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Julia Dabbs, associate professor of art history, examines women and aging as portrayed by early modern European women artists

Summary: Dabbs received a 2011 Imagine Fund Award for Vision and Insight: The Self-Portraits of Anna Dorothea Therbusch.

(July 12, 2011)-Julia Dabbs, associate professor of art history, received a 2011 Imagine Fund award to probe the depths of “Vision and Insight: The Self Portraits of Anna Dorothea Therbusch.”

Dabbs’ research interest in women artists in early modern Europe led her to Therbusch while writing her book on Life Stories of Women Artists, 1550-1800, published by Ashgate in 2009. Therbusch was an eighteenth century German portraitist who served as court painter in Stuttgart and Mannheim, and was one of the few women artists elected to the Académie Royale in Paris. “She is distinguished by having created an unprecedented series of self-portraits towards the end of her life,” Dabbs notes.

The fascinating thing, Dabbs says, is that “rarely did women portray themselves at this stage in life, yet Therbusch does so in a confident, unidealized manner, and typically includes a monocle, which could refer to the impairment, or enhancement, of vision.” Dabbs intends to delve deeper into what Therbusch was attempting to express about her identity as a woman artist by closely examining and researching her seven extant self-portraits displayed in museums in Berlin, Stuttgart, Nürnberg, and Weimar.

Dabbs had planned to focus on Therbusch for a chapter in a second book on early modern women artists dealing with various themes, such as old age, as well as for a separate journal article. But closer scrutiny of Therbusch and her contemporaries pointed in another direction. After presenting a paper at a conference on Aging and Aesthetics at the University of Toronto this spring, Dabbs became intrigued by the idea of a new book focusing solely on women artists and old age. “I have been particularly struck by self-portraits of elder women that I’ve encountered and have shared with my students in classes on Women and Art, Principles of Art, and Portraiture in the Early Modern Period,” Dabbs explains.

Her revised plan is to present the research on Therbusch as one chapter in a book tentatively titled *Sibyls of Sight: Women Artists and Old Age*. A revised version of her conference paper, “Vision and Insight: Portraits of the Aged Woman Artist, 1600-1800,” will be published in the journal *Occasion* (Stanford University Press).

In following this line of research, Dabbs has carved out a unique niche at the intersection of art history with other fields of study as she seeks “to interpret how visual images communicate aspects of culture, for example ideas concerning gender and aging,” she says. Amazed that this subject has been largely untouched, she realizes that “to some extent that mirrors our culture’s gerontophobia (fear of old age). We prefer to view portraits of the young and beautiful, not older women who show the signs of aging quite visibly on their bodies. What these portraits also show, however, as I hope to demonstrate, is the courage and determination to deal with physical impairments that arise due to aging, such as vision loss, and the wisdom and insight that comes from years of experience. Aging is an issue that affects all of us, and so by

shedding more light on how it has been represented and written about in the lives of Therbusch and other women artists, we might give more thought to those in our community who have been marginalized simply because they are advanced in years, as well as grapple with how we ourselves will face the future.”

Dabbs majored in art history and English at the University of Michigan. After working for five years in the library field, however, she conceded that her passion for art history was unquenched, motivating her to obtain masters and doctoral degrees from the University of Maryland, College Park. She has held two museum fellowships at the National Gallery of Art, assisting with research for exhibitions dealing with Old Master drawings and Italian Baroque painting, and has done contractual projects with the Newseum in Arlington, Virginia. During spring break 2010 she co-taught, with Jimmy Schryver, associate professor of art history, a study abroad course on Art and Architecture of Italy in Context.

Dabbs is one of nineteen Morris professors who received all-University 2011 Imagine Fund Awards. The program is supported in part by the McKnight Arts and Humanities Endowment. The endowment’s mission is to support, sustain, and enliven arts and humanities research and activities on the four University campuses.

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