Tragic to Triumphant: Rosalba Carriera's *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1746

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KEYWORDS

Materiality; effigy; visual metaphor; self-portraiture; aging artist; death of the artist; memorialization; self-fashioning; colour theory; gender

ABSTRACT

The intimate artwork of the Venetian pastel artist Rosalba Carriera (1675–1757) catered to international tastes of eighteenth-century European society during a period when women's increasing mobility and visibility in the emerging public sphere resulted in the negotiation of new social identities. Her body of work comprises portraits of European society, sensual allegories, and a range of self-portraiture. Pastels enabled her to tailor her product for her clientele, creating portraits intended for intimate representations of familial connections, while at other times fashioning representations of palpable semi-erotic allegories. Carriera distanced her own self-image from the eroticized nature of some of her works, fashioning herself as an intelligent, pious, virginal marvel. Her self-portraits remain under-explored despite the significance of the artist in the eighteenth-century culture of the Grand Tour, and the keen interest in early modern women artists' self-fashioning in modern scholarship. Focusing on Carriera's Self-Portrait, ca. 1746, my research will investigate how Rosalba constructed a multivalent autoritratto (self-portrait) to show herself as triumphant, fashioning an image that is quite unique within the tradition of artistic self-representation. This painting works in three important ways: firstly, it manipulates Early Modern European visual culture to metaphorically align Carriera to leading minds of the classical and early modern periods; secondly, it claims immortal fame by creating an effigy to live as an avatar long after the artist's death; and thirdly, it shows Rosalba's authority and skill as an artist via the use of early modern colour theory and a deliberate application of pigment on the canvas. In arguing for a new understanding of this significant female artist, my research will build new and much-needed scholarship on Rosalba Carriera and enrich our understanding of female artistic self-representation within European culture.

Rosalba Carriera's (1675–1757) self-image, *Self-Portrait,* ca. 1746, in the Gallerie dell' Accademia in Venice has long intrigued scholars (fig. 1). Executed when the artist was in her seventies, and possibly one of the last images she created, the small-scale, bust-length image depicts her wearing restrained clothing and a simple laurel crown. Shown without jewellery, Rosalba's only embellishment is a wreath of leaves. Cast in subdued light and rendered in muted, natural colour—far from the bright pastels of previous self-depictions—her image conveys a measure of gravitas as her contemplative gaze looks out of the picture at the viewer. Considering the seemingly sombre nature of the image, it is often considered a personal statement of melancholy and has been referred to by Michael Levey as the "Muse of Tragedy". [1] The laurel wreath anointing the assumed sad expression, furthered by the sombre colour scheme, is read through the lens of perceived depression, mourning, and loss. Written in 1959, Levey's survey of eighteenth-century Italian art is one of the few books that specifically addresses Carriera's *Self-Portrait* and its meaning.[2] In his book, Levey—who was the former Director of the National Gallery in London from 1973 to 1986—describes *Self-Portrait* as "tragic," with the intended "effect of tragedy in portraits of herself in old age."[3]

Biographies on Rosalba state that Carriera suffered from depression, especially after the deaths of her sister and her mother. These biographies further detail how she descended into depression after she went blind during the last ten years of her life, a condition that would have prevented her from practicing her art and livelihood. Given Carriera's biography, and the knowledge she painted this image after a cataract surgery that tried to correct her fading vision, scholars such as Liana De Girolami Cheney, Alicia Craig Faxon, and Kathleen Lucey Russo agree with Levey and have read this self-portrait as a personal reflection on a sad life turned tragic.[4]

FIGURE 1
Rosalba Carriera, *Self-portrait*, pastel on paper, 31 x 25 cm. Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia.

With permission from Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali - Gallerie dell'Accademica di Venezia.

Women were judged differently than men in terms of the importance of beauty, but also in how they suffered emotionally.[5] According to Julia Dabbs, women were more likely to be made out to be depressed because of grief over a loved one, and were more likely to be described as suffering from vision loss.[6] In her interpretations of the writings of Francesco Moücke, a contemporary biographer of Carriera, Dabbs asserts that "Carriera was able to transcend the tragedy of vision loss through her intellective powers, which counter[ed] a

common perception of the period that women lacked the capacity for intelligence, and in particular the faculty of judgement that was considered crucial to artistic excellence".[7] As Dabbs' ideas help to underscore, there is a danger in reading too much of an artist's biography into a painting. Relying solely on a biographical reading runs the danger of missing evidence present in the image that supports a different interpretation; such restrictive analysis ultimately limits the image to a one-sided, self-reflective frame.

This paper will challenge the interpretation of those scholars who read this work of art as strictly a biographical image. By closely examining Carriera's imagery in her self-portrait, I argue that other multivalent meanings become possible and that Rosalba's *autoritrato* (self-portrait) works: to act as a visual metaphor of a *maestra* (female maestro; a distinguished figure), to stand as an effigy, and to claim her *ingegno* (ingenuity in art) by using a masculine application of colour within the context of early modern colour theory.[8] I offer that it was with this consciously crafted sense of self that Carriera created a final self-portrait to stand as a sentinel, claiming eternal fame among the pantheon of celebrated early modern artists.

At first glance this painting may seem like a very honest representation of a self-portrait with little concern by Rosalba to conceal her appearance. The self-portrait is a small painting (measuring only 31cm long by 25cm wide) which immediately makes it an intimate image of the artist. Rosalba's expression appears composed and resolute. She has shown herself as a mature woman, evident in the soft jawline and her grey hair. Further signs of maturity are the laugh lines that form around her mouth and nose, and the bags that rest underneath her eyes. It is with this deceivingly simple image that Carriera draws on complicated themes in early modern Italian art to depict herself with grace, while simultaneously clarifying that she was a respected individual and a talented artist. Carriera

was conscious to present herself as a professional and wealthy artist in her correspondence to friends and clients and was cognizant throughout her lifetime to construct an identity of an educated, well-mannered, artistic powerhouse.[9] In *Self-Portrait*, her oval face sits firmly supported by her smooth neck. Further, Rosalba has depicted herself wearing a plain brown painter's smock similar to the one seen on Tiziano Vecellio (Titian, 1488-1576) in his *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1550-1562. Other than a light, quickly sketched material over her breast, the only other distinctive part of the costume features the soft blue-green leaves of the laurel wreath resting on her head. In this painting she shows herself as calm, confident, and exceedingly capable. Knowing this, it makes little sense that the *autoritratto*, her final statement to the world, be suffused with self-pity.

Self-Portrait as Metaphor of *Maestra*

Eighteenth-century Venice embraced the intricate, ornamental and theatrical art of the Rococo. However, the Roman Neoclassicism that was gaining momentum throughout Europe may be the key to understanding this self-portrait more accurately. Carriera's *Self-Portrait* fits into this post-classical concern for the antique; she shows herself wearing a laurel wreath, a crown worn in antiquity by victorious people. Here then, Rosalba has likely used the double meaning of the bay tree to crown herself as a victorious artist. Firstly, the laurel wreath had strong associations with Laura, the muse of the famous poet laureate Francesco Petrarch, 1304–1374.[10] As Petrarch has Laura say, "the laurel means triumph, of which I am worthy, thanks to that Lord who gave me strength."[11] This association between Laura and Carriera's laurel wreaths thus crowns Carriera with the same grace, triumph, and God-given strength. As Elizabeth Cropper has stated: "the laurel provides the single referent to the Petrarchan figure."[12] If this association with the crown of bay leaves is true, it is possible that Carriera meant to further align herself to one of the greatest humanists of the early modern era, to that of

Petrarch as seen in the circa sixteenth century *Portrait of Petrarch* at the Casa del Petrarca in Arezzo. This association between Petrarch and Carriera is supported by early modern art criticism that aligned the image of aging poets with aging artists.[13] As educated as Rosalba was, it is entirely possible that her reference to Laura establishes not only Carriera's own virtue, but also aligns her to the author, elevating herself as artist to the status to the esteemed poet laureate, Petrarch. Secondly, it is important to note the connotation of the laurel crown with eternity. Again, this is underscored by the idea that the use of theory in art "is associated with the soul and, therefore, with ageless immortality".[14] In this way, it is possible that the image does not mark her as the personification of tragedy, but rather as a *maestra*, eternal master of her art.

To go beyond the biographical reading so often prescribed to Rosalba's final self-portrait one need only turn to the visual evidence she provided in her image. If the accoutrement of the bay leaves shows Carriera as triumphant, the stark cropping of her image, reduced to the tops of her shoulders and her face, show her as philosophical. Instead of using a half-length depiction of herself that includes her torso, Rosalba cropped her self-portrait to bust length. This simple alteration likely would have been recognized by contemporary audiences as a pictorial representation of an antique bust statue used by the ancient Greeks and Romans, and by Renaissance Italians, to capture the portraits of emperors, senators and important literary and philosophical men such as Virgil, Horace, Petrarch, Dante, Seneca, and more, as can be seen in the second century bust portrait of Homer housed in the British Museum in London.[15] In this way, Rosalba likely aligns herself to representational traditions within classical traditions (from antiquity onwards) by using a bust for her self-portrait. It is very possible that in *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1746, Carriera is alluding to the teachings of Seneca the Younger (4 BC–AD 65), a stoic philosopher who taught followers to

live a life of "moral and intellectual perfection".[16] Ancient busts represented great men as calm, capable intellectuals who looked to the afterlife with confidence. Maria Loh believed the bust acted like a touchable relic and represented the departed after their death.[17] In this way, my analysis indicates that Rosalba quotes the bust tradition by presenting herself in the same proportions, looking beyond her current reality to the eternal fate that awaits us all.

Further highlighting this association between herself and literary and philosophical greats, Carriera's dual-coloured eyes do refer to her blindness, as one had turned from blue to brown after her cataract surgery. But rather than being a literal reference, the eye colour and the previously mentioned fleshy lower lids that emphasize them, highlight her eyes and act in an iconographical manner (fig. 2). Representations of a blind old man anointed with laurel leaves were interpreted

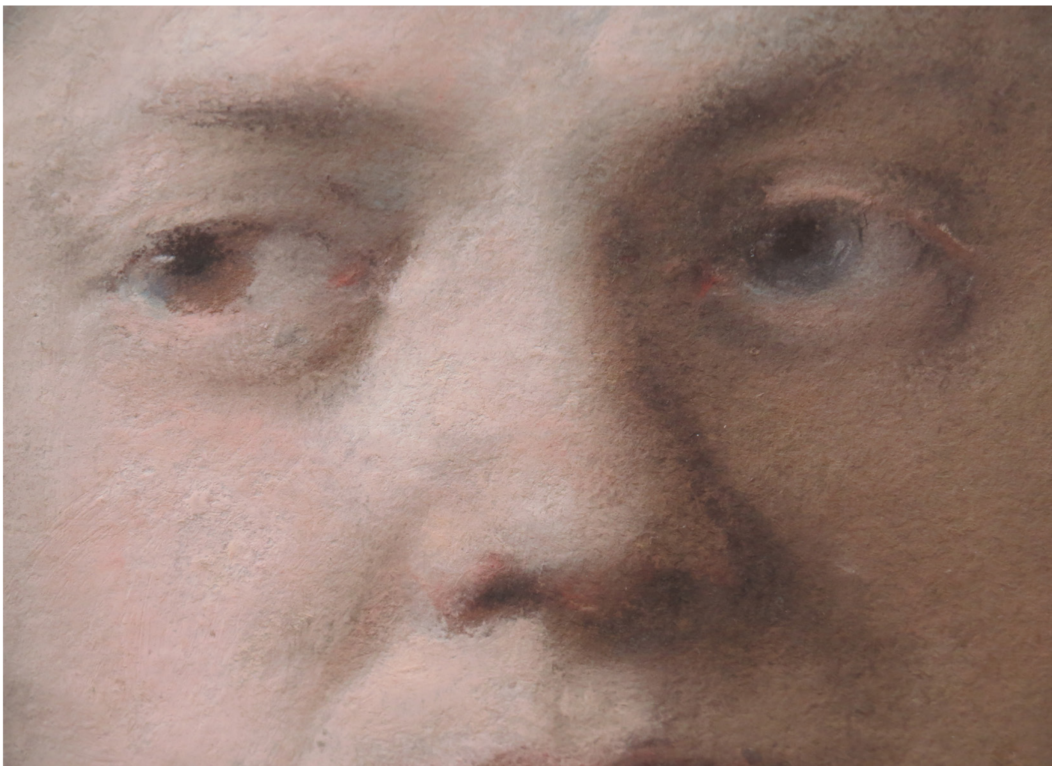

FIGURE 2
Rosalba Carriera, *Self-portrait* (detail), pastel on paper, 31 x 25 cm. Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia.

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as representations of the blind author of antiquity, Homer, considered the greatest literary mind, antique or contemporary. In *Prophets, Saints, and Matriarchs: Portraits of Old Women in Early Modern Italy*, Erin Campbell notes that in the "premodern psychology of the ages of man … old age is perceived as a time of wisdom," a suggestion adopted here.[18] This association of Homer and Petrarch equates Carriera to the leading intellectual minds of antiquity and of the Renaissance.

Self-Portrait*, ca. 1746 as *Maestra

Rosalba visually aligned her own artistic reputation to that of her fellow Venetian artist, Titian (c. 1488–1576), considered the pre-eminent artist from the Lagoon City.[19] I suggest that Rosalba would have seen many parallels between Titian and herself. I do not believe that Carriera wanted to be Titian, but rather that she modelled her own creativity on his visual rhetoric to assert her own agency. Living and working in Venice, Carriera and Titian (in his capacity as a portraitist) had many similarities.

Both Carriera and Titian were seminal to developments in portraiture. Previously, portraits had been limited to the head and shoulders of an individual. Titian's influence was the way he expanded the depiction of the figure in his portraiture so that the viewer could see the torso or full body of his subjects.[20] Carriera's influence was due to her choice of medium; she played a vital role in the establishment of using pastels, which became an independent category within the larger portraiture genre.[21] Another common feature in their oeuvre was the inclusion of Beauties – representations of erotically-toned images of beautiful women disguised as allegories meant to stimulate meditative practices on the viewer and assist them in intellectual contemplation. Carriera and Titian both worked for international, elite, wealthy and royal patrons. As artists from the Veneto, both painters (working in pastel and oil, respectively) used the Venetian

sense of *colore*, rendering their figures with the blending of tone, and embraced the use of colour in their art.[22] Both Carriera and Titian were formally recognized for their professional success. Carriera won critical acclaim in the academies of Rome, Bologna and Paris. The Habsburg Emperor, Charles V of Spain (1500–1558) gave Titian the title 'Count Palatine' and 'Knight of the Golden Spur.'[23] Like Titian's *Self-Portrait* of 1550-1562 in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin, Carriera uses a similar loose, unpolished brushwork to depict the painter's smock that both artists wear in their respective self-representations. Carriera, who enthusiastically embraced colour in the portraits of her clients, some of her own earlier self-portraits, and in her fancy pictures of Beauties, intentionally restricts the use of colour in her self-portrait to the same muted tonal palette evident in Titian's image. The only bright colour in Titian's self-portrait is the reddish golden chain gifted to him by Charles V upon the artist's knighthood. Although Carriera's social status was never formally elevated, she wears the wreath of laurel leaves that would have connoted a crown. The loose style could be evidence that both artists were affected by failing vision and declining physical abilities as they aged but as Dabbs points out "this loss could be countered to some extent by exemplary or heroic reactions to this decline, such as an increased emphasis on intellectual acuity, or emotional or spiritual strength".[24]

Titian died in the sixteenth century. His funerary monument by Luigi Zandomeneghi at the Church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in Venice was not built until 1838-1852. Yet when completed, his effigy shows him wearing the same crown of laurel leaves that Carriera anoints on her own head in her self-portrait. Titian, not reduced to a tragic muse, sits triumphantly enthroned, flanked by angels under a triumphal arch. Carriera could not render herself in stone. Instead, *Self-Portrait* alludes to sculpture by showing her head-and-shoulders in a bust format. With this direct tie between the final effigies of both artists, one must

consider the possibility that it was a Venetian practice to crown successful artists with laurel leaves, drawing important associations between the arts and ideas of triumph. Carriera is not referencing tragedy, but rather engaging with an artistic practice common to funerary monuments. Further, the propaganda generated by those who survived to speak about an artist after death had the ability to influence an artist's reputation. For example, Giorgio Vasari's book, *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, still influences the way Michelangelo Buonarotti's (1475-1564) intrinsic artistic talent is seen as God-given. As he did for his Florentine colleague, Vasari celebrated Titian, whose style came to represent the epitome of Venetian art; as the most renowned artist to come from Venice. Yet Rosalba did not have someone like Vasari well-placed within artistic circles to pontificate about her artistic merit the way he had spoken of the genius of Michelangelo and Titian. Rosalba Carriera was arguably the most successful eighteenth-century Venetian portraitist and it would be only natural that she compares herself to her countrymen that came before her. I suggest that with *Self-Portrait*, Carriera astutely references the same critical acclaim and celebrity granted to Titian by making a direct visual reference to him in her final self-portrait and quoting some of the same visual qualities used by Titan in his *Self-Portrait,* ca. 1550-62.[25] With this final self-image, Carreira did not align herself to her predecessor, but rather it is likely that she signalled herself as a modern-day Titian, and as with Titian's immortal reputation as a Master artist, Carriera too establishes her own eternal fame as the Venetian *Maestra*.

By drawing on more modern research of female aging in the early modern period, Dabbs argues that Rosalba Carriera was able to situate herself within "the exemplary category of "heroic old age" through … inspirational demonsrations of emotional tenacity and intellectual acuity in the face of blindness".[26] Drawing on

Dabb's research, I agree with her that Carriera intentionally embraced this view of herself as the "heroic old woman" in the self-portrait as a means to "exhibit wisdom, creativity, authority and other forms of agency".[27]

The Self-Portrait as Effigy

To understand how Rosalba's self-image may have been constructed in the guise of an effigy, my examination employs the ideas of Maria Loh regarding artistic self-imaging. Loh's book, *Still Lives: Death, Desire, and the Portrait of the Old Master,* has been foundational to my argument that the meaning of Rosalba's final self-portrait surpasses the biographical to present her image as an effigy to stand as a monument to the artist's posthumous fame.[28] Loh's study examines how an artist's death is a form of staged portraiture, and therefore an important moment for artistic self-fashioning.[29] Basing my argument on Loh's research, I suggest here that it is possible that Carriera constructed her staged persona in this final self-image to secure her eternal fame and to confirm her artistic talents and her elite status amongst the leading intellectual and artistic minds in classical and contemporary Europe. Although Loh's emphasis is on sixteenth-century artists, her deconstruction of how Renaissance artists were established as Old Masters and Geniuses is important to my reading of the self-portrait. It permits us to situate Carriera within a style of early modern self-fashioning that was both intermediary and explicit.[30] Maria Loh's model of intentional constructions of the artistic persona permits us to decipher Rosalba's self-portrait beyond the limited biographical reading I am challenging. Loh considers how the portraits of, and self-portraits by, artists helped to establish a newfound fame for their creators during their lifetimes. Further to this, Loh discusses how these images continued to act even after the represented person's death. In this way, the representations of artists became both material objects to replace the physical body and immortal avatars that stood as sentinels to memorialize their predecessor. Portraits of artists

have the power to constitute and evoke memory and to fashion personas long after the subject's death.

While Loh's analysis centres mainly on male artists, her examination of the prolific female artist, Sofonisba Anguissola (1532-1625), corroborates my assertion that Carriera deliberately calculated an image of pre-eminence and immortal celebrity. Notably, Loh illuminates how Anguissola, a female Renaissance painter, fully understood the power of her own likeness and exploited it to a level not evidenced in the work of her male peers. Not only did Anguissola record her own existence in history, she also exploited the "knowledge that one's identity was something to be fashioned, disseminated, and safeguarded; otherwise it ran the risk of being, among other things, lost".[31] Loh compares the images of Michelangelo Buonarroti to Sofonisba Anguissola's self-portraits to underline the significance Sofonisba established with her own self-fashioning. Although there are a few portraits of Michelangelo, and a sculptural self-portrait originally intended for his tomb,[32] the artist did not take the same initiative as Anguissola. By default, Michelangelo left his posthumous image up to others to imagine, and by extension, lost control of it.[33] Could it be that Carriera understood the significance of controlling her own posthumous image the way that Anguissola did, and therefore worked to create a self-portrait to highlight the way she felt she deserved to be seen? Instead of being forgotten about, as many women artists seem to have been, or reduced to 'just a woman', Carriera marked out an image to show her own agency highlighting her significance as a preeminent artist of her time, regardless of the fact that she was a female.

Loh explores "… the liminal space in which portraiture hovers between being a *symbolic icon* (an image that imposes a certain likeness upon its subject) and an *iconic index* (a touch relic that preserves the embodied trace of the artist)".[34] Using Daniele da Volterra's *Portrait of Michelangelo*, c. 1540, Loh explores the

complex idea of how a portrait is an artefact, a physical remnant that was once a part of, and created by, the artist. This idea of the 'touch relic' explores the objectivity of the portrait as a means for a viewer to connect physically with the long-dead artist. For Loh, a portrait acknowledges its history, its materiality, its objectivity, and its status as a relic. In this way, a portrait is a "symbolic icon that exceed[s] and supersede[s] the body of the artist".[35] In other words, the (self-) portrait is an image that surpasses the artist during their lifetime and lives on after their death. Loh contends that the death of the artist is a form of staged portraiture via the production of their subsequent funeral and the creation of the artists' funerary monument. Using the internment examples of the artists Michelangelo, Raphael Sanzio da Urbino (1483–1520), and Titian, Loh illustrates how their funerals aided to further their reputations and their establishment as geniuses. As she argues, the deaths and funerary monuments of these significant artists reflect the vulnerability of their physical bodies and their reputations after their deaths. As Loh states, "The death of the flesh-and-blood artist enabled the birth of the representational figure of the Artist – one must inevitably trade viscera for virtuality."[36] This concept of the symbolic icon and the iconic relic applies to Carriera because it establishes how her self-portrait acted as both a signpost that advertised her persona and as a tangible object that evidenced her adroitness as an artist. In this way, *Self-Portrait* becomes a graven image on which Carriera establishes her celebrity.

In much the same way as her artistic countrymen, Carriera's post-mortem reputation was left up to friends such as the poet, playwright, and editor, Luisa Bergalli Gozzi (1703-1779) to record.[37] Although she left behind a lifelong series of self-portraiture, Carriera's works and her contacts were mainly within private circles, much like Anguissola centuries before. Without the backing of prominent male critics to continue bolstering her reputation when the tastes in art changed

after the Rococo style went into decline, Carriera's artworks were left with no one to speak for them the way that Vasari spoke for Michelangelo. It is my belief that this is how her *Self-Portrait* of 1747 may have been misinterpreted by scholars, and indicates why my approach offers an important corrective to the record.

Carriera's ultimate self-portrait works in the same manner as Michelangelo Buonarroti's ca. 1550 *Pietà* at the Florentine Museo dell' Opera del Duomo does. The *Pietà* makes a statement on Michelangelo's great piety for the benefit of his eternal soul. Further to this, it makes a claim for his posthumous reputation as a master sculptor. In *Self-Portrait* Carriera's wit and intelligence foster the same double meaning: commenting on her virtuous life as a dedicated sister and daughter, and on her status as a great master. Unlike Michelangelo, Carriera was a pastelist, not a sculptor. This paper suggests that, by self-consciously alluding to stone, a much more durable medium than the delicate nature of pastel, Carriera references the enduring material and aligns her final self-image to the eternal realm of an effigy. *Self-Portrait* stands as a conceptual funerary monument that entrenches Carriera's artistic immortality.

Colour Theory

Given her educated mind, it is very possible that Carriera wanted to establish herself as an intellectual and artistic powerhouse by employing the rhetoric of early modern colour theory to solidify her *autoritratto (self-portrait)* within a discourse of gender that would enhance the establishment of her posthumous fame. Patricia Reilly's article *The Taming of the Blue: Writing out Color in Italian Renaissance Theory* and Philip Sohm's *Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia* show how important gender and colour were to early modern artists.[38] Their scholarship elucidates how the rhetoric of gender in early modern art criticism was well-established by early modern critics. These two

essays are foundational to understanding the masculinization or feminization of artistic style, medium, and artistic identity. Underscoring the use of colour to make a statement about her agency as an artist, Carriera used an energized application of pigment, which, as this section will show, makes further claims to how this female artist established masculine authority in her self-portrait. The scholarship of Reilly and Sohm have shown the brandishing of gender like a weapon by critics to assault or defend artists and their work in a rhetorical fight that used ideal feminine beauty as the site for battle.[39] By following the arguments of Reilly and Sohm, I propose that it thus becomes evident that later artists versed in the rhetoric of colour intentionally evoked a gendered style to either heighten or minimize the masculine or feminine readings of their own work to enhance their prestige – as is apparent in the pastel paintings of Rosalba Carriera.

Using the influential scholarship of Elizabeth Cropper, who showed that the rhetoric of ideal female beauty extended to the beauty of art, Reilly explains how the colours and pigments used by artists in the Quattrocento were considered gendered, or more specifically, female, within the rhetoric of Renaissance art criticism.[40] Looking back to the classical writings of Aristotle, early modern scholars saw *disegno* (the form and the ingenuity of the artist) as form, an "idea in its ideal state".[41] Form gave shape to matter. It was this active agency that gave *disegno* its masculine qualities. On the other hand, *colore* was understood as matter, the "fleshing out of the divine world of ideas" mouldable into form. As such, *colore* was understood to be passive, and therefore, considered feminine. This argument extended to the debate between sculpture and painting. Supporters argued that the lack of colour and pure form of sculpture aligned it to the most masculine qualities of *disegno.*[42] Supporters of painting praised their medium for its colour that could express "varying intensity" unavailable in monotone sculptures.[43] They further argued that painting was the more masculine of mediums because

it added new material (formed matter) to the surface of the canvas (or panel), and allowed the viewer to distinguish form more clearly.

In early modern art criticism that favoured the use of drawing, colour fights for the attention of the viewer, upstaging *disegno* by distracting the eye with beauty. Colours, like women, were beautiful when graceful, and in this rhetoric of colour and beauty, women's body parts – such as blushed pink cheeks, blonde hair, or white marble skin – had a correct "tone and colour".[44] Further to the physical ideal, the intrinsic female virtues of graceful mien and comportment aided in establishing ideal female beauty.

This conflation of colour and women in art was significant in the discourse of Renaissance art theory that saw their uses in art as evidence of an artist's mastery, or *disegno*, and by extension, the artist's honour.[45] The painter became a Creator by manipulating colour and female identity. In this way, the rhetoric aligned the conception of a painting to the conception of Adam by God, and thus to divine creation. As Reilly states, "color alone was incapable of producing this life; for that it needed the active agency of the painter."[46] Without the active creativity of the artist, pigments would remain inert. With this article, Reilly excavates a Renaissance discourse that saw the *paragone* (comparison) debates on *disegno* and *colore* saturated in gendered understandings. Jumping off of Reilly's intricate arguments, Philip Sohm pushes even further into the gendering of style in early modern art criticism. Sohm proposes that overt references in early modern art criticism were evidence of the academic notion of gendered style, and further, that these gendered styles provided a frame of reference with which Renaissance art critics could describe and evaluate works of art.[47] As he states, "femininity in particular was frequently disembodied in Renaissance criticism and wielded as a rhetorical weapon usually against objectionable art".[48] The gender of an artwork could be separated from depictions of male or female, and then

located within the formal elements of a painting.[49] Although elements such as medium and colouring (both its stylistic use and the colours themselves) do not have an actual gender, they were "culturally determined" female or male.[50]

In Sohm's first section, "Vasari, Firenzuola, and the Gendered Style", the nebulous female physicality translated to women's psychology, and thus represented the unstable nature of their minds. As Sohm states, these ideas "eventually were used to implicate art without design or proportion."[51] In other words, these notions of insecure female attributes were later used to critique art that lacked formal or symbolic structure. Counter to this negative, a woman's undefined nature was also used as evidence of her beauty, unrestricted by typical mathematical language, and the seductive nature of *vaghezza,* or vagueness; the *non so che* of seductive femininity attributed to colours that attracted a male viewer.[52]

Sohm first traces ideas of femininity to the early modern critic Agnolo Firenzuola's treatise, *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne* (Diologue on the Beauty of Women) that itemized ideal female beauty. Carriera claimed her spiritual grace via alluding to the rhetoric of beauty as it was intimately tied to the rhetoric of virtue. [53] Here, along with colour theory, the highly feminized colours of her Beauties, and especially the pretty colours contained within *Self-Portrait, Holding a Portrait of her Sister Giovanna,* 1709 which resides in the Uffizi Collection in Florence, Carriera could solidify her claim to *leggiarda* (pleasing to everybody), *grazia* (grace), *vaghezza* (feminine ambivalence that enamours a man to his beloved), *venusta* (charm), *aria* (pleasant comportment), and *maestà* (majesty).[54] The pale pink and the saturated blue that Carriera adorns herself with in her first self-portrait heighten her femininity and remind the viewer of the ideal in art. Here Carriera is careful to present herself honestly and leave the idealized image of a woman to her sister's portrait. In this way, she claims *ingegno* by placing herself in a liminal position of simultaneous subjectivity and objectivity. Rosalba was not considered

beautiful and by rendering herself as such her talent could not be reduced to her inherent access to it because she was a woman. Here she has shown herself actively creating beauty in the portrait of her sister; she thus underscores her artistic creativity leaving no doubt it is her *disegno*.

To attempt to verify that Carriera was cognizant of early modern colour theory and that she actively employed it in her own art, one only need look at Rosalba's Beauties to see how she took advantage of the feminine *colore*, and the soft effects of the medium of pastel to heighten the eroticism of her brightly coloured young women who would have been recognized as real Venetian women by her patrons.[55] As the pastel painting was brightly coloured, so too were the cosmetics of the actual women who used the makeup to entice male viewers.

Shifting now from the use of colour to the manner in which it was applied to a canvas, in his final section, *The Manly Brush and Women Painters*, Sohm examines the "vocabulary of brushwork" which, during the early modern period, was considered gendered.[56] Unassuming brushwork that was delicate, sweet, and clean was considered feminine.[57] This kind of style can be seen in Carriera's earlier works where her style was more polished, as in *Self-Portrait Holding a Portrait of her Sister, Giovanna.* Contrary to this, rough brushwork that was bold, thrusting, brave, and aggressive was considered masculine.[58] Carriera seems to have manipulated both the masculine and the feminine in this self-image. Historically, she has made it clear that her status as a spinster and dedicated daughter and sister ensure her as a devoted and virtuous woman. Yet by also referencing masculine colours and methods of working, Rosalba quotes the masculine aspect of painting that saw men as natural creators with inherent access to *ingegno* and ensures that her talent is in the same vein of creation, a status that male artists enjoyed.

In her article, *Prophets, Saints, and Matriarchs*, Erin Campbell evidenced the tradition in early modern art for older women to claim male authority by

representing themselves with goiters, wrinkles and other depictions of old age.[59] However, when one considers that Rosalba was approximately 71 years old at the time of this painting, the number of crow's feet, wrinkles, blemishes and jowls one might expect to see on an elderly woman are purposely missing. I argue that Rosalba claims male authority by constructing the image of herself as a metaphor of the *maestra*, as an effigy, and by using a masculine application of the pastel medium along with masculine colours.

The Value of Self-Portraiture

Michael Levey has claimed Rosalba Carriera demonstrated no evolution in her style.[60] This statement ignores Carriera's shifts from designing lace patterns for her mother to painting miniature portraits on snuffbox lids of her early career, to finally working with pastels in her thirties. However, if one looks solely at Rosalba's pastel portraits commissioned by a discerning clientele, one may agree that the patronage demands did little to accommodate artistic changes. Yet Levey has neglected the one area that Carriera would have had complete control over: her self-portraiture.

Carriera's earlier self-portraits such as *Self-Portrait Holding a Portrait of her Sister, Giovanna, 1709* and *Self-Portrait as Winter,* ca. *1730-1731* highlight her abilities with *colore*. As Sohm has established, her clean brushwork and her feminized colours would have heightened the femininity of her art and her gender. It is possible that this was an intentional move by Carriera who, earlier in her career, was establishing herself a virtuous marvel: indeed, she was as gracious and as competent as any male artist.

In her later self-portraits of ca. 1745 and ca. 1746 Carriera again claimed her power as a successful and talented artist. This is evident by her more masculine brushwork and her choice of a subdued colour palette. As Fredrika

Jacobs notes in *Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa*, women artists could show "… that which is masculine (if not always male) to maintain a position of superiority…"[61] in their own works. Carriera's oeuvre shifts the emphasis from bright colours to muted tones, demonstrating her skills as an artist, adept at both *colore* and *disegno*. This shift shows her evolving sense of self – from a young marvel to old master – as she genders her art and her self-images first as feminine, and finally as masculine.

Sohm has shown that gender could be separated from the artist and applied to their art so that a man could produce feminized art.[62] If so, then the reverse must be true. In her last self-portrait Carriera has separated her intrinsic femininity to create a masculine work of art present in the muted tones, and the reduced colour palette. By extension, in *Self-Portrait* the masculine gender of the colour palette and application of pastel gives Carriera masculine agency, and thus enhances her claim on artistic genius.[63]

Conclusion

Arguing for a new reading of Carriera's *Self-Portrait*, I have suggested that the image was designed by Rosalba Carriera to work in three ways: first, to work as a metaphorical device that presented Carriera as a *maestra* by elucidating connotations of great humanists and the Venetian artistic tradition that, although updated for an eighteenth-century audience, rose from the foundations established by Titian; second, to work as an effigy to remind viewers of her spiritual presence long after her death; and third, to visually allude to her *ingegno*, all of which signifies her status as a great artist, a *maestra*. These three elements were integral to the reading of this work to declare and safeguard Rosalba's immortal celebrity.

I believe Rosalba Carriera's ultimate self-portrait posed a challenge to academics in the past – they could not reduce it to a pretty young lady or sexualize

it, but neither could it be reduced to that of a hag, simply ignored, or used for moralistic contemplation. Michael Levey interpreted this image as a solipsism of Carriera's biography. He saw an image of a sombre woman wearing a laurel crown and presented it as a personal representation of Rosalba's struggles with depression, which limited it to a representation of melancholy and self-pity. This reduction of agency was not wielded against Michelangelo and his personal self-portrait in his later *Pietà* (sometimes known as the *Deposition)* now in the Museo dell' Opera del Duomo. Likewise, *Petrarch's Portrait* in the Casa del Petrarca saw no reduction to a love-sick man crowning himself as a martyr for love, despite his unrequited love for a married woman. I contend that Carriera would not suddenly turn from self-promotion to self-pity at the end of her career to depict the final image of herself as a sad, dejected individual. Carriera was a powerhouse as an artist and as a woman. Her artistic talent, her wit, and her intelligence allowed her to thrive in a male-dominated culture that saw women artists as unnatural. Within this environment, Rosalba was conscious to present herself as decorous, virtuous, intelligent, highly qualified, and successful. This *autoritratto* is not a lament, it is a triumph.

In this paper I have argued that *Self-Portrait* is an image of a stoic and graceful figure who claimed her artistic agency and posthumous status as a leading artistic figure in the eighteenth century by establishing an effigy of herself to maintain her presence long after the death of her physical body. Rosalba Carriera's *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1746, previously misread as a lament, is in fact a tour de force of early modern self-fashioning.

ENDNOTES

1 "We know that Rosalba intended the effect of tragedy in portraits of herself in old age, for in more than one of these she appears as the *Muse of Tragedy*, the only fictitious element a laurel wreath about her sparse gray hair." Michael Levey, *Paintings in Eighteenth-Century Venice* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1959), 145.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 171.

4 Liana De Girolami Cheney, Alicia Craig Faxon and Kathleen Lucey Russo, *Self-Portraits by Women Painters* (Brookfield: Ashgate, 1999), 104.

5 Julia K. Dabbs, "Making the Invisible Visible: The Presence of Older Women Artists in Early Modern Artistic Biography" in *Aging Women in Literature and Visual Culture: Reflections, Refractions, Reimaginings*, ed. Cathy McGlynn, Margaret O'Neil, Michaela Schrage-üh, (https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9783319636085), 30. Accessed May 11, 2019.

6 Ibid., 30-31.

7 Ibid., 33.

8 *Maestra*, the feminine of *maestro*, is used in this paper to denote the idea of an exemplar, a respected and an intelligent and talented woman. *Ingegno* is used in early modern art criticism to speak of a person's intelligency, talent and their ingenuity in their art, or how much creative prowess they posess.

9 Included in her research, Shearer West examined primary documents including letters to and from Carriera, and also Carriera's changing will at the end of her life. Shearer West, "Gender and Internationalism: The Case of Rosalba Carriera" in *Italian Culture in Northern Europe in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Shearer West (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

10 Francesco Petrarca was an early Italian Humanist. I will refer to him by his English last name, Petrarch, going forward.

11 Elizabeth Cropper, "The Beauty of Women: Problems in the Rhetoric of Renaissance Portraiture," in *Rewriting the Renaissance: Discourses of Sex and Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, et al. (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 187.

12 Ibid., 183.

13 Erin J. Campbell, "The Art of Aging Gracefully: The Elderly Artist as Courtier in Early Modern Art Theory and Criticism," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 33.2 (Summer, 2002): 322.

14 Ibid., 325.

15 The Bust Portrait of Homer is a Roman copy based on a Greek Hellenistic original from the second century BC, now in the British Museum in London England.

16 Dirk Baltzly, "Stoicism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2019, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), the https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/stoicism/.

17 Maria Loh, *Still Lives: Death, Desire, and the Protrait of the Old Master* (Princeton; New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015).

18 Campbell, "The Art of Aging Gracefully", 330.

19 I would like to recognise the work on artistic genius done by Martin Kemp and Fredrika Jacobs in: Martin Kemp, "The 'Super-Artist' as Genius: The Sixteenth-Century View" in *Genius: The History of an Idea*, ed Penelopy Murray (Oxford: Blackwell 1989), 32-53, and Fredrika Jacobs, *Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa: Woman Artists and the Language of Art History and Criticism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Their scholarship exemplifies the depth and breadth of the Early Modern understanding of the term 'genius'. However, these arguments are beyond the scope of this current essay, which seeks to explore the associations of 'genius' with 'artistic greatness'.

20 Cecil Gould, "Titian" *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed July 27, 2016, http://www.oxfordartonline.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/subscriber/article/grove/art/T085242.

21 Bernardina Sani, "Rosalba Carriera's "Young Lady with a Parrot", *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 17.1 (1991): 76.

22 During the Renaissance, *paragone (comparison)* debates surrounded many competing ideas and arguments regarding the superiority of sculpture versus painting, poetry versus painting, and design versus colour were debated at length. One of the *paragone* centered around the superiority of *disegno* (drawing and line to define an image) versus *colore*, (using colouring and shading to define an image). To some, d*isegno* was seen to be more masculine and *colore* was seen to be more feminine.

23 As both artists lived to an advanced age, both suffered from a degeneration of their vision. This could be one reason the later works of Carriera and Titian seem more blurred than their earlier works. Gould, *Titian*. This idea is also supported in Philip Sohm's book *The Artist Grows Old* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2007). For more on Titian, see Sheila Hale, *Titian: His Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).

24 Dabbs, 28.

25 Although Titian mastered multiple genres, the focus of this paper is his role as a portraitist and painter of Beauties.

26 Dabbs, 34.

27 Ibid.

28 Loh, *Still Lives*.

29 Ibid.

30 Here Loh is using the ideas of Genius within the Sixteenth Century mode of viewing artists as having innate abilities to create. A Master Artist would have gone through years of rigorous training to learn how to paint, or sculpt, until they graduated from the apprentice system. I am using the terms 'master' and 'genius' to denote a modern sense of the words to claim that Rosalba Carriera was extremely talented, was highly intelligent, and was exceptionally skilled at her work.

31 Loh, *Still Lives,* 19.

32 The self-portrait of Michelangelo can be seen in the face of Nicodemus in his second sculpture of the *Pietà*. Michelangelo, *Pietà*, ca. 1550, marble, Museo dell' Opera del Duomo, Florence, Italy.

33 To make her point, Loh uses Giorgio Vasari's book, *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (New York : Modern Library, 2006). For hundreds of years since its publication (both the 1550 and the 1568 editions) the volume has affected the reputations of the artists it contains. Loh, *Still Lives.*

34 Ibid., 58.

35 Ibid., xv.

36 Ibid., 172.

37 Catherine M. Sama, "'On Canvas and on the Page': Women Shaping Culture in Eighteenth Century Venice" in *Italy's Eighteenth Century: Gender and Culture in the Age of the Grand Tour,* ed. Paula Findlen, Wendy Wassyng Roworth, and Catherine M. Sama (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 141.

38 Patricia L Reilly, "The Taming of the Blue: Writing out Color in Italian Renaissance Theory" in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Gerrard (New York: Harper Collins, 1992); and Philip Sohm, "Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia" *Renaissance Quarterly* 48.4 (1995): 759-808.

39 Sohm, *Gendered Style.*

40 As Reilly discusses in her paper, design versus colour were hotly debated. Reilly investigates the employment of gender both to praise and denounce the use of colour in painting and how these gendered criticisms influenced Renaissance scholars to write about them. Reilly, 87.

41 Ibid., 88.

42 Opponents claimed that sculpture was a medium that by definition takes away material from the source via manual labour. As such, they saw this as a feminized art of moulded matter.

43 Reilly, 89.

44 Ibid., 90.

45 Ibid., 91.

46 Ibid., 92.

47 Sohm, "Gendered Style", 760.

48 Ibid., 760.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid., 761.

52 Ibid., 771. Firenzuola enumerates six qualities of female beauty. The first three denote qualities of the body and comportment: *leggiarda*, pleasing to everybody; *grazia*, grace; and most importantly, *vaghezza*, feminine ambivalence that enamours a man to his beloved. The last three qualities denote moral and spiritual beauty: *venusta,* charming, attractive; *aria*, literally air but this author translates it to a pleasant comportment; and lastly, *maestà*, or majesty. As such, Sohm shows how the lack of a clear definition on female beauty, the *non so che* (that indefinable certain something) of beauty, becomes equated with women's superior beauty, and as such, aligns feminine beauty to ideal artistic beauty.

53 Rosalba's final self-portrait alludes to the rhetoric of beauty while still maintaining an honest rendering of herself. For further reading, see Patricia Simons, "Portraiture, Portrayal, and Idealization: Ambiguous Individualism in Representations of Renaissance Women" in *Language and Images of Renaissant Italy,* (Oxford; New York: Carendon Press; Oxford Univeristy Press, 1995), 263-311, and Patricia Simons, "Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture," *History Workshop Journal* 25.1 (1988): 4-30, and Elizabeth Cropper, "On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, *Petrarchismo*, and the Vernacular Style," *Art Bulletin* 58.3 (1976): 374-394, and Elizabeth Cropper, "The Beauty of Women: Problems in the Rhetoric of Renaissance Portraiture," in *Rewriting the Renaissance: Discources of Sex and Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. gerguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago; London: The University of Chicaco Press, 1982), 175-190.

54 As above, n. 52.

55 Barbara Ann Naddeo, "Cultural Capitals and Cosmopolitanism in Eighteenth-Century Italy: The Historiography and Italy on the Grand Tour," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies,* 10.2 (2005): 189.

56 Sohm, "Gendered Style", 798.

57 This paper uses the term brushstroke to discuss the application of pigment onto the paper or canvas because there is no equivalent term for pastels being actively applied.

58 Early modern art criticism went as far as to ascribe phallic references to describe gendered associations of style. Marco Boschini, a contemporary Venetian art critic, defended his city's masculine style, as Sohm tactfully summarizes, by connoting painting's "virility by developing a phallocentric terminology borrowed from fencing and full of jabbing and thrusting brushes laden with pigment." Sohm, "Gendered Style", 798.

59 For a discussion on depictions of old women as exemplars and their claims on masculine authority, please see Erin J. Campbell, "Prophets, Saints, and Matriarchs: Portraits of Old Women in Early Modern Italy," *Renaissance Quarterly* 63.3 (2010): 807-849.

60 Levey, 171.

61 Fredrik Jacobs, *Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa: Women Artists and the Language of Art History and Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4.

62 Sohm, "Gendered Style".

63 Further research on Rosalba Carriera's *Self-Portrait*, ca 1746 was done in a paper of the same name that was submitted as my Masters Paper to the Department of Art History & Visual Studies at the University of Victoria in 2016. It explores Rosalba's biography more closely and looks at how this artist was sought-out by the European elite. It examines how Sofonisba Anguissola and Lavinia Fontana represented shifting models of female artistic agency that paved the way for Carriera to stand as an artist in her own right. Turning to Early Modern art criticism, the paper discusses how Rosalba subverted the reduction of female agency by manipulating the rhetorics of ideal female beauty and of virtue to establish herself as honourable and graceful. Further, it looks at how Carriera was conscious of her significant influence on eighteenth century popular culture, and how she became a model for other artists, such as Jean-Étienne Liotard to emulate. Finally, the paper examines how Rosalba used the rhetoric of eighteenth-century cosmopolitanism and the idea of the international citizen to bolster her career to locate herself within a multi-national context.

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