

Lavinia Fontana (1552–1614)

Lavinia Fontana is considered the first European woman to succeed as a professional artist. She had art training similar to that enjoyed by men, sought commissions, earned payments for her art, and even supported herself and her large family with income from her art. In sixteenth-century Italy, women were not allowed to apprentice themselves to master artists to study art seriously as their male peers could. Women who did become artists usually had a father or other male relative who was an artist. Fortunately for Fontana, her father Prospero was a successful painter who decided to teach her his craft. He had no son so it may be that he trained his daughter so that she could help support him when he could no longer paint.

Fontana's family life was unusual in many ways compared to other women in her time. Most young women who married had to provide their husband with a dowry. A dowry was a payment of money, property, jewelry, and other goods that would help the husband support his wife. Fontana was such a good painter, she did not have to pay a dowry because it was known that she would earn money through her art. Her husband was also an artist, but not as talented as his wife. He gave up his career to help Fontana in the studio and manage the family's accounts and household. As busy as she was painting, Fontana also gave birth to eleven children.

Fontana painted many portraits of the wealthy women of Bologna, where she lived. She also painted religious and mythological paintings. These subjects were considered unusual for women artists because they required knowledge of the human body and literature that few women had the opportunity to study.

Not only was Fontana a skilled artist, she was also a smart businesswoman. She chose her patrons, the people who purchased her art, as godparents for her many children. By doing so, she built a network of people who would purchase her paintings and could recommend her skills to others.

Selected Bibliography

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