to relinquish personal freedom for the benefit of the state and their families. Under these circumstances, Tiepolo maintained, they were at least entitled to a life within the convent that was relatively comfortable and free from excessive restrictions. Such remarks reflect a significant shift in

perception, suggesting an early recognition of women as “indisputably as a sociological group, their position defined by custom and politics rather than nature.” (Cox 1995:12)

According to Virginia Cox, the feminist writings of the period should be interpreted not so much as a reflection of past mentalities, but rather as the beginning of a new era. These texts signal a conceptual turning point, one in which women started to be publicly defended as rational and capable individuals, capable of intellectual and artistic agency. This framework will be essential as we move forward in analysing the women artists of the time: not merely as exceptions to the rule, but as figures deeply embedded in and shaped by the socio-economic and cultural transformations of sixteenth and seventeenth century Venice. This period is chosen especially because it seems like a time of intensified debate and polarization contemporarily. In fact, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, a revived cultural discourse known as the *Querelle des Femmes* emerged. This debate “questioned and redefined women’s intellectual and creative capacities, opening new avenues for women [...] to assert themselves professionally.” (Kelly 1986:45) Although it can be argued that the querelle was simply a game of literary prowess, Joan Kelly claims that “both its misogyny and its feminism expressed passionately held views and tell, as well, of a historically changing gender construction that was being imposed and resisted.” (ibid.) Tennen adds that this led to a high increase of the literature that women created. She states, that it “was an era in which the status of women was malleable, and the literary text was one of the many ways in which this dialogue asserted itself.” (Tennen 2014:14) The existence of the *Querelle des Femmes* around 1600 fits perfectly in the analysis of the case studies and serves as a timeframe.

3.3 Artistic Training and Professional Pathways

Talent alone is not enough to make someone successful and great at their metier. This counts for any given activity and therefore also for the arts it seems recommendable to uncover the training opportunities women artists could consider for their artistic development. Training for women artists in Venice often occurred within family workshops, where daughters might learn from fathers or brothers, but evidence also shows that some women received instruction from male artists outside their families or from other female artists and artisans. This diversity of training pathways challenges earlier assumptions that women's artistic education was solely domestic or convent-based.

Access to academies: Artemisia Gentileschi achieved a historic milestone in 1616 when she became the first woman ever admitted to the Accademia delle Arti del Disegno di Firenze. We know that happened thanks to the archives of the academy that contain "several [...] documents referring to her, [...] the most important being an entry of July 19, 1616, acknowledging the receipt of her matriculation fee." (Bisell 1968:154) Her membership in the academy provided her not only with professional recognition and access to excellent training but also powerful patrons such as the Medici family. (<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/artemisia-gentileschi>). When searching for the first woman to enter the Venetian Academy one cannot find information, probably then due to the fact that the academy of Venice was founded in 1750, so much later. Still, a contemporary artist, Giulia Lama, was not known to have been granted access to their classes. As a consequence, we can state that in Florence a woman was allowed to join their academy much earlier than in Venice. What about painting outside the academies? Even though there hasn't been a state-funded academy, "opportunities to draw communally from life models in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Venice were plentiful." (Nisse 2024:225)

In a description from 1688, Maximilien Misson notes that in Venice, it was not uncommon for artists to hire a nude male or female person to use as a model to study human anatomy. The figure, the model, was posed in a designated room organized by the academy's master and each participating artist contributed a fee, for example the collegio dei pittori rented rooms in 1690. These life drawing sessions were reportedly open to all, not to all, all though. As this type of setting is likely captured in Tiepolo's famous life drawing class, it there portrays a distinctively

male-dominated environment, “and is as far as we know historically accurate—women are thought not to have had regular access to nude male models in such contexts.” (ibid.) There are no records of women being admitted to the main Venetian painters’ guilds or academies during the 17th century.

The structure and customs of Venetian artistic institutions made a formal recognition for women extremely rare, and the first documented case of a woman breaking through these barriers in Venice comes much later, with Lama’s public commissions, not formal guild admission. Still, her name is not inscribed in the *Fraglia dei Pittori di Venezia*, whereas for example Rosalba Carriera’s name, another contemporary woman artist, can be found (see Pignatti 1965:28) in this “register of prestigious Venetian artists.” (Cheney 2017:225)

Although the Venetian tradition often regarded the artist’s workshop as a family enterprise passed down through generations, most leading male painters in sixteenth-century Venice did not train their daughters to paint. A notable example is Lavinia Vecellio, who lived from 1530 to 1561 and was the daughter of the famous painter Titian. Unlike her brother Orazio, who became a prominent assistant in their father’s workshop, Lavinia did not receive professional artistic training. Instead – she was provided with a substantial dowry. However, apparently Irene di Spilimbergo, born 1538, trained first with another woman and then with Titian, though documents remain unclear and not extensively researched. Also, Paolo Veronese only trained his male children in his workshop, while the daughter and actually also two other sons were excluded. One notable exception to this general reluctance was Jacopo Robusti, known as Tintoretto, who did teach his daughter Marietta, born approx. in 1554 to paint. The most concrete example of women training other women is the case of the nun-artists trained in the convent, where they typically studied art (and music) with their sisters.

“Although workshops existed throughout Europe, many Venetian workshops had long relied on familial artistic tradition. The emphasis on group identity and cooperation ensured not only a facade of domestic tranquility, but also a distinctive approach to authorship under a common name. The Venetian family *bottega* usually included several generations of men, including male siblings and in-laws.” (Savage 2012:4)

Following the educational training of artists in Venice and its limited, even non-existing possibilities for women the next paragraph will outline artistic pathways of women artists in early modern Venice. In her work on women artists in Bologna Bohn differentiates among

three primary artistic pathways. Bohn specializes in women artist in Bologna, nevertheless she applies this differentiation to women artists all over early modern Italy. The first, and likely the least documented today, is the model of the nun-artist, who practiced her craft within the convent and was not reliant on external commissions. The second model refers to the court artist, who maintained a more stable and ongoing connection with a noble or princely patron. The third and most widespread model for women as for men is the “professional artist who worked in the marketplace and received commissions from different patrons” (Bohn 2021: NN) This approach became established with Lavinia Fontana in the 1570s and applies broadly to later women artists, especially in Bologna and other Italian cities. These artists needed to manage relationships with multiple patrons, “and were inevitably concerned with issues of self-promotion, pricing, and the interests of patrons and collectors.” (ibid.)

In Conclusion it has been shown that women pursued markedly different and often more constrained paths to becoming artists in sixteenth-century Venice. Unlike their male counterparts, daughters were rarely trained within the family workshop, as the prevailing social and cultural norms generally excluded them from this professional lineage. This limitation was also due to choices of male artists, who, despite having a tradition of multigenerational workshops, did chose to not instruct their daughters. Instead, women who did receive artistic training were more likely to do so in convents, where nuns taught other women in environments relatively insulated from broader societal restrictions. This divergence in training opportunities reveals much about the societal relations and professional structures available to women at them time. As also mentioned in chapter 1, girls generally had less educational opportunities. The artistic training structure suggests that artistic development for women was shared less by familial inheritance and more by alternative, often marginal networks of education and practices. This observation leads us to the next chapter, which explores the social and professional networks women artists cultivated.

3.4 Social and Artistic Networks

Since relatively little is known about women artists as explained in the previous chapters, it comes as no surprise that even less is known about their networks. The available insights into their private lives are often fragmented and at times contradictory. Some suggest that these

women led isolated lives (cf. Cheney 2017:226), while other accounts point to the existence of close friendships and meaningful personal connections, and the “hidden presence of women in early modern culture” (Salomoni 2019:339), as consequential for research on their existence and lives. case in point is Giulia Lama, whose life illustrates the complexity and ambiguity of such interpretations.

On the one hand, she has been described as socially withdrawn, yet on the other, we know she maintained friendships with prominent figures, which suggests a degree of engagement in both intellectual and artistic circles. This raises important questions: what kind of evidence supports the assumption that Lama led a secluded life? And how does this reconcile with her relationships to well-known contemporaries? Was she, perhaps, part of an artistic network while remaining socially reclusive – limited not by lack of connection but by the spatial and behavioural constraints imposed on women at that time as seen in chapter one?

Further examples will serve to shed light on the extent to which networks may have existed in which women engaged in exchange, established contacts, and supported and learned from one another. One such case, though a bit later, is Elena Corner, the first delivered woman who received a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Padova in 1678, “corresponded; she received important guests who came to sample and admire her erudition; she participated in the debates of those academies who had admitted her.” (Labalme 1981:143) As demonstrated in the section on education and training, there is not much proof on women teaching women, but scholarly research is discovering more also on that. It is therefore worth questioning assumptions on the existence or non-existence of networks. The common scholarly assumption that these female artists were reclusive and had no meaningful interactions with others cannot be universally upheld, particularly when viewed through the lens of feminist historiography. As the mentioned case of Giulia Lama demonstrates, differing interpretations exist, and this ambiguity calls for a broader investigation.

Indeed, when we shift our attention to other early modern women, we find evidence of rich and varied social and professional networks that challenge these basic assumptions. For instance, the engraved portrait associated with Caterina Tarabotti reveals a tightly knit circle of individuals connected to her directly or through shared circumstances. (Markou 2024:202)

The painter Artemisia Gentileschi also presents a compelling example. As Gasparotto convincingly states: “There is no doubt that Artemisia, after her return to the Eternal City”

(Gasparotto 2024:160) , cultivated a wide network of friends, patrons, and fellow artists. Her circle included Simon Vouet and Cassiano dal Pozzo, who supported her work and commissioned it. Between 1625 and 1626, Gentileschi completed at least three paintings for Fernando Afàn de Ribera, Duke of Alcalà, during his tenure as ambassador to the papal court. (Gasparotto 2024:160) These connections point to a professional strategy rooted in cultivating elite networks, which helped to secure artistic commissions and visibility.

Similarly, in eighteenth-century Venice, so a bit later than the other artists and the main focus of this work, Rosalba Carriera forged relationships with prominent intellectuals and collectors such as Pierre Crozat, an [Art collector, who formed a famous collection of drawings](#) and Anton Maria Zanetti the Elder, a “[Draughtsman, print-maker; collector of, and dealer in, prints, gems, medals, picture](#)”. (Barcham 2009) She was one of the “most celebrated woman artist in eighteenth-century Europe” (Salomon 2024:236) and has been internationally recognized. Carriera gained fame for her mastery of pastel portraiture. Her success extended beyond Venice, influencing European courts and networks could have enhanced her reputation across Europe and grant her access to important transnational art markets and connoisseurial circles. Subsequent examples are therefore intended to offer evidence that women were, in fact, involved in forms of exchange and connection. In the following chapter, this inquiry will be pursued in conjunction with a working definition of "network" and supported by interviews, in order to analyze whether, and if so, how and within which frameworks, female artists participated in artistic or intellectual networks. For instance, the Jewish poet Sara Copio Sullam was part of a notable intellectual circle, which offers an important starting point for further exploration.

3.5 Visibility and Historiographical Injustice

The historiographical visibility of women artists in Venice has been shaped by a complex interplay of local biographical practices, workshop traditions, and institutional structures. As Bohn notes, “early biographical approaches to recording women artists in different Italian cities, the proclivity of some women to sign their works, local workshop traditions, and varied possibilities for the artistic education of women are among the factors that have shaped what we know today about women artists from early modern Italy.” (Bohn 2024:36) In the Venetian

context however, early biographers such as Carlo Ridolfi, Sansovino and Martinioni seemed to be “more interested in local women’s collective existence as a type of cultural capital for Venice rather than in their individual careers.” (Bohn 2024:32) This contrasts sharply with the Tuscan tradition, where the genre of artists biographies, called the *vite*, developed as a part of a broader elevation of visual arts to intellectual status. As Digalakis explains, “the specific biographical genre of the “*vite*” or lives of artists is a phenomenon that developed in Renaissance Italy, specifically in Tuscany, as a corollary to the elevation of visual arts to an intellectual pursuit and consequently to the evolution of the social status of the artist.” (Digalakis 2024:94) The Venetian context by contrast, remained comparatively less invested in the myth of the individual genius. [Julius von Schlosser](#), an Austrian art historian passing through Venice, already noted this discrepancy, remarking that “It is strange that Venice, so important for the development of all painting, was left a little behind the wealth of the wise Bologna.” (Julius von Schlosser in Digalakis 2024: 95) Which would make sense as we have seen in the chapter on the common good of Venice as a top priority, to not follow the individual genius but rather a collective interest. Despite this collective orientation, the number of women artists recorded in Venice during the seventeenth century belaeuft auf twenty-nine registered artists. Bohn records that “In Venice, the second-largest city in Italy during the century, many more women artists are recorded in early documents and biographies—at least twenty-nine, making it second only to Bologna in terms of raw numbers.” (Bohn 2024: 31) However, only a few of these women achieved lasting recognition or have securely attributed works. This could be due to the mentioned limited attention that early biographers gave to the women’s output. As Bohn notes, “since the early Venetian biographers have very little to say about these women or their artworks, however, there were probably many other practitioners whose names are no longer known.” (ibid.) This historiographical neglect may also stem from the broader cultural patterns of Venice itself, which generally lacked the biographical impulse found in other Italian cities. As a result, individual recognition, especially of women, remains marginal, probably reinforcing a narrative that underestimated their presence and contributions.

3.6 Obstacles and Strategies

As explored in the previous subchapters, women artists in early modern Venice faced systemic and multifaceted obstacles that severely limited their opportunities for training, visibility, and recognition. Their marginalization in our contemporary time starts as late as a historiographical absence. Many women were not recorded in historical sources, raising the question of their existence within the narrative of art history and the mechanisms of legitimation. Their educational paths, life choices, and creative expressions were all constrained by the broader structures of the 16th century society in the Republic of Venice.

Access to formal artistic training, for instance, was exceptionally rare. Women were generally excluded from institutions like the Venetian Accademia di Belle Arti and denied access to workshops where life drawings, especially from nude models, was fundamental. This exclusion effectively barred them from genres such as history painting, the most prestigious form of artistic production. Statistically, only about 0.2 percent of women received formal education, and artistic knowledge was predominantly transmitted from father to son within family workshops.

These barriers were reinforced by deep-rooted social and cultural prejudices. As Cox notes, the gender relationship was understood as a power struggle, in which men employed every tool available, including the exclusion of women from education, military training, and public office, to maintain dominance. (Cox 1995:4) Lucrezia Marinella expressed this clearly: “it is men who make the laws and so they tyrannously exclude women from office, even though they are well aware that women are quite capable of governing; indeed, that they are eminently suited to the task.” (Marinella 1601:124) She further observed that women were frequently denied even the basic ability to read and write, out of fear that education might threaten male supremacy. (see Fonte 1988:170 and Marinella 1601:32)

Prevailing gender norms casted women not as creators or intellectuals, in the best cases it acknowledged them as caretakers and moral guardians of the family. (see Chapter one Barbero) The belief that artistic genius was an inherently masculine trait resulted in the devaluation of women’s creativity. Female artists were often confined to so called feminine genres such as portraiture, still life, miniature or decorative arts, which were considered less intellectually and culturally significant.

Beyond social bias, women were also subject to moral restrictions that regulated their public visibility. As Cox observes, Marinella's writing demand for Italian women the possibilities they were believed to enjoy elsewhere in Europe. Such as the chance to develop and apply their talents in the public sphere (cf. Cox 1995) In Venice, however, there have been strict codes of decorum limited women's presence in public spaces such as coffeehouses, academies, or studios gatekeeping access to professional networks and potential patrons. Working with nude male models was considered inappropriate, further limiting the scope of artistic engagement. Material and economic conditions imposed further constraints. Artistic work requires resources: costly materials, workshop infrastructure, professional labour were hardly available to women.

Recognition posed its own set of difficulties. Women's works were frequently attributed to male relatives or mentors, reinforcing their invisibility. As Digalakis argues, the scale of success of that time for artists was measured by a "gradual emancipation of the exceptional craftsman (artefice) from the "guild regime" to that of a prominent artist (artista) worthy of historical record." (Digalakis 2024:94) This raises the provocative question whether women were considered inherently unworthy of historical remembrance, even when they produced work of equal merit. It is a rhetorical question rather than a provocative, and the answer should be clear when having read this chapter on women artists challenges in the sixteenth century Republic of Venice.

Despite all the persistent structural impediments, the systematic belittlement, and the lack of recognition that women have faced since birth, they nevertheless dared to think and, as this chapter sought to demonstrate, to act publicly. It is therefore fitting to conclude with the hopeful and compelling call to action voiced by the writer Moderata Fonte:

"Could we not earn our own living and manage our affairs without help from them? Come, let us rouse ourselves and claim back our freedom and the honor and dignity they have usurped from us for so long. Do you think that if we put our minds to it, we would be lacking the courage to defend ourselves, the strength to fend for ourselves, or the talents to earn our own living?"

Were there also positive aspects? Indeed, a few women did find supporters. While commerce itself was not inherently beneficial for women, the moment of rupture, the historical shift from

trade to investment and the accompanying structural transformations, may have opened up certain opportunities for emancipation.

In light of these considerations, I now turn to examine a number of individual women, a few fellow women artists that lived in the same time as Moderata Fonte and how they navigated, adapted to, or actively engaged with these structural conditions.

Conclusions: Recovering buried gold

This chapter began with a metaphor from Moderata Fonte describing the painter Marietta Robusti as buried gold: hidden, yet very valuable and capable of shining once brought to light. (Fonte 1581 in Ray 2015:13; Echols and Ilchman 2024:84) This metaphor framed the examination of structural conditions that historically obscured the artistic legitimacy of women in early modern Venice. The chapter analyzed how the civic model of the Republic, while rooted in ideals of collective good and institutional stability, excluded women from political participation, education, and public office (Cox 1995:4) Despite this exclusion, women shaped and were shaped by these same structures. Barriers to artistic training, including exclusion from academies and life-drawing classes, restricted women's access to genres such as history painting. (Nisse 2024:225; Cheney 2017:225)

Patriarchal norms limited women to feminine genres and marginalized their creativity. Male artists rarely trained their daughters: Lavinia Vecellio, Titian's (famous Venetian painter) daughter received a dowry, not instruction, while Jacopo Tintoretto taught his daughter Marietta, which apparently was a rare exception. (Bohn 2024:36, Digalakis 2024:94) Nevertheless, we don't know much about her own paintings. Meanwhile, convents, which were a place of seclusion, in the 1600's apparently trained their nuns. (Labalme 1981:137)

Moderata Fonte and Lucrezia Marinella exposed the systemic exclusion of women in their books, asserting that the prejudices against them and their non-inclusion into society was rooted not in incapacity, but in fear of their empowerment. Their writings marked a conceptual shift, portraying women as rational and capable.

Although artistic institutions formally excluded women, some forged relationships across artistic and intellectual sphere. In how far they can be counted as networks shall be developed

in the next chapters. This chapter demonstrated how women's contributions, though marginalized, reflected deep cultural engagement. If their legacies are like buried gold, this chapter revealed what has kept them hidden. The next will examine selected artists empirically, bringing these lives and works to light.

This chapter began with a metaphor of Moderata Fonte on Marietta Robusti stating that she is like buried gold, who even though is not seen, still shines. The chapter then dedicated itself to the issues and moments of burying a woman's artistic legitimation. It showed that Women's artistic contributions, though historically marginalized, yes excluded, reveal the depth of their engagement with Venetian culture and society. The next chapter will therefore illuminate in the deep some of those artists by showcasing their life and contributions empirically. In order to state that the metaphor is right, the artist work has been buried, this chapter showed what lays on top, the next chapter will delve into the subject itself.

CHAPTER FOUR

Empirical research

Preface

Following the contextualization of the Republic of Venice in general terms, along with the specific historical setting around 1600 and the particular circumstances for female members of society, this chapter aims at digging deeper into a few examples. The presented background has been intended to support the interpretation of the case studies that follow. In the previous chapter, the emergence of a female artist was described in comparison to her male counterparts, highlighting the systematic and structural exclusion of women within the artistic sphere. It was shown how, in this climate of marginalization and invisibility, women had less opportunities and privileges compared to men. The following chapter now turns to the targeted empirical analysis of three women artists in the Republic of Venice around 1600. A more focused examination aims to allow for a precise interpretation of their actions within the Republic. In doing so, the key research questions of this thesis will be addressed and substantiated.

Giulia Lama - “Attention to Lama’s apparently boundary-pushing artistic practice has the potential to continue the endeavor of challenging preconceptions about the opportunities available to female painters in the early modern era.” (Nisse 2024:231)

4.1 Sara Copio Sullam

This first case study will analyse the life and legacy of Sara Copio Sullam (1592–1641), or how some scholars write: Sara, Copio Sullams life, who was an “influential poet, letter writer, polemicist, and salonnière” (Westwater 2007:96). Her name is found written Sarra, Sara and Copio or Copia, this thesis sticks to one version: Sara Copio Sullam.

She was chosen as an example because of several reasons, the main being that she had a literary salon, an intriguing fact when considering the narrative presented in Chapter 2 that women were structurally confined to the private sphere and hence isolated individuals. Furthermore,

she is a woman and part of a religious minority: she is Jewish and lived in the ghetto of Venice. As Tennen observes, women in that period did not only have “to overcome [...] religious persecution, but also the oppression of the female sex.” (Tennen 2014:1) Tennen analyzes women from the other side so to say, regarding to this thesis’ case study she was not only to overcome the oppression of the female sex but also the religious persecution. Even though facing obstacles, as intersectionally discriminated, Tennen believes that Jewish Women “made significant steps both toward the emancipation of their sex and toward the intellectual development of Judaism as a whole.” (ibid.) In this context Sullam’s life and connections and her literary work are deeply interconnected, and recognizing this link is essential to fully grasp the “impact that this woman had in Venice in the early seventeenth century.” (Tennen 2014:2) The steps of Sara Copio Sullam shall be examined in this chapter, by first contextualizing her once again in the ghetto and her family and then proceeding to identify her actions.

The ghetto was the space where the religious minorities were allowed to live, in concordance with the Republic. Even though it was a limited space, their walls were “porous” (Katz 2017) meaning people and ideas circled in and out freely. In those ghettos all over Italy, the first one being in Rome but the biggest one in Venice, Jewish communities experienced a vibrant cultural and intellectual life, giving rise to several “figures worthy of study.” (Tennen 2014:1) The writer Sara Copio Sullam was born around 1590, scholars haven’t found out the precise date of her birth. Some say it was in the years of 1588-1589, other in 1590. (see Boccato 1974:171). Her father, Simone Copio, was a prosperous merchant with land holdings in the Eastern Mediterranean and business interests in insurance, agricultural trade, and moneylending. After her father’s death in 1606, her mother, his wife, Ricca de’ Grassini in Copio managed the family’s affairs. The Copios were among the wealthiest families in the Ghetto. In his will, Simone Copio recorded assets worth 23.000 ducats invested in his banking ventures. She received a very good education, as her father wanted to create an academy at home, and she spoke several languages.

She could dispose of a “thousand-scudo dowry and [...] one-third of her father’s estate.” (Westwater 2003:97) Those were at her absolute control, with the condition that she kept her Jewish faith. Probably in 1606 Sara married the businessman Giacob Sullam who most probably supported her activities. Her father wrote in his will that his daughters should “have

husbands to their liking, so long as they are decent, honest and honorable.” (Westwater 2003:97)

Building on this foundation of education and social standing within the Venetian Ghetto, Sara Copio Sullam developed into a central figure of the cultural and intellectual life of the Republic of Venice, especially thanks to the establishment of her literary salon which she hosted at her home and most certainly supported by her husband.

Sara Copio Sullam grew to be widely recognized as a “poet, polemicist, and patron of culture.” (Adelman 2018:11) She brought together a circle of apparently only male intellectuals, many of whom were affiliated with the Accademia degli Incogniti, Venice’s most influential academic society of their time. In exchange for her financial support, these men provided her with instruction and engaged in intellectual exchange. (see *ibid.*) To better understand the nature of these gatherings she hosted, and the connections among her associates, one notable event held at her home illustrates the academic and social dynamic of her salon. On this occasion, a portrait of the Genoese monk and writer Ansaldo Cebà was displayed, and dramatist and priest Baldassare Bonifacio recited sonnets he had composed in Cebà’s honour. Also present was Numidio Paluzzi, a Roman poet and writer who had been hired by Copio Sullam as her teacher and was supported financially by her. He attended the gathering with Alessandro Berardelli, a painter, poet and fellow member of the Incogniti.

Copio Sullam’s literary salon was primarily attended by Christian intellectuals, including Bonifacio, Paluzzi, and Berardelli, but also Rabbi Leon Modena, a significant Jewish scholar and prominent figure in early modern Venice. The presence of such diverse figures pictures the salon’s role as a space for cross-cultural and interreligious intellectual exchange. (Westwater 2007)

Copio Sullam admired Cebà’s epic on Esther and initiated a four year long correspondence starting in 1618. This epistolary exchange between Sara Copio Sullam and Ansaldo Cebà reflects both the intellectual aspirations and limitations faced by women writers in early modern Venice. In 1623 Cebà “published their correspondence without including Sullam’s letters.” (Tennen 2014:9) He erased all of Sara’s letters but four of her sonnets and Cebà’s footnotes referencing her, offering only a fragmentary view of her literary engagement, as he also didn’t publish any of her accompanying prose letters. Scholars offer diverging interpretations regarding the omission of her side of the correspondence. Some suggest it was due to the

perceived heretical nature of her writings, others argue it may have been an attempt to shield her, while another view holds that he feared her literary talent might surpass his own. (see Tennen 2014:9) This editorial choice not only silenced her perspective but also obscured the full scope of her intellectual contributions and network.

Had her letters been preserved or published, our understanding of her work, relationships, and literary presence would likely be far richer and more nuanced. The loss highlights the precariousness of women's authorship and the reliance on male gatekeepers for historical transmission, raising critical questions about whose voices are remembered and how intellectual legacies are kept.

While corresponding with Cebà, Sara Sullam maintained her Jewish belief, even though Cebà made no secret of his intention to win a soul over to the Christian faith. (see Boccato 1974). This correspondence must also be understood within a broader context of interreligious exchange, as Christian culture entered the Venetian Ghetto with particular intensity in the early seventeenth century. Such exchanges are further evidenced by the sixty-six Jewish testimonies recorded by the notary Bracchi. (Tennen 2014:5) On the contrary, Sara Copio Sullam kept her belief, "never, however, does the author interest herself in the religiosity of the man." (Tennen 2014:34) This shows that Sullam was contrary to Cebà not aiming at a religious conversation. She was an educated person and interested in literary exchanges and discussions not in converting. "Her fame threatened to transform to infamy" (Westwater 2003:182), when the archdeacon of Treviso and later bishop of Capodistria, Baldassarre Bonifaccio (see Veltri 2009:334) published an article titled 'manifesto for the soul' where he severely accuses Sullam of denying the immortality of the soul. She answered promptly "in a treatise entitled *Manifesto di Sara Copio Sulam ebrea, nel quale e da lei riprovata e detestata l'opinione negante l'immortalità dell'anima falsamente attribuita dal signor Baldassare Bonifaccio*, in which she refutes and abhors the opinion against the soul's immortality which signor Baldassare Bonifaccio attributed to her." (Westwater 2003:212) Bonifaccio then claimed she had received help writing it, from Paluzzi and Modena, the Rabbi. Aproso and Berardelli further accused Paluzzi of being the real author. Paluzzi and Berardelli also conspired to steal from Sullam and blame it on witchcraft. As we have seen in Chapter 1, the witchhunting process was a contemporary issue back then and this shows the serve it had, using it for a theft. They tricked her into paying Berardelli for a portrait supposedly commissioned by a French admirer.

Eventually, Sullam charged Berardelli and dismissed Paluzzi. In retaliation, they accused her of plagiarizing Plauzzi's writings. Later, a fictional trial on Mount Parnassus was written, defending Sullam through the voices of "the greatest writers of all time, mostly women, including Vittoria Colonna, Veronica Gambara, Isabella Andrini, Sappho of Lesbos, and Pietro Aretino and Baldassar Castiglioni, as well as other members of the Incogniti" (Adelman 2015:8)

Sara's debate [on the question of the soul's immortality] with the priests" (Veltri 2009:349) contributed to intensifying theological and philosophical debate within the Jewish community, particularly in the early 1620's. Her dispute with the two Christian clerics preceded and possibly influenced a wave of Jewish responses, including works by Samuel da Silva, Uriel da Costa, and Menasseh ben Israel indicating her relevance to broader intellectual and religious discussions of the period.

Despite the initially supportive atmosphere, the intellectual network Copio Sullam cultivated eventually turned against her. As Adelman notes, "many of them betrayed and humiliated her in the way that men of letters often treated talented women, including accusing her of plagiarism and heresy, and they withheld her work from publication." (Adelman 2018:11) She was deceived not only in terms of honour but also of money by "other members of Copio Sullam's literary circle—Paluzzi and Berardelli—[...] by defrauding her of hundreds of ducats" (Westwater 2007:98). In all of this she remained steadfast in her Jewish faith, a condition her father had set in order for her to inherit the full amount of money and property. However, it seems that she herself was also interested in defending Jewish faith as she not only didn't convert but also openly wrote an answer to the manifesto, and before as well in her correspondence with Cebà argued in favour of Judaism. What demonstrates Sara Copio Sullam's courage and intellect, according to Fortis (2014), is her engagement as a Jewish woman who stood by her faith and negotiated this position.

The idea that Sara Copio Sullam actively sought inclusion in the literary world and acted in accordance with its norms only to be intentionally excluded, can be understood through the lens of intersectional discrimination, as she was member of two minorities regarding gender and religion. Da Fonseca-Wollheim supports this view by showing how her temporary access to the literary market, governed by reciprocal exchanges of praise and manuscripts, was actually undermined by an anti-Jewish stereotype. "The opposition of Christian mercantilism and

Jewish usury leads to her being accused of greed for worldly glory”(da Fonseca-Wollheim 2000:1), and enriching herself at the expense of her Christian peers. Such claims culminated in charges of “plagiarism which ultimately silence her voice.” (ibid.)

Despite the betrayal, suppression, and distortions surrounding her, Sara Copio Sullam received both support and recognition already during her lifetime, a fact that challenges any simplified narrative of isolation or marginalisation. Although many of her supporters remain unnamed, the existence of collective action in her defence indicates her prominence within contemporary intellectual circles. As Westwater notes, “more than a dozen minor writers appear to have banded together to produce a work that countered these charges.” (Westwater 2007:98) This response, although not fully recovered, suggests that Copio Sullam’s reputation inspired solidarity, possibly even beyond the male-dominated literary sphere. Given the extent of her known salon activities and the diversity of her interlocutors, one may reasonably ask whether some of her supporters were women, a question that remains open due to the fragmentary nature of the archival record. At present, there is no evidence to confirm this, but the existing traces open up spaces of possibility.

These gaps in the record invite us to reconsider what might be uncovered if we were to approach the material with focused and deliberate attention, guided by the awareness that such support could have existed. This shift in perspective, being open to what has long gone unconsidered, can act like a door we had not previously noticed. Once opened, it may allow us to detect evidence that has remained hidden simply because no one thought to look for it in the first place. In this sense, the recognition of possibility becomes a critical methodological step toward expanding the boundaries of what we know and illuminating lives and networks that so far remained in the shadows.

Moreover, Copio Sullam’s intellectual stature was explicitly acknowledged within her own community. An important piece of evidence comes from the Venetian Jewish death registry, where her name is accompanied by the rare Hebrew inscription *isha maskelet* meaning wise woman, or intelligent woman. As Locci points out, this phrase, drawn from the book of proverbs (14:1 and 19:14), was not commonly used, and its presence in the Registro Morti 1627- 1653 of the Jewish Community Archive of Venice, l’Archivio della Comunità Ebraica di Venezia, offers further insight into her stature as “portata innovativa di una donna del suo calibro.” (Locci 2021)

Although Sara Copio Sullam's literary salon in the Venetian ghetto attracted numerous visitors from diverse backgrounds - "Che i cultori fossero italiani o stranieri, ebrei o cristiani, nella casa di Sara Copio Sullam trovavano un punto d'incontro per discussioni costruttive e culturalmente rilevanti."(<https://www.shalom.it/cultura/a-la-bella-ebrea-sara-copio-sullam-un-salotto-letterario-nel-ghetto-veneziano-del-a-600-b1100371/>) it is striking that there is no evidence of other women participating in these gatherings. This absence is all the more curious as contemporary to her lived other writers, with a clear focus and position, such as Lucrezia Marinella, Moderata Fonte and Arcangela Tarabotti. Yet as Westwater notes, "she seems not to have been in contact [with them] though these women's literary careers were also marred by the frequent hostility and charges of plagiarism that beset Copio Sullam." (Westwater 2007:98) Interestingly, Westwater writes of two other contemporary fellows, by now we know of at least three. Nevertheless, this absence of frequency with fellow writers raises important questions whether women intellectuals, even in the same city, really operated in separate spheres, were excluded or the absence is due to a lack of documents and proof that indeed there has been exchange. What now can be stated for sure, is that Sara Copio Sullam was not living a solitary life. When asked via eMail, whether Westwater as an expert in the field personally believes that these women knew each other she affirms that assumption. Westwater writes: "do think Marinella and Tarabotti likely knew of SCS (and vice versa, though SCS had retreated from her public literary life by the time Tarabotti rose to prominence). As I've noted a number of times, their literary networks were overlapping. Fonte is an entirely different story because of her early death -- but these women likely knew of her." (eMail Westwater June 2025)

In conclusion, the case of Sara Copio Sullam offers a compelling lens through which to examine the intersection of gender, religion, and authorship in early seventeenth-century Venice. Her intellectual and social engagement demonstrates the opportunities as well as the constraints faced by Jewish women in the early modern Republic of Venice. Despite tentative of her colleagues to convert her, despite accusations and betrayal, she remained intellectually active and steadfast in her faith. Recognition during her lifetime, support of other writers and posthumous admiration of her writing affirm her status within her context. This case study contributed to a fuller understanding of women's agency and intellectual presence in early modern Venice by recovering her voice and reassessing the archive with regard to connections and visibility.

4.2 *Giulia Lama*

This case study examines the life and work of Giulia Lama, a Venetian painter often described in historical accounts as a solitary figure confined to her chamber. By critically reassessing this narrative, this study seeks to trace the origins and persistence of this portrayal and to explore the extent of Lama's professional and artistic acting within the cultural and social fabric of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Venice.

Giulia Lama was born on October 1, 1681 in the parish of Santa Maria Formosa. She had four siblings and lived in her local parish on Calle Lunga until her death. There is no record of her ever having been married or having had children. ([https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giulia-lama_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giulia-lama_(Dizionario-Biografico)/))

According to Abbott Antonio Conti, Lama lived a secluded life. (see Conti in Pallucchini 1970:161f.) Despite this characterization of isolation, Lama's works are held today in public collections in Trieste, Bergamo and Venice, as well as in major international institutions such as the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Even more remarkable is the fact that portraits of Giulia Lama are exhibited in museums in Madrid and Zuerich. Drawing her portrait speaks to a level of recognition and staging within the art scene that goes beyond the image of an isolated painter. Recently, one of her paintings was auctioned by the Dorotheum in Vienna (<https://www.dorotheum.com/de/1/9501161/>), and several more have appeared in auctions internationally. (see <https://www.invaluable.com/artist/lama-giulia-391boxy4oj/sold-at-auction-prices/?srsltid=AfmBOorHWYGd5quB6J7-caFrJ9Ei38-nC-ZnRlf7d3eC0jLYV7kLxOJc>)

Therefore, while Conti described Lama as having led a withdrawn life, and according to Nisse, having suffered hostility from fellow painters, this image is complicated. To date, at least one professional connection of Lama is known – the painter and later leader of the first Venetian academy Giambattista Piazzetta (1682-1754). His portrait of Lama, that is now exposed in the Museum Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, “shows her as a working artist, holding her palette, her twisted pose conjuring the impression that Piazzetta interrupted her in the very act of painting” (Nisse 2024:218) Lama, in turn portrayed herself at work in a self-portrait, featuring

a compass and a book “alluding additionally to her literary talents and skill at geometry.” (ibid.) The stylistic similarity between the two portraits underscores an artistic dialogue between Lama and Piazzetta, the full extent of which and maybe also others remain to be explored. Apparently, according to the information text of the auction house Pandolfini, after having first studied mathematics she remained impressed by Piazzetta's chiaroscuro in his paintings and started studying with him, trying to interpret them in a highly probable dramatic way: “di cui cercò di dare un'interpretazione ad alto potenziale drammatico” (<https://www.pandolfini.it/it/asta-1355/giulia-lama-12019006778>) that led to her painting of Judith and Holofernes.

As Cheney observes “her daring act of drawing both male and female figures from the nude makes her one of the first woman to do so in the eighteenth century.” (Cheney 2017:230) Nisse states that if Lama indeed worked from the nude and did so in shared environments, such as Piazzetta's atelier, this prompts a reassessment of the extent to which women may have had access to life drawing from male models at the time. It raises the possibility that such opportunities were more available than previously assumed, or “whether, instead, she was a pioneer or outlier.” (Nisse 2024: 226) However, her output was not limited to nudes and altarpieces. Her repertoire matched that of many painters of the eighteenth century, engaging with mythological and biblical themes, as mentioned before the Judith and Holofernes for example. A painting recently exhibited in Naples, of Judith and Holofernes by Artemisia Gentileschi (cf. <https://www.monasterodisantachiara.it/artemisia-gentileschi/>) and dated to around 1630, raises further questions on artistic influence and circulation. Given that Gentileschi spent a brief period in Venice, it is worth considering whether Lama might have been aware of this work or whether it was simply a much-drawn image of the time. While direct evidence of such knowledge is lacking, the possibility highlights the interconnectedness of artistic networks and the role of female artists within them.

Cheney highlights the stylistic importance of Lama's work, noting that Lama's paintings convey narratives free from sentimentality or idealization. Through her use of light effects, realistic depiction of nude figure, and fluid brushwork, she aligns with a new stylistic direction “hence anticipating the depiction of lifelike manner in nineteenth-century Realism.” (Cheney 2017:241) Lama's reception during her lifetime and shortly after, was based on the typical style of that time, by comparing her with other women rather than giving her an individual reception.

In those comparisons the critic focused not only on their artistic achievements but also on their physical attributes.

Giulia Lama is thus remembered, if at all, through comparison with Rosalba Carriera (1673 – 1757), or as a solitary woman, an unattractive woman or for one specific commissioned piece such as her altarpiece. The question raises whether this is a new biographical pattern of the time. Now that more than one woman is known, they are not remembered as individual artists but as counterparts, woman who are compared to one another. Notably, Lama was studied by scholars such as Fiocco, Pallucchini, and Ruggieri, all male, and the literature on her remains relatively scarce. However, since “after her death in 1747, Giulia Lama all but disappeared from view” (Nisse 2024:218), she has then been rediscovered rediscovered recently, and therefore, can be analysed in more depth.

In fact, Ruggieri reattributes a painting called *San Rocco in preghiera* to Giulia Lama, contrary to previous assumptions that it was by the dalmatian painter Bencovich. (see Ruggieri 2010 in Crosilla 2012:87) Ruggieri corrects also other paintings. Therefore, some unveiling already happened in the beginning of the twentieth century and is reopened now. Currently the safe venice inc. is conservating a work that is attributed to Giulia Lama: *Four Evangelists*, a bold group of large canvases for the Venetian church of San Marziale. (Nisse 2024:214) Despite their remarkable expressiveness these paintings have received only limited attention to date. Nisse presents three possible reasons, the first being that the placement of the *Four Evangelists* sprandels six meters above their respective altars, the second that conservation issues have partly obscured her works until now and the third, a reason that is a recurrent theme in this work: “Giulia Lama’s relative neglect by art history.” (Nisse 2024:215) to be discussed in regards to visibility today

Cheney writes that although Lama was a painter, she likely needed another source of income to sustain herself. Given her limited patronage and the possibility that she painted only part-time, Cheney suggests that lacemaking may have provided her with financial stability and enabled her to live independently. She states that, “for a woman to be economically independent was defying society and was a credit to her sex.” (Cheney 2017:226) At present, little is known about Giulia Lama’s workspace or whether she had assistants. (see Nisse 2024:228) If she has had assistants, or the possibility of it doubts in consequence the narrative of her secluded lifestyle. Cheney’s assumption on the historical documentation describing her

as lonely and living in seclusion may be “due to her artistic commitments and intellectual interests.” (Cheney 2017:226) In all cases, as Logan states, Lama’s “network and collaborations reveal a professional artist with significant intellectual ambition.” (Logan 2005: 530)

When analyzed to “their positioning within this church and their figurative power” (Nisse 2024:229) Giulia Lama’s artworks have the potential to be not only on a level with Piazzetta, her friend and at their time of living a very influential Venetian artist but also “with one of the major Venetian figurative artists of all time, Jacopo Tintoretto.” (ibid.) Jacopo Tintoretto has been a famous artist and received much recognition for his work. In fact, the biographer Carlo Ridolfi dedicated him a chapter that lasted 90 pages. In this same book, the next artists discussed is a certain Marietta Robusti, his daughter. The next chapter shall shed a light on her and analyze her particular case as a female artist in the Republic of Venice.

4.3 Marietta Robusti

This chapter will be analyzing the case of Marietta Robusti. As previously mentioned, after her father’s vita, one chapter is dedicated to her. However, as seen in the two figures beneath, whereas her father receives a 90 pages long dedication, hers comprehends two pages. Furthermore, whereas Jacopo Robusti is described as Cittadino Veneziano, a Venetian citizen, Marietta Robusti is described as figliuola di Jacopo, his daughter. That being said, the following chapter will try to decipher the potential and work of Marietta Robusti and her standing according to the biographer as well as according to recent scholarship.

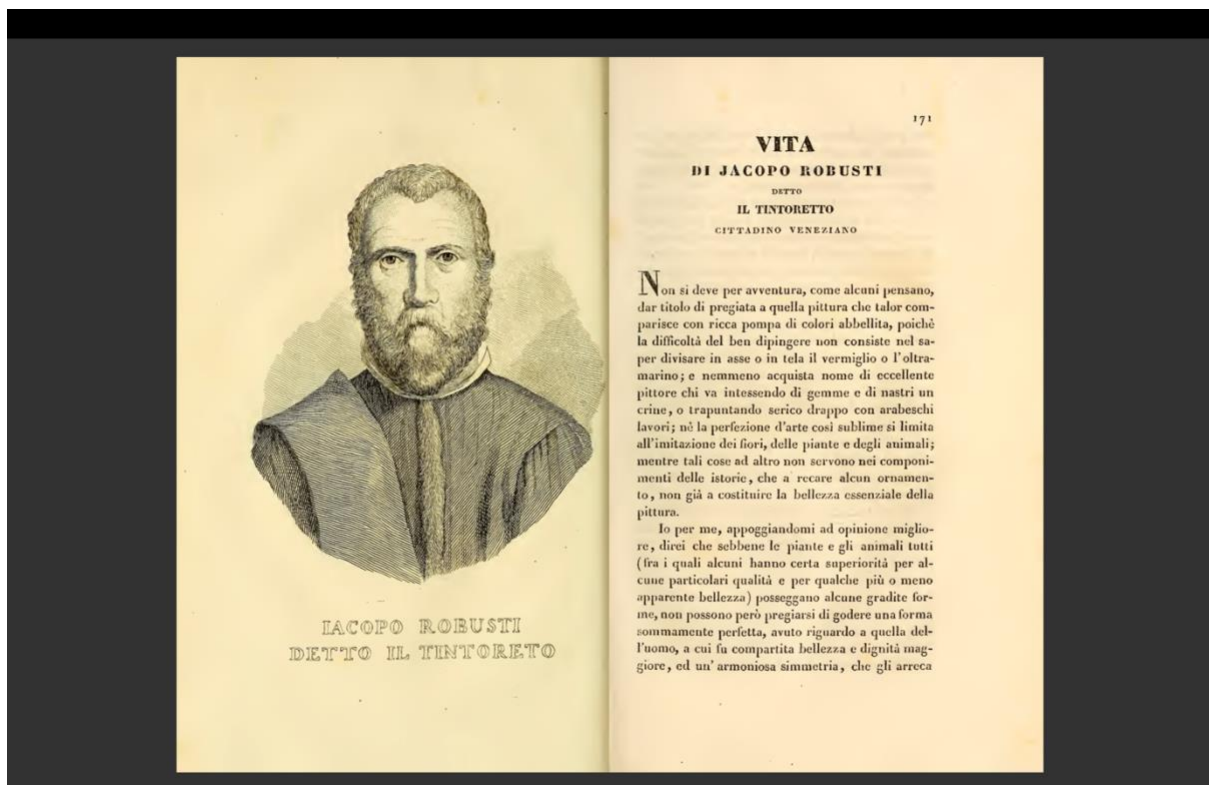


Figure 1, Ridolfi, Le Maraviglie dell'Arte, 1648, page 171

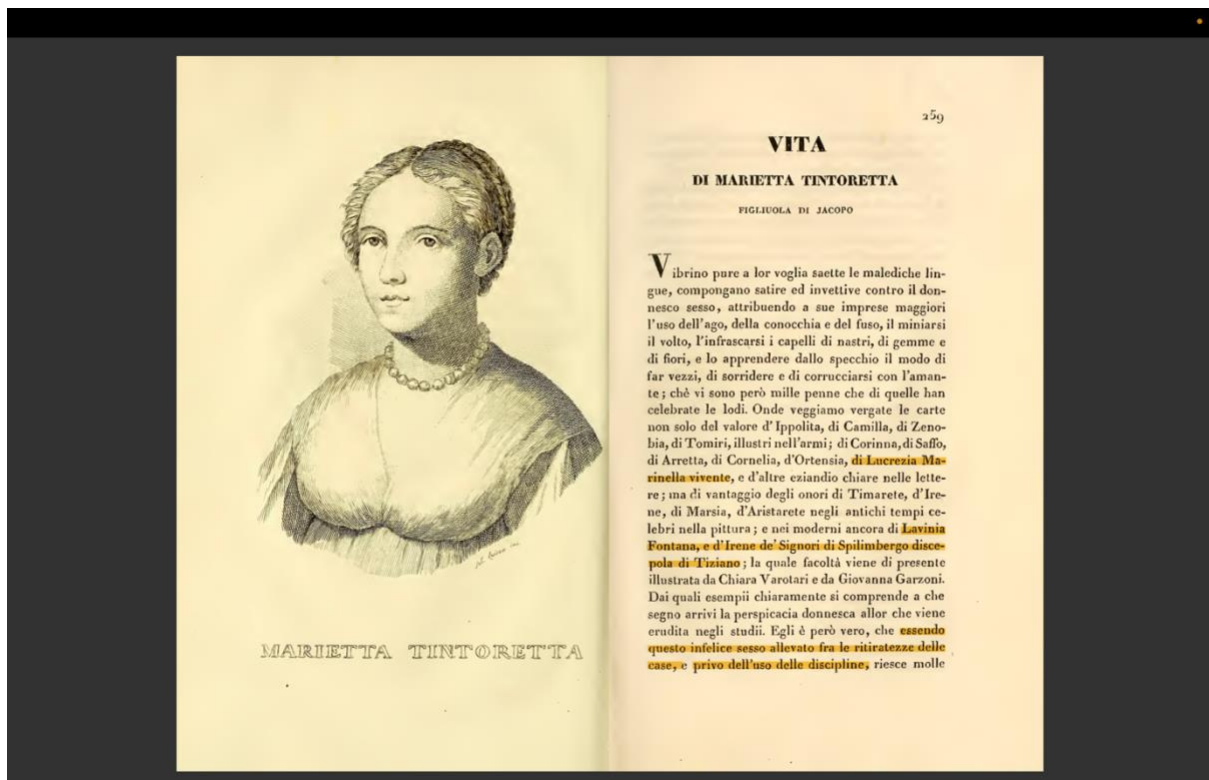


Figure 2, Ridolfi, Le Maraviglie dell'Arte, 1648, page 259

In his *Meraviglie dell'arte*, published in 1648, Carlo Ridolfi opens the 90-page vita of Jacopo Tintoretto with a telling declaration: “e la perfezione d'arte così sublime si limita all'imitazione dei fiori, delle piante e degli animali; mentre tali cose ad altro non servono nei componimenti delle istorie, che a recare alcun ornamento, non già a costituire la bellezza essenziale della pittura.” (Ridolfi 1648:171) meaning: true excellence in painting lies in the ability to represent the human figure with perfection, proportion, emotion, and expressive force, for it is the noblest of all divine creations. All that is merely ornamental or naturalistic may serve as embellishment, but it does not constitute the essence of painting. By doing so he creates an aesthetic hierarchy that places intellectual and expressive mastery above decorative imitation. This shaped how Ridolfi, and his contemporary early art historians, conceptualised artistic greatness. In fact, when Ridolfi turns to Marietta Robusti, Tintoretto's daughter and student, she is mainly described as the “delizia più cara del genio suo” (Ridolfi 1648:257), the dearest delight of his genius, and praised for her many talents, still framed as exceptional for a woman: “in lei sola si videro molte virtuose qualità [...] sparse difficilmente si trovano in altre.” (ibid.) Marietta Robusti, known as Tintoretta, was the daughter of Jacopo Tintoretto. She was raised in Venice within her father's workshop and received a comprehensive education in drawing and painting. As a child she wore boys' clothing and because her father took her with him wherever he went, people were believing she was a boy: “onde era tenuta da tutti per maschio.” (ibid) As described in Chapter one on the spaces in the city of men and women, the latter were meant to be in the private space and men could freely enter the public sphere. Savage notes that sumptuary laws imposed strict penalties on women wearing male clothing, raising doubts as to whether Tintoretto would have truly endangered his daughter's reputation in this way, or whether Ridolfi may have exaggerated aspects of Robusti's biography. (see Savage 2012:4) The story of Marietta Robusti is shaped almost entirely by male-authored sources, none of which were written by those who knew her directly. In Savage's words, “remains are the words of men who may not even have met her.” (Savage 2012:30) Indeed, Ridolfi's biography closely follows the earlier mention by Raffaello Borghini in *Il Riposo*, published in 1584. Savage writes that “the credibility of Ridolfi specifically lies in his known connection to the Robusti family.” (Savage 2012:23) According to Wagner however, Ridolfi's biography is clearly modelled on Borghini's, expanding slightly on the details but largely repeating the same tropes. What Ridolfi adds is the part on the boy's clothes that Robusti is wearing as a youngster to

accompany her father to the commissions. A later source, the *Genealogia della Casa Tintoretto*, published in 1682, claims that Robusti was the illegitimate daughter of Tintoretto and a German woman who he deeply loved. (see Wagner 2023:10) Ultimately, due to scarcity and contradictions in sources, modern scholarship remains uncertain about Robusti's precise biography and her oeuvre "sofern man ueberhaupt davon sprechen kann" (Wagner 2023:10) – if there is even an oeuvre.

Despite being described as a skilled portraitist, and "chief assistant" (Savage 2012:28) in her father's workshop, little of Robusti's work survives today, and scholars are unsure whether there has been her work at all. Ridolfi mentions portraits of Marco de' Vescovi and his son Pietro, as well as various noblemen and women, friends of her husband. Many of these works were already lost by the time Ridolfi wrote her biography, "col mancar delle famiglie, molti se ne sono smarriti." (Ridolfi 1648:261) In the twentieth century the question of provenience was reopened in 1934 with Erica Tietze-Conrat's claim that the double portrait 'Old Man and a boy' bore the initials M.R. and could be Robusti's work. Tietze derived "that it was plausibly the portrait of Robusti's grandfather Marco dei Vescovi and his son Pietro, mentioned by Ridolfi." (Savage 2012:25) However, "Erich von der Becken rebuffed the theory, though neither claim has been definitively proven." (ibid.)

Diverse scholars, such as Marinelli and Savage, argue that what made Robusti noteworthy may not have been the special artistic skills but rather her uniqueness as a woman in a male-dominated profession. They believe that foreign courts' interest in her were more likely to be because of her position rather than solely the art. (see Savage 2012, Marinelli 1996)

Apparently, Robusti became particularly skilled in portraiture. Among her known works were portraits of "Marco de' Vescovi, con lunga barba", at Ridolfi's times still preserved in the Tintoretto household, and "quello di Pietro suo figliuolo." Her models enjoyed her "praticar [...] essendo ripiena di tratti gentili, e trattenendole col canto e col suono." She had a social charm and entertained them with her singing and playing. Savage reflects on this part of Ridolfi's explanation of Robusti's many talents, that she produced original compositions of her own and also adapted works her father had made, suggests that she contributed far more than portraiture." (Savage 2012:6) Her reputation spread beyond Venice, and she caught attention of powerful men. For example, she painted a portrait of Jacopo Strada, antiquarian to the Emperor Maximilian, which Strada gifted to the Emperor as *opera rara*. As a result, the

Emperor requested her for his court. Also “Filippo II, re di Spagna, e l’arciduca Ferdinando” made similar requests.” (Ridolfi 1648:260) Therefore, we can assume that she probably met people, had contact and exchange and ultimately, was known and despite being secluded also not! This being said, one could reconceptualize the private sphere, what did it mean being secluded, and does it in some ways differ from the twenty-first century approach on seclusion? Besides the artistic training, Robusti received musical training, studying singing and instruments under Giulio Zacchino, a Neapolitan musician described by Ridolfi as a very good musician, “tenuto a que’ tempi eccellente nella musica”. (ibid.) She is described by Ridolfi as a highly cultivated and versatile woman. Is it worth considering whether many more women might have been equally educated, versatile, or talented, but persistent societal assumptions about female capabilities prevented this from being recognised? Despite various examples suggesting otherwise, the dominant narrative, the narrative found in the *vite*, remained that women were not intellectually or artistically gifted. Interestingly, this standard was not equally applied to men – there were also male artists or writers with limited formal education, as we saw in Chapter one, many were *popolani*, whose talents were not questioned on that basis. The assumption of female inferiority in education and artistic capacity appears therefore to be gendered. I recall reading in *Veltri* that such biases remain “triste realtà” – a sad reality – and that this discrepancy in judgement continues to shape how female and male artists are remembered and evaluated.

Ridolfi concludes that Robusti’s *vita* should serve as a model of feminine virtue, and that true adornment lies not in jewelry or fine clothing but in the moral qualities that endure beyond life, “i veri ornamenti femminili ma quelle virtù che risplendono nell'animo, e che rimangono eterne dopo la vita.” (Ridolfi 1648:261) This framing still remains moralizing and categorizing, reinforcing gender norms as it appears to transcend them.

Ultimately, if what remains of Marietta Robusti are the words of men and a few uncertain portraits, then we must acknowledge the interpretive space this opens – not just to speculate, but to critique. And in doing so, we should also reconsider women like Giulia Lama, whose supposed reclusiveness may not reflect social withdrawal, but rather a refusal to engage on male terms. The absence of women in history therefore reveals less about their actual presence, and more about the conditions of visibility under which histories were, and still are, written. The next case study will illuminate the story of Veronica Franco, who has had quite a lot of

visibility, but that was very much owned and entangled with her particular work and its conception rather than her art heritage.

4.4 Veronica Franco

Veronica Franco, 1546 -1591, has been cited in the preface of this paper and shall be included in the analysis of women artists, their reception and their networks. She has been a poet and a writer, with clear political messages as seen above. The letters not only show her progressiveness in terms of concepts such as masculinity but also her political will to act as an agent within a context that, while enabling a certain degree of female intellectual emancipation, simultaneously perpetuated misogynistic ideologies and renders her if not invisible then visible through a very certain lens, much connected to her main income job, a courtesane of honour. To attain such a position in Renaissance Venice meant access to a sphere of public life that was generally barred to women of the patrician and cittadina classes. The cortigiana onesta offered “offered social and intellectual refinement [through poetry, music, performance and intellectual exchange] in return for patronage” (ibid.:6). Franco’s writings, comparable in function to those of the male courtier, can therefore be read as strategies to secure recognition and social legitimacy. Within her poetry, sexual actions are often placed in deliberate parallel with poetic virtuosity. (see ibid.) Rosenthal, who wrote the first English biography of Veronica Franco, and who critically examines the stories that have been told about her before especially in the context of her being a courtesan, describes Franco’s legacy as an “intriguing and eloquent testimony to a courtesan’s interaction with the Venetian patriciate and with leading intellectuals in Venetian society.” (Rosenthal 1992:1) The fact that she has been a courtesan had various implications. On the one hand, Franco maintained connections with influential patrons and, allegedly, even with King Henry of France. It has been suggested that she functioned as a form of soft power in the tensions between Venice and the Church. On the other hand, as Rosenthal argues, her identity as a courtesan set her apart from encounters or the establishment of networks with other women such as writer Moderata Fonte. Fonte published a feminist pamphlet in 1600, yet apparently due to their different social positions, the two women never met. Since this thesis challenges established assumptions and encourages further scholarly

exploration of hidden networks, it seems worthwhile to acknowledge Rosenthal's argument while also considering whether traces of a possible meeting or a mutual influence might be uncovered. Although Rosenthal observes that "much remains to be learned about the salons women held; what we know comes from the occasional reference to social gatherings in women's familiar letters." (ibid.:87) She concludes that "in the absence of information on this important subject, or on the connections between women writers from different European countries who might have formed a literary subculture, it is hard to come to any other conclusion than that women had few intellectual networks that bound them together as a group." (ibid.)

It is necessary to realize that since 1992 much more on women's networks has been discovered, as seen previously and that it would be worth it to continue to find out whether those networks may have been stronger than previously assumed. As she recalls the absence of information, this should be a reminder to the visibility/ invisibility dispute and therefore not seen as a Grenze but rather an obstacle worth overcoming. It may seem plausible that class differences led to less engagement between the women, "the silence that existed between Franco and Fonte (da Pozzo), for example, attests most vividly to the social boundaries that divided courtesan from cittadina writer-and this despite the fact that Franco was herself by birth a cittadina" (Rosenthal 1992: 87) However, it is important to remember that just because a relation is not visible directly doesn't mean it hasn't existed.

Like Sara Sullam, she defends herself, acts with experience, and speaks on her own behalf. When Veronica Franco was summoned before the Inquisition on October 8, 1580. To respond to anonymous accusations of performing heretical spells in her house near San Giovanni Novo, "she had already gained valuable experience in defending herself against vindictive opposition." (Rosenthal 1992:153) Franco was in "opposition to a system of injustice directed not only against her own person but in fact against all women" (Samà 2023:48)

As Hélène Cixous observes, writing then constitutes the very possibility of transformation "the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures." (Cixous 1976: 879) Letters such as the ones written by Franco remind us the power and subversive acts that have always existed, no matter the circumstance oppressing them.

4.5 Discussion

As explained in the introduction to chapter one, this thesis wanted to contribute to a narrative that challenges the conventional framework that of the solitary male genius. This narrative only acknowledges women when they are deemed extraordinarily talented or exceptionally deserving of recognition, and also then it is questionable whether it should be part of our contemporary vocabulary. Marietta Robusti's case and recent scholarship around it interprets her biographers praise as potentially a reason of her promotion and not oriented on her actual skill. In addition, even if Barbero saw women in a positive light and contrasted the misogynistic understanding that women were not to be considered as seen in chapter 2, nevertheless his argument was not helpful for women artists, whom being a mom was not a primary concern. The Venetian maxime, the broader movement in Venice toward prioritizing civic duty and the common good over personal profit could have had an implication for biographies as discussed before. However, as we have seen in Ridolfi's vitae when discussing Marietta Robusti's case, there has been a significant difference in biographical description not only substantially but also in terms of the length when comparing the father to the daughter. Now, we don't know much about Robusti's quality of paintings, still the content of the biography indicates a difference of the quality of the text on a gendered dimension. The case that Robusti was dressed in male clothing makes sense given the fact that the moral restrictions women had to follow also determined their public visibility, as discussed in Chapter 1.5. On a reflection on the previously mentioned art historian Erica Tietze-Conrat and her visibility in the 1920's an example of how Artur Schnitzler, the writer, notes a visit of her husband and herself. He writes the full name of the husband and in relation to Tietze he just writes a plus one. As Polt-Heinzl argues, such notions typically do not generate index entries, and thus women are excluded from registers, and by extension, from the annals of history. She writes, „das „und Frau“ generiert – wie hier – in der Regel keinen Register-Eintrag.” (Polt-Heinzl 2015)

Sara Copio Sullam is an example as a figure who actively built an intellectual community of exchange and debate by establishing her literary salon. Being intersectionally discriminated as woman and as a Jew, she had to navigate these difficulties during her whole life. Her story reflects the fragility of female authorship when mediated through male-controlled institutions of transmission. Her defence of Jewish, her own, belief, and her written legacy affirm the

potential of a woman intellectually engaged and unafraid to respond to accusations in the public sphere.

Sara Copio Sullam's marriage was arranged by her father, a wealthy man who secured for her a substantial dowry. As discussed in chapter two, such financial arrangements were often framed as enabling a woman's future security or kind of power. However, while wealth and a generous dowry could provide a foundation for autonomy, this counts more for a widow than a married woman. In Sullam's case, it appears that access to education and cultural capital, rather than the wealth per se, formed the basis for her intellectual and creative activity. The investment in her training and the ideological basis of her husband and the people with more power around her were more consequential than her wealth in enabling to shape her own trajectory. On the other hand wealth did play a role in the *ausgangspunkt* of her activities, as we have also seen in Chapter 1 regarding life in the Ghetto and different chances of discourse related to wealth.

When Sullam asserted her own identity and resisted pressures to convert, she was vilified and betrayed by those who had previously supported or courted her. The attacks she endured mobilized entrenched gendered and religious prejudices, marking her experience and attack a form of intersectional discrimination. She was targeted not only as a woman who defied male authority but also as a Jew who challenged prevailing Christian supremacy. Although little is known about the circle of female supporters that may have surrounded her, there is some indication of its existence. This gap suggests an important direction for future research: exploring networks of women who may have offered solidarity and intellectual support to Sullam. According to Lynn Westwater, Sullam was likely familiar with other women artists and intellectuals of her time. (Lynn Westwater, personal communication, 3 June 2025) Whether this contact resulted in documented exchanges, remains an open question. The potential existence of such materials invites further archival investigation and would offer valuable insights into the collaborative or dialogic dimension of early modern women's cultural production. Marietta Robusti, by contrast, is a figure whose visibility was constructed almost entirely through male-authored narratives. Positioned as her father's prodigious daughter, Robusti's identity remains tied to the family and to the statement of her exceptionality. Her biography raises questions about authorship, attribution and provenience, and the ways in which female artistic labour was integrated within workshop economies. While Robusti's

networks are likely extended to courtly and international influential men, her legacy is filtered through a lens that moralizes and aestheticizes her rather than recognizing her as a professional in her own right.

The case of Marietta Robusti illustrates several key dynamics concerning the position of women artists in the Venetian context. While it is known that she was eventually married, there is no documentation regarding a dowry, which might otherwise provide insight into her social and economic standing within her natal or marital household. Her father appears to have played a dominant role in shaping both her personal and artistic life. Robusti died at 30 years old, a young age, and this early death significantly limits also her artistic repertoire.

One may ask whether the relative absence of extensive biographical narratives for women artists such as Robusti is tied not only to the structures of Venetian society but also to broader historiographical tendencies. Unlike her father, who is the subject of an extensive ninety-page chapter detailing his artistic achievements, Robusti is afforded only a brief biographical account, focused on anecdotal aspects of her charm, artistic versatility, and her role in receiving and entertaining guests. The emphasis lies on the fact that she was desired by various courts, though her father consistently refused to let her go. This could either mean that he followed protective or strategic motivations. However, her own artistic output, by contrast, remains largely marginalised within these accounts.

This discrepancy is also reflected visually and symbolically: whereas Tintoretto appears on the chapter introduction as the celebrated artist, Robusti is cast primarily as his daughter. This framing mirrors long-standing tendencies in early modern art history to subordinate female artists to male genealogies.

In terms of education, the general pattern in sixteenth-century Venice did not favour the training of daughters in the visual arts. As noted in Chapter two, most leading male painters did not pass their experience and skills to their daughters, even though the workshop was seen as a family business. Therefore, it cannot be stated that in this case of education at least the texture of the Republic was favourable for the evolution of women artists. However, later, when convents started to educate young women in the musical arts especially, things changed and those convents produced a lot of artists. This phenomenon starts in the middle/ end of the 17th century, and is not covered here in this thesis. Back to Venice, Robusti's inclusion in her father's workshop is particularly noteworthy, as she has been included in some forms, though

the precise nature and extent of her participation remain unclear and also whether, this inclusion was more of a performance than rather a fact. It is evident, that Robusti was visible with certain social and cultural circles. It can be assumed that she came into contact with various individuals and had opportunities for exchange and recognition. This invites a reconsideration of what the private sphere' entailed in the Venetian context: what did it mean to be secluded in early modern Venice, and how might this differ from contemporary understandings of privacy and domesticity? Regarding her position within her father's workshop, the lack of documentation makes it difficult to determine her exact contributions or artistic responsibilities. Much of what is known doesn't stem from her own voice but from attributions, back then and in the modern ages. As some scholars suggest, the possibility is raised that Robusti has been instrumentalized – as an exceptional case of female artistry she could have been used to enhance the fame of her father's workshop.

Nevertheless, she was known to be cultivated and socially agreeable. Sources highlight her musical skills and her ability to entertain male and female guests, suggesting her being appreciated not only for her talent in drawing but also for her broader artistic contributions such as musical skills and social skills. This multidimensional talent may have further reinforced her appeal in elite and courtly circles- however, it still remained underposed to male-controlled structures of representation and mobility.

Giulia Lama, generally depicted as reclusive, emerges instead as a professional artist with intellectual ambition and remarkable technical skill. As Giulia Lama was also depicted as ugly, calling her reclusive could stem from the prejudiced perception of her appearance. In fact, Chadwick argues that “women artists have often been subjected to judgments based on their physical appearance” (Chadwick 2012:112) which consequently influenced both contemporary and later understandings of their identity and artistic contributions. Chadwick then proceed to state that “sometimes [this action led] to unfair labels such as ‘reclusive’ or ‘unapproachable.’” (ibid.) As seen in Robusti's case the women's analysis back at their time was closely tied to an image they had. Her personal and professional contacts further complicate assumptions of isolation. Her engegament with the drawing style chiaroscuro and dramatic biblical subjects, and furthermore, her collaboration with contemporaries like Piazzetta, suggest a more complex, networked presence than commonly assumed. In addition to this friendship, there is evidence that she may have employed models for nude studies. As described before, this encourages a

reconsideration of how much access women may have had to drawing from male nude models during that period. It opens up the question of whether such practices were more common than traditionally believed, or if her case represents an exceptional or pioneering instance. However, given the fact that the genius term excluded women in general from being artists, it is noteworthy that apparently in practice their art still somehow has been recognized. The geni She appears to have achieved a degree of financial independence and to have employed assistants or staff, which marks a substantial shift from figures like Marietta Robusti. This difference may be partly explained by the turn of the century around 1600, a period that coincides with the cultural debate of the *Querelle des femmes*. Here new ways of thinking were stimulated about women's intellectual and creative capacities, as described above.

In Lama's case, the dowry she received was not necessarily a form of direct support of her artistic or intellectual pursuits. Rather, it points out to the availability of wealth and a favourable social environment that enabled women's visibility and participation. Sullam's example underscores how a supportive cultural terrain, combined with individual confidence and ambition, could foster a woman's flourishing. In fact, this view conciliates with Harrán's observation that the dowry that this artist "brought to her marriage was less a direct investment in her literary career than a reflection of her family's wealth and the social milieu that enabled her intellectual visibility and participation." (Harrán, 2010, p. 78)

Lama's case shows how narratives of female isolation may result more from interpretation at their times as well as historiographical omission than from historical fact. Her marginal position in art history contrasts with her actual productivity and artistic experimentation, highlighting how female visibility was not necessarily tied, or not at all tied, to contemporaneous fame or consistent documentation.

Despite their different degrees of visibility and historical survival, all three women demonstrate that artistic and intellectual engagement of female artists was not absent in early modern Venice, it was rather contested constrained, negotiated, and in some cases, reclaimed. These women's cases complicate simplistic dichotomies of private versus public or visible versus invisible. Instead, they suggest that women's presence in the cultural life of the Republic was often mediated by intersecting factors of gender, class and religion. Ultimately, reading these women side by side and with the knowledge of the context of the time and space not only

allows for a richer understanding of their individual trajectories, but also reassess how we read and recover female authorship and artistry (and the role of men in it).

General Conclusions

Women's artistic production in the Republic of Venice during the early modern era was a vibrant yet historically underrecognized side of the city's rich cultural landscape. Despite operating within a patriarchal society that imposed significant social and institutional constraints, the genius narrative that excluded women from being able to be creative, Venetian women artists found ways to participate in and contribute to the visual and material culture of the city and its territories from the fifteenth throughout the eighteenth century. Their work, in parts marginalized or overlooked by traditional historiography, played a role in shaping the artistic and cultural identity of the Republic, a role that modern scholarship is only now beginning to fully recover.

While the creative presence of women in early modern Venice has too often been relegated to the margins of historical discourse, a closer look at their lived experiences and professional trajectories reveals a far more interconnected and dynamic reality. It is from this perspective that the present thesis set out to question prevailing assumptions about women's isolation, ultimately demonstrating that, despite formidable barriers, Venetian women artists were indeed woven into the complex social and artistic networks that defined the Republic's cultural identity.

This thesis began with the question of whether women artists in early modern Venice were, contrary to traditional assumptions, integrated members of the Republic's artistic and social networks. The research has demonstrated that indeed, despite systemic restrictions and the persistent invisibilization of their contributions, women were not isolated figures but participants in cultural, intellectual, and professional exchange. Their histories, as fragmentary as they sometimes are, challenge the enduring narrative of the lone male genius, which only rarely makes space for exceptional women deemed worthy of inclusion. It has also been discussed, that it is not a narrative worth having for a few women as it is exclusionary per se. The four case studies presented, Sara Copio Sullam, Giulia Lama, Marietta Robusti, and Veronica Franco each offer a distinct yet interconnected perspective on the intellectual and

artistic room for maneuver of women in the Republic of Venice around 1600. Taken together, they are an example on women's lives and intersectional struggles in their times as well as the still ongoing disparities regarding the reception of history.

On the same time, Sullam and Lama are a testimony for taking up space, pursuing a path that has not been paved for them and succeeding as far as possible. Robusti's case is an example for the position of a talented woman in a society that imposed restrictions and had much opinion on them.

These cases, taken together, complicate the view of Venice as either uniquely enabling or entirely misogynistic. The Republic did not systematically support women artists, and yet women such as Lama, Robusti, Franco and Sullam managed to assert forms of intellectual and artistic presence. Each in their own way and social and artistic register.

While historical narratives often depict early modern women as isolated or exceptional, this research confirms that all of the women studied maintained social or professional connections, even if these were not always preserved in the archival record or framed through dominant historiographical lenses.

Such findings bring a wide range of implications. First, the visibility or invisibility of these women today is shaped not just by their historical conditions, but by how art history as inherently political has chosen to tell, or not tell, their stories. The disproportion between the coverage of a male versus a female artist, such as in the case of Tintoretto and Robusti, and the not existing coverage of other artists, exemplifies an imbalance that has to be acknowledged. This underscores a broader epistemological point: we are acutely aware of how much we do not know. The gaps and silences in the sources reflect not an absence of activity, but the historical and methodological limitations that have shaped what has been preserved and interpreted. What has long been assumed to be factual often corresponds more closely with time-specific projections rather than the historical and also factual reality. Even if Giulia Lamas biographer assumes that she lives a secluded life, that reflects his understanding of seclusion and not the fact that she didn't meet anyone for example.

In sum, the evidence gathered affirms the central hypothesis of the thesis: women artists were not lonely, secluded and out of society – they were active, in their own possible ways, discussed members of Venetian society. Even though they navigated their lives and careers in different ways, what unites these cases is the inadequacy of the male genius paradigm. Despite its

centrality in Venetian art, the workshop's most significant aid, Marietta Robusti, remains undocumented in any sustained or reliable way.

The obscuration of women's contributions, they have been mediated, and at times instrumentalized. This demands not only for ongoing recovery but a reconfiguration of the frameworks through which we assess artistic value, visibility, and legacy.

Looking ahead, this analysis underscored and underscores the importance of continued research and educational engagement that contribute to a rethinking of the frameworks through which we interpret history and society. These women's lives invited us to reimagine intellectual history not as a fixed canon, but as an evolving map of overlooked connections and emerging possibilities. For this reason, I advocate for further research into women artists connections and also non-artists. The apparent absence of any comprehensive mapping or systematic identification of women artists in Venice highlights a significant gap. Addressing this is not only essential for expanding the field of art historical inquiry, but also for substantiating the argument that women were indeed present, active, and networked. Visual methodologies, such as mapping via a social network analysis, how for example in the case of the letter exchange during the time of the German Romantik (see <https://briefe-der-romantik.de>) offer promising tools for making these connections visible and for challenging the long-standing erasure of women from historical narratives.

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Diese Arbeit widmet sich der Sichtbarmachung von Menschen, die in der Republik Venedig gewirkt haben und nicht im Kanon der Erzählungen Platz gefunden haben.

Sie macht sich also auf die Suche nach den versteckten Spuren und leistet so einen Beitrag zu einem erweiterten Verständnis der Republik Venedig. Es möchte die unsichtbaren Schriften, Bilder, Musikstücke einer Epoche kennenlernen. Sie zeigt auf, dass Künstlerinnen trotz signifikanter gesellschaftlicher und institutioneller Barrieren aktive Teilnehmerinnen an den kulturellen und sozialen Netzwerken Venedigs waren. Der Fokus der Arbeit liegt in der eingehenden Analyse von vier zentralen Künstlerinnen: Sara Copio Sullam, Giulia Lama, Marietta Robusti und Veronica Franco, wobei ihre Karrieren, Netzwerke und Sichtbarkeit im sozial-politischen Kontext Venedigs um das 16. und 17. Jahrhundert untersucht werden.

Die Arbeit offenbart, dass diese Frauen, obwohl sie im institutionellen Rahmen einer gesellschaftlichen Ordnung agierten, die formale Bildung, Ausbildung und Anerkennung von Frauen einschränkte, in Netzwerke künstlerischen und intellektuellen Austauschs eingebunden waren. Sie verhandelten ihren Zugang zu Bildung, knüpften soziale Beziehungen und behaupteten Handlungsspielräume innerhalb der Einschränkungen ihrer Zeit. Ihre Sichtbarkeit in historischen Aufzeichnungen variiert und wird häufig von geschlechtsspezifischen und religiösen Vorurteilen beeinflusst.

Es wird der Mythos des einsamen männlichen Genies abgelehnt und stattdessen die Künstlerinnen als integralen Bestandteil des kulturellen Gefüges Venedigs positioniert. Durch die Verbindung von Gender Studies, Politikwissenschaft und Kunstgeschichte bekräftigt sie die Bedeutung sozialer, kultureller und politischer Netzwerke für das Verständnis der Beiträge von Frauen in der Frühen Neuzeit Venedigs. Darüber hinaus plädiert sie für weitere interdisziplinäre Forschung, wie die Analyse sozialer Netzwerke, um das volle Ausmaß der künstlerischen Präsenz von Frauen zu entdecken und abzubilden.

Letztlich fordert die Arbeit eine Neukonfiguration kunsthistorischer Erzählungen, um die komplexen Realitäten von Künstlerinnen besser anzuerkennen und zu integrieren, ihre Kämpfe, Errungenschaften sowie die Strukturen, die sie sowohl einschränkten als auch ermöglichten, sichtbar zu machen.