

LAVINIA FONTANA

1552 – 1614

The most successful woman artist of the Renaissance



TIMELINE

- 1552**
Born in Bologna
- 1560s**
Trained in her father's workshop
- 1577**
Married fellow painter Gian Paolo Zappi
- 1579–1614**
Ran a thriving workshop in Bologna with her husband and 11 children
- 1602**
Appointed to paint for the Pope in Rome
- 1614**
Dies in Rome

THE ARTIST

Lavinia Fontana was born in Bologna in 1552 and trained in the studio of her father, Prospero Fontana. Exceptionally talented, she became a highly sought-after portraitist and history painter.

She married painter Gian Paolo Zappi, and together they ran a large and successful workshop, training many students, including her daughters and sons.

Fontana received commissions from popes, cardinals, royalty and the highest circles of Italian society. She was the first woman artist in Europe to earn a living on such a scale and to manage a major studio.

A SUCCESSFUL CAREER

- Painted for popes, cardinals and royalty**
- Managed a large workshop with her family**
- Trained many students, including women**
- Versatile in portraiture, religion and myth**
- Works collected across Europe during her lifetime**

HER ART

Lavinia's art is elegant, refined and technically superb. She excelled in portraiture, capturing intelligence and character with sensitivity. Her religious and mythological paintings are graceful and beautifully composed.

She had a remarkable ability to paint rich textures—fabrics, jewellery, lace—with extraordinary detail and luminosity.

LOOKING BEYOND THE MYTH

Lavinia Fontana's success was not a modern discovery—she was famous in her own time. She was praised by Giorgio Vasari and other contemporary writers. Her achievements were real, recorded and widely acknowledged.

We should remember her because she was a brilliant artist and an exceptional entrepreneur, not simply because she was a woman working in a man's world.

MASTERPIECES:

- Portrait of the Gozzadini Family, c.1584**
Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna



- Minerva Dressing (Dressing Minerva), c.1613**
Galleria Spada, Rome



- Noli Me Tangere, c.1581**
National Museum, Warsaw



WHY HISTORY OVERLOOKED HER

Despite her success, Lavinia was gradually pushed to the margins of art history for several reasons:

- Later art histories focused on a small group of male "geniuses".
- Women artists were rarely recorded by later writers.
- Many of her works remained in private collections.
- Changing tastes led to her style being undervalued.
- Only recent scholarship has fully restored her important place in the Renaissance.

History did not deliberately erase her. Shifting priorities and incomplete records dimmed her legacy over time.

SCAN TO EXPLORE more about Lavinia Fontana



Images • Timeline
Further reading
French version
& more resources

WHY HER WORK MATTERS

- She proved a woman could run a major studio and achieve international success.
- Her portraits are among the finest of the Renaissance.
- She expanded opportunities for women artists to follow.
- Her technical mastery continues to inspire.



DID YOU KNOW?

Lavinia ran a workshop with around 11 children—many of whom became accomplished artists—while continuing to receive major commissions.



WHERE TO SEE HER WORK

- Accademia Nazionale di San Luca, Rome
- Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna
- Galleria Spada, Rome
- National Museum, Warsaw
- Museo del Prado, Madrid



CONTEMPORARIES FOR CONTEXT

- | | |
|------------|-----------|
| Titian | 1488–1576 |
| Veronese | 1528–1588 |
| Tintoretto | 1518–1594 |
| Caravaggio | 1571–1610 |
| Rubens | 1577–1640 |

1 Self-Portrait at the Harpsichord, c.1577

Accademia Nazionale di San Luca, Rome



2 Portrait of the Gozzadini Family, c.1584

Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna



4 Minerva Dressing (Dressing Minerva), c.1613

Galleria Spada, Rome



5 Noli Me Tangere, c.1581

National Museum, Warsaw



FORGOTTEN WOMEN ARTISTS IS NOT ABOUT REWRITING HISTORY. IT IS ABOUT COMPLETING IT.