

SOFONISBA ANGUISSOLA

c.1532 – 1625

The first internationally celebrated woman artist of the Renaissance

"I hold that I had as much talent as any man of my time."

– Sofonisba Anguissola



TIMELINE

- c.1532 Born in Cremona, Italy
- 1546 Begins formal training in her father's studio
- 1559 Invited to the court of Philip II in Spain
- 1564 Appointed Dame-in-Waiting and drawing teacher to the Queen
- 1609 Returns to Italy after many years in Spain
- 1625 Dies in Palermo

THE ARTIST

Sofonisba Anguissola showed extraordinary talent from childhood. Her father, Amilcare Anguissola, a respected painter, gave her the same training as his sons. Her skill won her invitations to the greatest courts in Europe. At just 27 she was summoned to Madrid by King Philip II, where she became a highly respected court painter and drawing teacher. She enjoyed a remarkable career spanning more than sixty years—unusual for any artist, let alone a woman of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

A SUCCESSFUL CAREER

- Served the Spanish royal court
- Among the most respected women artists of her time
- Appointed teacher of drawing to the Queen
- Produced portraits, devotional paintings and drawings
- Admired across Europe during her lifetime

HER ART

Sofonisba was a master portraitist with a rare ability to capture intelligence, sensitivity and inner life. Her compositions are carefully balanced, her drawing precise, and her use of colour subtle and refined. She excelled in portraying complex relationships within families and courts, offering psychological insight that was ahead of her time.

LOOKING BEYOND THE MYTH

For centuries, Sofonisba was neglected in art history despite her fame in her own time. Only recently have scholars recognised her as one of the greatest portraitists of the Renaissance. We should remember her because she transformed portraiture through psychological insight and became the first woman artist to achieve international renown.

AT A GLANCE

Nationality: Italian
 Movement: Renaissance (Mannerism)
 Speciality: Portrait painting
 Active: Italy · Spain
 Career: Over 60 years
 Reputation: Celebrated in her lifetime across Europe

HER CONTEMPORARIES

Titian c.1488–1576
 Michelangelo 1475–1564
 Tintoretto 1518–1594
 SOFONISBA ANGUISSOLA c.1532–1625
 El Greco 1541–1614
 Rubens 1577–1640

Sofonisba belonged to the central generation of the Renaissance and Mannerist masters.

1 Self-Portrait at the Easel

c.1556
 Liechtenstein. The Princely Collections, Vienna



A confident self-portrait demonstrating the artist's skill and professional ambition.

2 The Chess Game

1558
 Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid



One of the Renaissance's most celebrated family portraits, depicting her sisters Lucia, Minerva and Europa.

3 Portrait of the Anguissola Family

c.1558
 Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples



An intimate family portrait displaying Sofonisba's remarkable psychological insight.

4 Portrait of a Lady ("La Bella")

c.1560
 Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



An elegant court portrait admired for its refined characterisation.

5 Saint Catherine of Alexandria

c.1563–1566
 Palazzo Abatellis, Palermo



A devotional painting combining dignity, grace and subtle emotional depth.

WHY HISTORY OVERLOOKED HER

- Art history 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 restored her rightful place in the history of art.

History did not deliberately erase her. Shifting priorities, limited records and gender bias caused her to be overlooked.

WHY HER WORK MATTERS

- First internationally renowned woman artist.
- Master of portraiture and psychological insight.
- Opened doors for women artists in Europe.
- Exemplifies the heights women could reach when given training and opportunity.
- Her work remains powerful and deeply human.

DID YOU KNOW?

Sofonisba Anguissola is regarded as one of the first women artists to achieve international fame during her lifetime, paving the way for later generations of professional women painters.

WHERE TO SEE HER WORK

- Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid
- Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples
- National Gallery, London
- Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna
- Palazzo Abatellis, Palermo

CONTEMPORARIES FOR CONTEXT

Titian c.1488–1576
 Michelangelo 1475–1564
 Tintoretto 1518–1594
 El Greco 1541–1614
 Rubens 1577–1640

Sofonisba belonged to the same era as the greatest masters of the Renaissance and Mannerism.