Barbara Longhi of Ravenna
Barbara Longhi of Ravenna:

Art, Grace and Piety

By
Liana De Girolami Cheney
In Memoriam

Giuseppina (Pina) Quarta De Girolami (1920–2008)

*Mater amabilis et admirabilis*

La Nina
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The present book is the latest comprehensive study on Barbara Longhi’s art. It is also one of the most recent studies by Liana De Girolami Cheney, whose vast scholarship on the sixteenth century, especially Mannerism, has contributed to a more complete knowledge and understanding of the art and some of the artists of the age in point.

Cheney’s analytic examination of Longhi’s paintings in this volume presents the artist as an exceptional woman artist who depicted various themes: devotional imagery, mythology, portraiture, and self-portraiture. These attest to the wide range of Longhi’s creativity and the many sources that she used, for example, ancient characteristics of Longhi’s birthplace, Ravenna, and her view of the zeitgeist of the age in which she lived and worked—that of the well-known Counter Reformation. At the same time, Cheney underlines the singular characteristics of the painter’s originality and the latter’s sensibility as an unusually educated and surprisingly savvy woman (a fact that is evident in Longhi’s two wills, translated for the first time in this volume).

The author’s convictions and arguments consider, of course, those of earlier scholars. However, her iconographical analyses are much enriched by her proficiency in roman texts and philosophy, religious texts, and, especially, her ongoing research on emblems.

The book is divided into six major chapters in addition to an Introduction, Conclusion, Appendices, and a Selected Bibliography. Each chapter is dedicated to one of Longhi’s many variations on a specific theme: religion, mythology, portraiture, and self-portraiture. The topic of devotional art, the most important, is explored in two especially interesting chapters: one centers on depictions of Mary and the Christ Child that are deciphered, in part, as reflections of Longhi’s original approach to the love, affection, and caring between mothers and children; the other focuses on altarpieces. The chapter on portraiture and self-portraiture presents, as another example, Longhi’s innovative attitude to self-portraiture, which was thought to have been emblematic of woman artists in Italy and Northern Europe. In these self-portraits, woman painters identified themselves as intelligent, educated, and as veritable painters who, therefore, depicted themselves painting, playing music, and holding books.

It is worth mentioning the clarity of the text itself. For instance, Chapter One is devoted to a description of Ravenna, its history, culture, and place.
within Italy, whereas other publications tend to provide only brief mention of this milieu.

Cheney’s research on Longhi’s art has already resulted in several major publications on woman painters: among them are articles (1984, 1998) and a book (2021) on Lavinia Fontana, an essay on Sofonisba Anguissola (2000), and a recent essay (2022) on one of Longhi’s images which has not been studied before: *Madonna Purissima*.

Yael Even, Professor of Art History (emerita)
University of Missouri at Saint Louis
April 2022
A fortunate aspect of my life were my Italian parents, Pina (Giuseppina) Gabriella Benedetta Rizzo Quarta, my mother, from Lecce, and Ettore Mosé Lombroso De Girolami, MD, my father, from Milan. They instilled in me the love of beauty and wisdom, through art, literature, music, religion, and science. The origins of my De Girolami family are Florentine and Venetian, from the eleventh century, with ancestors in the arts and the medical field, including the physician and criminologist, Cesare Lombroso of Verona (1835–1909). This provided a stage for my quest to study the meaning of images and the inventive mind of their creators.

My interest in iconography and iconology in Renaissance and Mannerist art began with my undergraduate and graduate studies at the University of Miami, Florida (1968 and 1970), Wellesley College, Massachusetts (1972), and Boston University in Massachusetts (1978). Under the tutelage of Professor Edith Watson-Skipper, a Platonic philosopher at the University of Miami, I studied Renaissance Neoplatonism. With Richard Wallace of Wellesley College, an emblematist and iconologist who followed the conceptions of Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968), I learned to decode emblematic images. And with Craig Hugh Smith of New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts, an Italian Mannerist, I formulated my investigations in the field of Mannerism and its classical influences. My quest to study female artists began at Wellesley College under the mentoring of the eminent miniaturist and Venetian scholar Lilian Armstrong.

Thus my study on Barbara Longhi—to whom I refer in this text by her first name, Barbara, and not her last name, Longhi, so as not to confuse her with her father, Luca Longhi, and her brother, Francesco Longhi—commenced years ago during my graduate studies and with presentations at conferences in the USA and then abroad. I first presented the results of my investigations on Barbara at conferences hosted by the Southeastern College Association (SECAC) in 1986, followed by the Renaissance Society of America (RSA) in 1987, the South-Central Renaissance Association (SCR) in 1990, and the Sixteenth Century Association (SCSC) in 1991, 1998, and 1999. Presentations on female artists and women’s studies continued at symposia hosted by various associations, seminars, and universities: Ball State University, Indiana (1989); Amsterdam, Holland (1996); University of Miami, Florida (1998); Oxford University, UK (2011); Woman’s Forum,

Ad Barbara Longhi honorem!

Liana De Girolami Cheney
Ocala, Florida, 2022
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This writer is thankful for the permission, access, and assistance granted by archives, libraries and art historical centers in Europe and United States for the visual and textual research of this book. In Europe: the Archivio di Stato of Bologna, Forlì, and Ravenna; the Istituzione Biblioteca Classense, Archivio Storico Comunale of Ravenna; the Museum of Art of Ravenna; the Ravenna Public Library; the Seminario Arcivescovile of Ravenna; several church archives in Ravenna; the Fondazione Biblioteca Capitolare di Verona; the Brera Pinacoteca in Milan; the Museo del Prado in Madrid; the British Museum Library and Archives in London; the British Library in London; and the Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe degli Uffizi in Florence. In the United States: Harvard University Libraries in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Boston University Library, Massachusetts; Beinecke Rare Book Library, Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut; and the University of Massachusetts Lowell Library in Massachusetts.

The author is appreciative to these various private and public collections, museums, libraries, galleries, and publishing companies that gave me permission to consult and publish reproductions of certain works in their collections on Barbara Longhi, her family, and other artists included in this book: the University of Massachusetts Lowell Library; the Istituzione Biblioteca Classense of Ravenna; the Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientale of Ravenna, Emilia-Romagna; the Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe degli Uffizi in Florence; the Pinacoteca Comunale of Ravenna; the Pinacoteca Nazionale of Bologna; and the Castelvecchio Museum of Verona. For visual resources: Bridgemanimages of the UK; Art Resource of New York; Kevin Noel of Agefotostock Collection; Alamy Stock Photo Collection; Jonathan Hoppe of the Philadelphia Museum of Art; Sally Kurtz of the Dayton Art Institute of Ohio; The Burghley House Collection in Stamford, UK; Nelly Fessuy, Piguet Hôtel des Ventes, Geneva; Nice Art Gallery, France; Hampel Fine Art Auctions in Munich; Alberto Loda of the Galleria Armondi in Brescia; Arianna Strazieri of the Musei Civici in Verona; Paolo Rambelli and Andrea Severi of Fondazione Casa di Risparmi in Forlì; Micaela Cascella of Intesa Sanpolo Collection in Forlì; Simona Marelli of the Altomani Collection in Pesaro and the Altomani & Sons House in Pesaro; Dr. Ilaria Ferrari of the Fondazione Biblioteca Capitolare in Verona; Don Federico, Seminario Arcivescovile, Santi Angeli Custodi,
in Ravenna; Dr. Thomas Melai, Seminario Arcivescovile, Santi Angeli Custodi, in Ravenna; Catia Morganti, Comune of Ravenna; Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio in Ravenna; Museo Diocesano of Faenza; and, in particular, Dr. Robert Simon of New York City.


Research and publication on a female painter of the sixteenth century in Ravenna, Italy, Barbara Longhi, could only be accomplished because of scholarly research by Daniele Benati, Babette Bohn, Natia Ceroni, Giulia Daniele, Angela Ghirardi, Anna Tambini, and, especially, Serena Simoni, Giordano Viroli, and Raffaella Zama. I am thankful for their insights that guided me in my research.

My appreciation is also extended to the University of Massachusetts Lowell for supporting my research throughout the years with traveling grants and sabbatical leaves when I was a faculty member, Full Professor of Art History, Chair of the Art Department, and then Chair of the Cultural Studies Department. By granting me research affiliation, my gratitude continues to SIEALE of the University of Coruña, Spain, and Prof. Sagrario Lopez; and to the University of Aldo Moro, Bari, Italy, and Prof. Giuseppe Cascione. I continue to be grateful for the assistance of William Wanbaugh for his translations. My constant debt is to my indefatigable and invaluable editor Juleen Eichinger for her constant guidance and patience, and most of all her friendship.

And to my dear friends and colleagues for their advice and encouragement: Sonia Michelotti Bonnetti of Trento; Yael Even, Professor of Art History (emerita), University of Missouri at Saint Louis; Dr. Brendan Cole, Independent Scholar; Eva S. Buzawa, Professor of Criminology and Justice Studies (emerita), University of Massachusetts Lowell; Carl G. Buzawa, Esq.; Brian Steele, Professor of Art History (emerita), Texas Tech University; Tina Waldeier Bizzarro, Professor of Art History (emerita), Rosemont College and Villanova University; Ellen Longsworth, Professor of Art History (emerita), Merrimack College; Lynette M.F. Bosch, Professor of Art History, the State University of New York at Genesco; Lilian Armstrong, Professor of Art History (emerita), Wellesley College;
Adelina Modesti, Professor of Art History, University of Melbourne; and Vera Fortunati, Professor of Art History, University of Bologna.

I am especially grateful to my *amica carissima* and eminent scholar on gender visual culture, Yael Even, for her insightful and complimentary Foreword.
INTRODUCTION

‘Everything must have meaning.” (Tutto ha da aver significato.)
Giorgio Vasari, I Ragionamenti (1588)

The purpose of this study is to highlight the importance of Barbara Longhi’s artistic contributions to the study of Mariology and Marian iconography and iconology in Italian art of the sixteenth century. Although there is limited information about her personal life, through the records of her two Wills and Testaments we learn about her administrative ability, family dedication, and most of all about her Christian religiosity and devotion to the Virgin Mary (La Madonna).

In addition to the invaluable and noteworthy contributions of Alessandro Cappi and Giordano Virolì, extensive recent scholarship on archival data, documents, patronage, provenance, and restoration, with new attributions, were added by researchers such as Nadia Ceroni, Serena Simoni, Anna

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Tambini, and Raffaella Zama. All these contributions assisted in better understanding Barbara Longhi’s artistic acuity. These scholarly investigations of her life and career resulted in a catalogue raisonné of her attributed and known paintings as well as noted comparisons of her art with that of her father and brother (see Bibliography). Furthermore, recorded in documents and inventories, in particular, her two Wills and Testaments (1624 and 1630), here translated into English for the first time (see Appendices A, B, and C), provide some insight into Barbara’s persona.

In sixteenth-century Ravenna, Barbara Longhi (1552–1638) is the first female painter to concentrate in her oeuvre on small devotional paintings associated with concepts of love and tenderness between the Mother of God and her Child, Christ (Madonna and Child). These Marian paintings reveal a fusion between physical motherly love and spiritual devotion and are steeped in the culture of Ravenna and Counter-Reformation artistic patronage. Working in the late sixteenth century in Italy, Barbara paved the way for mystical devotion or maniera devota (energeia), which would later be interpreted by female painters in the seventeenth century.

Chapter One of this book, Barbara Longhi of Ravenna: Art, Grace, and Piety, describes the cultural milieu of Ravenna, the city where Barbara was born and lived all her life. Chapter Two discusses Barbara’s life, career, and her family of artists, drawing particular attention to fundamental issues relating to the artistic formation of female painters during the sixteenth century in Italy. This also includes a closer examination of the cultural milieu in Ravenna at the time, looking at issues including historical influences (classical Greek and Roman, medieval, and Renaissance), literary sources, and patronage as revealed in religious tradition and transformation during the Tridentine period of the Roman Catholic Church Reformation and the Counter-Reformation decrees (1545–1563).

Chapter Three specifically deals with Barbara’s small devotional paintings, focusing on the theme of Madonna and Child (Mariology; Marian iconography and iconology), comparing her religious imagery with that of other female and male artists of the time, for example Sofonisba Anguissola

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7 Lynette M.F. Bosch, Mannerism, Spirituality and Cognition: The Art of Enargeia (New York: Routledge, 2020), 1, n. 4, definition as "vividness, the power of language to create a vivid presence intimately connected to the emotions of the interpreter/receiver [or creator]."