

Ersy Contogouris
Emma Hamilton and Late Eighteenth-Century European Art: Agency, Performance, and Representation

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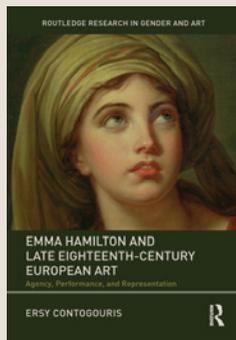
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In the history of European art and literature there is hardly a more paradigmatic example of the “problem” of the “woman artist” than Emma Hamilton (1765–1815), a fact indicated by the changes in her name over the course of her relatively short lifetime. In the European tradition, the artist was always understood to be male; the “woman artist” was a marked term and understood to be constructed differently in the discourse. In the Introduction, Contogouris makes something of the “difficulty” of Hamilton’s names and resolves to call her “Emma.” However, the variability of the names of female artists may be said to signify the instability of the figure of the “woman artist” in culture.¹ In the case of Emma Hamilton, and many others in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the name also signifies the precarity of the existence of the life of the individual female in a society where women were dependent on men and the institution of marriage for economic security and social standing. Thus, while the singular artist may indeed be a distinctive cultural figure from the early modern period to the present—one who, over the course of these eras, increasingly defines the meaning of art, the authority of its institutions and the power of its market—the figure of the “woman artist” and individual female artists de-stabilize these aspects of culture and society. Feminist art historians have generally agreed that the earliest historical example of such



destabilization occurs in the historiography of the seventeenth-century Italian artist Artemesia Gentileschi (1593–ca. 1656).²

Born Amy Lyon in England in 1765, and called Emma Hart beginning in 1782 until her marriage in 1791 to Sir William Hamilton, Lady or Dame Hamilton, as she came to be known, used and was used by the performativity of naming in order to assure a position in upper class and aristocratic society. She assumed the name of Emma when, at the age of sixteen, she became the mistress of Sir Harry Fetherstonhaugh. Soon after, Charles Greville insisted on naming her Mrs. Emma Hart when she came “under his protection.” With that name, he sent her to Naples in 1786, intending to make her the mistress of his widower uncle Sir William Hamilton, who eventually married her. However, “Emma,” as she is called by the author Ersy Contogouris, could not give any of these surnames to either of her two daughters. They were not hers to give: the first child, fathered by either Fetherstonhaugh or Greville, was called Emma Carew after her mother and a distant relative; the second, Horatia Nelson Thompson, was recognized by her father the naval hero Lord Nelson only on his deathbed. In the history of art, the individual subject known as the artist requires recognition so that the works by that person may be known, attributed, and collected. If the proliferation of names around the subject “Emma Hamilton” have consistently

confused and confounded interpreters of her performances and observers of the portraits of her by famous artists of the day, we should not be surprised.

As Contogouris argues in the Introduction, artistic mis-attributions and mis-recognitions proliferate in the literature on Hamilton, starting in her own lifetime. According to the author, these extended well beyond the usual key distinctions made in art history between the artist as subject and the work of art as object to include questions of “agency” in Hamilton’s role as model and muse, and the nature of her “attitudes” and dance performances. The many striking caricatures of Hamilton as dancer and model, discussed by Contogouris, exploit the fact that the artist embodied for others a mis-recognition that adhered in general to the woman artist as subject and in particular to the historical individual, Emma Hamilton. Caricatures affect the viewer through the deformation of resemblance to a person’s face or body taken to its furthest extreme of embodiment, which is what some viewers found in both Hamilton’s performances and in portraits of her.

In her book, Contogouris aims to rectify the misunderstandings that have circulated around Hamilton’s *oeuvre* for two centuries by re-reading the visual material against the prevailing literature, which has maintained an aesthetic of sexualized mis-recognition. Her intention should be read against the backdrop of a substantial art historical literature of the last three decades devoted to the feminist project of re-interpreting both female artists and the representation of women in the eighteenth century. The late Mary Sheriff’s publications on the representation of women in the *ancien régime* by Fragonard and in the years following the Revolution by other French artists, in particular Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, should be considered primary here. Sheriff understood that, in the case of the woman artist, the very malleability of the female artist-subject’s identity—what