

Repositioning Plautilla Nelli's Lamentation

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Fig. 1 Plautilla Nelli, *Lamentation*, 1550

My favorite underrated work of art is the *Lamentation* by Suor Plautilla Nelli (1523-1588), the first woman artist in Renaissance Florence with an oeuvre to go with her name. This large altar painting (Fig. 1) was created for the Dominican convent of Saint Catherine of Siena, where it stood, nearly ten feet high, on a prominent altar in the convent's public church. Located in Piazza San Marco, Santa Caterina was founded by a female disciple of Savonarola and became a major center of his spiritual legacy. Today the painting is in the museum of San Marco, the adjacent monastery from which the reformist friar preached.¹

At age fourteen, Pulsinella Nelli took the veil as Plautilla and entered the convent she would serve three times as prioress. She was trained in drawing and painting, probably

by nuns. By age thirty-five, she had created several large paintings for Santa Caterina, and was receiving income from paintings sold “outside,” perhaps to the Florentine noblemen and women who, Vasari said, owned many of her works.² Suor Plautilla did not have access to studio training available to male artists, but since Santa Caterina was not cloistered until 1575, she was free to learn from the exceptional wealth of art visible in Florence. Her drawings reveal an attentive study of individual figures by other artists, including Michelangelo’s *Risen Christ*, which indicates she traveled as far as Rome. Nelli also inherited a cache of drawings by the artist-friar Fra Bartolommeo, which she drew on for some figures in her own compositions, modified to suit her purposes.

Writers have consistently described Nelli’s art in terms of its limitations. Vasari said that her best works were those she copied from others; that she could have done marvelous work had she been able, like men, to draw figures from life; and that her women were better than her men because she could study them directly (which contradicts the claim she could not draw from life). Other writers pointed to a set of models for Nelli’s painting in Lamentations by Perugino, Fra Bartolommeo (Fig. 2), and Andrea Sarto (Fig 3). Those few elements of Nelli’s *Lamentation* that echo these works – Christ’s pose, the kneeling Saint John, and a male figure with outstretched arms – have been sufficient to persuade some modern scholars that Nelli was an unoriginal and technically deficient copyist, best understood as an artistic dilettante.³



Fig. 2 Fra Bartolommeo, Lamentation, 1511



Fig. 3 Andrea del Sarto, *Lamentation*, 1524

But was originality the point? Or is this simply the wrong context? Recent scholarship has changed old assumptions about art produced for convents. Far from being isolated ivory towers, Renaissance convents were vital artistic centers of writing, music, theater, and the production of textiles, manuscripts, and altarpieces, as they had been in the Middle Ages. Nuns were active agents in obtaining images for their convents, either by commissioning “outside” artists or by creating paintings themselves. They stipulated the sizes and subjects of commissioned works, and specified how they would see and use the images around them.⁴

Art produced for convent environments was judged for its devotional efficacy, not for the creator’s originality. The function of art in this context was to support meditation by producing an appropriate state of mind in the viewer, and to induce emotional empathy. Images of saints or deities did their work best if shown, not performing a momentary or distracting action, but as serene, enduring essences. Monastic patrons, consequently, preferred their saints in static poses, not as actors in heroic narratives. Nuns had neither access to nor interest in such vanguard artistic concerns as linear perspective, humanist rhetoric, or academic art theory.⁵ Their taste was conservative by the standards of the

“progressive.”

Such conservatism has its own values, which include a sense of continuity with exempla of the past that progressives would consider obsolete. In referencing (not copying) Perugino, Fra Bartolommeo and Andrea del Sarto, Nelli evokes Florentine paintings a good half century old. In joining her Lamentation to theirs, she adds a link to a chain of lineage within a monastic community, for each of the three works was painted for a local convent or a monastery.⁶ Ironically, Nelli’s affirmation of models no longer stylish in Florence opposed the values of her models themselves. Despite their monastic commissions, Fra Bartolommeo and Sarto were deeply attuned to the avant-garde propelled by Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael, and both changed their styles almost annually in the direction of heroic monumentality. Sarto’s *Lamentation* (Fig. 3) upstages both his own earlier version and that of Fra Bartolommeo (Fig. 2), in the increased virilization of the standing Saint Andrew, whose muscular chest and dramatically foreshortened hand bespeak a knowledge of Raphael’s more theatrical late works.

Nelli studiously avoided going in that direction. She also resisted the dramatic energy of a *Lamentation* engraving after Raphael (Fig. 4), from which she took only the figure of Joseph of Arimathea.⁷ Departing from the print, Nelli made Joseph’s domically crowned headdress echo the domes of a city behind him, inviting our speculation that the three segments of her invented landscape might be creatively correlated with the men who overlap them. In the Lamentations of Marcantonio, Fra Bartolommeo, and Sarto, the grieving or swooning Virgin is the dramatic focus of the composition. In Nelli’s painting, by contrast, four women weep, equal in size and emphasis, and linked to one another through gaze or gesture. Mary touches her breast with one hand, suggesting the privacy of her grief, not its drama. Suor Plautilla’s focus is not the singular heroic demeanor of Christ’s mother, but the collective mourning of the four women. We are reminded that the Italian word for the Lamentation theme is *compianto*, a grieving together.

The women’s copious tears, their reddened eyes and noses, index a profound anguish of long duration, which is the true subject of this painting. To the nuns of Santa Caterina who constituted Nelli’s primary audience, the female figures in this large painting would have been visible at eye level, women whose dress invited the nuns’ identification, and whose sorrow afforded a keynote for meditation on Christ’s death. The women’s grieving compromises the behavior of the men. John dutifully sheds a tear, but gazes away blankly, as if he would rather be elsewhere. Joseph looks uncertainly to Nicodemus for a cue, but this Nicodemus is no hero, just a short-bodied man who plays a supporting role.

Nelli’s version was probably not meant as a critique of her male predecessors, but it functions as one. To those who say that her figures lack heroic monumentality, we might reply that what they lack is bombast. She has cast a cold eye on figures who flaunt their contrapposto and strut their power at the highly inappropriate moment of the Saviour’s death. She has replaced dry-eyed women who pose affectedly with drapery-swaddled mourners whose bodies are subordinated to their flowing tears, which speak from and of the heart. Models for Nelli’s intensely grieving women are found in Northern European



Fig. 4 Marcantonio Raimondi, Lamentation (After Raphael), ca. 1515

painting of a century earlier, when women and their tears carried the emotional freight of religious paintings (Fig. 5). Nelli clearly drew inspiration from Northern paintings (some came to her in Fra Bartolommeo's bequest), not only the signifying tear but also the power of abstract patterns to create expression, seen here in the landscape and the women's angular draperies, and the electric zigzag energies of the Magdalene's flowing hair and drapery.

According to early modern writers, admirers of Nelli's paintings included noblemen, women, the devout, and Northern Europeans.⁸ The latter three groups constituted a category of "otherness" for progressive Italian Renaissance artists. Michelangelo allegedly rebuked his friend Vittoria Colonna for liking Northern art's "devoutness," explaining that Flemish painting lacked reason, boldness, and vigor, and appealed to women, monks, nuns, and others not responsive to true harmony and proportions.⁹ In one stroke, this assertion feminizes both Northern and religious art, and decrees certain formal values to be universal. Such gender policing invites us to consider reception and audience. Sarto played to an insular masculine art world, while Nelli addressed women, whose identification with grieving spans a larger universe. In many cultures,

women are the primary mourners: in Renaissance Florence, as in ancient Israel and Greece, they prepared the dead body for burial and sang lamentations.¹⁰ In performing their gendered role, mourning women are the carriers of cultural memory, providing an emotional framework that gives meaning to heroic deeds and tragic events. Both in her design and from a broader perspective, the women in Nelli's *Lamentation* are its natural protagonists, and the men are merely extras.



Fig. 5 Rogier van der Weyden, *Deposition*, 1438

The heroic individualism of High Renaissance art would not have served the social interests of the nuns of Santa Caterina. Theirs was a communal society, grounded in a spiritual sisterhood that transcended blood ties, whose goal of communal harmony was supported by the images they placed around them. Suor Plautilla did not work in creative isolation, as Vasari described her, but as part of a vital artistic community that she guided. She personally trained a group of artists at Santa Caterina, many of whose names are known to us, and whose prominence is demonstrated in the fact that eleven of the thirty-seven female artists named in sixteenth-century sources were Santa Caterina nuns.¹¹ It is time to acknowledge the artist nuns' share in the complex mixture that was Renaissance culture, and the power of their art to reify and reinforce alternative values.

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Citation Guide

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Notes

1. Major conservation of the *Lamentation*, completed in 2006, was sponsored by Jane Fortune and the Florence Committee of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C. A symposium on Nelli in Florence in 1998 paved the way for publications on the artist and her work, including Jonathan Nelson, ed, *Suor Plautilla Nelli (1523-1588): The First Woman Painter of Florence* (Florence: Edizioni Cadmo, 2000); and Jonathan K. Nelson, ed., *Plautilla Nelli (1524-1588): The Painter-Prioress of Renaissance Florence* (Florence: Syracuse University in Florence, 2008). Conservation revealed the painting's original sparkling color and previously obscure details, while reflectography showed the artist's compositional changes in the underdrawing. On Nelli as artist and the conservation of the *Lamentation*, see also Jane Fortune, with Linda Falcone, *Invisible Women: Forgotten Artists of Florence* (Florence: The Florentine Press, 2009), chapters 3 and 4.

2. Vasari discussed Nelli in his life of Properzia de' Rossi, reproduced conveniently in Nelson, 2008, with English translation. Only two other paintings and about twelve drawings have been securely ascribed to Nelli, but new attributions began to surface following the conservation (see Appendices 1 and 2 in Nelson, 2008).

3. For these writers, beginning in the eighteenth century, see Magnolia Scudieri in Nelson 2008, 60-61. For the most extreme definition of Nelli as an unoriginal dilettante, see Andrea Muzzi in Nelson 2008.

4. See especially Gary M. Radke, "Nuns and Their Art: The Case of San Zaccaria in Renaissance Venice," *Renaissance Quarterly* 54 (Summer 2001), 430-59. doi:10.2307/3176783; K. J. P. Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Silvia Evangelisti, *Nuns: A History of Convent Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Ann Roberts, *Dominican Women and Renaissance Art: The Convent of San Domenico of Pisa* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2008).

5. Roberts, chapter 7, gives a good account of the concerns and tastes of convent art

patrons. For the differences of purpose between medieval devotional art and the narrative art that gradually supplanted it in Renaissance Italy, see Sixten Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative: The Rise of the Dramatic Close-Up in Fifteenth-Century Devotional Painting* (Abo: Abo Akademi, 1965).

6. Perugino's *Lamentation* of 1495 was painted for the Florentine convent of Santa Chiara; Fra Bartolommeo's *Lamentation* for the monastic church of San Gallo; and Sarto's *Lamentation* for the abbess of the convent of San Piero a Luco in Borgo San Lorenzo. Eventually, all three wound up in Palazzo Pitti, Florence, where they were seen by their commentators.

7. Marcantonio's composition appears again in a monochrome ceiling panel at San Marco, which was proposed as Nelli's model by Scudieri (in Nelson, 2008). Scudieri aptly noted that both might derive from a (Northern) engraving, and I propose that the Marcantonio print was that common source.

8. These include Vasari and his Northern counterpart Carel van Mander, the Dominican friar Serafino Razzi, and the Florentine art chronicler Francesco Bocchi. For details, see Fredrika Jacobs' discussion of Nelli in her *Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa: Women Artists and the Language of Art History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 111-21.

9. Reported by Francesco Da Hollanda, reputedly from conversations with Michelangelo in 1538-40. See Sohm, 775 ff., and Jacobs, loc. cit.

10. In Florence, women continued to be culturally designated mourners, yet were excluded from public funerary processions. See Allison Levy, *Re-membering Masculinity in Early Modern Florence: Widowed Bodies, Mourning and Portraiture* (Ashgate, 2006), chapter 2.

11. In their individual essays in Nelson 2000, Catherine Turrill gives the names and vital information about the artist-nuns, Gary Radke gives the statistics on nuns among named artists (drawn from Jacobs, loc. cit.), and Sally Quin contrasts Vasari's misperception of Nelli's isolation with the Dominican friar Sebastiano Razzi's more accurate image of Nelli's mentoring of an active group of students, whom he identifies by name.