

Josiah OSGOOD

Female Painters in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds

In this paper I expand on previous discussions of female painters in antiquity (Pomeroy, Kampen) by reexamining the ancient literary evidence (especially Pliny HN 35.147-48), pointing to previously neglected sources (Campanian wall painting and the manuscripts of Soranus) and making comparisons to female painters in the modern period.

Social and cultural institutions of antiquity (similar to those of the modern period) ensured that most female painters were the children of artists. Pliny's discussion confirms this. Its position in the history of painting is designed to show their oddity and (tacitly) inferiority; it follows three ranked catalogues of male painters (with whom at least one of Pliny's female painters was on an equal footing) and starts on a note of surprise, "Even women have painted..." Pliny often in this manner organizes information according to the importance he accords it.

Iaia of Cyzicus, who lived in first century BCE Rome, probably as a peregrina, was unusually for a woman "single her whole life." Her status as outsider allowed her a career unthinkable for Romans of standing; as a woman free from domestic concerns she could focus on her artwork. Pliny's story that she painted her self-portrait at a mirror (many artists do: no subject is more sensitive to the painter's wishes) might reflect self-education.

An "illustrator of women's bodies" is mentioned in the table of contents to the manuscript of Soranus' Gynecology. The illustrator is credited with color drawings of various birth positions (the corresponding pages in the text proper are blank), apparently the work of one Olympias Heracleia, who sent them to Cleopatra! This attribution, to be denied factually, might represent a late antique editor's wish to avoid assigning the illustrations to Soranus himself.

Painters in the Hellenistic Greek world had more prestige than in Rome. Two Campanian wall paintings of leisured women painting panels probably were inspired by Greek genre scenes. Painting was not a leisure activity for Roman women (or men). Women, however, did produce elaborate woven works of art and would tell fictional tales to one another and their slaves as they made them in groups. We can commemorate the existence of these various lost productions.