Research on Literary and Art Development
2025, VOL. 6, NO. 6, 139-143
DOI: 10.47297/wsprolaadWSP2634-786530.20250606

The Game of Gaze: Self-Representation and Social Discipline in the Portraits of Sofonisba Anguissola

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ABSTRACT
This study examines the work of Sofonisba Anguissola, an eminent female artist of the Renaissance period, focusing on the central theme of the "game of gazes" within her portraiture.Under the male-dominated visual tradition and social discipline, how did Anguissola skilfully balance self-expression with societal expectations through her self-portraits and portraits commissioned by female patrons? This study explores how she constructed a female image that was both subjectively assertive and conforming to norms.Employing gaze theory as the primary analytical framework, combined with close reading of images and socio-historical analysis, this study contends that Anguissola's creative strategy represents not simple compliance or resistance, but a complex form of "negotiation." This not only enriches our understanding of Renaissance female artists' creative approaches but also offers fresh perspectives on the relationship between visual power structures and female agency.

KEYWORDS
Renaissance; Anguissola; Portraiture; Gaze; Female artist

1 Introduction

Within Western art history, the Renaissance is often depicted as an arena for male genius, while women were typically relegated to the position of being "looked at," serving as objects. As John Berger observes in Ways of Seeing: "Men look at women, and women look at how they are being looked at [1] ." This entrenched notion has long obscured the creative agency of female artists.Yet in 16th-century Italy, the eminent female artist Sofonisba Anguissola (1532–1625) emerged to challenge the visual conventions of her era.

Though academia has fully acknowledged her historical significance as a pioneering female artist, a closer examination of her life journey—from her hometown in Cremona to the royal court in Madrid, there will still be a lot of questions in my mind: how did a woman socially defined as 'the viewed' reclaim the power of 'the viewing' upon her canvas? Did her vibrant self-expression vanish when she left liberated Italy for the rigidly regulated Spanish court? Were her later portraits —seemingly solemn and conforming to official paradigms—a complete submission to authority, or a subtle, survival-driven negotiation concealed beneath the brushstrokes?

Guided by these questions, this study employs gaze theory as its analytical framework. Rather than merely categorising stylistic elements superficially, it delves into the intricate visual relationships within the paintings themselves. Through careful interpretation of Anguissola's representative works from different periods, this paper will explore how this female artist engaged in complex visual "negotiations" within the male-dominated visual tradition and social discipline, and how she carved out a space for women amidst these constraints.

2 Discipline and Self-Shaping: Visual Strategies in Early Portraiture

2.1 Social Discipline and the Tradition of Female Portraits

Though humanist thought flourished in sixteenth-century Italy, societal discipline imposed upon women remained stringent. The ideal woman depicted by Castiglione in The Book of the Courtier must embody virtue, talent, and humility [2]. This was not merely moral edict but directly translated into rigid painting conventions. In portraiture, women were required to maintain bodily restraint and downcast eyes to avoid any latent erotic connotations. This social expectation presented a significant obstacle for Anguissola, who had to balance demonstrating her professional skill with portraying herself as a proper lady.

The limitations of female self-portraiture also stemmed from academic exclusion. Firstly, women were barred from art academies, and even the most fundamental training in "studying nude models" excluded them, confining them to "feminine subjects" like portraiture. Secondly, they struggled to escape the predicament of being "observed," with their independent artistic identity and creative agency perpetually at risk of being erased. Consequently, they had to exercise extreme caution in self-representation, often conforming to aristocratic conventions in their depictions, fearful of being criticised for vanity.

Yet it is precisely within this narrow space that Anguissola's female self-portraits reveal their potential as tools for self-definition and resistance. Born in Cremona, northern Italy, Anguissola ranks among the most prolific and innovative female self-portrait artists of the Renaissance period [3]. Depicting herself before an easel or musical instrument, she sought to establish her credentials as a professional artist and showcase her humanist education, thereby distancing

herself from eroticised representations. These works thus functioned as vehicles for self-promotion and identity assertion. Simultaneously, Anguissola employed novel visual language. In her work Playing Chess (Figure 1), she constructed a scene of purely feminine intellect, while in Portrait of Bernardino Campi Painting Sofonisba Anguissola (Figure 2), she utilised a 'picture within a picture' structure – both ingeniously asserting her role as the ultimate creator of the image.Beyond this, she further shaped a new feminine ideal—one that eschews frivolity and emphasises inner learning and independent spirit—through her choice of dignified black attire and simple hairstyles. Thus, despite numerous constraints, female self-portraits enabled women to construct identities, assert their voice, and forge a restrained yet resilient self within their art.

2.2 Analysis of Anguissola's Early Works

2.2.1 Playing Chess

Painting a Game of Chess (Figure 1), created in 1555, stands as one of Anguissola's most strategically crafted early works. This group portrait featuring family members subverts the passive, rigid conventions of contemporary female portraiture. Simultaneously, it expands the scope of genre painting by integrating everyday familial scenes with expressions of female intellect. This reflects the artist's careful navigation of social conventions, balancing the portrayal of self and family identity with the representation of female intelligence and aristocratic status.

In terms of composition, I observe Anguissola engaging in a remarkably subtle 'strategic manoeuvre'. While selecting the garden as a public setting, she creates an entirely enclosed space belonging solely to women, where both participants and observers are exclusively female.This approach is remarkably astute. Firstly, it accommodates the social conventions of the time, where women were not expected to be overly visible in public. Secondly, it transforms the traditionally private sphere of the household into a stage for showcasing female intellect and intimate relationships. Examining the painting itself, Anguissola constructs a visual space of mutual subjectivity, completely overturning the traditional model where women passively present themselves for others to observe.Consider Lucia, the central figure. Her gaze never rests on the chessboard but pierces directly through the frame to meet ours. This penetrating stare not only shatters the fourth wall but feels like an active provocation and invitation. She no longer waits to be judged; instead, she adopts the posture of a victor, demanding external validation of her intellectual achievement. Indeed, Anguissola employs chess—a game symbolising strategy and logic—to elevate the traditionally fragile feminine essence from mere display of talent to the elevated plane of intellectual combat.

The figures' postures on the canvas skilfully balance confidence with humility. Lucia's gesture, holding the 'Queen' chess piece symbolising power, is depicted as imperious and commanding, proclaiming her victory and intellectual superiority.Meanwhile, the other sister, Minerva, raises her right hand in a gesture of concession, interpreted as an elegant acknowledgement that embodies sporting grace and sisterly affection during competition. This softens the direct intellectual contest depicted, aligning it with expectations of "modesty"[4]. In terms of attire and props, the sisters wear sumptuous gowns, clearly signifying their noble status.The chessboard, as the central prop, serves as the crowning touch. Following rule reforms, the queen had become the most powerful piece on the chessboard. Anguissola employed this game—a puzzle testing thought and logic—and placed it entirely under female control. She thus expanded the scope of talent from music and literature to strategy and logic, metaphorically suggesting women could equally become "strategic queens" in the intellectual realm.

In essence, Playing Chess transcends a mere domestic scene. Through visual strategy, Anguissola transforms attire, props, posture, and composition into a negotiated language. She simultaneously displays the family's refined upbringing and sisterly harmony while highlighting feminine intellect and capability; maintaining the painting's serenity and decorum, yet conveying through gaze and composition a profound yearning for public recognition and self-definition.



Figure 1 Sofonisba Anguissola, Playing Chess, c. 1555, oil on canvas, 72cm × 97cm, National Museum, Poznań, Poland



Figure 2 Sofonisba Anguissola, Portrait of Bernardino Campi Painting Sofonisba Anguissola, c. 1559, oil on canvas, 110cm × 111cm, Galleria dell'Accademia, Siena



Figure 3 Sofonisba Anguissola, Self-Portrait with a Keyboard, c. 1557, oil on canvas, 56.5cm × 48cm, Capodimonte Museum, Naples

2.2.2 Self-Portrait with a Keyboard

Beyond her depictions of groups, Anguissola's self-portraits are equally compelling. In the case of Self-Portrait with a Keyboard (Figure 3), this is unquestionably a deliberate act of self-presentation. One observes a compelling equilibrium she struck between the Renaissance's stringent conventions for the ideal woman and her own ambition to become a professional painter.In the painting, Anguissola's gaze is serene yet direct, fixed upon a point beyond the picture plane. This unflinching stare subverts the traditional notion that women could only be objects to be looked at, asserting her confidence and self-awareness as a creator. Simultaneously, her posture while playing the harpsichord is restrained and composed, utterly absorbed in the moment of performance. She channels her innate talent into a framework deemed socially appropriate and dignified.This equilibrium extends to her attire. She has chosen dark, minimalist garments with impeccable tailoring, complemented by a refined white collar, eschewing ostentatious adornment. Thus, she crafts an image of a dignified, intellectual artist—even somewhat masculine—instantly distinguishing herself from those "beautiful objects meant only to be gazed upon."As art historian Garrard observes, this unadorned presentation cleverly circumvents the major challenge facing female artists:[5]. The meaning of the central prop, the keyboard instrument, is even more complex. It represents both the requisite talent of the aristocracy and hints at her mastery over her body, mind, and artistic prowess.Compositionally, Anguissola positions herself squarely at the centre of the frame, ensuring her protagonism. Yet the overall scene adheres to the tradition of indoor portraiture, thus concealing her self-promotion beneath an exterior of compliance with gender norms.

I contend that Anguissola's strategy in her early self-portraits essentially involved negotiating within the confines of strict social discipline rather than confronting it head-on, thereby expressing her selfhood.In Self-Portrait with Keyboard, she transforms the instrument and simple attire into symbols of intellectual identity. In Playing Chess, she turns the domestic setting into a stage for showcasing feminine wisdom and strategy. This approach is not mere compromise but a clever circumvention.While outwardly accepting conventions of virtue, talent, and humility, she subverts their meanings, transforming external constraints into tools for self-expression. Thus, Anguissola's early self-portraits are not passive compliance but a productive victory in the game of the gaze.

3 Under the Gaze of Power: Negotiation and Complicity in Spanish Court Portraits

3.1 Court Discipline and the Reinforcement of Visual Power

When Anguissola entered the court of the Spanish Habsburg dynasty, the situation changed entirely. This was a far stricter disciplinary environment than Italy. Here, art was not a vehicle for casual artistic expression; it had to serve Spanish court culture and visual politics.Philip II's court, renowned for its rigid etiquette, Catholic orthodoxy, and imperial ambitions, transformed visual art into a potent instrument for proclaiming royal authority, consolidating centralised power, and reinforcing the inviolability of social hierarchy. As Pollock observes, artists here sought not merely recognition for their craft but aspired to align themselves with the aristocracy, striving to appear as cultured elites [6].Consequently, the paramount task of court portraiture lay not in realism, but in crafting an idealised visual symbol that met the expectations of power. The style demanded solemnity and dignity, with rigid specifications governing composition, colour palette, and figure posture. Any deviation risked being perceived as a transgression against the royal image of authority. Within such a meticulously constructed visual political system, the function of female portraits within the court was clearly defined as symbols of status and models of virtue. Firstly, as status symbols, portraiture served as a vital medium for showcasing royal and aristocratic standing, facilitating political marriages and diplomatic engagements. In an era before the advent of photography, these portraits circulated among European royal houses, their purpose being to emphasise the noble status of their subjects. As evidenced by the stylistic shift in Anguissola's work – moving from her earlier bright colours and animated expressions towards a style emphasising sumptuous attire and austere, rigid expressions – this transformation ensured the subjects conformed to their exalted status, thereby serving the purposes of royal alliances and diplomatic exchanges.Secondly, portraiture served a strict moral exemplification function. It demanded that women depicted reveal no personal emotion, conforming to the virtues of restraint, chastity, and decorum championed by the royal courts.This visual 'forbidden smile' represented a visual manifestation of moral norms, shaping the female body into a compliant symbol of virtue conforming to standards, rather than a subject possessing inner emotions and desires. Thus, court portraits of women served both as displays of power and status, and as deliberately regulated, concrete reflections of society's idealised female morality.

3.2 Analysis of Anguissola's Court Portraits

Sofonisba Anguissola's portrait of Queen Isabella de Valois of Spain (Figure 4) exemplifies her strategic shift in visual negotiation within the court's power structure. Compared to his earlier self-portraits, which were rich in dialogue, this courtly work exhibits a marked visual regularity. Anguissola's artistic language shifted from personal emotional expression to the collaborative presentation and reinforcement of royal authority.

Upon entering the Spanish court, Anguissola's painting style underwent a marked political transformation. Consider

her portrait of Queen Isabella: the direct gaze engaging the viewer present in her earlier works has vanished, replaced by a gaze that is restrained and detached.This restrained gaze does not signify a loss of subjectivity, but rather translates the Habsburg court's stringent etiquette into pictorial language. The Queen's slightly averted gaze and immobile posture create a sense of sacred, inviolable distance. This effect precisely aligns with the King's expectations for royal women: to be both moral exemplars and vessels of power. The symbolic significance of the attire and backdrop is greatly amplified. The viewer's gaze is inevitably drawn to objects signifying status and wealth: rich velvet, glittering jewels, exquisite lace, and the heraldic emblems representing familial political alliances [7]. Even without speech, these external, politically charged symbols declare the subject's identity. The Queen's very body thus becomes the primary emblem displaying the kingdom's riches and authority. All these strategies ultimately serve to imply the power dynamics within the composition. Though positioned centrally, securely and conspicuously, the Queen's static posture and restrained gaze subtly suggest to the viewer that she herself is a product of this very power structure.Through this delicate equilibrium, Anguissola fulfils her duty as court painter to speak for power while subtly revealing the true predicament of royal women—both embodiments of authority and subjects under its gaze.



Figure 4 Sofonisba Anguissola, Portrait of Isabella de Valois, c. 1561–1565, Oil on canvas, 121 × 102 cm, Museo del Prado

3.3 Collusion and Compromise: Survival Within Discipline

Within the rigid confines of the Spanish court, Anguissola demonstrated a shrewd survival strategy, here termed "collusion." Rather than passively enduring discipline, she proactively transformed courtly conventions into tools for her own expression. Faced with stringent creative constraints, she developed her own set of tactics. As Garrard observes, Anguissola faced a major challenge: finding a safe ground between being "merely a woman" and being "not a woman" [5]. Her solution was to broadly accept the conventions of court portraiture while infusing her artistic individuality into the details.Take the official commission Portrait of Isabella de Valois: she adhered strictly to tradition, rendering the subject with solemn dignity. Her meticulous brushwork captured the opulent fabrics and jewels, fulfilling the portrait's function as a symbol of status. Yet she also paid careful attention to the queen's vividly rosy cheeks, imparting a touch of vitality and warmth to the figure.

Simultaneously, Anguissola skilfully leveraged her dual identity: both court painter and noblewoman. She appropriated the authoritative visual language learned at court to express her own vision.To my mind, this constitutes a masterful form of 'collusion'. She embraced and reproduced the visual symbols of the ruling class, thereby carving out a space for her own voice. Naturally, such negotiation inevitably involved compromise. Historical records note that when she sought to inject a touch of everyday life into the Queen's portrait, she was promptly criticised by conservative forces.

Yet Anguisola was not wholly constrained by these conventions. Leveraging her close ties with courtly women, she pioneered a visual approach within the framework of official portraiture that might be termed an "empathetic gaze." This gaze diverged from the dominant, often controlling perspective common in male painters' work, emerging instead from a visual alliance among women.Her dual role as both court lady-in-waiting and painter granted her genuine insight into the circumstances and emotions of her female patrons within court life. Unlike male court painters who merely piled symbols of power onto the canvas, Anguissola, beyond depicting sumptuous robes and jewels, imbued Queen Isabella with vivid vitality through her delicate capture of subtle facial expressions.This "empathetic gaze" rooted in shared gender identity allowed the portraits to fulfil their political propaganda function while preserving an intimate warmth and understanding between women. This constituted the core wisdom of her survival within the court: carving out a path within a heavily constrained environment where compromise contained resistance, and collusion fostered emotional connection.

4 Echoes of Later Years: Appropriating Authority and Identity Affirmation

This strategic approach found its most striking expression in Anguissola's later works after her departure from court. It signalled a shift in her strategy: from the "explicit construction" of her early period, through the "implicit negotiation" of her middle years, towards the "appropriation of authority" of her later years.

In her 1610 Self-Portrait, Anguissola employs a startling visual strategy. Here, she no longer conceals the marks of time, instead portraying herself as a deeply wrinkled, profoundly gazed-upon old woman seated in a red armchair. Unlike her youthful self-portraits where she held a paintbrush or musical instrument to demonstrate her talents, this time she held a book in her left hand and a note for the King of Spain in her right. Clearly inscribed upon it are the words: "To Jesus of Catholicism, I am your servant [8] ." This composition carries profound symbolic significance. Art historians note that this posture of "seated in an armchair" bears striking resemblance to Raphael's Pope Leo X or Titian's Pope Paul III. The red chair, in traditional iconography, often symbolises the Pope or the highest level of male authority. As Li Shuo's research indicates, by emulating the composition and posture of this "prototypical portrait of authority," Anguisola successfully "elevated her status to one comparable to the powerful figures of her time"[9].

By appropriating these visual tropes originally reserved for supreme male authority, Anguissola declared to the world that in her later years, she no longer needed to gain recognition by demonstrating specific "skills"; she directly assumed the posture of a spiritual mentor, borrowing symbols of male power to confer authority upon herself. This represents not merely a confirmation of her historical stature as a great artist, but a culmination of her lifelong struggle to break free from patriarchal visual conventions—ultimately not merely adapting to the rules, but mastering them. Through the red chair of history, she transformed herself from an "object of the gaze" into a "subject possessing absolute authority."



Figure 5 Sofonisba Anguissola, Self-Portrait, c. 1610, oil on canvas, 98cm × 78cm, Haager Kunstmuseum, Nibe, Denmark

5 Conclusion

Sofonisba Anguissola's artistic career charted a unique path of circuitous breakthrough within the patriarchal visual tradition. From the provocative direct gaze of her Cremona period, through the restrained profile of her Madrid court years, to the authoritative seated pose of her later years, Anguissola's visual strategy underwent a profound transformation. The core value of Anguissola's portraiture lies in its masterful "strategic play". She never sought to overturn contemporary social conventions outright, but instead astutely identified the boundaries of those rules. Within these limits, she pushed the boundaries of what she could achieve to their utmost. In her early works, she simultaneously depicted feminine virtues and artistic talents. By reconstructing domestic scenes, she transformed women from passive aesthetic objects into subjects possessing intellect and strategy. During her court period, she concealed self-expression within depictions of symbols of power and through an "empathetic gaze" towards her female patrons, achieving female solidarity within a rigid hierarchical order. Anguissola bequeathed to us not merely exquisite portraits, but a visual methodology for finding freedom within constraints. I believe examining Anguissola's "strategic navigation" remains profoundly relevant today. It compels us to acknowledge efforts beyond the mainstream—those employing seemingly gentle yet resilient tactics to continually expand spaces for survival and possibilities for expression. As Anguissola's late self-portrait demonstrates, even with diminished vision, the elderly woman seated upon her throne maintains an unquestionable presence, proclaiming to the world the indelible imprint of women throughout history.

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