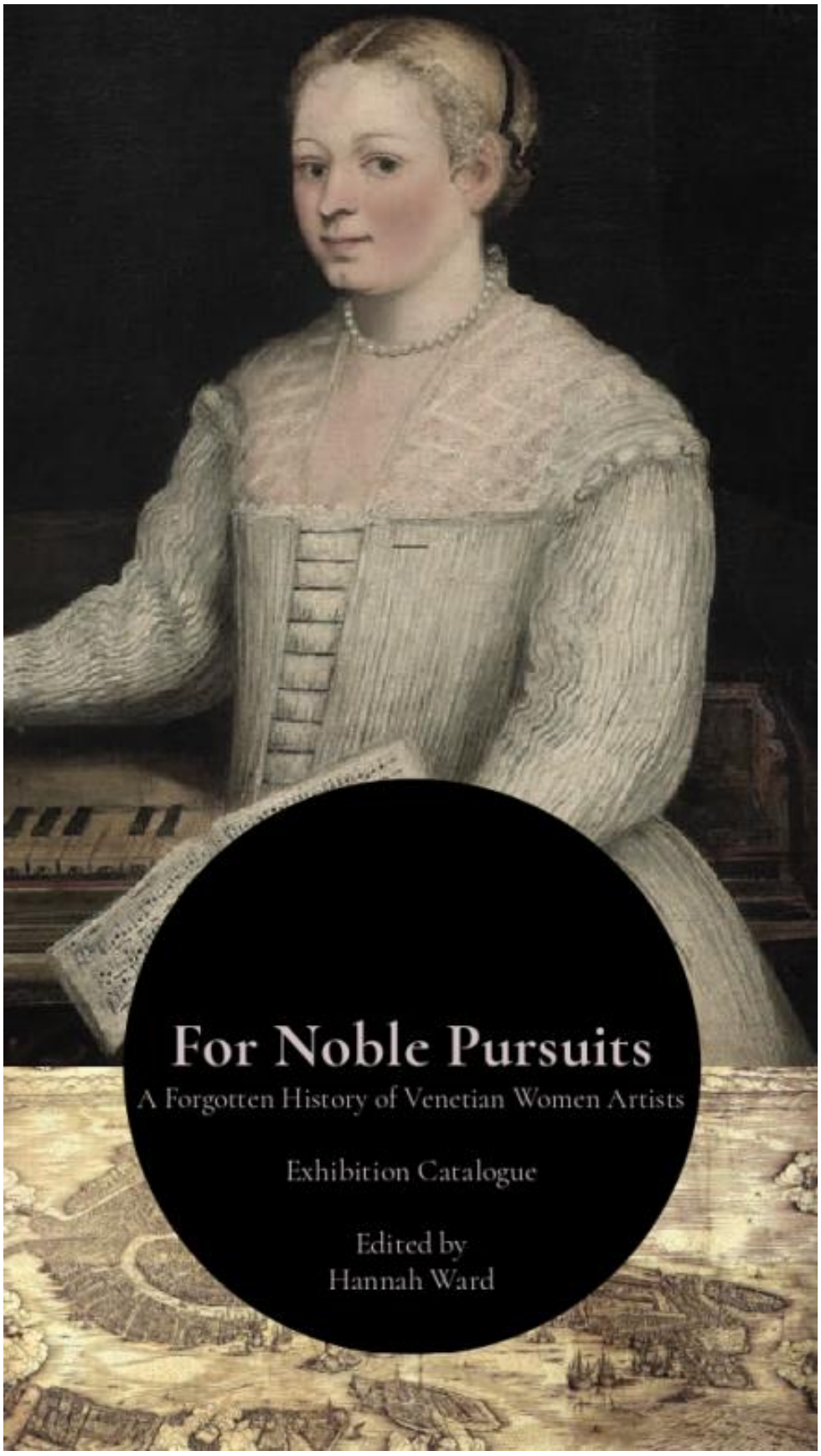
For Noble Pursuits
A Forgotten History of Venetian Women Artists
Exhibition Catalogue
Edited by
Hannah Ward

The National Gallery

With Major Contributions from the Following Institutions

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Gallerie degli Uffizi

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Exhibition Dates: May 1 2021 - September 1 2021

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For Noble Pursuits: A Forgotten History of Venetian Women Artists

Exhibition Introduction

The late American Art Historian, Linda Nochlin, posed the question "Why have there been no great women artists?" in her 1988 publication titled *Women, Art and Power*.[1] Following this publication much activism has taken place to attempt to revise this glaring gap in the canon of art history. Regarding Renaissance women artists, important contemporary organizations have been created, such as Advancing Women Artists and The Medici Archive Project, with a goal to preserve and research the contributions of women artists during the Renaissance.[2] With the previous two organizations working primarily with Florentine artists, this has left Venetian women artists hidden within the historical record.

What was the artistic scene in 15th through 16th century Venice like? Giorgio Vasari, who lived and worked for much of his life in Florence, wrote in his *Lives of the Artists* that "while Florence was winning fame through the works of Leonardo no less glory was conferred to Venice by the talents and achievements of one of her citizens."[3] Vasari's statement indicates both that he preferred art from Florence and is also telling of the inherent competition between the two cities – both known for their rich arts and business scenes. While Florentine painters were trained to focus on 'disegno,' which translates to mean design, and drawings for preparatory work in order to complete a commission, the Venetian artists were more focused on

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[1] Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" artnews.com, The Art News, January 1971. Accessed January 2021. https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists-4201/.
[2] Advancing Women Artists, "AWA's Mission and Goals," advancingowmenartists.org. Accessed January 2021. http://advancingwomenartists.org/about/mission-and-goals.
[3] Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists.* (London, UK: Penguin Classics, 1965), 272.

color and the blending of pigment based on setting and light within a composition.[4] Venetian artists during the Renaissance were also known for popularizing painting on canvas, due to the wood panel material, popularly used in Florence often becoming warped by the damp atmosphere in the port city. Although in both artistic centers similar genres of subject existed, including: portraits, religious subjects, allegorical figures, mythological scenes, and history paintings popularly displaying the ideals of each of these Renaissance republics. Some recognizable Venetian artist names from the canon of art history include Giorgione da Castelfranco, Titian of Cadore, Gentile Bellini, Paolo Veronese, and Jacopo Robusti, also known as Tintoretto. Two of these aforementioned artists, Titian and Tintoretto, were integral to the training of two women artists displayed in this show.

This exhibition's goal is to bring Venetian women artists to the foreground of history, rather than their current position in the background. If history could be likened to a painting, often the women are found in the background with men taking the space in the foreground, as is especially the case with the canon of Renaissance artists. When asked to name 5 Renaissance artists, most usually name men – Leonardo, Michelangelo, Botticelli, Raphael, or Donatello. But what about prominent Renaissance-era women artists such as Sofonisba Anguissola, Plautilla Nelli, Properzia Rossi, Lavinia Fontana, or Giovanna Garzoni? This exhibition specifically focuses on the life, works, and subtle resistance of Renaissance and Baroque era Venetian women artists, including: Marietta Robusti, Irene di Spilimbergo, Marietta Barovier, and Chiara Varotari, whose names, though known in their time, have been forgotten since.

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[4]Jean Sorabella, "Venetian Color and Florentine Design," metmuseum.org, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2002. Accessed January 2021. https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/vefl/hd_vefl.htm.

Renaissance Women's Resistance Through Self-Portraiture: A Study of Marietta Robusti's *Self-Portrait with Madrigal*

Marietta Robusti, also known as Tintoretta, was the daughter of the renowned Venetian mannerist artist Jacopo Robusti, known as Tintoretto.[5] She was born out of wedlock due to Tintoretto's affair with her mother, a German woman residing in Venice around 1550. But she stayed in her father's household and was trained by him in painting, alongside her brother Domenico. There is only one early biographical account of her life – included at the end of her father's extensive biography by Carlo Ridolfi. Ridolfi, was known as the Venetian equivalent of the Tuscan author Giorgio Vasari. Both men wrote biographies on artists and were trained painters themselves. Ridolfi's 1648 biographies exclusively followed Venetian artists in his volume *Lives of the Venetian Painters* while Vasari focused on artists from across the Italian peninsula, but specifically on artists from Tuscany in his own *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* published in 1550. Both Ridolfi and Vasari were trained artists who then became

[5] Throughout this essay I will refer to Marietta Robusti, as Robusti, and to her father exclusively as Tintoretto in order to avoid confusion of names.

writers by chance due to their meticulous records on other artists and their interest in studying the lives of artists from their respective cities.[6]

Marietta Robusti's biography is a short two-page document. Most of the biography includes extravagant humanist language such as: "However, we do see pages written about the merit of Hippolyte, Camilla, Zenobia, and Tomyris, renowned in war; of Corina, Sappho, Arretta, Cornelia, Hortensia…and others who are renowned in literature; and, even more, of the worthiness of Timarete, Irene, Marsia, and Aristarete who were celebrated in painting in ancient times…" For a short biography, this inclusion of comparable ancient women takes up some extremely important real estate – for this inclusion does not indicate much about the life of Robusti herself, but rather the humanist studies of Ridolfi who had obviously studied Vasari's writing style due to his inclusion of humanist praises bestowed upon the artist. But these ancient allusions are also indicative of Robusti's celebrated status as an artist during her time and her own knowledge of humanist studies due to her artistic training.

Ridolfi adequately records how difficult it was for a woman during this time to acquire training in the arts due to her expected domestic duties as a woman, thus to alluding to the idea that a woman even having a position as an artisan was an act of resistance against societal norms during the Renaissance. Ridolfi states, "we clearly understand the high level that feminine perspicacity attains when women acquire learning the various disciplines. However, it is a fact that that unhappy sex, because of being reared within the confines of the home and kept from the exercise of various disciplines, becomes soft, and has little aptitude for noble pursuits. Nevertheless, in spite of man the female sex triumphs, armed as it is by the beauty that serves it

[6] Carlo Ridolfi, *The Life of Tintoretto and of his Children Domenico and Marietta* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1984), 1.

well."[7] Often women did not have opportunities to train as artisans unless they had a family connection to the trade. Robusti's father, Tintoretto, was a well-known painter in Venice, famous for his mannerist style in religious images found in churches, monasteries, and convents across the city. Robusti is one of multiple women artists who possessed the rare opportunity to be trained in the arts due to having an artist father. Other Renaissance and Baroque women artists with a similar training history include Sofonisba Anguissola, Artemisia Gentileschi, and Lavinia Fontana. Not many women artists were self-trained, with the exception of women artists at convents such as Suor Plautilla Nelli. Even less often, were women allowed to train under the tutelage of another artist outside the family due to the fact that most artists were men and having a woman apprentice would be considered scandalous what with the strict social rules for young marriageable women during the 15th and 16th centuries. Linda Nochlin exclaims in her article, that Renaissance women artists "almost without exception, were…the daughters of artist fathers" and Marietta Robusti is no exception.[8]

According to Ridolfi's biography, Tintoretto would often dress his daughter up as a boy and would take her to watch him work on his commissions throughout Venice. Apparently, people believed Robusti to be a young boy during her childhood. This included detail, whether true or fantastical, strips away the agency in Robusti's training as a woman. Since it was believed that no woman could attain artistic status as high as a man, Ridolfi instead masculinized Robusti in order to enforce the gendered status quo held in the art world. It is evident through her own

[7] Ridolfi, *The Life of Tintoretto and of his Children Domenico and Marietta,* 98.
[8] Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Art News, 1971.

self-portrait, included within this exhibition, that she did not necessarily view herself as masculine, but rather created an image of herself as a *gentildonna*.[9]

Robusti's 1578 *Self-Portrait with Madrigal* is held in Uffizi Gallery's collection in Florence, Italy.[10] Self-portraits were a common genre for women artists to paint during the Renaissance. Other common genres included portraits of noble court personalities and religious figures. Not many women were commissioned to paint large-scale historical scenes until Artemisia Gentileschi became the first woman to be admitted into the Academia del Disegno, the prestigious art academy in Florence in in the early 17th century. In this three-quarter length self-portrait, Robusti holds a book of Madrigals open to a romantic song by Philippe Verdelot titled "*Madonna Per Voi Ardo."*[11] Dressed in a white gown and wearing pearls, she displays her beauty and status within the prominent Robusti family of artisans. Her hand gestures toward either a clavichord or a harpsicord. The inclusion of a clavichord is indicative of Robusti's close studies of preceding and cotemporary women artists from the Italian peninsula, including Sofonisba Anguissola and Lavinia Fontana, who also portrayed themselves playing a similar instrument.[12]

Some art historians, such as Catherine King, believe that self-portraits by women artists needed to include certain feminine attributes to make the artist look more "lady-like to convince

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[9] Katherine A. McIver, "Lavinia Fontana's "Self-Portrait Making Music", *Woman's Art Journal* 19, no. 1 (1998): 3-8. Accessed January 4, 2021. doi:10.2307/1358647., 3.
[10] Gallerie degli Uffizi, "Self Portrait with Madrigal," Uffizi.it, Gallerie degli Uffizi. Accessed January 2021. https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/Self-portrait-with-madrigal-Marietta-Robusti%20
[11] Gallerie degli Uffizi, "Self Portrait with Madrigal," Uffizi.it, Gallerie degli Uffizi. Accessed January 2021https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/Self-portrait-with-madrigal-Marietta-Robusti%20
[12] Mary D. Garrard, "Here's Looking at Me: Sofonisba Anguissola and the Problem of the Woman Artist." *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1994): 556-622. Accessed January 4, 2021. doi:10.2307/2863021., 591-593.

the viewer that she could be a socially safe member of the court," since her craft was believed to be a masculine occupation and hence she was considered an oddity in society.[13] The clavichord, also sometimes called a virginal, is known to have symbolic ties to purity and chastity due to it being a popular Renaissance-era symbol of Saint Cecilia, the Saint of music who vowed to remain a virgin the night before her marriage and was later martyred for her chastity.[14]

Though a symbol of feminine purity and chastity, the inclusion of a clavichord in Robusti's self-portrait may be infused with more resistant iconography than what first meets the eye. The included instrument is inherently a symbol of the sitter, in this case the artist herself, wielding creative knowledge and training in order to play the instrument. Artist self-portraits often act as what can only be described as a "visual resume" in which the artist displays themselves in the midst of creative pursuits in an endeavor to convince possible patrons to commission a work.[15] Self-portraits could also be a mode of displaying the artist's status in society as a part of the noble class due to the recent societal elevation of artisans by the publication of Vasari's biographies which depicted artists as divine persons rather than as lowly peasants.[16] Many women artists found they needed to paint themselves in the midst of displaying their creative skills since their artistic profession was considered an oddity in society, hence why artists such as Sofonisba Anguissola would paint herself in the act of painting or playing an instrument.[17] Robusti is recorded by Ridolfi to have been gifted in music. Her father hired the

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[13] Catherine King,"Looking a Sight: Sixteenth-Century Portraits of Woman Artists." *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte* 58, no. 3 (1995): 381-406. Accessed January 4, 2021. doi:10.2307/1482820., 387.
[14] Garrard, "Here's Looking at Me: Sofonisba Anguissola and the Problem of the Woman Artist," 591.
[15] Jean Sorabella, "Portraiture in Renaissance and Baroque Europe," metmuseum.org, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, August 2007. Accessed January 2021. https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/port/hd_port.htm.
[16] Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists,* 14-15.
[17] King, "Looking a Sight: Sixteenth-Century Portraits of Woman Artists," 387.

Neapolitan musician Guilio Zacchino to teach his daughter how to sing and play the clavichord.[18] Ridolfi also writes that while painting portraits of Venetian notables, she "entertained them with music and song," indicating the full oeuvre of Robusti's creative talents.[19]

It is important to mention that artistic training and a humanist education, both of which Marietta received, was not the norm in Renaissance society, with most women never even becoming literate in their vernacular language, let alone Latin or Greek. Training in the arts was often restricted to women of upper-class society and only usually occurred due to art world connections through family members.[20] Often if women were given a creative and humanist education it was for the purpose of elevating family status in court life due to performing skills such as singing, reciting poetry and dancing, often for a male audience.[21] Baldassare Castiglione wrote his 1528 publication *The Book of the Courtier*, "I wish this Lady to have knowledge of letters, music, painting, and to know how to dance and make merry; accompanying the other precepts that have been taught the Courtier with discreet modesty and with the giving of a good impression of herself" and that *gentildonne* must have "knowledge of many things, in order to entertain him graciously."[22]

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[18] Ridolfi, *The Life of Tintoretto and his Children Domenico and Marietta,* 98. Gallerie degli Uffizi, "Self Portrait with Madrigal," Uffizi.it, Gallerie degli Uffizi. Accessed January 2021. https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/Self-portrait-with-madrigal-Marietta-Robusti%20

[19] Ridolfi, *The Life of Tintoretto and his Children Domenico and Marietta,* 98.

[20] Julie Lynne Drisdelle, "Female Self-Portraiture and the Construction of the Self," Université Laval, Québec, 2006. https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.630.8762&rep=rep1&type=pdf, 17.

[21] McIver, "Lavinia Fontana's "Self-Portrait Making Music," 4.

[22]Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier,"* neiu.edu, Northeastern Illinois University, original publication date 1528. Accessed January 2021. http://homepages.neiu.edu/~wbsieger/Art312/312Read/312Pisan.pdf., 1-2.

The inclusion of the clavichord in many women artists' self-portraits may also signify the depicted woman's agency over her own creativity, though her artistic training was likely taught to her under the tutelage of a male artist, her own mind's creativity was still inherently her own. The clavichord is a small instrument that is meant to be played by a single person – is not one's creativity and imagination also an individual composition? Thus, the inclusion of the clavichord becomes both a symbol of "her total creative potential" and also a display of creative agency.[23]

Art historian, Mary Garrard, whose academic research focuses on Renaissance women artists, even suggests that the frequent inclusion of a clavichord in self-portraits of Renaissance women artist could be symbolic of the depicted artist's sexual agency. This hypothesis is intrinsically connected to the clavichord's symbolism of the virginal Saint Cecilia who decided her own desires based on her spirituality rather than on the patriarchal expectations of society. The clavichord inclusion could just be an attributive feature of a gentildonna adhering to the norms and standards of court society but it could also be representative of "a female who manages her sexuality as competently as she performs upon the musical instrument that symbolizes her total creative potential."[24] Therefore, Marietta Robusti could have been utilizing her portrait to depict both her adherence to societal norms as a gentildonna to ensure commissions and to also display underlying resistant symbols of both creative and sexual agency.

One understudied hypothesis on Marietta Robusti's self-portrait comes from Julie Lynne Drisdelle's master's thesis for the Université Laval in Quebec. Drisdelle draws the attention to

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[23] Garrard, "Here's Looking at Me: Sofonisba Anguissola and the Problem of the Woman Artist," 596.

[24] Garrard, "Here's Looking at Me: Sofonisba Anguissola and the Problem of the Woman Artist,"595-596.

the clavichord Robusti gestures towards. When studying the instrument, it is noticeable that the keys are placed in an odd order for a conventional keyboard. If the artist herself was known to have been a skilled musician, as accounted in Ridolfi's biography, then why would she methodically paint a flawed keyboard? Drisdelle brings up the fact that during the Renaissance, though this key formation was unusual, there was no adhered-to standard order of key placement during the 16th century. But the flaw is made stranger because her hand gestures to the specific mistaken keys. Drisdelle hypothesizes that this included detail may be a private joke between the artist and the viewer due to the irony of the madrigal being so detailed that it is known to have been written by French musician Philippe Verdelot's passionate *Madonna, Per Voi Ardo (Lady, For You I Burn,)* paired with the purposefully blundered clavichord keys which prohibits Robusti from adequately performing the romantic piece held in her hands.[25]

The romantic madrigal inclusion has led some art historians, such as Katherine A. McIver, to assume the self-portrait was painted for Robusti's husband, a Venetian jeweler named Mario Augusta, whom she married in 1586.[26] But it is also recorded that this self-portrait traveled across Europe to the court of Holy Roman Emperor Maximillian II, along with a portrait she painted of the emperor's antiquarian Jacopo Strada, previous to her marriage. Hence, indicating Robusti's self-portrait was not created with romantic intentions.[27] If Robusti did

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[25] Drisdelle, "Female Self-Portraiture and the Construction of the Self," 60-62.
[26] McIver, "Lavinia Fontana's "Self-Portrait Making Music," 6.
[27]Marcel Grosso, "Robust, Maria, called Tintoretta," treccani.it Treccani Biographical Dictionary of Italians-Volume 88, 2017. Accessed January 2021. https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/robusti-maria-detta-tintoretta_(Dizionario-Biografico). Ridolfi, *The Life of Tintoretto and of his Children Domenico and Marietta*, 98. Rijksmuseum, "Portrait of Ottavio Strada," Rijksmuseum.nl, Rijksmuseum Collection. Accessed January 2021. https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/search/objects?q=strada&p=1&ps=12&st=Objects&ii=10#/SK-A-3902,10. - attributed by the Rijkmuseum curators to her father Tintoretto, but is one of the pieces most likely to have been completely done by Marietta Robusti herself as stated in

indeed include this inside joke, what might she be attempting to tell the viewer of the painting? Perhaps, she is poking fun at the societal standards of gentildonne in Venetian society and Castiglione's notion that women's creative knowledge should only exist for male entertainment and consumption.

Marietta Robusti's *Self-Portrait with Madrigal* exemplifies the importance of resistant viewings within art history, especially regarding women artists during the Renaissance. Robusti's inclusion of a clavichord within her portrait fits into a genre of self-portraiture exclusive to women artists during the 16th century. This instrument was utilized as a symbol of women artists adhering to social norms based on principles set by Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*, but also included resistant undertones alluding to both the creative and sexual agency of the self-depicted woman artist.

Ridolfi's biography. Also, currently named the *Portrait of Ottavio Strada*, rather than Jacopo Strada as Ridolfi recorded.

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For Noble Pursuits:

A Forgotten History of Venetian Women Artists

Exhibition Image Guide

Barovier Family (Including Marietta Barovier)

Barovier Wedding Cup

15th Century

Venice, Island f Murano

Glassware

Glass Museum of Murano

Marietta Barovier

Rosetta beads from Murano studio

15th century

Venice, Island of Murano

Glassware

Glass Museum of Murano

Artemisia Gentileschi

Esther Before Ahasuerus

1620s

Venice

Oil on canvas

208.3x273.7cm

Metropolitan Museum of Art

Artemisia Gentileschi,

Venus and Cupid

1625-30

Venice

Oil on canvas

131.45x9.53cm

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Assistant of Titian, Possibly Gian Paolo Pace

Portrait of Irene di Spilimbergo

C. 1560

Venice

Oil on canvas

122x106.5 cm

National Gallery Art, Washington D.C

Marietta Robusti, also known as Tintoretta

Self-Portrait with Madrigal

C. 1578

Venice

Oil on canvas

93.5x91.5 cm

Gallerie degli Uffizi

Marietta Robusti, also known as Tintoretta

Dama Veneciana

16th Century

Venice

Oil on canvas

77x65 cm

Museo del Prado

Marietta Robusti (Also attributed to Tintoretto)

Portrait of Ottavio Strada

C. 1567?

Venice

Oil on canvas

128x101 cm

Rijksmuseum

Chiara Varotari

Portrait of a Young Girl and Portrait of a Young Boy

1640s

Padua

Oil on Canvas

125x69 cm

Museo Civico of Padua

Chiara Varotari

Portrait of a Lady

1630s

Padua

Oil on canvas

200x117 cm

Museo Civico of Padua