

Lavinia Fontana Zappi (1552-1614) by Angelo Fernandez

Born in the major art center of Bologna, Italy to leading painter, Prospero Fontana, Lavinia enjoyed her professional training at home. In her artistic development, she was influenced by her role model, Sofonisba Anguissola, the first internationally recognized Italian female portrait painter. Lavinia's own portrait style combined elegance and elongation of the human figure, typical of the Mannerist style. She was admired for the beauty of color and the precise description of clothing, texture, and jewelry worn by her subjects.



Women painters of the era were generally limited to portraiture. Lavinia enjoyed a well established reputation for portraits of many women sitters but also of local, aristocratic men. She became the portraitist of choice among Bolognese noblewomen and important individuals connected with the University of Bologna. By the 1570's, public commissions for large paintings of religious and mythological subjects, which included female nudes, resulted in her unique reputation.

In 1577, at the age of 25, Lavinia married Giovanni Paolo Zappi, a wealthy fellow artist. Zappi recognized her superior talent and dedicated himself to assisting Lavinia by rendering backgrounds in some of her paintings. Despite her demanding art schedule, the

couple bore 11 children. Only 3 outlived Lavinia.

The first of Fontana's large religious paintings was the *Holy Family with St. John* (1589), done as an altar piece for El Escorial, the Spanish Royal Palace and now in the collection of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C. She subsequently executed a major commission, her most ambitious narrative work, *The Visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon*, presently in the National Gallery, Dublin, Ireland. This is probably a group portrait of the wealthy, powerful, and ruling Gonzaga family of Mantua. Another altar piece, *The Vision of Saint Hyacinth* (1599-1600), for the Santa Sabina church in Rome led to an invitation by Pope Clement VIII to become a papal court painter. The Zappis permanently moved to Rome in 1603 where Lavinia became a court portraitist, enjoying the patronage of Pope Gregory XIII's family. In 1604 she painted the *Martyrdom of St. Stephen*,





her largest altar piece for a Roman basilica, San Paolo Fuori le Mura. A rare honor for a female, Lavinia was elected a member of the Roman Academy.

After her marriage, Fontana would occasionally sign her paintings using her married name, Zappi. Of Fontana's body of work, only 30 paintings consistently attributed to her survive. This still represents the largest known body of work by a woman up to the year 1700. Lavinia received many awards and honors, was one of the first women to paint

large, publicly commissioned figure paintings, and is recognized for developing a successful artistic career while working within the sphere of her European, male counterparts. At present, Fontana's *Portrait of a Noble Woman*, said to be Bianca Capello, Grand Duchess of Tuscany, and her *Portrait of Constanza Adidosi* are in the collection of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.



Lavinia Fontana, *Portrait d'homme assis feuilletant un livre (dit du sénateur Orsini)*,
Musée des Beaux-Arts, France Bx E 197 ; Bx M 5689

Lavinia Fontana, *Judith and Holofernes*, oil on canvas; 175.9 x 134.1 cm

Lavinia Fontana, *Ritratto di ragazza*, ol/rame, diam 10 cm, Private Collection

Lavinia Fontana, *Minerva Dressing*, Oil on canvas, 1613, Galleria Borghese, Rome

Lavinia Fontana, *Sacra Famiglia con san Giovannino*, ol/rame, 22 x 21 cm, Nat.
Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington