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Emma Lazerson April 1, 2022

Performance and Imitation: The Devotional Images of Sofonisba Anguissola

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Abstract

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Sofonisba Anguissola (?1532/35-1625) has historically been known as a portraitist, lauded for creating the largest number of self-portraits between Albrecht Dürer and Rembrandt van Rijn. Prior scholars have considered her self-fashioning as emblematic of her virtuousness and chastity, but they have often neglected to consider Sofonisba's interactions with the broader world of Cinquecento Italian painting. My thesis examines three of her extant devotional images: her *Self-Portrait with Madonna and Child* (c. 1556), her *Madonna dell'Itria* altarpiece (late 1570s), and her *Maria Lactans* (1588). I analyze how Sofonisba adapts her style for the different anticipated audiences for whom she painted, and how her style ultimately becomes an amalgamation of these various influences. In her youth, she looked to Correggio and Parmigianino both in manner and subject to create an image of herself as the ideal courtier, relying on principles outlined by Baldassare Castiglione in his *Il Cortegiano* (1528). In the autumn and winter of her life, Sofonisba experimented with mode, creating an altarpiece and a private devotional image. The altarpiece looks to the specific iconography of Paternò in Sicily, blending that iconography with deeply personal elements that allude to her grief upon the death of her first husband. Finally, in the *Maria Lactans*, Sofonisba employs lessons she learned in the Spanish court to create a private devotional image full of charm, softness, sweetness, and color, traits that were valued by the Spanish. Many of the previous studies on Sofonisba have not examined her artistic practices in the broader Renaissance world; my study attempts to evaluate works in her *oeuvre* that have not often been discussed and to shed light on Sofonisba's interaction with the early modern artistic practices.

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In 1992, Ilya Sandra Perlingieri published one of the first biographies dedicated to Sofonisba Anguissola, entitled *Sofonisba Anguissola: The First Great Woman Artist of the Renaissance.* This study situates Sofonisba within the dialogue of the Cinquecento Renaissance artist. It was written as a counter to other art historical scholarship prior to the 1990s, which often neglected early modern women artists. Following Perlingieri's efforts, Judith Rose wrote "Mirrors of Language, Mirrors of Self: The Conceptualization of Artistic Identity in Gaspara Stampa and Sofonisba Anguissola" and Naomi Yavneh penned "To Bare or Not Too Bare: Sofonisba Anguissola's Nursing Madonna and the Womanly Art of Breastfeeding," both published in *Maternal Measures* in 2000. Rose compares Sofonisba's practice of painting herself in a mirror to the practice of viewing oneself as if in a *speculum sine macula* (mirror without sin), the latter being a metaphor commonly connected to the Virgin. She says that Sofonisba uses mirrors in a complicated loop in her *Self-Portrait with Madonna and Child* (c.1556, oil on canvas), where St. Luke reflects the Virgin, Sofonisba, as a stand-in for St. Luke, reflects him, and, by extension, Sofonisba reflects the Virgin (Figure 1).[1] Yavneh, for her part, examines Sofonisba's *Maria Lactans* (1588, oil on canvas): she argues that Sofonisba took up the motif—which had fallen out of favor in the Cinquecento—to restore humanity to the Virgin and remove any implication of sexualization. In her own self-imaging, Sofonisba strives to represent herself as chaste, and, therefore, Yavneh argues, uses the iconography of this image, to create another equation between the Virgin and herself.[2]

[1] Judith Rose, "Mirrors of Language, Mirrors of Self: The Conceptualization of Artistic Identity in Gaspara Stampa and Sofonisba Anguissola," in *Maternal Measures*, ed. Naomi J. Miller (Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate, 2000), 41-42, 45.

[2] Naomi Yavneh, "Too Bare or Not Too Bare: Sofonisba Anguissola's Nursing Madonna and the Womanly Art of Breastfeeding," in *Maternal Measures*, ed. Naomi J. Miller (Aldershot; Burlington: Ashgate, 2000), 65, 73.

Until recently, with the exception of Joanna Woods-Marsden's *Renaissance Self-Portraiture* (1998), nearly all of the scholarship concerning Sofonisba's self-fashioning has focused on the representation of the virginal woman. Pivoting away from this model, Michael Cole published *Sofonisba's Lesson* (2019). The general goal of his book is to demonstrate how Sofonisba represents the model of the educated woman and the importance of an education for a young woman in the Renaissance, but his introductory chapter delves specifically into the ambitions of Sofonisba and her father, Amilcare. Cole argues that her self-fashioning emerges from her desire for fame and that she works to place herself in the tradition of Giovanni Boccaccio's illustrious women.[3]

In my thesis, I want to move away from a focus of Sofonisba's virginal and virtuous self-fashioning, which Rose and Yavneh stress in their essays. Working within Cole's model, I intend to turn the discussion to a selection of her devotional images, considering how Sofonisba adapts her style to different purposes and circumstances, sometimes away from the manner associated with her domestic portraits, which had been very successful for her. The works under consideration, while sharing generally religious subject matter, are of different types. They include the above-mentioned *Self-Portrait with Madonna and Child* (c. 1556, oil on canvas), an altarpiece, known as the *Madonna dell'Itria* (late 1570s, oil on panel), which Sofonisba created during her time in Sicily, for the Franciscan order at Santissima Annunziata of Paternò, and two private devotional images: a *Maria Lactans* (1588, oil on canvas) and a *Holy Family with Saint Anne and Saint John the Baptist* (1592, oil on canvas).

In examining these pieces, I will consider the profound impact that place, function, and anticipated audience had on her work. Sofonisba did not paint in a vacuum: she was well-attuned

[3] Michael Cole, *Sofonisba's Lesson* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019), 22-25.

to the desires of the audiences for whom she painted. While the manner of her self-portrayal as developed in her early works remains much the same, her devotional images offer a lens into Sofonisba's ability to adapt to the changing preferences within the Renaissance world.

The *Self-Portrait with Madonna and Child* was painted around 1556, at the height of Sofonisba's career as a portraitist. Today, she is known to have created the largest number of self-portraits between Albrecht Dürer and Rembrandt van Rijn.[4] Her prior works featured Sofonisba holding a book or playing a keyboard, but the *Self-Portrait with Madonna and Child* is the first to show her actively engaged in art-making.

Stationed at the center of the *Self-Portrait with Madonna and Child,* Sofonisba depicts herself staring out at the audience. Her nose is slightly enlarged as is her left eye, alluding to her use of a mirror, and her hair is wrapped in her customary tight chignon. She wears a black dress with maroon sleeves and a white lace collar. She paints at an easel, with black, white, and red pigment smeared across a palette at the bottom of the canvas, while steadying her hand with a maulstick. Her right hand adds color to the flesh of Christ. The canvas she paints shows a youthful, idealized Madonna, wreathed in a two-toned pink dress, with a blue cloak across her legs, as is typical in many depictions of the Madonna from the Renaissance. One of her hands cups the back of Christ's head, while the other delicately rests against his cheek, in preparation for a nuptial kiss. The Child is nude: his left hip juts out, and he places his right arm against his mother's lap. The background of the canvas being painted near sepia-toned, with a large column base placed behind the Virgin.

This image requires a twofold analysis: it is at once a self-portrait and a devotional image. Rose argues that this image features Sofonisba in the place of St. Luke, the painter of the

[4] Ibid, 2.

Virgin. St. Luke's act of painting the Virgin aligns him with the Virgin and her morals, which Sofonisba also does, emphasizing her own virtuousness. Rose's position is valid on several grounds. Sofonisba intentionally highlights what Fredrika Jacobs has called her "(pro)creative powers" by painting the Christ Child's arm—showing herself as an artist and as a proxy for the Virgin, a proxy for creation.[5] Sofonisba's painting gesture, coupled with the austerity of her appearance, likely allude to her ability to produce art as the Virgin produced Christ: without sin.

Rose's reading examines Sofonisba in light of her virtuous self-fashioning, which may not be Sofonisba's sole aim in depicting herself painting the Virgin and Child. In doing so, she underscores her longing for fame. As Cole observes, she inserts herself into a history of illustrious women, as written by Boccaccio and Christine de Pizan. Boccaccio created the genre of writing about famous women in his *De Mulieribus Claris* (*Concerning Famous Women*) (c. 1360-74).[6] Christine de Pizan later engaged with his work, translated and expanded her own version into French, *Le Livre de Cité des Dames* (*The Book of the City of Ladies*) (c. 1405)[7], and both Boccaccio and de Pizan's works were reproduced in illuminated manuscripts throughout the fifteenth century. Boccaccio's *Concerning Famous Women* was first printed in Italian in 1506; by 1545, scholar Giuseppe Betussi added descriptions of the women of Sofonisba's day, such as poets Veronica Gambara and Vittoria Colonna, to Boccaccio's list, showing that the history of illustrious women was ongoing.[8] In *Concerning Famous Women*, Boccaccio specifically references three female artists: Irene, Marcia, and Thamyris. Thamyris, according to Boccaccio,

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[5] See Fredrika Jacobs, "Woman's Capacity to Create: The Unusual Case of Sofonisba Anguissola," *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (Spring 1994), 78-93. Jacobs argues that when Sofonisba produces art, there is an equation between the art she produces and her reproductive abilities.

[6] Susan Gaylard, "*De Mulieribus Claris* and the Disappearance of Women from Illustrated Print Biographies," *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 18, no. 2 (2015), 287.

[7] See the introduction from Rosalind Brown-Grant in Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (London; New York: Penguin Classics, 2000), xviii.

[8] Cole, *Sofonisba's Lesson,* 22.

was famous for painting an image of Diana, and Marcia was most well-known for painting a self-portrait. Significantly, Boccaccio mentions that Marcia remained chaste, even if she never made "a vow to Diana."[9] In the fifteenth century, many manuscript copies of the French version of Boccaccio's book represent Thamyris painting the goddess Diana, who, despite being a pagan deity, was often conflated with the Virgin. This conflation arose because the Virgin, in her chastity and purity, upheld the same ideals of Diana, while being a more suitable figure for worship in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. For example, in MS Français 598 (*De Mulieribus Claris*, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 1403, Paris) Thamyris is shown painting an image of the Virgin and Child, substituting the goddess for the Virgin (Figure 2). With her *Self-Portrait with Madonna and Child*, Sofonisba inserts herself into the pictorial tradition of celebrating Marcia and Thamyris as famous women painters. She shows herself creating an image of the Virgin: on one hand, accentuating her own chastity and devotion, but on the other, highlighting her desire for fame.

In Cinquecento Italy, there were few avenues for women to become professional artists.[10] Sofonisba's contemporaries who succeeded as practitioners of art, such as Lavinia Fontana, Marietta Robusti, Barbara Longhi, and, later, Artemisia Gentileschi, had fathers who were artists themselves.[11] Sofonisba's father Amilcare, by contrast, was not an artist, but with six daughters and limited financial resources, he decided to employ the talents of his eldest daughter.[12] He enlisted the help of local painter Bernardino Campi (and later Bernardino Gatti) to teach his

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[9] Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, trans. Guido A. Guarino (London: George Allena and Unwin LTD), 122, 131, 144-45.
[10] See Joanna Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture*, 188. "It was unthinkable for a female to become an artist. Just as poetry, if we follow the logic of gendering in Western languages, was conceived as a masculine activity, so artistic creative powers were a male prerogative, the three arts were gendered male on Florence Campanile, and in the sixteenth century art was defined as a 'profession di gentil*uomo*.'"
[11] Ibid, 189.
[12] Cole, *Sofonisba's Lesson*, 18.

daughter the art of painting. Amilcare aimed to secure Sofonisba a position as an artist at a court—either in Italy or abroad.[13] As a woman, Sofonisba would not have been able to join a guild or receive an apprenticeship in a workshop.[14] She was reliant on private individuals, and a court would have been the highest place to which she could have aspired.[15]

It is well-documented that Amilcare sent examples of Sofonisba's work to powerful courts throughout Europe, including that of the Este in Ferrara and of the Gonzaga in Mantua.[16] These images could have functioned as an informal sort of job interview, in which Sofonisba had to market herself to appeal to these courts. To do so, Sofonisba turned to Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*) (1528) for a description of how the ideal courtier could represent herself.[17] Castiglione's book, which became popular in educated circles of Sofonisba's time, features a dialogue between figures such as Elisabetta Gonzaga, Pietro Bembo and Gaspare Pallavicino, to name a few. Over the course of four days, the characters, all members of the court of the Gonzaga in Urbino, discuss qualities that could be suited to the ideal courtier, both male and female. The book itself creates an open discussion, often with dissent about the ideal appearance of a courtier, describing alternate modes of dress, manners, and activities to which the courtier should subscribe. However, the text was often read as prescriptive.[18] It is this sort of reading that apparently informed Sofonisba's self-portrayal.

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[13] Ibid, 20-21.
[14] Joanna Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture,* 188.
[15] Cole, *Sofonisba's Lesson,* 14. In the introduction, he mentions that she would not have been able to travel outside of Cremona to learn about art; she was largely confined to her home.
[16] Ibid, 21. "From early on, Amilcare sent examples of her work to powerful men and women. A letter of 1556 from Amilcare to Ercole II d'Este, the Duke of Ferrara, refers both to a self-portrait by Sofonisba that accompanied the letter and to other portraits he had sent 'many years before' to Gerolamo Somenza, the duke's seneschal. In 1557, he sent a painting by Sofonisba to Margherita Paleologo, the duchess of Mantua, asking her to deliver it to Eleonora Gonzaga della Rovere…Vasari reports that Amilcare sent pictures to Pope Julius II as well…by 1559, Amilcare was also corresponding with King Philip II of Spain."
[17] Joanna Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 201.
[18] Ibid, 15-17.

Working from what she (and likely also her father) perceived as Castiglione's advice, Sofonisba portrayed herself with sobriety to represent her strong morals.[19] She relied on the *Book of the Courtier* to frame herself within the paradigm described by Castiglione.

Sofonisba's self-presentation, her preferred black-and-maroon high-collared dress goes beyond an austere self-fashioning: it directly fits into one of the ways an ideal courtier could dress, according to Castiglione.

> I prefer [the courtier] always [in dress] to tend a little more toward the grave and sober rather than the foppish. Hence, I think that black is more pleasing in clothing than any other color; and if not black, then at least some color on the dark side…I would have our Courtier's dress show that sobriety which the Spanish nation so much observes, since external things often bear witness to inner things.[20]

Sofonisba's expression in her self-portraits is always "grave and sober"; she wears black and maroon, both colors "on the dark side"; and her dress in its high neckline shows the "sobriety which the Spanish nation so much observes." This passage from Castiglione refers to the manner of the male courtier. In my view, Sofonisba does not acknowledge this difference: she fashions herself to appear as an ideal courtier, regardless of gender. She signals key characteristics that Castiglione ascribed to the ideal courtier: modesty, reservedness, *diligenza*, and *sprezzatura*—an affected appearance of ease.[21] Her clothes are demure without frills, and her expression is undemonstrative, indicating her modesty and reservedness. Though her expression is impassive, in her turning pose and the position of her hands, Sofonisba shows her propensity for labor: her

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[19] Ibid, 201.
[20] Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), 89.
[21] Ibid, 25, 32.

arms muscles are tensed, her body is rotating, and her hands steadily hold the brush and the maulstick. All are signs emblematic of the *diligenza* she employs in her art and—presumably—in her life. Sofonisba has defined herself as a courtier before ever working at a court, and her self-presentation does not look feigned. She looks like a courtier described by Castiglione.[22] In performing a role still unfamiliar to her, she has demonstrated an ease of assimilation. Also, her art of painting, which Castiglione esteems as a positive characteristic for a courtier,[23] appears to be done with ease, shown through the two modes and two styles in which she paints fluidly, a point to which I will return. Her self-fashioning reflects the concerns of Castiglione's court and her own desire to adapt to such a setting.

Sofonisba thus portrays herself as a courtier, but how does the Madonna and Child canvas image itself convey Sofonisba's longing for a position at court, and what does it communicate about her engagement with the art world around her? First of all, Sofonisba demonstrates her propensity for imitation through the embedded painting of the Madonna and Child, which is done in a style different from the one she uses to portray herself and akin to that of painters of the previous generation, especially Correggio and Parmigianino. In her early career, Sofonisba would have been exposed to the style of Correggio through her teacher Campi, who himself was taught by a follower of the great master.[24] The Madonna clearly resembles many versions of the Madonna Correggio completed, such as *Virgin Adoring the Christ Child* (1518-20, oil on canvas; Figure 3). Sofonisba borrows Correggio's soft portrayal of flesh in her image of the Virgin: both versions of the Madonna have rosy cheeks set against softly rendered skin, with the same sort of thick, dark hair, and similarly small, softened lips. Sofonisba's Christ

[22] I must emphasize that the court Castiglione describes, though it includes real people, is fictious. In framing herself within his model, Sofonisba self-fashions to appeal to a more general idea of court, as opposed to a specific place.
[23] Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, 57-59.
[24] Ilya Sandra Perlingieri, *The First Great Woman Artist of the Renaissance* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 40-41.

Child also clearly borrows Correggio's blonde, fine curls visible in works such as *Madonna and Child with an Angel* (1522-25, oil on wood; Figure 4). Sofonisba's canvas which she shows herself painting looks to Correggio for his softened textures, but her image is not a one-to-one copy of Corregesque style; she also implements elements from the manner of Parmigianino.

While Correggio's manner is very soft, with rounded forms, and rosy flesh, Parmigianino's style is much sharper. The limbs of the Virgin closely parallel the long, sinuous body shape of the Madonna from Parmigianino's *Madonna of the Long Neck* (1534-35, oil on wood) and his Madonna in *Virgin and Child with Saint John and Mary Magdalene* (1535-40, oil on paper placed on panel; Figures 5 and 6). Additionally, her Virgin's hands have very long, thin fingers and slim wrists, extending into attenuated arms. Parmigianino often uses attenuated limbs, as can be seen in his *Madonna of the Long Neck,* as a hallmark of idealized female beauty.[25] Sofonisba's Virgin's jaw is also clearly defined, with a sharper face, and a pointed nose done in a manner atypical of her style, but very much in the vein of Parmigianino. The Christ Child similarly is composed of Parmigianino-esque features. The Child's body is thinner, with a jutting hip. Rather than embracing the chubby infants of Correggio, Sofonisba emulates Parmigianino in the infant's anatomy. She sexualizes the Child, and this sexualization is further carried out through the nuptial kiss. The pose invokes an embrace between Venus and Cupid more than an embrace between Virgin and Child.

There is no other image in Sofonisba's *oeuvre* that is so sexualized. The chosen subject matter, a nuptial kiss in which the Virgin is at once "sposa, madre e figlia" to Christ as the bridegroom, is unusual for her.[26] In the Middle Ages, Christ and the Virgin as bridegroom and

[25] Elizabeth Cropper, "On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, Petrarchismo, and the Vernacular Style," *The Art Bulletin* 58, no. 3 (September 1976), 376.
[26] Rose, "Mirrors of Language, Mirrors of Self," 43.

bride was a common theme, but, in medieval examples the two actors were usually represented to be close in age, rather than as a mother and child.[27] The iconography of Christ and Virgin as a married couple was accepted by audiences, as the union was deemed an allegory for the church. According to Marilyn Lavin, these images allude to the five stages of love: "Seeing the Beloved (God's covenant with Abraham), 2) Speaking with her (God's conversation with his people through Moses and the Prophets), 3) Touching her (Christ's Incarnation and historical life, 4) Kissing her (the gift of Peace given the disciples by the Risen Christ, and 5) having intercourse with her (perfect union enjoyed in heaven)."[28] In sixteenth-century Italian paintings, such as those by Perugino, Raphael, and Titian, devotional images showing Christ as a child usually showed the Virgin holding him, but they were not usually engaged in a nuptial kiss. The viewer was meant to ally oneself with the pious love shown for Christ.[29]

Parmigianino's paintings departed from the norm represented by such works. In 1529, he painted a kissing scene between an infant Christ and Saint Margaret, alluding to their mystical marriage (oil on canvas; Figure 7). In Parmigianino's altarpiece, St. Margaret looks longingly at Christ who sits on his mother's lap. She kneels across from him, bracing herself against the Virgin's knee, who turns away in contemplation. The infant lightly touches Margaret's shoulder, and she leans close, though does not directly kiss the Christ Child. Parmigianino painted sexually charged religious scenes.

I mentioned previously that Sofonisba did not produce sexually-charged images. Sofonisba's self-portrayal stressed her modesty and reservedness. Yet, the canvas image she shows herself painting within the *Self-Portrait* is eroticized, as Parmigianino sometimes did in

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[27] See Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, "Art of the Misbegotten: Physicality and the Divine in Renaissance Images," *Artibus et Historiae* 30, no. 60 (2009), pages 225-232 for examples of the nuptial kiss.
[28] Ibid, 229.
[29] Ibid, 229.

his religious images. I argue that Sofonisba is imitating not only Parmigianino's style but also the type of subject he would have painted.

In eroticizing the image, she partially counters the chastity she has established in her self-imaging; she differs from the precedents set by Marcia and Thamyris. The eroticization of the canvas image raises several questions: why would Sofonisba mix a chaste self-fashioning with a sexual religious image? Why would she take up a subject so unusual for her? What does the canvas image tell the viewer about her style? In sexualizing the Christ Child, Sofonisba is not diminishing her position as *virgo* or removing herself from a line of famous women. Rather, she is demonstrating her stylistic range. Sofonisba sexualizes the Christ Child and the Virgin to not only echo Correggio and Parmigianino's styles but to echo the subject matter Parmigianino would have chosen. She does this to show her proclivity for adaptation as a form of imitation. And, beyond adaptation, Sofonisba demonstrates how easily she can move between two different types of grace. During Parmigianino's time, the Catholic Church was trying to re-create itself after Martin Luther's break. While the newly-founded Church under Luther wanted the Virgin to demonstrate her humility through a lack of ornamented beauty, as to not turn her into a goddess or an idol, the Catholic Church valued ornament as it "was a proper sign of the Church's development over time."[30] Two aesthetics of grace, "naturalistic and artful," came into contention when depicting the Virgin.[31]

Despite using Castiglione's work as a guidebook, which provides one definition for female beauty, Sofonisba rejects some of his conventions in her self-fashioning, in favor of an unornamented type of grace. In the sixteenth century, many writers explored the topic of ideal

[30] Regina Stefaniak, "Amazing Grace: Parmigianino's 'Vision of Saint Jerome,'" *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 58 (1995), 106-110.
[31] Ibid, 108.

feminine beauty, including former monk Agnolo Firenzuola in his 1548 treatise.[32] As Elizabeth Cropper discusses in her article on Parmigianino's paintings, Firenzuola defined ideal female beauty in specific terms. He states that women should have fine, long curly hair that is blonde, "ranging from gold and honey to the color of bright sunshine"; a brow that is twice as wide as it is high and gleaming white without wrinkles; dark, fine eyebrows with clear tapering; "dark chestnut irises with whites that are large and curving, following Homer's description of Juno"; and lashes that are neither too long nor too dark. Firenzuola continues on to describe the ideal body silhouette (based on an amphora vase) and the ideal appearance of a woman, even designating a preferred shape for her ears.[33] Aside from the appearance of a woman's face, Firenzuola states that both an amphora vase and a capital were ideal models for a woman's body. Naturally, as the tenets put forth by Firenzuola were perhaps inspired by Parmigianino's *Madonna of the Long Neck,* or vice-versa, there is a capital in the *Madonna of the Long Neck*, echoing the beauty of Parmigianino's perfected Madonna. Like Parmigianino, Sofonisba, too, includes a capital next to the Virgin in her *Self-Portrait*, presumably as analog for the Virgin's beauty. The capital's inclusion acts as a purposeful allusion to the kind of grace promulgated and articulated by Parmigianino and Correggio.

It may be that Sofonisba purposefully represents herself in her usual manner and the Virgin in the manner of Correggio and Parmigianino to show the "*non so che*,"[34] the unknowable quality, of grace, as well as showing that grace can exist in multiple manners, and that these manners can be navigated between seamlessly. Sofonisba's easy navigation between the two

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[32] See Castiglione, *Book of the Courtier,* 151: "And I do think that beauty is more necessary to her than to the Courtier, for truly that woman lacks much who lacks beauty."
[33] Cropper, "On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, Petrarchismo, and the Vernacular Style," 381-383. Also see Agnolo Firenzuola, *On the Beauty of Women*, trans. Konrad Eisenbichler and Jacqueline Murray (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).
[34] Ibid, 381.

distinct types of grace is a kind of performance, for which Castiglione coined a term in his *Book of the Courtier*:

> Avoid affectation in every way possible as though it were some very rough and dangerous reef; and (to pronounce a new word perhaps) to practice in all things a certain *sprezzautra,* so as to conceal all art and make whatever is done or said appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it. And I believe much grace comes of this: because everyone knows the difficulty of things that are rare and well done; wherefore facility in such things causes the greatest wonder.[35]

To look at the *Self-Portrait with Madonna and Child,* it is not apparent that Sofonisba struggled to differentiate between the two manners in which she painted. Her adaptation appears easy, even if it had felt unnatural to her to work in a different style. The *Self-Portrait with Madonna and Child* features both Sofonisba's typical style of self-portraiture and the style and subject matter of Correggio and Parmigianino in the canvas she paints.

As suggested earlier, Sofonisba's self-fashioning as a courtier could be viewed as a type of performance, since she represents herself with the qualities of a courtier, which she did not yet possess. The canvas within the self-portrait can be considered a different type of performance. Painting in a style unlike one's own requires one to consider how someone else conceives of lines, shapes, color, and forms; it requires one to consider the inventive techniques of another. Sofonisba not only thinks about the appearance of the manners she is representing but also about Correggio and Parmigianino's type of invention. Her austere self-fashioning as a courtier, done in her established style, further divides her own manner of painting with the canvas she has rendered, which is sexually charged. The recognizability of the style of others does not diminish

[35] Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier,* 32.

the imitation: the visible imitation shows that it is a performance. Moreover, the oscillation between styles and inventions heightens the appearance of *sprezzatura*. Because the imitation is visible, the negotiation between her own style and Correggio's and Parmigianino's becomes part of what the painting is about. Sofonisba's representation of their styles is done beautifully. Neither part of the image looks like it was done with difficulty; they flow seamlessly between each other.

Sofonisba, in her interpretations of Castiglione's text, seems to demonstrate her engagement with the artistic debates about *sprezzatura* and grace during her time. When Castiglione first introduced the term *sprezzatura*, he meant it in the context of the performance of the courtier. The courtier should laugh easily, speak freely, move sinuously, even if all of these actions are rehearsed.[36] The theorist Giorgio Vasari appropriated these ideas onto art, considering artworks representing bodies in contorted poses, such as Michelangelo's figures, to be the highest form of *disegno* and the embodiment of *sprezzatura*, since the complex poses are made to look easy.[37] The Venetian scholar Lodovico Dolce furthered these ideas about *sprezzatura*, but he thought Raphael and Titian embodied the highest form of it, because their figures represented similar poses to Michelangelo without the same visible strain.[38] Still, the *figura serpentinata*, for example, is not the only expression of practiced ease. In maneuvering between styles, Sofonisba shows her propensity for assimilation, and she performs. At this time, Sofonisba was not just considering Castiglione's text as a prescriptive manual for the courtier: she was engaging with

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[36] Ibid, 33.

[37] Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists 1550-1950* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1977), 31. Sutherland Harris and Nochlin state that "[Vasari's] use of the word 'diligenza' is a warning signal, for above all he admired artists whose work was not obviously the product of hard work but rather those whose technique were effortless, who displayed 'disinvoltura,' and he normally paid little attention to portraits." *Disinvoltura* can be translated to mean "ease."

[38] Mark W. Roskill, *Dolce's* Aretino *and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), 22-24.

and interpreting the text, identifying ways to make her own form of *sprezzatura* recognizable in her work.

Sofonisba's *Self-Portrait with Madonna and Child* shows a kind of performative imitation, where Sofonisba specifically highlights the manners from which she adapts. This clever interplay between her own style and that of Correggio and Parmigianino could have helped her to secure a position at the Spanish court, as she shows that she can adapt her style to other manners. But the Spanish would not have wanted her imitation to continue to be visible when she worked for them. Sofonisba would have been appreciated for her skill in painting in a manner nearly identical to her contemporaries, particularly when creating portraits. The Spanish court largely did not prize invention: they wanted an artist who could duplicate similar poses and manners exactly.[39] As Cole says, "What took place around Isabel [of Valois], however, was neither the promotion of a school nor a typical late sixteenth-century form of eclecticism but rather a kind of assimilation. Even when making independent paintings, artists sought to create images that could hold universal authority." This assimilation was done through the "unbroken continuity" in portraits.[40] Artists tried to emulate each other to create similar likenesses of court members.

Sofonisba's *Self-Portrait with Madonna and Child* could have helped her to secure a position at the Spanish court. Her portrait, which easily transforms her into a role of the courtier which she did not yet possess, shows her in the preferred dress of the court: she is grave, reserved, and chaste. The devotional image done after Correggio and Parmigianino which she paints within the canvas further alludes to her ambitions to obtain a courtly position through the ease with which she negotiates between styles. In particular, the Spanish nation favored

[39] Cole, *Sofonisba's Lesson*, 137.
[40] Ibid, 137.

conformity in its static depiction of rulers. By painting after Correggio and Parmigianino, Sofonisba demonstrated her adaptability to conform to the styles of others. Her clever reading of Castiglione allowed Sofonisba to represent herself as the ideal courtier, in both appearance and in her painting manner.

Sofonisba arrived in Spain in 1559.[41] There exists little scholarship on her work after this point in her life, partly because, while at the court, Sofonisba worked alongside fellow artists like Alonso Sánchez Coello to produce official royal portraiture.[42] Much of this portraiture is indistinguishable in style. However, her Spanish period and her Genoese and Sicilian periods thereafter offer an exciting opportunity to understand Sofonisba's engagement with the art world at large. At the Spanish court, Sofonisba would have been exposed to a wider breadth of artistic styles. The new artistic styles, often done in modes Sofonisba had little experience with, prompted her to experiment further with both style and mode in her later works. Implementing this newfound knowledge, Sofonisba created a number of devotional images during her Genoese and Sicilian periods—the autumn and winter of her life.

Following her tenure at the Spanish court, in 1573, Philip II arranged for the marriage between Sofonisba and the governor of Paternò, Sicily, Don Fabrizio de Moncada. The couple returned to Italy and lived there through 1578 when Moncada sailed to Madrid, hoping to persuade Philip II to intervene in a conflict with the widow of his late brother over his inheritance. The ship was attacked by pirates, and Moncada tragically drowned, leaving Sofonisba a widow.[43] This event inspired Sofonisba to paint her largest recorded work: the

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[41] Ibid, 46.
[42] Ibid, 123-125. Sofonisba never received the official title of court artist; she was considered a consort to the queen, but Coello is still credited as painting a portrait of the queen after one by Sofonisba.
[43] See Cole, *Sofonisba's Lesson,* 146 and Maria Kusche, "Comments on the Attributions to Sofonisba Anguissola by Doctor Alfio Nicotra," *Spanish Art Archive* 82, no. 327 (July 2009): 285-287.

Madonna dell'Itria altarpiece, which stands at 162 x 230 cm (roughly 64 x 91 in; Figure 8). The altarpiece was painted after April 1578 (when Moncada drowned).[44] While the attribution of the work to Sofonisba is disputed, the documents in support of the attribution of this work to Sofonisba were rediscovered in 2002, when Filippo Marota Rizzo found the dedicatory papers in the Catania Archives. Sofonisba donated this image to the Franciscan order of Paternò on 25 June 1579.[45] The altarpiece itself shows the Virgin and Christ balanced atop a sarcophagus, carried by two Franciscan friars, with the assistance of two angels placed at either end of the sarcophagus. A group of worshippers kneels in front of the Virgin, exulting her presence. The background shows two ships in a bay, surrounded by icy blue mountains and rolling green hills. The Virgin is clad in deep red and sapphire blue and is being crowned by two angels, while the nude Christ Child on her knee points skyward to the angels.

Using the terms of the typology established by David Ekserdjian in his book on Italian Renaissance altarpieces, the *Madonna dell'Itria* altarpiece might be located in the category of "mystery." Ekserdjian divides altarpieces into three groups: icons, narratives, and mysteries. According to him, an icon, usually a *sacra conversazione*, shows the Virgin and Christ enthroned and worshipped by saints.[46] Conversely, a narrative tells a clear story, such as the Adoration of the Magi trope. A mystery inhabits the liminal space between the former two categories.[47] Mysteries are usually doctrinal, and they represent episodes from the Virgin's history, generally

[44] Cole, *Sofonisba's Lesson,* 146-147.
[45] Ibid, 285.
[46] David Ekserdjian, "The Italian Renaissance Altarpiece: Between Icon and Narrative" (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021), 110-112. The term *sacra conversazione* was coined in modernity by German scholars Franz Kugler and Gustav Friedrich Waagen to denote a type of holy conversation between the figures in the image. Today, the term more so refers to the "recollection," the movement to piety, the viewer has when looking at the image.
[47] Ibid, 255-56.

featuring the Virgin in one of her guises, surrounded by saints or other worshippers, as they attempt to understand the holy workings of God—something unknowable, and thus, a mystery.[48]

As Mauro Salis explains, the iconography of the Madonna dell'Itria is of particular importance in Paternò. Originally, the Byzantine people evoked the Virgin Hodegetria as protector against invading Muslim populations. Though there is not an unbroken continuity between this figure and the Madonna dell'Itria, which the Italians called her, the idea of the Virgin as a protectress remained popular. The Madonna dell'Itria evolved in the sixteenth century as a result of an increase in Turkish Barbary attacks, where many Christians were taken as slaves. She was evoked by seafaring professions, such as sailors, fishermen, and merchants. Because of the Barbary attacks, the Madonna dell'Itria merged with Our Lady of Navigators as a "liberating force against slavery by the Barbary enemies," prompting the cult to spread throughout Southern Italy and the Iberian Peninsula. Furthermore, the image became a popular representation in the confraternities of Sicily, as it was deemed appropriate by the Council of Trent, which set strict rules about the decorum surrounding iconographies of religious subjects.[49]

Sofonisba's altarpiece shares its iconography with other depictions of the Madonna dell'Itria from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries such as Pietro Francesco Sacchi's *Virgin Hodegetria with Saints John the Baptist, Antonius of Florence, and Nicholas of Tolentino* (1526, oil on panel; Figure 9). In these late-sixteenth century examples, the Virgin with Child is shown on some sort of box, carried by friars, and worshipped by saints. Angels usually seem to flank her, though this piece of iconography is not consistent; the box, friars, and saints are the primary elements that are repeated. Sofonisba's version of the image follows these conventions, in the

[48] Ibid, 238.
[49] Mauro Salis, "The Virgin Hodegetria Iconography in the Crown of Aragon in the Early Modern Period Canons, Allotropies and Variants," *Ikon* 10 (June 2017): 187-190.

sense that the Virgin is seated on a box, which is carried by friars, and figures worship her. However, Sofonisba alters the standard iconography of Paternò to suit her own purposes. The box that the Virgin sits upon is no longer just a box: it is a coffin. The trapezoid-like shape at the head of the box is distinctive and makes Sofonisba's box unlike the simple rectangular boxes, and it may allude to a coffin, rather than the straight rectangular boxes in the later painting of the Madonna dell'Itria by Alessandro Allori, Francesco Aurelio and Pantaleone Calvo.[50] Maria Kusche posits that, in making the box into a coffin, Sofonisba uses the painting as a point of catharsis, reflecting upon the death of her husband.[51]

Kusche's suggestion is intriguing and may be related to another distinctive aspect of Sofonisba's altarpiece, namely the portrayal of the Virgin in a manner that invited comparison with Sofonisba's earlier self-portraits. The Virgin has the same large eyes. Her eyebrows are thinner, but in a similar shape. Her nose is long and thin like Sofonisba's, and her lips share the same fuller lower lip and defined cupid's bow. Her hands also have the elongated, slim fingers of the painter. Yet, the Virgin in Sofonisba's altarpiece is not a direct mirror of Sofonisba's self-portraits. Her eyes are the chestnut brown described in Firenzuola's description of a beautiful woman, while Sofonisba's are grayish-green. The Virgin's hair is also the golden honey blonde of Firenzuola's ideal woman. In this altarpiece, Sofonisba amalgamates her own self-image with the portrait of the idealized woman. She combines the two mediums of representation from the *Self-Portrait with Madonna and Child*. The woman in the altarpiece is a version of herself ornamented with traits of the ideal woman, as was represented in the figure of the Madonna in her *Self-Portrait*. Sofonisba has combined two types of grace into one figure. She makes clear reference to herself as a means of showing the grief she experienced at the loss of her first

[50] Ibid, 195.
[51] Kusche, "Comments on the Attributions," 286-87.

husband,[52] but she idealizes her self-imaging to reflect the ideal woman, at once creating a deeply personal and universal altarpiece.

Noticeably, the Christ Child also looks different from the Corregesque infant of the painting within the *Self-Portrait with Madonna and Child*. This altarpiece exhibits signs of overpainting, but overpainting cannot be the sole cause for the difference in her painting of the Christ Child. His hair, though blonde with some curls, lacks the definition she has shown before. The seriousness of the Christ Child's expression and his static pose, pointing up at the angels crowning the Virgin, perhaps hearkens to earlier Byzantine icons of the Child, an allusion to the Virgin Hodegetria.[53] Sofonisba could be referencing the earlier images of Paternò's protector, blending a pictorial tradition with her own style. She likely would have seen Byzantine-style images of the Virgin Hodegetria throughout Paternò, so she might be recalling earlier sources through the infant Christ, showing the continuity of the Virgin's protection.

Besides mode, the altarpiece diverges from Sofonisba's typical manner in many ways. This image showcases the only full-length figures in motion that Sofonisba ever portrayed. In her full-length portraits, the figures are usually shown standing, but they are not shown moving. Here, the friars bear the brunt of the weight of the coffin, and, despite their faces being impassive—perhaps denoting that the spiritual strain of bearing the Virgin brings them peace—they show the physical strain of the weight of the casket. If Kusche is right that the kneeling figures who worship the Virgin may be Moncada's family, Sofonisba has incorporated another personal element. Interestingly, this is also one of her few compositions, other than in her

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[52] Ibid, 286-87.

[53] See Salis, "The Virgin Hodegetria Iconography," 188. Salis states that "There is no reason to doubt that the period ranging from the mid-15th century to the first decades of the 16th century, is the crucial period during which the cult of Hodegetria spread most significantly between East and West. In this period the main iconographic and cultural shifts occur, giving birth to allotropies and variants of the image. It was only after the fall of Constantinople that the new ways of representing the Hodegetria appeared, together with the replicas of the holy icon, on the Italian peninsula and in Sicily."

Minerva, Amilcare, and Asdrubale Anguissola (Nivå, ca. 1559, oil on canvas; Figure 10) and the *Chess Game* (Poznań, 1555, oil on canvas) that Sofonisba paints a landscape. The water represents the Bay of Capri and Paternò's close position to it.[54] However, the mountains and greenery she portrays looks very similar to the background in her *Minerva, Amilcare, and Asdrubale Anguissola*. The mountains appear too wintery to relate to Sicily. The bay serves to situate the viewer within Paternò, but the mountains may reference her Lombard home. Again, Sofonisba blends her personal experiences with the iconography of Paternò.

The iconography of this image is distinct to Sicily, but Sofonisba personalizes that iconography to recall past memories of her home and altarpieces she may have seen in the Spanish court. While her early *Self-Portrait with Madonna and Child* expresses her longing for a courtly position, her altarpiece expresses different concerns. By the time she painted it, Sofonisba had already worked for the Spanish court; she was an established, famous artist. Her altarpiece still demonstrates her ability to adapt her style to the preferred iconography of place and audience: in this case, the iconography of the Madonna dell'Itria in Sicily, a popular motif in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, while simultaneously creating an image that is deeply personal through her references to her grief. The Christ Child refers to a past tradition of Madonna dell'Itria images in Paternò, and the Virgin refers to Sofonisba herself. The altarpiece at once functions as a piece meant to fit into the continuum of Sicilian iconography and as a plea for help from the Virgin as an intercessor.[55]

Though Sofonisba has created an altarpiece, the personal elements within the image recall small votive tablets, usually made by common individuals to plead to the Virgin or to the

[54] Kusche, "Comments on the Attributions," 287.
[55] Fredrika Jacobs, *Votive Panels and Popular Piety in Early Modern Italy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 6.

saints as intercessors between the individual and God. Jacobs states that "with illustrative clarity, tavolette votive depict the laity's ability to engage in direct and dynamic discourse with God through his saints whenever and wherever they confronted life's dire challenges."[56] Sofonisba's altarpiece may function as a *pro remedia animae*, an offering of thanks for future salvation.[57] Perhaps, by employing the intercessory iconography of the Madonna dell'Itria, Sofonisba is pleading with the Virgin to save her first husband's soul.

By 1581, Sofonisba had met her second husband Orazio Lomellino: after the death of Moncada, she intended to return to Cremona with her brother, Asdrubale. She made it to Livorno, and wrote to her unhappy sibling that she had fallen in love with Lomellino and intended to marry him. Her family was against the union, because Sofonisba was well-known by this point in her life, and Lomellino was a ship captain of little renown, but, regardless of their concerns, Sofonisba and Lomellino wed, and the pair moved to Genoa with his son Giulio.[58] During her three decades there, Sofonisba established relationships with the local artistic community, where she completed two of her latest works: her *Maria Lactans* and her *Holy Family with Saint Anne and Saint John the Baptist* (Figures 11 and 12).[59]

Genoa for much of the sixteenth century was not considered an artistic epicenter, despite it being the "gateway to Italy." Located on the Mediterranean Sea, the city offered access to the Lombardy of Sofonisba's childhood and northern cities like Milan.[60] For Sofonisba, Genoa exposed her to new artists, like Luca Cambiaso. In that context, her painting underwent another change. Her style became an amalgamation of her own manner, the artists she adapted from

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[56] Ibid, 7.
[57] Ibid, 7.
[58] Cole, *Sofonisba's Lesson*, 146-47.
[59] Ibid, 147.
[60] Arturo Pacini, "Genoa in the Sixteenth Century: A Historical Overview," in *Luca Cambiaso 1527-1585*, ed. Jonathan Bober (Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2006), 14.

during her youth, the artwork she saw at the Spanish court, and, to a lesser extent, elements of Genoese style. Sofonisba's *Maria Lactans* is emblematic of the artist's evolving manner.

The *Maria Lactans* is tondo-shaped, emphasizing the close relationship between the central figures as they curve into each other.[61] The Madonna looks down lovingly at her child, while she steadily holds her breast to allow the baby better access. Noticeably, the Madonna is older than the other depictions Sofonisba has painted. Her nose is narrow and pointed, and her face curves into a prominent, angular chin. Additionally, her neck has more pronounced folds, further indicating age. The Christ Child is depicted as if grown out of infancy, with large brown eyes and blonde curling hair. He looks off to the left of the picture. This painting shows Sofonisba using the bright colors of Titian, featuring the Madonna dressed in her classic deep rose pink and green-blue with canary-colored accents. According to Perlingieri, the way Sofonisba shows the Madonna feeding her child is anatomically correct.[62]

Sofonisba's painting contains clear references to Parmigianino and Correggio. The Virgin's chin is angular, with a sharply defined nose, and a small mouth like in works of Parmigianino, while the infant again draws upon Correggio. The hands of the Virgin strongly resemble Sofonisba's manner of painting her own hands, with elongated fingers and sturdier palms. Additionally, the Virgin's face draws on elements of Sofonisba's own style, including her trademark doe eyes. Sofonisba's Spanish period also clearly influenced her devotional images.

Both this image and Sofonisba's *Holy Family with Saint Anne and Saint John the Baptist* feature the deeply saturated colors of Titian, with pious, sweet scenes of maternal devotion between the Madonna and Christ or between Christ and his larger family. It is unknown

[61] Naomi Yavneh, "To Bare or Not Too Bare," 73. The shape echoes "the encircling arms of the mother and the curve of the two central figures toward each other."
[62] Ilya Sandra Perlingieri, *The First Great Woman Artist of the Renaissance,* 178.

specifically for whom these images were painted, but there is some reason to believe that she was working in a style that would have appealed to patrons associated with the Spanish court. There are records to show that Sofonisba made an image of the Madonna for Maria of Spain, Holy Roman Empress, when Maria of Spain was visiting Genoa. Either the *Maria Lactans* or *The Holy Family with Saint Anne and Saint John the Baptist* could have been made for Maria of Spain. As Michael Cole suggests, either subject could have worked as a play on her name.[63]

Because these two paintings may have been made for a Spanish audience, they stylistically mirror other devotional images that were appreciated in the Spanish court when Sofonisba worked there. As Jesse Locker has discussed, the Spanish favored *vaghezza,* "an indefinable charming and seductive quality"; *morbidezza*, "softness"; *dolcezza,* "sweetness"; and *colorito,* "coloring." According to Locker, the Spanish preferences, at times, veered toward the "excessively devout and sweet." They were less interested in indecorous works, with "the sensual allure…of high renaissance painting," and were more concerned with works that could "move the stones to piety."[64] The Spanish preferences were very different from those in Rome or Florence, which emphasized anatomy of the male nude and inventive scenes. The Spanish preferred sweet devotional scenes such the maternal love between the Virgin and Child.

Titian's *The Virgin and Child with Saints Dorothy and George* (1515-1518, oil on panel) exemplifies these characteristics (Figure 13). Titian's early painting technique featured dramatic lighting effects, softening contours, and a lack of precision of detail for a "more suggestive handling" of the paint. He used opaque and transparent pigment mixtures to create his deeply saturated colors and soft lighting.[65] In *The Virgin and Child with Saints Dorothy and George,* the

[63] Cole, *Sofonisba's Lesson*, 149-150.
[64] Jesse Locker, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Language of Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 28.
[65] Jill Dunkerton et al, "Titian's Painting Technique to c. 1540," *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* 34 (October 2013): 4-8.

Madonna's peaches-and-cream complexion draws attention to the rounded curves of her face, her jaw, and the subtle decrescendo from her neck to her shoulder. Her semi-translucent veil contrasted with the satiny pigment of her dress becomes tactile; the viewer can imagine the soft fabric brushing against the Christ Child's legs. The infant himself is given similar flesh to his mother, and his hair is composed of fluffy curls. The Madonna's expression is tender as she and her Child gaze at each other. The image, one of the earliest acquired from Titian by Philip II for his Escorial Palace, features all of the hallmark traits of what would ultimately be characterized as preferred Spanish devotional paintings: bright colors, soft flesh, sweet expressions, and an indefinable tenderness meant to make the viewer feel piety.

The Spanish sought works with bright colors; tender relationships; delicate features; and delightful scenes. Sofonisba's *Maria Lactans* displays these characteristics. Sofonisba's *Maria Lactans* employs the traditional colors worn by the Virgin, but they are deeply saturated, similar to the way Titian uses colors. As I have established, in her self-presentation, Sofonisba largely avoided bright color; she painted herself in black and maroon. The fact that her devotional images feature such saturated colors suggests that she may have created them to appeal to a Spanish audience. She may also have wanted to style her devotional images after those she would have seen at the Spanish court.

While the *Self-Portrait with Madonna and Child* showed a highly eroticized image of the Madonna and Child after the styles of Correggio and Parmigianino, the *Maria Lactans* is tender in presentation. The infant still resembles Correggio's infants in his bright, curling hair, but there is no sexual charge. The Madonna is nursing, and the nursing reflects the homey simplicity of the Madonna, the accessibility of the Madonna. By choosing to represent the nursing Madonna, Sofonisba counters the late Renaissance preoccupation with the "sanctity and queenly

exaltation"[66] of the Madonna, instead favoring an approach that could move a viewer through the related experience of caring for a child. In addition to the tenderness of the scene, Sofonisba also shows the figures as delicate in presentation. The Virgin's hands, unlike her face and neck, show no signs of aging. Her fingers are long and thin, and they clutch her breast fondly, as she watches her Child be nurtured. The infant himself has chubby legs and arms, and he presses with his hand against his mother's left breast softly, showing the closeness of their relationship. This scene is meant to delight the viewer. In seeing the image, one can take in the actions instantly and appreciate the close relationship between mother and child. The complex conceit of the image is not dependent on a multi-figural scene, where each figure's anatomy reflects a different pose and different muscular strain. This image is complex in Sofonisba's negotiation between her own style and the beginnings of a preferred style for the Spanish court.

Sofonisba likely played a large role in the formation of Spanish court taste. After Sofonisba's sojourn at the court, Philip II and his descendants sought female artists capable of conforming to their so-called "feminizing" mode. Philip II requested Marietta Tintoretto along with Sofonisba to join the Spanish court, but Marietta's father, Jacopo Tintoretto, declined on her behalf. After Sofonisba left Madrid, Lavinia Fontana made compositions for Philip II including *Holy Family with St. John* (1589, oil on canvas) which shows a delicate Christ Child with golden locks, gently sleeping, his hands clasped in prayer (Figure 14). The Madonna stands above him, and Joseph stays behind her, tenderly reaching for her outstretched hand, while John the Baptist places his finger to his lips, exhorting the viewer to remain quiet while Christ slumbers. This painting was so popular in the Spanish court that, according to Pacheco's *Arte de la pintura*, Philip II paid Fontana a thousand ducats for the image. She went on to make two copies of the

[66] Naomi Yavneh, "To Bare or Not Too Bare," 65.

painting, now at the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm and at the Villa Borghese in Rome.[67] After Fontana, Artemisia Gentileschi would briefly become a painter for the Spanish court.[68] The evidence suggests that Sofonisba played an instrumental role in carving out a niche for later female artists at the Spanish court.

For all that they may have appealed to Spanish patrons, Sofonisba's devotional images are grounded in her past experiences of painting. She looks to Correggio for the soft, tender flesh of the Virgin and the curling hair of the infant, while also mimicking Parmigianino's sharp angles in some of the Virgin's features, like her nose. Her later years brought her to the Spanish court, where she absorbed lessons on coloration and flesh-making from Titian, as well as a saccharine styling that became emblematic of Spanish tradition. Her devotional images show the culmination of her experiences as an artist. Her imitative practices became a part of the conventions she would draw upon when conceiving of subjects, tools she used to build upon and refine her own style.

In 1592, Sofonisba painted a second devotional scene: a *Holy Family with Saint Anne and Saint John the Baptist*. This scene shows a much younger version of the Madonna, with features that are beautiful and idealized, cloaked in vibrant red and blue. She is seated, and the Christ Child, shown as a toddler, leans into her lap, while he holds hands with his grandmother, Saint Anne, who wears a drab mauve dress. They pass yarn back and forth, as indicated by the yarn winding device next to Saint Anne. There is a small dog next to her on the floor. On the other side of the Madonna, Saint John the Baptist leans against a table with a single lit candle. He looks very similar to his cousin: they each have the same blonde curls of Correggio. In the

[67] Locker, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Language of Painting*, 26, 30.
[68] Ibid, 27.

background, Joseph, with a lantern, appears walking into the next room, but remaining in the shadows.

In no other image does Sofonisba exhibit such clear *chiaroscuro* nor does she set any of her scenes at night. Sofonisba looks to Cambiaso's late career when he experimented with "lower[ing] the chromatic timbre…to cold 'nocturnalism.'" It is thought that Sofonisba's *Holy Family with Saint Anne and Saint John the Baptist* was done after an image from Cambiaso other than his *Madonna della Candela* (1570-75, oil on canvas), [69] but the comparison between Sofonisba's painting and Cambiaso's *Madonna della Candela* is nevertheless compelling (Figure 15). Sofonisba's scene and the *Madonna della Candela* are so similar in *chiaroscuro*, with the same candle serving as the artificial light source, the same shadowy figure of Joseph, the same blonde curls of the children. However, Sofonisba is not passively copying the Cambiaso image. Instead, she infuses the image with the bright colors of Titian—as seen on the dress of the Madonna. She uses his scene as a point of inspiration from which she then diverges.

She changes the composition of the figures so Saint Anne is to the right of the Madonna, versus on her left, and rather than having Saint Anne focus on something other than Christ, she holds hands with her grandson. Similarly, Saint John now stares at his cousin instead of something indeterminate and shadowy on the floor. The Christ Child has been aged up, and the light has been changed to fully illuminate both him and his mother. The addition of the dog is also interesting, since it sits atop the inscription which states that Sofonisba made the image. The dog may be a symbol of fidelity, indicating that the family has faith in Christ, but Sofonisba also points to her own faith through the dog's placement near her autograph. Overall, Sofonisba's composition is more unified around the Christ Child. Everyone, other than Joseph, looks to the

[69] Jonathan Bober, *Luca Cambiaso 1527-1585*, 376.

young boy, clearly indicating where the viewer should also be paying attention. The saturated colors and the intense focus on Christ mark this scene as a devotional image also meant to delight the viewer. The *Holy Family with Saint Anne and Saint John the Baptist* perfectly encapsulates how Sofonisba emulated other artists, while simultaneously changing the composition to suit her own manner.

Sofonisba's career can be characterized by chameleon-like stylistic changes. In her youth, she established her own manner as a portraitist, but in practicing early devotional image painting, she looked to other examples, absorbing what she learned and carefully negotiating a balance between her own manner and the manners of others. Later, she examined the Sicilian iconography of the *Madonna dell'Itria* altarpiece, and she accommodated her interests by employing motifs such as the box, friars, and worshippers while simultaneously reflecting on presentations of grace, the history of the *Itria* motif, and North Italian landscape, turning an iconography into a personal picture of grief. And, toward the end of her life, her late devotional images represent the accumulation of her learning and her experiences. Sofonisba's painting was never a static practice: her manner constantly evolved as she interacted, not only with the artistic debates of sixteenth century Italy and Spain but also with the local traditions and tastes of the places she worked.

My study has attempted to position Sofonisba's devotional images within the conversation of imitation through adaptation, by analyzing how her style changes to fit the respective places and audiences for whom she created these works. There are still many questions that remain to be answered about the artist's imitative practices. The discussion I have offered in this paper invites several questions for continued research. What other types of imitation did Sofonisba practice? Can the provenance of her extant devotional images be traced?

What can scholars learn from other devotional images by Sofonisba that have been mentioned in records but are no longer extant? How do her devotional images reshape the artist's *oeuvre*? These questions, among others, provide future avenues of scholarship surrounding the most famous female artist of the Renaissance: here's looking at her.

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Figures

Figure 1: Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait with Madonna and Child*, ca. 1556, Łańcut, oil on canvas. Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

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Figure 2: Giovanni Boccaccio, *De Mulieribus Claris* (Scene of Thamyris), MS Français 598, 1403. Image redacted due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 3: Correggio, *Virgin Adoring the Christ Child*, 1518-20, Florence, oil on canvas. Licensed under CC-BY-SA 4.0.

Figure 4: Correggio, *Madonna and Child with an Angel*, Budapest, 1522-1525, oil on wood. Licensed under CC PDM 1.0.

Figure 5: Parmigianino, *Madonna of the Long Neck*, Florence, 1534-35, oil on wood. Licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

Figure 6: Parmigianino, *Virgin and Child with Saint John and Mary Magdalene,* Los Angeles, 1535-40, oil on paper placed on panel. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.

Figure 7: Parmigianino, *Mystic Marriage of St. Margaret*, Bologna, 1529, oil on canvas. Licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

Figure 8: Sofonisba Anguissola, *Madonna dell'Itria*, Paternò, late 1570s, oil on panel. Image in the public domain in the United States, available through Wikimedia Commons at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Madonna_dell%27Itria_-_Anguissola.jpg.

Figure 9: Pietro Francesco Sacchi, *Virgin Hodegetria with Saints John the Baptists, Antoninus of Florence, and Nicholas of Tolentino,* Church of Santa Maria di Castello, Genoa, 1526, oil on panel. Licensed under CC BY 3.0.

Figure 10: Sofonisba Anguissola, *Minerva, Amilcare, and Asdrubale*, Nivå, ca. 1559, oil on canvas. Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

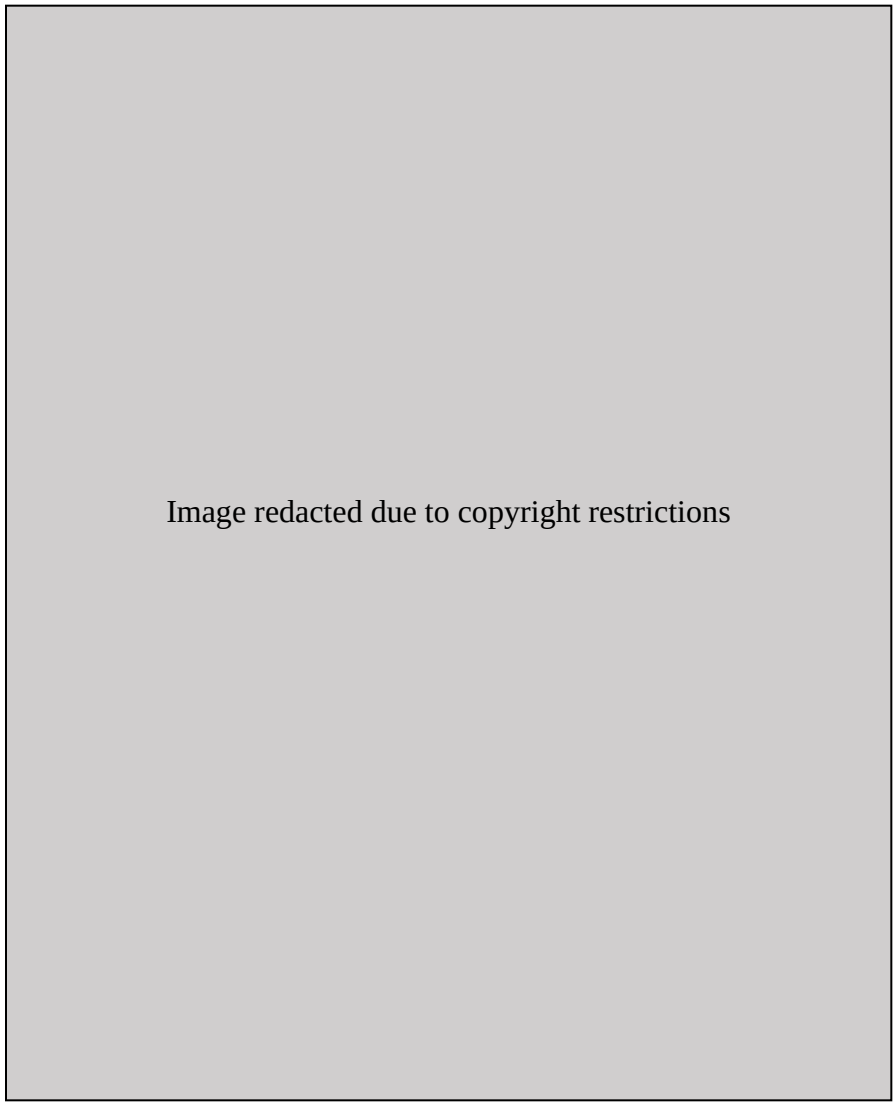

Figure 11: Sofonisba Anguissola, *Maria Lactans*, Budapest, 1588, oil on canvas. Image redacted due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 12: Sofonisba Anguissola, *Holy Family with Saint Anne and Saint John the Baptist*, Coral Gables, Florida, 1592, oil on canvas. Image in the public domain in the United States, available through Wikimedia Commons at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%27The_Holy_Family_with_Sts._Anne_%26_John_the_Baptist%27_by_Sofonisba_Anguissola.JPG.

Figure 13: Titian, *Virgin and Child with Saints Dorothy and George*, 1515-1518, Madrid, oil on panel. Image in the public domain in the United States, available through Wikipedia at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Virgin_and_Child_with_Saint_George_and_Saint_Dorothy#/media/File:Tiziano,_Madonna_and_Child_with_Sts_Dorothy_and_George.jpg.

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Figure 14: Lavinia Fontana, *Holy Family with Saint John*, Rome, 1589, oil on canvas. Image redacted due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 15: Luca Cambiaso, *Madonna della Candela*, Genova, 1570-75, oil on canvas. Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.