

ELISABETTA SIRANI'S *JUDITH WITH THE HEAD OF HOLOFERNES*

by

JESSICA COLE RUBINSKI

(Under the Direction of Shelley Zuraw)

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the life and artistic career of the female artist, Elisabetta Sirani. The paper focuses on her unparalleled depictions of heroines, especially her *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*. By tracing the iconography of Judith from masters of the Renaissance into the mid-seventeenth century, it is evident that Elisabetta's painting from 1658 is unique as it portrays Judith in her ultimate triumph. Furthermore, an emphasis is placed on the relationship between Elisabetta's *Judith* and three of Guido Reni's *Judith* images in terms of their visual resemblances, as well as their symbolic similarities through the incorporation of a starry sky and crescent moon.

INDEX WORDS: Elisabetta Sirani, Judith, Holofernes, heroines, Timoclea, Giovanni Andrea Sirani, Guido Reni, female artists, Italian Baroque, Bologna

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*To my Family especially
To my Mother, Pamela*

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CHAPTER 1

THE LIFE AND CAREER OF ELISABETTA SIRANI

Fortuna Critica

The *fortuna critica* of the seventeenth-century Bolognese artist Elisabetta Sirani reflects publications as diverse as her biography written by Count Carlo Cesare Malvasia (1678), general literature on Baroque art, the Bolognese school, and on women artists, and finally recent essays and monographs devoted solely to Elisabetta and her work. My research would not have been possible without in-depth consideration given to the study of women artists, especially Elisabetta, in the last five years.

Elisabetta's biography was written by her friend and mentor, Count Carlo Cesare Malvasia and included in his book, Felsina pittrice. Vite de' pittori bolognesi, first published in 1678.¹ This book is a compilation of biographies of several Bolognese artists and was modeled after the Florentine-based Lives of Painters, Sculptors, and Architects written by Giorgio Vasari in 1568.² Malvasia set out to document the lives and works of those he considered to be the greatest artists, the Bolognese.³ Felsina

¹ Carlo Cesare Malvasia, Felsina pittrice: Vite de' pittori bolonesi. Con aggiunte, correzioni e note inedite dell'autore, di Giampietro Zanotti e di altri scrittori, 2 vols, (Bologna: Forni, 1967) [Reproduction of the 1841 Bologna edition from the 1678 edition]. Malvasia included in the original publication from 1678 a poem written for Elisabetta's funeral by Giovanni Luigi Picinardi. Elisabetta's biography begins in volume two on page 385 as "*Di Gio. Andrea Sirani e di Elisabetta sua Figliuola*," and continues to page 407. All further references to Malvasia's text will be as Felsina pittrice. Malvasia's book was reproduced by Luigi Crespi with additions in 1769: see footnote 6.

² Giorgio Vasari, Lives of Painters, Sculptor and Architects, 3 vols, trans. Gaston du C. de Vere, intro. Kenneth Clark (New York: Abrams, 1979). All further mention of this source will simply be referred to as Lives.

³ As for female artists, Malvasia wrote full biographies on Elisabetta and Lavinia Fontana (Felsina pittrice, I, 173-180) with brief mentions of other minor women artists. Malvasia does mention Ginevera Cantofoli

pittrice, although biased like Vasari's Lives, includes the most comprehensive narrative of Elisabetta's life along with a list of her completed works. Malvasia's recounting of Elisabetta's biography has been the predominate source for almost every later publication on Elisabetta Sirani. A contemporary of Malvasia who also wrote about Bolognese women artists was Antonio di Paolo Masini. He wrote Bologna Perlustrata in 1650 and later published a more complete edition in 1666.⁴ Masini was also responsible for the unpublished Aggiunte from 1690. As opposed to Malvasia's inclusion of only two biographies of women artists, Elisabetta and Lavinia Fontana, Masini provided detailed information on other women painters from Bologna, including Anna Maria and Barbara Sirani, Teresa Muratori, Ginevra Cantofoli, Lucrezia Scarfaglia, and Veronica Fontana, interestingly, all students of Elisabetta.⁵

After Malvasia and Masini, no further discussion of Elisabetta appeared until the late eighteenth century when several writers revisited the subject of Bolognese women artists. Luigi Crespi published a third volume of Malvasia's book, incorporating artists that were either overlooked by Malvasia or were not yet established when Felsina pittrice was first published in 1678.⁶ Marcello Oretti also wrote several unpublished manuscripts in the decades between 1760 and 1780, some of which mention Elisabetta.⁷ This trend

as one of Elisabetta's students (Felsina pittrice, II, 407). A later edition of Malvasia's Felsina pittrice, with Crespi's additions, notes her two sisters: see note 6.

⁴ Antonio di Paolo Masini, La Bologna Perlustrata (Bologna: V. Benacci, 1666).

⁵ The Bologna Perlustrata and unpublished notes (Aggiunte) from 1690 have been published together by Adriana Arfelli, "'Bologna Perlustrata' di Antonio di Paolo Masini e l' 'Aggiunta' del 1690," L'Archiginnasio, 52 (1957), 188-237.

⁶ Luigi Crespi, Felsina pittrice. Vite de' pittori bolognesi non descritte nella Felsina pittrice (Bologna: Marco Pagliarini, 1769). Luigi Crespi was Malvasia's primary biographer. He included the biographies of twenty-three female painters. According to Whitney Chadwick, Women, Art, and Society, 3rd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 2002) [Reproduction of the 1990 edition], 90, only Elisabetta and Lavinia Fontana achieved international fame.

⁷ Marcello Oretti, "Notizie de' Professori del Disegno, cioè dei pittori, scultori et architetti bolognesi ei de' forestieri di sua scuola," 1760-1780, ms. B 123; 126, IV; 127; 129; 130, Bologna, Biblioteca Comunale

continued into the nineteenth century with Gaetano Giodani and Carolina Bonafede, who both wrote books on important Bolognese women.⁸ Ottavio Mazzoni-Tosselli focused on the details of Elisabetta's unusual death; his findings reflect advancements in medical studies.⁹

In the late nineteenth century, the Bolognese school fell out of favor with critics such as Ruskin and Baudelaire, and by the early twentieth century Elisabetta's paintings were not highly valued.¹⁰ Her works were considered "[as] tired and pallid imitations of the most tired and pallid manner of Guido Reni," according to a 1924 exhibition catalogue.¹¹ In spite of this disparagement of Elisabetta Sirani and Bolognese art in general, Laura Ragg, a pioneer in the history of women artists, wrote The Women Artists of Bologna in 1907.¹² This book was the first account in English of Elisabetta as well as three other women artists: Caterina dei Vigri, Properzia de' Rossi, and Lavinia Fontana.¹³ Ragg's work is problematic because she does not cite her sources, making it hard to separate the facts from her romanticized narrative; nonetheless, her book is critical for all further Anglo-American studies of Elisabetta.

dell'Archiginnasio. Information on Oretti's writings is provided in Jadranka Bentini and Vera Fortunati, Elisabetta Sirani: "pittrice eroina" 1638-1665 (Bologna: Compositori, 2004), 274.

⁸ Gaetano Giodani, Notizie delle donne pittrici di Bologna (Bologna: Tipografia Nobili e Comp., 1832), and Carolina Bonafede, Cenni biografici e ritratti d'insigni donne bolognesi; raccolti dagli storici più accreditati (Bologna: Tipografia Sassi nelle Spaderie, 1845), see Bentini and Fortunati, "pittrice eroina," (2004), 267-270, 276-277.

⁹ For more information on Elisabetta's death see Ottavio Mazzoni-Toselli, Di Elisabetta Sirani pittrice bolognese e del supposto veneficio onde credesi morta nell'anno XXVII di sua età (Bologna: Tipografia del Genio, 1833); and Idem, Racconti storici estratti dall'Archivio Criminale di Bologna ad illustrazione della storia patria (Bologna: Antonio Chierici, 1868).

¹⁰ Adelina Modesti, "Sirani, Elisabetta," in Dictionary of Women Artists, II, ed. Delia Gaze (London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997), 1275.

¹¹ Ibid, 1275 gives this quote from the exhibition catalogue, La pittura italiana del Seicento e del Settecento alla mostra di Palazzo Pitti, Milan-Rome, (1924), 81.

¹² Laura M. Ragg, The Women Artists of Bologna (London: Methuen & Co., 1907), 229-312 specifically discuss Elisabetta Sirani.

¹³ Published a decade before Ragg's book was Antonio Manaresi, Elisabetta Sirani: la vite, l'arte, la morte, la tradizione del veneficio, il processo, i prodromi, l'autossia, la causa mortis, versi e prose, appendice sulle opere (Bologna: Tipografia della Ditta Nicola Zanichelli, 1898).

Other than a brief article published about Elisabetta in 1929, it was not until the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s that Elisabetta was given closer scrutiny.¹⁴ In 1974 Eleanor Tufts' book, Our Hidden Heritage: Five Centuries of Women Artists, was published with a three-page chapter dedicated to Elisabetta.¹⁵ Only two years later Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin organized the groundbreaking exhibition, Women Artists: 1550-1950. Elisabetta was included in this exhibition, and thus also in the catalogue. This exhibit and its catalogue enabled the public to consider four centuries of women artists.¹⁶ The catalogue played an instrumental role in reviving the reputation of female artists, especially those dismissed or ignored in much contemporary literature. Toward the end of this early era of feminist criticism, Germaine Greer, again writing from a pro-feminist standpoint, produced a book on the obstacles faced by women artists that included a chapter on the "Bolognese Phenomenon," where Elisabetta's role as a Bolognese female artist was analyzed.¹⁷

The desire to revive Elisabetta's reputation intensified and numerous publications followed. In an article from 1978 by Fiorella Frisoni, Elisabetta's paintings from her first recorded work until her death are examined.¹⁸ This article seems to be the first modern publication that focused more on Elisabetta's paintings and her style rather than the events of her life and premature death.

¹⁴ Evelyn Foster Edwards, "Elisabetta Sirani," Art in America, 17 (1929), 242-246, is a short article that discusses Elisabetta's biography, artistic training, and two of her paintings. Edwards briefly compares her work to that of Guido Reni.

¹⁵ Eleanor Tufts, Our Hidden Heritage: Five Centuries of Women Artists (New York: Paddington Press Ltd., 1974), 81-83.

¹⁶ Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, Women Artists: 1550-1950 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 147-150, for the entry dedicated to Elisabetta and her work.

¹⁷ Germaine Greer, The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979).

¹⁸ Fiorella Frisoni, "La Vera Sirani," Paragone, 29 (1978), 3-18.

Over the last twenty years much new research has been devoted to Elisabetta. Her life has been discussed in contexts ranging from Baroque art in general to women's roles in society. There are also articles and book chapters that address specific aspects of her work, including her self-portraits, drawing techniques, patrons, and particular genres of her paintings.¹⁹ Her role as exemplar for woman artists, arising from the 1970s feminist movement was adjusted in the late twentieth century to reflect her contributions to the development of the Bolognese school. Elisabetta's work was included in several recent exhibitions; The Age of Correggio and the Carracci, from 1986 and La Scuola di Guido Reni in 1992.²⁰

In 2004, an exhibition featuring only the work of Elisabetta was organized called Elisabetta Sirani: "pittrice eroina." The catalogue includes several essays and an extensive bibliography.²¹ In the same year a monograph on Elisabetta by Adelina Modesti, Elisabetta Sirani: Una virtuosa del Seicento Bolognese, was published after

¹⁹ There is an abundance of current literature on Elisabetta Sirani. Some of the most significant works include Angela Ghirardi, "Women Artists of Bologna. The Self-Portrait and the Legend from Caterina Vigri to Anna Morandi Manzolini (1413-1774)," in Lavinia Fontana of Bologna (1552-1614), exhib. cat. ed. Vera Fortunati (Milano: Electa, 1998), 32-47; Adelina Modesti, "The Making of a Cultural Heroine: Elisabetta Sirani 'Pittrice celebritissima' di Bologna (1638-1665)," in Per l'Arte: da Venezia all'Europa: studi in onore di Giuseppe Maria Pilo: Rubens al contemporaneo, vol. 2, ed. Mario Piantoni and Laura De Rossi (Monfalcone: Edizioni della Laguna, 2001), 399-404; Babette Bohn, "The Antique Heroines of Elisabetta Sirani," Renaissance Studies 16 (2002), 52-79; Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Elisabetta Sirani: 'Il pennello lieto non lacrimato'," in Essays On Women Artists 'The Most Excellent.' vol. 1 (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 71-80; Bentini and Fortunati, "pittrice eroina," (2004), 274-286; Bohn, "Elisabetta Sirani and Drawing Practices in Early Modern Bologna," Master Drawings, 42 (2004), 207-236; idem, "Female Self-Portraiture in Early Modern Bologna," Renaissance Studies, 18 (2004), 239-286.

²⁰ D. Stephen Pepper, "Bolognese Painting in the Seventeenth Century," in The Age of Correggio and the Carracci: Emilian Painting of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1986), 534-537, are devoted to Elisabetta and two of her paintings, however Fiorella Frisoni was responsible for the catalogue entries on Elisabetta's *St. Jerome* (cat. no. 195) and *Portrait of Anna Maria Ranuzzi as Charity* (cat. no. 196) on pages 535-537. Frisoni was also responsible for the entry from the 1992 exhibition catalogue: see Fiorella Frisoni, "Elisabetta Sirani," in La Scuola di Guido Reni (Modena: Artioli, 1992), 343-364.

²¹ Bentini and Fortunati, "pittrice eroina," (2004).

twenty years of research.²² A growing interest in Elisabetta Sirani has also led to a return to studies of not only her work, but also her relation to other women artists such as Artemisia Gentileschi and Properzia De' Rossi, in academic dissertations.²³ Without the concentrated research of the previous scholars and writers that make up Elisabetta's *fortuna critica* recent academic studies, including mine, would not have been achievable.

The Biography of Elisabetta Sirani

Elisabetta Sirani was born in Bologna on the eighth of January 1638.²⁴ The eldest of four children, she had two sisters, Anna Maria, and Barbara, and a brother, Antonio Maria. Little is known about her mother, Margherita, however her father, Giovanni Andrea, was the principle assistant of Guido Reni. Elisabetta, as well as her two sisters, followed in their father's footsteps and became artists. Unfortunately, Elisabetta's life ended in August 1665 at the age of twenty-seven. Her sudden death from an inexplicable cause turned into a controversial trial between her suspicious family and a maid accused of poisoning the young artist.²⁵ An autopsy revealed that her stomach was full of holes; a modern medical explanation links her death to severe ulcers.²⁶ On November 14, 1665,

²² Adelina Modesti, Elisabetta Sirani: una virtuosa del seicento Bolognese (Bologna: Editrice Compositori, 2004).

²³ Nancy Baker, "Elisabetta Sirani: Her Life, Her Influence, and Her Legacy," M.A. thesis, University of Cincinnati, (1995), and Jennifer Estep Rhea, "The Power of Naming Themselves: Artists Properzia De' Rossi, Artemisia Gentileschi, and Elisabetta Sirani," Ph.D. diss., University of Alabama, (2002) are two examples of more focused research of Elisabetta Sirani from the last decade.

²⁴ Ragg, Women Artists, (1907), 238, explains that Elisabetta's birth date was written on a tablet above the front door to her home. It says "NEL GIORNO VIII, GENNAIO MDCXXXVIII QUI NACQUE ELISABETTA SIRANI...[Here born on the 8th of January 1638, Elisabetta Sirani...]."

²⁵ Ibid, 257-258, quotes Elisabetta Sirani's father that he truly believed the housemaid, Lucia Tolomelli, was capable of poisoning his talented daughter. Unfortunately Ragg gives no reference for this quote; therefore its validity could be considered questionable.

²⁶ According to Harris, Women Artists: 1550-1950, (1976), 149, and Tufts, Our Hidden Heritage, (1974), 82-83, at the time of Elisabetta's death it was believed by Malvasia that these holes, or ulcers, were possible, especially in a woman, as the result of a "lively female temperament;" he goes on to suggest that they "concealed her craving for a perhaps coveted husband, denied by her father." Despite a modern tendency to attribute the ulcers to the stress of her demanding career (see Bohn, "Female Self-Portraiture,"

three months after her death, the city of Bologna honored Elisabetta with an elaborate public funeral.²⁷ She was laid to rest in the vault belonging to Signor Saulo Guidotti in the church of San Domenico, next to the body of Guido Reni.²⁸

Elisabetta's short life and career is well documented thanks to the writings of Count Carlo Cesare Malvasia, a prominent art collector and critic in seventeenth-century Bologna. He not only wrote her biography, but also included an extensive and detailed list of approximately one hundred and ninety of her completed works in Felsina pittrice. Malvasia's catalogue is based on what he described as a careful record made by the artist of every work that she did.²⁹ Each year that Elisabetta worked professionally she made a list of the commissions as she received them. In his writings, Malvasia described Elisabetta as a child prodigy and an artistic genius.³⁰ Later in life he became an almost father-like mentor to Elisabetta. According to Malvasia, it was he, not her father, who was the first to recognize Elisabetta's early interest in and talent for painting, and encouraged the reluctant Giovanni Andrea to train her as a painter.³¹ Being trained at

(2004), fn. 58, who lists three publications relating to the modern medical diagnosis), the newest explanation for ulcers makes this unlikely, too.

²⁷ Chadwick, Women, Art, and Society, (2002), 104-105.

²⁸ Bohn, "Female Self-Portraiture," (2004), 264, explains that Elisabetta was laid to rest next to Guido Reni so that, "the two might be united in death as they had been in life." The original inscription on the tomb no longer exists, however the plaque on her home describes her as an "emulatrice di Guido Reni." The plaque was in place at least by 1907 because it is also described by Ragg, Women Artists, (1907), 238. For more information on Elisabetta work in relation to that of Guido Reni see Chapter 2.

²⁹ Felsina pittrice, II, 393-400, is a reproduction of Elisabetta's catalogue. Chadwick, Women, Art, and Society, (2002), 100, explains that she has listed in her catalogue 150 paintings and over 190 works including drawings and engravings, a figure that seems too low based on recent research. This implies that she produced several other works during her brief life that were not recorded for one reason or another. Tufts, Our Hidden Heritage, (1974), 82, states that Malvasia personally knew of other works executed secretly, without her father's knowledge, to help her mother financially.

³⁰ Felsina pittrice, II, 478. This description was taken from Rhea, "The Power of Naming Themselves," (2002), 13.

³¹ Malvasia states that it was "I who encouraged her always to the worthy enterprise..." see Felsina pittrice, II. The translation was taken from Greer, The Obstacle Race, (1979), 215, and Rhea, "The Power of Naming Themselves," (2002), 41. Ragg, Women Artists, (1907), 239, suggests that Giovanni Andrea's original reluctance to train his daughter was because he feared that her success might surpass his own.

home by one's father was virtually the only option open to women interested in the arts during the sixteenth and seventeenth century.³²

Although the exact details of Elisabetta's training are not clear, she primarily studied with her father whose style is linked to that of his master, Guido Reni.³³ Guido Reni was trained in the Carracci Academy and eventually began his own workshop in Bologna where he took on several students. Giovanni Andrea was a student of Reni's and became his most trusted assistant in the mid 1630's.³⁴ After Reni's death in 1642, Giovanni Andrea took charge of his studio, finishing several of his outstanding commissions and copying others.³⁵ It is because of the closeness between Guido Reni and her father that Elisabetta's work has been linked with the style of Reni, even though she was only four years old when he died in 1642. Besides her presumed access to Reni's work in her father's studio, she was able to view several of Reni's paintings in Bologna. This, more than likely, served as part of her training. Learning from her father and from the example provided by his master, Elisabetta might be characterized as representative of the third generation of the Carracci Academy.³⁶

Another significant influence on Elisabetta's art was the city in which she lived her entire life. By the seventeenth century Bologna was an urban center famous for both

³² Caroline Murphy, Lavinia Fontana: A Painter and Her Patrons in Sixteenth Century Bologna (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 13, explains that generally females interested in art were trained by an established artist who was related to them, such as a father, uncle, or husband. Lavinia Fontana, for example, was trained by her artist-father, Prospero Fontana, in the 1570's in Bologna.

³³ See Bentini and Fortunati, "pittrice eroina," (2004), 170-176, and Modesti, Elisabetta Sirani: una virtuosa del seicento Bolognese, (2004), 161-225.

³⁴ Count Carlo Cesare Malvasia, Live of Guido Reni, trans. Catherine Enggass and Robert Enggass (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), 15-16, 73; D. Stephen Pepper, "Scuola di Guido Reni. Edited by Emilio Negro and Massimo Pironi [book review]," The Burlington Magazine, 136 (1994), 629; and Modesti, "Cultural Heroine," (2001), 399.

³⁵ Ragg, Women Artists, (1907), 239, and Baker, "Sirani: Her Life," (1995), 16.

³⁶ Despite Bologna's openness towards women, Elisabetta would not have been able to study the human nude or train at any academy, even the Carracci Academy. See Pepper, "Bolognese Painting," (1986), 325-340, for more information on the generations of the Carracci Academy.

its educational opportunities and economic growth that, in turn, led to thriving artistic production. The University of Bologna was founded in 1088 and received its charter in 1158 from Frederick I Barbarossa.³⁷ Along with the building of Europe's first university came increased migration, a growing infrastructure, and vibrant civic activity. During Elisabetta's life, Bologna was full of scholars, whose fields ranged from law to the natural sciences, was economically sound, and was a flourishing center for the arts.³⁸ Bologna was also a major religious center, hosting the Council of Trent in 1547. The resulting Counter Reformation demands led to the need to build and decorate more religious buildings which also led to the overall increase in artistic production.

One of Bologna's greatest resources, its university, was open and accessible to women, a privilege that was not typical at this time.³⁹ The education of women was encouraged by the Bolognese Bishop Gabriele Paleotti (1522-1597), whose mother had been well educated.⁴⁰ The city of Bologna considered its ability to produce female scholars in many areas of study a source of pride. Women were able to attend as students, present lectures, and had access to educational tools such as the extensive libraries in the city.

By the beginning of the fifteenth century the population of female outnumbered men.⁴¹ In correlation with the population increase of females, Bologna became home to some of the earliest recorded female artists. Many of the women artists were nuns, who

³⁷ J.K. Hyde, "Universities and Cities in Medieval Italy," in *The University and the City*, ed. Thomas Bender (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 17-18, states that the University Law School was in existence during the twelfth century. The official web site of the Università di Bologna says that the university began in 1088 and received its charter in 1158 as a place where "research could develop independently from any other power." See "Our History," Università di Bologna, 2004-2008, <http://www.eng.unibo.it/PortaleEn/University/Our+History/default.htm> (February 25, 2008).

³⁸ Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, (2002), 87, 91-92.

³⁹ Ibid, 87; Baker, "Sirani: Her Life," (1995), 46; Modesti, *Elisabetta Sirani*, (2004), 43, 105-107.

⁴⁰ Caroline Murphy, "Lavinia Fontana and le Dame delle Città: Understanding Female Artistic Patronage in Late Sixteenth-Century Bologna," *Renaissance Studies*, 10, no. 2 (1996), 192-193.

⁴¹ Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, (2002), 90; Baker, "Sirani: Her Life," (1995), 46; and Harris, *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, (1976), 20. Bohn, "Female Self-Portraiture," (2004), 279, reaffirms this notion by explaining that the number of female monasteries increased from twenty in 1490 to twenty-nine in 1621.

link devout Christian beliefs to the production of music and visual arts for their religious houses. Caterina dei Vigri (1413-1463) was the first of several women artists who, ultimately, paved the way for Elisabetta's career.⁴²

Caterina was born into a prosperous Bolognese family in 1413.⁴³ She became a Franciscan nun in Ferrara in the late 1420's. Caterina returned to Bologna in 1456, becoming the founder of the Poor Clares and creating a convent connected with the church of Corpus Domini.⁴⁴ Although she was well educated, literate, and able to play music, she never trained as an artist. Her paintings were mostly manuscript illuminations and miniatures.⁴⁵ Her fame as an artist was not tied to her stylistic innovations, but to the notion that her paintings were miraculous and able to cure the sick. According to Laura Ragg, she was a prophetess of sorts who had visions, premonitions, and supernatural healing capabilities.⁴⁶ Caterina dei Vigri was beatified in 1592, canonized as one of the patron saints of Bologna in 1712, assuring the preservation of her art as spiritually significant.⁴⁷ Elisabetta Sirani's house was around the corner from the Corpus Domini convent, so it can be assumed that she had knowledge of the saintly nun and her work.⁴⁸

⁴² Several sources mention the tradition of female artists influencing Elisabetta's career. See Greer, The Obstacle Race, (1979), 208-215; Baker, "Sirani: Her Life," (1995), 46-50; Ghirardi, "The Self-Portrait," (1998), 32-47; Chadwick, Women, Art, and Society, (2002), 87-100; Bohn, "The Antique Heroines," (2002), 52-59; and Vera Fortunati, "Frammenti di un dialogo nel tempo: Elisabetta Sirani e le donne artiste," in Elisabetta Sirani: "pittrice eroina" 1638- 1665 (Bologna: Compositori, 2004), 19-40.

⁴³ Ragg, Women Artists, (1907), 14; Harris, Women Artists: 1550-1950, (1976), 20. For more recent literature see Chadwick, Women, Art, and Society, (2002), 88-90, for a brief biography of Caterina dei Vigri.

⁴⁴ Bohn, "The Antique Heroines," (2002), 52-53. For more information on the Poor Clares see Jeryldene Wood, Women, Art, and Spirituality: the Poor Clares of Early Modern Italy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁴⁵ Greer, The Obstacle Race, (1979), 174.

⁴⁶ Ragg, Women Artists, (1907), 67-102, and later confirmed by Harris, Women Artists: 1550-1950, (1976), 20, and Bohn, "Female Self-Portraiture," (2004), 280.

⁴⁷ Bohn, "The Antique Heroines," (2002), 53, notes that Bologna is the only Italian city with its own female saint associated with the art of painting.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 285, suggests that Elisabetta would have known about Caterina, although she never produced a depiction of the nun. Elisabetta Sirani's sister, Anna Maria, painted a canvas for Malta of the *Beata Caterina Vigri of Bologna* according to three writers, Felsina pittrice, II, 412; Arfelli, "Bologna

It was only in the sixteenth century that women began to take on art as a profession. In Bologna at least twenty women were recorded as painters in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, along with one successful sculptor, Properzia de' Rossi.⁴⁹ She was born in Bologna in 1490 and studied drawing under Marcantonio Raimondi (c. 1475-1534) who was known for his engravings of the paintings by Raphael.⁵⁰ She began her career carving intricate scenes on the pits of fruit.⁵¹ According to Vasari, around 1525, she received an important commission for the façade of San Petronio, a large-scale marble relief of *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*. Despite its evident public function, Vasari and all subsequent writers emphasized its seemingly autobiographical character, linking Potiphar's lustful wife to Properzia's unrequited love.⁵² Like Elisabetta, Properzia died at a young age. She was well known throughout Italy, and her reputation was such that even Pope Clement VIII knew of her.⁵³

Another example of a Bolognese female artist who Elisabetta would have admired was Lavinia Fontana (1552-1614). Unlike Caterina dei Vigri and Properzia de' Rossi, Lavinia's early recognition as an artist came because she trained under her father, a famous painter.⁵⁴ Prospero Fontana, the teacher of Ludovico Carracci, educated his

Perlustrata," (1957), 188-237; and Crespi, Felsina Pittrice, (1769), 75. According to Crespi, Felsina Pittrice, (1769), 119, Elisabetta's student, Lucrezia Scarfaglia, did a painting of the saintly nun for the Bolognese Albergati family.

⁴⁹ Chadwick, Women, Art, and Society, (2002), 90.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 92-93, notes that Rossi studied drawing under Marcantonio Raimondi. For more information on Raimondi see Lisa Pon, Raphael, Dürer, and Marcantonio Raimondi: copying and the Italian Renaissance (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

⁵¹ See Vasari, Lives, III, 857 for a description of a Passion of Christ carved on a single peach stone.

⁵² Ibid, 858; Fredrika H. Jacobs, "The Construction of a Life: Madonna Properzia De' Rossi 'Scultrice' Bolognese," Word and Image, 9 (1993), 123; and Natalie Harris Bluestone, "The Female Gaze: Women's Interpretations of the Life and Work of Properzia De' Rossi, Renaissance Sculptor," in Double Vision: Perspectives On Gender and the Visual Arts (London: Associated University Press, 1995), 38-62.

⁵³ Vasari, Lives III, 1046.

⁵⁴ For description of Lavinia Fontana's beginnings as an artist and her early career see Chadwick, Women, Art, and Society, (2002), 93-96; Murphy, Lavinia Fontana, (2003), 13-48; and Vera Fortunati. "Lavinia

daughter in the ideals of Renaissance painting, practiced in his own workshop and later in the Carracci Academy.⁵⁵ Lavinia also studied paintings by Raphael, Parmigianino and Pellegrino Tibaldi in local churches and palaces. She began painting around 1575, a date based on the earliest legible inscription on one of her paintings, a *Portrait of a Child*, and continued to paint until her death in 1614.⁵⁶ The subjects of her paintings range from portraits and small religious works to altarpieces for churches in Bologna, Cento, and Rome. Fontana was the first woman who seems to have managed to combine an active career with what could be described as a conventional lifestyle for a woman in the sixteenth century.⁵⁷ She was married in 1577 to Gian Paolo Zappi, a minor artist who became her assistant, and was the mother of eleven children.⁵⁸ By invitation from Pope Clement VIII, she moved to Rome in 1603 where she died eleven years later. Her immense body of work and her fame surely served as an exemplar for her fellow Bolognese female artist, Elisabetta Sirani. Caterina dei Vigri, Properzia de' Rossi, and Lavinia Fontana set an important precedent for Elisabetta to follow.

Elisabetta began painting at quite a young age. Her competence as a painter was quickly recognized and her fame spread through the city of Bologna. One of the most significant characteristics of her work was the speed with which she painted.⁵⁹ There are

Fontana: Woman Artist in the Age of the Counter-Reformation," in Lavinia Fontana of Bologna 1552-1614, exhib. cat. (Milano: Electa, 1998), 13-14.

⁵⁵ Fortunati, "Lavinia Fontana," (1998), 13, explains that Renaissance masters such as Raphael and Correggio inspired her father's work and that he owned several prints, engravings, and drawings by them that would have been accessible to Lavinia.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 14.

⁵⁷ Harris, Women Artists: 1550-1950, (1976), 111.

⁵⁸ Chadwick, Women, Art, and Society, (2002), 93-94, explains that Prospero Fontana also trained Zappi. The marriage contract of 1577 stated that the couple had to remain part of her father's household and her husband would be responsible for assisting Lavinia in painting and in caring for their large family.

⁵⁹ It is obvious from the large amount of recorded works completed during her short life that she worked quickly and efficiently. For a recent source see Beatrice Buscaroli Fabbri, "Il tempo lungo e il tempo breve di Carlo Cignani ei di Elisabetta Sirani," in Elisabetta Sirani: "pittrice eroina" 1638- 1665 (Bologna: Compositori, 2004), 143-153.

several instances where the rapidity of her painting was noted by Malvasia.⁶⁰ Her patrons would come to watch her in her studio to witness the quickness with which she worked and to admire her sophisticated compositions and technique. They were also able to witness for themselves that Elisabetta really did design and produce her paintings without the help of her father.⁶¹ Indeed, due to the quality of her compositions and painterly touch her work became an artistic phenomenon. As her reputation spread, Elisabetta became a tourist attraction. In 1664, the Grand Duke Cosimo III de' Medici came to her studio, having heard about her marvelous talent. Impressed with her paintings and her technique he commissioned an image of the Blessed Virgin from her, which Elisabetta, as she recorded in her inventory with pride, was able to complete so quickly that it was dry in time for the Duke to take it home to Florence.⁶²

Her father, realizing that she could produce a large number of paintings in a short amount of time, used his daughter's ability for financial gain.⁶³ Elisabetta was under constant pressure from her father to complete commissions, working from dawn until dusk each day with the exception of Sundays.⁶⁴ With the exception of objects such as necklaces that she received in lieu of payment, Giovanni Andrea was also in full control of her monetary income, which he used for the family's day-to-day living expenses.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Greer, *The Obstacle Race*, (1979), 218 translates Malvasia discussion of the completion of her first large-scale public commission for the nave of the church of San Girolamo at the new Certosa of Bologna, which was completed within only one year.

⁶¹ Ibid, 216, and Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, (2002), 104, explains that there was speculation that Elisabetta's father was actually responsible for drawing the elaborate compositional development of her paintings. Further it was rumored that Giovanni Andrea was passing off his own paintings as his daughter's to exploit the publicity value of a young female prodigy. Due to such speculation about her working method, Elisabetta became comfortable working in public.

⁶² *Felsina pittrice*, II, 473-474. This note was taken from Tufts, *Our Hidden Heritage*, (1974), 82; and Rhea, "The Power of Naming Themselves," (2002), 63. Also see Modesti, *Elisabetta Sirani*, (2004), 23-25.

⁶³ Ragg, *Women Artists*, (1907), 242 and Baker, "Sirani: Her Life," (1995), 9.

⁶⁴ Ragg, *Women Artists*, (1907), 242.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 242; Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, (2002), 100; and Rhea, "The Power of Naming Themselves," (2002), 48.

According to Malvasia, Elisabetta's catalogue did not represent her total output of work, since it excluded various small heads and figures that she painted without the knowledge of her father in order to provide some extra financial support for her mother. With Giovanni Andrea suffering from gout and unable to paint and her mother also unable to support the family, it is no mystery why Elisabetta's family was not eager to marry her off. She became the primary source of income for the struggling family. This extensive, even excessive activity led eventually to sickness and premature death.

Despite these hardships, Elisabetta Sirani also contributed much to the long-standing tradition of Bologna women artists. Due to the high regard of her contemporaries held her in, by 1652 she was able to develop a school of unprecedented scale for women to learn painting and drawing.⁶⁶ Elisabetta's workshop was filled with visitors who were not only important patrons, but were also interested in learning her painting style. Eventually her workshop became a crowded classroom, with students whose artistic knowledge ranged from poor to highly advanced. Her studio provided an exciting and vibrant environment for a wide variety of female artists.

The backgrounds of these women ranged across the entire social spectrum, even including aristocratic noblewomen, such as Caterina Pepoli and a member of the Panzacchi family.⁶⁷ According to Malvasia, some of Sirani's students were close to her own age, other girls were quite young, while yet others were twenty and thirty years her

⁶⁶ Chadwick, Women, Art, and Society, (2002), 104, gives the date of 1652 for the beginning of Elisabetta's school. Greer, The Obstacle Race, (1979), 218, mentions that Elisabetta's school for women was not the first of its kind, but it was the first significant women's school for in-depth artistic training. She mentions an earlier example, Mariangiola Criscuolo, who taught young girls the basic fundamentals of art. Also see Ragg, Women Artists, (1907), 242; Irene Graziani, "Il cenacolo di Elisabetta Sirani," in Elisabetta Sirani : "pittrice eroina" 1638- 1665 (Bologna: Compositori, 2004), 119-135; Modesti, Elisabetta Sirani, (2004), 71-157.

⁶⁷ Ragg, Women Artists, (1907), 242; Greer, The Obstacle Race, (1979), 219-221; and Modesti, "Sirani, Elisabetta," (1997), 1272-1274, discuss the information that follows regarding Elisabetta's students.

senior.⁶⁸ An example of the latter is Ginevra Cantofoli, of whom Elisabetta painted a portrait in 1656.⁶⁹ Cantofoli is considered the most successful painter to emerge from Elisabetta's school.⁷⁰ She painted miniatures, but with the help and encouragement of Elisabetta, she also began to execute works of substantial size, including altarpieces and history paintings such as the *Last Supper* for San Procolo.⁷¹ Other successful artists from Elisabetta's school include, but are not limited to Lucrezia Bianchi, who received commissions from the Duchess of Modena, and Veronica Fontana, who became a famous wood-block printmaker and coincidentally was the illustrator of Malvasia's Felsina pittrice.

Elisabetta also taught her sisters, Anna Maria and Barbara. The Sirani sisters were responsible for several commissions after the death of their older sibling. There are ten known works by Anna Maria, and it appears that Barbara produced at least nine paintings, one of which, an *Ecce Homo*, is located in the church of the Servi in Bologna.⁷² This work was completed, or at least begun, before the death of Elisabetta because some of the characteristics of its design reflect her drawing style.⁷³ Another work linked to a design provided by Elisabetta is Barbara's altarpiece still in the church of Santissima Trinità fuori del Castello.⁷⁴ Finally, Barbara is credited with producing two ink and wash drawings for Elisabetta's funeral in 1665. The subjects of these drawings are allegories

⁶⁸ Felsina pittrice, II, 406-407, lists several of Elisabetta's students.

⁶⁹ The existence of this portrait is unknown, however it was documented by Malvasia, see Felsina pittrice, II, 393.

⁷⁰ For more information on Ginevra Cantofoli see Massimo Pulini, Ginevra Cantofoli: la nuova nascita di una pittrice nella Bologna del Seicento (Bologna: Compositori, 2006).

⁷¹ Modesti, "Sirani, Elisabetta," (1997), 1275, describes the *Last Supper*, still located in San Procolo, as Ginevra Cantofoli's altarpiece based on the design of her teacher.

⁷² Baker, "Sirani: Her Life," (1995), 50

⁷³ Greer, The Obstacle Race, (1979), 219, attributes the elegant, simple composition to Elisabetta describing Barbara's execution as poorly done.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 219. A study drawing for this altarpiece, *Three Persons of the Trinity*, is located in the Uffizi and is attributed to Elisabetta.

of *Elisabetta Sirani as Virtue (la Virtù)* and *Elisabetta Sirani as Poetry (la Poesia)* (Fig. 1 and 2).⁷⁵

Elisabetta's school is evidence of her unique role in the history of Bolognese art. Although Elisabetta herself trained with her father, she opened her workshop to train other women. This process is clearly different from the initial training she received, and from the training that had been available to other women up until that point. This extraordinary moment of women training women lasted for only a short time and ended with Elisabetta's sudden death.⁷⁶ Her sisters continued to work for their father and kept the workshop open, but their art production slowly declined without the influence of Elisabetta.

The Career of Elisabetta Sirani

By the young age of sixteen Elisabetta Sirani had become a talented artist.⁷⁷ In 1655, Elisabetta had completed her first two commissions, both for private patrons. By this time she had begun to keep a very precise account of her completed paintings and engravings, noting the subject matter, the medium, the buyer, and its intended location.⁷⁸ Her commissions increased year after year, with five works in 1656 and an astonishing eighteen works, two of which she also engraved, in 1657.

⁷⁵ Greer, *The Obstacle Race*, (1979), 220; Baker, "Sirani: Her Life," (1995), 51; Modesti, *Elisabetta Sirani*, (2004), 342-343. They are now located in the Uffizi, Gabinetto del Disegni.

⁷⁶ Bohn, "Female Self-Portraiture," (2004), 258, explains how Elisabetta revolutionized artistic training for women in the sixteenth century. Baker, "Sirani: Her Life," (1995), 53, implies that shortly after Elisabetta's death the workshop and school cease to exist.

⁷⁷ Although the exact dates of her training are unknown, she began studying with her father at a young age. By 1654, when Elisabetta was sixteen, she had become an artist skillful enough to be noticed by patrons.

⁷⁸ Her complete list of works is published in *Felsina Pittrice*, II, 393-400. According to Tufts, *Our Hidden Heritage*, (1974), 81, keeping a list of completed works was typical of painters at this time. Idem, 82, explains that Elisabetta's etchings and engravings are mostly religious in subject matter and date from early in her career. Once she became widely popular her time was devoted to fulfilling her painting commissions.

Elisabetta received her first public commission on February 28, 1657, at the age of nineteen.⁷⁹ Her largest recorded painting, the *Baptism of Christ* was commissioned for the Church of San Girolama alla Certosa in Bologna and completed in 1658 (Fig. 3).⁸⁰ The details of the commission, discussed in *Felsina pittrice*, reveal that Elisabetta was overjoyed when she received the commission for the *Baptism of Christ* and that she immediately drew a brush-wash sketch as a possible composition while still in the church.⁸¹ According to Malvasia, the *Baptism of Christ* is evidence of Elisabetta's genius.⁸²

This enormous painting, which measures approximately thirteen feet high and sixteen and a half feet wide, is unusual in its elaborate, multi-figural composition, unlike traditional *Baptism* scenes that depict private and quiet moments. As her first public commission, Elisabetta took this opportunity to demonstrate her abilities as an artist, proving that she could paint any genre of art. In the *Baptism* Elisabetta included a still-life, a landscape, several animals, crowds of people, all showing her ability to articulate the human form, a self-portrait, and genre scenes such as the figure that hangs wet linens

⁷⁹ Bohn, "Female Self-Portraiture," (2004), 279, explains the details of the commission. The painting was more than likely commissioned by Daniele Granchi, the Ferrarese prior of San Gerolamo from 1644 to 1660. Elisabetta was promised a fee of 1000 lire for the completed work according to Crespi, *Felsina pittrice*, (1769), 20.

⁸⁰ *Felsina pittrice*, II, 394, lists the *Baptism* as a painting produced in 1658. Ragg, *Women Artists*, (1907), 292-297; Bohn, "Drawing Practices," (2004), 212; Idem, "Female Self-Portraiture," (2004), 279, specifically mentions that the painting was signed and dated 1658 by the artist. Modesti, "Sirani, Elisabetta," (1997), 1274, states that the *Baptism* is signed and dated 1657. Based on her inventory and more recent studies, the date given by Modesti must be an error.

⁸¹ *Felsina pittrice*, II, 402; Harris, *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, (1976), 148; Modesti, "Sirani, Elisabetta," (1997), 1274-1275. Ragg, *Women Artists*, (1907), 293, tells the story slightly different, explaining that Elisabetta was in her home when she sketched the preliminary composition. Regardless, she emphasizes that Elisabetta presented Malvasia with a complete sketch that was conceived and executed extraordinarily quickly. Bohn, "Drawing Practices," (2004), 213-216, notes four known preliminary sketches for this *Baptism*.

⁸² *Felsina pittrice*, II, 385-407. This information was taken from Modesti, "Sirani, Elisabetta," (1997), 1274-1275, and further discussed in Jadranka Bentini, "Elisabetta Sirani: 'Un'idea di perfezione' (Malvasia)" in *Elisabetta Sirani: "pittrice eroina" 1638- 1665* (Bologna: Compositori, 2004), 41-56.

from a tree branch, in addition to the religious subject matter of Christ's Baptism.⁸³

Elisabetta used this enormous *Baptism of Christ* to attract patrons interested in any type of painting.⁸⁴

Elisabetta also used this painting to prove that her artistic talent was comparable to male artists. Her *Baptism of Christ* includes a depiction of both the earthly and heavenly realms. In the center of the painting Christ kneels on a boulder before John the Baptist. In accordance with tradition, a similar scene had been painted by Francesco Albani in 1640 and by Annibale Carracci in 1584 for the church of San Gregorio (Fig. 4 and 5).⁸⁵ Directly above the Baptism scene is the dove of the Holy Spirit and God the Father emerging from the heavens surrounded by several angels, similar to the lost work, *God Establishing the Sabbath* by Raphael, painted between 1518 and 1519 in the Vatican Logge (Fig. 6).⁸⁶ Flanking the central scene is a crowd of angels, men, women, children, and animals. Some of these figural groupings can be identified with the work of several sixteenth and seventeenth-century artists. For example, the two angels with large white wings kneeling to the left of Christ resemble the angels from Verrocchio's *Baptism of*

⁸³ The seated female figure nursing in the right foreground of the painting is considered a self-portrait of the artist according to Ragg, *Women Artists*, (1907), 295-286, Baker, "Sirani: Her Life," (1995), 23, De Girolami Cheney "Elisabetta Sirani," (2003), 72; and Bohn, "Female Self-Portraiture," (2004), 277-279.

⁸⁴ Bohn, "Female Self-Portraiture," (2004), 279, explains that Elisabetta's signature on the painting today is not the original signature. Originally her name was more modestly painted, but then changed to bright white capital letters that stand roughly two feet in height. Also see Bentini and Fortunati, "pittrice eronia," (2004), 251, for a detail which illustrates Elisabetta's first signature.

⁸⁵ Francesco Albani and Annibale Carracci's *Baptisms* are traditional in their strong vertical composition, which is quite opposite from Elisabetta's horizontal painting. See Catherine R. Puglisi, *Francesco Albani* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 29-31, 179-181; and Anton Willem Adriaan Boschloo, *Annibale Carracci in Bologna: Visible Reality in Art After the Council of Trent*, 2 vols. (New York: A. Schram, 1974), 11-13, 272.

⁸⁶ For a reproduction of this lost work see Bernice F. Davidson, *Raphael's Bible: A Study of the Vatican Logge* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985), 46-47, figs. 8 and 9. This painting was produced for the Vatican Logge under Leo X between 1518 and 1519.

Christ from 1472 to 1475 (Fig. 7).⁸⁷ Another two figures in the crowd, one a young man dressed in a red tunic on the lower left side of the painting and the other, a man removing a white shirt, on the opposite side of the painting are similar to figure sketches produced by Annibale Carracci. The boy on the left is pulling up his stocking, a pose that is reminiscent of Carracci's red chalk drawing of a *Boy Taking off His Sock* from 1584, and the other on the right side of the painting who removes his shirt from over his head appears to be the same in position as *A Boy Taking off His Shirt* drawn by Annibale from 1583 to 1585 (Fig. 8 and 9).⁸⁸ In general, the crowd of gesturing figures appears similar to the movement in paintings such as Guido Reni's *Massacre of the Innocents* from 1611 and Jacopo Tintoretto's *Miracle of the Slave* from 1548 (Fig. 10 and 11).⁸⁹ It is obvious from these comparisons that Elisabetta knew the work of famous male masters and was able to emulate them. As her first large-scale public commission, *The Baptism of Christ* proved her worth as a multi-talented painter and attracted further patrons.

Without a doubt, *The Baptism of Christ* is evidence enough that Elisabetta looked to the tradition of Bolognese art. A painting such as Elisabetta's *Cleopatra* is yet another type of work that demonstrates knowledge of well-established traditions (Fig 12).⁹⁰

Several prominent Bolognese artists, including Guido Reni, Guercino, and Domenichino,

⁸⁷ See Antonio Natali, "Lo sguardo degli angeli," in *Lo sguardo degli angeli : Verrocchio, Leonardo e il "Battesimo di Cristo,"* (Milan: Silvana, 1998) 61-94, for detailed colored pictures of two angels in the *Baptism of Christ* by Verrocchio.

⁸⁸ Daniele Benati, *The Drawings of Annibale Carracci* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1999), 63-64 and 67-68, for a reproduction of the sketch of a *Boy Taking off His Sock*, now located in the British Museum, and *Boy Taking off His Shirt*, currently located in the Louvre.

⁸⁹ Guido Reni's *Massacre of the Innocents* was painted for the family chapel of Conte Beró in S. Domenico, Bologna, but it is now located in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Bologna, see D. Stephen Pepper, *Guido Reni: A Complete Catalogue of His Works with Introductory Texts* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 225-226, and idem, *Guido Reni: L'opera completa* (London: Phaidon Press, 1988), 230-231. The *Miracle of the Slave*, now in the Accademia Museum, was painted for the Scuola Grande of San Marco, see Tom Nichols, *Tintoretto: Tradition and Identity* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 48-51, 58-61.

⁹⁰ See Modesti, *Elisabetta Sirani*, (2004), 269 (plate 154), for a color plate of Elisabetta's *Cleopatra*, which measures approximately thirty-seven by thirty inches and is currently located in a private collection.

produced paintings similar to Elisabetta's *Cleopatra* that were quickly and easily created, sold to market buyers, and often copied or mass-produced.⁹¹ Generally paintings that follow a famous standard are dull, lacking the spark of creativity, however Elisabetta's painting was unusual in comparison to the work of her predecessors. For the most part, this type illustrates a portrait-like image of an individual accompanied by their defining attribute; typically Cleopatra is portrayed with a snake representing her famous suicide. In the case of the Elisabetta's *Cleopatra*, however, she holds in her hands a pearl and a bowl. This change in attributes reflects a change in subject, replacing the scene of her suicide with the moment when Cleopatra cleverly proves her wealth to Antony.⁹² Elisabetta's portrayal of the heroine lacks the nudity and exaggerated emotion that was common in versions of the same subject by male artists, including Guido Reni's *Cleopatra* painted from 1625 to 1626.⁹³ Elisabetta created a dignified portrait of Cleopatra while at the same time, keeping within the tradition of the market painting.

Among Elisabetta's most famous paintings are a group of works illustrating the virtues of courage, honor, and integrity possessed by a female protagonist. An example of a work that possesses these characteristics is *Portia Wounding Her Thigh* from 1664, which features a heroic female protagonist (Fig. 14). According to Elisabetta's list, this painting was intended to be hung over a door in the home of Simone Tassi, a wealthy

⁹¹ Examples of specific paintings that fit into this market type are Guido Reni's *Saint Cecilia* (Fig. 13) from 1606 (now located in the Norton Simon Museum): see Pepper, *Guido Reni: L'opera completa*, (1988), 221, and Guercino's *Persian Sybil* painted in 1647 (currently located in the Capitoline Gallery in Rome): see Sergio Guarino and Patrizia Masini, *Pinacoteca Capitolina: catalogo generale*, (Rome: Electa, 2006), 286-287.

⁹² See Bohn, "The Antique Heroines," (2002), 76-77 and footnote 87.

⁹³ See Pepper, *Guido Reni: A Complete Catalogue*, (1984), 255 (cat. no. 111), is the entry for Guido Reni's *Cleopatra* from 1626. This painting portrays Cleopatra nearly nude with only a sash of fabric across her pubic area. Her head is tilted back with her eyes directed upwards as she leans on a bed. This painting is now located in a private collection in Florence.

Bolognese silk merchant who primarily collected Bolognese works of art.⁹⁴ In his collection Tassi also had paintings by Giovanni Andrea Sirani, one of which portrayed *Semiramis*, an Assyrian queen. This portrait hung next to Elisabetta's *Portia*, and is generally thought to have been its companion piece.⁹⁵ The story of Portia is told in two ancient sources, one of which, Plutarch's *Lives*, is known to have been in the Sirani library.⁹⁶

In the Life of Brutus, Plutarch documented Portia's heroism.⁹⁷ Portia demonstrated her devotion to Brutus, her husband, by courageously stabbed herself in the thigh with a dagger. She then explained to him that she wounded herself to prove that she is strong enough for her husband to confide in about his conspiracy. In the end, Portia committed suicide after Brutus' death at the battle of Philippi.

Closely following the literary text, Elisabetta elegantly illustrates the moment after Portia has removed the dagger from her leg. Her hand, grasping the dagger, is raised in the air while she contemplates the blood emerging from the wound on her upper thigh. Portia is placed close to the front of the picture plane where the fabric design and

⁹⁴ Raffaella Morselli and Anna Cera Sones, Collezioni e quadriere nella Bologna del Seicento: inventari 1640-1707 (Los Angeles, California: J. Paul Getty Information Institute, 1998), 420, Tassi's inventory from 1671 shows that he owned five pictures by Elisabetta Sirani and her *Portia* was considered the most valuable item in his collection, appraised at five hundred lire. Bohn, "The Antique Heroines," (2002), 67, names two other paintings in his collection, a Venus and a Sybil. *Portia Wounding Her Thigh*, which measures forty inches in height and fifty-four inches in length, is now located in Houston, Texas: see Fortunati, "Frammenti di un dialogo nel tempo," (2004), 34, plate 12.

⁹⁵ Bohn, "The Antique Heroines," (2002), 67. The *Semiramis* by Giovanni Andrea Sirani is now lost. The biographies of both Semiramis and Portia are included in Giovanni Boccaccio, Famous Women, ed. and trans. Virginia Brown (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 16-23 and 340-343, respectively.

⁹⁶ According to Bohn, "The Antique Heroines," (2002), 60, and Morselli and Sones, Collezioni, (1998), 414, an inventory of Giovanni Andrea Sirani's possessions in 1666 show that he had a collection of twenty ancient and modern books, which were accessible to Elisabetta, who lived in his house her entire life. This collection includes Pliny's Natural History, Ovid's Metamorphoses, Plutarch's Lives, Vasari's Lives, a book of the lives of saints, and Cesare Ripa's Iconologia.

⁹⁷ Plutarch, Makers of Rome: Nine lives: Coriolanus, Fabius Maximus, Marcellus, Cato The Elder, Tiberius Gracchus, Gaius Gracchus, Sertorius, Brutus, Mark Antony, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (New York : Dorset Press, 1985).

texture of her dress is detailed.⁹⁸ The figure of Portia is rendered with soft, curving limbs, bold facial features, and an intricate hair arrangement laced with pearls and jewels. Her deep red dress accented with gold is modestly raised above her knee restraining the display of flesh to what is only necessary to illustrate the story.⁹⁹ Through the doorway in the background are four maidens weaving, an activity appealing to the patron, a silk merchant.¹⁰⁰

Typically it was Portia's suicide by ingesting hot coals that was depicted or implied by artists.¹⁰¹ For example, Guido Reni painted an image of Portia with a bowl of coals as her attribute.¹⁰² Instead of illustrating this moment in the narrative, Elisabetta chose to depict Portia's resolute actions in life. This work of 1664 is the most famous of her heroines and is a good example of her mature and sophisticated style. It also attests to her interest in the depiction of female power and authority. Furthermore it confirms a commitment to her patron through the inclusion of his profession into her painting. Painted in the last years of her life, *Portia* is emblematic of this talented, young artist who could transform the story of a pagan woman into one of a virtuous heroine.

⁹⁸ An emphasis placed on the fabric of Portia's dress might have been important to the patron considering his profession as a silk merchant.

⁹⁹ Elisabetta's *Portia* displays a moderate amount of nudity in comparison to heroines portrayed by male artists.

¹⁰⁰ A maid in the background, like Portia, also wears a red dress, which brightens the dark, earthy palette. Two other maidservants, dressed in green and white, balance the theological colors, namely red, green, and white, symbolic of charity or courage, hope, and faith or purity respectively. It is curious that Portia wears a combination of all three colors, however dominating the scene is red the symbol of charity and courage, but also symbolic of love. Arthur Wheelock, "Colour Symbolism in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting," in *The Learned Eye: Regarding Art, Theory, and the Artist's Reputation*, ed. Marieke van den Doel, Natasja van Eck, Gerbrand Korevaa, and Anna Tummers, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 99-110, focuses on the meaning of color based on Ripa's *Iconologia*, a book that Elisabetta would have been familiar with, see note 96.

¹⁰¹ Bohn, "The Antique Heroines," (2002), 66-67 and Harris, *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, (1976), 150, explain that there were numerous paintings of Portia's death, but none of her wounding her thigh. Elisabetta's *Portia* is signed and dated, 1664, by the artist.

¹⁰² Pepper, *Guido Reni: A Complete Catalogue*, (1984), 254 (cat. no. 107).

CHAPTER 2

*JUDITH WITH THE HEAD OF HOLOFERNES*An Analysis of Judith

One of the earliest examples of Elisabetta's reformulation of a heroic woman was her *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* painted in 1658, only a couple of years after she first began recording her commissions (Fig. 15).¹⁰³ The *Judith* measures ninety-three inches tall and seventy-two inches wide, making it one of her largest works, a monumental accomplishment at such a young age. This painting of the virtuous heroine was produced for Andrea Cattalani, a wealthy Bolognese banker who owned seven paintings by Elisabetta, fifteen by her father, and numerous other seventeenth-century Bolognese works.¹⁰⁴

In order to fully understand Elisabetta's *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* it is important to know the Old Testament story of Judith, which was anonymously written toward the end of the second century BCE and later translated into Latin by Saint

¹⁰³ Felsina pittrice, II, 394, transcribed Elisabetta's description of the painting: "Una Guiditta mostrante la testa di Oloferne al Popolo di Bettuglia di notte tempo, con la nutrice, e due paggetti con torci accesi che fanno lume, figure del naturale per il sig. Cattalani."; Hugh Brigstocke and John Somerville, Italian Paintings from Burghley House (Alexandria, Virginia: Art Services International, 1995), 138; and Modesti, Elisabetta Sirani, (2004), 234-240. Elisabetta's *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* is now located in the Burghley House Gallery in England. It is signed and dated 1658.

¹⁰⁴ Bohn, "The Antique Heroines," (2002), 60-61. Although Cattalani's inventory from 1668 (Morselli and Sones, Collezioni, (1998), 153-158) records seven paintings by Elisabetta, her list only cites three works commissioned by him (Felsina pittrice, II, 394, 397).

Jerome.¹⁰⁵ This translation was the source for numerous retellings during the Middle Ages.¹⁰⁶ The tale begins as the Assyrian general, Holofernes, under the command of the king of Nineveh, attacks the Israelite town of Bethulia on his way to Jerusalem. He cut off their water supply in an attempt to force the people of Bethulia to surrender. The citizens of Bethulia are on the verge of capitulation when the beautiful widow, Judith, steps forward and volunteers to save the Israelite people. After seeking guidance from God, Judith dresses in her finest clothing and sets off for the enemy camp with her maidservant, Abra. Smitten by her beauty, Holofernes' guards are duped into allowing Judith to meet with the Assyrian general. She explains to Holofernes that she has come to help him defeat the Israelites with a plan that forces them to sin against their God by indulging in the food and wine that had been consecrated for the priests. Indebted to Judith for her suggestions, Holofernes invites Judith to stay at the Assyrian camp, which she does for four days.

On the fourth day of her stay, Holofernes throws a banquet and invites Judith to eat and drink with him. During the feast Holofernes gets drunk, consuming more wine, "than he had ever drunk in one day since he was born," and begins to desire her sexually.¹⁰⁷ Judith follows him into his bedchamber, telling Abra to remain outside, and patiently waits for Holofernes to fall asleep from his over indulgence in food and wine.

¹⁰⁵ Morton S. Enslin and Solomon Zeitlin, ed., trans., The Book of Judith (Leiden: E. H. Brill, 1972), 26-27, explains that the dating of the Book of Judith varies from the fifth century BCE to the second century CE. See Idem, 34-37 for more information on the translations.

¹⁰⁶ My understanding of the Book of Judith is from the following sources, Enslin and Zeitlin, The Book of Judith, (1972); Mary D. Garrard, Artemisia Gentileschi: the Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 280-282; James C. VanderKam, No One Spoke Ill of Her: Essays on Judith (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992); Peggy L. Curry, "Representing the Biblical Judith in Literature and Art: An Intertextual Cultural Critique," Ph.D. diss. University of Massachusetts, (1994), 15; and Margarita Stocker, Judith, Sexual Warrior: Women and Power in Western Culture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

¹⁰⁷ Enslin and Zeitlin, The Book of Judith, (1972), 151, is a transcription of verse 12:20 from the Book of Judith.

Once he is asleep, Judith, praying for strength and courage, takes his sword and cuts Holofernes' head off with two swift blows. Judith hands the head of the Assyrian general to her maidservant who stashes it away immediately in a satchel and the two leave the camp and triumphantly return to Bethulia.

Upon returning, Judith is welcomed back by the Israelites to whom she presents the head of Holofernes. Judith advises the people of Bethulia to hang the head outside the city walls and to take their weapons and attack the Assyrian camp at daybreak. Meanwhile back at the enemy camp, the Assyrians discover the lifeless, decapitated body of their general and, in utter confusion and fear, the army disperses, allowing the Bethulians to easily defeat their enemy. The Israelites seize Holofernes' possessions, and Judith takes the spoils of Holofernes to Jerusalem where she dedicates them in the temple.¹⁰⁸ Judith never remarries despite numerous offers and remains a citizen of Bethulia where she is honored and revered until her death at the age of 105.¹⁰⁹ Based on this Biblical story, Judith became synonymous with the notions of humility, justice, chastity, and simple good versus evil.¹¹⁰

The scene that Elisabetta Sirani's *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* depicts is the triumphant heroine presenting the head of Holofernes to the people of Bethulia. Elisabetta's image of Judith illustrates a scene within the narrative, yet it strays from traditional depictions of the heroine that had developed in the Renaissance. This

¹⁰⁸ Enslin and Zeitlin, *The Book of Judith*, (1972), 161-169, 14:1-15:10.

¹⁰⁹ The Book of Judith is to be considered fiction, and not based on historical truths. There is no record of a city named Bethulia or an Assyrian general named Holofernes. Nevertheless, there were historical events that occurred that might have influenced the story. It has been suggested by several scholars that the story has a symbolic dimension, which should be taken into account. See Ibid, 28-30, 38-56; Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, (1989), 281-282; Elena Ciletti, "Patriarchal Ideology in the Renaissance Iconography of Judith," in *Refiguring Women: Perspectives on Gender and the Italian Renaissance*, Marilyn Migiel and Juliana Schiesari, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 41.

¹¹⁰ See Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, (1989), 298-301, for a detailed discussion of the negative interpretations of Judith within the context of iconographical tradition associated with depictions of her.

particular moment in the Biblical story, Judith's public presentation of the severed head, was not regularly illustrated.¹¹¹ Instead Elisabetta's *Judith* resembles and can be more closely associated with images of the triumphant David returning from his battle with the head of Goliath.¹¹² Most artists chose to portray Judith from another key segment of the story that moment in Holofernes' tent when she cuts off his head, as depicted in Donatello's bronze *Judith and Holofernes* sculpture from 1455-1460 (Fig. 18).¹¹³ Baroque pictures of the same scene such as Caravaggio's *Judith* from 1598 and Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judiths* from 1612 and 1620 were more gruesome (Fig. 19 and 20).¹¹⁴ Other depictions illustrate Judith fleeing from the Assyrian camp as, for example, in Sandro Botticelli's *Judith and Holofernes* diptych from 1470-1472 and one of the corner

¹¹¹ There is one exception that illustrated the triumphant public viewing of Holofernes' severed head is a fresco roundel by Domenichino located in the Bandini chapel in San Silvestro al Quirinale in Rome painted in 1628: see Bettina Uppenkamp, *Judith und Holofernes in der italienischen Malerei des Barock* (Berlin: Reimer, 2004), 112-117.

¹¹² Some portrayals of David presenting the severed head of Goliath to the public appear similar to that of Elisabetta's *Judith*. Two examples of paintings depicting David victorious return are Francesco Pesellino's *The Triumph of David and Saul* and Antiveduto Gramatica's *David Returning Triumphant with the Head of Goliath* (Fig. 16 and 17). Pesellino's *David* was painted in Florence around 1450, and it is now located at the National Gallery in London: see Christopher Baker and Tom Henry, ed., *The National Gallery Complete Illustrated Catalogue* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). The date of Gramatica's *David* is unknown, it is currently located in the Whitfield Fine Art Gallery in London. For more information on Gramatica's work see Gianni Papi, *Antiveduto Gramatica* (Soncino: Edizioni dei Soncino, 1995).

¹¹³ It is important to note that there were numerous depictions of Judith produced between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, however I have only selected a few to demonstrate the various ways the story of Judith was represented in the Renaissance and into the seventeenth century. For a more complete analysis of Judith imagery see the following sources: Jane Davidson Reid, "The True Judith," *Art Journal*, 28, (1969), 376-387, Mira Friedman, "The Metamorphoses of Judith," *Jewish Art*, 12-13, (1987), 225-246, and Uppenkamp, *Judith und Holofernes*, (2004). For more detailed information regarding Donatello's *Judith and Holofernes* bronze sculpture now located in the Palazzo Vecchio see John Pope-Hennessy, *Donatello: Sculptor* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), 277-288, and Sarah Blake McHam, "Donatello's Bronze *David* and *Judith* as Metaphors of Medici Rule in Florence," *Art Bulletin*, 83, (2001), 32-47.

¹¹⁴ Caravaggio painted the subject in a horrific, yet intimate manner by reducing its narrative qualities to an emotional scene between the protagonist and her prey: see Alfred Moir, *Caravaggio* (New York: Harry Abrams Inc., 1982), 70-71, and Catherine R. Puglisi, *Caravaggio* (London: Phaidon Press, 1998), 135-139. Artemisia Gentileschi followed in this tradition: see R. Ward Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art: Critical Reading and Catalogue Raisonné*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 191-198, plate 2, for information on the 1612 *Judith* located in the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples, and idem, 213-216, for details on the 1620 *Judith* is in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. For an excellent overview of all of Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith* paintings see Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, (1989), 303-336.

frescos of the Sistine Ceiling by Michelangelo, from 1509-1512 (Fig. 21 and 22).¹¹⁵

Another customary portrayal was Judith's contemplation of her enemy's head as seen in Mantegna's *Judith and Holofernes* from approximately 1495 and Giorgione's serene *Judith* from 1500-1504 (Fig. 23 and 24).¹¹⁶ Instead of foreshadowing Judith's triumphant return to Bethulia, as shown by earlier artists, Elisabetta actually depicts the victorious conclusion.

Elisabetta's *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* shows the monumental figure of Judith standing on a scaffold. She is pushed to the front of the picture plane; the toe of her sandals nearly touches the edge of the painting. Positioned in the center of the canvas, Judith gazes out at the viewer. As the most visually significant figure in the nearly eight-foot canvas, Judith stands slightly over life-sized. Judith towers over all other figures in the camp. Her stance is sturdy, with her left leg firmly planted in a classical contrapposto stance. The body of Judith has a smooth, fleshy quality. Her costume is elaborately decorated, consisting of layers of billowing drapery. The textures of the opulent fabrics are all highly detailed, revealing an intricately decorated brocade fabric under a rich blue silk dress. Attached at her shoulders is a cloak made of deep reddish pink silk with patterned detailing around the trim. It is so thickly rendered that it

¹¹⁵ R. W. Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli: Life and Work* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 32-38, discusses Botticelli's *Judith* diptych which is currently located at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. See Marcia Hall, "The Corner Spandrels: The Histories of the Liberation of the Israelites," in *Michelangelo: The Frescoes of the Sistine Chapel* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2002), 76-83, regarding the corner fresco painting of *Judith and Holofernes* by Michelangelo.

¹¹⁶ There are several Judith images that Mantegna produced, however the paintings specifically referred to in the text is located at the National Gallery in Washington D.C., see R. W. Lightbown, *Mantegna: with a Complete Catalogue of his Paintings, Drawings, and Prints* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 435, cat. no. 30, plate 120. See also Reid, "The True Judith," (1969), 380-381, and Jan Bialostocki, "Judith: Story, Image, and Symbol. Giorgione's Painting in the Evolution of the Theme," in *The Message of Images: Studies in the History of Art* (Vienna: IRSA, 1988), 113-131, for Giorgione's *Judith*.

seems almost sculptural.¹¹⁷ Jeweled ornamentation appears on the clips attaching the cloak to her shoulders, the metal fasteners around the sleeves of her upper arms, and finally the screaming Medusa-head brooch at her bosom.¹¹⁸ Judith's red Roman boots lace up her calf and are also decorated with pearls and jewels. She wears delicate gold bracelets, pearl earrings, and strands of pearls are laced in her wind-blown hair. Finally, the culmination of this adornment is the large turbaned headdress, also decorated with braiding and jewels. Judith is almost fully lit with the exception of her right shoulder and a slight shadow on the right side of her face.

The figure of Judith reaches towards her right to pull Holofernes' head out of the blood stained satchel, grasping it by the hair with both hands. The head is presented as a trophy, further demonstrating Judith's honorable triumph. Holofernes' face shows a harsh brow over his closed eyes, a large nose, and slightly opened mouth. The majority of his face, however, is in shadow as it emerges from the bag. Abra crouches to Judith's right and assists her in revealing the head. Abra is represented in typical fashion as an old, wrinkled woman.¹¹⁹ She is wearing a simple red tunic with a piece of beige fabric draped over her head. There is less detail to her costume than Judith's, instead Elisabetta focuses on the features of Abra's gaunt face and neck. Unlike the figure of Judith, Abra's

¹¹⁷ This type of drapery is similar to the detailed heavy drapery painted in the later work of Guido Reni in paintings such as *Cleopatra with the Asp* from 1630 in the Royal Collection at Windsor, the *Penitent Magdalen* from 1633 in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica in Rome, or the *Salome with the Head of the Baptist* from 1640 in Chicago.

¹¹⁸ The Medusa-head brooch at her breast is significant in that the story of Medusa also involves decapitation as well as a dangerous female. Bohn, "Female Self-Portraiture," (2004), 275, explains that such a choice emphasizes ferocity and power instead of beauty and delicacy. According to Jon Culverhouse the medallion resembles a screaming male head more than the head of Medusa, which does harmonize with the story of Judith and the decapitation of Holofernes. Personal correspondence, July 26, 2006, Jon Culverhouse, Curator, Burghley House, Stamford, Lincolnshire, England.

¹¹⁹ There are several famous examples of the Abra "type" of an old, ugly maidservant in paintings of Judith by such artists as Mantegna, Caravaggio, and Rubens.

muscles and bones are clearly defined. Her bare arm with its strong muscles appears almost masculine.

Two young pageboys hold long vertical torches illuminating this night scene. They also stand on the wooden platform, flanking the figure of Judith. The boys move forward to take a peek at her trophy as it is removed from the bag. Their soft, sweet faces and curly blond hair mimic the angelic faces of children that Elisabetta painted so frequently in her career, such as the child depicted in the *Triumphant Cupid of the Sea* (The Medici Cupid) from 1661.¹²⁰ The boy to the right of Judith is elaborately dressed, wearing a dark velvet tunic adorned with gold buttons and a sash. His undershirt bursts through cut outs in the tunic. Holding a torch in his right hand, he gestures outward with his left. He is completely in shadow except for the top of his head and his protruding thigh. The other torchbearer stands behind Judith and Abra, partially hidden from view. Only his head, upper chest, and part of the right hand that holds the torch are visible. He is dressed in gold, but details of his costume cannot be distinguished. The blond curls of his hair, accentuated by varying shades of golden paint, are the only highly detailed elements of this figure.

There are two known preparatory drawings for the four main figures in the painting.¹²¹ One of the drawings, done in black chalk and partially finished in ink, is a compositional study of all four central figures (Fig. 25). The drawing measures 315 by 261mm. The three figures on the left side of the drawing, Abra, a torchbearer, and

¹²⁰ Illustrated in Modesti, *Elisabetta Sirani*, (2004), 24. This painting is listed in Elisabetta's inventory of 1661 as "*Un Amorino nel Mere, per la gran Principessa Margherita...*" (*Felsina pittrice*, II, 395).

¹²¹ Although Elisabetta worked quickly, she had a tendency to make compositional sketches for complicated large-scale commissions, and *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* is no exception. Bohn, "Drawing Practices," (2004), is a very informative and detailed article about Elisabetta's drawing techniques. Also see Otto Kurz, *Bolognese Drawings of the XVII and XVIII Centuries in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen at Windsor Castle*, (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1955), 133-134, for reproductions of the drawings with brief catalogue entries.

Holofernes' severed head, are outlined in pen, whereas the figure of Judith is only sketched in chalk. The details of the drawing, including the positions of the figures, the wrinkles in the drapery and even the basic outlines of part of the crenellated architecture, exactly correlate to the finished painting. The drawing appears to be unfinished because the other torchbearer on the far right is faintly drawn; however Elisabetta sketched a more detailed red chalk drawing of this figure (Fig. 26).¹²² The sketch of the young torchbearer measures 291 by 170mm. It is loosely drawn, but it, too, closely resembles the same figure in the finished painting. He is moving forward and gestures with his left hand, in his right hand he holds a torch. The torchbearer's stance in the drawing and the painting are identical. The pleats in the fabric of the boy's garment are articulated and the effect of wind blowing the boy's hair and sash is evident. Based on the drawings' nearly identical similarities to the finished work, they demonstrate how useful Elisabetta's compositional studies were. The fact that there are two surviving drawings suggests that there were more studies for this important commission.

In the finished painting, the four principle figures stand on a scaffold made of wooden beams attached by two rows of nails that recess back into space. This technique draws the viewer's attention towards the background, creating depth in the painting. Elisabetta's evident pride in her knowledge of complex perspective is suggested by the fact that she cleverly signed and dated this painting in perspective on one of the beams of

¹²² Kurz, *Bolognese Drawings*, (1955), 7, states that after the compositional study, "the artist started on more detailed red chalk studies for the single figures, of which one has been preserved." Kurz implies that at one time more drawings existed, but he does not explain this hypothesis. Perhaps he speculated that there were more drawings because there have been approximately two hundred sheets attributed to Elisabetta, which is a significant amount compared to the output of other Italian women artists from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, according to Bohn, "Drawing Practices," (2004), 207.

the platform.¹²³ A congregation of Bethulian citizens gathers behind and below the four primary figures. The crowd, consisting mostly of men, looks up towards Judith on the platform to view the evidence of their victory over the Assyrian army. The majority of the crowd stands on the right side of the painting, however there are some figures standing between the knee of Abra and the leg of Judith. Only the heads of these figures are visible. Most of the faces are loosely depicted without sharply defined features, however there are two men that stand at the edge of the platform that have more facial detailing. One is a bearded man wearing a feathered helmet. He looks upwards with his lips slightly parted in astonishment. The other man, standing at the far right of the paintings, also wears a helmet and looks directly at the viewer. Even though the faces of other figures in the crowd are less intricate, their expressions and gestures are clearly one of astonishment as they point and raise their hands. There are two full-length figures deep in the background who are dressed as soldiers with helmets and spears. Even farther in the distance are the crenellated towers of Bethulia. These buildings resemble the medieval architecture of Bologna such as the *Piazza Maggiore* that still remains intact in the center of the city.¹²⁴ Like the figures in the on-looking crowd, the architecture is not painted in detail; rather the loose painterly brushstrokes accentuate its distance from the central scene.

One of the most interesting aspects of the painting is the use of a night sky.¹²⁵

Elisabetta painted the sky in various shades of green, gray, and black illuminated by the

¹²³ Babette Bohn, "Il fenomeno della firma: Elisabetta Sirani e le firme dei pittori a Bologna," in *Elisabetta Sirani : "pittrice eroina" 1638- 1665* (Bologna: Compositori, 2004), 110, says that Elisabetta's father also signed and dated a painting in perspective for San Gerolamo della Certosa in 1652.

¹²⁴ For more information on Bolognese architecture see Naomi Miller, *Renaissance Bologna: A Study in Architectural Form and Content* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1989), 44-45.

¹²⁵ Elisabetta's choice in depicting the scene at night follows the narrative, "Judith returns to Bethulia at night and presents the head before dawn," (Enslin and Zeitlin, *The Book of Judith*, (1972), 157, 14:2).

moon and stars. There are hazy clouds moving across the sky. The flames of the torches flicker and the figures' hair blows in the wind further emphasizing the atmosphere. The moon in the upper left corner of the picture is one of the most curious aspects of the painting. This thin crescent moon that points upwards emits an unnaturally large amount of light that brightens the inflated clouds that surround it.

Elisabetta's prominent inclusion of a moon suggests its multivalent meaning; several of its symbolic characteristics parallel Judith's own attributes. The moon is symbolic of Diana, the mythological goddess of the hunt, the moon, and animals; she is often illustrated wearing a crescent moon on her headdress. Diana went so far as to kill any man who saw her in order to preserve her virginity.¹²⁶ By the same token, Judith is praised for her chaste victory over Holofernes. A crescent moon is also a symbol of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception.¹²⁷ As early as the tenth century, Mary and Judith's virginity and victories over the devil were seen as comparable.¹²⁸ The interpretation of Judith's victory as equivalent to Mary's could possibly explain the significance of Elisabetta's incorporation of the brightly illuminated crescent moon, which represents their divine purity.

¹²⁶ Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, (1989), 326-327, discusses the symbolism of the goddess Diana as the forerunner and prototype of the Virgin Mary based on her virginity. A detail from *Judith Slaying Holofernes* by Artemisia Gentileschi (1620) of Judith's bracelet shows linked carved gems illustrating the figure of Diana. Here, evidently, parallels are being suggested between the Biblical heroine and the goddess. Together with Judith and Mary, Diana shares virtuous characteristics of chastity, independent of masculine domination.

¹²⁷ Stephen F. Ostrow, "Cigoli's *Immacolata* and Galileo's Moon: Astronomy and the Virgin in Early Seicento Rome," *The Art Bulletin*, 78, no. 2, (1996), 222 and 225, specifically explain the moon as an attribute of the Virgin in terms of the Immaculate Conception and illustrates several examples.

¹²⁸ Ciletti, "Patriarchal Ideology," (1991), 42-43, discusses that Mary triumphed over Satan through the conception of Christ and Judith through her chaste killing of Holofernes. Furthermore, the Church promoted the correlation of Mary and Judith in political efforts to attack the Protestant position, which limited Mary's importance. Idem, 43, also explains the tradition that transforms Judith from a widow into a virgin.

Beside the moon, there is also a canopy of stars that punctures the dark sky. By painting some of the stars larger than others, Elisabetta is able to show variation in the brightness of the stars. Not only do the stars fluctuate in size and brightness, but also their placement is clustered as if they are specifically placed rather than haphazardly decorating the sky. This accentuates Elisabetta's attention to natural detail and her basic understanding of astronomy. It is certainly possible that Elisabetta shared with her contemporaries an interest in heavenly bodies. By the 1650's there were numerous advancements in astronomy and several publications on the subject were available to the public.¹²⁹ For example Galileo's various advancements in science, particularly astronomy, circulated widely throughout Europe during the early seventeenth century. Perhaps Elisabetta intended to define a specific constellation or night sky because the arrangement of stars seems to be so precise. If that were the case, she might have consulted a star map to diagram a certain star arrangement.¹³⁰ Unfortunately, because of the haziness of the atmosphere and the gray cloud formations covering up parts of the painted sky, some stars may be hidden while others shine through openings in the clouds, which has made it impossible to precisely detect a particular constellation in the painting.¹³¹ It would be remarkable, in correlation with the symbolism of the moon, if a

¹²⁹ "Our History," [Università di Bologna](http://www.eng.unibo.it/PortaleEn/University/Our+History/default.htm), 2004-2008, <http://www.eng.unibo.it/PortaleEn/University/Our+History/default.htm> (February 25, 2008), notes that astronomy was being taught at the University of Bologna by this time, and more than likely, books on astronomy and star maps would have been accessible to the public according to Dr. Scott Shaw from the Astronomy Department at the University of Georgia.

¹³⁰ It might not have been necessary for Elisabetta to use a star map as a reference for this painting. According to Dr. Scott Shaw, the average person living in pre-modern times would be quite familiar with the stars and specific constellations because they used them in their daily lives, whether it was to define the season, plant crops, or simply know how much the stars would illuminate the sky at night if one were to go outdoors without a torch. It got so dark at night prior to the invention of electricity that Elisabetta could have seen stars that are not visible to us today.

¹³¹ I consulted with Dr. Shaw regarding the placement of the stars. He and I both believe that a constellation was being represented, yet none of the visible stars matched precisely. We specifically examined the constellations Virgo and Perseus based on their relevance to the story of Judith.

specific constellation was identifiable. Although I have not been able to exactly identify a constellation, I am certain that there is a symbolic meaning depicted in the precise starry sky.

An outdoor night scene, not to mention such a detailed sky, is quite rare in images of Judith and in art in general.¹³² Most scenes with Judith are set outdoors are day scenes, such as Botticelli's or Giorgione's *Judith* paintings mentioned earlier. More frequently images of this subject take place inside Holofernes' tent, for example Caravaggio's or Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith*. The time of day is assumed to be night because of the dark background of the composition illuminated by candlelight. Since there is not a strong tradition of Judith paintings similar to Elisabetta's, her inspiration for this type of imagery must have been personal. Elisabetta must have had a clear idea of how she intended this painting to look based on her preparatory drawings. The inclusion of the torch indicates that Elisabetta had decided on creating a night scene in the preliminary stages of her work.

Elisabetta sets the scene of Judith's triumph at a specific time and in a specific place; it is night and she has returned to Bethulia. The painting is composed so that the viewer is invited to share in Judith's triumph, rather than simply voyeuristically gaze upon it. Elisabetta encourages the viewer to witness the unveiling of Judith's victorious deed as if we are standing directly in front of her, unlike the crowd behind her who see the event from the rear. The viewer's attention is drawn to the figure of Judith, in particular to the severed head she has pulled from the satchel. We are face to face with

¹³² There are very few paintings that illustrate a night sky similar to this. Adam Elsheimer's *The Flight into Egypt* from 1609 is comparable to this painting (Fig. 27). For more information on Elsheimer's work see Keith Andrews, *Adam Elsheimer: Paintings, Drawings, Prints* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1977), 154-155, cat. no. 26, plate no. 91, and Rüdiger Klessmann, *Adam Elsheimer 1578-1610* (Edinburgh: National Gallery of Scotland, 2006), 37-39, 174-177.

Judith, yet our position in relation to the painting is difficult to determine. Is the viewer to believe that he or she is standing on the platform with the heroine, essentially included in this momentous event? Obviously our viewpoint cannot be from directly below the platform because our focus would be placed on Judith's feet and projected upwards. Instead the viewer has been given a special place within the composition, further inviting them into the scene. Like Judith and her companions, the viewer is also on the platform above the crowd standing in the background. Being elevated and in the company of the virtuous heroine allows the viewer to become significant. Perhaps then also the virtues of purity, integrity, and honor that Judith possesses are also reflected upon the viewer.

The Influence of Guido Reni

Elisabetta's *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* is an unusual painting in that it strays from the tradition of Judith imagery, while at the same time its conception was clearly derived from the work of Guido Reni. It has been established that Reni was a major source of influence for the young artist.¹³³ In her own time, Elisabetta was praised for bringing Reni's style to the next generation of artists, and Malvasia considered her to be the "second Guido."¹³⁴ The work of Guido Reni was the primary source of inspiration for Elisabetta's *Judith*, as demonstrated by three paintings of Guido Reni's, all of which appear to be the sources for her work.

In terms of its formal composition, I believe that Elisabetta utilized a half-length composition of *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* by Guido Reni (Fig. 28). In Reni's version, Judith is situated in the center of the canvas. She holds Holofernes' head steady

¹³³ See Chapter 1, The Biography of Elisabetta Sirani and The Career of Elisabetta Sirani.

¹³⁴ Modesti, "The Making of a Cultural Heroine," (2001), 399-400, explains that Malvasia considered Elisabetta to be the "second Guido." The second volume of *Felsina pittrice* begins with the biography of Guido Reni and concludes with the life of Elisabetta and her students, whom he considered to be the next generation of Bolognese artists.

by his hair, which she grips with both hands. Her face is tilted to the right, in the opposite direction of the severed head, as she turns in disgust to stare off into the distance. Judith's face has delicate features and her red, yellow, and green dress is decorated with jewels. A strong emphasis is placed on the folds and texture of the ornate drapery. Behind Judith's right shoulder is Abra, wearing a brown hooded cloak that shadows her aged face. Abra's focus appears to be on Judith, while at the same time she attempts to shift a satchel underneath Holofernes' decollated head. At the front to the picture plane is Holofernes' sword leaning against a metal bedpost, which is evidence that Judith has not yet escaped the Assyrian camp.

This painting, although not identical to Elisabetta's *Judith* in the Burghley House collection, is similar in terms of the formal characteristics of Elisabetta's central grouping. Judith, in Elisabetta's painting, mimics the same pose and dress as the Judith in Reni's half-length composition. In both paintings Judith grasps Holofernes' hair with both of her hands. In addition, the figures of Abra are nearly identical, as is the severed head of Holofernes.

The strong similarities between these two works cannot be coincidental. Although Elisabetta must have known about this work, Reni's painting has quite a problematic history. There are several known copies that have been assessed and re-assessed by scholars.¹³⁵ Although no firm agreement has been reached about the painting

¹³⁵ The literature on Guido Reni's *Judith* composition attempts to deal with several problems- the number of variants that exist, their attribution, and provenance. Pepper, "Scuola di Guido Reni" [book review], (1994), 630, note 2, identifies two works in particular that are possible copies of Reni's original work from the Gentile Collection. One, formerly in the Cattaneo-Adorno collection in Genoa and now in a private collection in Milan, is identical to the Gentile *Judith* and is by the hand of Guido Reni. The second was at in auction in New York and later in Milan, and can be accurately attributed to Giovanni Andrea Sirani, by Fiorella Frisoni, "Giovanni Andrea Sirani," in *Scuola di Guido Reni*, ed. Emilio Negro and Massimo Pironi (Modena: Artioli, 1992), 369, note 18. Although Frisoni attributes the painting to Sirani, Pepper, "Scuola di Guido Reni" [book review], (1994), 630, note 2, explains that she confuses two different

once in the Gentile collection in Genoa (now located in a private collection), Reni was probably responsible for it. This must surely be the painting in Genoa mentioned by Malvasia as “in the house of Signore Cesare Gentile, a Judith with the Head of Holofernes and her maidservant...”¹³⁶ The exact date of this work is unknown; Pepper, however, has recently argued that this painting belongs to the late 1630’s based on the stylistic and thematic similarities with other paintings produced by Reni during those years.¹³⁷ Also, it is important to note that Reni did not have an extensive workshop until the mid 1630’s when Giovanni Andrea Sirani became his assistant.¹³⁸ A painting such as the *Judith* that was copied several times would imply the presence of assistants; therefore it seems reasonable to date this painting to Reni’s later career.

Besides the various problems surrounding Reni’s half-length *Judith*, there is also the question of how Elisabetta would have been familiar with this painting considering she was born around the time of its execution. A drawing of this painting attributed to Giovanni Andrea Sirani exists (Fig. 29). It has been suggested that it was produced for a later engraving.¹³⁹ If this attribution is correct, then it would prove that at least

pictures. For more information of Reni’s Gentile *Judith* see Pepper, *Guido Reni: A Complete Catalogue*, (1984), 302, App. 1, C11, and idem, *Guido Reni: L’opera completa*, (1988), 341, App. 1, 51, where he does list the Gentile painting as an autograph Guido Reni. A more recent publication also credits Reni with the Gentile execution: see Richard E. Spear, *The “Divine” Guido: Religion, Sex, Money, and Art in the World of Guido Reni* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 345, note 59.

¹³⁶ Malvasia, *Life of Guido Reni*, (1980), 149.

¹³⁷ Pepper, *Guido Reni: A Complete Catalogue*, (1984), 301, does not date this painting, however four years later in the 1988 edition, Pepper dates the painting to 1637-1638, see idem, *Guido Reni: L’opera completa*, (1988), 341. After reviewing Reni’s work from these dates, it seems completely logical to date this painting to these years. During this time Reni executed half-length images of *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist*, *Cleopatra*, and pendant images of *Artemisia* and *Lucrezia*, see Pepper, *Guido Reni: L’opera completa*, (1988), cat. no. 169, 173, and 170, respectively. Reni also produced large-scale paintings that arguably share similar characteristics to the *Judith* such as *The Rape of Europa* in the Denis Mahon collection and *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist* in the Art Institute of Chicago Museum. For more information and images see, Pepper, *Guido Reni: L’opera completa*, (1988), cat. no. 176 and 179, respectively.

¹³⁸ Pepper, “Scuola di Guido Reni” [book review], (1994), 629.

¹³⁹ Pepper, *Guido Reni: A Complete Catalogue*, (1984), 301; and idem, *Guido Reni: L’opera completa*, (1988), 341. This drawing is currently in the Louvre, inv. no. 8952 and to me it appears identical to the

Elisabetta's father knew of the painting and she might have either seen the drawing or a print made after it.

There are two known engravings of Reni's half-length *Judith* composition.¹⁴⁰ One engraving is identical to Reni's work and is attributed to Giovanni Andrea Sirani (Fig. 30).¹⁴¹ This print is a reverse of the Sirani's drawing in the Louvre, which is to be expected from the printing process. The second engraving is a variant of the first and its attribution remains uncertain (Fig. 31).¹⁴² This print is identical to the first except it is again reversed, matching Reni's original *Judith*. Perhaps Elisabetta executed the second engraving, essentially copying the work of her father.¹⁴³ This second engraving could have been part of her artistic training or possibly an extensive study for a half-length oil painting of *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* that has been attributed to Elisabetta (Fig. 32). This oil painting, which is currently located in the Walters Art Gallery, closely imitates Giovanni Andrea Sirani's engraving, and thus it is a reversal of Reni's half-length *Judith*.¹⁴⁴ Scholars have not agreed upon the attribution of the Walters Gallery

painting. If Reni's *Judith* was painted prior to the mid 1630's when Sirani entered the workshop it would be unlikely that he would be responsible for this drawing.

¹⁴⁰ Versions of both exist at the Museum of Fine Arts in San Francisco.

¹⁴¹ This print is 25 x 17.4 cm and its attribution is agreed upon by Federico Zeri, *Italian Painting from the Walters Art Gallery*, vol. 2 (Baltimore: Trustees of the Walters Art Gallery, 1976), 478; Pepper, *Guido Reni: L'opera completa*, (1988), 341; and The Museum of Fine Arts San Francisco image base, 2006, <http://search3.famsf.org:8080/view.shtml?keywords=%6A%75%64%69%74%68&artist=&country=&period=&sort=&start=31&position=36&record=59536>, (February 25, 2008).

¹⁴² Although the print is labeled as anonymous, the work is identified as executed "after Guido Reni, after Giovanni Andrea Sirani." See The Museum of Fine Arts San Francisco image base, 2006, <http://search.famsf.org:8080/view.shtml?keywords=%4A%75%64%69%74%68&artist=&country=&period=&sort=&start=1&position=2&record=59537>, (February 25, 2008).

¹⁴³ It is known that Elisabetta produced several engravings, some of which were not catalogued in her inventory, see Bohn, "Drawing Practices," (2004), 210-211, which specifically mention two known engravings by Elisabetta of *The Virgin Contemplating the Instruments of the Passion* and *The Martyrdom of the Baptist* both from 1657.

¹⁴⁴ Pepper, *Guido Reni: A Complete Catalogue*, (1984), 301, attributes the Walters Art Gallery *Judith* to Giovanni Andrea Sirani, based on the etching that he produced. On the other hand, I am in agreement with Zeri, *Walters Art Gallery*, (1976), 478, plate 240, who believes that Elisabetta painted the reversed variant. The work of Guido Reni, his assistant Giovanni Andrea Sirani, and Elisabetta Sirani are similar in style, therefore to base the attribution of these variants on style alone is unfounded.

Judith because there is only one entry of a *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* in Elisabetta's precise list of works. The transcription of Elisabetta's *Judith* in Felsina pittrice specifically mentions the crowd of Bethulians and the torchbearers.¹⁴⁵ The *Judith* in the Walters Art Gallery is too simple in composition to be confused with Elisabetta's *Judith* in the Burghley House collection. If she was indeed responsible for the Walters painting, it is curious that she did not record the painting in her list. A possible explanation could be that this small painting and its matching engraving were created during her training with her father. If that were the case, she may not have recorded it.¹⁴⁶ Nonetheless, based on the similarities between the Burghley House *Judith* and the Walters Gallery *Judith*, it is clear that Elisabetta was responsible for both of these works.

The second and third Guido Reni paintings that Elisabetta must have been familiar with are full-length depictions of *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*. The first full-length work is an unfinished painting from ca. 1640-1642, now located in the Walpole Gallery in London (Fig. 33).¹⁴⁷ The composition of Reni's Walpole *Judith* is similar to earlier depictions of *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, except Abra is not

¹⁴⁵ Felsina pittrice, II, 394 is the only description of a *Judith* on Elisabetta's list and it states; "Una Giuditta mostrante la testa di Oloferne al Popolo di Bettuglia di notte tempo, con la nutrice, e due paggetti con torci accesi che fanno lume, figure del naturale per il sig. Cattalani." This accurately describes the full-length *Judith* in the Burghley House Gallery.

¹⁴⁶ Tufts, Our Hidden Heritage, (1974), 82, mentions that many paintings by Elisabetta have been discovered that do not match an entry in her list. It is possible that this painting was just not recorded. Zeri, Walters Art Gallery, (1976), 478, explains that the half-length *Judith* is a painting from late in her career. On the other hand, I believe that this work was produced before the Burghley House *Judith* of 1658. Due to its simple composition and Elisabetta's quick painting technique, it might be a painting that was produced secretly. According to Chadwick, Women, Art, and Society, (2002), 100, there were a few paintings that Elisabetta completed without the knowledge of her father in order to earn some extra money for her mother.

¹⁴⁷ The full-length *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* in the Walpole Gallery in London has been catalogued as a work of Reni's from 1640-42 by D. Stephen Pepper, "Guido Reni: additions to the catalogue," Atti e memorie- Accademia Clementina, 28-29 (Bologna: Nuova Alfa, 1991), 84. Spear, The "Divine" Guido, (1997), 313-314, 345 note 59, and 391 note 110, agrees with Pepper's dating of the painting based on similarities between the *Judith* and *Salome with the Head of the Baptist* at the Art Institute of Chicago.

present. Reni paints Judith in the center of the composition. The scene takes place inside the tent as Judith holds Holofernes' head aloft. The facial expression of agony is still present on his face. Judith looks off to the right in a contemplative stare. The emotionless expression that Judith portrays is similar to Elisabetta's strong, stoic Judith.

The second full-length *Judith* by Reni that must have influenced Elisabetta is the painting now in the Sedlmayer collection in Geneva (Fig. 34).¹⁴⁸ Like the Walpole *Judith*, Reni places her in the center foreground, in a contrapposto stance. She is the dominant figure in the composition, a powerful, heroic presence. Typical of Reni, his heroine looks upwards to the sky in search of divine guidance. The moment portrayed emphasizes Judith's spiritual contemplation. She appears to be praying to God in gratitude for the courage and strength required to complete the horrific task. She holds the massive blood stained sword in her right hand and rests it point down on the ground. In the other hand she grips Holofernes' head by his hair and places it on his lifeless neck. On the left side of the painting, visible through an opening in the background is a small landscape with Assyrian tents, a cloudy night sky, and a faint crescent moon that points upward. At her feet, pieces of Holofernes' armor are scattered on the floor. Although the

¹⁴⁸ This painting, like many of Reni's paintings, has a complicated history. Richard E. Spear, "Re-Viewing the "Divine" Guido, *The Burlington Magazine*, 131, no. 1034, (1989), 372; and idem, *The "Divine" Guido*, (1997), 345, note 59, questions the autographic quality of the Sedlmayer *Judith*. On the other hand, Pepper, *Guido Reni: L'opera completa*, (1988), 258, believes this work to be an autograph Reni painting produced in Bologna between the years 1625 and 1626. Reni's *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* in the Sedlmayer collection is problematic due to the numerous reproductions. The majority of scholars agree that it was painted in the late 1620's on the basis of a *Lucrezia* painted during this same time, however it has also been proposed that the painting was completed in 1623: see Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, Andrea Emiliani, and Erich Schleier, *Guido Reni e l'Europa: Fama e fortuna* (Bologna: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1988), 145-150, A11. For complete information on all of the Sedlmayer *Judith*'s various copies see Pepper, *Guido Reni: A Complete Catalogue*, (1984), 252-253.

color is quite hard to decipher primarily because of severe damage to the canvas, earth tones of browns, oranges, and red with dashes of blue are used.¹⁴⁹

Reni's painting reduces the composition to only two figures in the scene, Judith and Holofernes, unlike Elisabetta's elaborate multi-figural composition. The moment illustrated also differs. Reni portrays Judith in the tent, whereas Elisabetta's Judith has arrived back in Bethulia safely. Despite these differences, both images of Judith emphasize her triumph. In both paintings Judith towers over the scene in heroic monumentality. The attention given to the details and texture of the fabric are extensive in both cases. Elisabetta's composition, although more elaborate than Reni's, certainly shows an understanding of his painting style. Many of Reni's compositions, including the Sedlmayer *Judith*, make use of a shallow stagelike setting, comparable to that employed in Elisabetta's *Judith*. Finally the element that is so important and curious is that both paintings illustrate a night sky with a crescent moon in the top left corner of the work. It is because of this small detail of the painting that I am certain Elisabetta knew Reni's painting in some form.¹⁵⁰ As previously discussed, a crescent moon in association with Judith imagery is quite unusual.¹⁵¹ Historically, the crescent moon has represented

¹⁴⁹ Pepper, *Guido Reni: A Complete Catalogue*, (1984), 252-253, explains that this painting was damaged in the Royal Palace in Madrid at the time of the fire of 1734. Clearly visible on the back of the canvas are the arms of Cardinal Rospigliosi, Legate to Madrid in the 1650's, and it was cited in the Spanish Royal inventory as early as 1666, by Pérez-Sánchez. A copy is currently located in the Prado Museum in Madrid and is attributed to Juan Carreño, the Royal Painter from 1669-1671.

¹⁵⁰ The probability that Elisabetta saw this exact painting, which was completed at least twelve years before she was born, is doubtful. Furthermore, the dates of all the copies predate her birth or were made after her death. Elisabetta might have known about the four extant drawings by Reni for this painting, but they are all of the figures and none of them show the moon, for reproductions see Ebert-Schifferer, Emiliani, and Schleier, *Guido Reni e l'Europa*, (1988), 370-378. According to Pepper, *Guido Reni: A Complete Catalogue*, (1984), 252, Malvasia described an engraving of a *Judith* by Reni that matches this painting. Knowing that Malvasia at least saw an engraving of the work is intriguing. If an engraving existed then it is possible that Elisabetta saw it too, although there is no documentation of this occurring. Despite the uncertainty about how she knew about this work, I still presume that she borrowed Reni's iconography of Judith through the incorporation of the exact crescent moon.

¹⁵¹ For a full discussion on the iconography of the moon see Chapter 2, *An Analysis of Judith*.

Diana the goddess of the hunt and the Virgin Mary of the Immaculate Conception, as symbols of their purity.¹⁵² Although Judith shares similar traits with both of these women, a crescent moon has rarely been associated in depictions of her.¹⁵³ The chance that these two artists, who are so closely linked, coincidentally both applied this symbol seems impossible. Since there was not a firmly rooted visual tradition incorporating Judith and a moon, the only link to a night scene such as this, with which Elisabetta might have been familiar, is Guido Reni's *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* in the Sedlmayer collection.

Just as interesting as the shared iconography of the moon is the fact that both Reni's Sedlmayer *Judith* and Elisabetta's Burghley House *Judith* had pendants. As mentioned earlier, Reni's *Judith* was paired with another painting of a heroic female, *Lucrezia*, which was copied for several patrons (Fig. 37).¹⁵⁴ Elisabetta also painted a virtuous heroine, Timoclea, to accompany Judith for her patron, Andrea Cattalani.

¹⁵² In fact Reni employed the combination of a crescent moon and the Virgin Mary a version of *The Immaculate Conception* from 1627 (Fig. 35), which is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, see Pepper, *Guido Reni: A Complete Catalogue*, (1984), 256-257, cat. no. 114; and Angelo Mazza, *Guido Reni, 1575-1642*, exhib. cat. ed. Susan Caroselli (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1988), 264-266.

¹⁵³ Antiveduto Gramatica (1571-1626) painted a *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* that illustrates Judith and Abra emerging from Holofernes' tent with a full moon visible in the upper right sky (Fig. 36). This painting is located in the Samuel H. Kress Foundation Collection at the Indiana University Art Museum. Gramatica worked mainly in Rome, so it is less likely that Elisabetta knew of this work. However, it is possible that Guido Reni knew of Gramatica's work since Reni was in Rome from 1601 to 1614: see Susan Caroselli, ed. *Guido Reni, 1575-1642*, exhib. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1988), 167. Since Gramatica died in 1626, his *Judith* must precede the execution of Reni's *Judith*. There is not a date specified for this painting. For Gramatica's biography and work see Papi, *Antiveduto Gramatica*, (1995).

¹⁵⁴ For complete information on Reni's *Lucrezia* see Pepper, *Guido Reni: L'opera completa*, (1988), 260-261, plate 89; Ebert-Schiffener, Emiliani, and Schleier, *Guido Reni e l'Europa*, (1988), 160-163. These copies of *Judith* and *Lucrezia* were produced presumably from 1627 to 1633. These two pictures were more than likely considered pendants when Elisabetta was alive, thus the significance of Elisabetta pairing her Judith with a heroine.

Painted in 1659, *Timoclea Casting Alexander's Captain into a Well*, like her *Judith* is another example of a heroine as redefined by Elisabetta (Fig. 38).¹⁵⁵

The story of Timoclea is found in Plutarch's Life of Alexander the Great where Alexander is portrayed as merciful towards her and her family because of her strength and virtue.¹⁵⁶ The narrative takes place during the destruction of Thebes by the army of Alexander the Great. One of his soldiers, a captain, used violence and force against Timoclea to satisfy his lust, and afterwards demanded to know where she had hidden her family's money. Timoclea agreed to show him where the riches were concealed, then lured him outside into the garden, and told him the money was in the bottom of the well. When the captain leaned over to look deep into the well, Timoclea lifted him by his legs, threw him in, and pelted him with stones until he died. The soldiers led her away to stand trial before Alexander, where she was allowed to plead her case. Because of the way she conducted herself, Alexander was impressed by her dignity and let her go free.

The moment Elisabetta chose to portray highlights not only the masculine characteristics of courage and strength required of Timoclea, but also the feminine attributes of beauty and grace. This same combination of power and beauty is central to her *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*. The full-length figure of Timoclea appears steady and stable as she effortlessly hurls the soldier head first into the well. True to the text, the scene takes place outdoors in a walled garden. The wall runs behind the scene, flattening the picture plane, yet it is low enough for treetops and sky to be seen in the distance. The event took place in a stage-like foreground, which is cropped so that only

¹⁵⁵ See Felsina pittrice, II, 394, for Elisabetta's account of the *Timoclea*. Harris, Women Artists: 1550-1950, (1976), 150, stated that Elisabetta Sirani's *Timoclea* was lost, but it is located in the Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte in Naples according to Bohn, "The Antique Heroines," (2002), 60-61. The *Timoclea* is signed and dated, 1659, by Elisabetta.

¹⁵⁶ Plutarch, The Life of Alexander the Great, trans. John Dryden (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 69.

part of the architecture of the well is shown, adorned with classical relief sculpture illustrating the battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs. This sculpted battle echoes the battle between Timoclea and the soldier by correlating the rape of Timoclea with the rape of the Lapith women by the Centaurs. This obvious intentional parallel between the relief sculpture and the story exemplifies Elisabetta's knowledge of ancient history and her wit in connecting the two.

Timoclea is dressed in simple attire and her hair is secured with a turbaned hat. Both her dress and hat are intact despite the violent actions that took place before the event illustrated. This diverts the viewer's attention from her earlier rape, and reminds us instead of her high moral character. The soldier is dressed in Roman costume with a bright red cape that swirls with movement as he is tossed downwards. Due to Elisabetta's lack in training of anatomy, especially male anatomy, the body of the soldier is awkward, as he plunges into the well with his limbs rotating like the spokes of a wheel. His body is also disproportionately small; if he stood up next to his female counterpart her body would be larger than his. Despite this perhaps unintentional flaw, the variation in scale between the two figures does serve to accentuate the inevitability of Timoclea's victory.

Elisabetta's depiction of the story is completely unique, further underscoring her interest in illustrating heroic females.¹⁵⁷ Like the *Judith*, Elisabetta captures a moment from Timoclea's story that is ignored in more traditional portrayals of the heroine. Earlier depictions show Timoclea as a captive on trial before Alexander emphasizing his

¹⁵⁷ Bohn, "The Antique Heroines," (2002), 60-64, note 42.

heroism and virtues as a just and merciful leader.¹⁵⁸ Instead of suggesting Timoclea's admirable, moral character, Elisabetta's painting features her as the strong heroine by actually pushing the soldier into the well. This unprecedented portrayal of a heroine is united thematically with its pair, the victorious *Judith*.

As pendants with the similar subject matter of virtuous heroines, Elisabetta cleverly juxtaposes the paintings, visually, as opposites. The *Timoclea* was painted second in 1659, therefore serving as a response to the *Judith* painted in 1658. Although both scenes take place outdoors, the *Timoclea* takes place during the day, whereas the *Judith* is a night scene. The picture plane of the *Timoclea* is quite shallow in comparison to the deep recession into space that is illustrated in the *Judith*. The depth of the *Judith* is necessary to accommodate the large crowds of figures within the painting, however with only two figures depicted in the *Timoclea*, the action is private and contained by the wall in the background. Both heroines are centrally illustrated in the paintings. Furthermore, the vanishing point of each painting is in the center of the painting and is significant to the subject matter. In the *Judith* painting, the vanishing point leads straight to Judith's lower abdomen, or womb. This is important because it not only draws attention to the femininity of Judith, but it further links Judith with Mary the Virgin. The vanishing point of the *Timoclea* is the crotch of the soldier emphasizing the rape in the story. Timoclea, now possessing the control over the man, spreads his legs apart as she throws him to his death. The *Timoclea* painting revolves around her isolated movement, but on the other hand, Judith stands motionless as the stoic heroine. Visually, Elisabetta's paintings are complete opposites, but they co-existed as pendants based on their similar stories. To

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 63-64, discusses Domenichino's version of Alexander and Timoclea from ca. 1615 as an example of an image where the artist is less concerned with Timoclea's heroism as opposed to that of Alexander.

defeat their opponents these women possessed courage and strength, which are characterized as masculine traits. The ancient Roman story of Timoclea commences with her rape, yet she was still regarded as honorable by Alexander the Great. At the same token, the Biblical figure of Judith is the personification of purity and chastity, despite the violence that she perpetrated. Judith and Timoclea epitomize the qualities of loyalty and honor, making these two paintings of heroines a perfect pair, much like Guido Reni's *Lucrezia* and *Judith* pendants.

Conclusion

Elisabetta Sirani used the work of Guido Reni as a source of inspiration for her own paintings. Her *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* is just one of many works that can be directly linked with paintings by Reni. Elisabetta borrowed several visual characteristics of Reni's painting style, such as a stage-like setting and dramatic drapery of the Sedlmayer *Judith* and the pose and grouping from his half-length version of *Judith*. Thematically, Elisabetta referred to Reni's *Judith* paintings, not only for his depiction of the heroine, but also in terms of the qualities of Judith's character expressed by the symbol of the crescent moon. Finally, like Reni, she paired her image of *Judith* with another heroine from ancient Roman literature. Reni's pendant for his *Judith* was *Lucrezia*, and Elisabetta chose to portray another admirable woman, *Timoclea*. What is remarkable about Elisabetta's *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* is that even though she looked to previous paintings by Reni, her finished work does not exactly resemble any of Reni's work. She incorporated obvious visual and thematic elements from Reni's three *Judith* images, and yet her *Judith* is completely original and unprecedented. Elisabetta was innovative in depicting the moment of Judith's ultimate triumph.

The title of Elisabetta's painting, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, is purely descriptive, evoking the story of Judith, but not fully representing the entirety of its meaning. Paintings with this title have generally shown Judith's valiant actions in Holofernes' tent, while others illustrated her contemplation after the violence. Both of these scenes are characteristic of Judith's story and what she symbolizes, however, the scene painted by Elisabetta portrays Judith at the pinnacle of her victory. The triumph is not when she is alone at the scene of the decapitation, nor is it on her journey back to Bethulia. The most triumphant part of the narrative is when Judith publicly presents the head to her people showing them that she was victorious in her efforts. Judith risked her life and her purity for these people and after she had slain Holofernes she was not completely successful until she had brought back the proof that Bethulia would endure. Essentially this is the moment when she frees the citizens of Bethulia from the threat of tyranny. Elisabetta reinvented the story of Judith by transforming the subject matter from a story of a Biblical woman to the triumph of a victorious heroine. Therefore, the painting created by Elisabetta should not be called *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* based on what is simply illustrated on the canvas. Rather it should be titled *The Triumph of Judith* on the basis of its meaning. Elisabetta's painting shows the significance of Judith displaying the head to the Bethulians; their triumph of faith defeating evil. In a comparable fashion, Elisabetta was triumphant as a female artist in the seventeenth century. She defeated societal conventions, becoming a successful female artist. She had to prove her artistic merit by displaying her talent as a painter in her workshop that was open to the public. Throughout her short life, and even after her sudden death, Elisabetta was honored and revered as pure, honest, and courageous. She became synonymous with

some of the same virtues possessed by the heroines she painted. Elisabetta left an important legacy through her teaching, which led to another generation of women artists. In her own right, Elisabetta Sirani, like her *Judith*, was a triumphant heroine.

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Figure 1: Barbara Sirani, *Elisabetta Sirani as Virtue*, 1665, ink drawing, Florence, Uffizi



Figure 2: Barbara Sirani, *Elisabetta Sirani as Poetry*, 1665, ink drawing, Florence, Uffizi



Figure 3: Elisabetta Sirani, *Baptism of Christ*, 1658, Bologna, San Girolamo della Certosa



Figure 4: Francesco Albani, *Baptism of Christ*, ca. 1640, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg



Figure 5: Annibale Carracci, *Baptism of Christ*, 1584, San Gregorio, Bologna



Figure 6: Pietro Santo Bartoli, engraving of *God Establishing the Sabbath* by Raphael, 1518-1519, now lost



Figure 7: Verrocchio, *Baptism of Christ*, 1472-1475, Uffizi, Florence

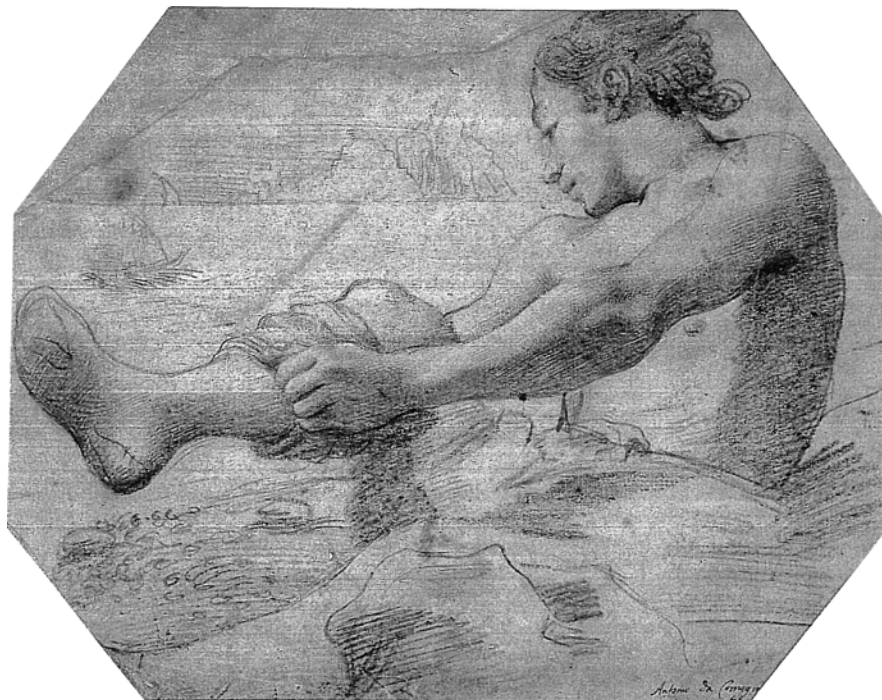


Figure 8: Annibale Carracci, *Boy Taking off His Sock*, 1584, red chalk drawing, British Museum



Figure 9: Annibale Carracci, *Boy Taking off his Shirt*, 1583-1585, red chalk drawing, British Museum



Figure 10: Guido Reni, *Massacre of the Innocents*, 1611, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna



Figure 11: Jacopo Tintoretto, *Miracle of the Slave*, Accademia Museum, Florence



Figure 12: Elisabetta Sirani, *Cleopatra*, n.d., Michigan, Flint Institute of Arts



Figure 13: Guido Reni, *St. Cecilia*, 1606, Simon Norton Museum



Figure 14: Elisabetta Sirani, *Portia Wounding her Thigh*, 1664, Houston, Stephen Warren Miles and Marilyn Ross Miles Foundation



Figure 15: Elisabetta Sirani, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, 1658, Stamford, England, Burghley House Gallery



Photo © The National Gallery, London.

Figure 16: Francesco Pesellino, *The Triumph of David and Saul*, ca. 1450, London, The National Gallery



Figure 17: Antiveduto Gramatica, *David Returning Triumphant with the Head of Goliath*, n.d., London, Whitfield Fine Art Gallery



Figure 18: Donatello, *Judith and Holofernes*, 1455-1460, bronze, Florence, Palazzo Vecchio



Figure 19: Caravaggio, *Judith and Holofernes*, ca. 1599, Rome, Palazzo Barberini



Figure 20: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, 1620, Florence, Uffizi Museum



Figures 21: Botticelli, *Judith Returning to Bethulia*, 1470-1472, Florence, Uffizi Museum



Figure 22: Michelangelo, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, 1509-1512, Sistine Chapel, Vatican



Figure 23: Andrea Mantegna, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, ca. 1495-1500, Washington D.C., National Gallery



Figure 24: Giorgione, *Judith*, ca. 1504, St. Petersburg, Russia, The Hermitage



Figure 25: Elisabetta Sirani, Compositional drawing, 1658, Royal Collection, Windsor Castle



Figure 26: Elisabetta Sirani, figural study, 1658, Royal Collection, Windsor Castle



Figure 27: Adam Elsheimer, *Flight into Egypt*, 1609, oil on copper, Munich, Alte Pinakothek



Figure 28: Attributed to Guido Reni, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, 1637-1639(?), Private collection



Figure 29: Attributed to Giovanni Andrea Sirani, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, n.d., drawing, Paris, Louvre, inv. no. 8952.



Figure 30: Attributed to Giovanni Andrea Sirani, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, n.d., engraving, San Francisco, Fine Arts Museum



Figure 31: Anonymous (Elisabetta Sirani), (after Reni, after Giovanni Andrea Sirani), *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, n.d., engraving, San Francisco, Fine Arts Museum



Figure 32: Attributed to Elisabetta Sirani, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, n.d., Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery



Figure 33: Guido Reni, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, ca. 1640-1642, Walpole Gallery, London



Figure 34: Guido Reni, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, ca. 1625-1626, Geneva, Sedlmayer Collection



Figure 35: Guido Reni, *The Immaculate Conception*, 1627, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Figure 36: Antiveduto Grammatica, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, n.d., Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Art Museum



Figure 37: Guido Reni, *Lucrezia*, ca. 1625-1626, Switzerland, Private Collection



Figure 38: Elisabetta Sirani, *Timoclea Casting Alexander's Captain into a Well*, 1659, Naples, Museo di Capodimonte