

*HEROINES OF THE BRUSH*





*Heroines of the Brush:  
Women Artists from the Renaissance  
to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

CATALOGUE BY  
Dominic Ferrante  
with Robert B. Simon

ROBERT SIMON FINE ART

Front and back covers:

Details of Suor Plautilla Nelli, *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Catherine, Ursula, John the Baptist and John the Evangelist* and Elisabetta Sirani, *Head of a Youth*.

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## Introduction

Our exhibition is titled “Heroines of the Brush,” not only in homage to the intrinsic talent of the women artists represented, but also as an acknowledgment of the struggle each endured to follow her calling as an artist. But an important aspect of the art they created is that it is not about themselves, nor about the obstacles and frustrations they endured, or the plight of women in society. Rather their art is concerned with the same issues, challenges, passions that all artists of their time shared. There is in fact little that can be perceived as feminine or feminist in their art, and one proof of that is that several of the paintings in this exhibition have “passed” over the years as the work of male artists.

Today one’s ethnicity, gender, sexuality, race, and religion, are commonly held to be the most defining factors of one’s creative output. This form of identity politics seems sadly misplaced among the paintings, drawings, and sculpture presented here. We believe that each artist in the exhibition was a heroine in her quest to achieve a personal goal—not to rival or surpass a male counterpart, but to make a worthy, even great, work of art. So while we are highlighting figures that have long been overlooked, we invite you not to dwell on their often fascinating biographies, but to look at their works as objects to be studied, appreciated, enjoyed, celebrated, and perhaps owned.

Robert B. Simon

**SUOR PLAUTILLA NELLI**

(Florence, 1524 – 1588)

*Madonna and Child Enthroned  
with Saints Catherine, Ursula, John the Baptist and John the Evangelist*

Oil on panel  
14 ½ x 11 inches (37 x 28 cm)

Suor Plautilla Nelli was a Dominican nun celebrated as the first woman painter in Florence. She entered a convent on the Piazza San Marco at the age of fourteen, taking the name of the early Christian saint Plautilla. Vasari, who wrote about her during her lifetime and presumably knew her, tells us that Nelli was essentially self-taught. Although her initial artistic education is undocumented, she may have received instruction from the lay brothers and friars active in the workshops at San Marco, including Fra Paolino da Pistoia, the principal student of Fra Bartolommeo.

Vasari reports that between her early work as an illuminator and the later large ecclesiastical paintings, Suor Plautilla painted many small-scale paintings as private commissions. Her paintings share a similar linear description of forms and features and a gentle, if somewhat uniform characterization of the principal figures. The composition of this painting can be seen as reduction of a Florentine altarpiece type current in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but beyond echoing earlier models, Plautilla's work manifests the inherent conservative tenor of her art—a reflection both of her own religious calling and that of her patrons, many of whom were women in close contact with the convent.



Attributed to  
**MARIETTA ROBUSTI**, called **LA TINTORETTA**  
(Venice, ca. 1554 – 1590)

*Portrait of a Lady*

Oil on canvas  
19 ¼ x 15 ¼ inches (49 x 40 cm)

We know from early writers (Ridolfi and Borghini) that Marietta Robusti, the daughter of Tintoretto, was both an accomplished musician and portraitist. But, frustratingly, no securely documented painting by her is known. A *Self-portrait* in the Uffizi, a *Double Portrait* in Dresden, and two portrait groups of children at the Ambrosiana in Milan have been attributed to her, of which the Ambrosiana portraits seem to be by the same hand as the present work.

The engaging expression of the sitter, together with a sense of immediacy and the evidence of *pentimenti*, suggest that this head-and-shoulders depiction of an elegant, bejeweled Venetian lady was painted directly from life and was meant to serve as a finished oil sketch for a large-format portrait that has not survived.



**FEDE GALIZIA**  
(Milan, 1578 – 1630)

*A Silver Tazza “Alzata” with Figs and a Melon*

Oil on panel, transferred to canvas  
11 ½ x 15 ½ inches (29.2 x 39.4 cm)

Fede Galizia occupies a singular position in the history of Italian painting. The daughter of the painter Nunzio Galizia, with whom she trained, Fede was not only an accomplished artist, but a pioneer. She was the author of the earliest signed and dated purely still-life painting by an Italian artist (1602) and a key figure in the adoption and development of still-life as a genre on the Italian peninsula. While Fede Galizia was also a painter of religious compositions and portraits, her still-lives today constitute the majority of her surviving *oeuvre*—though these too are exceptionally rare and highly prized.

Our painting is a distinguished example of Fede’s artistic production, putting on full display the polish and harmonious balance that are so successful and familiar in her works. The silver *tazza alzata* appears in several of her paintings, although here it takes on greater prominence in its scale and its contents. The figs, surmounted and surrounded by leaves, are cracked and painted in a deep purple hue that signals their ripeness. An enticing half of an opened fig rests on the ledge beneath the *tazza*—ready to be visually plucked and savored by the viewer. At right a cut melon is opened to reveal its flesh and seeds.







**ORSOLA MADDALENA CACCIA**

(Moncalvo, 1596 – 1676)

*Madonna and Child*

Oil on canvas

32 ½ x 24 ⅝ inches (82.5 x 62.5 cm)

The remarkable painter-nun Orsola Maddalena Caccia was the daughter and student of Guglielmo Caccia, called il Moncalvo (the name of his hometown in the Asti region of Piedmont). She became a nun at the age of twenty-four and at her father's death took over his studio, merging it with the adjacent Ursuline convent, of which she later became Abbess. Orsola Maddalena was clearly an enterprising woman, producing over one hundred paintings over her long career, thereby supporting and sustaining her religious community.

Her work included altarpieces, still-lives (including two recently acquired by The Met), and paintings for domestic devotion, such as our *Madonna and Child*. Characteristics of her style evident in our work include a palette tending towards pinks and soft blues, crisp delineation of folds highlighted in white, and an overriding tenderness expressed in gesture and composition. According to her biographer, flowers functioned as a disguised signature for Orsola Maddalena. Here the array of white and pink roses flanking a sprig of lily-of-the-valley double as signature and Marian emblems. Personal too is the distant mountainous landscape cast in a spectral blue light which evokes the appearance of the Alpine peaks visible from Moncalvo.



**VIRGINIA VEZZI (VIRGINIA DA VEZZO)**

(Velletri 1600 – 1638 Paris)

*Self-Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria*

Oil on canvas

39 ⅛ x 29 ¼ inches (99.4 x 74.3 cm)

Virginia Vezzi, wife of the French Caravaggist painter Simon Vouet, is one of the most intriguing figures of the Roman Baroque. Vezzi frequently served as a model for her husband—appearing throughout his oeuvre as various biblical figures and mythological heroines. However, her career as a painter in her own right has only recently become the subject of scholarly attention.

This striking work on canvas by Vezzi is a self-portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria, the early Christian virgin martyr, here shown with her traditional attributes—a crown, a martyr's palm, and the broken wheel of her torture on which she rests her right arm. The saint's idealized features bear a strong resemblance to those in Claude Melan's engraved portrait of Vezzi. As a self-portrait, our painting follows a tradition of women artists painting themselves in the guise of strong and powerful women, including saints. Most prominent of these is Artemisia Gentileschi, whom Vezzi befriended in Rome in the 1620s.



**ELISABETTA SIRANI**  
(Bologna, 1638 – 1665)

*Madonna and Child*

Oil on canvas  
14 x 10 5/8 inches (35.6 x 27 cm)

Famously described by Carlo Malvasia as “the glory of the female sex, the gem of Italy, the sun of Europe,” Elisabetta Sirani enjoyed great renown across Europe for her prolific talent and reputed beauty. She was the daughter of Giovanni Andrea Sirani, Guido Reni’s principal assistant, and began painting by the age of seventeen. This jewel-like *Madonna and Child* dates from a moment in which the artist was only in her early twenties but had already found great success as a painter of private devotional paintings.

The Virgin Mary presents the blessing Christ child to the viewer, encouraging both visual engagement and spiritual contemplation. With its intense focus on the figures—placed close to the pictorial plane and brought into close proximity with the viewer—the composition of the painting is especially intimate and well-suited to a work intended for private meditation. Sirani has emphasized the divinity of the Virgin and Child by painting them against a plain dark background that counterbalances the light of their halos. This painting may be the one recorded by Sirani in her account book as a commission for Henrietta Adelaide of Savoy, Duchess of Bavaria in 1663.



**ELISABETTA SIRANI**  
(Bologna, 1638 – 1665)

*Head of a Youth*

Inscribed, lower right: *Sirani*

Colored chalks with pastel and white heightening on paper  
12 5/8 x 9 3/16 inches (32.1 x 23.3 cm)

Elisabetta Sirani was a leading light in her native city, ranking among the most important artists in the crowded field of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Bologna. As distinguished as Sirani was as a painter, she was equally celebrated as a draughtswoman. Her graphic *oeuvre* is the largest of any woman artist in early modern Italy, but her drawings in colored chalks and pastel are extremely rare. Only two other examples are known, one each in the Louvre and the Uffizi. While several works of this type by Sirani are recorded in early Bolognese inventories, only these three have survived.

This sensuous depiction of a youth was clearly a finished work in its own right, though it also served as the basis for one of the artist's most beautiful depictions of the young Christ, a 1664 oil in the collection of the Cassa di Risparmio in Bologna. While it was clearly drawn from life, the subject is nonetheless idealized, infused with the elegant aesthetic that informs the artist's work in all media.



**MARIA LUIGIA RAGGI**

(Genoa, 1742 – 1813)

*A Pair of Capricci:*

*River Landscape with Ruins and a Waterfall*

*Bay of a Mediterranean Port with Ruins*

Each signed and dated, lower left: *M.l.r.* and *M. l. r. 1796*

Tempera on paper laid down on canvas  
23 1/8 x 28 7/8 inches (58.7 x 73.4 cm), each

Maria Luigia Raggi is one of the most elusive and fascinating landscape artists of 18<sup>th</sup> century Italy. While her body of work was first assembled on the basis of style, Raggi's identity and artistic personality were only rediscovered in 2003 following the emergence of three works signed with her full name. Born Battina Ignazia Raggi to a family of noble Genoese and Roman lineage, she entered a cloistered order of nuns in Genoa at the age of eighteen, taking the name Suor Maria Luisa Domenica Vittoria.

Given the strict rule of the order, it is likely that Raggi never left the confines of her convent for the remainder of her long life. This is especially remarkable considering the idyllic vision and nostalgic evocation of an Arcadian existence expressed through the roughly 80 surviving works by her. Almost all are of medium-to-small format and executed in series or pairs in tempera. Raggi's *capricci* are invented scenes, populated by everyday people and punctuated by both imagined and well-known ancient ruins. These represent what must have been a beautiful escape from an otherwise sheltered life. One of our pair of paintings is the only dated work by the artist.







**MARIE THÉRÈSE VINCENT DE MONTPETIT**

(Paris 1775 – 1837 Brest)

*Portrait of Mademoiselle Lange of the Comédie-Française*

Signed and dated, lower left: *Par M. T./ Philiberte Montpetit/ 1794*

Oil on canvas

21  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 18  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches (55.5 x 46 cm)

Marie Thérèse Vincent de Montpetit was the daughter of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century French inventor and painter Armand Vincent de Montpetit and likely received her artistic training from him. Armand was interested in the problem of fixing pastel and also actively produced pastels, so it is not surprising that Marie Thérèse's other documented works are all in that medium.

Our painting is a newly discovered work by the artist, painted on canvas and signed with both her married and maiden names—Philiberte and Montpetit. The stretcher is inscribed with the identity of the sitter, Anne Françoise Elisabeth Lange, a well-known actress of the Comédie-Française and one of the *Merveilleuses*—the marvelous women—of the day. Lange was a prominent performer and was depicted by several prominent artists of the day, most notably Anne-Louis Girodet, whose scornful depiction of the actress as Danae is now in the Minneapolis Institute of Art.





**LOUISE-MARIE-JEANNE MAUDUIT, later HERSENT**  
(Paris, 1784 – 1862)

*Portrait of a Young Boy*

Signed and dated, lower left: *Louise Hersent/ 1823*

Oil on canvas  
22 ½ x 19 inches (57.2 x 48.3 cm)

This endearing portrait of a young boy is the work of Louise Hersent, an artist of the French Restoration often known by her maiden name, Mauduit. The known details of her life reveal that she held a privileged position in artistic life in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Paris. She exhibited at the Salon from 1810 until 1824, and in 1821 married the similarly-named painter Louis Hersent, a successful artist who counted two French kings among his patrons. While little is known about Louise's artistic formation, she was almost certainly the student of the portraitist Constance-Marie Charpentier, one of the few female students of Jacques Louis-David.

This portrait is a characteristic example of Hersent's ability to create sensitive images of youth. The boy is elegantly dressed in a dark blue coat and a bright white shirt with a gold pin placed in his white jabot. The artist has added visual interest and emphasized the subject's youth through the inclusion of the few small strands of hair that fall on his forehead and in the depiction of the collar with one side turned upward. Later in her career Hersent's style would veer towards Romanticism, but at this moment she portrays this handsome boy firmly within the Neoclassical tradition.



**ELISABETH JERICHAU-BAUMANN**

(Warsaw 1819 – 1881 Copenhagen)

*Portrait of an Italian Revolutionary*

Oil on canvas

18 x 13 ½ inches (46 x 34.3 cm)

Elisabeth Jerichau-Baumann was arguably the most important woman artist in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Scandinavia. She was among the first female members of the Danish Royal Academy of Arts, and was also deeply engaged in the cause of women's emancipation and in redefining the position of women within the arts. Her career and legacy were achieved only through perseverance amid prejudice due both to her gender and her birth outside of Denmark, where she settled with her husband.

Early in her career Baumann traveled from her native Warsaw to Rome, where she lived and worked for many years, painting local life and people. Our portrait depicts a young Italian man, likely a revolutionary, as suggested by his attire and “Ernani” hat—famously worn by supporters of the struggle to unify Italy during the period. She has infused the portrait with a sense of warmth, presenting the figure closely cropped and close to the pictorial plane, creating an intimate encounter between the viewer and the sitter.



**ADRIENNE GRÄFIN VON PÖTTING**

(Chrudim 1856 – 1909 Abbazia)

*Vanitas Still Life with a Skull and Rosary on an Open Bible*

Signed and dated, lower right: *A. Pötting / 1877*

Oil on canvas

13 ⅝ x 16 ¾ inches (34.5 x 42.5 cm)

This impressive *vanitas* still life by Countess Adrienne Gräfin von Pötting stands out from the artist's *oeuvre*—generally characterized by sober portraits and tranquil interior and landscape scenes—both in its choice of subject and the high quality of its execution. This painting is among Von Pötting's earliest works and likely dates from the time when she was still a student in Vienna, where she made her career.

Here a large human skull rests on an open Bible alongside a rosary composed of carnelian beads and a golden plaquette. The skull is placed in three-quarter position, and is lit dramatically from the left, which emphasizes the play of light and shadow across the various cavities of the skull, as well as on the rosary beads, which each display glints of light. Von Pötting has rendered the cranium with especially great sensitivity—capturing subtle shifts in color, tone, and texture across this surface.



**CHARLOTTE MAJOR WYLIE**  
(London 1828 – 1909 Aberystwith, Wales)

*The Veiled King Death*

Tempera and gesso, with silver and gold leaf, bone, pearl, agate and colored stone inlays, on a circular wood panel  
20 inches diameter (50.8 cm)

Set within a richly ornamented frame designed and fabricated by the artist  
31 ¼ x 31 ¼ inches (79.4 x 79.4 cm)

A masterpiece of the Arts & Crafts movement, *The Veiled King Death* was painted and modeled by Charlotte Major Wylie, a Victorian British artist of little celebrity but manifest imagination. Working with different formulations of colored gesso, gilding, and inset stones, the artist created a haunting image that evokes the transient nature of life and the inevitability of death. Wylie designed and fabricated the painting's extraordinary frame as well, surrounding the tondo with a series of low reliefs in gilt gesso both symbolic and decorative. She was a friend of the artist G. F. Watts, with whom she shared an attraction to the mystical and spiritual in art.

In part due to her painstaking technique, Wylie's known works are few in number and have rarely appeared on the art market. First exhibited at the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in London in 1893, the present work later served as the model for a large stained-glass window dedicated to the artist's memory in the Church of St. John, Caterham Valley, Surrey.



**MARIE SPARTALI STILLMAN**  
(Middlesex 1844 – 1927 London)

*A Pre-Raphaelite Stunner*

Signed in monogram, lower left: *MS*

Graphite on paper  
8 x 5 ¼ inches (20.3 x 13.3 cm)

The daughter of Greek immigrants in England, Marie Spartali was famed for her extraordinary beauty. She was befriended by and modeled for Whistler, Rossetti, Burne-Jones, and Ford Madox Brown, and in 1871 married the influential American writer and artist W. J. Stillman. At about this time Marie had begun to take up painting herself, studying with Ford Madox Brown, who became her mentor and close friend, both in London and in Florence, where she and her husband lived for many years.

Spartali Stillman has sometimes been described as a second-generation Pre-Raphaelite artist as her style fuses the literary and romantic evocations of the movement with elements of symbolism. In the present drawing the artist focuses on the vibrant patterns of drapery and hair while the somber expression of the model provides a dream-like counterpoint.



## SUZANNE VALADON

(Bessines-sur-Gartempe 1865 – 1938 Paris)

### *Nu au Peignoir*

Signed, upper right: *Suzanne Valadon*

Charcoal on paper

24 ½ x 18 ¼ inches (62.3 x 46.4 cm)

Suzanne Valadon's successful career as an artist defied the odds of her circumstances. One of only a few women artists in *fin-de-siècle* Paris whose primary subject was the female nude, her works undermined social and artistic conventions while also recording the realities of her life. Born Marie-Clémentine Valadon in 1865, she was the illegitimate child of a maid. At an early age, she and her mother moved to Montmartre, the epicenter of the Parisian avant-garde.

Surrounded by a bohemian world at the height of its activity, she taught herself how to draw at the age of nine. Between 1880 and 1890, Valadon became a sought-after figure model within the studios of some of the most best-known Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists, including Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Toulouse-Lautrec not only encouraged her after seeing some of her drawings, but also introduced her to Edgar Degas, who became a lifelong mentor and friend. Degas had a profound impact on Valadon in the development of her signature drawing technique, characterized by the dark lines and thick contours seen here. Valadon's nude is boldly presented, the firm contours defining a figure dwelling between abstraction and naturalism.



**SUZANNE VALADON**

(Bessines-sur-Gartempe 1865 – 1938 Paris)

*Jeanne et son Chien*

Signed, lower left: *S Valadon*

Charcoal on paper  
12 ¼ x 7 ⅞ inches (31 x 18 cm)

This lovely drawing by Suzanne Valadon captures a private scene of a young woman seated with her dog at her feet. Although the identity of the figure is not definitively known, it possibly depicts her close friend Jeanne Wenz, who also modeled for Toulouse-Lautrec. Valadon's distinctive heavy outlines encircle both the figure and her pet, defining the curve of the model's back, as well as her folded arm, outstretched leg, and foot that rests on the canine's back as it dozes peacefully on the floor. She has rendered the settee and the fabric on which the model sits with notably lighter strokes and subtle shading—subtly defining the folds of the cloth.

The soft features of the model, particularly her face, are similarly delicately rendered, contrasting beautifully with the dark outlines. Valadon's compositions often showcased models engaged in mundane activities, and here the model is shown in a quiet, self-possessed moment, unfazed by the presence of the artist or viewer and firmly absorbed in the private examination of her leg.



**MARTHA WALTER**

(Philadelphia, 1875 – 1976)

*Lady with a Parasol (Portrait of Alice Schille?)*

Oil on canvas

77 x 38 inches (195.6 x 96.5 cm)

Martha Walter is among the most accomplished women artists of the American Impressionist movement. She is best known for her bright and loosely painted beach, street, and park scenes, as well as her sober images of immigrants arriving at Ellis Island. This full-length portrayal of an elegant woman in profile is a striking and unusual work from early in her career. The subject has traditionally been thought to represent Alice Schille, Walter's lifelong friend and fellow painter. However, the original title is not known, and it appears to never have been exhibited, remaining in the artist's possession until her death in 1976 at age 99.

The figure wears a flowing dress and a wide brimmed hat perched dramatically atop her gently inclined head. She holds a black-and-white striped parasol which contrasts beautifully with the muted green of her dress. Executed on a monumental scale and evoking the work of Walter's teacher William Merritt Chase, this impressive painting is a romantic evocation of a fashionable but solitary woman of the Edwardian age, standing in vivid contrast to the Impressionist subjects for which the artist is better known.





**MALVINA CORNELL HOFFMAN**  
(Brooklyn 1885 – 1966 Manhattan)

*Portrait of Ni-Polog*

Signed, dated, and inscribed on the verso:

*Malvina Hoffman/ Den Pasar/ "Nipolog"-/ © 1932/ Bali*

Terracotta

15 ½ x 9 ¼ x 5 ½ inches (39.4 x 23.5 x 14 cm)

Malvina Hoffman studied with several American sculptors—George Gray Barnard, Herbert Adams, Gutzon Borglum, and Alexander Phimster Proctor—before moving with her mother to Europe. They eventually settled in Paris, where Malvina became a student of Rodin. Hoffman's career mixed sculpture, philanthropy, and public engagement. Her most celebrated commission was for the Field Museum in Chicago—a series of over 100 sculptures for the Hall of Man. For this project Hoffman traveled extensively—modeling, photographing, and measuring her models. She would then finish and cast the works in one of her two studios, in Paris and New York, the latter located at the end of Sniffen Court off East 36th Street.

At Denpasar, the capital of Bali, she met a celebrated traditional dancer named Ni-Polog, who would become the subject of one of her most alluring works, called alternatively *Bali Girl* or *Bali Dancer*. The present terracotta, which comes from the artist's Estate, is the Malvina Hoffman's original model for that work and includes an integral base decorated with a Balinese design. Photographs of Ni-Polog taken by Hoffman's husband, who accompanied her to Bali, as well as of Hoffman measuring Ni-Polog with calipers, attest to both the beauty of the subject and the care with which the artist documented her features.



