

Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Jones, Tanja L., ed. Women Artists in the Early Modern Courts of Europe (c. 1450–1700)

Johanna Vernqvist

Volume 45, Number 2, Spring 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094841ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39784>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Vernqvist, J. (2022). Review of [Jones, Tanja L., ed. Women Artists in the Early Modern Courts of Europe (c. 1450–1700)]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 45(2), 323–325. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39784>



Jones, Tanja L., ed.

Women Artists in the Early Modern Courts of Europe (c. 1450–1700).

Visual and Material Culture, 1300–1700. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021. Pp. 218. ISBN 978-94-6298-819-4 (hardcover) €99.

In 1993, Martin Warnke’s imperative study of 1985 was published in English as *The Court Artist: On the Ancestry of the Modern Artist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). More recently, his study has met criticism because of his narrow categorization of the “artist,” which fails to include, for example, tapestry makers and embroiders—a definition that consequently leaves out many women artists. The authors of *Women Artists in the Early Modern Courts of Europe (c. 1450–1700)* argue specifically that Warnke overlooked the specific conditions for early modern women court artists. They underline a need to broaden the scope when investigating the titles women held at courts, and to rethink and expand the definition of artistic practice. Furthermore, the authors want to showcase women’s artistic contributions in a broad European context, presenting studies spanning from the Habsburg court, via the Italian and French courts, to that of Madrid.

Christina Strunck’s opening chapter concentrates on contexts (such as *la querelle des femmes*), on statistics, and on titles, and it functions very well as a solid backdrop to the chapters that follow. Importantly, Strunck adds to previous research by presenting “hard facts” that come from serious archival research. Statistics may be dry to some, but in this case the material discussed is utterly interesting and of great value to the field. Hence, these are not only numbers presented in tables but a woman is seen behind every one of these numbers, and the discussion relates to early modern contexts, and the self-fashioning and the career strategies used by women.

Jennifer Courts’s chapter is the volume’s first case study of a specific woman artist, Caterina van Hemessen (1528–after 1565). While new ideas are coming to the fore, such as the convincing argument that van Hemessen’s fame as an innovative painter of self-portraits secured her a place at the Habsburg court, there are a few threads that, because of a lack of archival material, are necessarily presented as more speculative. As Courts states, studying van Hemessen’s career “requires us to be flexible when considering what constituted success for a woman artist in the sixteenth century” since the field has previously viewed the goal for the early modern artist to be a highly valued

practicing artist at court. However, for van Hemessen, painting was primarily a ticket to the court, where, quite probably, she did not continue her artistic practice. Courts's study, while it leaves the reader hoping for continued research, convincingly builds a case of the career moves of one of the first early modern women artists who paved the way for others to follow.

One of those who followed was the famous Sofonisba Anguissola (1532?–1625), who is the subject of Cecilia Gamberini's contribution to the volume. Anguissola's work and life have gained increasing interest over the last decades, but a focus on her way towards and experiences as a lady-in-waiting at the Spanish court is here presented in a new light. Gamberini's chapter focuses on the importance of the Anguissola network, described through archival findings, and refreshingly portrays a playful and lively Anguissola that goes beyond her artistic skills.

In line with the aim to broaden the scope of what a court artist could practice, Maria F. Maurer dedicates her chapter to the printmaker Diana Mantuana (c. 1547–1612). Although she had ties to the Gonzaga court, Mantuana was never a paid court artist nor did it seem that she accepted any direct commissions from the court. However, as Maurer argues, she “used the language and style of the court in order to position herself as a courtly printmaker” (118). This strategic move led to a fascinating career. In Rome, Mantuana obtained a papal privilege for her work and appears to have been the first woman to do so. This privilege protected her designs, several of them dedicated to members of the Gonzaga family, and “asserted her status as the sole artist in Rome who could produce engravings based upon Giulio's [Romano] work” (120).

To have women court artists, there needed to be patrons willing to appoint them. This was truly the case with Grand Duchess Vittoria della Rovere (1622–94) at the Medici court. Adelina Modesti discusses three of the women under the Grand Duchess guard, who all received the finest education in lacemaking and embroidery: Caterina Angiola Pieroncini and “La Trattolina” were both sent to Paris, and Maria Maddalena Cagliari undertook her education in a Florentine convent. Under the protection and economic support of the Grand Duchess, these women gained “specialized skills that would enhance their positions at her court and in society” (153). Modesti thus proves the importance of dedicated archival studies (such as that of financial documents and letters) and of the need for continuous research on the importance of other (women) patrons at early modern courts.

In the closing chapter on Luisa Roldán (1652–1706), *Escultora de Cámara* (Sculptor to the Royal Chamber), Catherine Hall-van den Elsen seeks to fill some of the gaps in the previous research on the sculptor's life, career, and challenges. Roldán seems to have been a woman of determination, both in terms of her artistic education and other life-changing events such as her marriage. For some years, without the support of her father but together with her husband, she created a reputation in Seville producing life-size sculptures for churches. Hall-van den Elsen follows Roldán to Madrid, discussing the specific demands of the Spanish court and how Roldán was challenged to succeed in new techniques to develop her career and survive as an artist. Thus, this final chapter also functions as a concluding note on the challenges that women artists seeking a career within the European courts had to face.

Women Artists in the Early Modern Courts of Europe (c. 1450–1700) is an ambitious volume covering new ground and presenting innovative ideas concerning women artists' strategic career moves. It is an inspiration to others to continue the research and to dig deeper into the archives with the aim to rethink and revalue the history of women artists.

JOHANNA VERNQVIST

Linköping University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i2.39784>