

## ***The Portrait***

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# The Portrait

Evelyn Lincoln

The portrait of Girolama shows a clear-eyed new widow, a modestly veiled *donna onesta*, a working woman in simple, unadorned dress, presented to us without lace or jewels, unguarded, as if unaccustomed to posing or scrutiny, or perhaps stunned by her new situation (fig. 2.1). The painter seems familiar with the particularities of her face, and the circumstances of her life. There is a sense of vulnerability in its lack of pretention; she looks unaware of being studied. A devout Oratorian and active member of that congregation since its inception, Girolama worked for most of her life with her husband, Leonardo Parasole (d. 1612), and other members of her family carving images into boxwood blocks to illustrate an astonishing range of books published in Rome around the turn of the 17th century.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 2.1** Anonymous, *Portrait of Girolama Parasole*, before 1633, oil on canvas, Accademia di San Luca, Rome

Illustrations in books, no matter their subject or genre, were resources for a varied and expanding image-using market that

included the ambitious art students of the Accademia. The Parasole family provided woodblock illustrations for prestigious publications on New World plants; images in canonical liturgical books that required republishing after the Council of Trent; hagiographies and descriptions of martyrdom; visualizations of arcane iconography; and images for books in Arabic for the Medici Oriental Press. Portraits of clerics and rulers and images of the city created more opportunities for the family. It is likely that Girolama worked with her husband, her sister-in-law Isabella Parasole, and her brother-in-law Rosato Parasole on model books of lace patterns, which would have been the most notably original works of *invention* from this second iteration of the busy family workshop.

While Parasole is named and present in some surviving legal documents related to family matters and real estate that she owned in the city, her professional presence, and even her name, are confusing. In legal documents written in Latin, she appears as Hieronima Cagnaccia Parasole or a variation on that name. The monogram she used in the few cases where she signed woodcuts in illustrated books was “G.AP” with a tiny image of a woodcarver’s knife, a matching pendant to her husband’s monogram, “LP” with a knife. Her two large, undated, single-sheet prints are signed with her name in Latin, Hieronima Parasole. The cartouche at the bottom of her Accademia portrait, which may have been painted later than the portrait itself, gives her name in Italian along with the date and her profession: “Girolama Parasoli, Sc./1612.”<sup>7</sup> We are looking at a portrayal of a sculptor in woodworking for the first time under her own name, as would be appropriate for widows.

Attempting to characterize Girolama’s talent, skills, and even her oeuvre puts us on unstable terrain. She never claimed to design the prints we know she carved. Indeed she worked in the space between the world of invention, increasingly represented at the Accademia di San Luca, and the world of production and circulation that took place in the printshops and bookshops at the center of Rome. No contracts or agreements of association have yet been discovered that help us to understand the conduct of Girolama’s professional life, although documents regarding that of her husband and brother-in-law do exist.

Women transacting business in Rome during this period required a *mundualdus* to enter into a contract. This male relative or family friend negotiated contractual terms and “provided a means of dealing with those potentially

dysfunctional moments in the structure of male dominance when women entered the public arena.”<sup>8</sup> For this reason, when trying to piece together the professional life of a Roman woman from this period, it is necessary to interpret sources in light of social and family relations to understand what was socially and legally probable. Surviving materials for this include a notarial document from the beginning of Girolama’s career as a carver of woodblocks to illustrate books, and Baglione’s entry in a canonical work of the literature of art published two decades after her death. Since they bookend a discussion of Girolama Parasole’s career and reputation, we could begin by reading them together.

The document from the beginning of Girolama and Leonardo’s book-illustrating career frees Leonardo from association with a family workshop that practiced the “arte di zoccholi.”<sup>9</sup> It was contracted in 1585 at the death of his father, who arrived in Rome from Sant’Angelo in Visso in Norcia around 1572, and established a workshop for carving wooden clogs in the printing district.<sup>10</sup> The document releasing Leonardo from the family business shows that four Parasole sons worked together, each specializing in tasks necessary to run a shop that produced wooden shoes as well as small drums, tambourines, and small wooden caskets. While two brothers carved and would continue to carve the hardwood shoes, boxes, toys, and tambourines that were the shop’s mainstay, Rosato painted them with decorations and Leonardo carved woodblocks to print images that decorated them. The agreement shows that Leonardo had already begun working on his own, carving botanical images by an unknown designer for an herbal by the papal physician, Castore Durante.<sup>11</sup> Leonardo’s wife is mentioned but not named in the document, which shows that her dowry had been invested in the running of the shop, as had the dowry of another brother’s deceased wife, and the couple was allowed to extract those funds from the family association along with the paper, blocks, and prints related to the herbal. From the beginning of their Roman residency, the model for the Parasoles’ social and economic life was the family workshop, in which both men and women of an extended family shared work and financial resources. It is important to conceptualize Girolama Parasole’s formation as a sculptor in that structure, where she contributed her skills as a woodblock carver to a diversified family enterprise.

The second central, if convoluted, document is full of errors but sheds light on the arc of Girolama’s professional life and reputation: Baglione’s entry that included the Parasole family among biographies of noteworthy Roman artists.