

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

Transcript: "The Holy Family with Saints Elizabeth and John the Baptist"

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My name is Suzanne van de Meerendonk and I am the Bader Curator of European Art at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University. In this Collection Highlight, we take a closer look at Elisabetta Sirani's etching *The Holy Family with Saints Elizabeth and John the Baptist*. In this touching depiction of motherhood and kinship, we see the Virgin Mary nursing her son Jesus while playfully interacting with the infant Saint John the Baptist. John's Mother, Saint Elizabeth, is seated right next to them winding the swaddling bands of the newborn Christ child. While most attention is given to the women and children, Mary's husband Joseph can be seen in the background doing woodwork. Almost entirely covered in shade, his axe however gleams in the sunlight, ready to strike – a singular detail focused on hard, manual labor that draws contrast to the tender scene in the foreground.

Sirani's etching was acquired by Agnes in 2018, and, dating to the 1650s, it represents the earliest work known to have been created by a female artist to enter our European art collection. Early modern Europe was a highly patriarchal society, and not many women were able to establish themselves as independent masters. As a result, collections of historic European art often count few artworks documented or signed by women artists. That does not mean, however, that they did not exist, but rather that such works were often not recognized, undervalued and under-collected. There may be women artists among our unsigned, unattributed artworks, and we just would not know because no name has been preserved. And with no name, there is usually less scholarly attention for a work, and so the cycle continues.

Elisabetta Sirani, however, was very aware of the importance of signing her works to promote herself and her abilities. Trained by her father in Bologna, Italy, she was celebrated for her depictions of biblical and mythological subjects, a genre then still almost entirely dominated by men. *The Holy Family with Saints Elizabeth and John the Baptist* exemplifies her brief but remarkable artistic career, and we are lucky to be able to care for it here at Agnes.

In this audio guide, we deepen our understanding of this artwork through the lens of two distinct perspectives. The first is by Kingston-based artist Rebecca Cowan. She brings a maker's perspective to the work by looking at its finest details and staged etching process. In the second audio segment we hear from art historian and renowned Sirani expert Dr Babette Bohn, who situates the print further in the artist's dynamic hometown of Bologna.