

Sharon Thomas' Herstory in context

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Sharon Thomas' project *Herstory Portrait* comprises a series of seven portraits of women that the painter has met in her capacity as an artist. Her paintings have been conceived of from the outset as a series – they are painted on identically sized panels, in the same egg-tempera media and the sitters are all presented bust-length – these shared qualities serve to formally unite the group of works.

Throughout history women have been represented innumerable times, however, finding a precedent in the history of art for Thomas' *Herstory* series remains illusive. In the past portraits of women have frequently belonged to cycles, including men, asserting dynastic claims, while idealised personifications of women (divorced from the identity of any specific sitter) have often been used to allegorically represent exemplary virtues or vices (as well as religious figures such as saints or the Virgin Mary). Most frequently, such representations of women were made by men consequently these representations of women are subjects of the male gaze. Related to the personification of virtues is a third type: that of the exemplary (or famous) man whose deeds have earned him distinction among his peers – history shows that women were largely excluded from this category of image.

As a woman painting portraits of real women, that seen as a series constitute an exemplary group, Thomas' portrait cycle is distanced from its art historical precedents. Significantly this distance indicates the emergence of a new representational territory. In order to obtain this territory, Thomas has appropriated and merged three existing traditions: that of portraiture with that of allegorical personifications and cycles of historical exemplary or 'famous' men. Each of these traditions is closely related and on occasion two or even all three traditions were used together for the creation of powerful didactic visual programmes. Such pictorial cycles were frequently intended to communicate the power of the works' owner – in the ages prior to photography and film, portraits were frequently created to perpetuate the image and ideas of leaders, and, being costly to produce, their sitters were usually limited to members of the economic and political elites.

In the following pages we will take a brief look at these three pictorial traditions, identifying some portrait series and cycles of allegorical figures that over time have become canonical milestones in the production of images of dynastic, political or intellectual power.

Beginning in ancient Rome, the Forum of Augustus complex (inaugurated in 2 BC) combines both dynastic portraiture and portraits of exemplary or famous men to create a powerful visual programme of sculptures that would serve as a model for generations to come. This complex was created at the behest of Rome's first imperial leader, the Emperor Augustus, the adopted son and heir of the Roman republic's general, Julius Caesar. The Forum of Augustus served an important didactic function – at its centre stood the Temple of Mars Ultor (the avenger of Rome with whom Augustus identified himself) and to each side it was flanked and enclosed by long colonnades that sheltered two significant cycles of sculpture. This forum has long been a fragmentary ruin, but its description by one of the era's greatest poets, Ovid,

serves to provide a clear picture of the rhetoric of power the forum's visual programme embodied. In his epic poem, *Fasti* Ovid describes how in the forum:

'Mars strong in armour looks upon the temple pediment and rejoices that unvanquished gods occupy the places of honour. At the entranceways he sees arms of all sorts from all the lands conquered by his soldier [Augustus]. On one side he sees Aeneas with his precious burden and about him the many ancestors of the Julian house; on the other, Romulus, son of Ilia, with the arms of the enemy chief he conquered with his own hand and statues of distinguished Romans with the names of their great deeds. He gazes upon the temple and reads the name Augustus. Then the monument to him seems even greater.' (*Fasti* 5.533 ff.)

What is evident from this brief description of the sculptural programme is that Augustus asserted his claims to Rome's religious and military leadership by visually invoking his dynastic heritage. As a descendant of the Julian house he claimed descent both from the goddess Venus and the Trojan, Aeneas, and from Mars and (Aeneas' descendent) Rhea Silvia, who the war god made mother of Romulus and Remus (Rome's founders). Augustus thereby asserted both his divine and dynastic right to leadership. By juxtaposing this dynastic imagery with representations of the most distinguished Romans of the past, Augustus claimed his deeds justified his place at the head of the illustrious Romans' ranks.

The visual rhetoric of power Augustus established through the representation of his ancestors both dynastic and civic was to serve as a model that would be imitated for centuries both by rulers and private citizens endowed with means.

To find an equally canonical representation of the seven Virtues and seven Vices we must progress to the late Middle Ages, to the Arena Chapel in Padua, painted in 1305 by Giotto – considered the father of modern painting. Here the frescoes of the Virtues (all represented as women) and Vices (both men and women) are represented as idealised figures, painted in monochrome, to resemble sculptures set up in niches along the lower register of the chapel. The seven Virtues – four secular (Prudence, Fortitude, Temperance, Justice) and three religious (Faith, Hope and Charity) are set opposite the seven Vices (here Foolishness, Inconstancy, Anger, Injustice, Infidelity, Envy and Despair). In the religious context of their setting, the clearly labelled Virtues and Vices serve a significant didactic role as exemplary figures, that are graphically backed up by the large fresco of the Last Judgement on the counter façade of the chapel. The souls in Paradise are represented on the same side of the chapel as the Virtues and the damned are aligned with the Vices. These moral connotations would remain constant to pictorial representations of the Virtues and Vices, amplifying their didactic role, which is underpinned by the prevailing religious doctrine of Christianity.

One of the first representations, in the modern era, of a cycle of famous men and women is to be found if we advance in time to the early years of the Renaissance – the era when the achievements of antiquity were first being rediscovered and assessed, stimulating a return to antique examples in the arts. At Villa Carducci near Florence, the Early Renaissance master, Andrea del Castagno painted, in 1449, a cycle of nine *Illustrious Men and Women* (these frescoes detached to canvas, are now in the Uffizi, Florence). The selection of figures depicted (each clearly labelled) is

particularly interesting – the six men represented are all local heroes of the recent past, three are military leaders (Pippo Spano, Farinata degli Uberti and Niccolò Acciaiuoli) and three are poets (Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio). The three women represented are near mythical figures drawn from the distant past: the Cumaean Sibyl, an Apollonian oracle, is an important character in the legends of early Rome. Tomyris was Queen of Massagetae, she ‘defeated and killed’ Cyrus the Great of Persia, who had attacked her country and in whose hands her son had perished; while Esther an Old Testament heroine was elevated to the rank of Queen by Ahasuerus, king of Persia, who chose her for his wife for her beauty, from this position she was able to save her people from a planned systematic massacre. Despite the depiction on the end wall of this pictorial cycle of the Madonna and Child, accompanied by Adam and Eve, perhaps the most famous people in Biblical history, the choice of the nine illustrious individuals indicates decidedly secular intentions, alluding to patriotic and military achievements. It remains unclear what the exact narrative intentions of this programme were, however, recalling that Florence was then a republic, it is clear that intellectual freedom and democratic liberty were correlated.

Some twenty years later, in 1472, another commission in Florence, for an oil on panel series of the seven Virtues provides us with another important stepping stone in the development of such pictorial cycles. Six of the Virtues paintings were by the Renaissance master Piero del Pollaiuolo and one was by Botticelli, they are all now in the Uffizi, but they were originally commissioned by and installed in the *Mercanzia* or Merchants tribunal of Florence. As in the case of the virtues by Giotto, in this cycle all the virtues were represented as idealised figures of women each bearing an identifying attribute. And like Andrea del Castagno’s series, the Madonna and Child was represented on a different wall to the virtues. What marks the *Mercanzia* cycle out as particularly interesting is not only its location in the main chambers of the merchant’s tribunal – a highly secular setting – but also that each of these monumental paintings was set on the wall above the seats of each of the tribunal’s six magistrates and the *Ufficiale Forestiere* or outside overseer of the tribunal, thereby, transforming the magistrates into physical embodiments of the Virtues they sat beneath. This striking visual rhetoric suggested that the magistrates arrived at their decisions under the explicit guidance of the Virtues. The images then served to justify the magistrate’s actions, which were meant always to be unprejudiced and in the name of the common good.

A British commission of circa 1525-26 for a cycle of *Nine Heroines of Antiquity* painted in tempera on panel is a very early and rare example of such a series including only women. The selection of women included was probably based on the ballad *The Nine Ladies Worthy*, at the time believed to be by Chaucer. As is clear from the cycle’s title, the subjects were all drawn from the near mythical distant age of antiquity. Only eight of the nine paintings by Lambert Bernardi survive, they are of: Cassandra, Princess of Troy; Lady Hyppolita, Lady Lampedo, and Lady Menalippe, all queens of the mythical tribe of Amazons; Queen Semiramis of Babylon; Queen Sinoepe of Armenia; Queen Thomyris of Massagetae and Queen Xenobia of the Palmyrenes. Each of these exemplary women embodied and emphasised a specific virtue that was further elucidated in the accompanying inscription beneath her image. The nine paintings were commissioned by the humanist Bishop of Chichester, Robert Sherburne, (1508-1536), who probably also devised the inscriptions accompanying the paintings that were installed in his residence, Amberly Castle. The Bishop became

heavily involved with Henry VIII's marriage and divorce from Catherine of Aragon and it has been suggested that he commissioned the paintings of the *Nine Heroines* for the occasion of a visit to Amberly Castle by the king in 1526 so as to comment explicitly on the king's anxiety for a male heir. The unheeded Bishop (casting himself in the role of Cassandra) was certainly aware that Henry's divorce proceedings against Catherine of Aragon, (in favour of his more regular lover, Anne Boylen, whom he later married secretly in 1533) would lead England into political peril alienating both the Papacy and Spain, at the time her only allies against the constant threat of France. Blinded by his chauvinism, a sense of irony remains in the king's failure to imagine that he could have a daughter – Elizabeth – who might embody all the virtues of the *Nine Heroines of Antiquity*, becoming an exemplary figure in her own right.

We must progress to the earliest phase of the enlightenment, in the early eighteenth century, to find the next significantly innovative contribution to the idea of cycles of exemplary or famous men. Commissioned by the Irishman Owen McSwiny of a host of major Venetian artists (Canaletto, Piazzeta, Marco and Sebastiano Ricci, etc.) his enterprise was to have represented in paint a series of monumental tombs to commemorate the 'considerable Figures in the Court, the Camp, the Church and State, as well as ... Learning, ... who contributed largely to the carrying of the Reputation and Credit of the British Nation to a much higher Degree than it was ever before.' In each painting the tomb was set within an heroic landscape of ancient ruins serving as a reminder of the exemplary great deeds of the ancients whose achievements were also called into play as aids to identifying the contemporary heroes represented. Formally uniting the series each picture was of the same monumental scale, vertically oriented with a rounded top, like altar paintings. The great importance of the series, as Francis Haskell observed, rests in its being: 'one of the first attempts to produce a secular and patriotic counterpart to the religious iconography of the Counter Reformation ... among the many figures commemorated were many of the 'Saints' of the Enlightenment such as Locke and Newton.' By 1722 many of the paintings in this series had been begun and eventually some fourteen or fifteen entered the collection of the Duke of Richmond (the project's initial backer) where they were exhibited with 'a written description...to explain their meaning'. A point that is of particular significance is that in 1741 nine of the paintings (now in the Duke's collection) including four representing intellectuals, were published in a set of large, elegant engravings with an accompanying text identifying the hero. The step to publish this series is of importance, because it maximised access to the works, and thereby knowledge of the heroes represented – later in the century, published cycles of heroes were to obtain much greater distribution, and therefore influence than their original source images that were usually held outside the public realm.

Perhaps the most famous example of a published cycle of heroes is the frontispiece of the first volume of the *Encyclopédie méthodique* issued in Paris from 1782 to 1792. Centre stage is held by the *Encyclopédie's* editors Diderot and d'Alembert who are represented in large cameo profile portraits, surrounded (seven on each side) by profile medallion portraits of the luminaries that contributed to the project, including Voltaire and Rousseau. Their undertaking was to represent the methodical, alphabetical, presentation of all human learning up to their day and presented itself as the culmination of that tradition of learning originated by Galileo and passed on to Francis Bacon, Descartes, Newton, Locke and Bayle. In the wake of the *Encyclopédie's*

publication sculptural and painted portrait cycles of such heroes appeared in public and private spaces to serve as reminders of the subject's exemplary deeds.

With the advance of the Age of Enlightenment there evolved a climate more accepting of women and in the eighteenth century more women artists began to emerge as serious talents, comparable to their male counterparts, than ever before – none however produced a pictorial cycle of famous women. The great Venetian portraitist, Rosalba Carriera was the first to assert herself as both highly respected for her talent and sought after by patrons throughout Europe, in 1720 she was accepted as a member of both the prestigious Accademia di Bologna and the Académie Royale de Peinture de Paris. Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun became most famous for her portraits of Marie Antoinette, whose official painter she became. A portraitist of potent talent, when after considerable resistance from the committee she was received into the Académie Royale de Peinture de Paris, it was as a result of a royal order obtained on her behalf by Marie Antoinette from her husband Louis XVI. To lessen the impact of this woman's acceptance into the exalted ranks of the Académie and to distract from comparing her work with that of the men (whom she threatened to show up) she was received with Adélaïde Labille-Guiard to encourage comparisons between the women's work, rather than the existing members. A third woman of this era also stands apart as a pioneer: Angelica Kauffmann. A great painter of both histories and portraits her work was sought after internationally, and like Rosalba Carriera, she travelled throughout Europe. Unlike her peers she found greater acceptance, and in 1768 she became a founder member of the Royal Academy in London. The high esteem she was held in is reflected by the fact that her works adorn the entrance atrium of the Academy's head quarters at Burlington House. Here she represented a cycle of five ceiling *tondi* with allegorical figures of great beauty: *Fame* is represented at the centre, on one side are *Poetry* and *Painting*, and on the other *Sculpture* and *Architecture*. Like earlier series of virtues, each of these personifications takes on the human form of a woman, thereby also alluding to their roles as muses – related to the Nine Muses who dwelt with Apollo on mount Parnassus to represent absolute learning.

With the advent of the nineteenth century and an increased range of public as well as publishers a book issued in 1829 at Milan is particularly notable: *Vite e ritratti di dieci donne illustri* (The Lives and Portraits of Ten Illustrious Women). The ten women portrayed not only represent an international range of figures but the range of the activities they became illustrious for is notable. Each of these women is represented both with a written account of her deeds and, according to the established method of depicting famous men as well as virtues: their portraits retain the same formal format. Each woman is represented at a three-quarter angle, bust-length, within an enclosing frame with her name inscribed below. Among the illustrious women included are more famous international luminaries such as the painter, Angelica Kauffmann or the Romantic novelist, essayist and outspoken opponent of Napoleon, Madam Stael, as well local celebrities of the age like Gaetana Agnesi the mathematician distinguished for her algebra scholarship or the poet Grismondi Suardi. Books such as this multiplied over the decades to follow, they served to highlight the achievements of women and their ability to rival their male counterparts and to draw in to focus the fact that these women, in every way the intellectual equals (or superiors) of their male counterparts were, none the less denied citizen's rights to own or inherit property, to become professionally qualified or to have political rights, such

as the most basic right to vote in elections. Almost a century would pass from the year *Vite e ritratti di dieci donne illustri* was published, to the Suffragette revolution which was to address and rectify these points.

The twentieth century has seen the proliferation of women occupying important roles in almost every walk of life, however their achievements are rarely celebrated or remunerated as those of men are. While the enlightenment zeal to create iconographies celebrating secular and patriotic achievements may have dwindled, it is never the less surprising that from among the numerous women artists active over the course of recent decades none, it seems, have sought to celebrate the achievements of their peers within the framework of honorific imagery such as the pictorial cycles discussed above. Sharon Thomas' *Herstory Portrait* marks a significant redress of this theme. The subjects of her cycle are all women whom she has met working as an artist in Glasgow, the city where she is based, as well as further a field. They are united by Thomas' admiration for their achievements in arenas conventionally dominated by men. Like earlier cycles of illustrious figures, Thomas' paintings will also be accompanied by explanatory text, not in the form of inscriptions on each painting, but by interviews with the sitters revealing elements of their character and biography and the significance of their achievements as women. Just as Thomas' sitters have striven to obtain profiles in essentially male arenas, the means by which Thomas' pictorial cycle asserts the significance of her sitter's achievements, is the appropriation and fusion of existing pictorial traditions, to create a new representational territory appropriate to her ends.

Thomas' choice to represent seven women in her pictorial cycle is not incidental but symbolic: the number is a direct reference to the number of Virtues – which as we have seen is a guise in which women have frequently been represented in the past. Her portraits, in some respects, may then be understood as contemporary renderings of the Virtues. Her sitters however are all real women that have made significant achievements: in this respect Thomas' paintings come closest in concept to the illustrious or famous man cycles of the past. However, Thomas knows all her sitters individually and her paintings are un-idealised, accurate portraits that are the result of close preliminary studies. Even her choice of media for the painting of this series is symbolic: egg-tempera was not only the preferred medium of the early renaissance masters – the egg itself connotes significant value as emblematic of fecundity, birth and regeneration – as such the sitters, and their actions, must also be viewed in this light. Each sitter should then not only be considered exemplary for her achievements, but because of these, the initiator of a new history, *Herstory*.

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