
The forty-six life stories contained in this anthology were taken from writings contemporary to each artist’s life. Many of the primary resources in this volume are available for the first time in English. While stories about artists such as Artemisia Gentileschi and Sofonisba Anguissola can be found in many other publications, most of the artists that appear in this volume have been found only in very obscure compendiums, published centuries ago in their native language. This publication includes only one non-European artist and covers the early modern period. While fascinating and filled with information unavailable elsewhere, this is not an easily readable book.

In the introduction to this anthology, the author provides an interesting insight into the dynamics of how men (the biographers) characterized women (the artists) within their compilations and society as a whole. In most cases, the womanly qualities of chastity, modesty, and high moral standards preceded any mention of artistic ability. This greatly contrasts with the life stories of men that appeared in these same compilations that enumerate the male artist’s education, apprenticeships, students, patrons, and their many works. The moral character of women artists however was of utmost importance to offset the idea that as an artist, women were transgressing into the male world. As a result they were likely to be seen as anomalies of the early modern culture in which they lived. Their achievements were therefore perceived by society as quite extraordinary, and clearly exceptional and uncharacteristic of womankind as a whole. This idea was reinforced by the fact that women were such a small percentage of these biographical compilations.

Each artist’s story is preceded by an introduction to the biographer, his background, how his information was gathered, and how this woman’s story fits into the particular compilation from which it has been extracted. The author has annotated each introduction to provide needed clarification, to place the reader in the time and place of both biographer and artist. If there have been previous translations, the author comments, especially if she has found the translation to be confusing or in error, and provides clarification and new translations where needed.

Since most of the artists have not appeared in previous publications, this anthology will make a good addition to any library reference section dealing with art history. However, because of the extensive comments and footnotes, scholars interested in tracing the changing or unchanging history of the role of women in society as a whole will also gain from this anthology. There is an extensive appendix, bibliography and index.

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