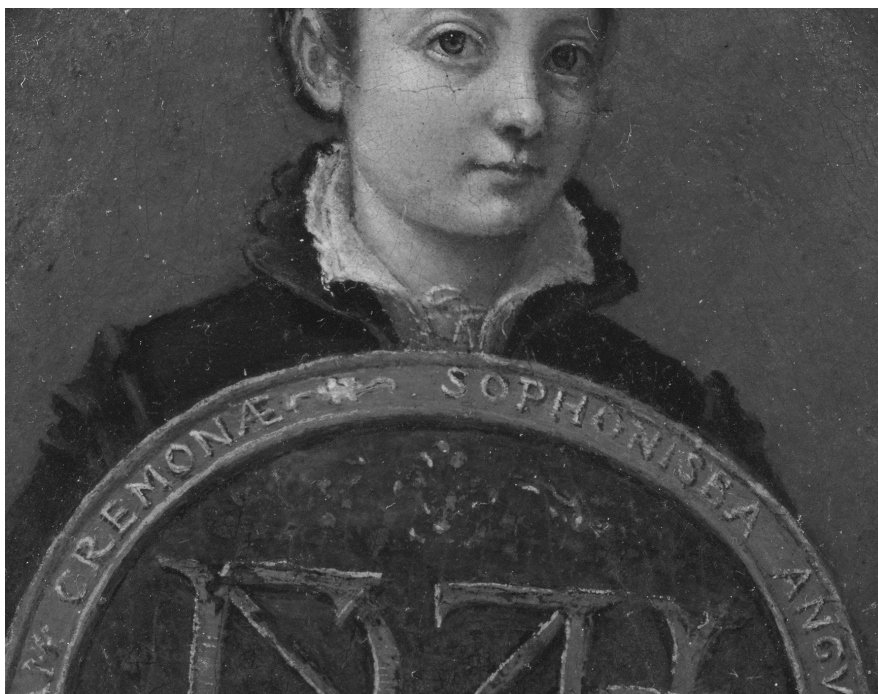
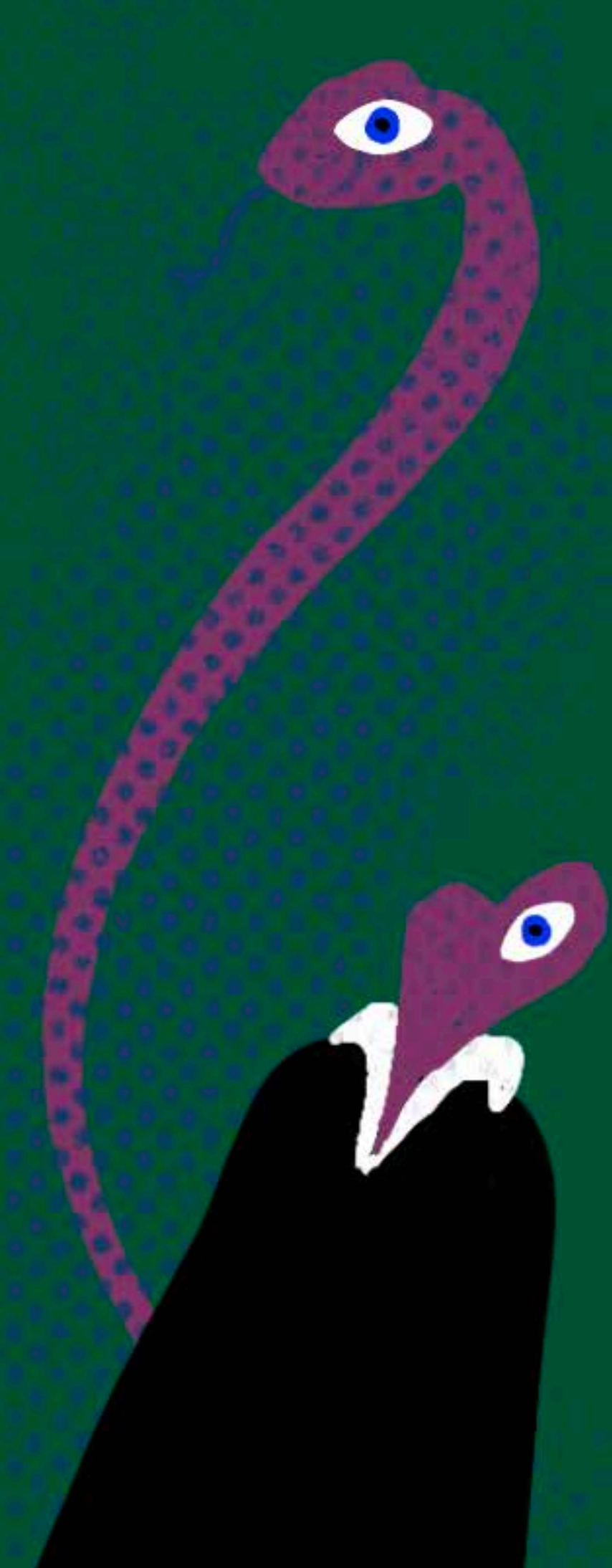


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## Unfolding the Overlapping Bodies: An Analysis of Sofonisba Anguissola's Self-Portrait Miniature in Boston as a Feminist Manifesto



Praised both by her contemporaries and scholars today as the most prominent female artist of the Renaissance, Sofonisba Anguissola is no stranger in the history of art. There is much discussion of her works in the critical literature by art historians such as Mary Garrard and Fredrika Jacobs, who offer insights on her uniqueness as a female artist in her time. These scholars provide a fairly comprehensive overview of Anguissola's works and her revolutionary mind, but a self-portrait miniature (in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) seems overlooked (fig. 1). Although it has not received



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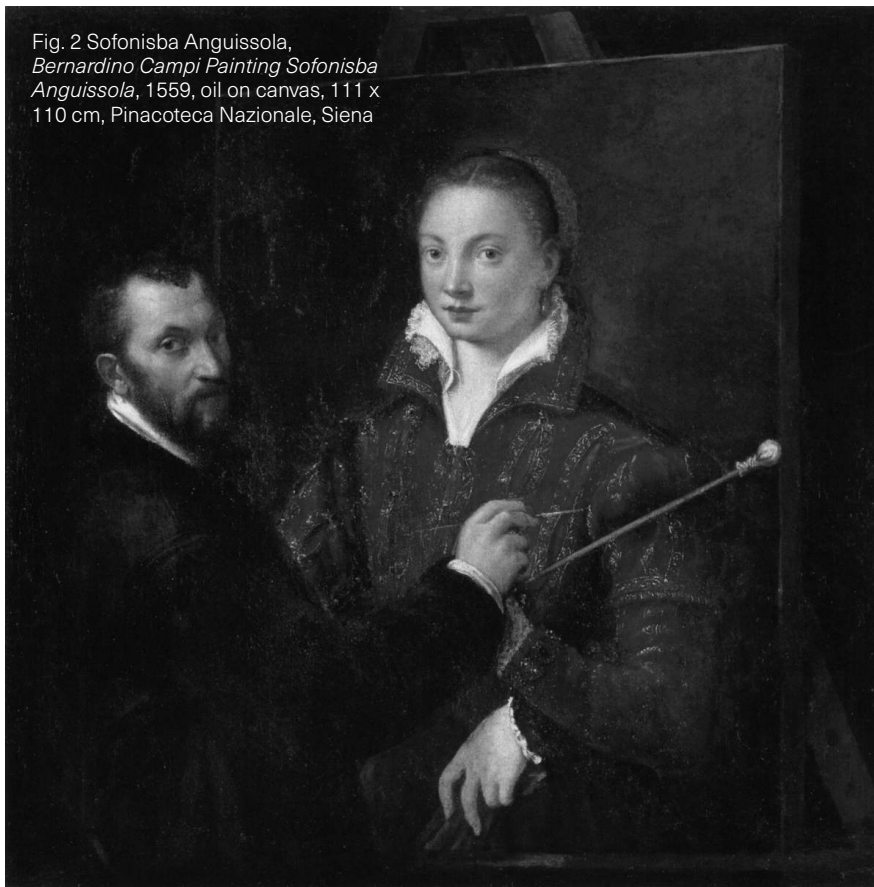
*“Anguissola, as the artist of this painting, plays both the role of the subject and object, the creator and the created.”*

much scholarly attention—both Garrard and Jacobs mention it only briefly in their studies—it is, nonetheless, an exceptional work, both in terms of the meticulous technique and its abundant symbolic meanings. The miniature portrays Anguissola holding a shield with inscriptions along its outer edge and a complicated monogram made up of interwoven letters in the middle. Wearing the black dress that appears in almost all of her self-portraits, the artist sits against an austere dark-green background, with a determined expression on her face. At first glance, this self-portrait miniature is no different from her other portraits in the sense that it likewise includes her iconic big eyes, sombre dress, and typical modest demeanour—which were everything she needed for a self-portrait as a female artist in the Renaissance era. It would be naïve, however, to consider this work as equivalent to any other simple self-portraits meant to present a mirror reflection of self, as there are many unanswered mysteries behind this miniature. Why is Anguissola carrying a shield? What does the monogram mean? Why did she paint this? Who was the recipient? And most importantly, if it is not a simple self-portrait, what alternative purposes and messages does it carry? To answer these questions, this paper provides an in-depth analysis of this self-portrait miniature and argues that

it is a manifesto of Anguissola's female power in which she attempted to magnify her strength as a revolutionary female artist and to decentre male power at the same time. As portraits are essentially a representation of a body, it is necessary to examine the notion of bodies when deciphering portraiture. In Hans Belting's study on the coat of arms and portraits, he carefully distinguished different

Figure 1. Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait Miniature*, 1556, varnished watercolour on parchment, 8.3 x 6.4 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Emma F. Munroe Fund. Photograph © 2022 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston





notions of bodies—namely the shield body (body sign and heraldic abstraction) and the panel body (body image and physiognomic duplication).<sup>1</sup> It is a rarity to include both the shield body and the panel body within one picture plane, yet I argue that there are four bodies in this miniature. Using Belting’s studies as a framework, this paper unfolds those four bodies—both seen and unseen, depicted and implied—overlapping in this miniature, and explains how each body carries its own significance that helped demonstrate Anguissola’s power as a proto-feminist artist of her time.<sup>2</sup>

As a female artist in the *cinquecento* (that is, the sixteenth century), the self-confidence and self-possession in Anguissola was unprecedented and impressive. Starting from the 1500s, there was a significant shift in artists’ roles from “drawing tools” with unknown identities to respectable individuals with noteworthy lives. In other words, the perceptions of the artists, both by the public and by the artists themselves, had changed. Vasari’s famous *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* itself is a quintessential example of this increasing public recognition

of artists, as it is, in essence, a compilation of artists’ biographies.<sup>3</sup> Artists, for the first time, were recognized as creators of art, thanks to Vasari’s work, which granted them the title of artist. Under such circumstances, a rise in artists’ self-awareness and confidence would not be improbable, but it was strictly reserved for male artists. In the Renaissance, the very existence of female artists was already a rarity, not to mention a revolutionary female artist like Anguissola, who was constantly challenging established conventions rather than obeying them. Despite coming from a noble family, Anguissola’s lineage did not exempt her from following the rules for women that greatly restricted their rights, identities, and creativities. What her lineage did provide her, however, was the necessary skill and courage to challenge these conventions set up by men and to strive for a gender role reversal in her works in a subtle, discreet, and intelligent manner. She and her sisters enjoyed the rare privilege of neither needing to work for a living nor to marry, thus providing them freedom for artistic creation and experimentation.<sup>4</sup> From there, Anguissola visually and figuratively decentred male dominance in the art industry in her art works, which she demonstrated to a great extent in the Boston miniature.

Examples of her displacing male power appear in multiple portraits and self-portraits, such as *Bernardino Campi Painting Sofonisba Anguissola* (1559) and *Portrait of Giulio Clovio* (1556–57) (fig. 2, 3). The former is a double portrait in which her teacher, Campi, is painting Anguissola on a canvas bigger than him. No consensus has been reached regarding the reading of this portrait. At first glance, Campi, as a man, is depicted as a subjective art creator, while Anguissola, as a woman, is more of a passive product that is being created by a man. Garrard, author of “Here’s Looking at Me: Sofonisba Anguissola and the Problem of the Woman Artist,” however, interprets this work as an example of female empowerment. Though she’s depicted being painted on the canvas by a man, Anguissola’s image is larger in size and more imposing with her penetrating gaze. What is more powerful, however, is that Anguissola, as the artist of this painting, plays both the role of the subject and object, the creator and the created.<sup>5</sup> Anguissola thus was playing with the unseen, controlling body of the artist outside the canvas—a trick that she had used in her Boston miniature in 1556, which manifested itself over the years and was exemplified in this celebrated double portrait. In the *Portrait of Giulio Clovio*, Anguissola’s teacher, Clovio, is

holding a miniature of his female student, Levina, which highlights the gender power dynamic more pointedly than the former work. Garrard argues that this painting portrays women as small and possessable objects of men and illustrates the tragic status quo of female artists existing in the grasp of their male counterparts.<sup>6</sup> Though the portrait’s visual form fits into Garrard’s analysis (as Clovio is undeniably holding a small miniature of a female), Anguissola was an active advocate of female power, making it unlikely for her to portray women in such an objectified manner. Therefore, alternatively, this portrait acts as testimony for Clovio’s interest in receiving portraits of the female artists he admired, as it depicts a moment where he appreciates such a portrait.<sup>7</sup> In essence, the message implied is that an image of a woman created by a female artist was capable of gaining admiration from a male viewer. As such, this portrait is equally effective as the portrait of Campi in demonstrating Anguissola’s female power.

These two portraits of her teachers serve two purposes. First, Anguissola wished to pay homage to her teachers, as it was difficult for female artists to find teachers who would teach young women. To have access to art as a woman in the Renaissance was almost unheard of, but to study

and produce it was even more unprecedented and even more unacceptable. The very act of commending her teachers is a noble act in and of itself, which is in keeping with Anguissola’s noble background. At the same time, Anguissola was making a bold statement to her teachers that she was surpassing them, despite being “inferior” according to the Renaissance definition (as an apprentice and, most emphatically, a woman) through the gender implications shown in both



paintings. As such, it can be said that proclaiming female power in her artworks was consistent for Anguissola, which serves as a precondition that needs to be recognized for my following analysis. Such demonstration of her female empowerment over men is exemplified in the Boston miniature, which, although tiny in size, is powerful because of its layers of overlapping bodies.

### **1. The Shield Body: The Abstraction**

The biggest mystery about this self-portrait miniature is the monogram made up of interwoven letters on the shield. Scholars have attempted to decipher it, with some art historians, such as Ann Sutherland Harris, agreeing that it indicates Anguissola's father's name—Amilcare.<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, Patrizia Costa, author of "Sofonisba Anguissola's Self-portrait in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts," brings up a different interpretation of the monogram—that the letters are from a Latin phrase that was special to the Anguissola family: "*Anguis sola fecit victoriam*" (the snake alone brought victory), from which the last name Anguissola originated.<sup>9</sup> The lineage of the Anguissola family was connected to a Byzantine general named Galvano Sordo, who liberated the city of Constantinople in 717. At the end of the war, Sordo held up his shield (which bore the effigy of an asp) while declaring,

"*Anguis sola fecit victoriam*" to announce victory. This resulted in the emperor granting him the last name Anguissola. Taking this family motto in a literal sense, "Anguissola" means "snake alone," who "*fecit victoriam*," indicating the direct connection between their last name and the notion of victory. The inclusion of this family motto in this portrait is particularly significant for Sofonisba Anguissola, as it affirms her noble lineage and, more importantly, proclaims not only her family's victory, but her own (as a member of the Anguissola family and as a "snake alone" in the male-dominated art industry) as a successful female artist.

The very reason why this monogram has been difficult to decipher is that the letters intertwine in a serpentine form, which is yet another piece of visual evidence supporting Costa's interpretation of the monogram related to the concept of a snake. The image of a snake on a shield is certainly a direct reference to the asp on Galvano's shield, in accordance with the family legend; but taking it out of this context, it may read as reminiscent of the myth of Medusa, who had been killed by the reflecting shield of Perseus—on which she sees her own image with serpent hair. The Medusa analogy is also supported by the inscription on the perimeter of the shield, which reads, "The

maiden Sofonisba Anguissola, depicted by her own hand, from a mirror, at Cremona." Although signing artworks had become common practice prior to the mid-sixteenth century, this inscription does more than simply indicate authorship. As indicated, she drew herself from a mirror based on her mirror reflection, and as a result, the reflection was transferred onto the panel. Similarly, in the Medusa myth, a mirror is what protected Perseus from being petrified by Medusa and thus enabled him to decapitate her with Athena's reflective shield. As such, a shield with an image of the serpent-haired Gorgon is the quintessential representation of the Medusa story, which is exactly what seems to have appeared in this self-portrait. The question arises: why did Anguissola incorporate the symbol of snake and, by extension, refer to the Medusa myth? To answer this question, we must bear in mind that, first, Anguissola was from the Renaissance, a time when Greco-Roman traditions were revived and Greek mythology had found its way back into the art arena; second, Anguissola's education would have equipped her with proper knowledge about Greek mythology and thus she would have been well acquainted with Medusa; third, we must also consider the different messages behind the image of Medusa from which Anguissola chose an appropriate one to associate

herself. It is only when these three conditions were present that the Medusa analogy was made possible.

In most versions of the Medusa myth, Medusa is raped by Poseidon in Athena's temple, which enrages Athena. In this sense, Medusa is no more than an innocent victim of Athena's rage, punished for no faults of her own. Hated by others due to the petrifying power granted to her against her will, she is eventually violently killed by the young hero Perseus. That is to say, Medusa, despite possessing fatal power, could still be easily conquered by a man—thus making her death a classic example of male dominance and female oppression. This reading of Medusa, however, is certainly not the one and only interpretation. As Susan Bowers argues, the same image of Medusa that has been used to oppress women can also be used to set women free and grant them power, given that Medusa is a multifaceted character who has the power to literally petrify men or other threats posed to her.<sup>10</sup> In Anguissola's case, she would not align herself with Medusa's tragic facet; but it is reasonable for her to draw a parallel between the petrifying power of Medusa and the petrifying power of her own artworks. In fact, in one of her later self-portraits, done in 1560, she oddly portrays her hair styled in little curls rather than in her

*“In this manifesto, she proclaims herself as a rising star in Cremona, as a revolutionary female artist who constantly defied male-imposed restrictions, and as a Medusa-like figure in the Renaissance art repertoire whose art has a petrifying power.”*



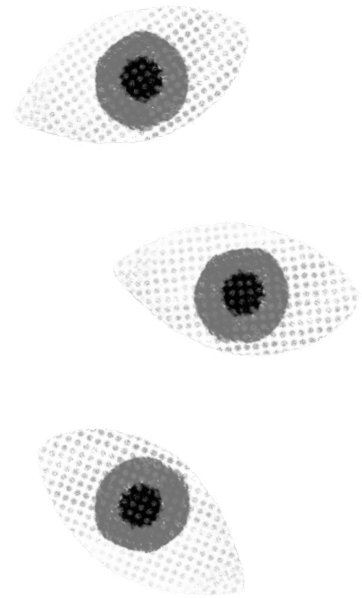
iconic braids parted in the middle (Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait*, 1560, oil on canvas, Musée Condé, Chantilly). These serpent-like curls suggest that Anguissola attempted to link herself with Medusa on multiple occasions, as a powerful expression of female subjectivity and creativity.<sup>11</sup>

We can further understand the relevance of the shield body that appears in this miniature from how imposing it is: its disproportionate size almost overpowers and displaces Anguissola's physical body (which should have been the main subject—because at the end of the day, this is still a self-portrait, not a portrait of the shield). The slightly off proportion reinforces the importance of the shield body and its heraldic messages. One might ask, does it mean, then, that her portrait body is less important? The next part of my analysis will provide an answer to this question through a detailed analysis of the second body, in which I argue that it is not a mere physiognomic duplication by Belting's definition, but a body that is equally important as the shield body.

## 2. The Panel Body: The Paradoxical Realism

Through her sombre dress, simple hairstyle, and modest demeanour, Anguissola seems to present herself as a noble lady by Baldassare Castiglione's definition

in *Cortegiano*, a popular book in the sixteenth century.<sup>12</sup> However, while following certain rules set for noblewomen, she was at the same time defying conventions for women, primarily through her *odd* self-representation. Firstly, the colour choice of her clothing is more in keeping with that of a man. Indeed, Castiglione described black as the preferred colour to be worn by courtiers, but this advice applied only to men, not women. By constantly wearing black both in life and in art, Anguissola deliberately substituted herself in a man's role.<sup>13</sup> In his famous treatise of 1542, *Delle bellezze delle donne*, Agnolo Firenzuola set the standard of female beauty, including features such as thick, golden, curly hair; ample, swelling breasts; long slender legs—none of which Anguissola presented in the portrait. Anguissola's lack of jewellery, flamboyancy, and exposure of the bodice points to how the artist avoided the traditional female attributes that were associated with beauty and vanity. To further de-sexualize herself, she covered her upper body—notably her breasts, which are perhaps the most sexualized feature of a female body. Similarly, she also styles her hair in a simple way, with it neatly parted in the middle with no accessories. In an era when beauty was often indicative of virtue, and when women were constantly exposed to the male gaze with a sexualized



lens, Anguissola freed herself from being objectified by eschewing and covering her feminine signifiers. By depicting herself in an almost androgynous way, Anguissola decentred male power by depriving men of their sexual gaze.

By covering the majority of her body and female attributes, Anguissola draws attention to her powerful, penetrating, Medusa-like gaze. In the original context of the Medusa myth, the fatal gaze of Medusa was an antidote to the male gaze, one that protected women from being sexualized and objectified, while encouraging them to “see clearly for themselves, thus reconstructing traditional male images of women.”<sup>14</sup> Anguissola performed a similar act by deliberately directing her “petrifying” gaze, which posed a menace to male viewers, while,

*“While following certain rules set for noblewomen, she was at the same time defying conventions for women, primarily through her odd self-representation.”*

by hiding her feminine signifiers, simultaneously avoided being pinned by the sexualized male gaze. The juxtaposition of the gaze and the avoidance of gaze (as demonstrated in the second body) altogether brought her power as a woman to the paramount. Such is the paradox of the second body—it was supposed to demonstrate her modesty and dignity as a female artist with noble lineage, yet in fact it was an outright challenge to all conventions set by men, while weakening men with her powerful gaze.

### **3. The Wearer Body: The Embodiment**

On the surface, the first and second bodies are the only two that can be seen in this miniature. However, the miniature technically remains a physically disembodied artifact up until this point. It is not until the third body—the body of the wearer—that the miniature literally becomes embodied by actually being worn on a physical body. Although not all miniatures are meant to be worn—for instance, the one that Clovio holds in the portrait of him and Anguissola is merely a painting—this one is likely meant to be worn; the hook on top of the miniature implies that a chain should accompany it. Who, then, is this wearer body that enables the miniature to be embodied? Patrizia Costa suggests two possibilities as the recipient of this miniature: Anguissola’s father, Amilcare, and her teacher, Clovio. Although she provides supporting evidence for both, it is unlikely that Amilcare would wear this medallion, as he would most likely send it away to other artists to advertise his daughter’s artistic skills. Since Clovio had a predilection for receiving portraits of his female pupils, I interpret this body as Clovio’s body. From this conclusion, I argue that Clovio being the wearer is an overt claim of Anguissola’s female power in the face of a person that was (at the time) “superior” to her in terms of gender (male) and status

(teacher), as it decentres not just Clovio, but the male figure in general.

One might ask what has led me to this interpretation. Sending a self-portrait miniature to the teacher who helped her to master this field may seem to be a simple act of paying homage; but considering it in the larger Renaissance theoretical context (specifically on the issue of procreation) the message behind it becomes different. After 1500, a revival of Aristotle's theory of the division of procreative responsibilities became popular throughout the Renaissance. According to Aristotle, men and their semen were responsible for creating the soul, whereas women and their uteruses were only supposed to be the material that men would work on. Women were intended to hold what had been created by men, thus making them merely "carriers" of the child.<sup>15</sup> When Clovio wears the medallion and thus becomes the "carrier" of the image, he is playing a passive role of receiving and holding, like how Aristotle defined and labelled women in the procreation process. Anguissola was the creator of this image held by Clovio, which automatically puts her in a male role, as this image was the product of the art-making process, just like children in a procreation process. However, the feminization of Clovio does not necessarily mean

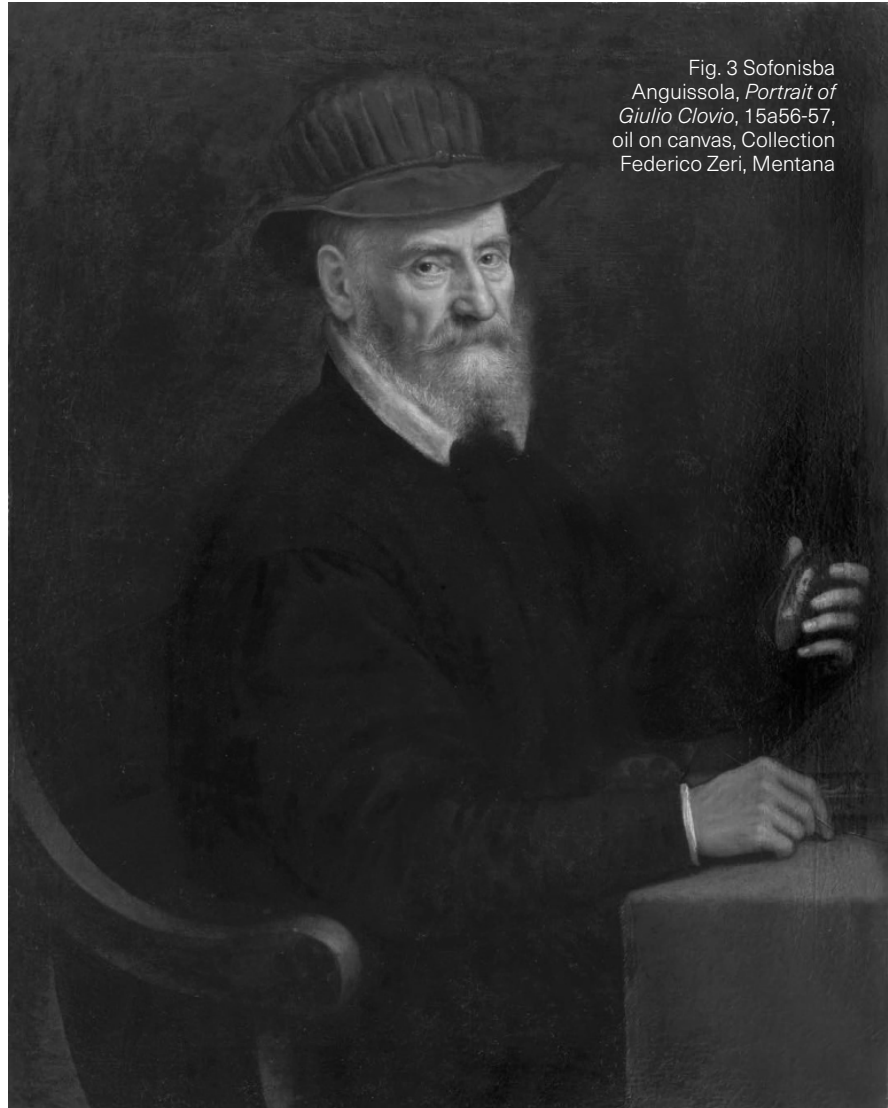


Fig. 3 Sofonisba Anguissola, *Portrait of Giulio Clovio*, 15a56-57, oil on canvas, Collection Federico Zeri, Mentana

a personal attack, especially with Anguissola being a well-bred noblewoman. Rather, it is more likely to be a part of Anguissola's systematic attempt to strive for a change in the gender power dynamic. Here, by placing Clovio (a male figure) in a "feminine" role, Anguissola is demonstrating that she, and perhaps other female artists, are creators as well. Thus, rather than purposely

choosing Clovio as the target of her "attack," the male wearer body simply happened to be Clovio's by circumstance.

#### **4. The Painter Body: The Omniscient**

The fourth body—the unseen body of the painter—is the ultimate declaration of Anguissola's female power and dominance. The aforementioned Aristotelian theory

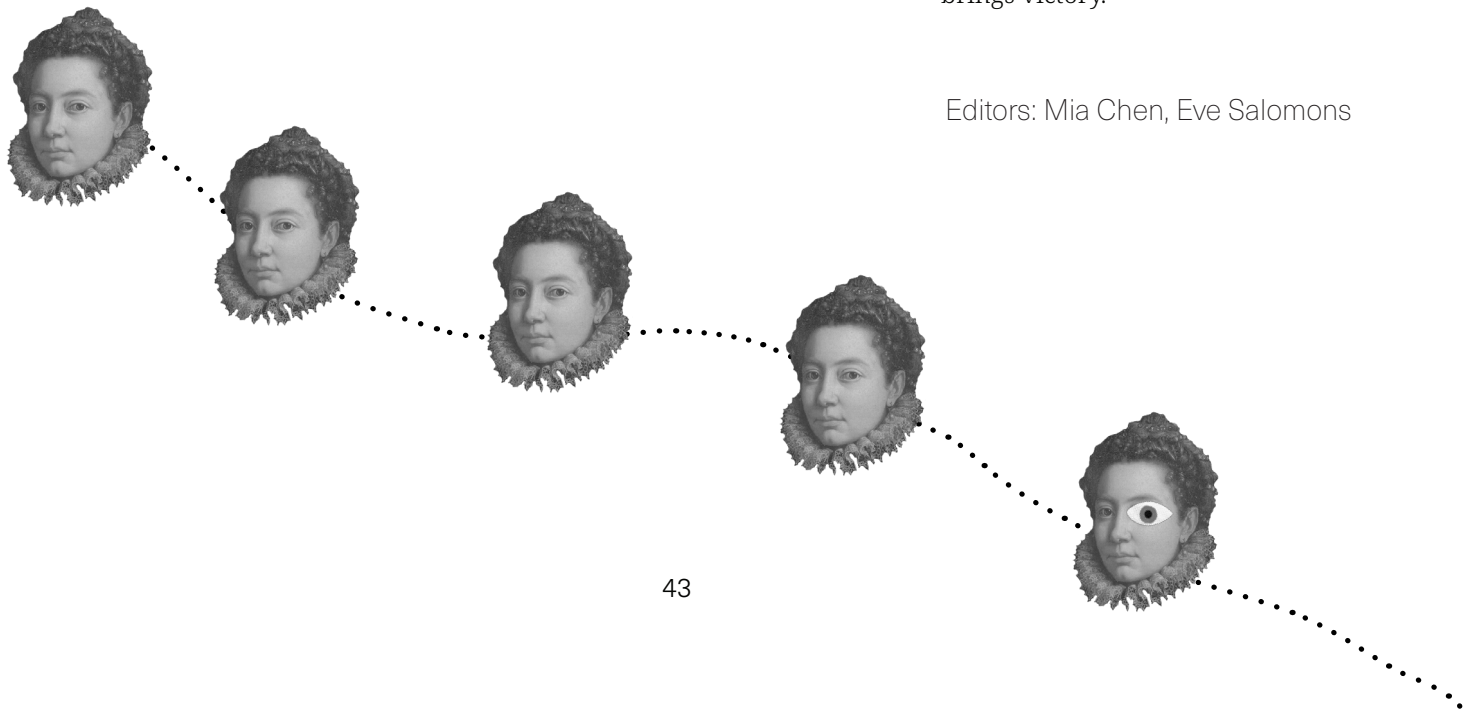
of the procreative responsibilities was also translated into the art-making process. According to Aristotle, it was men who created the soul of the children, and thus also had the creativity and capability to create the soul of the art; while women, as merely the medium on which male artists worked, lacked the creativity to create art, and thus could only imitate and copy their male counterparts.<sup>16</sup> This perception was prevalent throughout the Renaissance. Vasari, for example, praised many female artists, but only for their skills in making copies. The sole exception was Anguissola, as he describes how she “not only succeeded in . . . copying from nature and in making excellent copies of works by other hands, but has also executed by herself alone some very choice and beautiful works of painting.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, taking this self-portrait miniature as example, Anguissola invented a new form of self-representation with the emblem and portrait on the same

plane, which was unprecedented in art history. By actively taking up the tasks of creating and inventing, which were normally reserved for men, Anguissola distinguished herself among her contemporaries, especially in Renaissance society where women were considered “intellectually and spiritually inferior.”<sup>18</sup> While being fully aware of what she was doing with her paintbrush, Anguissola consciously observed, created, and dominated the three bodies shown and suggested in this tiny medallion, from an omniscient point of view. Her female wisdom and power thus set her on equal footing with her male counterparts, if not on a higher level. While Anguissola is “the medium” and the subject of this work, she is also the creator of the art’s soul—a statement backed by Vasari and contradicting theory that demands a revisit by Aristotle.

By unfolding the four overlapping bodies in this self-portrait miniature, this paper finds that Anguissola demonstrated her

power as a female artist, reversed gender roles, and decentred the dominating male artist’s role at the time, using this complex miniature as her instrument. In short, this paper provides a conceptual analysis of this overlooked work of Anguissola’s, which in fact deserves a greater amount of attention. In the Renaissance, when art was inaccessible to women (and the very few women who did engage with art generally stuck to the rules imposed on them), Anguissola had the courage to turn this self-portrait miniature into a powerful manifesto of herself as a female artist. In this manifesto, she proclaims herself as a rising star in Cremona, as a revolutionary female artist who constantly defied male-imposed restrictions, and as a Medusa-like figure in the Renaissance art repertoire whose art has a petrifying power. Though this miniature is admittedly tiny in size, Anguissola used it to announce a powerful message: “[*Anguissola*] *fecit victoriam*”—Sofonisba Anguissola brings victory.

Editors: Mia Chen, Eve Salomons



## NOTES

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3. Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. Gaston du C. de Vere (London: Philip Lee Warner, 1912–14), 127–28.
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8. Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists, 1550–1950* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1984), 10.
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12. Costa, 57.
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18. Jacobs, 92.

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