Early Modern domestic environments supported and reinforced gendered activities far beyond the “house” or “home.” Intellectual, social, cultural, and imaginative spaces were coded for men and women in order to support the Elizabethan gender hierarchy. Whether gendered identities were real or imagined, they played a crucial role in dictating movement, ideas, and physical spaces.

Both within the home and around it—in gardens and surrounding countryside—women filled roles as wives and mothers, family members and servants, and as employers and employees. Whatever role she assumed, a woman was expected to comport herself in prescribed ways that limited movement and fixed identity.

How did women move through the world in both real and imaginary locations? We seek to open new avenues of inquiry into how women’s gendered spaces and activities both restricted and encouraged the exploration of individual identities; in particular, whether women could and did form or shape their own intellectual, literary, and physical environments. A woman’s gendered identity was constructed through the spaces she inhabited, the books she read, the language she employed in speech and letters, her clothes, and her restriction to the domestic environment as distinct, separate, and opposite to the public realm.

Within this investigation are many possible avenues of inquiry. The architectural spaces of the country houses constructed and elaborated during the reign of Elizabeth I are notable for their reinforcement of the division between male and female, public and private. Landscape architecture provides new and intriguing possibilities for women’s expansion of the “domestic realm” beyond the walls of the house and into gardens, fields, and subsidiary buildings and spaces that supported the country house lifestyle. Social history brings further issues of degree, status, and social interaction between strata of Elizabethan society, including the fluidity of class and rank. Finally, women’s letters, as historical documents and instruments of women’s voices and agency, created a means of self-presentation and influence beyond the domestic sphere.
READING
EARLY
MODERN
WOMEN

An Anthology of Texts in Manuscript and Print, 1550–1700

Edited by Helen Ostovich and Elizabeth Sauer

Assisted by Melissa Smith

Routledge
New York & London
myself I have spoken to your uncle for a tobacco or bonds. If not you write to use it, and I will write that you will take some for your venture in the appointment of Richmond, so that you will take service as well as your two children at Church Square. If you can take well to all sorts of work and labor, you will have some commodity bought, where I hope your family and all your means will come, to take to your purse and all other benefits of the same. Let the letter make clear for the four acres of your own land and your manner and to point I have good hope of yet for the sake of my soul, there or anywhere or which I will do your name. I will give you nine pounds to commence in.

5.1: Lady Elizabeth Cavendish (Duchess of Devonshire) to Francis Whitfield (14 November 1552). By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.
Lady Elizabeth Cavendish (Bess of Hardwick) to Francis Whitfield (14 November 1552)

Transcription

francys I have spoken with your mayste[r] for the clytres [cleats] or bordes that you wrote to me of and he ys contenste that you shall take some for your nescyte by the apountemente of neusante: so that you take seche as wyl do hymne no sarvese aboute his bylynges at chattysworthet. I pray you loke well to all thynges at chattysworthet till my aunted comynge when wyche I hope shalbe shortly and ym the meane tyme cause bronshawe to loke to the smethes and all other thynges at penterge lete the brewar make bere for me fourthevith for my owne drynkynge and your mayster and se that I haue good store of yet for yf I lacke ether good bere, or charcole or wode I wyll blame nobody so meche as I wyll do you. cause the flore ym my bede chamberts to be [fol. 1'] made even ether with plater claye or lyme and al the wyndothes were the glase ys broken to be mendode and al the chambers to be made as close and warne as you can. I herc that my systere jane come not haue thynges that ys nedeoule for hare to have amougste you yf yet be trewe you lacke aget of honyste as well as dyscrecyon to deny hare any thyngy that she hath a mynde to beynge ym case as she hathe bene. I wold be lothe to have any stranger so yoused ym my howse and then assure your selfe I cane not lyke yet to have my systere so yoused. lyke as I wold not haue any superfleuete or waste of any thyng ym wyse wold I have hare to have that whyche ys nedeoule and necessaary. my comynge whome I shal knowe more. and then I wyll trim as I shall haue cause. I wold haue you to give to my mydytys frome me and frome my boye wyllc and to [fol. 2'] my systere nose frome me and my boye as hereafter folowyet hys fyrste to the mydytys frome me tene shyllynges. and frome wyllc fyshe shyllynges to the nose frome me fyshe shyllynges. and frome my boye ill fore pecce. so that ym the wolfe you mouste gwe to them twenty thre shyllynges and fore pecce make my systere jane preuyce of yet and then paye yet to them fourth with yf you have no other money take so metche of the rente at penterge ym my systere jane that I wyll gve my dowter someynghe at my comyng whome and prayinge you not to fayle to se all thynges done accordyngely I bede you fare well frome londone the xiii of novemeber your mystryts Elyzbet the Cavendish tyll jaymes crompes that I haue resauved the fyshe ponde and ix shillings that he sente me by heue alospe.10

[address leaf] to my sir[vant] francys wytfeldes [delive] thys at chattysworthel

[notes in another hand] for the mylle for tak[in]g shepe for tak[in]g C Il wode for cupons to be farr for swynce / for the hard cornefelde for a pynder

[notes in modern band] Elizabeth Wife of Sir William Cavendish of Chatsworth, afterwards Countess of Shrewsbury

Notes

1. Her husband, Sir William Cavendish.
2. Novant, a master carpenter, was paid 8 pence a day and his assistant 5 pence: Williams, Bess of Hardwick, p. 92.
3. Chatsworth House, Derbyshire.
4. Marella Laiuze, his maternal aunt, the widow of a Derbyshire gentleman, appears to have lived with Lady Cavendish.
5. Penrich Woods, Derbyshire.
7. William Cavendish (1551-1626), Bess of Hardwick's second son, created Baron Cavendish in 1605 and Earl of Devon in 1618.
8. Her first daughter, Frances, who was born in 1548 and married Sir Henry Pierrpont in the 1560s, rather than her second daughter, Temperance, who was born in 1549 and died in her first year.
9. Crompe was steward of Chatsworth.

Commentary

Elizabeth Cavendish (c.1527-1608), perhaps better known as "Bess of Hardwick," was the fourth daughter and coheir of John Hardwick (1495-1528) of Hardwick, Derbyshire, by his wife, Elizabeth, daughter of Thomas Leake of Halsland. She first married Robert Barlow (or Barley; d.1544) circa 1543. Her second husband was Sir William Cavendish (c.1505-57), a member of the Privy Council; she married him as his third wife on 20 August 1547. By Cavendish she had six children (her sole issue): Frances, Temperance, Henry, William, Charles, and Elizabeth. In 1559, Elizabeth married Sir William St. Loe (d.1565), captain of the guards, as her third husband. She finally married her fourth husband, George Talbot, sixth Earl of Shrewsbury (c.1528-90) in 1567, as his second wife; the couple later separated. In marrying well, Bess achieved a higher level of social status and sphere of influence than that to which she was born. She inherited handsomely from all her husbands and is well known as a builder. In addition to the Elizabethan mansion at Chatsworth, she built the seats of Oldcotes, Worksop, and Bolsover, and, after the death of Shrewsbury in 1590, she set to work on building a new Hardwick Hall.

Over 100 of Bess of Hardwick's letters survive, written to various correspondents: family, servants, friends, neighbors, and government officials. The example reproduced here is the earliest known extant letter written by her. This letter is printed in Joseph Hunter (107) and in Maud Stepney Rawson (9-10), but both Hunter's and Rawson's transcripts contain numerous inaccuracies. Extracts of the letter are also printed in Basil Stallybrass (351-52), and E. Carleton Williams (23-24). It elicits further interest in that it was addressed to a male servant, Francis Whitfield, her bailiff. Her letter (one of two written by Bess to Whitfield, the other being Folger X.d. 428 (84), October 20, [1560]) was penned probably in 1552, while she was married to Sir William Cavendish. During this period, Chatsworth, which had been purchased in June 1549, underwent major rebuilding, and Bess and Sir William divided their time between there and London. In her absence from Chatsworth, Bess placed her sister Jane in charge of running the household, with Francis Whitfield responsible for running the estate. The letter instructs Whitfield to look well to all things at Chatsworth until her aunt Marcella Linacre arrives; to cause Bronshawe to manage things at Pentrich Wood; to stock up with charcoal, wood, and beer; to ensure that the floor in her bedchamber is made even and to mend the glass in the windows; to provide for her sister Jane's needs; to pay her midwife and her sister's nurse; and to inform James Crompe that she received the five pounds he sent her. On the address leaf, there is a list of things to do written in another hand. The authoritarian manner with which Bess delivered these orders is characteristic of other letters from aristocratic women to servants, though its severity is heightened by her displeasure at the poor way in which her sister Jane was treated at Chatsworth. She charges Whitfield with a lack
of honesty and discretion in his dealings with her sister, adding that she would not wish a stranger in her house to be used in such a manner. Perhaps Whitfield's behavior reflects a jurisdictional conflict within the household between Jane and himself, yet clearly Bess expected her sister to be treated with the respect due a woman of her gentle status.

In 1560 a new phase of building work began at Chatsworth, during a time when Bess was interested in contemporary architectural developments. She was in touch with Sir John Thynne, for example, during his overseeing of the first rebuilding of Longleat. (Longleat House, Thynne MS 13 no. 3: Lady Elizabeth St. Loe to Sir John Thynne, April 25, 1560). Her keen interest in Chatsworth is reflected in the way in which her husband, William St. Loe, addressed her as "my honest swete chatesworth," a reference to the considerable time she spent there (Folger X.d. 428 f. 77: Sir William St. Loe to Lady Elizabeth St. Loe, 24 Oct. [1560]). In rebuilding the property, a task that required lavish expenditure, Bess was constructing a house of magnificence suitable to the dynasty that she was founding.

James Daybell
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A letter from Lady Elizabeth Cavendish to Francis Whitfield, 14 November [1552], Folger Shakespeare Library (Cavendish/Talbot MS) X.d. 428 (82); holograph
In a provocative essay that generated considerable discussion when it was published in 1971, Linda Nochlin affirmed:

Thus, the so-called woman question, far from being a minor, peripheral and laughably provincial sub-issue grafted on to a serious, established discipline, can become a catalyst, an intellectual instrument, probing basic and "natural" assumptions, providing a paradigm for other kinds of internal questioning, and in turn providing links with paradigms established by radical approaches in other fields. Even a simple question like "Why have there been no great women artists?" can, if answered adequately, create a sort of chain reaction, expanding not merely to encompass the accepted assumptions of the single field, but outward to embrace history and the social sciences, or even psychology and literature, and thereby, from the outset, can challenge the assumption that the traditional divisions of intellectual inquiry are still adequate to deal with the meaningful questions of our time, rather than the merely convenient or self-generated ones.1

Following Nochlin's lead, more than a generation of feminist art historians have investigated the historical, sociological, and anthropological reasons why women were perennially relegated to "the margins," as Natalie Zemon Davis so aptly described it,2 and hindered from developing their own artistic identities, succeeding in emerging from the private sphere only in rare cases during the period that extended from the sixteenth century to about the middle of the eighteenth century. Women were usually found working in a semi-clandestine manner, hidden from sight in family-based ateliers, although it may be noted that "family" and "convent"—the two social poles which defined the existence of women in that period—were in fact much more open than one might tend to think today.3

Few indeed were the exceptions, among whom may be singled out the outstanding Roman artist Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1651/1653). Elizabeth Cropper, who for many years has studied women and their roles in the panorama of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century art, raised many interesting issues about this painter. In an essay she wrote for an exhibition shown in 2002, Cropper pointed out how Gentileschi's life and works "became a magnet for the exercise of every new form of art history."4 Indeed, all research focusing on art produced by women has the potential to generate "magnets" for similar exercises, leading to new methodological approaches and reflections of a much broader nature. Our perspective on their work can only open further each time that, freed of the rigid schematicism of the past, we focus on actual personages, their historical and cultural backgrounds, and specific works of art, challenging traditional orientations and the

1 Maria Sibylla Merian, frontispiece from Dissertatio de generatione et metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium (Amsterdam, 1705) Collection of Mrs. Paul Mellon, Oak Spring Garden Library, Upper marble, Virginia
numerous topos or clichés that persist in the study of art history. These might include the myth of the genius or that of the artist as a completely free and independent creator, not to mention the value judgments implicit in many of the conventional classifications, including the dichotomies "man-woman," "nature-culture," and "reason-intuition." These notions that have proved most difficult to uproot concerns the artistic genres traditionally associated with women artists over the course of the centuries. Although it is now agreed that they regularly worked in the studios of their fathers, husbands, or other male relatives—where they may even have participated in such prestigious projects as historical, mythological, and religious paintings—women received public recognition only for a limited number of "low-style" subjects conventionally reserved for them. These were genres in which neither the gift of inventio nor any great technical or stylistic virtuosity—both of which were considered the prerogative of male artists—was believed to be necessary. These themes, imposed by long tradition, were regarded as the only ones truly suitable for the donnesca mano (womanly hand) and femminil pazienza (feminine patience), characteristics that even today tend to be associated with the so-called fair sex.

The prevailing conviction, therefore, was that embroidery, the sermon humilis (humble language) of flowers, insects and birds; the still life; and in certain cases domestic scenes and portraits were peculiarly adapted to women artists. Techniques requiring the precise application of colors or a delicate touch, such as the painting of miniatures and works in gouache or watercolor, were considered appropriate to the feminine hand, just as the painting of frescoes and large-scale canvases in oils, not to mention sculpting in stone—which demanded physical strength and, above all, were sustained by the power of genio—were regarded as the domain of men. It is certainly not fortuitous that most historical sources describe those virtuose donne (talented women) who dedicated themselves to the arts as miniatrici (miniaturists) or intagliatrici (engravers) rather than as genuine pittrici (painters), thus underlining the distinction between the higher and lower forms of artistic endeavor.

Another art form in which women distinguished themselves at a very early stage, but on which much research remains to be done, was that of naturalistic illustration. The aim of this genre, whose emergence coincided with the birth of the modern sciences, was to provide an accurate portrayal of plants and animals, a faithful copy of the natural world. Between the end of the sixteenth and the middle of the eighteenth century, in the stimulating atmosphere created by the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, Europe saw an outpouring of artistic works marked by particular attention to naturalistic phenomena. During this period, in which new criteria and new instruments for scientific study (such as the microscope) were introduced, naturalistic illustration achieved the status of an artistic genre. Although generally commissioned by men of science as an aid to their studies, such works soon won the appreciation of sovereigns and curiosi, who vied with one another to add examples to their collections. The genre quickly attracted many women artists, some of whom achieved both wealth and fame, although they have until now received little attention from scholars in comparison to women from more recent epochs, such as the Victorian age or the early twentieth century.

Since antiquity, women have been considered the privileged repository of knowledge regarding herbs and their curative properties, and they were often credited with magical powers: the figure of Circe in Homer's Odyssey is a classic example. However, the activities of these women were usually relegated to the level of popular medicine and superstition, women herbalists being considered little more than witches and held in contempt by the officially recognized practitioners of medicine—physicians and apothecaries. Notable exceptions did exist, however, such as the German abbess Saint Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179). In addition to her musical compositions, she is distinguished for her treatises on natural history and the medicinal uses of plants,
animals, and minerals. Between 1550 and 1560, she compiled a list, in both Latin and German, of no fewer than 233 different medicinal herbs.

Artists or Scientists?
The role of women in the sciences has been studied in considerable detail, and it may be said that here they played an even more sporadic and marginal role than in the arts, at least until the Age of Enlightenment. This happened in part because the sciences were considered a highly elite and intellectually exacting pursuit, while the arts, after all, included a component of manual dexterity and craftsmanship which women were admitted to possess. Furthermore, as scientific discoveries and information were disseminated through the medium of the printed word, the authors of scientific texts were invariably men, for the pen was considered to be an instrument even less suited to the female hand than the brush.

As the sciences became institutionalized during the course of the seventeenth century, they barred women far more unconditionally than the arts. Women were not admitted to the scientific academies of Europe (the first of which, the Accademia dei Lincei, was established in Rome in 1603) until well into the eighteenth century—even though, ironically, these academies were often symbolized by female figures. In contrast, during the seventeenth century, some art academies were already accepting women as members, although they were never granted official duties or allowed to participate in meetings.

Denied an active role in the theoretical and experimental sciences, many women with an inclination for such subjects turned instead to scientific illustration, an art form which provided an outlet for their innate curiosity and sensitivity to the myriad aspects of the natural world. With their attributes of patience and minute accuracy, women were acknowledged to excel in this art form. Furthermore, the favorable climate that developed beginning in the late sixteenth century allowed some women to separate themselves from the paternal atelier system and to strike out on their own, placing their talents at the disposition of scientists or, in a few cases, affirming themselves in autonomous careers.

In addition, advances in printing technology during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries led to the publication of ever more lavishly illustrated texts, whose popularity increased the demand for specialized artists and engravers, among whom could be counted many women. For example, it is known that at the end of the sixteenth century the renowned bookbinder and printer Christophe Plantin of Antwerp (1520–1589), who specialized in the publication of scientific texts, retained three widows on his staff to hand-color the plates of important botanical texts. The coloring was done not only to make the books more attractive to potential buyers but also in the interest of scientific accuracy, as such work was always carried out under the direct supervision of scientists. A limited number of copies intended for presentation to illustrious personages were prepared with particular care and attention to detail, so that their plates approached the quality of miniature paintings. Plantin’s employment of women confirms that they had been found to be particularly skilled at this painstaking task.

Before long, however, a handful of women painters began to dedicate themselves to the representation of plants and animals as fully autonomous artists, achieving impressive results not only on an aesthetic level but also on a scientific one. Botanical, floral, and zoological (in particular ornithological) subjects traditionally associated with embroidery, the feminine art par excellence, became the preferred subjects for these artists. Once women had advanced beyond the stage of copying the masters, they did not limit themselves to the mere documentation of naturalistic specimens but sought instead to capture and portray their subjects’ very essence, in the process developing a highly personal style.

This period also saw the affirmation of the still life, which came to share some of the same themes as naturalistic illustration. As reflected by the various terms devised for this new genre in the many languages of Europe—still life, nature morte, natura morta, Stilleben—its aim was to depict “immobile” nature, as opposed to
the "living" model of the human figure. In the hierarchy of painting, the still life was relegated to a subordinate position. Initially it was considered a "low" genre, and indeed the Roman polymath and art collector Vincenzo Giustiniani (1564–1637), around 1620 placed no higher than fifth in his classification of the gradi (grades) of painting "il saper ritrarre flori ed altre cose minute" (the ability to portray flowers and other small things). This low rank was assigned to flower painting in spite of the judgment of the revolutionary painter Caravaggio (1571–1610), as reported by Giustiniani himself, that "tanta manifattura gli era a fare un quadro buono di flori come di figure" (there was as much effort involved in executing a fine painting of flowers as one of human figures).

The still life was obviously as fitting to the female hand as was scientific illustration, and many women—especially in northern Europe—specialized in this genre, including the French artist Louise Moillon (1561–1627), the Italian painter Federica Cigoli (1585–1630), the Dutch painter Clara Peeters (1594–c. 1647), and—perhaps the most famous of them all—Rachel Ruysch (1664–1750), the daughter of Frederik Ruysch (1638–1731), illustrious professor of anatomy at the university in Amsterdam and owner of an exceptional collection of scientific specimens.

Inevitable and immediate were the ties and exchanges that sprang up between the still life and naturalistic illustration, a fascinating theme of which many aspects remain to be investigated. While artists focused on and polished the "naturalistic citations" contained in their works, scientific illustrations tended "irresistibilmente a farsi quadri" (irresistibly to turn into paintings). Transcending their specialized status as a form of scientific documentation, still-life paintings soon acquired a decorative dimension and the configuration of genuine works of art. Indeed, it is sometimes impossible to decide whether to assign these works to the category of still life or that of scientific illustration. Many of the florilegia, manuscripts of miniature paintings, and printed books illustrated with engravings of flowers (usually exotic species or horticultural varieties) which were being produced all over Europe during this period constituted a veritable marriage between botanical illustration and the floral still life. These works in turn came to be used as sources for designs in the applied arts.

If one examines the careers of those women who dedicated themselves to naturalistic art throughout the seventeenth and in the first decades of the eighteenth centuries, linking their body of work, where possible, to the salient events in their personal lives, it may be possible to understand better the contributions they made to this new genre in which art and science fused, with intriguing consequences. The close links that developed in this period between these two traditionally separate cultures have formed the subject of study by many scholars. Ultimately, the recomposition of these two branches of human endeavor, illuminated by an examination of one of their most pleasing manifestations—scientific illustration—could provide points for further reflection and unexpected insights into various issues relating to the role of women in art.

The Seventeenth Century: Three Women Artists in Rome

During the reign of Pope Urban VIII (Maffeo Barberini, 1623–1644), Rome was one of the most open and vivacious cultural capitals of Europe. A number of women artists managed to establish careers for themselves in cultural circles among the gifted and the powerful, sharing a passion for the sciences and the arts. In this period, the nobleman Federico Cesi (1585–1630) founded the illustrious Accademia dei Lincei, of which the astronomer Galileo Galilei was a member. Various members of the papal family, in particular Cardinal Francesco, the nephew of Pope Urban VIII, cultivated an interest in the sciences, especially botany, and constructed magnificent gardens in which exotic plants and rare cultivars were grown.

In this fertile climate, where the activities of artists and scientists were so closely intertwined, many painters chose to specialize in the genre of botanical painting, among them the Frenchman Nicolas Robert (1614–1685), whose work would later win
great favor at the court of Louis XIV and the approval of Nicolas Guillaume Ic. 1600-1663) of Lorraine, also known as Nicolas de La Fleur and "Monsu Fiore" for his great skill as a botanical artist. Both Robert and de La Fleur came to Rome early in their careers, and it was there that they painted the leaves of their first florilegia. Indeed, for many artists a sojourn in the Italian capital allowed them to gain solid training and establish a reputation that would later help them to obtain prestigious commissions from wealthy patrons in other Italian and European states. 

Rome in this period also saw the publication of books on the subjects of botany and horticulture, which met with immediate success and became models of their kind because of the importance of their scientific content and the remarkable quality of their illustrations. In 1616 the printer Jacopo Mascardi published Minus cognitae nostri coelo orientis stirpium ekphraseis, an encyclopedic work on the flora of Europe by the Linceian academician Faonio Colonna (1556-1640), which included a particularly fine set of etched plates. In 1625 the same printer published Exactissima descriptio rariorum quarundam plantarum ... in Horto Farnese, in which the alchemist and herbalist Tobias Aldini (dates unknown), formerly curator of the "gabinetto di cose rare del cardinale Barberini" collection of rare objects [owned by] Cardinal Barberini, in collaboration with the celebrated physician and botanist Pietro Castelli (c. 1575-1657), described the rare plants growing in the garden of Cardinal Odoardo Farnese on the Palatine Hill. This text was accompanied by extraordinary plates engraved by Luca Ciamiberlano (c. 1580-c. 1645). 

Botanical illustration in this period therefore became not only a well-established and respected genre, but also a vastly popular one which attracted such women of talent as Isabella Cattani Parasole [or Parasoli; act. 1597-1616], Anna Maria Vaiani [act. 1677; d. c. 1653], and Giovanna Garzoni (1600-1670). Parasole was Roman, while Vaiani was from Florence and Garzoni was born in Ascoli. All three came from families of artists and artisans but were irresistibly drawn to Rome, where they eventually gravitated to the scientific circles of the Accademia dei Lincei and the entourage of the Barberini family. 

Isabella Cattani Parasole
Isabella Cattani Parasole, artist and engraver, won a certain renown for her volume of designs for embroidery and lacework, Teatro delle nobili e virtuose donne, published in 1616 with plates drawn and engraved by the artist herself. Earlier in her career, her talent had attracted the attention of Castore Durante (1529-1590), who commissioned her to prepare the illustrations for his treatise, Herbario nuovo. Isabella's husband, Leonardo Parasole (c. 1570-c. 1670, also known as Leonardo Norsino) engraved the woodblocks to print her designs. Durante, a native of Umbria, was chief physician to the pope and professor of materia medica at the university in Rome. After the Herbario nuovo was first published in 1585, it was so well received that it immediately went through several reprints.

Although the title of the work alludes to "figure che rappresentavano piante vive" [pictures representing live plants], Cattani Parasole's illustrations were in large part drawn—perhaps on the advice of Durante himself—from illustrations published in the most authoritative botanical treatises of the period, such as the many editions of I discorsi by Pietro Andrea Mattioli and De historia stirpium commentarii insignes (Basel, 1542) by Leonhard Fuchs. Despite Isabella's use of prototypes, however, her drawings, and the engravings into which they were translated, exhibit a noteworthy originality that is clearly discernible, even in the reduced dimensions of the illustrations accompanying Durante's text. While the artist took care to provide an exact, if somewhat abridged, portrayal of each plant, including its leaves, roots, flowers, and fruit, she also sought to add her own personal touches, departing from the traditional canons of botanical illustration and showing a considerable freedom of expression and style. In some of the drawings the plant is shown in a landscape illustrating its natural habitat, with perhaps the addition of a human figure or two. In others, the plant is depicted in a garden setting, for example,
growing in an ornamental pot such as those "tienesi... su Ie logge" (kept on loggias), in a charming allusion to the everyday details of gardening (figs. 1 and 2). 22

After the successful completion of this project, Cattani Parasole was invited to work with one of the most illustrious and demanding patrons in Rome, Prince Federico Cesi. Giovanni Baglione, a painter and writer on the arts, describes Cattani Parasole's "intagli nel Libro dell'erbe del Principe Cesi d'Acquasparta, letteratissimo signore" (engravings in the book of plants of Prince Cesi of Acquasparta, most learned gentleman), some of which would later be reproduced in Tesoro messicano (officially titled Rerum medicarum Novae Hisp. maniae thesaurus), the monumental work on the natural history of the "Nuove Indie" (New Indies) begun by Cesi and finished in 1653, many years after his death, by members of his scientific circle. Some of the engravings in Tesoro messicano were clearly adapted from the Herbario nuovo, although they have been shorn of the added details that made the illustrations to the original work by the Umbrian physician so captivating.

Anna Maria Vaiani

Little is known of Anna Maria Vaiani, a native of Florence like the Barberini pope and daughter of the painter and engraver Alessandro Vaiani, from whom she learned her art. 24 A portrait of her, executed in Rome by the French artist and engraver Claude Mellan (1598–1688), has been preserved. 25
who, describing her as a "fanciulla di grandissimo talento" (young lady of the greatest talent), did his best to introduce her into influential cultural circles in Rome.\(^\text{27}\)

Galileo, who dedicated one of his letters on Copernicus to Christine of Lorraine, grand duchess of Tuscany, appreciated the friendship of gifted women and the talent of women artists, as is demonstrated by his close ties with Artemisia Gentilechi.\(^\text{28}\)

Vaiani soon showed herself to be not only a skilled engraver, translating drawings of antiquities into elegant plates, but also a fine floral painter whose works became quite sought after.

Although the floral paintings that she executed for Cardinal Francesco have been lost, an impressive work by Vaiani's hand may be found in the treatise on gardening and horticulture published in Rome in 1633 by the Jesuit Giovanni Battista Ferrari (1584–1655). *De florum cultura* (1633) was one of the most prestigious books to be produced in seventeenth-century Rome, and many well-known artists collaborated on its illustration, including Pietro da Cortona, Andrea Sacchi, Giovanni Lanfranco, Guido Reni, Johann Friedrich Grotezer, and Claude Mellan. Vaiani herself designed and engraved a plate showing an elaborate bouquet of some of the rarest flowers—double anemones, a tulip, and other prized bulbous species—then being cultivated in the most famous gardens in Rome (fig. 4). Although this is the only signed engraving by the artist in *De florum cultura*, it is not unreasonable to hypothesize a closer and more prolific collaboration with Monsù Fiore, who prepared the botanical drawings that were reproduced in the treatise.\(^\text{29}\)

Other works allow us to appreciate the breadth of Vaiani's oeuvre. In the short period from 1632 to 1633, for example, she not only participated in the illustration of an exceptional work dedicated to the antiquities preserved in the Roman Galleria Giustiniana,\(^\text{30}\) she also painted the coats of arms in the *cappello segreto papale* in the Vatican and was an active member of the atelier of the eclectic connoisseur and collector Cassiano dal Pozzo (1588–1657).\(^\text{31}\) Anna Maria Vaiani probably also had ties with the Accademia di San Luca, the artists' academy of Rome, as her

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The engraving and the original drawing show the artist in elegant attire and wearing jewels, to all appearances a lady of rank, with a cartouche that identifies her as "pittrice et intagliatrice fiorentina" (fig. 3). Although her name is mentioned by various sources, however, the woman behind the portrait—as Elizabeth Cropper has observed—remains a tantalizingly elusive figure.\(^\text{35}\)

Vaiani is cited, for example, in admiring terms in several letters by Galileo Galilei,
name is cited in some of the institution’s later documents.

A few sources mention her possible (but brief) marriage to the well-known painter of battle scenes Jacques Courtois (1621-1676), and later a trip to England (on which she was duly accompanied by her mother). She was ostensibly invited to paint floral pictures for Altheia Talbot, Countess of Arundel (d. 1654), the wife of Thomas Howard, second Earl of Arundel, but the actual reason for Vaiani’s presence was apparently to add luster to the reputation of George Conn, the pope’s envoy to the Court of Saint James. Serving officially as artistic adviser to Charles I, Conn was at the same time seeking (unofficially) to convert him to Catholicism.28

Giovanna Garzoni

While the information we have regarding Isabella Cattani Parasole and Anna Maria Vaiana is disappointingly meager, much more is known about the life and career of Giovanna Garzoni, the miniaturista (miniaturist), as she was often referred to by contemporary sources. Indeed, her personality stands out distinctly against the panorama of the seventeenth-century art world.29 Garzoni was born in Ascoli, in the Marches, in 1600 to a family of goldsmiths and artisans originally from Venice. Boldly striking out on her own at an early age, she eventually established a brilliant career for herself in many of the capitals of Europe. In 1648 she would be cited by the seventeenth-century art historian Carlo Ridolfi in Le meraviglie dell’arte as demonstrating “a quale segno arrivi la perspicaccia donnesca” (to what great heights feminine perspicacity may reach), a most laudatory judgment indeed, especially since his contemporary, the historian Emanuele Tesauro, described this very quality of perspicaccia as enabling the possessor “penetrare le più minute e lontane circostanze di ogni soggetto” (to penetrate the most minute and subtle causes underlying every subject).30

Garzoni’s portraits and her copies of famous paintings, superbly executed in the miniaturist style, were greatly admired, but she was above all known for her luminous still-life paintings—beautiful floral compositions and luxuriant vessels of fruits and vegetables painted in an unmistakable style based on the application of minute dots and strokes of color using the finest brushes. She was showered with commissions from members of the court of Savoy in Turin and the Medici family in Florence, as well as numerous virtuosi in Naples, Venice, Florence, and Rome, who were ready to pay considerable sums to possess one of her works.

The artist arrived at her mastery of the principles of still life, however, only after a long period of training in botanical illustration during the early seventeenth century in Rome. Testifying to this is a series of botanical studies Garzoni executed at age sixteen and preserved in a remarkable miniaturized herbal at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C.31 As we learn from an unedited manuscript note by the eighteenth-century Tuscan naturalist Giovanni Targioni Tozzetti (1712-1783), in 1616 the pharmacist Enrico Corvino (Hendrik de Raeff, dates unknown) commissioned the young artist (who had just completed a fine painting of the Holy Family for a church in her native city) to paint an herbal for him. Corvino was born in Delft and moved to Rome, where he married the sister of the botanist Pietro Castelli. He owned the celebrated pharmacy “at the sign of the Imperial Eagle” on Mount Giordano, which became a meeting place for many of the naturalists who lived in Rome, including members of the Accademia dei Lincei. Like other pharmacists of the period, Corvino assembled a fine collection of naturalia and cultivated a large garden of medicinal plants. Corvino was also considered a capable botanical artist in his own right, and two of his children became miniature painters, Francesco specializing in insects and butterflies and Maddalena in religious subjects.

The Erbario miniaturo (which Targioni Tozzetti tells us was later acquired by Monsignor Leone Strozzi, as confirmed by the owner’s stamp on the frontispiece), had until recently been thought to be a fairly late work because of the inclusion of a presumed self-portrait showing the artist as a fully mature woman (fig. 5). This sheet was actually inserted at a later date, however, and is not by Giovanna Garzoni herself, but rather by an anonymous
Anonimous, Giovanna Garzoni, from Giovanna Garzoni, Enrico miniato, indated, pencil, ink, and watercolor
Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, D.C.

Giovanna Garzoni's portrait, pencil, ink, and watercolor
Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, D.C.

Mattioni’s translation, with commentary, of Dioscorides' *De materia medica*. Perhaps Corvino gave her a copy to use as a model, just as Castore Durante seems to have done with Isabella Cattani Parasole. The manuscript also contains many later paintings in which the artist provides ample demonstration of her ability to draw from life and, in the case of the illustration of *Labrea clandestina* (purple toothwort), of her close ties with Federico Cesi and his academy, the prince having made a special study of this parasitic plant. 

It may be presumed that the artist’s connection with the botanist and antiquarian Cassiano dal Pozzo also dates from this early period in Rome. Cassiano, who arrived in the papal city in 1612, became an enthusiastic advocate of Garzoni’s work, and his support helped her to obtain many prestigious commissions, as revealed by the letters of gratitude she sent him.

It is known that Giovanna Garzoni lived for some time in Venice, where in 1622 she entered into a brief marriage to the portrait artist Tiberio Tinelli. Perhaps because she had taken a vow of chastity when she was a young woman, her experience of matrimony was less than happy, but it may, in fact, have been her husband who convinced her to turn her exceptional talent as a miniaturist to the art of portraiture. Garzoni, perhaps realizing that she was wedded exclusively to her art, spent the next three decades of her life working for a series of enlightened patrons, moving from one Italian court to another, always accompanied by her devoted brother Mattio.

The artist’s name was by this time familiar to connoisseurs all over Italy and abroad. After a sojourn in Naples from 1626 to 1631, where she painted portraits and religious scenes for the Duke of Acquaviva, viceroy of Naples, Garzoni transferred to the Savoy court in Turin. She remained there until 1637, painting fruit, flowers, and animals on vellum for Christine of Lorraine and executing an extraordinary series of portraits for other members of the family.

Evidence has recently come to light confirming her trip to Paris in 1640, Garzoni received warm accolades and expressions of esteem from no less than the distinguished Italian artist and engraver Stefano della Bella.

Tongiorgi Tomasi
Giovanna Garzoni, Vase of Flowers, undated, gouache on vellum
Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe, Uffizi (621); color, photographer Scala/Art Resource, New York.

6. Giovanna Garzoni, Vase of Flowers, undated, gouache on vellum
Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe, Uffizi (621); color, photographer Scala/Art Resource, New York.

7. Jean Michel Picart, Vase of Flowers, undated, oil
Portland Art Museum, Oregon; museum purchase, funds provided by the Reserve Fund and the Mary Tachtich Bequest and Georgi Strobel Bequest.
of the family in still life, fit admirably with Garzoni’s chosen themes and refined style.

When Garzoni returned to her beloved Rome in 1651 she was a wealthy and celebrated artist. There she became closely associated with, although never an official member of, the Accademia di San Luca, to which she bequeathed many works, some of her papers, and her personal fortune upon her death in 1670. Today Garzoni’s name is associated with a large body of work consisting of elegant floral paintings and glowing “portraits” of fruits and vegetables. To her known oeuvre, most of which is preserved in Florence, may be added some previously unpublished works presented in the exhibition The Flowering of Florence (2002) and another still life [private collection] depicting a platter of asparagus, several carnations, and a lively green grasshopper (fig. 9). These are all further testimony to the pictorial and naturalistic sensibility, the fruit of an infinite femminil pazienza, of this exceptional artist.

Catherine Perrot, Painter and Teacher

Giovanna Garzoni may never have been allowed to become a full-fledged member of the Accademia di San Luca, but her slightly younger French colleague, Catherine Perrot, was officially received into the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture of Paris in 1682. She was one of the few women ever to obtain this honor. Unfortunately, little information about Perrot has come down to us, and no paintings can be attributed with certainty to her hand. We do know that she studied under the French painter Charles Le Brun (1619–1690) and that she learned to paint miniatures of naturalistic subjects from the great botanical artist Nicolas Robert. Returning to Paris after his trip to Rome, Robert was appointed premier peintre du roy en miniature, a prestigious but demanding position. His appointment required him not only to document the king’s botanical collections in the Jardins royaux, producing the superb vellins (paintings on vellum) in which he so excelled, but also to spend considerable time teaching his art to others.44
Catherine Perrot married Claude Horry, notary to the archbishop of Paris, and was assigned to teach the art of miniature painting to the younger members of the royal family, including Gabrielle de Savoie, the future wife of Philip V, king of Spain. Perrot was thus one of the first of her gender to become a teacher of naturalistic painting, an occupation that was destined to become a specialty for women artists. This unusual appointment also presaged the emergence, in the eighteenth century, of the predominantly female figure of the amateur painter.

Perrot was the author of two modest works intended for students of the art of flower painting that were published in Paris in 1686 and 1693. The first, Les Leçons royales, en la manière de peindre en naturete les fleurs et les oiseaux, was dedicated to "Madame la Dauphine" and explained, step by step, how to paint flowers and birds on vellum, imparting some of the "secret" techniques that had become an essential component of the tradition of naturalistic painting (fig. 10). This work gives us an idea of Perrot's teaching methods, which consisted primarily in having her students copy the works of the great master Nicolas Robert. "To paint flowers . . . ," she wrote, "and to succeed at it, you cannot find better examples than the prints of Nicolas Robert . . . the most excellent flower-painter who has ever lived, until now." She also furnished a list of the necessary pigments, together with their prices, and noted that these materials could be purchased at the shop "À la Cornemuse," run by the widow Foubert, in the parish of Saint Nicolas Deschamps.

Perrot borrowed thirty engravings from Robert's florilegium, Multiformes florum species, to serve as models and taught her students how to make careful copies of these as the first step to becoming true flower painters. They had to begin by tracing the outline of an engraving, either in silverpoint or by piercing a series of tiny holes with a needle onto a piece of high-quality vellum fixed to a wooden board. The colors, diluted with gum arabic, could then be applied within the outlines, taking care to employ only the most delicate tints where there were no shadows. For each engraving Perrot specified the exact pigments to be used and their gradations, following the example of the original by Robert.

9. Giovanna Garzoni, Plate of Asparagus with Cattarans and a Grasshopper, undated, gouache on vellum.
Les Leçons royales, which could be purchased at the printing house of François Poilly, was not, as the introduction explained, addressed exclusively to “personnes de qualité.” Rather, it was intended to serve as a do-it-yourself manual for anyone interested in learning the art of flower painting. The simple yet effective format invented by Catherine Perrot proved highly successful and would later be adopted by other authors of painting treatises.

Maria Sibylla Merian

One of the greatest painters in the history of scientific illustration was Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717) (fig. II), an artist whose life and work have formed the subject of numerous studies, some of them quite recent. Researchers have focused, in turn, on her unique contributions to the art of botanical painting, her impressive scientific achievements, and lately on an analysis of her career from the perspective of gender studies.

Merian was born into a family of artists, her father, Matthias Merian the Elder (1593–1650), was a well-known engraver from Basel who eventually settled in Frankfurt. His daughter’s natural talents were brought out by early training, so that she became proficient in drawing, painting, and embroidery, as well as in the use of various printmaking techniques—etching, engraving, drypoint, and autography (in which a dampened sheet of paper or vellum was pressed onto a freshly prepared plate and both were passed through a press). After the death of her father, Maria Sibylla learned the art of flower painting from her stepfather, the still-life painter and art dealer Jacob Marrel (1614–1681). She also studied under two artists from Marrel’s atelier, Abraham Mignon, a painter specializing in still lifes with insects, and the German Johann Andreas Graff (1637–1701), whom she married in 1665.46

Even as a child, Merian had always been fascinated by insects and their various metamorphoses; it is known that she collected silkworms and fed them leaves, carefully observing and recording their subsequent transformations.47 After her marriage she continued her studies, depicting the life cycles of the moths and butterflies to be...
found around her new home in Nuremberg. Although entomology was her main interest, plants and flowers also figured prominently in her art, for she usually portrayed her insects together with a branch of the plant on which they fed. In addition to her highly original insect studies, she also produced more traditional works in the genre of botanical painting, such as a volume of floral motifs for embroiderers, *Neues Blumenbuch* (1680), and a magnificent florilegium in three volumes for the nobleman Vincent Moller, a prominent figure in the political, economic, social, and religious affairs of the city of Hamburg.

Merian’s first important work, *Der rupsen begin*, *voedzel en wonderbare verander*—ing, published originally in German as *Der Raupen wunderbare Verwandlung und sonderbare Blumenahrung*, was devoted to caterpillars and their transformation into butterflies. It was originally divided into three volumes, the first appearing in 1679 and the second in 1683, both published by her husband. The fifty plates in each volume were accompanied by a text prepared by the artist and based on her own observations. The third volume was published posthumously in Amsterdam, together with a Dutch translation of the first two volumes, under the supervision of the artist’s elder daughter and close collaborator, Dorothea Maria Henrietta. In keeping with the time-honored tradition of the family atelier, the artist generally signed her works with her maiden name, Maria Sibylla Merian, but on the title page of the second volume of *Der rupsen begin* appear the words “Maria Sibylla Graffin Sculptor.”

In this work we find early evidence of a rare characteristic of the artist, one that has not received much attention from scholars. Most of her illustrations were accompanied by descriptions that reveal not only the faculty for observation of the born scientist, but also a genuine literary talent. She conceived her studies as an enthralling experience of discovery of the marvels of creation, and her words contain an irrepressible note of wonder and joy, sometimes verging on the lyrical tones of poetry, in their descriptions of even the most humble plants and insects, couched in a style which could have not been more different from the works of her male colleagues.

For example, the description that accompanies Maria Sibylla’s drawing of the moth *Petiphanes delphinii* not only reflects the passionate interest and boundless patience which she brought to her studies; word and image work together to provide the most precise idea possible of the phenomenon under investigation (Fig. 13). She writes:

I have often seen hovering over the light blue flowers of the *Consolida regalis* the enchanting little moth that I depict here: so well known is it for its beauty and unusual coloring that I found myself wondering more than once from what caterpillar it might spring. I therefore pursued my research until I found the caterpillars I was looking for on the flowers of this very plant, to which they cause great damage since they not only like to feed upon them, but often devour the leaves and flowers with such voracity that they leave the stem completely bare.

The text continues with an account of the magnificent colors which the insect assumes in its various mutations, and concludes:

I have portrayed one of these small moths in the center of the picture, posed on two green
leaves, the more to delight the eye of the nature lover; the more attentive and acute that eye is, and to lend lustre to this tiny work of art of indefatigable Nature.49

On the subject of the humble plantain, the artist observes:

I have often found these endearingly pretty green caterpillars on the greater plantain and, ascertaining that this weed is so much to their taste that they will eat it with the greatest voracity, I was extremely glad to be able to include in my forthcoming treatise this salutary little plant with its changeable colors, which many thoughtlessly tread upon as they walk through meadows or along roads: whereas an artist might perhaps make good use of it because of its unusual and lovely form, arranging it in the foreground of a landscape or similar painting.50

In 1685, at the age of thirty-eight, Merian was persuaded by her beloved half-brother Caspar to abandon husband and home and, together with her two daughters and her mother, to join the Labadists, a pious sect founded by Jean de Labadie (1610–1674). This ex Jesuit priest called for a return to the virtues of the early church and to this end established a religious community at the isolated castle of Waltha, near Leeuwarden, in Frisia. Taking advantage of the sect’s belief in absolute equality between the sexes, the artist devoted all her time to scientific study. At Waltha, she discovered a unique collection of insects from Surinam that had been acquired by a member of the Sommelsdijk family, proprietors of the castle. The color, form, and dimensions of these tropical insects, so different from the European species with which she was familiar, must have been a revelation to her.

Merian left the Labadist community in 1691 and moved to Amsterdam, where she earned her living by painting floral still lifes for wealthy art collectors. There she also began working on the third volume of Der rupsen begin, her treatise on caterpillars and butterflies. At the same time she had the opportunity to associate with such intellectuals as Nicolaas Witsen, the enlightened burgomaster of Amsterdam, who was a member of the Dutch East India Company and owned a magnificent insect collection. She also met two illustrious scientists, the anatomist Frederik Ruysch and the botanist Caspar Commelijn, director of the city’s botanical garden.

In 1699, when she was fifty-two years of age, with the encouragement and financial assistance of these friends, Merian was able to realize her dream of setting off for Surinam to study in situ the insects that she had hitherto seen only as inanimate specimens. From this extraordinary two-year expedition, which she undertook with her daughter Dorothea Maria Henrietta but “without a man’s protection,”2 Merian produced Dissertatio de generatione et metamorphosis insectorum Surinamensium, the crowning achievement of a life dedicated to art and
to intellectual and spiritual inquiry. Both mother and daughter suffered great hardships during their stay in the South American colony. As the artist wrote in 1702 upon her return to Amsterdam, “In that country there reigns a torrid heat, and every task becomes an enormous effort; I myself risked paying with my very life and for this reason could not prolong my stay.” Indeed, she had contracted malarial fever, and thus in September 1701 she and her daughter set sail for home.

Merian spent the rest of her life completing the record of the entomological observations that she had made in Surinam, editing the scientific data with the help of the botanist Commelijn and arranging and retouching the paintings which she had executed on site. The extraordinarily refined technique of these works, which today can be seen in the British Museum, the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle, and the Russian Academy of Sciences in Saint Petersburg (fig. 13), reflects the artist’s early training as an engraver. Beneath the tempera colors one can trace the marks of her original pencil drawing, with strokes that are reminiscent of the fine lines incised by the engraver’s tool. In fact, these pencil marks must have been of invaluable help to the artists charged with the task of transferring her drawings to metal plates. Merian herself engraved perhaps twenty of the plates for the book she was preparing, while the remaining forty plates were executed by Joseph Mulder (1659/1660—after 1718) and Jan Pieter Snytter (1675—1713). The artist insisted, however, that only she and her daughter, who had studied the insects from life, should be entrusted with the final task of coloring the illustrations in the printed copies of the book.

The first edition of Dissertatio de generatione et metamorphosis insectorum Surinamensium was published in Latin and Dutch in 1705, with sixty plates. The second edition, which appeared in 1719, two years after the artist’s death, contained an additional twelve plates, some of which were engraved by the hand of her younger daughter, Johanna Helena. The sheer magnificence of its engravings and its unusual subject matter make the Dissertatio one of the most important scientific books ever to be produced in Europe, a true masterpiece of the printer’s art.

The work opens with a frontispiece showing the artist examining specimens presented to her by six putti, while behind her a spacious arch frames a tropical landscape (fig. 14). The foreword is full of factual information and personal reflections, the author describing in detail her “longinquum et sumptuosum” (venturesome and costly) voyage, her working methods, and the help that she received from the natives of Surinam. She explains that each insect
has been carefully studied in the various phases of its life cycle—often with the aid of a microscope—and is depicted life-sized together with the plant, flower, or fruit that made up its usual diet. Each entry begins with such botanical data, thus furnishing additional information on how the artist composed her pictures. As we have already seen in *Der rupsen begin*, here the artist's images are reinforced by her words. A description of the pineapple (fig. 151), which opens the *Dissertatio*, is characteristic and illustrates the artist's approach to her subject matter:

The pineapple being the most important fruit [in the Americas] among those which are edible, it is only fair that it occupy first place in this work, just as it has in my research. On the page I have painted it at the moment of its flowering. The tiny colored leaves that lie just beneath the fruit are like satin spotted with yellow. The lateral shoots continue to grow, when the mature fruit is gathered, the longer leaves are sea green on the outside and grass green on their inner sides, while the borders are slightly reddish and armed with sharp spines. Of all the insects in America, the best known are the cockroaches, primarily because of the heavy damage that they cause to the plants they feed upon. They have a special predilection for the pineapple, because they are attracted to all that is sweet. They deposit their eggs very close to one another, with a protective covering that is round in form to defend them from the numerous spiders. On the other part of the fruit is a different species of cockroach, which carries its eggs in a brown abdominal sac. If the creature is attacked it immediately drops the covering, from which the little ones can emerge. This defensive action allows them to escape more easily.52

Merian's sensitivity to the most minute aspects of the natural world and her rich visual vocabulary, the fruit of a lifetime of study and practice, are reflected in every detail of the *Dissertatio*. Unlike the authors of other botanical and entomological treatises of the period, our artist-naturalist provides a perspective that has been defined as "ecological"53 rather than systematic, for she always studied her animals in their natural setting rather than in the sterile environment of the laboratory. Moreover, although she made ample use of the microscope to examine the external details and form of her insects, Merian never dissected them in order to analyze their anatomy as her colleagues generally did, from Francesco Redi and Marcello Malpighi to Jan Swammerdam, a Dutch naturalist whose work was well known to Merian and whom she cites in her preface. As the nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet observed, the artist's unique approach amounted to a veritable "theology of the insect." In his work *L'Insecte*, published in 1858 in Paris, Michelet discusses the complex and sometimes contradictory aspects of Merian's personality, while on the one hand he admits her "noble vigor, strong simplicity, and virile seriousness," he concludes by seeing in her work "the hand of a woman, conscientious and tender, that has reached out to touch [her subjects] with the most loving respect."54

Merian's vision of Surinam was far from that of an idyllic tropical paradise, and in many of her paintings she shows next to the insect its natural predator. As the French physiologist and chemist Louis Figuier [1819–1894] wrote: "Every one of her paintings depicts a drama in miniature. Next to the frightened and suspicious insect one can see

![Image](image-url)
an avid lizard waiting patiently, or a ferocious spider weaving its sinister snare. Nor do the implacable laws of nature spare the splendid tropical flowers, often depicted by the artist as falling prey to ravenous insects.

Among all the countries of Europe, Holland was perhaps the only one where the career of such an exceptional figure as Maria Sibylla Merian could have been possible. During the late seventeenth century, there was a passionate interest in the exotic plants and other natural history specimens that were arriving, many of them through the Dutch East India Company. In addition, an exemplary rigor was exercised in the approach to scientific research established by the great universities, such as that of Leiden, and by the botanical gardens of Leiden and Amsterdam. For example, an extensive and systematic effort to introduce exotic plants to meet the demands of the public botanical gardens and the private gardens of wealthy collectors was begun around 1665 and reached its apex around 1682.

One notable figure among many in this stimulating ambience was Agnes Block (1629–1704), known as the Lady of Flines, a noblewoman with an interest in the natural sciences who won the admiration of botanists in Holland and abroad, including Lelio Trionfetti of Bologna (1656–c. 1708), with whom she conducted an interesting correspondence. In 1687, on the estate of Vijverhov, near Loenen, along the Vecht River, her gardeners succeeded in cultivating a pineapple to fruition. Agnes had this exceptional plant depicted, along with many other exotic specimens from her garden, by botanical artists then active in Amsterdam, including Jan Moninckx and his sister Maria; Alida Withous, the daughter of Matthias Graf and the sister of Jan and Johanna Helena Graf; and Dorothée Maria Henrietta, the daughter of Maria Sibylla Merian.

Behind the Convent Walls: Artist-Nuns and Botanical Painting

During this period, many members of religious orders, both male and female, found an outlet for their energy and talents in the arts. Embroidery and miniature painting constituted regular activities in the convent, and Tuscany, especially Florence, could boast a long tradition of nuns who were also artists, the most celebrated being Sister Plautilla Nelli (1533–1588). A student of Fra Paolino and a follower of Fra Bartolomeo, Sister Plautilla entered the Florentine convent of Santa Caterina da Siena, which was renowned for its highly productive atelier specializing in religious paintings. The names of other artists active there between the end of the sixteenth century and the middle of the eighteenth century—such as Sister Prudence Cambi, Sister Felicia Lumicini, and Sister Maria Angelica Razzi—have come down to us, although their lives and their oeuvre still remain to be reconstructed.

Even less is known about the nuns who devoted themselves to naturalistic illustration, although the close ties between this genre and the art of embroidery, with its bird and flower motifs, allow us to hypothesize that within the cloister many of the artistically inclined must have been attracted to the painting of subjects of this kind.

Teresa Berenice Vitelli, or Sister Veronica (act. 1706–1739), was one such figure. Probably born sometime during the last decades of the seventeenth century, she took her vows as a nun of the Benedictine order and joined the convent of Sant’Apollonia in Florence. It is known that her work was admired by Violante of Bavaria, wife of Grand Duke Ferdinando de’ Medici, for whom she executed copies in pastels of works by Rembrandt van Rijn, Francesco Trevisani, and Livio Mehus, a Flemish painter who died in Florence in 1691. She is also mentioned as one of the participants in an exhibition organized by the Accademia dell’Arte del Disegno and held in the cloister of the church of the Santissima Annunziata.

The first known painting by Sister Veronica is a lively composition of birds and lizards on vellum, signed and dated 1706, to which other works on similar subjects have recently been added. Her realistically portrayed birds and other animals are arranged in charming little scenes against domestic backgrounds. Sister Veronica was clearly familiar with the oeuvre of Giovanna Garzoni, however, for an elegant painting in gouache on vellum of two tulips, a rose, and a delphinium, bound together with a flowing blue ribbon, contains distinct echoes of the latter’s style. This particular work allows us
to ascribe to Sister Veronica other unattributed paintings on floral subjects contained in the fourth volume of *Ornithologiae vivis coloribus expressae*, a miscellaneous collection of paintings assembled by the Vallombrosan monk Bruno Tozzi (1656–1743) from the end of the seventeenth century into the first decades of the eighteenth. Tozzi was a naturalist and botanical artist working at the abbey of Vallombrosa, near Florence, a center for botanical studies that was renowned beyond the Alps and as far as away England.  

The fourth volume of *Ornithologiae* contains gouache and watercolor paintings by various hands on a variety of subjects. Some of the paintings at the beginning of the manuscript, in particular several small bouquets bound with fluttering ribbons, vases of flowers, and paintings of single blossoms, can in my opinion be attributed to Sister Veronica because of their stylistic affinities with the works mentioned above (fig. 16). It should also be noted that since the convent of Sant’Apollonia and the abbey of Vallombrosa belonged to the same religious order, there must certainly have been close ties and regular exchanges between them.

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### The Eighteenth Century: Women Artists and Students of Flower Painting

During the eighteenth century, as the popularity of naturalistic illustration spread beyond the ruling classes, men of science, and virtuosi to an emerging class of wealthy bourgeois, the genre began to assume new dimensions and greater complexity. As the number of women artists in Europe multiplied, they also began to turn their hands to subjects traditionally reserved for men, although the still life would always retain an important place in their oeuvre.

Among the artists who gained particular recognition in this genre was Rachel Ruysch, daughter of the anatomist Frederik Ruysch and the most talented student of Maria Sibylla Merian, whose trip to Surinam was partly organized and financed by Rachel’s father. Rachel Ruysch was best known for her large paintings of floral bouquets, marked by brilliant plastic and chromatic effects. She did not forget her early training, however, and—in the rigorous tradition of scientific illustration—focused with microscopic precision on the individual elements in her compositions.

Because the eighteenth century was also the age of *femmes savantes*, the important role that women played in the study of the exact and natural sciences has already been thoroughly examined. What has received considerably less attention is an analogous phenomenon in the arts: women skilled in botanical and zoological illustration began to play a dominant role in the family atelier. The unique contributions of a few such artists deserve brief examination here.

**Barbara Regina Dietzsch**

A German painter of botanical and zoological subjects, Barbara Regina Dietzsch (1706–1783) provides a typical example of the emancipated woman who enjoyed complete autonomy in the practice of her art. She was the eldest of nine children, born into a family that counted many painters, engravers, and musicians among its members, her father was the well-known landscape painter Johann Israel Dietzsch (1681–1754). Barbara Regina grew up in Nuremberg, a city with an illustrious artistic and scientific tradition.

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17. Barbara Regina Dietzsch (Sister Veronica). A German painter of botanical and zoological subjects, Barbara Regina Dietzsch (1706–1783) provides a typical example of the emancipated woman who enjoyed complete autonomy in the practice of her art. She was the eldest of nine children, born into a family that counted many painters, engravers, and musicians among its members, her father was the well-known landscape painter Johann Israel Dietzsch (1681–1754). Barbara Regina grew up in Nuremberg, a city with an illustrious artistic and scientific tradition.
during the same period in which the eminent botanist and physician Christoph Jacob Trew (1694-1769) wrote many of his lavishly illustrated encyclopedic treatises.

Barbara Regina Dietzsch specialized in painting flowers, birds, and insects, while her sister Margaretha Barbara concentrated primarily on botanical subjects and provided some of the illustrations for Trew's works. Their brother Johann Christoph Dietzsch (1710-1769) chose instead to continue the tradition of landscape painting established by their father, but few works on scientific subjects by his hand have come down to us. Although Barbara Regina was undoubtedly the most gifted of the three siblings, it is not always easy to determine the exact authorship of the botanical and floral compositions in gouache on vellum that came out of the highly productive Dietzsch workshop, compositions that were often enlivened by the addition of insects, lizards, and other small animals, posed against velvety dark backgrounds (fig. 17).60

Elizabeth Blackwell

Elizabeth Blackwell (1700-1758) was not an artist by profession and a somewhat involved personal story lies behind the creation of her work, *A Curious Herbal, Containing Five Hundred Cuts of the Most Useful Plants* (London, 1737-1739). Elizabeth's husband, Alexander Blackwell, was a wealthy Scottish intellectual and self-educated physician who, when his credentials were challenged, was forced to give up his medical practice in Aberdeen. The couple then moved to London, where he set up a successful printing house. He again ignored professional licensing requirements, however, and his violation of trade regulations resulted in a series of heavy fines. He was forced to close his shop and, being unable to pay his mounting debts, he was eventually arrested and sent to debtor's prison.61

Elizabeth began casting about for a means to restore the family's fortunes, and when she learned from Sir Hans Sloane, president of the Royal Society, that English physicians and botanists lacked an up-to-date illustrated herbal of medicinal plants, she decided to remedy this lacuna. Renting a house close to the Chelsea Physic Garden (the only botanical garden in London at the time), she began in 1715 to make botanical drawings of the garden's collection of medicinal herbs. Her husband, still in prison, wrote the text describing their uses and properties, basing his work in large part on the *Botanicum officinale* published by Joseph Miller in 1732.

*A Curious Herbal*, featuring illustrations of five hundred flowering plants engraved and hand-colored by the artist herself, was published in several parts from 1737 to 1739 and then reissued in two volumes by the Loudon publisher Samuel Harding (fig. 18). The work came to the attention of the naturalist Dr. Christoph Jacob Trew, who undertook the publication of a new edition of the work, with the text translated into Latin and German and the plates re-engraved by N. F. Eisenberger (who added another hundred illustrations of his own). This expanded version of the herbal, with various supplements, appeared as *Herbarium Blackwellianum* in Nuremberg over the period 1750-1773.

The simplicity of the drawings in *A Curious Herbal* betrays the fact that Elizabeth Blackwell was not a professional botanical artist, but they are nonetheless commendably accurate (each plant being drawn in careful outline, colored, and neatly arranged on the page, together with details of its flower and seeds) and possess an undeniable charm of their own. *A Curious Herbal* enjoyed a modest success, and Elizabeth was able to obtain her husband's release from prison and regulate his affairs so that he could once again take up his practice.

The story of the Blackwells and their herbal underscores the fact that in the middle of the eighteenth century there was a growing demand for botanical illustrations. With resourcefulness and determination, the wife of the eccentric physician was able to take advantage of this opportunity.62

**A Genteel Pastime**

While Elizabeth Blackwell took up her brush in the face of economic necessity—choosing the genre of botanical illustration because it was popular and marketable and using her native talent to the best of her ability—many other women began painting flowers simply
because social convention deemed it to be a suitable pastime for them. Thus, as had occurred in France in the time of Catherine Petrot a century earlier, a vogue for naturalistic painting sprang up among young ladies in eighteenth-century England. Although it was conceded that members of the fair sex were particularly sensitive to the beauties of nature, it was also believed that their natural propensity needed to be carefully directed and trained. The popularity of the flowers-painting genre was therefore reflected in the large number of female pupils who clamored to study under the most celebrated botanical painters of the day.

One of these was Georg Dionysius Ehret (1710–1770), who had settled in England after collaborating with the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778) on some of his groundbreaking studies. Ehret was in such great demand as a teacher that for many years he directed an informal and remarkably successful school of botanical painting for well-born young ladies, in which he sought to teach botanical painting in accordance with the highest standards of the art. Furthermore, he codified the rules of botanical illustration, which gave the genre a solid professional dimension based on technical training and a careful grounding in the natural sciences. Ehret taught his students not only how to paint flowers in accordance with the strict rules of scientific illustration, but also how to conserve their works; he even emphasized the importance of recording on each sheet the scientific names of the species portrayed using the system of Linnaeus. In his memoirs, the artist enumerated with pride the names of the many ladies of aristocratic birth who frequented his classes, including Catherine, Duchess of Norfolk, and Mary, Duchess of Leeds. Some of his students, such as Lady Frances Howard and Lady Ann Hamilton, later gained a modest fame of their own as botanical artists, although they rarely surpassed the level of a conscientious reinterpretation of the master's style.

The panorama described here, embracing such different personalities, all passionately engaged in the art of naturalistic illustration, gives an idea not only of the richness and complexity of this art form, but also of a uniquely feminine approach to the natural world and scientific phenomena. In this perspective, the feminina pazienza that was otherwise considered a lesser gift traditionally attributed to women artists acquired extraordinary potential. Maria Sibylla Merian was fully aware of this fact when she wrote in June of 1704 to the physician Johann Georg Voelcker of Nuremberg: "patience is a very beneficial little herb."