
The exhibit, “Pomp and Power: Antoinette Bouzonnet Stella’s Entrance of the Emperor Sigismund into Mantua,” after Giulio Romano’s design for the Sala degli Stucchi in the Palazzo del Te in Mantua, presents an accomplished set of twenty-five numbered engravings, first published in 1675 for Jean-Baptiste Colbert (minister and chief counselor to Louis XIV). Although Antoinette Bouzonnet Stella (1641–1676) was among the small group of women engravers Ann Sutherland Harris identified as deserving further serious study in the catalogue for the Harris-Nochlin 1976 Los Angeles County Museum exhibit, she remained, until this exhibition, virtually unknown outside the archives. The youngest daughter of Etienne Bouzonnet and Madeleine Stella, sister of the painter Jacques Stella (1596–1657), Antoinette is recognized primarily for three sets of engravings, of which the one represented in this exhibition is the most widely cited. While notice of her work is slowly beginning to appear in the literature, more than thirty years after Harris-Nochlin, the NMWA exhibit is the first to present a substantial body of work by this remarkably accomplished French artist, and is itself, therefore, a most welcome adventus.

While those familiar with Diana Scultori’s Roman engravings may find themselves on familiar turf, some visitors to the museum might think the martial subject matter of the engravings an odd choice for a woman artist, since exhibitions of works by early modern women artists more often focus on portraits, genre studies, floral arrangements, and still lifes, with the occasional devotional, religious study, or pastoral. It is, then, not altogether unexpected that details related to the conventions of ancient Roman campaigns and triumphs, rather than to the accomplishments of the artist, become the focus of the exhibition captions. Yet on close examination, the prints provide ample evidence that the martial subject matter afforded Antoinette a prime opportunity to demonstrate her ability to render both objects and figures, to develop pleasing and at times dramatic tableaux, and to display her mastery of the work of perhaps the most-imitated Renaissance master of classical subjects, Giulio Romano.
Installed in the small gallery on the ground floor of the museum, the exhibit creates a comfortable environment in which to study each individual engraving while affording a panoramic view of the twenty-four engravings (numbered 2–25) after Giulio. This enables the viewer to comprehend the sweep of the series and to appreciate the complexity of Giulio’s design and Antoinette’s execution of it. Descriptive captions skillfully explicate the images within the context of an imperial *adventus* (entrance) and serve to educate viewers about the conventions and iconography of early Roman practices of war. Of particular note are captions for plates 2, 3, and 23, which point out signs of abundance (a basket brimming with fruit), of comfort (women and children traveling with the soldiers), and of triumph (captives and displays of armor as trophies of victory). Other captions detail shields, battle standards (plates 4 and 7), customs (plates 7 and 13), a triumphal arch (plate 11), and a figure identified as the Emperor Sigismund (plate 17). Two of the captions, those explaining the Roman traditions associated with *signiferi* (standard bearers) and *suovetaurilia* (sacrificial pig, ram, and bull), are noteworthy for connections made between Giulio’s design and details from Trajan’s Column in Rome (plates 7 and 21); a third follows the lead of Frederick Hartt to speculate on a link between Giulio’s design and a sixteenth-century Italian engraving after the now-lost cartoon for Michelangelo’s epic composition, *The Battle of Cascina*, suggesting that Giulio may have had Michelangelo’s bathing soldiers in mind when he modeled his disrobed soldiers fording a river (plate 8). These discussions give weight and context to the exhibit and offer an explanation for the interest in Giulio’s images in France at a time when, as the accompanying notes on the frieze indicate, Roman antiquities were much sought after. Yet caption after caption points to decisions, choices, and designs made by Giulio and Primaticcio rather than to any contribution by Antoinette. Crediting Primaticcio and Giulio equally, when Primaticcio also was carrying out Giulio’s designs (but in a different medium), seems like a curious choice for a museum exhibit devoted to rediscovering the execution of those designs by a woman artist.

In the accompanying essay by Raphael Sikkora in the museum bulletin, this decision seems less abrasive, since the essay begins with a biographical sketch of Antoinette, positions her within the tradition of her
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uncle Jacques Stella and his role in bringing the idealized forms of ancient Roman sculpture into French art, details the exceptional nature of her training at the Louvre, and discusses her work and that of her sisters before discussing the circumstances surrounding the Sala degli Stucchi engravings. That Giulio and Primaticcio are both credited with the design seems but a part of the effort to contextualize Antoinette’s life and work rather than a diminution of her skill. In fact, the essay concludes with a brief comparative discussion of Antoinette’s series and that of the better-known Pietro Santi Bartoli, in which Sikkora praises Antoinette’s sequence for its “deeper shading and more complex detailing” as well as for the “weighty appearance and defined musculature” of her figures (21). In the exhibit itself, however, with the exception of the caption for Plate 11 (which notes that Antoinette compresses into a single engraving what Bartoli had spread over two, thereby “creating an illusion of dramatic movement”), there is no recognition of Antoinette’s artistry until we come to the final wall of the exhibit and a placard titled, “The Frieze in Mantua and Antoinette’s Prints.” Yet, here too, by condensing four paragraphs of the essay into two shorter ones and situating the placard next to a sizeable photographic reproduction of a portion of the original frieze, the emphasis remains on Giulio and Primaticcio rather than on Antoinette, despite the affirmation that her work is “[m]asterfully executed” and that she “helped promote a new style in French art.”

As a result, while the exhibit was indeed “a visual feast: a complex, intertwining pageant of human activity” as Sikkora notes (21), I came away feeling it could have been even richer. Despite a large placard titled “Antoinette and Her Family” on the wall outside the main exhibit, where Antoinette’s title page engraving (fig. 1) was also mounted, I kept feeling something was missing. Here again, Sikkora’s lively portrait in the bulletin essay of a charmed circle of talented artists whose work brought “prestige and financial security for their family [and] also helped secure the longevity of a new style in France” (21) is reduced to vital statistics serving to link her and her siblings to their more famous uncle. This is followed by a full paragraph devoted to the reign of Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu, both of whom had been dead more than a decade before the Bouzonnet Stellas took up residence in the Louvre. The only mention of Louis XIV comes
Figure 1. Antoinette Bouzonnet Stella. Frontispiece, *Entrance of the Emperor Sigismund into Mantua*. Engraving, without Colbert’s coat-of-arms (first state?), 1675. Courtesy of Spaightwood Galleries, Inc., Upton, MA.
Figure 2. Antoinette Bouzonnet Stella. Plate II. (Triumphant arch with cavalry), *Entrance of the Emperor Sigismund into Mantua*. Engraving, 1675. Courtesy of Spaightwood Galleries, Inc., Upton, MA.
in a reference to Jean-Baptiste Colbert as “minister of finance under Louis XIV.” Yet under Louis XIV and Colbert, the most radical transformations of French arts and society were achieved, including the purchase of significant art collections, the reform and development of the academies, both in France and in Rome, the extension of royal control over building and manufacturing, and, not insignificantly, recording the King’s collections and disseminating his interests and taste through engravings. Thus, focusing on the arts under the reign of Louis XIII rather than during the reign of Louis XIV, as the exhibit does, robs Antoinette’s work of its true context and undermines her actual role as engraver to the King of France. Ironically, it also undercuts the role she and her siblings played in documenting and promoting, not only the splendor, but the primacy of the court of Louis XIV, the Sun King. One can only wonder why such a clear link to the pomp and power heralded by the main title of the exhibit was so casually overlooked.

Similarly, while Antoinette’s work is briefly discussed with reference to Bartoli, whose work appeared five years after Antoinette’s, there is no recognition of a possible link between Antoinette’s engravings and the three 1575 engravings based on the frieze at the Palazzo del Te by Diana Scultori. Yet so similar are the plates that a German print dealer recently offered for sale Antoinette’s plates 12 and 13 as “Roman Cavalieri in the manner of Diana Scultori” without any recognition that they were by Antoinette or from her series. While Diana’s plates are slightly larger than Antoinette’s, plates 2 and 3 of Diana’s small group are, in fact, so similar to Antoinette’s plates 12 and 13 as to be indistinguishable without close inspection. Only minor differences in cloud formations, landscape fissures, the angles and lengths of spears, arrows, and the imperial standard differentiate the two versions. Once again, however, it is plate 11 (fig. 2) that signals the choices Antoinette is making, for like Bartoli’s later engravings, Diana’s first plate excludes the arch that anchors the left side of Antoinette’s plate. In this case, Diana is closer than Antoinette or Bartoli to the original frieze, where the arch anchors the corner of one wall and the galloping horse begins the next, but Antoinette’s composition creates a stronger narrative tableau, not only through inclusion of the arch, but also by addition of a tree near the center of the frame. Diana’s scene, which includes only
the five horsemen and the hindquarters of a sixth horse, seems barely to fill the plate, a spatial problem she appears to have corrected in the two following plates that are so like Antoinette’s. Might Antoinette have known Diana’s prints and learned, by looking at Diana’s changes in composition, how to give her own plates dramatic intensity? Without a better sense of what drawings or images Antoinette worked from, we cannot at this time be certain these are Antoinette’s narrative decisions alone (see note 8). Yet the consistently balanced groupings of figures, of action, and of landscape detail throughout the series establish each individual plate as a self-contained tableau, so that dramatic composition appears to be a measure of her artistry.

Finally, it is difficult to understand why Antoinette’s title page composition (fig. 1) received so little attention. The museum caption focuses on the humility displayed by Antoinette in presenting the engravings to Colbert and notes only that the cartouche is “surrounded by ornate columns and arches.” It fails to mention that atop the cartouche three female figures create a focal point for a carefully balanced composition. Given the martial nature of the series and its presentation in the midst of the third Dutch war, we may identify the central figure in armor as Bellona, the Roman goddess of war, here providing protection for the two younger women, one, facing forward, seated on a unicorn (a symbol of chastity) and the other in profile with her arm around a dog (a symbol of fidelity). On the left, two men, one younger, one older, extend their arms toward the women in a gesture of presentation as two other men register what in our contemporary argot might be called shock and awe. In the right foreground, a group of women whose backs are to the viewer peer uncertainly around a column, while in the background a group of children and adults peek curiously from the shadowed portico, unsure, apparently, how to regard this arresting trio. Since no source has yet been identified for this image and since drawings identified as Antoinette’s have sold at auction, might we speculate that this is an original composition by Antoinette, in the antique style, intended to pay homage not only to the artist Shakespeare called “rare Giulio Romano” and to her patron Colbert, but to the three Bouzonnet Stella sisters as well? Since we know that Giovan Pietro Bellori, under whose direction Bartoli’s later engravings were produced, dedicated
his long-awaited first edition of *Le vite de pittori, scultori et architetti modern* (1672) to Colbert (complete with allegorical frontispiece and coat-of-arms by French engravers working in Rome),\(^2\) may we not read her frontispiece allegorically as well: the two younger women as the sisters Françoise and Antoinette, inspired and protected by their older sister Claudine (here in the form of Bellona), as their brother Antoine (the kneeling youth) and their benefactor pay them homage? In doing so, surely we can look upon her work as more than a curiosity and come out from the shadows to hail the far too brief life and work of this fine engraver as we look forward to further research and discussion of her work.

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**Notes**

1. The exhibition notes indicate that the set of engravings on display come from a posthumous edition, probably around 1787. While the Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris) makes no mention of a posthumous edition, the museum set appears to correspond to the BN third state (1675). Following the BN descriptions, the two plates illustrated here (figs. 1 and 2) appear to be from an earlier edition than that on display at NMWA.

2. E. Benezit, *Dictionnaire Critique et Documentaire des Peintres, Sculpteurs, Dessinateurs et Graveurs*, vol. 2 (St. Ouen: Librairie Grund, 1966), vol. 2, 85–86. Because there are four Bouzonnet Stella siblings who worked as artists—Claudine (1636–1697), Antoine (1637–1682), Françoise (1638–1691), and Antoinette (1641–1676)—I will use first names throughout.


4. There are now over twenty pages of Google entries related to Antoinette, almost all since the opening of this exhibition.


International 30/1/2006 (http://www.studio-international.co.uk/painting/self_portrait.asp); Roderick Conway Morris, “Acknowledging, finally, the work of women artists,” The New York Times, Friday January 18, 2008 (http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/18/arts/18ht-conway.1.9318380.html); and Jane Fortune, “The Art of Women: From the Renaissance to Surrealism,” Jane Fortune Mosaics, issue no. 73/2008 (February 21, 2008) (http://www.theflorentine.net/articles/article-view.asp?issuetocId=2939&browse-by=Mosaics). In addition, reviews and press releases of even the work of Artemisia Gentileschi, the woman who (along with Lavinia Fontana, Elisabetta Sirani, and Diana Scultori) is most likely to be seen as an exception, focus on biographical links, turning even her Susanna and her various Juditths into types of self-portraits; see National Museum of Women in the Arts, “’Susanna and the Elders, Restored’ Reinterprets Inspiration for Artemisia Gentileschi Painting: On View at the National Museum of Women in the Arts October 18, 2001—January 21, 2002,” Press Release Archive (http://www.nmwa.org/news/news.asp?newsid=78); see, also, Ann Sutherland Harris, “Sofonisba, Lavinia, Artemisia, and Elisabetta: Thirty Years after Women Artists 1550–1950” in Italian Women Artists from Renaissance to Baroque (Milano: Skira, 2007), 49–62. While Harris’s intent here is clearly to signal a move beyond the focus on biography and portraiture, nonetheless, the majority of paintings in the NMWA exhibition (the catalogue for which the essay was written), were, in fact, portraits, still lifes, and devotional subjects.

7. See especially Egon Verheyen’s discussion of the reverence with which Giulio’s work at the Palazzo del Te was regarded by artists from the mid-sixteenth century onward and its use as an almost limitless source of material for printmakers, in The Palazzo del Te: Images of Love and Politics (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 55 & passim. See, also, Frederick Hartt, Giulio Romano (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1958), vol. 1, 147–50.

8. How Antoinette had access to Giulio’s invention, whether through drawings made by her brother Antoine while he was in Italy (Benezit, vol. 2, 85; see also http://www.stefar.org/dictionnaire-des-femmes-de-l-ancienne-fr), through earlier copies and engravings of portions of the frieze (Massari, 271) or through drawings by Giulio himself (Massari, 85) has not been resolved.

9. I am grateful to Raphael Sikkora, curatorial assistant and exhibitions coordinator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, for providing full text of the captions (which follow the numbers of Antoinette’s individual plates) and placards (which are identified by name in the text). There is no exhibition catalogue.

10. Whether the figure is, in fact, Sigismund is disputed (see Hartt, vol. 1, 148–49 and Verheyen, 123–27). Neither Sikkora nor Massari make reference to Bellori’s connection to Colbert or to any possible link between Bellori and Bartoli’s Sigismund project and Antoinette’s, yet Massari, in her discussion of Diana’s Te engravings, affirms that it is Bellori’s assignment of the design to Sigismund’s visit to Mantua and his descriptions that accompany Bartoli’s engravings that shifted the identification of the Te frieze from the more generic Roman horsemen associated with the frieze throughout the sixteenth century (160). What effect this may have had on Antoinette’s engravings will have to wait
for another discussion.

11. Illustrations of the stucchi themselves are catalogued under Primaticcio rather than under Giulio but the design is always given to Giulio. The concern expressed here may seem a picayune objection, but given the existence of other engravings and engraving sets after Giulio’s designs for the Sala degli Stucchi (see Verheyen, 126–27, for a list of sixteenth-century prints based on the design; and Massari, 84–85, and 159–61, for illustrations of earlier related engravings, and 247–71 for Bartoli’s later set) and the consistent recognition by all the engravers of Giulio as the sole inventor, it seems much more respectful of both Giulio and Antoinette to discuss the images without privileging Primaticcio.


13. While most of the captions seem to follow Massari’s explication of Bellori’s descriptions for Pietro Santi Bartoli’s 1680 version of the same subject, the observations about Antoinette are clearly Sikkora’s. Massari does not recognize Antoinette’s range and power; rather, she acknowledges that Antoinette’s version predates Bartoli’s by five years, notes the plates where there are significant differences in the tableaux, and extols Bartoli for not showing any particular reliance on Antoinette’s work (267–71).


15. Sikkora, 21. However, Colbert was much more than minister of finance. Aside from his titles (Knight, Marquis de Seignelay, Count) and his unwavering loyalty to the king, in her dedication Antoinette notes that Colbert was Counselor to the King in all and to all his councils, Royal Commander and Grand Treasurer, Secretary of State, Comptroller General of Finance, Bursar and General Overseer of his Majesty’s buildings and gardens as well as the arts and manufacturing in France (Monseigneur, Chevalier Marquis de Seignelay Comte feaux et autre lieux Conseiller du Roy en tous ses Conseils et du Conseil, Royal Commandeur et Grand Thresorier de ses Ordres Secretaire ‘Etat Control, General des Finances sur Intendant et Ordonnateur general des bastimens et jardins de sa Majesté Arts et Manufactures de France,’ quoted in Massari, 249, my translation).


Alice Sedgwick Wohl, Helmut Wohl, and Tomaso Montanari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 11; for a more comprehensive discussion, see Pevsner (above).

18. See The Illustrated Bartsch, 31, Italian Artists of the Sixteenth Century, ed. Suzanne Boorsch and John Spike (New York: Abaris Books, 1986), 287–88; Massari 159–61; and Evelyn Lincoln, The Invention of the Italian Renaissance Printmaker (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 128–31 for reproductions of the Scultori engravings. Sikkora acknowledged in a personal email that she was not aware of the Scultori images. Massari, who does not reproduce Antoinette’s engravings in her study, likewise draws no link between Diana and Antoinette. She suggests a correspondence between Diana’s engravings and Bartoli’s (160) and between Antoinette’s and the 1542 engravings on the subject attributed to Fantuzzi (85). However, comparing the images shows that, while all four artists were working on the same subjects, only Diana’s and Antoinette’s engravings share significant stylistic and compositional details.


20. See Dickens, 240.

21. The British Museum online catalogue note for this image identifies the figure as Minerva (http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database), perhaps reading the snake depicted on Colbert’s coat of arms (BN state 2) as a symbol for her. While the circumstances seem to favor calling the figure Bellona, the concept of protectress remains.

22. For insight into Bellori’s collaboration with Bartoli see Janis Bell’s Introduction to Art History in the Age of Bellori: Scholarship and Cultural Politics in Seventeenth-Century Rome, eds. Janis Bell and Thomas Willette (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 12–15 and, in the same volume, Ingo Herklotz, “Bellori, Fabretti, and Trajan’s Column,” 127–44, and Hetty E. Joyce, “From Darkness to Light: Annibale Carracci, Bellori, and Ancient Painting,” 170–88. For a discussion of Bellori’s use of allegorical figures in the Vite, see (in the same volume) Claire Pace and Janis Bell, “The Allegorical Engravings in Bellori’s Lives,” 191–223. I have as yet been unable to establish a firmer link between Bellori and Antoinette although it is quite likely that Bellori, who was a close friend of Poussin (Montanari 8–9), would have been acquainted with her brother Antoine, for Thuillier tells us that Poussin took Antoine into his home and treated him like a son; see Jacques Thuillier, Nicolas Poussin (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), 136.