

## 17. The Role of Art in Recent Biofiction on Sofonisba Anguissola

*Julia Dabbs*

### Abstract

In recent years the life stories of early modern women artists have inspired many works of biofiction; yet often authors know more about what the artists created than the facts of their lives. This essay will explore the intermediality between visual and verbal content by exploring the role of art in two recent novels on the Italian Renaissance painter Sofonisba Anguissola: Donna DiGiuseppe's *Lady in Ermine: The Story of a Woman Who Painted the Renaissance* and Chiara Montani's *Sofonisba: Portraits of the Soul*. In the process I will explore the Renaissance *paragone* debate and consider how verbal descriptions of artworks may (or may not) enhance our understanding of the artist's fictionalized character.

**Keywords:** *paragone*, women visual artists, Sofonisba Anguissola, biofiction, Donna DiGiuseppe, Chiara Montani

What makes biofiction about an early modern woman painter different from that concerning female musicians, authors, or other artists? In a word, paintings. Biographical background is frequently lacking on these women, so known artworks can supply helpful information regarding who the artists knew, what their artistic ambitions were, and what they looked like (if they created self-portraits). However, artworks can do more than provide missing information: they can serve as windows into the artist's physical, intellectual, and emotional worlds, allowing us to more fully enter into the life of that protagonist, to see what they see, think, and feel – if the artworks are used effectively.

Two recent works of biofiction about the Italian Renaissance painter Sofonisba Anguissola (c. 1535–1625) particularly have struck me in terms of

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how her artworks were integrated into the novels: Donna DiGiuseppe's *Lady in Ermine: The Story of a Woman Who Painted the Renaissance* and Chiara Montani's *Sofonisba: Portraits of the Soul*. Anguissola has been the subject of eight works of biofiction between 2006 and 2019,<sup>1</sup> even though she is less well-known than the Baroque superstar Artemisia Gentileschi. Yet there are numerous reasons why Anguissola would be a popular subject. First, Anguissola had either direct or indirect ties with significant historical figures such as Michelangelo, Pope Pius IV, and King Philip II and Queen Isabel of Spain. Anguissola served the Spanish royalty from 1559 to 1573, allowing for a fictionalized setting of court intrigue and glamour seen through the eyes of a modest "outsider" with whom the reader might more readily connect. In addition, Anguissola's personal life had some dramatic vicissitudes: she received an invitation to serve at the court in Spain, but this meant leaving her family in Cremona, Italy indefinitely (and as it happened, for the rest of her life). Anguissola's first marriage was arranged by the Spanish court; but this obligatory relationship ended after eight years when her husband died at sea. A few years later while traveling back to her family in Cremona, Sofonisba<sup>2</sup> fell in love with the ship's captain, Orazio Lomellino, and despite objections from her family, the couple married. Through these personal as well as professional challenges, Anguissola kept painting, which suggests a woman of great personal strength, independence, and resilience – character traits which readers might value as inspiring or even heroic.

Finally, and especially significant, there is Anguissola's art: some 34 paintings and drawings have been firmly attributed to her (Cole, pp. 155–186),<sup>3</sup> and they've gained some public notice through museum exhibitions and publications. Indeed, one of the first modern-day books about the artist titles her the "first great woman artist of the Renaissance" (Perlinghieri). Anguissola's particular gift was for naturalism, as we see in her early masterpiece, *The Chess Game*, which captures three of her sisters in a moment in time. Even in her court portraiture Anguissola stood apart from her male colleagues by humanizing the harsh formality of official portraits, such as her portrait of King Philip II in which he holds a rosary (Madrid, Prado Museum). She also painted her self-portrait at least ten times, the most of

1 The authors of these novels (in addition to DiGiuseppe and Montani) are Boullosa; Cullen; Damioli; de Medici; Pierini; and Sautois.

2 I will be referring to the artist as "Sofonisba" in more personal contexts and "Anguissola" in professional ones.

3 Numerous other paintings have been attributed to Anguissola, for which see Cole (pp. 186–253).

any artist before Rembrandt, allowing us to visually connect with this artist who gazes confidently at us.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly there is much historical and art historical content that novelists could work from; but when writing biographical novels about women artists in particular, the focus can often be on the emotional tides brought on by internal and external conflicts,<sup>5</sup> leaving the creation of art to the background. One potentially key difference here is that both of these novelists have backgrounds in art or art history: DiGiuseppe wrote her master's thesis on Anguissola, and Montani's background is in art and design.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, both authors indicate that they studied Anguissola's artwork in person, which makes a significant difference when writing authentically about art. In this essay I will examine how each author makes use of these paintings to construct the narratives and to illuminate the artist's character, and then will directly compare their discussions of a few key paintings by Anguissola. In so doing we will reprise the Renaissance *paragone* debate between visual and verbal descriptions, and thus give further attention to the limitations of and liminalities between these two media. Ultimately, I hope that this intermedial approach will broaden our methods of analyzing biofiction about women artists.

### The role of art in DiGiuseppe's *Lady in Ermine*

DiGiuseppe, a first-time author, ambitiously explores Anguissola's life from her teenage years to her deathbed in this third-person narrative. "Sofi" (as she is informally nicknamed) is absorbed by art from a young age; in an initial scene the young artist is mesmerized by a saint's face in a church altarpiece because it seems to reveal the holy woman's soul – and as the reader discovers later, this is the goal that Anguissola has for her portraiture as well (p. 36). Although that goal is very much in keeping with how an art historian might interpret Anguissola's artwork, the novelist's description of particular portraits consistently are too brief to adequately convey the "soul-like" quality of the sitter, at least to this reader. For example, one of the key portraits in

4 Sources used for background on Anguissola are Cole and Gamberini. Anguissola was also the subject of numerous life stories in the early modern period; one of the most complete and knowledgeable is that of Raffaele Soprani, translated in Dabbs (pp. 112–118).

5 As Alexandra Lapierre states, "Inner conflict is at the heart of every literary work dealing with a woman artist" (p. 77). See also Lent on the exaggerated emotionalism apparent in fiction concerning Artemisia Gentileschi.

6 See Montani's website for more on her as an artist.



Figure 17.1. Attributed to Sofonisba Anguissola, *Lady in A Fur Wrap* (Glasgow, Pollok House). Photo credit: Album / Alamy Stock Photo.

the novel, the titular “Lady in Ermine” portrait purported to be of the Infanta Catalina Michaela (Fig. 17.1), is sketched out in the following passage:

Instead of a formal gown, Sofonisba posed the duchess in a headscarf wrapped in ermine, as if she were set to travel – ready to go, but waiting for the opportunity. [...] The painter emphasized the duchess’ searching eyes: open to possibilities she might never know [...] Sofonisba decided the portrait would have no background. (p. 331)

To be fair, this is not the entirety of the portrait-making process as described by DiGiuseppe, since preceding this passage we hear Anguissola's internal dialogue regarding how she "reads" Catalina's physical and emotional traits, as filtered through the lens of their past interactions. Her interpretation is encapsulated by the words "lovely and sad" (p. 331), and certainly the resulting portrait is strikingly beautiful; but is the young woman also sad? This emotional trait suits the verbal Catalina in the plotline that DiGiuseppe has constructed, yet to my mind is questionable when applied to the visual Catalina, given her alert, bright eyes and the upturned corners of her mouth. Certainly this discrepancy could be a matter of interpretation; yet if the author had indicated *how* this sadness was conveyed in the portrait through further description, that quality of her soul might have been more effectively reinforced. Thus, when actual artworks are described in biofiction there can be some complication for readers if the author's interpretation of that visual "truth" doesn't coincide with what we see and interpret (and especially when that artwork is on the book's cover).<sup>7</sup>

Early in the narrative DiGiuseppe establishes another artistic goal for the painter: the creation of a "masterpiece." This *topos*, a familiar one in artistic biography, is introduced as something that Sofonisba feels she must achieve in order to gain credibility as a woman artist. Prior to leaving for the Spanish court she realizes, with her father's encouragement, what the ultimate subject for this masterpiece would be – a portrait of King Philip II (p. 60). This would be a lofty goal for any Renaissance artist but virtually impossible for a woman, for even if she were able to obtain a court position as a portraitist, she would be relegated to painting portraits of the female members of the court, or their children, simply due to her gender.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, this career goal helps to propel the narrative for the first two-thirds of the book. First, Anguissola must gain the confidence and trust of the Queen and the King as a loyal court member despite her "outsider" (that is, non-Spaniard) status. She then paints a portrait of Queen Isabel that is well-received (but barely described by the author), as well as a successful

7 Another potential problem is an artwork's attribution; the consensus of most art historians is that *The Lady in Ermine* is not by Anguissola, but by either Alonso Sanchez Coello or El Greco. However, DiGiuseppe is aware of this issue, and explains on her website why she believes the painting is Anguissola's (October, 2019). Interestingly, the cover image was changed to a self-portrait by Anguissola in a self-published 2020 edition of the book.

8 One notable exception was Levina Teerlinc, who served the English court in the sixteenth century; however, as a miniaturist, her skills would be seen as entirely appropriate for a woman artist and thus not as transgressive as Anguissola's creating a larger-scale, official portrait of the king.

portrait of the erratic Prince Carlos, moving closer to her goal. However, DiGiuseppe then introduces a dramatic biographical *topos* especially associated with male artists: competition (Kris and Kurz, pp. 120–125). For Anguissola to create a portrait of the king her skills must match or even go beyond those of the king's misogynistic official portraitist, Alonso Sanchez Coello. She also knows that such a portrait would be compared to those by the even greater Venetian Renaissance artist Titian, whose works could be seen in the royal collection.

Coello's opposition is rather quickly eliminated after Anguissola's portrait of Queen Isabel is publicly celebrated; and with the intercession of Queen Isabel, the woman painter receives her ultimate commission. But now more drama ensues, again reliant on *topoi* from artistic biography. First, in the process of painting the king's portrait, Sofonisba suffers from artist's block (which happens on other occasions as well), primarily because her internal image of the king is negatively framed by his involvement with the Inquisition in Spain. Nevertheless, Anguissola perseveres and finally completes the canvas, but is so dissatisfied that she destroys the portrait just prior to its being unveiled to the court – thus fulfilling the artist "self-destruction" *topos* demonstrated so effectively by Michelangelo in Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy*. Now Sofonisba is under even more pressure to produce the "masterpiece." She re-paints the portrait, but both she and the king realize that it lacks the ineffable quality of being *al vero* ("truthful" or verisimilar).

Anguissola then asks to redo the portrait after she observes the king's expression of intense grief and piety following the death of Queen Isabel. The artist finally is able to capture this new, and rather vulnerable, "truth" of King Philip, who in the final painting holds a rosary and has one arm upon a chair's armrest for support.<sup>9</sup> As the narrator confirms, "Sofonisba found her *al vero*" (p. 247).

But at this critical narrative juncture in which Anguissola has achieved her long-desired "masterpiece," there are 50 more years in her life. The artist's creativity, which had been effectively foregrounded by the author up until this point, is now submerged by a dramatic story line focused on personal issues: the arranged, unhappy first marriage; financial difficulties; the sudden death of her husband; new love; familial objection; and second marriage. This is not to say that Anguissola's artwork is completely disregarded; it can't be, given DiGiuseppe's adherence to the chronological

9 Technical studies have shown that this portrait indeed was repainted (de Celis, García, and Carcelén, p. 76), which presumably informed DiGiuseppe's plotline.

output of her work, which lends the novel a greater sense of historical veracity. Now, however, those few paintings mentioned are used as a rather perfunctory means of revealing the artist's emotions. For example, Anguissola's altarpiece of the *Madonna dell'Itria* is painted as a means of expiating her guilt and contrition at the sudden death of her husband (p. 283). Then slightly later in the novel, regretting her lack of biological children, Anguissola "returned home and transferred her unrequited urges to painting a Madonna and Child for her own collection" (p. 337). Here DiGiuseppe makes use of another literary *topos* in which works of art substitute for biological children (Kris and Kurz, pp. 115–116).<sup>10</sup> For the modern reader, however, this psychoanalytical and biologically limiting emotional reaction can seem unsatisfying; it ignores other factors that may have led Anguissola to paint a Madonna and Child, such as her own religious devotion.

### The role of art in Montani's *Sofonisba: Portraits of the Soul*

Montani, also a first-time novelist, focuses on a shorter time span in Anguissola's life, from her teenage years to the beginning of her second marriage. From the opening we see that art will play a central role in this narrative, for example when the author states: "In the beginning there was colour" (p. 12). As in DiGiuseppe's novel, Anguissola's artworks are frequently mentioned in Montani's biofiction, and similarly serve as chronological markers of the artist's life. However, there is much less narrative emphasis on achieving an artistic "masterpiece"; in fact, this "Sofi" is initially "dismayed" when she is asked to paint King Philip II's portrait because of the inevitable comparisons that would be made to great masters such as Titian (p. 112). What Montani does emphasize, and to a much greater degree than DiGiuseppe, are the psychological, physical, and intellectual processes involved in creating art. This emphasis likely reflects Montani's identity as a practicing artist, but also is consistent with the fact that this novel is a first-person narrative voiced by Anguissola.

An early example that demonstrates this depth of creative as well as psychological vision occurs soon after Sofonisba's sister Elena, who had studied painting alongside her in the Campi studio, tells her that she will be entering a convent to become a nun. Sofonisba is hurt and upset, unable

10 Jacobs (pp. 27–63) discusses in-depth the notion of procreativity and its associations with women artists.



to speak a word to her closest sister; she quickly gets up to leave the room, then looks back at her sister:

The late afternoon light played on her face, moulding the lines in a splendid ethereal glow. Her tranquil features, her large modest eyes, remote from the world's concerns, the strong-willed curl of her lip, that grown-up and very aware expression [...] Against my will, I imagined her framed in the glow of a novice's habit, with its severe, purely geometrical lines sculpted in a cascade of white, modelled solely by shade and light. I saw the pure white shape, motionless, emerge from the dark background, warmed slightly by a diffused glow and taking life thanks to the mobility of the face and hands [...] The urgency with which the picture sprang to mind was stronger than my willpower. I simply had to fix it there. To my surprise I realized that this desire had taken the place of the pain I had felt. (pp. 22–23)

Montani (via her English translator, Verna Kaye) has beautifully evoked not only the actual painting by Anguissola (*Portrait of Elena Anguissola*, 1553; Southampton City Art Gallery), but also has conveyed how it was conceived in the mind's eye of the artist. We can sense what Elena looks like in the flesh, and how that will be translated by Sofonisba into a timeless image. Yet we also gain an understanding of the artist's character, specifically how her love for her sister is able to transform the selfish pain and hurt of impending loss into a visual testament to Elena's pure faith.

The most extensive discussion of the artist's process, both psychological and physical, occurs when she paints the *Madonna del' Itria* following her first husband's unexpected death. In this religious painting Sofonisba is not looking into another individual's soul to bring out its essence, but instead into her own, in the light of an unhappy marriage. Montani's description of the painting process is visceral; Sofonisba relates that parts of her skin and blood (from broken blisters) filter into the paint: "The awareness that the work would contain parts of my body too made me feel it more intensely" (p. 207). This physical–emotional connection ultimately serves as a catharsis for Sofonisba's grief and guilt: "With each brushstroke and each glaze of colour I felt the grips of my consuming remorse start to ease slightly" (p. 207). The description of the finished painting is more matter-of-fact; what primarily mattered was the outpouring of Sofonisba's soul through the act of painting, rather than the outcome.

In addition to the psychological and physical aspects of being an artist, Montani also weaves in the intellectual element through the recurring motif



of chiaroscuro. This process of shading by using varying degrees of light and shade to create the illusion of a lifelike, three-dimensional form was a significant development in Renaissance art, and thus of great interest to artists who strove for naturalism, such as Anguissola. Yet we also find it used for conceptual effect in certain passages, such as the description of Elena's portrait, in which the young nun's form spiritually shines forth from the dark obscurity surrounding her. In contrast, the portrait of conflicted prelate Ippolito Chizzola with its "absolute black of the cloak and the ice white of the vestments" were "[t]wo opposites placed side by side which would never meet" (p. 33). Later in the novel this conceit of light versus shade is discussed in a philosophical manner by Sofonisba and her future husband Orazio, who associate these two fundamental elements with the "mirror of life." The artist eventually unifies the two extremes when she remarks, "As in the technique of sfumato, the line between the two [light and shade] is lost in a soft progression, from which you can slip alternately into one or the other. Or perhaps have them live together in the same instant, letting them blend so closely [...] so no further distinction is possible" (pp. 245–246). As I read these lines, I was reminded of another type of art, that of biofiction, with its shades of historical "truth" versus imagined "truth," often imperceptibly merged so as to create a fuller literary reality for a particular individual. Montani's imagined incorporation of art and especially the artistic process are essential to her Sofonisba's tangible, authentic presence.

### *Paragone*: visual and verbal

To their credit, both DiGiuseppe and Montani emphasize the visual creations and processes of their protagonists within their biographical novels – even though they (perhaps necessarily) still allow narrative space for love, betrayal, sex, heroic deeds, and family drama. Both authors also go to the effort of making illustrations of pertinent Anguissola artworks available to their readers through electronic or published means,<sup>11</sup> which I've rarely encountered in biographical fiction about artists. This dual importance of image and word immediately calls to mind the *paragone* debate of

11 DiGiuseppe published a booklet, *A Pictorial Companion to Lady in Ermine*, which has seven illustrations of Anguissola's works accompanied by brief discussion, primarily based on her direct viewing of the artworks. A more complete resource to images is found on her website at "Paintings by Chapter." Montani sends her readers an electronic file of Anguissola's artworks upon request.



Figure 17.2. Sofonisba Anguissola, *The Chess Game* (Poznan, National Museum). Photo credit: The Picture Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo.

Anguissola's own time, in which intellectuals, courtiers, and artists actively discussed the relative merits of various media, such as painting versus poetry, or sculpture versus painting.<sup>12</sup> In fact, this debate is encountered in Montani's novel, when Anguissola's portrait of Queen Isabel is shown to Francesco de' Medici and various members of the court. Is Anguissola's painting superior to the other arts because of its "realism and harmony," as one individual suggests? Or is there more of an equilibrium between painting and poetry, following Horace's dictum of *ut pictura poesis*, as another courtier states (p. 102)?

To consider this question further in relation to these biofictions, we might directly compare how two Anguissola paintings emphasized by both DiGiuseppe and Montani are verbally rendered. The first example is the artist's early masterpiece, *The Chess Game*, which depicts with remarkable verisimilitude three of the Anguissola sisters engaged in a game of chess, while a maidservant hovers in the background (Fig. 17.2)

12 For useful background on the *paragone* debate in Renaissance Italy, see Ames-Lewis (pp. 141–176).

Even in the Renaissance this painting was singled out for praise: Giorgio Vasari saw the painting in the Anguissola home and remarks in his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* that the figures are “all done with such care and such spirit, that they have all the appearance of life, and are wanting in nothing save speech” (2: p. 466). Vasari’s last phrase exposes the limitations of the visual form, no matter the artist’s excellence – it is mute. Therein lies a potential advantage for writers, who can give voice to the scene before our eyes. But correspondingly, how completely or effectively can the writer convey the visual richness of this painting, from the intricate gold-brocade gowns to the varied expressions on the girls’ faces? DiGiuseppe focuses on providing context for the scene: Sofonisba is asked to look in on her younger sisters, and when she sees them playing chess she realizes that she must capture this extraordinary moment and begs her sisters to stay still while she sketches them (p. 20). Although DiGiuseppe doesn’t describe the finished painting, there is no need to since she also gives voice to the sisters’ interactions, thus conveying the immediacy of the scene rather than attempting to describe its details.

In contrast, Montani undermines the naturalism and immediacy that we see in the painting by indicating that Anguissola has very deliberately set up the scene, including what each sister will wear, what each will be doing, and what the stage-setting will be (p. 28). The one moment of spontaneity comes when the maidservant Maria happens upon the scene being painted, and Sofonisba asks her to remain looking on, an important aspect of the painting in terms of social proprieties and class issues that DiGiuseppe omits. Montani does provide greater overall description of the finished painting (pp. 28–29) compared to DiGiuseppe, but while it may be sufficient for the reader to imaginatively see the painting, there also seems to be a missed literary opportunity in comparison to other published ekphrases of *The Chess Game*.<sup>13</sup>

The other Anguissola painting that both DiGiuseppe and Montani give greater attention to is her *Family Portrait*, which features Sofonisba’s father, brother Asdrubale, sister Minerva, and the family dog (Fig. 17.3).

Vasari comments on this painting, too, stating that “these [figures] [...] are executed so well, that they appear to be breathing and absolutely alive” (2: p. 466). Although a painting might be “mute,” to say that the figures seem to breathe and be “absolutely alive” was very high praise indeed from Vasari. But do our biofiction authors convey this quality? In this instance

13 Anguissola’s *Chess Game* was the featured “challenge” of the *Ekphrastic Review* in March 2019 (“Ekphrastic”).



Figure 17.3. Sofonisba Anguissola, *Family Portrait* (Niva, Nivaagaards Art Gallery). Photo credit: Heritage Image Partnership Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo.]

it is DiGiuseppe who imagines an intentionally selected and deliberately posed portrait-making context, with Sofonisba as artistic director; as a result, the immediacy which Vasari saw is blunted. The author primarily focuses on the presumed symbolism within the portrait, such as the dog as a symbol of familial loyalty; this may be because the portrait was intended, per DiGiuseppe's narrative, as an homage to her father before Sofonisba left for Spain, and thus is embedded with meaning (p. 59). As a result, the

narrative momentarily takes on an art historical aspect, which may give readers a stronger impression of the potential intellectual depth of Anguissola's paintings – all important, in my opinion, when one is writing about a woman artist, whether historically or fictionally.

Montani describes the portrait as a focal point during a poignant interlude in the narrative: Sofonisba (via her father, Amilcare) has recently accepted the Spanish court's invitation, but now both characters are realizing the impact that this separation will have on their close relationship. They look together at this nearly finished portrait of familial devotion that now must forego the final touches to the foreground (which is true to the painting's current condition). "Sofi" describes the facial expressions, the colors, and the composition for us, effectively getting at their lifelikeness – yet with one surprising difference: Amilcare is said to be standing "in a heroic pose, like a statue dressed in black" (p. 46).<sup>14</sup> Such a pose would physically demonstrate the father's importance, and would be more typical of sixteenth-century Italian portraiture, but it is a significant change from the painting itself. There we see Amilcare seated and turned slightly towards Asdrubale, with one hand warmly placed on his shoulder, while the son reciprocates by placing his hand upon his father's other hand. To my mind it is this warmth and intimacy of Anguissola's remarkable family portrait that both honors the father figure, and makes them all, as Vasari perhaps best captured it, "absolutely alive."

As is typically the case for a Renaissance *paragone* debate, there is no clear "winner" here; instead, by comparing the strengths and weaknesses of each side, we can better appreciate their relative merits. In varying ways, DiGiuseppe and Montani successfully demonstrate the "artfulness" of writing about an artist, and through the intermediality of visual and verbal content allow us to more fully enter into the character and world of Sofonisba Anguissola. Certainly there are also the inevitable gaps and fissures between these media too; painting cannot fully speak, and literature cannot fully reveal. Yet these openings can also allow the reader to enter into the narrative and imaginatively expand on what is or is not written, or to look at the paintings and form their own impressions, and thus truly give the artist, and her art, life.<sup>15</sup>

14 Montani's Italian version does not literally state that Amilcare is standing, but it is understandable that Kaye would translate the description in this way, given that he is said to be "in posa staturia ed epica" (p. 42).

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## About the Author

**Julia Dabbs** is a Distinguished Teaching Professor of Art History at the University of Minnesota Morris. Her research focuses on the lives of historical women artists; she has published *Life Stories of Women Artists, 1550–1800* and numerous essays. Dabbs is working on an edited collection concerning visual artists and biofiction.



