

## A LIFE OF GENIUS, RETRIEVED AT LAST

Kathleen Burke, *Smithsonian*, May, 1995

**In an exhibition that celebrates her collected works, the singular accomplishments of painter Sofonisba Anguissola are restored to history**



Sofonisba's portrait of her father, sister Minerva, and brother, Asdrubale

In mid-16th-century Italy, at the height of the Renaissance, a household in the northern city of Cremona was a haven of domestic felicity. The spacious palazzo, still standing on the Via Tibaldi, was a dwelling rich in laughter, in a spirit of intellectual inquiry—and in daughters. Amilcare Anguissola, a member of Cremonese minor nobility, and his wife, Bianca, had in fact six daughters and a son. At a time when the pursuits of wellborn young women were rigidly circumscribed—instruction in little more than needlework and music was customary—Amilcare decided to educate his daughters. Each demonstrated astonishing artistic promise.



For a self-portrait at the age of nineteen, painted in 1554, Sofonisba cultivated an aspect of austere composure.

The result of his decision was extraordinary. The eldest, Sofonisba (c. 1535-1625), became the first woman to achieve fame as a painter during the century of Leonardo and Titian. Her name has largely been lost to history, but a groundbreaking exhibition containing more than 20 of her works should resurrect her renown. "Sofonisba Anguissola: A Renaissance Woman," at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, in Washington, D.C. through June 25, following a European tour, offers a rare glimpse of a fascinating figure.

Around the age of 11, Anguissola began her studies at the studio of Bernardino Campi. Her entrancing portraits soon earned notice among the aristocracy of Mantua and Parma. Michelangelo praised her drawings extravagantly. Soon after her sister Elena entered a convent in Mantua circa 1551, Anguissola created the haunting image of the young Dominican novice seen above. By her mid-20s she had gained the favor of the king of Spain. In 1559 Philip II called her to Madrid. She remained there for 14 years, serving for some time as art instructor to Queen Isabel and as a court painter, producing images of the royal family that are among the treasures of the Prado, including the 1573 portrait of Philip II (right).



Early on in her career, Anguissola had mastered not only formal portraiture but the art of everyday life. Capturing an intimate moment, *The Chess Game* (1555) portrays sisters Lucia, Europa and Minerva matching wits under a maidservant's eye. The work is one of the 16th century's most important genre paintings.

Anguissola journeyed back to Italy in 1573. Her marriage to the ship-captain son of a Genoese noble family was a happy one. A pension from the king left her in comfortable circumstances. She continued to paint into her 80s, an international celebrity who welcomed artists from across Europe into her studio.

*By Kathleen Burke*

In *The Holy Family with Saints Anne and John the Baptist*, dated 1592, Anguissola evinced a mastery of devotional painting.



**Excerpted from Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1990, 70 – 73.**

Sofonisba Anguissola's painting established new conventions for self-portraiture by women artists.... Anguissola's birth has been listed as early as 1532-35 (Harris and Nochlin) and as late as 1540 (Takacs) and we know that she died in Palermo in 1625. She was the daughter of Amilcare Anguissola, a widower and nobleman who apparently decided to educate his seven children according to the humanist ideals of the Renaissance in the belief that they would bring honor to their city. Several of the daughters became painters. Sofonisba, and Elena, studied with the Cremonese painter, Bernardino Campi, and she later worked with Bernardino Gatti. In turn, she instructed her sisters Lucia and perhaps Europa. Her noble birth and her youth when she began her short three-year apprenticeship (most

male painters of the time trained for a minimum of four years) quickly established her as a prodigy. Amilcare Anguissola's ambitions for his daughter are expressed in two letters in which he solicited the support of Michelangelo. In the first of these, dated 1557, he thanked him for his advice: "we are much obliged to have perceived the honorable and affable affection that you have and show for Sofonisba; I speak of my daughter, the one whom I caused to begin to practice the most honorable virtue of painting....I beg of you that...you will see fit to send her one of your drawings that she may color it in oil, with the obligation to return it to you faithfully finished by her own hand...." Michelangelo, who is known to have helped a succession of young artists by sending them drawings, had requested from Anguissola a difficult subject—a weeping boy. She sent him a drawing of her brother, Asdrubale, titled *Boy Bitten by a Crayfish* (before 1559, above left). A letter from Michelangelo's friend Tomaso Cavalieri, written to Cosimo de Medici on January 20, 1562, included the drawing as a gift along with another drawing by Michelangelo. Anguissola's early works, including the charming *Three Sisters Playing Chess*, are characteristic of the mid-sixteenth-century school of northern Italian painting in their emphasis on blacks and greens and their rough scumbled surface.

It was the Duke of Alba, advised by the governor of Milan, who called the attention of the Spanish court to her work. She was escorted to Spain with great ceremony in 1559 and served as court painter and lady-in-waiting to the Queen,

Elizabeth of Valois, until 1580, and was paid in the customary manner with rich gifts rather than a stipend. Her status at court is indicated by the fact that, before she left, the King arranged her marriage to a wealthy Italian and provided a dowry.



One of the few documented examples of Anguissola's Spanish period is a *Self-Portrait* (1561), depicting the artist as a serious, conservatively dressed young woman at the keyboard of a spinet. She is accompanied by an old woman, perhaps a chaperone who went with her to Spain. Anguissola's presentation of herself as a modest young woman of refinement and culture places the work in a tradition of self-portraits which articulate the Renaissance ideal of the artist as gentleman/woman rather than artisan. The presence of the musical instrument may show Anguissola's skills as a member of a cultured noble family at a time when musical accomplishment, long recognized as desirable for noblemen and women, was becoming a mark of culture for artists of both sexes.

Excerpted from Kathleen Krull, *Lives of the Artists*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1995, 24 – 27.

**SHE INTRODUCED LAUGHTER**

***SOFONISBA***

***ANGUISSOLA***

**BORN IN CREMONA, ITALY, 1531**

**DIED IN PALERMO, ITALY, 1625**

***Influential Italian Renaissance painter,  
world renowned for introducing new  
techniques in portraits***

SOFONISBA ANGUISSOLA had a lot of things working against her. In her day women, considered inferior versions of men, were thought to have little intelligence and no talent. Having lost some of the rights they had gained during the Middle Ages, most women were not even taught to read. They had no say in their own futures; in their teens they either married or entered a convent. Even fashions, such as whalebone corsets that restricted breathing and movement, worked against women. Anguissola had no role models to guide her in what she wanted to do—paint—and she was further handicapped by a lifelong inflammation of the eyelids, possibly from allergies.

Anguissola did, however, have parents who were known as enlightened. Her merchant father and his wife made sure their six daughters got the same private tutoring as their one son. The public considered the sisters intellectual marvels, almost like circus freaks, and travelers would go out of their way to visit the family. Anguissola's greatest champion was her



father, who always talked her up around town to the clergy and nobility. She was even allowed to journey an arduous three weeks on unpaved roads to Rome to study with Michelangelo, who was most encouraging.

As her reputation spread for painting likenesses that truly seemed alive, Anguissola continued to live with her family, except when she traveled to do commissioned portraits. Her arrival probably stirred much gossip. She would wear dresses of brocade and silk, and always had her boxes of paint, her canvases, and a chaperone. She prepared her own painting materials (from such ingredients as dried rabbit skins, copper, lead, and linseed or walnut oil) and wore smocks to protect her elegant gowns. Sometimes she was paid with money, sometimes with jewels and expensive fabrics. Those who met her said she had a quick spirit and was kind.

Then she was invited to become court painter to King Philip II of Spain, the most powerful ruler in Europe. It was a great honor, and she remained at court for twenty years. When the queen, Isabel, died in childbirth, she left Anguissola some fine brocade for a bedcover, as a hint to get married. At the relatively old age of thirty-eight, Anguissola married a man the king selected (with her preferences in mind): Don Fabrizio de Moncada, a Sicilian nobleman. She may have had a child, but historical records are unclear.

When her husband died, probably from the plague, Anguissola traveled back to Italy to visit her family. On the way she was swept off her feet by the ship's captain, a much younger man named Orazio Lomellino, and by the trip's end had agreed to marry him. The marriage was happy—and while her husband was at sea, Anguissola had plenty of free time for painting.



Except for her eye condition, Anguissola must have been unusually strong. At a time when the average life span for women was thirty years, she lived to age ninety-three. Eventually she was forced to get a document called a *fides vitae*, literally a certificate to prove she was still alive, in order to continue cashing the king's pension.

In her old age she was much sought out as an adviser to younger women, and her reputation encouraged generations after her to consider a career in the arts.

## ARTWORKS

In *The Chess Game*, which features her sisters Lucia, Minerva, and Europa enjoying a game of chess, Anguissola introduced a new element into portraits: laughter. Smiles were rare in portraits then, but Anguissola was always experimenting with a warm and lively style. Even in court, where portraits had to be serious, she worked in traces of grins and quirky personalities. Not for another one hundred years did other portrait painters show people in happy moods.



Also unique for incorporating still-lives into her portraits, Anguissola in *Self-Portrait at the Clavichord* made yet another innovation: portraying a person in action. In a move away from the formal, static style of the day, she liked to highlight her subjects' hobbies. Anguissola painted more self-portraits than almost any artist of her time, in part because she was considered so amazing that people wanted paintings done both by her and of her.