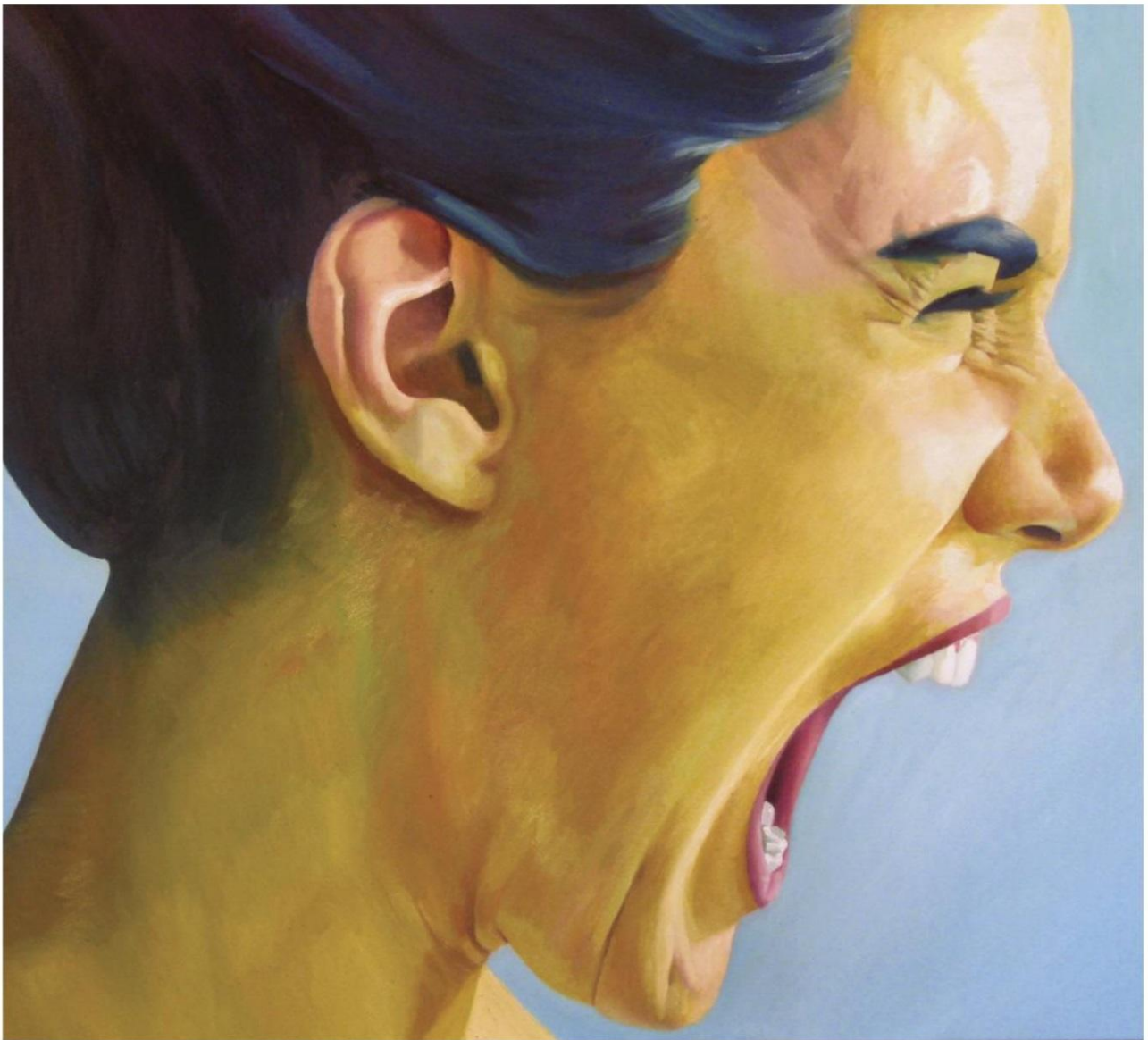

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SUOR PLAUTILLA NELLI: DIVINE REVELATION AT THE UFFIZI

This spring, Florence's renowned Uffizi Gallery highlighted the paintings of Suor (Sister) Plautilla Nelli (1524–1588), the first in its series of exhibitions planned to celebrate female artists.

The choice of Nelli to launch this series makes perfect sense.

Described as the first significant female painter of the Italian Renaissance, Suor Plautilla, a nun at the Dominican convent of Santa Caterina da Siena in Florence, embodies everything one could wish for in the story of an early female artist: brilliantly talented, largely self-taught, expressive, intelligent, devout, yet worldly enough to manage not only her convent (she served as its prioress three times), but also its business of making and selling art.

The way Suor Plautilla became the focus of such an exhibition is largely down to the philanthropist Jane Fortune and her Advancing Women Artists Foundation (AWA). Viewing Nelli's *Lamentation with Saints* at Florence's Museo di San Marco in 2004, Fortune was simultaneously enthralled by the painting's emotive quality and appalled by its state of dilapidation. She offered to fund its restoration, a decision that marked the start of her mission to champion history's "invisible women artists." She started AWA in 2007. In 2013, Fortune won an Emmy Award for the documentary *Invisible Women: Forgotten Artists of Florence*, based on her book of the same name. AWA's efforts have led to the rediscovery and restoration of other works by female artists — 40 works in Florence alone — yet Plautilla Nelli remains closest to Jane Fortune's heart.

THE NUN'S TALE

Despite the fact that she committed her life to religious service, taking vows at the tender age of 14, Plautilla Nelli never toiled in obscurity. She was prolific and highly regarded, painting devotional images that her secular patrons believed to have mystical qualities — created, as they were, by a "noble handmaiden" of the Lord.

Nelli's Lamentation with Saints (detail, after restoration)





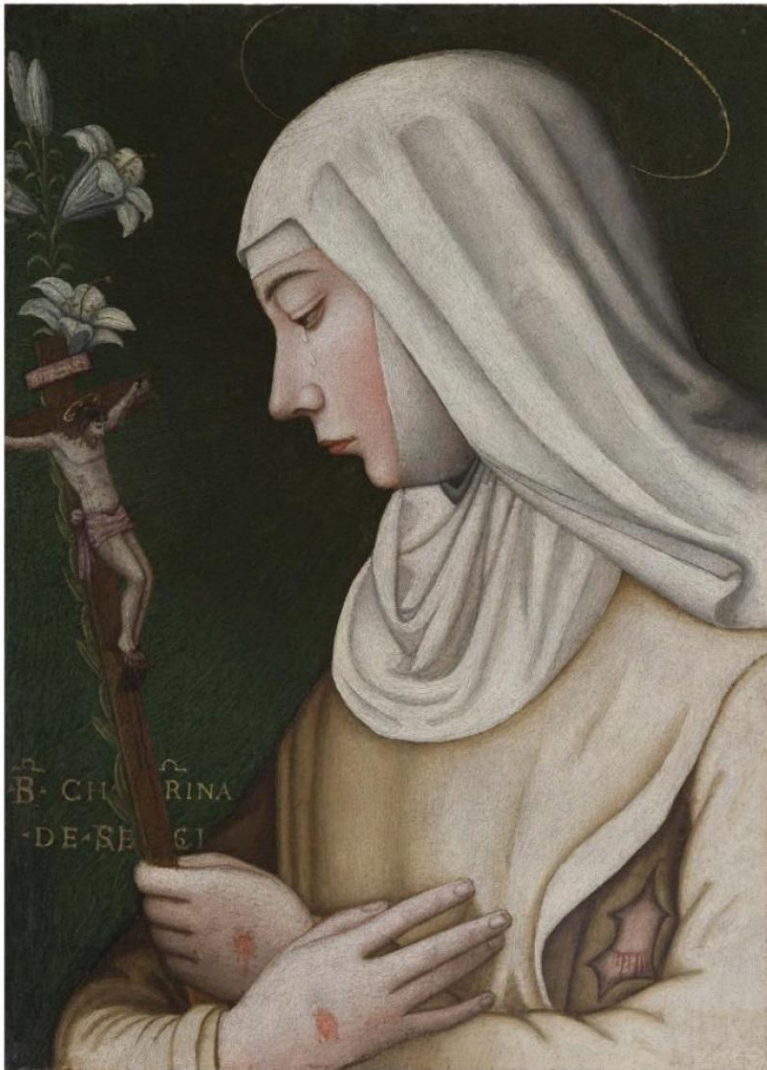
(TOP) Jane Fortune admires a lunette of *Saint Catherine in Prayer* at the Andrea del Sarto Last Supper Museum; photo: Leo Cardini ■ (BELOW) Nelli's illumination of *The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple with Two Nuns*; photo: Kirsten Hills

The convent of Santa Caterina was founded in 1496 by a follower of the Florentine religious leader Girolamo Savonarola. Best remembered for his mass destruction of secular treasures in the notorious “Bonfire of the Vanities,” Savonarola encouraged the creation of devotional art instead. Thus, Santa Caterina had an established artistic tradition by the time Suor Plautilla joined its community in 1538.

The extent of her formal art training is unclear. She inherited a collection of 500 drawings by Fra Bartolommeo that might have come to her through Fra Paolino da Pistoia, yet it's not certain that Fra Paolino taught her. More likely, Suor Plautilla was guided by senior nuns at Santa Caterina and her natural aptitude, coupled with diligence, led to her success. In turn, she trained subsequent generations of nun artists, who would start, as she did, producing illuminated manuscripts and small paintings. The sale of religious artworks was an important source of revenue for the convent and an enterprise that thrived under Suor Plautilla's direction.

Clients included other religious communities, as well as wealthy patrons commissioning decorations for their private chapels. She painted *Pentecost* for the church of San Domenico in Perugia, where it still resides. A large Madonna and Child was made for the monastery of Santa Lucia in Pistoia, and a predella (the decorated base of an altarpiece) with scenes from the life of Saint Zenobius for Florence's cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore (the Duomo). Her *Saint Dominic Receives the Rosary* and *Saint Catherine in Prayer*, both now in the collection of the Andrea del Sarto Last Supper Museum, are lunettes nearly 8 feet tall that were originally painted for the convent of Santa Caterina. *Lamentation with Saints*, the oldest





(TOP) *Saint Catherine with a Lily* was discovered in an attic storeroom at the Palazzo Pitti and subsequently restored. It is now in the collection of the Andrea del Sarto Last Supper Museum. Photo: Domingue & Rabatti
 ■ (BOTTOM) Removing Nelli's *Last Supper* from the monks' refectory at Santa Maria Novella; photo: Francesco Cacchiani



known of Nelli's major paintings, was also made for Santa Caterina. Measuring more than 9 feet tall by 6 feet wide, it's notable for its depiction of the body of Christ surrounded by eight mourners, five of whom are women.

The world's first art historian, Giorgio Vasari, who included Suor Plautilla among a handful of women artists in his 1568 edition of *Lives of the Artists*, suggests that her depiction of men lacks verisimilitude because she had little opportunity to draw or paint them in life. One might argue that hardly matters. The female mourners, with their red-rimmed eyes and tear-stained faces, are what make Nelli's *Lamentation with Saints* compelling. "In their white wimples they might as well have been sisters of her community and she painted them with complete confidence and understanding," wrote Germaine Greer in her 1979 book *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work*. "They express their grief not in extravagant postures, but in huddled weeping."

Nelli's undeniably feminine perspective was no obstacle to her popularity. Vasari observed: "She made so many paintings for the homes of Florentine gentlemen that it would take too much time to list them all here." More's the pity. If he'd taken the time, we'd have a better idea of which of Suor Plautilla's works are extant today; there are literally thousands of unattributed Old Master paintings in the world, but which ones did she paint? Today we know only that her work was collected even centuries after her death, and that much of it remains in private collections. Alas, as time passed, a shroud of invisibility rose around her.

UNVEILING THE ARTIST

This spring's exhibition at the Uffizi featured a number of recently attributed and restored Nelli works, including two illuminated manuscripts from 1568 that are the earliest known examples of her art. Most interesting is a group of nearly identical paintings of Saint Catherine of Siena in which the face of the saint in profile most likely derives from that of the Madonna in Nelli's *Lamentation*. Fausta Navarro, who curated the Uffizi show, found one of these Catherine portraits in a storeroom of Florence's Palazzo Pitti catalogued under a different artist's name. Once that painting was confidently attributed to Plautilla Nelli, others connected to convents in Perugia, Assisi, and Siena were brought to light.

"It is not at all surprising to find more than one image of Saint Catherine of Siena being produced in the workshop of a Dominican convent bearing her name," notes Nelli scholar Catherine Turrill Lupi, professor emerita at California State University, Sacramento. "What is interesting is that 'serial production' should have occurred at all. The Saint Catherine series is the first one found that seems to be entirely associated with Nelli and her workshop."

Restoration of the Saint Catherine paintings removed over-painting applied centuries ago to hide the bloody marks of the saint's stigmata. The Siena version had cream-colored fabric painted over the exposed torso and a layer of paint obscuring — but not completely covering — the wounds on her hands. The Assisi painting depicts the saint in a black veil and cape that were added some time after the painting was completed.

The reason for such over-painting might have been purely political. "The saint most famous for receiving (and displaying)



(TOP) A technician checks Nelli's *Last Supper* with diagnostic equipment. ■ (MIDDLE) A restorer works on a still life passage in Nelli's *Last Supper*. ■ (BOTTOM) Portions of a figure in Nelli's *Last Supper* before and after restoration. All photos on this page: Francesco Cacchiani



the wounds of Christ was Francis of Assisi. His mystical experience is a critical part of his legend, setting him apart from other saints," Lupi explains. "There was resistance from Franciscans, as well as members of the Church, to the depiction of Catherine of Siena (or other female saints, for that matter) with visible stigmata—the Dominicans upheld the legitimacy of her stigmatization, the Franciscans challenged it. Pope Sixtus IV, who was a Franciscan, specifically forbade the depiction of Saint Catherine with the wounds of Christ. It was not until the 1600s and 1700s that the question was resolved by papal decree."

Thus, though Suor Plautilla depicted the wounds in the original painting, at some point it was deemed prudent to disguise them—particularly on a painting destined for Assisi.

RESTORING THE LEGACY

The restoration of the 22 x 5 3/4-foot *Last Supper* that Nelli painted c. 1560 for her convent's refectory was recently crowdfunded under the hashtag #TheFirstLast—as in, the first (and only) known painting of the Last Supper by an early woman artist. After some 450 years out of the public eye, it will be placed on permanent display at the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence next year, when its restoration is completed.

"What makes Nelli extraordinary is the size of her works, particularly the *Last Supper*," says Linda Falcone, director of the Advancing Women Artists Foundation in Italy. "The fact that she [executed] this theme indicated that she was asserting a level of mastery." To complete such a massive undertaking, Nelli was assisted by other nuns, who mixed paints and might have executed parts of the painting. Almost certainly, she also had male help to stretch the vast canvas, which weighed nearly 200 pounds.

While it might not be the most exquisitely executed of Renaissance *Last Supper* paintings, Nelli's has qualities that set it apart from others, from its life-size figures to its detailed table setting. "There's a lot more food than what you normally see in a [painting of the] *Last Supper*, lots of wine, and fine tableware of the kind that the noblewomen of Nelli's convent might have brought with them as their dowry," Falcone notes.

Inch by inch, the restoration continues, as does the hunt for other works by Suor Plautilla Nelli. Just a few years ago, only three existing paintings had been definitively attributed to her. Now that list includes at least 20. With each new discovery, attribution, and restoration, this important early artist is reclaiming the visibility she deserves. ●

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Information: advancingwomenartists.org, uffizi.org, theflr.net/nelli-crowdfunding