

## The Game and the Gaze: Sofonisba Anguissola's Subversion of Gendered Genre Scenes

Sofonisba Anguissola, one of the few Renaissance female painters, used her position in society, as both a noble woman and as a painter, to assert that women were capable of succeeding in activities that were deemed masculine—most obviously the act of painting itself. This paper will focus on one painting in particular, Sofonisba Anguissola's *The Chess Game*. This painting emphasizes the ability of her subjects—all of whom are women—in several ways, which strongly contrasts another more common representation of a gaming scene, specifically, *The Chess Players* by Guilio Campi. In this picture, Anguissola inverts the Renaissance trope of a woman playing chess as a game of love. She does this by flipping the traditional situation of the viewer looking at the female subject, to one where the subject actually gazes upon the viewer.

This paper begins by reviewing existing scholarship on Sofonisba, which focuses heavily on her biography and gender, as female artists were substantially less common than male artists during the Renaissance. As is frequently noted, her familial status was essential in her training and success. This paper acknowledges that her biography is important, but rather than focusing on her family's connections, looks instead to her sisters, who comprise the subjects in *The Chess Game*, and how Sofonisba uses their portraits to create something different. Ultimately this paper will show that the rules of game etiquette are fundamental to understanding how and why these two paintings are so different and how Sofonisba subverted this type of scene. In *The Chess Players*, Sofonisba not only accentuates women's ability, but also implicates the viewer as an active participant.

Sofonisba Anguissola's biography has been treated extensively by several authors.<sup>1</sup> Sofonisba was the first daughter to an open-minded nobleman, who had no artistic training, but upon noticing the talent of his daughter, decided to cultivate it.<sup>2</sup> This point, regarding her artistic education, is expanded in

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<sup>1</sup> The most widely referenced of these scholars are Sylvia Ferino-Pagden, Ilya Perlingieri, Catherine King, Fredrika Jacobs and Sharlee Glenn.

<sup>2</sup> Ilya Sandra Perlingieri, *Sofonisba Anguissola: The First Great Woman Artist of the Renaissance* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 79.

Ilya Perlingieri's 1992 book *Sofonisba Anguissola: The First Great Woman Artist of the Renaissance* and in another prominent and widely referenced book by Maria Kusche and Sylvia Ferino-Pagden in 1995, *Sofonisba Anguissola: A Renaissance Woman*.<sup>3</sup> Perlingieri argues that Sofonisba's father was very influential in the establishment of her career by not only allowing her to train as an artist, under Bernardino Campi and Bernardino Gatti, but also connecting her to other famous artists of the day. Her first mentor, Bernardino Campi, was related to Giulio Campi, whose painting will be closely compared to Sofonisba's *Chess Game*. Perlingieri cites correspondence between Amilcare Anguissola, Sofonisba's father, and Michelangelo who was "kind enough to examine, judge, and praise the paintings done by my daughter Sofonisba."<sup>4</sup> Amilcare Anguissola further thanks Michelangelo for the "honourable and thoughtful affection that you have shown to Sofonisba, my daughter, to whom you introduced to the most honourable art of paintings."<sup>5</sup> This exchange implies that Michelangelo said favorable things about her work. Perlingieri analyzes these letters to show that Sofonisba had an impressive reputation as a Renaissance painter. Understanding the literature that brought traditionally overlooked female artists of the renaissance into popular thought is essential in understand the how they are treated today.

In 1977, Joan Kelly-Gladol's revolutionary essay "Did Women Have a Renaissance" confronts the traditional Renaissance narrative that society underwent a dramatic shift during the quattrocento and cinquecento. She argues that although male artists were allowed more artistic individuality, which brought greater social fluidity, women were not able to receive the same education and training as their male counterparts and were largely left out of the purported change in ideology and a shift towards increasing personal independence.<sup>6</sup> Kelly's essay furthered second wave feminist scholarship, which can be found in Linda Nochlin's 1971 article, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists." Nochlin explores many possible reasons why there were so few women artist in Europe, she argues that it was due

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>6</sup> Joan Kelly-Gladol, *Did Women Have a Renaissance?* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), [http://sites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic205827.files/October\\_22/Kelly\\_Did\\_Women\\_Have\\_a\\_Renaissance.pdf](http://sites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic205827.files/October_22/Kelly_Did_Women_Have_a_Renaissance.pdf), 186-189.

to women's lack of opportunity compared to their male contemporaries.<sup>7</sup> Nochlin and Kelly-Gladol sparked an interest in bringing to light female artists that the male-dominated traditional narrative of European history forgot.

Specifically, Kelly-Gladol shows that while women were still subjected to rigid gender roles and restrictions, a few women like Sofonisba Anguissola were able to become successful artists.<sup>8</sup> Kelly-Gladol notes that these women were born into special circumstances, which allowed them certain opportunities that other women of the time did not enjoy. They were often the daughters of artists, trained by their fathers or brothers, or daughters of progressive noblemen who could afford to have their daughters trained as artists. In order for the latter to be the case, a girl's father would have to be able to afford this training both financially and by holding the power to go against traditional gender roles of renaissance Europe.

In 1978, Germaine Greer presented a foundational argument that counters the notion that Amilcare, Sofonisba's father, had his daughters trained as artist due to his humanistic nature. Greer claimed in her publication, *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work*, that Sofonisba and her sisters' artistic education was cultivated by their parents, for a more pragmatic reason: to enhancement their reputations and therefore to require less dowry to be married.<sup>9</sup> Maria Kusche and Sylvia Ferino-Pagden embrace the idea that Amilcare Anguissola probably did consider what reputations would do for his daughters' futures, as Greer put forth. However, they argued that was not his sole motivation, and that he was a humanist regarding his daughters' education, wanting them to explore all of their options and make the best of their talents.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists," *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 1971, 229–33.

<sup>8</sup> The most well-known of these women artists of the renaissance include but are not limited to: Lavinia Fontana, Fede Galizia, Catharina Van Hemessen, and Properzia De' Rossi.

<sup>9</sup> Germaine Greer, *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work* (London: Pan in association with Secker and Warburg, 1981), 12-13.

<sup>10</sup> Sylvia Ferino Pagden, *Sofonisba Anguissola :a Renaissance Woman /* (Washington, D.C. :, 1995), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31822025555582>, 27.

Regardless of her father's reasons for training his daughters as artists, Sofonisba was evidently well known in her own time. In 1564, in an early art historical publication, *Libro de Sogni*, Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo mentions Sofonisba in an imagined conversation between Phidias and Leonardo da Vinci. Lomazzo was a painter turned writer based in Milan. The *Libro de Sogni* is structured as a dialog between Phidias and Leonardo da Vinci. Phidias's purpose was to represent the art of antiquity while Leonardo da Vinci represented the contemporary art of Sofonisba's time. In this imagined conversation, the two men discuss that Sofonisba "astonished many men by her paintings" and how "many valiant [professionals] have judged her to have a brush taken from the hand of the divine Titian himself."<sup>11</sup> This further emphasizes the high regard that she was held in, due to her artistic talent.

However, other artists of the Renaissance did not think that Sofonisba should be the one praised for her productions. In her discussion of the chess painting, Mary Garrard calls attention to a 1554 letter from Francesco Salviati to Bernardino Campi where he characterizes Sofonisba as "the beautiful Cremonese painter, your creation" and that her work is a product of Bernardino's "beautiful intellect."<sup>12</sup> Salviati implies that Sofonisba's talent was fashioned by Campi and was not due to Sofonisba's own creative capacity. Frederika Jacobs develops this idea further in her 1994 article "Woman's Capacity to Create: The Unusual Case of Sofonisba Anguissola" by analyzing why painting, and art in general, is normally associated with the masculine.<sup>13</sup> Jacobs attributes this gendered association to the belief held in the Renaissance about reproduction, where the female serves only as an incubator while the man creates and fashions the child, as the man typically creates and fashions the canvas or the stone.<sup>14</sup> Jacobs describes that women were not thought to possess the same artistic inclination that men did. The case of Anguissola shows and that some people concluded that if an instructor was able to produce a female artist

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<sup>11</sup> Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, *Libro de Sogni*, 1564. As Translated by Perlingieri in *Sofonisba Anguissola: The First Great Woman Artist of the Renaissance*.

<sup>12</sup> Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism* (University of California Press, 2005), 28.

<sup>13</sup> Frederika H. Jacobs, "Woman's Capacity to Create: The Unusual Case of Sofonisba Anguissola," *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (April 1, 1994): 78–93.

<sup>14</sup> Frederika H. Jacobs, "Woman's Capacity to Create: The Unusual Case of Sofonisba Anguissola," *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (April 1, 1994): 74–101, 82.

who was skilled, it was more a reflection of his own talent as a teacher and artist and less about the skill of the female trainee.

Most Anguissola scholars focus on Sofonisba's work in the context of her unique position as a female artist during the Renaissance.<sup>15</sup> Perlingieri notes that Sofonisba made explicit reference to the fact that she worked in a male dominated field; she emphasized her gender by signing, or incorporating the word "vir(go)" next to her name, which translates to virgin.<sup>16</sup> Another way that Sofonosbia highlighted her status as female artist is by the sheer number of self-portraits that she painted. Most of Sofonisba's work includes self-portraits, portraits of her family, as well as portraits of the Spanish court, because later in her career she became their court painter. Garrard suggests the reason that she painted the subjects she does is due to the limitations placed on appropriate subject matter for females, the unique ways that women were trained as artists, as well as the specialties of their teachers.<sup>17</sup>

Because the circumstances of her biography are so central to most interpretations of her work, it is useful to review them.<sup>18</sup> The exact year that Sofonisba Anguissola was born is somewhat disputed due to the lack of required record keeping in then cinquecento. However, it is most widely accepted that she lived from 1532-1625. She was born into a noble family and had seven siblings, the youngest of which was the only son. Coming from the nobility allowed Sofonisba opportunities that women of a lower class could not afford. As a young girl, her father, Amilcare Anguissola, noticed her talent in painting. Due to her natural skill, Amilcare made a decision that was unusual for the time, he decided to let her pursue a career as a painter, even sending her and two of her sisters away to live and train with the artist Bernardino Campi.

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<sup>15</sup> Catherine King, "Looking a Sight: Sixteenth-Century Portraits of Woman Artists," *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte* 58, no. 3 (January 1, 1995): 381–406, doi:10.2307/1482820; Jacobs, "Woman's Capacity to Create" P 74.; Ferino Pagden, *Sofonisba Anguissola*, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Mary D. Garrard, "Here's Looking at Me: Sofonisba Anguissola and the Problem of the Woman Artist," *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (October 1, 1994): 556–622, 558.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 619.

<sup>18</sup> Jacobs, "Woman's Capacity to Create," 76; Sharlee Mullins Glenn, "Sofonisba Anguissola: History's Forgotten Prodigy," *Women's Studies: An Inter-Disciplinary Journal* 18, no. 2–3 (1990): 297–297.

While training in painting, it is unclear as to how the Anguissola sisters had their lessons.

Scholars have expressed skepticism as to whether the girls lived in the Campi household as guests they may have come solely for their lessons, due to the social differences between the Anguissolas and the Campis, and if this is the case, their situation was unique.<sup>19</sup> Sofonisba studied with Campi until he moved away, she studied briefly under another artist, Bernardino Gatti. Through the paintings Sofonisba created, her reputation grew quickly. Around 1558, Sofonisba moved to Spain to paint for the Duke of Alba, who recommended her to the King of Spain. She was offered a position as the court painter, painting tutor, and lady-in-waiting, to Queen Elisabeth of Valois. In his 1568 publication of *Lives of Lombard Artists*, Vasari states “[she went into] into the service of the Queen of Spain, in which she still remains at the present day with a handsome salary and much honour, has executed a number of portraits and pictures that are things to marvel at.”<sup>20</sup> She stayed in this position, until the death of the Queen, remaining in Spain for several more years, before returning to Italy where she lived the age of 93.

Since she had the opportunity to train as a painter, particularly as a young female, made her a unique case in the Italian cinquecento. Although her apprenticeship was probably not performed in the manner for her as it was for her male contemporaries, she still had the opportunity to refine and expand her abilities with two notable painters of the Italian Renaissance. Bernardino Campi, her first master, taught her for several years, while her second instructor, Bernardino Gatti, taught her for a shorter amount of time. Scholars assume that he had preference for her first master, Campi, due to a portrait she painted of him (Figure 1).<sup>21</sup> This picture shows a curious scenario. Her painting depicts Campi in the act of painting a portrait of her, while Campi and the portrait within, both look at the viewer. Catherine King uses this painting to show the intimate master-student relationship. She also argues that this is Sofonisba’s tribute to Bernardino Campi and his guidance because it would seem to agree with the idea that some

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<sup>19</sup> Sylvia Ferino Pagden, Sofonisba Anguissola, and Maria Kusche, *Sofonisba Anguissola: A Renaissance Woman* (National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1995), 34.

<sup>20</sup> Giorgio Vasari et al., *The Lives of the Artists: Electronic Resource* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/metabook?id=livespainters>, 46.

<sup>21</sup> King, “Looking a Sight,” 390–391.

held, that women were not creative enough to become, because she is seen here being “manufactured” by Campi’s creativity.<sup>22</sup>

For the purpose for this argument Sofonisba’s later time with Bernardino Gatti is not as important as her formative time with Bernardino Campi. Giorgio Vasari, in his book *Lives of the Lombard Artists*, he discusses Giulio Campi (Campo) and his training by his father, Galeazzo Campi, and his training of his two brothers.<sup>23</sup> He also states that although Giulio Campi trained both of his brothers, Antonio, and Vincenzo, as well as Lattanzio Gambara, Sofonisba Anguissola “[did] him more honor than any of the rest.”<sup>24</sup> Vasari was evidently partially mistaken in this statement, as it is known that Sofonisba did not study with Giulio, but with his cousin, Bernardino Campi.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, to say that Sofonisba was the most talented pupil, even though he mistakenly identified who her true master was, was a high praise for any artist, especially for a female one.

Yet Vasari’s mistaken joining of Sofonisba and Giulio raises an interesting comparison. Though Giulio and Sofonisba would not have trained together, because he was an already established artist as she began her training, they did reside within the same artistic circle within Cremona, and was related to her tutor. Due to their similarities in training in Cremona, they were likely exposed to similarities in the methods of their training and the works they studied. Although there is not much background information about Giulio Campi, it is known that he also created a larger body of portraiture when compared with Sofonisba’s two known tutors: Bernardino Campi has one known portrait (Figure 2), and Bernardino Gatti has no known portraits. Giulio had three portraits accredited to him, as well as the *The Chess Players*, and one church fresco. Sofonisba Anguissola and Giulio have other nominal similarities: both created portraiture; in Sofonisba’s case it was a mixture of a large amount of self-portraiture, and portraits of others, but in Campi’s case, none were self-portraits. Therefore Giulio’s body of work is more similar

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<sup>22</sup> King, “Looking a Sight,” 390-391.

<sup>23</sup> Vasari et al., *The Lives of the Artists*, 45.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>25</sup> In *Lives of the Artists* Sofonisba’s name appears as “Sofonisba Anguisciola.” This is not the accepted spelling by all current scholars; but is useful to note.

to Sofonisba's in subject matter, than her teachers' work, which would make a comparison of their works, practical.

Among Sofonisba's portraits is an image of three of her younger sisters playing chess. This painting is called *The Chess Game*, and was painted in 1555 (Figure 3). Giulio Campi also made a painting of a similar subject. His painting, *The Chess Players* was created about 20 years before, in the 1530s (Figure 4). Both chess paintings are close in size; *The Chess Game* being 72 x 97 cm, and *The Chess Players* being 90 x 127 cm. The point to consider when comparing and contrasting these two paintings is how Sofonisba's unique position may have led her to take a traditional game scene and 'turn it on its head' in relationship to how her male contemporaries were depicting similar scenes.

Being a respected female artist from the nobility, Sofonisba used her position in society to produce a scene that was substantially different than her predecessors. Sofonisba created a scene pervaded by the intelligence of her sisters; this can be contrasted to Campi's *Chess Players* where the women do not show knowledge or interest in the game. Juxtaposing the two allows Sofonisba's contribution to become more apparent. She created a unique tribute to the intelligence of women, in a period where so few women were invited to publically demonstrate their intellect due to the mores of Italian Renaissance society by altering a genre game scene and giving her three sisters a sense of purpose in their actions.

In Sofonisba's *Chess Game* three sisters sit around a table in the middle of a game, as an elderly woman, perhaps a maid or a nurse, watches on. The eldest sister Lucia, on the far left, looks at the viewer almost as if she is inviting them to witness this "battle of wits." Lucia is winning against, the middle sister, Minerva, who is seated across from her. It appears that Lucia is about to, or has just made, an important move, because the youngest sister, Europa, standing next to her grins. This grin could even be considered slightly mocking, while looking across the table at the Minerva who has her hand raised. Minerva, has her mouth slightly agape as if to contest what just happened or what is imminent, or possibly she wishes to comment or as a question as she looks up at Lucia. The fact that these three sisters vary in age, yet all seem to understand the game, speaks to their ability to master the rules and complex patterns inherent to the game. Europa is very young, and that Minerva is interested enough to ask a



question or make a comment about the game, indicates that this depiction highlights the intelligence of the sisters.

In Campi's *Chess Players*, a mix of men and women, sit around a table, all looking in different directions, while the ostensible purpose of their assemblage, the chess game, is partially obscured. In Campi's painting, all of the characters are looking in directions, leading the viewers' eyes chaotically around the image. Campi's *The Chess Players*, emphasizes the mood of the scene as festive narrative, while Sofonisba's scene emphasizes something different, intelligence. In Sofonisba's *The Chess Game*, she depicted a scene/genre painting as well as having paid great attention to the inclusion of portraits, as well as having included a landscape in the background. It does not just revert to traditional archetypal characters, showing them coming together to pass time. She instead uses portraits of her sisters, unlike Campi who uses faces that appears to be using very general facial features for the women in his painting. There are three women and four men. The woman in the foreground in the green dress is in the middle of a chess game against the man in the red hat who sits at the right of the painting.

The setting between the two chess paintings is different: Campi's feels claustrophobic and chaotic by comparison, because it has substantially more people in all different types of clothing. Sofonisba shows off her talent in different genres of paintings, by painting a landscape in the distance, while in Campi's painting the background consists only of a bit of blue sky and a pillar. Perhaps with the inclusion of all of these usually separate facets, she wished to call attention to her well-roundedness in different types of painting. However, more significantly, this painting takes a somewhat traditional scene, gaming, and changes it into something more, a complex scene that engages the viewer differently than Campi's.

These are several other ways in which the treatment of the female characters is different between the two paintings, including the attention given to rendering their likeness, the differing degree of intellect and engagement in the game that the female characters display, and the types of attire they wear. In contrast to Sofonisba's formal, modest clothing, the chess playing female figure in Campi's also is wearing ostentatiously colorful attire that accentuates her womanly assets by a low neckline that exposes

cleavage. Additionally, the tops of the lady's breasts as well as her ungloved hand that is pointing to the chess pieces, are highlighted and illuminated by light significantly more than the rest of her figure, drawing attention to these areas.<sup>26</sup> There is also a rose present on the table in front of the lady playing chess, which can be a metaphor for love, evoking a game of love, or playing for the love of the lady.<sup>27</sup> The iconography of roses as a metaphor for love is multivalent: it could mean to show that though roses are beautiful, their beauty will eventually wither away, or it could represent lust and the fact that something can be so enticing and lovely, but at the same time there is potential to become hurt by being pricked by the thorn.<sup>28</sup>

Campi's painting appears to be a combination of all types of people, from different walks of life. In addition to the prominent lady with the rose in front of her, there is a soldier in armor, a few ladies whose clothing cannot be seen well—and one of the three has on a stone necklace—there is a man in a fur collared coat, and a man that doesn't look as well groomed wearing more plain attire, as well as jester who entertains others but also gives advice. Then the question arises; who are these women? It is known from historical sources, exactly who the women are in Sofonisba's painting; however, Campi's is less documented. Are these women well-off or noble women? If so that they are displaying questionable morality, by playing this the group of men. Perhaps the presence of the jester is a clue that they are at court, perhaps these women are courtesans. In any case, Campi's is not focusing on their intellect as Sofonisba does in her painting; he focuses on the chess game as a metaphor of courtly love.

In *The Chess Game*, Sofonisba alters the traditional mode of depicting portraits. She takes very specific portraits, those of her sisters, and places them in a scene where they are not being judged for their beauty or pedigree, but for their intelligence. Additionally, the way that the scene is set and how the eldest

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<sup>26</sup> For more information see Stallybrass, Peter, and Ann Rosalind Jones. "Fetishizing the Glove in Renaissance Europe." *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 114–32

<sup>27</sup> Although this painting by Campi was created prior to Bronzino's *Venus, Cupid and Time (Allegory of Lust)*, it very likely contains similar allegorical themes, but presents them in a scene with more identifiable human figures instead of focusing mainly of gods and goddesses.

<sup>28</sup> Although there is a rose sitting on the table, one can only see the beautiful, flowery top. The stem is obscured by the flower. The placement of this flower could be a reference that 'things are not always as they seem' and one should not be too taken by beauty and charm, because with time it will pass, like a flower dies and you will be left only with the thorny stem.

girl gazes invitingly at the viewer, this painting forges a more intimate relationship with the viewer than traditional female renaissance portraits. At first glance, *The Chess Players* appears to also include a use of gaze to encourage viewer participation in the narrative within the painting, but the woman in the back on the viewers' right is really looking within the painting. The woman sitting behind the lady that plays the game has an interesting purpose; she appears at first glance to be looking at the viewer like the eldest sister in *The Chess Game*, but she eyes are actually slightly downcast as if she is looking at the conversation between the chess playing woman and the jester, and not the viewer. This closes her off and functions to create more distance between the viewer and what is happening inside the painting. It also serves to draw attention to the interaction between the main figure and the fool.

The three other men on the left hand side, all look at the chess board as if they are studying and anticipating the different possible moves. The younger girl that sits among the men on the left side looks up at either the soldier or the man with the red hat.<sup>29</sup> Notably, in Campi's painting, a man and woman play against each other. The male player on the viewer's far left who wears a red cap, focuses her attention on the game while, the woman consults a fool for advice. Though no alcohol appears, this scene would fit well in a tavern/bar because the players and crowd surrounding are showing less focus on the game, and more on each other. Whereas in Sofonisba's painting, only women are playing the game, and they are all engaged with what is unfolding.

Through the use of the system of gazes of her subjects, Sofonisba creates an environment that highlights the intellect of her sisters. She does this by having the sisters in the middle of a game, all interacting with each other, to show that they are all very aware of how to play. She likely wanted the viewers to see her sisters as skilled players with knowledge of strategy. This skill of the players and the

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<sup>29</sup> The man with a red cap had a medallion on it. It appears that this could be important for the interpretation of this work, since this is the man that the woman is playing against. Upon close inspection, it appears to be a woman with a bow, possibly Diana. The story of Diana that could be relevant here is that on day she was bathing naked, and a human man, Actaeon, as spying on her, and was boastful that he was a better hunter than her. As his punishment, she turned him into a stag, so that his own dogs would mistake him, and descend upon him. This could relate back to the theory of the flower, and how people and things can be beautiful, but also painful, and a caution to be aware of one's own actions. It is possible that this figure could be cupid, but with the limited amount of zooming allowed by resolution it is hard to tell what exactly it is. However, appears to be a more feminine figure.

intensity of the game is reflected within the network of glances in both Sofonisba's and Campi's paintings. The women in Campi's *The Chess Players* shows the opposite, she is less attentive and displays less knowledge than the men, since not a single one of them is looking at the board, while three of the men are. Campi's chess game is not portrayed as a serious game of skill, but more as a pass time for the amusement of the people watching—perhaps even including the viewer. Sofonisba's is not the same; it shows the three girls in a battle of wits, engaged in an activity that would prove to cultivate their intelligence and creativity, as was in line with the way in which they were raised as noble young women.

Thus, although Sofonisba Anguissola's painting of *The Chess Game*, and *The Chess Players* by Gulio Campi are similar in subject matter, they differ in several key aspects. Through these differentiations, Sofonisba constructs an image that celebrates her sister's intellect, whereas Campi's is a more traditional scene where women are depicted as primarily love objects, and less knowledgeable than the men. Moreover, Sofonisba subtly implicates the viewer as an intellectual participant in the scene with a technique that she uses fairly consistently in her works: the exchange of gazes. Here, she employs the gaze of a subject in her painting, specifically the eldest sister, to make the viewer an active participant. This engagement serves to break down the barrier of audience and subject and blur the lines of viewer and participant. Through the perceived eye contact with the older sister, Sofonisba encourages the viewers to become participants in the scene that she depicts.

Notably, Sofonisba's image is constructed in a different way than Campi's; the viewer is level with the three sisters, meaning the viewer has a direct eye line to the oldest girl, and is therefore slightly taller than the smaller, younger girls. However, the perspective is a bit askew when looking at the table where the chess match is being played. It gives the effect of slightly looking down on the board; like viewers would do if they were observing a sports match. If one were to see the table from the angle in which it is painted, one would expect to be looking down at the sisters. Thus the viewer looks into the faces of the girls, but also has a good view of what is happening in the chess game so that one is intrigued to come watch the game unfold. The fact that the table is directly at the edge of the painting, and that there is an empty space at it where the viewer could walk up and sit down also assists in making this

scene feel inclusive. Instead of shifting the eyes slightly downward to avoid eye contact as in Campi's picture, Sofonisba painted her figures (more often than not, herself) to make direct eye contact, to the point where there can be no question in the viewer's mind where she is looking. This causes her work to become interactive—in regard to engaging the viewer through gaze—in a different way than Campi's.

Sofonisba's depiction of women in *The Chess Game* is not how women had been traditionally rendered in portraiture. Author Patricia Simons argues about how the roles of male and female portraits, and the methods in which they were painted, were substantially different.<sup>30</sup> Simons states that most of the portraiture created before 1440 was of men, but beginning after that, a shift occurred in which more portraits of women were created.<sup>31</sup> She argues that the role of female portraiture was to represent the status and wealth of the family. Because of this, their specific facial features were not as important of their clothes and the possessions represented, and were often beautified and not true to life.

Maurice Brock, in his discussion of Bronzino's 16<sup>th</sup> century portraits, refers to this phenomenon by calling the faces, a mask, saying that ladies had to wear them, because that was what was deemed proper.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, male portraits were often created as celebratory images to celebrate a victory or important political event, and were often meticulous in rendering likenesses of the subjects.<sup>33</sup> More often than not, the female portraits are used as tools of judgment, not of celebration. Although there is a shift in style of female portraiture around the 1470s, where these types of portraits went from being almost exclusively in profile, to the facing the viewer, the amount of individuality and therefore the amount possible viewer intimacy increased only slightly.<sup>34</sup>

Sofonisba uses direct eye contact; all of her subjects look at each other so that the viewer's eyes are easily directed. Contrastingly, in *The Chess Players*, the majority of the characters do not look at each other, but off in all different directions, and most of the male figures have their back facing the viewer.

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<sup>30</sup> Patricia Simons, "Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture," *History Workshop* 25 (1988): 8.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>32</sup> Maurice Brock, *Bronzino* (Flammarion, 2002), 66.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 8; Brock, *Bronzino*, 64.

These are contributing factors that makes his painting feel less interactive. The viewer is not encouraged to establish or feel included as part of the scene, but rather to witness it as an audience member would—at a distance. The ability for viewers to visualize themselves as part of the scene is further cultivated through the placement of objects and people, and the angles at which the viewer sees the scene. In Campi's painting, the viewer seems to be looking down into the scene which creates a sense of detachment. The viewers witness a scene unfold, and are not part of it due to the fact that there is a physical barrier blocking them from joining the characters. The viewer is blocked out of the scene by the soldier in the foreground. He sits at the table with his back facing the viewer, not only obstructing the view of the game, but serving as a barrier from allowing one to approach and sit down, since he takes up all the available table space. This is unlike Sofonisba's painting where the game table has empty space where the viewers could feel as if they could walk right up to the table, additionally none of *The Chess Game's* subjects have their back facing, and thus blocking out, the viewer.

The reason for each of these artists to depict their gaming scene the way they did could lie with the 'politics of play,' or the etiquette rules that govern gaming. George McClure's essay "Women and the Politics of Play in Sixteenth-Century Italy: Torquato Tasso's Theory of Games," argues that chess, along with other forms of gaming, had a certain honor code that dictated which player should be the winner. The reason for this set of unofficial rules that govern court gaming can be found in looking at sources such as *The Book of the Courtier* by Baldassare Castiglione, published some years before the chess paintings by Sofonisba Anguissola and Giulio Campi, in the early 1500s. Castiglione's book discusses almost all aspect of court life ranging from how nobles should be educated to the unspoken rules of etiquette dictating almost every aspect of court life.<sup>35</sup>

McClure's argument is useful in parsing the significance of the chess game in a specifically feminine environment and understanding the different constructions of Campi's *Chess Players* and

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<sup>35</sup> Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* (Digireads.com Publishing, 2010), 27-28. *The Book of the Courtier* touches briefly on gaming, by mentioning that chess is a game for onlookers because of human desire to see one party overthrown another, but one who excels chess due to the time they commit to practicing chess, has wasted all of their time.

Sofonisba's *Chess Game* and why these differing constructions cause these two paintings to contain such different messages. McClure emphasizes gaming etiquette when chess is played between men and women. He argues that gaming sometimes allowed for a break from the traditional hierarchy of the renaissance where women were typically subservient to men, and each man but the king had other men superior to him.<sup>36</sup> Games occasionally allowed for women to become the victor, in contrast the patriarchy where women were most always subservient to men.

The reason that women were only sometimes allowed true victories in games was due to the fact that well-mannered men, when playing chess with women, would allow them to win, regardless of whether they deserved to or not.<sup>37</sup> McClure discusses an imaginary story within the "Women and the Politics of Play" a situation similar to this: the female character is infuriated that her victories are not seen as indication of her cleverness and tactical prowess, but as a courtesy extended by her male opponent.<sup>38</sup> Since there were only women in Sofonisba's painting, this would not be an issue, but it would come into play in Campi's. The women in Campi's scene would probably fall victim to this. It is possible the lady might win, but it is hinted at that if this is the outcome, she does not deserve to win but is merely being let to win, because she clearly is not sure what move to make, because she consults with the fool. Interestingly, chess was invented as a means to practice warfare strategy, which could be why it was seen as a more masculine pass of time, and why a man would not want to be seen losing to a woman.<sup>39</sup> This could be a reason as to why the practice of letting women win was adopted, so that that was the norm, and a man would not be accused of losing to a woman because of her greater skill.

The practice of letting a woman win could have been employed for one of two reasons. Either, the woman was not very well versed in the game of chess, and defeating her would not give pleasure, or

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<sup>36</sup> George W McClure, "Women and the Politics of Play in Sixteenth-Century Italy: Torquato Tasso's Theory of Games," *Renaissance Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2008): 750–91, doi:10.1353/ren.0.0141, 751.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 757.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 757.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Charles Bell, *Bell, Robert Charles Board and Table Games from Many Civilizations*. Courier Dover Publications (Courier Dover Publications, 1979), 57.

the woman was actually better at chess than her male opponent. If a person won a game, against an unequal opponent, there is no fun in that, so the male opponent could simply let her win, which would make her happy, because she actually thought she did well. In contrast, it would look very poorly for a man, when playing a woman, to lose because she simply outwitted him. In order to avoid upsetting a woman who was not good at chess, and to avoid upsetting their ego, courtly men often allowed the women to win regardless of whether or not they deserved to.

In *The Chess Players*, we see a woman playing a man, as in one of the situations McClure discusses, however what can be seen is far from a woman frustrated because she cannot demonstrate her skill. In fact Campi shows the opposite to be true. It is a woman with so little knowledge of how to play the game that she has her consulting the fool for advice. Even though, this woman has such little knowledge of the game, it can be understood based on the visual clue of the rose, that this is not simply a game of wit, but perhaps it is also a game of love, and he will let her win, in order to win her love, or affection. Sofonisba chose to only include female characters in her painting was to combat this trope, so that no contemporary viewer could look at this painting and assume that either of the players would win, or be let to win, because they were both girls. Without the presence of a male player the two female players were free to strategize and win, because they deserved to, and most importantly, the people around them would know that the winner deserved to win, and did not win simply due to a code of courtly decorum. Contrastingly, in Campi's *Chess Players*, the viewer has no idea if the woman is putting on an act and playing a fool, by consulting the jester, or if she truly is not a skilled chess player. Either way, she is clearly part of the game of love—referenced by the rose—while Sofonisba's *Chess Game* entirely leaves any reference to a 'game of love' out of her work. As a part of the nobility, Sofonisba and her sisters may have experienced this gesture of courtly love, letting the woman win, when playing a man. She undoubtedly experienced gender inequality on her quest to become an artist, and most likely in various other aspects of her life

In "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" Kelly-Gladol paraphrases Castiglione, saying that the primary role of a man in Renaissance Italy was in the profession of arms, but for a lady charm had



become the most essential occupation.<sup>40</sup> She also quotes him directly stating "in a Lady who lives at court a certain pleasing affability is becoming above all else, whereby she will be able to entertain graciously every kind of Man."<sup>41</sup> This information further emphasizes the different positions in society that women were given. At this time, in the Renaissance, men and women were not on equal ground. Women were expected to remain subservient their whole lives, first to their fathers and then to their husbands. This quote from *The Book of the Courtier* demonstrates the way of thinking at this time, where men had military positions that required much skill, study, and knowledge, and women were only expected to be charming. However, being truly charming "entertaining every kind of man" took wit and intelligence.

This inherent intelligence of women was at the heart of what Sofonisba sought to depict in not only *The Chess Game*, but almost every one of her paintings. Depicting women as objects to be looked at, where the focus is not on the person but what surrounds her, as it indicates status, distances the viewer from the seeing the subject as a real person. Sofonisba closed this gap. In the *Chess Game*, Sofonisba challenges the traditional role of women in Renaissance paintings where in portraits what is most emphasized is the social status of the family that she belong to, and in genre scenes they often represent love interests—like in *The Chess Player*. In Sofonisba's employment of the eldest sister gazing at the viewer, it is clear that the sisters do not fit in the parameters of a traditional portrait or genre scene. Instead of being painted to be gazed upon, the viewers fill this roll; the gaze or the subjects invite the viewers to be witness their game and sense the life and personalities of the subjects, unlike preceding portraits or genre scenes. In other works by Sofonisba, we can see her depicting her female subjects as intelligent educated women reading, playing an instrument or placing herself in a scene where one would expect to find a man, not as a trope, to fit into a specific scene.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Kelly-Gladol, *Did Women Have a Renaissance?*, 186.

<sup>41</sup> Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, 207.

<sup>42</sup> See her three self-portraits titled: *Self-Portrait* from 1554, *Self-Portrait at the Easel* from 1556, and *Self-Portrait Playing the Spinnet* from 1556-57. In *Self-Portrait at the Easel*, she depicts St. John painting the Virgin and Child, but like Vasari, she replaces St. John with a self-portrait, which is highly unusual because she was a woman.



Figure 1:  
Sofonisba Anguissola  
*Bernardino Campi Painting Sofonisba  
Anguissola*  
c. 1559  
Oil on canvas

Figure 2:  
Bernardino Campi  
*Portrait of a Woman*  
c. late 1560  
Oil on canvas  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York





Figure 3: Sofonisba Anguissola  
*Portrait of the Artist's Sisters Playing Chess*  
1555  
Oil on canvas, 72 x 97 cm  
Muzeum Narodowe, Poznan





Figure 4: Giulio Campi  
*The Chess Players*  
1530s  
Oil on canvas, 90 x 127 cm  
Museo Civico, Turin

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- I am researching a female Renaissance painter, named Sofonisba Anguissola.
- I am looking into how she was breaking traditional barriers when it comes to the representation/depiction of women in genre scenes.
- I am looking at one of her images in particular, *The Chess Game*, and comparing it with a chess scene created by Giulio Campi, her tutor's cousin. I am researching how her image casts the female players in a different light, a more positive one, than the one that is more of a traditional genre scene, made by Campi.
- Campi's *Chess Players* depicts a scene that is focusing on chess as a metaphor for the game of courtly love, because it shows a woman and a man, surrounded by a whole group of observers playing against each other. Instead of depicting the woman as an equally intelligent competitor it casts her as the object of love/lust just highlighting her breasts and her hands, while she is shown consulting with a jester—making her seem 'fool-ish.' Whereas Sofonisba uses actual portraits, in her woman only game scene, to give the woman a sense of identity, when women in genre scenes are usually just beautified made up faces. Additionally she shows them interested in the game itself instead of being distracted by everything going on around them. She highlights their engagement and interest in winning by having the girls all looking at each other and reacting to a move the eldest sister, Lucia just made. Additionally the eldest sister makes full eye contact with the viewer as if to invite them to witness her make the final move to win the game. With the identity of the women in the scene, and the eye contact of Lucia, it makes the viewers feel much more connected to the scene.