

The difficulties in writing about women in early modern Italy are well known: absent or minimal documentation, the failure to mention women’s names except in wills or dowry documents, and the prevalence of writings by men about women rather than women about themselves. Researchers in recent decades countered these limitations by asking different questions and marshalling limited evidence in original and provocative fashion. In some respects it has been easier to conduct research on women and art because ecclesiastical authorities often recorded their commissions in considerable detail or monastic chroniclers recounted their patronage. Architecture is far more difficult because it long appeared that men commissioned significant buildings while women possibly played a role in decorating them. In her important earlier book, Women, Art, and Architecture in Northern Italy, 1520–1580, Katherine McIver took on this subject with regard to noble women of Parma and Reggio Emilia in the sixteenth century, especially the Pallavicino and Sanseverino families. While it was impossible to find evidence of women as actual designers, McIver documented their active participation in new and remodeled family palaces, chapels, and monasteries, often concluding that to all intents and purposes they did design. In this new edited volume, McIver expands her discussion to include women from throughout Italy whose active role in buildings could be documented, from Giovanna I of Naples to Caterina Sforza in Forlì.

A total of four of the ten chapters in this book concerns architecture, each illustrating the difficulties of identifying women’s architectural patronage. McIver documents several cases of women supervising architectural projects in their husbands’ absences, including Eleonora Gonzaga in Urbino and Pesaro and Costanza Farnese in Rome. Many of these women purchased properties, erected or enlarged palaces, and spent their own
funds remodeling existing buildings. Tied as we are to notarial documents, however, in most cases it is more difficult to establish the women’s precise roles: were they acting on their own behalf or on that of male family members? Even where a palace is erected when only a woman is present, for example, Eleonora Gonzaga and the Villa Imperiale in Pesaro, we cannot determine just how much of the palace design can be attributed to her. Unfortunately, this is true in most cases, one exception being Isabella d’Este and the suburban retreat she designed, subsequently transformed by Biagio Rossetti. Kimberley Dennis’s excellent essay on Camilla Peretti, sister of Pope Sixtus V, and the Villa Montalto in Rome demonstrates in greater detail the difficulties of attribution because both Camilla and her brother were involved in the purchase of properties and construction of various buildings on the site. Indeed, for the most part, subsequent historians attributed the villa to the future pope rather than to his sister. Without further documentation, Camilla’s exact role remains questionable, even if it appears that she was deeply involved in the entire enterprise. Alison Smith’s study of domestic architecture deftly documents developments in palace architecture in sixteenth-century Verona as well as positions women within the axes of public and private spaces.

At times historians find it difficult to remember that laws on the books do not always translate into lived practices. Smith instead confirms for this northern Italian city the distance between theory and practice in the organization and use of domestic spaces by women and men. In regard to the Neapolitan convent of Santa Maria della Sapienza, Aislinn Loconte traces the history of the building, initiated by Maria Carafa in the early sixteenth century, and subsequent decorative programs for which the nuns were clearly responsible. A growing body of research, including that of Helen Hills, focuses on the often neglected cities of southern Italy. Both of these studies illustrate the extensive activities of women in building enterprises, but at the same time, they reveal the difficulty in determining their specific roles in creating them. In the case of Carafa, epistolary exchanges with her brother show her deep engagement in the project, and subsequent convent histories confirm the direct role of the women in remodeling the church and commissioning a monumental new façade.
Not, however, that it was the women who put pencil to paper for the actual design. This raises a provocative question as relevant today as it is to studies of the past: is the designer the one who puts pencil to page or the one who provides the direction and ideas? If we accept the latter or a combination of the two, then women were as much the designers as any of their male contemporaries. Logic indeed suggests that women were as capable 500 years ago as they are now in design, had impediments not prevented them from exercising their talents.

Marilyn Dunn adopts a somewhat different approach in exploring the ways post-Tridentine cloistered nuns constructed their identities to give themselves visibility in their decorative programs for the public areas of their convent churches. They did this by emphasizing their role of prayer on behalf of the city and its individual inhabitants and by emphasizing female saints as exemplars for women and men alike. Just as McIver opened up the boundaries of women’s roles in building, so Dunn offers a framework for understanding the patronage activities of cloistered nuns for public spaces.

Decorative programs are quite another story, for here the specific involvement of women emerges quite clearly from notarial and other records. Women were both patrons and artists, as Marjorie Och reveals in her study of Properzia de’ Rossi, a Bolognese sculptor much celebrated in her day and whose art still decorates the church of San Petronio in Bologna. Och argues that Vasari’s presentation of de’ Rossi in his Lives of the Artists drew from the model the poet Vittoria Colonna crafted for herself in her verse and in medals she ordered coined of herself and her husband, and that to do so, Vasari deliberately omitted references to Properzia’s volatile character and well-known brushes with the law. Chapters by Jennifer Webb on the Varano and Sforza women in the Marche and Timothy McCall on women in the Rossi dynasty in Parma explicitly take up the problem noted at the beginning of this review: the historical invisibility even of significant noble women.

Finally, Allyson Williams examines the known portraits of Lucretia Borgia, duchess of Ferrara, quite rightly dismissing the authenticity of Bartolomeo Veneto’s Flora as representing the duchess. The face may well be hers, but a woman of her station and known piety would not have posed
partially nude. Artistic conventions certainly allowed for some license in the accuracy of representations, and they also included depicting real women as deities from the pagan world. In this case it is the long, wavy blond hair that seems to signal Lucrezia, as well as the profile, although contemporaries described her eyes as grey, not brown. Williams asks who was responsible for the various representations of the duchess, Lucrezia or her husband Alfonso d’Este. Certainly, she commissioned the famous bound Cupid medal along with her profile in 1505, but the trail goes cold afterwards. Although Williams constructs numerous hypotheses built upon a somewhat shaky sequence with little evidence of the duchess’s intentions, Lucrezia’s own statement in a letter to her ambassador in Paris, in which she affirms that she is quite alien to the practice of portrait painting, best defines her view and helps explain the shortage of extant images of the duchess (Diane Y. Ghirardo, “Lucrezia Borgia duchessa, imprenditrice e devota,” Quaderni Estensi 2 [February 2012]: 208). Even the portrait in the National Gallery in Melbourne, Australia, now appears to have been posthumous.

As a group, these articles attempt to render visible even those women about whom only scattered information is available and for the most part, they significantly enrich our understanding of how women shaped their environments in early modern Italy.

Sally Anne Hickson’s Women, Art, and Architectural Patronage in Renaissance Mantua follows a single woman and her activities as they intersected with those of other women, including Isabella d’Este, two of her daughters who were nuns in Mantua, and her daughter-in-law Margherita Paleologa. Margherita Cantelma, Duchess of Sora, a devoted companion of Isabella d’Este, lived primarily in Ferrara but also spent long periods of time in Mantua in the company of the marchesa. The letters the two exchanged are a compelling record of the two women’s bonds of friendship and of their harmony on spiritual matters. Long studied for her collections of antiquities and art and for her correspondence with the great poets, artists, and writers of her day, Isabella is here revealed for her piety. The two women were depicted together honoring one of Mantua’s most important “living saints,” Beata Osanna Andreasi. In Mantua at the turn of the sixteenth century, Hickson explores the images of female saints (some
of whom were alive), the patronage of Margherita and Isabella, and the convent Isabella funded and Margherita founded in fulfillment of Isabella’s last wishes. A collection of the wills of Paleologa, d’Este, and Cantelma, as well as a selection of letters exchanged among the three women, add to the book’s significant merits and document the extent and depth of their relationships.

Here as in the chapters in McIver’s book, the acute subtlety and determination of these female patrons becomes abundantly clear. They patronized devotional art within the framework of established contemporary patterns of patronage, neither breaking new paths nor retreating to older traditions, much as male patrons did. If anything, the women were more likely to commission works of art representing female rather than male saints, at least in the cases discussed here. In sum, if the two books cannot attribute architectural designs for certain to any of these women, nor any adventures into novel pious representations by them, what these studies do accomplish is the recognition that there were active, thoughtful, and determined women in early modern Italy who shaped their environments with persistence and determination, despite the obstacles they faced.

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