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Vision and Insight: Portraits of the Aged Woman Artist, 1600–1800

Julia K. Dabbs

AT THE AGE OF SEVENTY-FIVE, the noted American portraitist Alice Neel (1900–1984) turned the mirror on herself and remarkably began painting her first self-portrait (completed 1980; National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC; fig. 1).¹ In this image Neel represents what possibly no female artist previously had done: a self-portrait as a completely nude older woman.² She does not hide the visible signs of aging, preferring to reveal herself with characteristic honesty and vulnerability. Yet also pride: Neel has positioned herself rather regally on an upholstered chair,

Julia Dabbs is Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Minnesota, Morris. Her research has focused on the translation and analysis of art historical documents of the early-modern period of Europe (i.e., 1500–1800). This interest began with a dissertation on the art and theory of the seventeenth-century French sculptor Michel Anguier, about whom she has published in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* (2002). Since then her attention has turned to life stories of European and American women artists, leading to articles published in *Aurora* (2005) and *Eighteenth-Century Women* (2008). Dabbs is also the author of *Life Stories of Women Artists, 1550–1800: An Anthology* (2009), which includes translations and analyses of key biographical documents for forty-six early-modern women artists. Inspired by the University of Toronto conference “Aging, Old Age, Memory, Aesthetics,” held on March 25–27, 2011, she is currently working on a book tentatively titled *Sibyls of Sight: Old Age and the Woman Artist in the Early Modern Period*.

*This is an extensively revised version of a paper given at the “Aging, Old Age, Memory, Aesthetics” conference, held at the University of Toronto, March 25–27, 2011.

¹ Neel is said to have begun the painting in 1975 but then abandoned it; after she was encouraged to submit a painting to an exhibition of self-portraits in a New York gallery, Neel returned to the work and completed it in 1980. See Jeremy Lewison et al., *Alice Neel: Painted Truths* (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2010), 252 (and see 55–56 for more background on the Neel self-portrait).

² Ann Temkin, *Alice Neel* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), 13. As Lewison notes (Lewison et al., *Alice Neel*, 62n85), other twentieth-century artists had preceded Neel in a self-display of nudity; however, the examples of Suzanne Valadon and Edvard Munch that he mentions are not full-length but partial nudes.



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the vertical stripes of which accentuate her rolls of flesh. She holds a paintbrush as if it were a scepter and, in the other hand, grasps a rag, an artistic attribute that may suggest, since there is no easel in sight, that Neel, even at the age of seventy-five, is still a work in progress. Looking directly out at the viewer, Neel's steely gaze rivets us, fully confident of who she is, despite, or perhaps because of, her imperfect body. Accentuating her penetrating eyes, as well as the fact that she is stark naked, is the only accessory embellishing Neel's body: a pair of eyeglasses. Does their presence simply reiterate that Neel is an older woman whose physical being is no longer in its prime?³ Or do they attest to a heightened visual acuity that comes from years of painting psychologically probing portraits? Although boldly unconventional in the display of her naked body, Neel was by no means the first woman artist to portray herself in old age, nor the first to call attention to the simultaneous weakness and magnification of vision. This essay will examine some precedents for this particular theme, one that is so essential to the artist's identity in any time period, through the portraits and self-portraits of three early-modern⁴ women artists, namely Sofonisba Anguissola, Rosalba Carriera, and Anna Dorothea Lisiewska-Therbusch. All three women were internationally renowned painters who continued to create in their advanced years, and who faced the humbling circumstances of aging and vision loss by focusing on what remained: an artistic intelligence and inner vision that are projected through their portraits and life stories.



Fig. 1 Alice Neel, *Self-portrait*, 1980. (National Portrait Gallery, © Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.)

³ Neel's eyeglasses indeed were a marker of old age, for based on published photographs of the artist she is shown wearing them only from the 1970s onward (see the numerous images in the artist's chronology in Lewison et al., *Alice Neel*, 258–75). According to Lewison (ibid., 62n85), Neel suffered from cataracts in her later years.

⁴ For the purposes of this paper, "early modern" is used in the now current historical sense of the period between 1500 and 1800 in western Europe.

Before delving deeper into this topic, I would like to offer a quick aside concerning the state of research regarding women artists and old age. In the course of my research, I have been struck by how very little has been published in this area, even though there has been no shortage of scholarship in recent decades on early-modern women artists, as well as on their self-portraits. For example, a 1995 exhibition catalog on Sofonisba Anguissola includes no images of the artist as an older woman, even though (as will be shown) she was the subject of some striking, albeit not ideally beautiful, portraits in her elder years.⁵ Is this due to the pervasive gerontophobia of modern society, leading us to prefer images of fresh-faced, attractive young women? As Erin Campbell has suggested, “The focus on youthful beauty in studies of female portraiture has contributed to the neglect of portraits that fall outside of this discourse, or that challenge it.”⁶

As one might expect, somewhat more research has been done on the subject of male artists and old age, with a particularly noteworthy contribution being Philip Sohm’s *The Artist Grows Old: The Aging of Art and Artists in Italy, 1500–1800* (published by Yale University Press in 2007).⁷ I would contend, however, that it is even more extraordinary and fascinating to consider why women artists would portray themselves, or be portrayed, as older females given the predilection of writers in the early-modern period to equate a gifted woman artist with youth and beauty rather than with age and wisdom.⁸ What follows, then, is a prolegomenon to a topic that I intend to pursue in a future book-length study.

One of the first women artists to achieve international fame and recognition, and thus be the subject of portrayals in her elder years, was Sofonisba Anguissola (ca. 1532–1625). After gaining the attention of the Spanish court with her verisimilar portraiture, Anguissola left her native Cremona to become court portraitist to King Phillip II and Isabel of Spain in 1559. She was richly rewarded during her fourteen years at the Spanish court, but upon her marriage to a Sicilian nobleman in 1573, Anguissola returned to Italy, where she continued her career as a portrait painter. Upon the death of her husband in 1577 and subsequent marriage in 1579 to a ship captain, Orazio Lomellini, Anguissola settled in Genoa, and then, ca. 1615, she moved with her husband to Palermo, where she spent the last years of her life.⁹

⁵ Sylvia Ferino-Pagden and Maria Kusch, eds., *Sofonisba Anguissola: A Renaissance Woman* (Washington, DC: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1995).

⁶ Erin J. Campbell, “Prophets, Saints, and Matriarchs: Portraits of Old Women in Early Modern Italy,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 809. See also her essay “Unenduring Beauty: Gender and Old Age in Early Modern Art and Aesthetics,” in *Growing Old in Early Modern Europe: Cultural Representations*, ed. Erin J. Campbell (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 153–67.

⁷ See also Kenneth Clark, *The Artist Grows Old: The Rede Lecture, 1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); and Thomas Dormandy, *Old Masters: Great Artists in Old Age* (London: Hambledon and London, 2000). Dormandy’s book only briefly mentions two women artists, Rosalba Carriera and Kathe Kollwitz. Philip Sohm’s *The Artist Grows Old: The Aging of Art and Artists in Italy, 1500–1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007) is similarly focused on male artists. As Shearer West has noted, there has in general been minimal scholarly attention given to the subject of old age and portraiture; see her *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 232.

⁸ Early-modern biographers invariably incorporate the topos of beauty in association with young female artists; see, e.g., Giorgio Vasari’s description of the Renaissance sculptor Properzia de’ Rossi, or Giulio Mancini referencing a comment by an admirer of Lavinia Fontana: “he was not surprised that she painted so well and so beautifully the things of this world, because she painted herself, who was so extremely beautiful.” Both references can be found in Julia Dabbs, *Life Stories of Women Artists, 1550–1800: An Anthology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 56, 83.

⁹ Key sources on Anguissola include (in addition to the 1995 exhibition catalog cited in n. 5) Ilya Perlingieri, *Sofonisba Anguissola: The First Great Woman Artist of the Renaissance* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992); and *Sofonisba Anguissola e le sue sorelle* (n.p.: Leonardo Arte, 1994).

It was in Palermo that Anguissola, the now elder stateswoman of painting, received one of the most talented young portraitists of the day, the Flemish painter Anthony van Dyck, who had come there on a portrait commission from Emmanuele Filiberto, prince of Savoy, in 1624. Now in her nineties, Anguissola's eyesight had seriously declined, with one of her seventeenth-century biographers, Raffaele Soprani, stating that she had "totally lost her sight." Nevertheless, her passion for art remained undimmed, and as Soprani recounts she "at least enjoyed conversing with painters, always discussing the difficulty that they were encountering in art, and offering them very rare and useful documents."¹⁰ Van Dyck visually and verbally recorded one of these extraordinary sessions with Anguissola in his *Italian Sketchbook* (British Museum; fig. 2), the text of which has been translated as follows:

Portrait of Signora Sophonisba, done from the life in Palermo in the year 1624, on 12 July, at ninety-six she still has all her memory and is very quick-witted. She is most courteous, and even though she has lost her sight due to old age, still she relishes having pictures held up before her, and with great effort, putting her nose right up to the painting, she manages to make something out, and still takes great pleasure in that. While I was making her portrait she alerted me to various things: not to hold the light too high, so the shadows aren't too deep in the lines of an old person's face, for instance; and she told me many good things about her life, too. It was clear that she was a born painter and a wonderful one, and it pains her greatly not to be able to paint any more because of her vision. Her hand was steady, without the slightest tremor.¹¹

¹⁰ Soprani quoted in Dabbs, *Life Stories of Women Artists*, 117.

¹¹ This translation is mainly taken from Susan Barnes et al., *Van Dyck: A Complete Catalogue of the Paintings* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 2–3, with the exception of the first sentence, which Barnes omits but which is found in the translation of the passage by Christopher Brown in his *Van Dyck* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 82, 84. Barnes also provides the corresponding Italian text (*Van Dyck*, 3).



Fig. 2 Anthony van Dyck, page from his Italian Sketchbook (folio 110), 1624. (Dept. of Prints and Drawings, British Museum, London, © Trustees of the British Museum.)

From this passage it is evident that Anguissola had not gone entirely blind by this point, yet had lost sufficient vision to make seeing difficult and painting impossible, with the artist poignantly admitting the emotional toll of this disability. Van Dyck is careful to indicate, however, that her motor control was still intact, which suggests that if it were not for the vision loss, Anguissola might still be painting. He also makes it abundantly clear that the aged woman artist from whom he was seeking advice was still mentally lucid and even “quick-witted,” which must have amazed and inspired all those who had contact with the nonagenarian.

Anguissola’s mental alertness is also wonderfully captured in this passage by her determination to still control her portrait image, directing Van Dyck to soften the lighting so as to not accentuate her wrinkled visage. Anguissola knew well that a portrait could convey a certain immortality on the sitter, and thus even in old age physical appearance was still a primary concern for the female subject. As Perlingieri has noted, Van Dyck indeed took Anguissola’s advice to heart in his portraits of the artist (figs. 3 and 4).¹² The painting now in the Sackville Collection (Knole, Kent; fig. 3) is the most similar to Van Dyck’s sketch and shows a somber woman whose skin is gently rendered and whose eyes, though clearly aged, still brightly shine.¹³ The second portrait (Galleria Sabauda, Turin; fig. 4) almost appears to be a different sitter, especially if painted at approximately the same time: the elderly woman is now shown in a much weaker state as she lies supine on a bed, with a paler face and more sunken cheeks. Her reddened and

¹² Perlingieri, *Sofonisba Anguissola*, 205.

¹³ This portrait was not discovered until 1988 and is said to be in “poor condition” (*ibid.*). See further Oliver Millar, “Notes on Three Pictures by Van Dyck,” *Burlington Magazine* 111 (July 1969): 416–17; and Barnes et al., *Van Dyck*, 171.

narrowed eyes painfully testify to an eye disorder.¹⁴ Although there is greater vulnerability manifested in the Turin portrait, Van Dyck nevertheless renders his mentor with a touching sympathy and esteem, for Anguissola seems entirely at peace, evidenced especially by her slender hands, which are gracefully folded over her chest and draped with a rosary. In this alternate image Van Dyck pays final homage to the great artist, showing her in a seemingly transitional state between life and afterlife. It is a hauntingly prescient image, for Sofonisba Anguissola would pass away the following year.¹⁵



Fig. 3 Anthony van Dyck, *Portrait of Sofonisba Anguissola*, 1624. (The Sackville Collection [National Trust], Knole, Kent. © National Trust/Jane Mucklow. Reprinted with permission.)

¹⁴ On this portrait, in addition to Perlingieri, *Sofonisba Anguissola*, see Giorgio Nicodemi, "Commemorazione di artisti minori: Sofonisba Anguissola," *Emporium*, 1927, 232–33. It should also be noted that this portrait is not included in the catalog of Van Dyck's works in Barnes et al., *Van Dyck*.

¹⁵ Anguissola was buried on November 16, 1625, in Palermo.



Fig. 4 Anthony van Dyck, *Portrait of Sofonisba Anguissola*, 1624.
(Galleria Sabauda, Turin.)

Just as striking as the portraits of the aged Anguissola, though, is the recognition she is given by both Van Dyck and Soprani for her knowledge of artistic practice and theory. Women were forbidden from entering art academies in this period due to their supposed intellectual inferiority, and so Anguissola, like other young women, could study only with private instructors or relatives. Yet the wisdom that comes from years of experience has been a consistently recognized virtue of older people, and in that context it was perhaps more conceivable to acknowledge the female artist's intelligence. Soprani even indicates that "van Dyck used to say that he considered himself very indebted to have conversed with Sofonisba, and confessed to having received much greater instruction from the words of a blind woman, than from the works of the most esteemed painters."¹⁶ This is high praise indeed and demonstrates at a relatively early date that the woman artist, although of an age at which mental abilities are often in decline, could be regarded positively as a virtual ancient sibyl of artistic knowledge.

Like Sofonisba Anguissola, the eighteenth-century Venetian painter Rosalba Carriera (1675–1757) achieved international fame as a portraitist, creating dazzling and intimate pastel portrayals that perfectly aligned with the rococo taste for delicacy and surface brilliance. Carriera's image, as for any artist-celebrity of the period, was also in demand, resulting in at least seven self-portraits created between 1698 and 1746.¹⁷ Yet in contrast to those of many early-modern women artists, a number of these self-portraits were created after she had reached fifty years of age (most certainly "old" by early-modern standards),¹⁸ and with her artistic success se-

¹⁶ Soprani quoted in Dabbs, *Life Stories of Women Artists*, 117.

¹⁷ See additionally on these images Bernardina Sani, *Rosalba Carriera* (Turin: U. Allemandi, 1988); and Liana De Girolami Cheney, Alicia Faxon, and Kathleen Russo, *Self-Portraits by Women Painters* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 2000), 102–5.

¹⁸ Women in the Renaissance period were typically considered to be in the final "age" of their life span as of age forty due to physiological and social factors; see further Silvana Seidel Menchi, "The Girl and the Hourglass: Periodization of Women's Lives in Western Preindustrial Societies," in *Time, Space, and Women's Lives in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Anne Jacobson Schutte et al. (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2001), 64–65.

cure, they may have afforded greater opportunity to be self-reflective about who she was, allowing us intriguing insight into Carriera's character. In the first of these images, *Self-Portrait as Winter* (1731; Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden; fig. 5), Carriera appeals to the rococo penchant for fantasy portraits that blurred the boundaries between reality and ideality through role-playing, in this case presenting herself as an allegorical figure of Winter. The seemingly contradictory nature of this image is striking: our eyes are immediately captivated by the sensuality of the ermine fur trim lining a radiant cobalt-blue cloak. In conjunction with the pearl-drop earrings, this display of wealth must have impressed the intended recipient of the portrait, the empress of Austria. Yet in the midst of this glamorous embellishment is its opposite: a woman's face that is completely unidealized and rather coarsely featured. Carriera was unfortunately renowned among her contemporaries for her lack of beauty, a reversal of the Renaissance topos of ideal feminine appearance that permeates innumerable descriptions and biographies of famous women.¹⁹ A new topos thus had to be invented for Carriera's life stories; for example, one of her early biographers, Antoine-Joseph Dézallier d'Argenville, states with blunt eloquence, "Beauty, which is usually the lot of women, was not at all that of Signora Rosalba Carriera."²⁰ As an allegorical figure of Winter, however, Carriera could use her plainness to great advantage, deftly merging the season's duality of cold harshness with the soft beauty of the snowy ermine, resulting in a complex portrayal of a woman who was herself approaching the "winter" of her life. Her penetrating gaze toward the viewer affirms her mature confidence and unaffected satisfaction with who she is and what she looks like; it is no wonder that the portrait, with its sensual surfaces and psychological depth, the products of Carriera's vision and insight, was recognized in its day as one of the artist's masterpieces.²¹

¹⁹ On the reversal of this topos, see Julia Dabbs, "Anecdotal Insights: Changing Perceptions of Italian Women Artists in Eighteenth-Century Life Stories," *Eighteenth-Century Women* 5 (2008): 37–40.

²⁰ Dézallier d'Argenville quoted in Dabbs, *Life Stories of Women Artists*, 344. The biographer had met Carriera during her stay in Paris in 1720–21.

²¹ Francesco Moücke, "Rosalba Carriera," in *Serie di ritratti degli eccellenti pittori dipinti di propria mano che esistono nell'Imperial galleria di Firenze* (Florence, 1752–62), 4:243.



Fig. 5 Rosalba Carriera, *Self-portrait as "Winter,"* 1731.
(© Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen,
Dresden. Reprinted with permission.)

The most striking and poignant role that Carriera would play in a self-portrait, and similarly inspired by the reality of her life, is seen in one of the last works created by the artist, *Self-Portrait as Tragedy* (ca. 1746; Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice; fig. 6). Now approximately seventy years old, Carriera was confronting head on the end of her highly successful career due to vision loss, which one of her early biographers and friends, Pierre-Jean Mariette, indicates occurred in 1746.²² The more generalized, slightly out-of-focus pastel application seen here, not to mention the somber tone of the self-portrayal, likely indicates that diminishing eyesight was indeed beginning to take its toll. For Carriera, vision loss was a fate worse than death, so she bravely endured two cataract surgeries (Mariette writes of one that she "resolved to suffer the operation"), but they were to little avail. She did recover some vision following surgery in 1749, only to have a relapse,²³ which must have exacerbated the agonizing loss of something so central to her artistic

²² P.-J. Mariette, *Abecedario* (1851–53; Paris: F. de Nobele, 1966), 1:331. Mariette lived from 1694 to 1774 and is known to have met Carriera in Venice in 1718, initiating a lifelong friendship; see Franca Zava Boccazzi, "Rosalba Carriera," in *Le tele svelate: Antologia di pittrici venete dal Cinquecento al Novecento*, ed. Caterina Virdis (Mirano: Eidos, 1996), 130.

²³ Mariette, *Abecedario*, 1:331–32.

identity. By January 1751, the artist was completely blind, according to a letter sent to Mariette.²⁴ Three of Carriera's eighteenth-century biographers comment on this tragic vision loss as a way of providing insight into the artist's character, yet in surprisingly different ways. Dézallier d'Argenville puts a distinctly positive spin on the misfortune, writing, "In the last years of her life, she became blind, and she withstood this misfortune with a fortitude that astonished everyone."²⁵ However, in 1771 Anton Maria Zanetti, a fellow Venetian and possible acquaintance of Carriera's, posits a much more negative reaction to the blindness, indicating that Carriera lost not only her sight but also her mind.²⁶ He adds as a marginal comment to this statement:



Fig. 6 Rosalba Carriera, *Self-portrait as Tragedy*, ca. 1746. (© Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice. Reprinted with permission of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities.)

²⁴ Sani, "Cronaca biografica," in *Rosalba Carriera*, 31.

²⁵ Dézallier d'Argenville quoted in Dabbs, *Life Stories of Women Artists*, 347.

²⁶ Zanetti's text reads in translation: "It was precisely with pastels that she made the majority of her work, having abandoned miniatures as too aggravating to the sight, which she then unfortunately lost entirely some years before dying, and with the sight the sense." (Con pastelli appunto fatta è la maggior parte delle opera sue; avendo abbandonata la miniature, come di troppo aggravio alla vista, ch'ella poi sventuratamente perdette affatto alcuni anni prima di morire, e con la vista il senno.) See Anton Maria Zanetti, *Della pittura veneziana* (1771; Venice: Filippi Editore, 1972), 449.

It is really worth philosophizing about the case of this illustrious lady, whose spirit was in every age oppressed from time to time by natural, severe sadness, in the midst of a thousand ideas of felicity and happiness; and in the end that questionable behavior happened so much, perhaps due to the weakness of the aging organs, that she fell into an entire blinding of reason. A few years before [this happened,] she made her own portrait with a garland of leaves, and having been asked what she meant to signify with that, she responded that it was Tragedy, and that Rosalba must end tragically, as it was in real life.²⁷

As art historians have noted, Zanetti is undoubtedly referring at the end of his statement to Carriera's *Self-Portrait as Tragedy*.²⁸ Although we know from Carriera's own writings that she suffered periodically from depression throughout her life,²⁹ Zanetti's comment that the artist eventually lost her mind (i.e., "fell into an entire blinding of reason") is an unfortunate example of ageism and sexism, for he views Carriera's depression, not as a medical condition, but as an extreme form of female irrationality exacerbated by the supposedly greater susceptibility of women's organs to weakness, especially as they aged. In fact, another contemporary biographer, Francesco Moücke, writes to the contrary that although Carriera was "deprived of the bodily light [i.e., eyesight], she was just as much enlightened in her mind."³⁰ Indeed, the artist continued to very lucidly dictate correspondence and wills in her last years.³¹ Nevertheless, the air of melancholy permeating this self-portrait is undeniable, and while it may reflect her actual psychological state at the time, it is clear that the artist is also playing a role. I would contend that Carriera here not only is embodying "Tragedy" but, by representing herself with thinning hair, a thick neck, and a noticeable cleft in her chin, is appropriating the masculinized guise of an ancient philosopher to more positively align her old age with the specter of contemplative genius, something rarely associated with the female gender in the early-modern period. It thus seems entirely fitting that this self-portrait was subsequently given to one of Carriera's most esteemed students, Felicità Sartori Hoffmann,³² who must have gained additional inspiration from the wisdom exuded by her teacher's final visual creation.

Another eighteenth-century portraitist, Anna Dorothea Lisiewska-Therbusch (1721–82), even more emphatically called attention to the concurrent loss and magnification of the artist's vision in a series of self-portraits done in her later years. Her active career as a professional artist in fact did not begin until she was nearly forty and had raised three children; thus, virtually all her self-portraits, of which she created at least twelve between 1760 and 1782, were composed dur-

²⁷ "E da filosofare nei casi di questa illustre donna, lo spirito della quale fu in ogni età oppresso di tempo in tempo da naturali fierissime tristezze, in mezzo a mille idee di felicità e d'allegrezza; e in fine arrivò a tanto questo mal costume, forse per la debolezza degli organi nel crescer degli anni, che cadde in un intero abbagliamento della ragione. Pochi anni prima fec'ella il proprio ritratto con una ghirlanda di foglie; e venendole chiesto che volesse significare per ciò, rispose, ch'era qualla la *Tragedia*; e che Rosalba dovea finire tragicamente, come fu in verita" (ibid.). I would like to thank Professor Pieranna Garavaso for her assistance with these translations.

²⁸ Vittorio Malamani, "Intorno a un autoritratto di Rosalba Carriera acquistato dalle R. R. Gallerie di Venezia," *Bollettino d'arte* 8 (1928): 20; and Sani, *Rosalba Carriera*, 324. Malamani dates the portrait to ca. 1738–40, but in my opinion Sani more accurately dates the image to ca. 1746 on stylistic grounds.

²⁹ A good summary of documented instances of Carriera's bouts with depression is found in Boccazzi, "Rosalba Carriera," 135.

³⁰ Moücke, "Rosalba Carriera," 245. It is uncertain at this point whether Carriera and Moücke knew each other personally; however, he does write the longest, most specific life story of the artist in the eighteenth century.

³¹ Boccazzi, "Rosalba Carriera," 136.

³² Zanetti, *Della pittura veneziana*, 449. Sartori Hoffmann (ca. 1715–60) would go on to become court artist to the prince elector of Saxony, Augustus III.

ing what would have been considered her “old” age.³³ One of Lisiewska-Therbusch’s most elaborate self-portraits, dated to either ca. 1765 or ca. 1773–79, was painted by the artist when she was in her forties or fifties (Kunstsammlungen, Weimar; fig. 7). As in the case of Carriera’s self-portraits, we again see a curious yet successful merging of realism and artfulness: an unadorned, rather plain, and clearly middle-aged Anna Dorothea is surrounded by rococo surface richness featuring faux marble reliefs of rotund cherubs, elegant silken cloth, and a profusion of vines and abundant botanical forms. The artist engages the viewer with a knowing, direct gaze, while the right arm raised toward her head underscores a pensive expression as she looks away from her sketching board.³⁴ Distinctively placed on the board in front of her and positioned perpendicular to the surface so that we are more likely to notice it is a type of monocle identified as a superorbital arch spectacle.³⁵ Is the monocle set aside here, rather than worn, out of concern for her physical appearance? Sadly, Lisiewska-Therbusch, like Carriera, had been publicly humiliated for her lack of beauty, in her case by the French art critic Denis Diderot in his Salon commentary of 1767.³⁶ In addition, by not wearing the monocle, there is no clear indication that the woman artist’s faculties are weakening—it is simply another tool, placed on the sketching board to be used if needed.

³³ On Lisiewska-Therbusch’s self-portraits, see Cheney, Faxon, and Russo, *Self-Portraits by Women Painters*, 108–10; and two catalogs of the artist’s works: Ekhart Berckenhagen, “Anna Dorothea Therbusch,” *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft* 41 (1987): 118–60; and Katharina Küster and Beatrice Scherzer, eds., *Der Freie Blick: Anna Dorothea Therbusch und Lodovike Simanowiz; Zwei Porträtmalerinnen des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Heidelberg: Kehrer, 2002).

³⁴ Lisiewska-Therbusch’s biographer, Johann Georg Meusel, praises this self-portrait as one of her finest works and describes it as a “half-portrait painting of herself, sitting at an open window with a thoughtful expression on her face, trying to sketch on a piece of paper in front of her. Nature and taste are in perfect harmony in this painting, shown especially in the bas-relief that is visible at the bottom of the window. It is a sign of masterful drawing” (“The Life Story of Anna Dorothea Lisiewska-Therbusch,” in Dabbs, *Life Stories of Women Artists*, 439).

³⁵ J. William Rosenthal, *Spectacles and Other Vision Aids* (San Francisco, CA: Norman Publications, 1996), appendix S, “Listing of Art and Illustrations Demonstrating the Use of Spectacles,” 442. Rosenthal specifically identifies this eyewear in a self-portrait by Therbusch in what was the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museen, Berlin, likely the image now in the Gemäldegalerie of Berlin (see fig. 8).

³⁶ Diderot writes that “it was not talent that she lacked in order to create a big sensation in this country [i.e., France], . . . it was youth, it was beauty, it was modesty, it was coquetry.” See Ann Sutherland Harris, *Women Artists, 1550–1950* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1976), 169.



Fig. 7 Anna Dorothea Lisiewska-Therbusch, *Self-portrait*, ca. 1765 or ca. 1773–79. (© Kunstsammlungen, Weimar. Reprinted with permission.)

Whatever the reasons for not wearing the monocle in the Weimar portrait, Lisiewska-Therbusch eventually reversed her decision, for in at least three subsequent self-portraits she is shown wearing the unwieldy eyewear, one of which is reproduced here in figure 8 (variously dated ca. 1776–77 or 1779; Gemäldegalerie, Berlin).³⁷ The artist again turns away from something, in this case a book held in one hand, to gaze directly at the viewer. She is now completely in view rather than hidden behind an architectural framework, allowing us to see the glistening fabrics of an apparently wealthy woman (and talented painter). The monocle, now suspended over her head, is slightly askew rather than centrally positioned over the right eye, which draws further notice to its exceptionality and, given its location, suggests a more implicit connection with the artist's mind. As Vincent Ilardi has shown, when men (typically older males) are depicted in Renaissance art wearing spectacles, the eyewear is invariably perceived as an attribute

³⁷ On this painting see further Cheney, Faxon, and Russo, *Self-Portraits by Women Painters*, 109; and Anthony Bond and Joanna Woodall, *Self-Portrait: Renaissance to Contemporary* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2006), 134–35. A variant of this self-portrait, dated 1782, is now in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg; and a bust-length portrait of Lisiewska-Therbusch wearing a monocle is found in the Nationalgalerie, Berlin (see Küster and Scherzer, *Der Freie Blick*, for color illustrations of these paintings).

of intelligence and wisdom, whether of an earthly or a divine nature.³⁸ By the late eighteenth century there seems to be an increased number of representations of male artists wearing eyeglasses, including Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1771), François André Vincent (ca. 1780, by his wife Adélaïde Labille-Guiard), and Sir Joshua Reynolds (1788). Yet Lisiewska-Therbusch's self-portraits predate most of these works, nor would she have seen the Chardin portrait, since she had left France in 1768. What the artist apparently realized is that the monocle, although initially incongruous in its juxtaposition with her delicate feminine attire, absolutely heightens her aura of probing perception—and, in combination with the direct gaze, might make the viewer feel as if she or he were being observed under a microscopic lens.



Fig. 8 Anna Dorothea Lisiewska-Therbusch, *Self-portrait*, ca. 1776-77 or 1779. (© Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Reprinted with permission.)

³⁸ Vincent Ilardi, "Eyeglasses and Concave Lenses in Fifteenth-Century Florence and Milan: New Documents," *Renaissance Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (Autumn 1976): 357.

The Berlin self-portrait is anything but conventional; however, that would be entirely appropriate for Anna Dorothea Lisiewska-Therbusch, who was by no means a conventional eighteenth-century woman. In order to embark on a professional career as a portrait and history painter she separated from her family when she was about forty years of age to serve as court painter in Stuttgart and Mannheim. Lisiewska-Therbusch additionally spent time in France, Brussels, and the Netherlands, before returning to her family in Berlin in 1770. Over a span of twenty years she created some two hundred works of art; yet like other women artists of the period, her immense talent was seen as unnatural for her gender, and rumors of male assistance frustrated her first attempt for admittance into the male domain of the French Academy of Painting and Sculpture. Lisiewska-Therbusch may thus have been especially determined to be seen as the equal of her male artist colleagues and, by means of the added “third eye” of the monocle, along with the open book, sought to call attention to her intellectual and creative powers. Nor was this an assumed role: Lisiewska-Therbusch’s contemporary biographer, Johann Meusel, writing a year after the artist’s death, emphasizes her intellectual abilities in a fashion rarely evidenced in descriptions of women artists: “She had the keenest mind, the finest of instincts, and the most noble character that never left her, even in all her troubles. These merits were increased by her extraordinary thirst for knowledge. In her younger years she spent much of the night studying useful texts, with which she acquired knowledge in many different areas. In short, her mind was constantly at work, and she kept her usual liveliness in spite of all her sufferings until the end of her days.” Meusel sums up the artist best by proclaiming, “She was in all aspects a rare and commendable woman.”³⁹

In the portraits and lives of Anguissola, Carriera, and Lisiewska-Therbusch, we are offered a new paradigm of the woman artist and of the elder female as represented in art. In contrast to the desiccated crones and devout widows seen in the art of previous centuries, their portraits demonstrate that old age could be portrayed in a positive and powerful new light. Although there is acknowledgment of the decline of physical beauty and vision, we are given proud witness to the more lasting virtues of experience, wisdom, and penetrating intellectual vision, thereby demonstrating that the woman artist could be the equal of her male counterparts. [A]

³⁹ Johann Meusel, “The Life Story of Anna Dorothea Lisiewska-Therbusch,” in Dabbs, *Life Stories of Women Artists*, 439.