

## Collection Highlight: Elisabetta Sirani's The Holy Family with Saints Elizabeth and John the Baptist around 1650-1660

Transcript: "Success breeds success"

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My name is Babette Bohn, I am professor of art history at Texas Christian University and I have been working on the women artists of Bologna for a long time. I just recently published a book on the women artists of Bologna in which Sirani is one of the star players. Elisabetta Sirani is, I think, a fascinating figure in the history of art. She's an exception to many of the usual rules or tendencies that govern painting in Italy. For starters, she is a woman, which makes her unusual to begin with. She is not the first woman in Italy to be a painter, but she actually is one of the earliest to become what we call a *peintre graveur* that is a painter who also makes prints. Sirani was principally a painter, she produced around 200 paintings and she was only occasionally an etcher, producing ten etchings that are still known today.

Sirani principally produced religious subjects. Even within the context of her painted production her single most popular most frequently repeated subject either includes or exclusively represents the Virgin and Child. And she shows the virgin and child interacting in a variety of ways. Sometimes the Christ child is crowning Mary as the Queen of Heaven. Sometimes as in your etching he is nursing so it is a more intimate mother-child connection. Sometimes they are interacting more playfully. Sometimes Mary is worshipping the Christ Child. So this is a subject she thought quite a lot about and one might be tempted to hypothesize that as a woman she was sensitive to the mother-child relationship. But she herself had no children, never married and in fact died quite young at the age of twenty-seven, so I think we have to be careful about hypothesizing too much based on the artist's gender, but certainly this was a favorite subject of hers and I think many of them are notable for the intimacy in the ways they portray the interactions of the Virgin Mary with her infant child.

Etching was a relatively new art form so it is not surprising that we don't have loads of Italian women who were active as etchers before Sirani. In the sixteenth century there are some earlier Italian printmakers, Isabella Parasole and Geronima Parasole for example were both woodcutters and Diana Mantuana is active also in the sixteenth century and she works as an engraver. But women begin to produce etchings on the historical record as far as we know only in the seventeenth century and so Sirani is one of the earliest. I do think it is noteworthy that in Bologna itself Sirani's example creates a precedent and she is succeeded by a number of women who are active as etchers in the later seventeenth century and in the eighteenth century.

Women artists in Bologna are recorded beginning in the fifteenth century and there are a growing number of women artists whose names and to some extent careers I was able to track

down in the course of working on my book so today I can point to some 68 women artists, which makes Bologna by a considerable margin the number 1 Italian center for women artists.

Bologna is a really interesting city in a lot of ways. The churches of Bologna are effectively redecorated in the course of the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries so it provided a location that was really full of opportunities for all artists male and female during that period. I think another key factor in Bologna is that it was filled with dozens of noble families and quite a wealthy and prosperous merchant and banking class and fascinatingly lots of people from what today we might call the lower middle class up were commissioning and collecting artworks. So, in terms of Sirani, her most original conceptions in my view were typically produced for merchants and bankers and fishmongers and jewelers rather than for noble patrons and perhaps she felt freer to think out of the box while working for sympathetic patrons who were perhaps a little less wedded to traditional approaches. So, it was a pretty exciting place to be as a woman artist and Sirani's very successful example paved the way as I already mentioned in some measure for literally dozens of painters, many of whom like Sirani enjoyed successful public careers. So really success breeds success I guess we might say and Sirani's success opened lots of doors for other women artists to follow her exciting example.