

# FAMOUS WOMEN AND THEIR DEPICTION IN ITALIAN RENAISSANCE PAINTING

Background Notes

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**Artemisia (self-portrait) as a Martyr  
c.1615, New House Galleries, New York**



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The sources for female heroines of legends, myths and ancient history most popular with patrons of art and artists of this period include (aside the OT), the following writers:

### **Homer**

His dates are unknown. Homer was not the first author to be illustrated on *cassoni* because Greek was translated into Italian in the Renaissance later than Latin, Ficino (1433-1499) being one of the first who could read the language. But as the author of the **Iliad** and the **Odyssey**, Homer was thought to be one of the best storytellers.

### **Virgil**

Born near Mantua in 70BC, he became a close friend of Horace in Rome. Of relevance here, is the **Aeneid** - his twelve book epic honouring Rome's past. Writing in Latin, he was more accessible than Homer.

### **Livy**

Born in Padua in 59BC. He is famous for his **History of Rome From Its Foundation**. Only 35 of 142 books survive, covering the early history and legends up to the end of 4BC. His first two books formed an immediate sequel to the **Aeneid**: The Rape of the Sabine women and stories of brave and chaste women: Camilla, Lucretia, Tarpeia, Portia, Cloelia, Virginia, Tuccia. He also covered the stories of heroic men.

### **Ovid**

Born in 43BC, he wrote the **Metamorphoses**, 15 books of over 200 legends that allowed the amorous gods to pursue their love affairs. His stories became the main source for *cassoni* painting.

### **Plutarch**

Born in c. AD46, he was a Greek biographer, historian and philosopher, best known for his **Parallel Lives**, in which he compares eminent Greek soldiers and statesmen with similar figures taken from Roman history. Popular in the Renaissance, and used as a source by Shakespeare.

## Valerius Maximus

He worked during the reign of Tiberius (14 AD to 37 AD). He compiled the **Nine Books of Memorable Deeds and Sayings** of nearly one thousand historical anecdotes in Rome. Taken as a whole these stories give a sense of the values that were aspired to by the Roman upper classes in the early imperial period.

## Dante (c.1265-1321) and Petrarch (1304-1374)

Dante's story about his journey through hell was not suitable as *cassoni* subject-matter, but he did more for Homer than anyone else. On his journey, he is led by Virgil and meets four of the five most famous poets of antiquity: Homer, Horace, Ovid and Lucan. He transformed antiquity. It was from him that painters inferred their right to use the inheritance of antiquity.

Petrarch's **Trionfi**, which he had not completed by the time he died, were a hugely popular source for *cassoni* painting, describing as they did the triumphal processions celebrating chastity, death, fame, time, eternity and of course love. See below by a follower of Mantegna c. 1460s



**Boccaccio** (1313-75). He spent his youth in courtly French-influenced Naples, but was called back to commercial bourgeois Florence in 1340 by his family. He wrote **The Decameron** in 1350 (it is set in 1348). He also wrote his **Genealogia deorum**, **De viris illustribus** and **De claris mulieribus**, all of which provided artists with great subject-matter.

A few of the most popular female heroines depicted in the Renaissance:

**Camilla** was the daughter of Metabus, king of the Volsci (Virgil, Boccaccio). She is a sort of proto-Wagnerian heroine. Metabus was exiled from his city Privernum because of his cruelty; took his baby daughter with him, reached an impassable river, bound her to his spear, prayed to Diana, hurled it over to the other bank, swam across successfully, and found that Camilla had survived. He brought her up in the mountains, dedicating her to Diana, teaching her to hunt and to fight. She could run across grain without trampling it, and over the sea without getting wet. She joined Turnus fighting against Aeneas, riding like an Amazon, with one breast bared. She fought successfully until Arruns, an Etruscan helped by Apollo, transfixing her just below her bare breast. (See panels by Uccello? c.1470 at Seattle.)

**Cloelia** was a legendary Roman maiden who was held hostage by Lars Porsenna, the leader of the enemy Etruscans. She led the escape of a group of Roman maidens and swam across the Tiber to Rome. She was regarded as a model of virtue. (Livy) (See below Guidoccio di Giovanni Cozzarelli at the Met, New York.)



**Psyche** - Forbidden to look at her lover Cupid, she could not resist the temptation; she lit a lamp and wounded his foot with a drop of hot oil. After he had fled, she then searched the world for him until Jupiter took pity on them and reunited them (Apuleius). (See the panels by a painter close to Granacci, at the Bode Museum Berlin and Raphael's frescoes at the Villa Farnesina in Rome.)

**Susanna** - In the Apocryphal book of Susanna (also known as the Book of the Judgement of Daniel), the married and chaste heroine goes to bathe in the privacy of her own garden; she sends her maids off to get oils and spices, meanwhile two elderly men, who happen to be judges appear from their hiding place behind the hedge, surprise her and blackmail her. Either she must commit adultery with them or they will denounce her. Their word, given their standing, is believed and she is condemned to death until Daniel conducts a successful investigation, exposing the Elders by means of an early detective feat (= cross-questioning them separately!). (See Domenico di Michelino, Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University and many other examples.)

**Lucretia's** tragic story is told by Livy. She was the wife of Tarquinius and was raped by Sextus, son of Tarquinius Superbus, traditionally the last king of Rome 534-510BC and her husband's cousin. She confessed her shame to her husband and stabbed herself to death. (See Botticelli panel at Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and Filippino Lippi's at the Crawford Collection, Scotland.)

**Virginia** was killed by her father Virginius (Livy), to save her from Appius Claudius. He may have been a brutal member of the decemviri, who were overthrown by the plebs in 449BC. (See panels by Filippino Lippi, now at the Louvre and by Botticelli at Accademia Carrara at Bergamo.)

**Tuccia** was an ancient Roman Vestal Virgin whose chastity was questioned by a spurious accusation. When the piety of holy men and women was doubted by sceptics, the gods could perform miracles to vindicate them. In Tuccia's case, she utilized a flat perforated basket to carry water, without the water falling to the ground through the sieve. (Valerius Maximus 8.1.5)

**Judith** enters the enemy camp by stealth, woos the Philistine general Holofernes and kills him by decapitation (Book of Judith). (At least five images by Botticelli; also by Mantegna, National Gallery of Art, Washington.)

**Esther** showed admirable fortitude and devotion to her race and country (Book of Esther). In addition she attracts the attention of Ahasuerus, King of Shushan, who decides to jettison his first wife Vashti because she refuses to attend a banquet he has organised. Esther discloses to Ahasuerus that she is Jewish and pleads for her people to be spared. Several banquet scenes. (See Jacopo del Sellaio, Uffizi and Apollonio di Giovanni, Met Museum, New York.)

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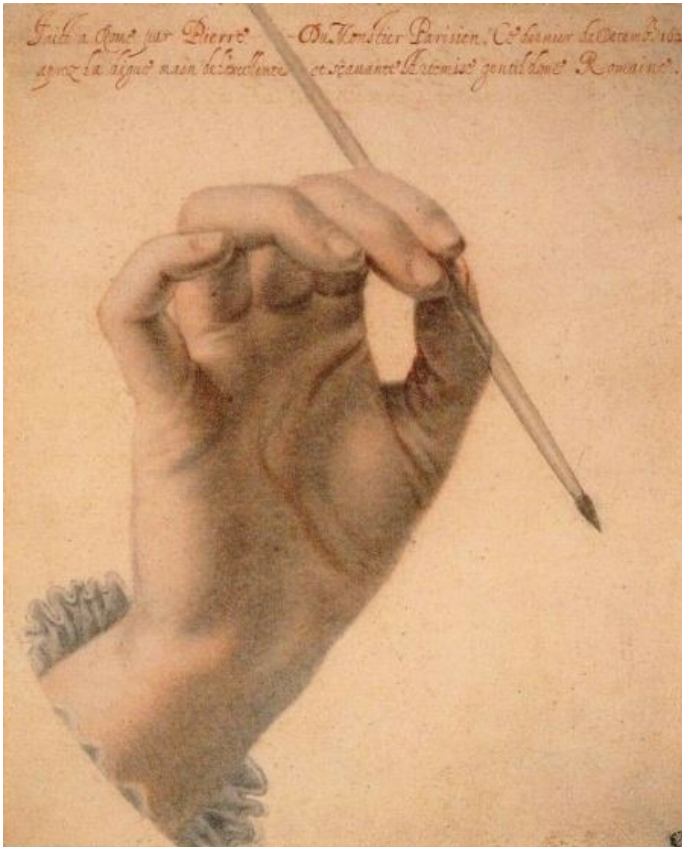
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Right Hand of Artemisia Gentileschi Holding a Brush, Pierre Dumonstier, Black and red chalk, 1625, British Museum



The Flemish painter, Anthony van Dyck, was twenty-five years old and travelling around the island of Sicily recording his travels in words and sketches in his diary. At the time, Sofonisba was ninety-two years old and van Dyck sketched her sitting in a chair. All around the sketch, he wrote notes in Italian, a rough translation of which is:

“...portrait of the painter Signora Sofonisba, done from life in Palermo in the year 1624, on 12 July: her age being 96 years, still with her memory and brain most quick, and most kind, and although she has lost her sight because of her old age, she liked to have paintings put in front of her, and with great effort by placing her nose close to the picture, she could make out a little of it...”

According to van Dyck, Sofonisba was 96 years old in 1624, which would of course make her birthdate 1528 which is some four years earlier than the date given in a number of other sources.