WOMEN IN THE RENAISSANCE: THE IMPACT OF A FLOURISHING CULTURE ON WOMEN IN FIFTEENTH CENTURY FLORENCE

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BY

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ABSTRACT

The Italian Renaissance began in Tuscany, central Italy, and was a time that brought with it notable cultural achievements in art, literature, science, technology, and thinking. There was also a new emphasis on individual achievement. These flourishing changes were taking place in numerous city-states, and Florence became the epicenter of this change. Artists created amazing works, and writers and poets thrived. In addition, there was a new sense of humanism.

Though the Renaissance was a time of immense cultural change, life for women during this period was not easy. As children, parents controlled girls, and then at the time of marriage, women were given to men who would control them as adults. In addition, dowries and marriage negations were a critical element of finding a proper husband. So, throughout their lives, women were considered the property of their fathers, their husbands, or the most powerful male figure in their lives. Women were expected to perform the
duties of a housewife; they had no political rights, little or no access to education, and they lived lives of obligation. This was the case for the majority of women no matter her class, and the realization of such inequalities begs the question: Did women have a Renaissance?

In order to address and answer the question I posed, my thesis is structured into four parts. First, I provide background information on the history of Florence leading up to the Renaissance to help give context for why and how Florence became the city it was in the fifteenth century and how this impacted women’s experiences. Second, I analyzed written works, which discusses the lives of women from birth to widowhood and highlights the obligations placed on them by the men in their lives. Third, I further supported my argument by analyzing portraits of women, and other works of art, such as painted marriage furniture and birth trays and bowls from the time. This analysis helps illustrate the parallels between how women were treated and how they were portrayed.

Through my research and writing on women in the Italian Renaissance, I discovered what life was like for them. This left me with the conclusion that women in fifteenth century Florence did not experience a Renaissance
at all. In fact, life for them, in some ways, seemed to become more difficult. Most women lived their lives in obligation to the men who held power and control over most aspects of life.
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CHAPTER ONE

FLORENCE BEFORE THE RENAISSANCE

Florence is often thought of as the city of the Renaissance. Many see the city as the birthplace of modern civilization,¹ but it took a long time for Florence to reach this height and gain such a reputation. During the first five to six hundred years of the Middle Ages (dated from about the fifth century through the eleventh century),² Florence was considered to be completely hidden from the rest of the world and was unimportant as a human center. It was in the late medieval period (about one thousand to thirteen hundred)³ that the stage was set for the emergence of the Renaissance and the powerful city that Florence would become.⁴ And as a whole, the Middle Ages in Florence may be considered the earliest phase of a civilization that grew on the ruins of the Roman Empire.


² Ferdinand Schevill, History of Florence from the Founding of the City Through the Renaissance (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing), 13.

³ Schevill, History of Florence from the Founding of the City Through the Renaissance, 13.

⁴ Ibid., 13.
Why is this history so important? Because it is the history of the city of Florence that sets the stage not only for the Renaissance period, but also for the female experience of the Renaissance in the city.

**The Beginnings of the City of Florence**

In ancient times Florence was just the suburb of the hill town of Fiesole, and in Roman times it was the path from Rome to Northern Italy and Germany. Because of this unique position, Florence began to develop rapidly. In the ninth and tenth centuries, the area was actually a combined county of Florence-Fiesole. But despite the rapid development of the county, these years were an anarchic time in the area’s history. This was mainly because Florence-Fiesole was still a place enclosed in the walls of Roman authority.

By the twelfth century, Florence had developed self-governing functions, and as Florence’s economy expanded, so did the city’s political clout. City-dwellers began to form associations of individuals with common interests and from

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6 Schevill, *History of Florence from the Founding of the City Through the Renaissance*, 64.

7 Ibid., 63.
there they began to govern themselves. From about 1080-1140, aristocrats dominated these associations and worked to create legislation. The associations were not democracies, but they were the beginnings of representative government that did not yet exist elsewhere in Europe.\(^8\)

Starting in the thirteenth century, the history of Florence was dominated by competition between political cultures and classes made up of two groups. The first was the elite and powerful entity that made up the city's bankers, traders, and landowners. The second class was a larger community of less wealthy people made up of merchants, artisans, and professional guilds. This larger group made up the popolo.\(^9\)

The Popolo and a New Government

The first government ruled completely by the popolo in Florence (and the rest of Europe) was called the Primo Popolo of 1250. The popolo was firmly established by 1290 and that was the year Florentine priors had a new headquarters at what is today the Palazzo Vecchio. It was a solid fortress that displayed a sense of stability and strength in the city. This fortress was created after the

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destruction of the tops of all the other towers in Florence that were over ninety-six feet high. The tumbling of older towers and the building of the fortress was a symbolic gesture of Florence’s disregard of the former ruling class.¹⁰

In addition to a new architectural landscape, the popolo enacted laws that reflected their interests. This included graduated tax legislation and the introduction of income property taxes. In addition, the nobility no longer enjoyed tax exemptions. Violent crimes were also being prosecuted and criminal law grew and developed to protect the city. And Florence’s government also underwent structural changes.¹¹

Between 1200 and 1207, the most important change to the Florentine government was the election of a foreigner as chief magistrate, known as the podesta. Although there were men who held this title previously, their duties were not as significant. This office was permanently established and incorporated into the constitution in 1207. The podesta had control of the administration of military affairs, and the office became one of great prestige. This

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¹⁰ Kaborycha, A Short History of Renaissance Italy, 9.

¹¹ Ibid.
constitutional reform proved to be a benefit for Florence in its first eight years. Street crime in Florence was reduced and foreign campaigns were conducted with success. Issues from barons also ended and the influence of Florence grew.\textsuperscript{12}

**Economic Expansion and Rivalries**

With the expansion of Florentine territory there was also an increase in the mercantile economy and in prosperity. But such prosperity came with conflict. Florence’s neighbors, Siena and Pisa, had animosities toward the city. These negative feelings came from commercial rivalries, particularly between Florence and Siena. Both cities were competing for Roman trade and both were also taking part in financial trade with the Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{13} Though Florence was victorious in its struggles with Siena and Pisa, the streets of Florence were the scenes of another kind of struggle. Their home affairs were coming close to anarchy. There were brawls going on between families in the city, and in order to have peace, arranged

\textsuperscript{12} Francis A. Hyett, *Florence: Her History and Art to the Fall of the Republic* (London: Methuen, 1903), 14-15.

\textsuperscript{13} Hyett, *Florence: Her History and Art*, 15.
marriages were organized between rival families.\textsuperscript{14} Two families that had major rivalries were the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. The first struggle broke out in 1215 and lasted until about 1248. At this time the streets of Florence were heavily violent but neither the Guelphs nor the Ghibellines were gaining any advantages until the latter group decided to request foreign aid.\textsuperscript{15}

With all of this change and development, Florence continued to grow economically, and other cities were taking notice.\textsuperscript{16} Though it had a population of only 45,000 people, in the middle of the thirteenth century Florence was an important center of banking and trade. By 1300, the city had become one of the most important cities in Europe and had also grown to a population of about 100,000. It was one of the most populous cities in Europe, on the same level with Paris, Venice, Genoa, and Milan. Florence also had financial and commercial interests that crossed its borders, going all the way to England and Constantinople. And Florentines were traveling far and wide as part of the expansion of the city’s economic and financial development.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 17.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 19.

\textsuperscript{16} Kaborycha, \textit{A Short History of Renaissance Italy}, 11.
This was a unique position for Florence, as it was located inland with no access to the sea and it was not on a pilgrimage route. In addition, the Arno River was so shallow that it was not possible for ships to navigate through it. In fact, the city was susceptible to dangerous flooding. In spite of all this, Florence was still able to thrive.

**Flourishing Industries**

Despite its shallow waters, there was something that the Arno River did provide that proved to be a major benefit to the city: water that the textile industry needed for dying cloth. This allowed the silk and wool industries to flourish early on in the city. There was soon a great demand for cloth, one that outdid the demand for raw materials that were also available in the region. Florence had gained such a great reputation for its cloth that huge quantities were sold at large fairs. These fairs saw in attendance the wealthiest merchants in Italy and a great deal of business was conducted. It is estimated that about 15,000,000 to 16,000,000 florins worth of goods were sold at each fair.

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17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 12.
Delivering the cloth was a huge job, so porters were called in to help with the deliveries. These porters were brought in from the piazzas that adjoined the baptistery. A description of the gathering of these men goes as follows:

Now in the piazza there was a cellar which is believed to have belonged to the Adimari, but inasmuch as it always stood open in consequence of its having been flooded by the inundation of the Arno, the porters used to take possession of the place, as their refuge from rain and cold while waiting for a job; and they used to have a fire there and play dice when work was slack. ¹⁹

A Popular Government and Florentine Expansion

By January 1251, a new constitution was established in Florence and the office of the *podesta* was abolished. A year later it was reestablished along with another new officer who became the leader of the popular party. He was called the *capitano del popolo* and was the counter to the *podesta*. The *capitano del popolo* was also the head of a newly established militia and was in charge of judicial functions. In addition, he was responsible for gathering his people and representing the republic in foreign

affairs.\textsuperscript{20} Adding to the capitano del popolo, twelve elders were elected by the people to form a cabinet.\textsuperscript{21}

The new constitution that was established at the time rounded out the first popular government that Florence had. The constitution indicated a desire to allow both parties (the podesta and the capitano del popolo) a voice in the government, and Machiavelli noted that this type of organization laid the foundation for the liberty of Florence. But this government was not effective in promoting peace. The constitution did carry out the law with a certain amount of success, but the two military officers that were appointed to head the Florentine government were by their nature heads of opposite factions.\textsuperscript{22}

By 1252 Florence’s fourth bridge, the Ponte alla Trinita, was built over the Arno\textsuperscript{23} and the Florin was minted. It was the first gold coin produced in huge sums in Western Europe.\textsuperscript{24} The florin began to circulate very quickly, and within a few years of its minting, it was

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 24.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 25.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{24} Kaborycha, \textit{A Short History of Renaissance Italy}, 12.
found all over the Tuscan region. Soon thereafter the city walls of Florence that had been built in 1072 had to be expanded. In 1172 the walls were expanded to enclose the city that grew to three times its original size. By 1284 the walls had to be expanded again, as the city was now eight times its original size.\(^{25}\) Along with the expansion of walls, a great deal of building development was also taking place. One of these was the famous Dominican convent of Santa Maria Novella, which was started in 1279. The Franciscan convent of Santa Croce was expanded sixteen years later in 1295. In addition, the building of the Santa Maria del Fiore began in 1296. Also in the 1290s, the Baptistery of San Giovanni was renovated.\(^{26}\)

At this time the citizens of Florence lived soberly. They also lived on little food and no extravagance. Men and women wore clothes that were made of coarse and unconformable materials. Women wore plain boots and dresses of woven camlet fabric. But despite the relatively simple lifestyle of regular Florentines, they were loyal people, loyal to each other and to their city.\(^{27}\)

\(^{25}\) Ibid.

\(^{26}\) Ibid.

Florentine Guilds

Another interesting aspect to Florence in the thirteenth century was the importance of guilds. By the 1260s guilds became one of the most important parts of Florentine life and work. They had been the backbone of the city for some time, and the manufacture of woolen materials had been created in Italy from early on, but the hillsides of Florence and Tuscany were better for growing vineyards and olive trees than they were for pasture that would provide wool.

To make up for the lack of homegrown wool, Florentine merchants went to foreign countries and bought cloth from places including France, Flanders, Holland, and England. But there was a problem with these materials. The cloth was coarse and needed to be finished. In addition, they did not meet Florentine standards of color and texture. To fix this problem, workshops were established where the foreign cloth was shaved, milled, processed, and dyed, then made into fine Italian wool. It was better, finer, and superior to any other wool that Italy had ever produced. This was the work that the guilds took on. And their work paid off, as this fine cloth carried a high price. It was sold all over

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28 Ibid., 33.
Europe for great profit within the country. Guild members were also known for their skill as cloth dyers, who produced a particular beautiful crimson cloth worn by Florentine legislators.\(^{29}\)

Guilds had their own rules and constitution, and every six months they met to choose a group of electors who were responsible for managing guild affairs and trade disputes. Two councils of twelve to eighteen members were also created to take on legislative duties. Guild members were also very serious about examining their goods to make sure everything was of the highest quality and displayed the best workmanship. If anything were found to be deficient in quantity and quality, a fine would punish those responsible. If a guild member refused to pay or put up an argument against his fine, he would be put out of the guild.\(^{30}\)

The Black Plague and Its Consequences

By the early to mid 1340s, significant architecture was being developed in Florence. Andrea Pisano was employed in 1345 by the Duke of Athens to fortify the Palazzo Vecchio, and the Ponte Vecchio was also completed the same

\(^{29}\) Ibid.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 34.
year. It was also at this time that Boccaccio began to write.\textsuperscript{31} But in 1348, Florence was attacked. This attack did not come from a rival city or group, but from the Black Plague. The plague ripped through Western Europe from 1348 to 1350 and spread all over Italy. It afflicted the city greatly and killed off three-fifths of the population. It left the people of Florence panic-stricken, abandoning children and the elderly. Husbands were leaving wives, and people were at a loss as to what to do. The plague also affected the politics of the city. Because so much of the population had been killed, it was not possible to fill public offices.\textsuperscript{32} But there was soon a change.

The Florentine government quickly passed legislation to help recruit more officials to run the government. More troops were also ordered to guard the city against violence and crime and craftspeople were brought in to operate the mint. Government officials also came up with a way to protect the food supply. They also stopped peasants from leaving their farms and implemented a plan for the growth of agriculture in the countryside. In order to pay for all of these changes in a time where the plague also created an

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 145-146.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 140-141.
economic crisis, government officials implemented new tariffs on imports into Florence. The government also passed inheritance laws. This was due to the fact that many people died before they were able to create wills. These new laws protected those properties. In addition, quarantines were established to house people who were infected with the plague.\textsuperscript{33} And the plague did not disappear completely for some time. From the first onset of the Black Death, the disease would appear in Europe one every ten years for about two hundred years. This meant that generations of people had to deal with its deadly effects. This led to physicians doing away with the old way of practicing medicine. Instead, they used observation to begin to develop strategies to fight the disease.\textsuperscript{34}

For those who survived the plague some interesting economic opportunities for growth emerged. Peasants took advantage of the social crisis and were able to gain land and become rich landowners. Other peasants moved into the city. Many professionals died, so there was a high demand for artisans, lawyers, doctors, priests, and craftsman. Even people with no certifications or qualifications for

\textsuperscript{33} Kaborycha, \textit{A Short History of Renaissance Italy}, 28.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
jobs were encouraged to work. Guilds were forced to accept new members, and regular people took on the responsibilities that formerly belonged to priests. The addition of new men into the workforce had positive effects, as new ideas and innovations came to light. This led to growth and development in the areas of medicine, law, and humanistic ideas.\textsuperscript{35}

In 1349, with new development happening with a new labor force, painters in Florence created the Guild of Saint Luke.\textsuperscript{36} And by 1373, Florentines established a chair for the promotion of the teaching of Dante. Florence’s university was re-founded in 1349, after the city had begun to recover from the plague, and the establishment was endowed with 2,500 florins. The Florence University was a second-class school compared to others in Europe, but it was the first in Italy that had a professor of Greek and a professor of Poetry. The university did not play a major role in the humanistic movement, but its best decade took place at the beginning of the fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{37}

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\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{36} Hyett, \textit{Florence: Her History and Art}, 167.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 176.
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Through this period, Florence went through many ups and downs, but still managed to develop as a city. It was mostly men that seem to have taken part in the growth of the city, so where were the women? And what was life like for them in the years before the Renaissance?

**Life for Women Before the Renaissance**

Traditionally, history has been about politics and war and other aspects of life that were mostly in a man’s realm. As time passed, history began to take into account the roles and accomplishments of women. But the history of women in the Middle Ages is hard to come by, as this was a time when they were not treated as equals to men and records for women were not kept in the same way they were for the opposite sex. In addition, though the experience of women in the medieval period spans a thousand years, information about them from this time can be very difficult to find and interpret. This is partly because the vast time span of the Middle Ages included sweeping changes throughout the European landscape. But it is clear that

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women had unique and important roles in society at the time. After all, women bore children and raised them, and introduced them to the society and culture in which they lived. Fortunately historians have pieced together the history of medieval women, so there is much we can learn.

During the five hundred years of the Roman Empire, women made major gains in their rights, freedoms, and status. By the end of the Roman Empire, women in much of Western Europe had reached a level of equality with men when it came to marriage, property rights, and even divorce. In some cases women were even economically independent. Some historians have even noted that they believe the fall of the Roman Empire had, in some part, to do with the rise of women. In Rome, women were free from restrictions placed by men. They could divorce, their dowries were safeguarded, and, in some cases, girls could even inherit. Women also had roles in the religious realm and still had a responsibility, with their husbands, to supervise the household. Some wealthier women even received an education and, in a few cases, women took on military

41 Herlihy, Women, Family and Society in Medieval Europe, 57.
42 Gies and Gies, Women in the Middle Ages, 12.
43 Ibid., 12-13.
roles. But this is not what life was like for women in the later years of the Middle Ages.

During the medieval period, both men and women stayed close to home. There were few reasons for them to go anywhere else. The only travel that really took place was in cases of war, missionary work, migration, pilgrimage, or the collecting of revenue. And none of these reasons for travel were in the woman’s realm. There were a few cases of women pilgrims, but these were women of high-status and great wealth. For the few who did travel to make a pilgrimage, it was a dangerous journey, as there were few roads and many rivers to cross.

Knowing that women did not go far from home in this period underscores the significance of family life, and one of the most important parts of family life was childbearing and motherhood. In the Middle Ages, for all classes of women, there is not a great deal of information on childbearing, as it was an exclusively female event until about the late seventeenth century. But there are some

44 Ibid., 21.
46 Bitel, Women in Early Medieval Europe, 23.
47 Ibid., 22.
clues into this world. And one thing we definitely know is that this area of a women’s life greatly affected her quality of life from pregnancy on. Obstetrics was dangerous and childbirth was a hazardous event. No matter if a woman was wealthy or poor, she was at major risk of death from childbirth. During childbirth, it is thought that skilled older women participated in helping birth children by acting as midwives. Female friends and relatives also played a part by heating water and bathing the mother and the child. They also offered support and encouragement and brought gifts.

When it came to medical techniques during childbirth, there really were none. Midwives had few aids to help the mother. These included using oils, potions, and feeding the mother vinegar and sugar. It is also thought that magnets placed in the mother’s hand or coral suspended around her neck would to help ease pain. If there was the added risk of a baby being born breech, it has been noted that the midwife would try to fix the position of the child:

If the child does not come forth in the order which it should, that is, if the legs or arms should come out

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first, let the midwife with her small and gentle hand moistened with a decoction of flaxseed and chick peas, put the child back in its place in the proper position.⁵⁰

If a child was born a girl, she had a disadvantage right from the start. Female babies were often victims of infanticide, a technique that was used to control population, and the perceived weakness of character, physical strength, and intellect of women added to this horrific practice. From an economic standpoint, having a girl was costly when it came time to marry and give profits to a future husband.⁵¹ If a baby, boy or girl, did survive birth, nursing was the most important factor in a child’s continued survival. This was because other forms of feeding were incredibly unsanitary. A child could easily die from infections due to dirty feeding tubes and bottles or indigestible animal milk.⁵² And girls were less likely to be nursed as long as boys, which meant they had a greater risk of infection and death.⁵³


⁵¹ Ibid., 5.

⁵² Mitchell, *Women in Medieval Western European Culture*, 32.

⁵³ Ibid.
In addition to taking care of infants, women were also responsible for educating their young children. They taught speech and motor skills and for their girls, they continued to teach them home skills.\textsuperscript{54} This leads us to the question of the percentage of female literacy in the Middle Ages, which is a hard thing to measure. This is mainly due to the types of measurements historians have made. Some have tried to gauge literacy by looking at the number of people who signed their names on official documents compared to the number of people who simply made a mark that represented who they were. But this approach does not take into account all of the people who could read but could not write or were not good enough writers to spell their names. Other historians have used the method of counting wills and adding up the number of people who bestowed their books and the number of books they owned. The obvious problem with this approach is that there is no way to know if the number of books being given included a whole collection or just part of it. In addition, through all of their methods, women were underrepresented in many of the documents these historians were looking at to make their calculations.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 33.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 36.
With all this being said, no matter if a woman could read and write or had talents beyond a man, there was one goal for her life, and that was marriage. This marked her transition to an adult life.\textsuperscript{56}

As far as life expectancy during the Middle Ages went, in the years of the thirteenth century that were free of the Black Death, many people lived to about 35–40 years of age. When the plague arrived, life expectancy fell about seventeen years. But there was something interesting going on with the life expectancies of women: they were going up. Women were beginning to live longer than men, something that had not happened before in the Western world.\textsuperscript{57} This was significant because it was the general belief that women were the weaker of the sexes. It also was thought that women reached sexual maturity earlier than men, aged sooner, and lived shorter lives overall. Soon medieval authors began to accept that women had a longer life expectancy. And the opinion that men lived longer than women slowly disappeared.\textsuperscript{58} From the eleventh or twelfth century the population of women also grew along with their

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 36-37.

\textsuperscript{57} Herlihy, \textit{Women, Family and Society in Medieval Europe}, 58.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 59.
life expectancies. This shift was most notable among townspeople and the nobility. In Florence, the population of women grew as age progressed, as there were a significant number of elderly women in the city.\textsuperscript{59}

There are a number of reasons that caused this trend in women’s life expectancies during the middle part of the Middle Ages (1000-1350). The first may have had to do with the establishment of strong and stable government, as this reduced violence and crime. Women were less likely to face the risk of rape or abduction. But even more significant than the development of government and the reduction of violence was the growth of the economy.\textsuperscript{60} In the earlier part of the Middle Ages, women were the ones who were used for hard labor in the fields (along with children and the elderly). Fieldwork was backbreaking and could be dangerous. With the development of cities, fewer women were doing this kind of hard labor.\textsuperscript{61}

This brings up an interesting point, as it has been noted that women were aware of opportunities for themselves when changes affecting men were taking place. This is to

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 61.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
say that when there were changes in population, settlement patterns, and labor practices, women were able to take advantage of such situations. In the Middle Ages, women benefitted from urbanization, but they did not benefit from towns hiring an abundance of male labor to build and work in cities. Then again women had economic gain when wars arose and pandemics killed men.62

As mentioned earlier, when the Black Death hit Europe there were severe economic losses, and these losses were greatly devastating to the male population. With this being the case, some historians believe that because of the population decline and the labor shortage, women were able to find more economic opportunities. Historians have even said that this period may have been a sort of golden age for women63 (but this may have been true mainly in the cases of women fieldworkers in the Middle Ages). In addition, since population growth was slow, it is believed that some women took jobs that were traditionally held by men. But into the fifteenth century, as the population of men began


63 Mitchell, *Women in Medieval Western European Culture*, 44.
to recover, new opportunities for women quickly diminished.\textsuperscript{64}

Other historians say that, though women may have seen an increase in job opportunities, it was not really a positive situation, nor was it a good way to gauge the status of women at the time. This was due to the fact that nothing had changed in terms of skill and wages—women were still under-skilled and underpaid. Though more women were working, they continued to be undervalued as compared to men.\textsuperscript{65}

As the urban landscape continued to develop, the new urban economy left even fewer options for women. They mostly stayed in the home taking care of the household and the children, joined the convent, or worked as domestic servants.\textsuperscript{66} This was also the period where the terms of marriage were changed, and the dowry became an important and incredibly significant part of marriage. It affected the lives of women drastically into and during the Renaissance.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{66} Herlihy, \textit{Women, Family and Society in Medieval Europe}, 61.
Looking at the lives of women in the Middle Ages in Italy and in Florence, it is clear to see that life was not easy, opportunities were few, and overall equality did not exist. But did anything change for women during the years of the Renaissance, the years that were marked by humanism, art, and literature, and a new understanding of the importance of the individual? As we head into the next chapter to explore the lives of women during the Florentine Renaissance, surprisingly, it seems there was not much change at all.
CHAPTER TWO
FLORENTINE WOMEN IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

The life of an individual in Renaissance society was dictated by two factors: the family a child was born into (which would determine societal rank), and gender. There was a major difference in the upbringing of boys and girls. Boys were brought up and trained to be part of the political and economic landscape of a city. Girls, on the other hand, no matter what class of family they came from, were meant to marry.¹ But the inferior view of women started well before girls were of marrying age. Girls were often forgotten members of a family. At times they were forgotten when counting members of a family, and as infants, it was not uncommon for girls to be abandoned or given less care and nurturing than boys.²

Men were considered the more noble sex, and noble positions were forbidden to women. In addition, women were not allowed to practice law or hold any other professional positions that were reserved for men. From a religious standpoint, it was thought that a man was created in God’s

¹ Mary Rogers and Paola Tinagli, Women in Italy 1350-1650: Ideals and Realities (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 94.

² Thomas Kuehn, Law, Family & Women: Toward A Legal Anthropology of Renaissance Italy (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), 221.
light, whereas a woman was seen as the sinner who ate the forbidden fruit with disobedience.\textsuperscript{3} This may explain why, in Renaissance Florence, women were raised to be modest, industrious, and obedient. It was believed that this type of behavior prevented women from wasting time or being lazy.\textsuperscript{4} Also, it was important for girls to be supervised to preserve their modesty and purity and to protect them from the potential risks of male company.\textsuperscript{5} When it came time to marry, a girl’s honor had to be upheld; otherwise no marriage would take place. Even the slightest hint of immorality would ruin a girl’s chances of a union.\textsuperscript{6}

In addition, appearance and manners were closely judged before the potential husband’s family decided whether or not a girl was a suitable bride. Beautiful girls were thought to have fair complexions, high foreheads, and blonde hair.\textsuperscript{7} In fact, many women would sit outside for hours under the sun with bleaching chemicals in their hair

\textsuperscript{3} Rogers and Tinagli, \textit{Women in Italy 1350-1650}, 13.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 94.

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{6} Kaborycha, \textit{A Short History of Renaissance Italy}, 89.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
in an attempt to lighten it. Their goal was to have hair the color of Botticelli’s Venus.  

Women were also judged by the way they dressed. In a sermon given by Saint Bernardino, he recommended modesty in dress and noted that it was a woman’s duty to “be and look chaste.” In this sermon from 1427, Bernardino stated:

How does one recognize a good woman? From the way she is dressed. . . . The exterior shows what is inside. . . . So, woman, don’t dress or walk so that you look like a prostitute, but rather wear suitable clothes which show you are good and chaste. . . .

This view of women and this type of surveillance impaired a girl’s education, as the only options for girls were an education in the home or in a convent. And the teachings they received were not literary; instead, they were taught household skills. In some cases girls were sent to a convent to safeguard their purity, as there was nothing more disgraceful that an immoral girl. An example of such belief is shown through the words of the

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8 Ibid.
9 Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy 1350-1650*, 146.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 94.
12 Ibid., 94-95.
13 Kaborycha, *A Short History of Renaissance Italy*, 89.
Florentine, Leon Battista Alberti, when he spoke of chastity to his young wife. He said:

You should know that in this respect nothing is so important for yourself, so acceptable to God, so precious to me, and so advantageous to our children as your chastity. . . . Absence of chastity angers God, and you know that God punishes nothing so severely in women as he does this lack. All their lives He makes them notorious and miserable.\textsuperscript{14}

Women were also viewed as inferior to men legally and socially, as men were considered to be the center or base of the family. This was because it was through men that family names and legal entitlements were preserved.\textsuperscript{15} Women were seen as those who spelled the end of a family, as they married and moved away, then gave birth to children for their husband’s family.\textsuperscript{16} In addition, women spelled financial hardship for their own families. This was due to the fact that a dowry, consisting of liquid assets such as cash,\textsuperscript{17} clothing, and other items was required for women to marry a suitable man and join a suitable family. Such

\textsuperscript{14} Rogers and Tinagli, \textit{Women in Italy 1350-1650}, 25.
\textsuperscript{15} Kuehn, \textit{Law, Family & Women}, 221.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
extravagant dowries often created financial distress for many families.

An example of the types of extravagant items included in a dowry was illustrated in a list of the contents written out by the Florentine Giovanni Corsini of his daughter’s dowry. Corsini stated:

Here I shall note all the donora that I, Giovanni, shall give to my daughter Caterina. I have given the value of the donora to her husband Nicolo as 130 florins...which are: a pair of chests, florins 24; a grey overdress, florins 18; a gown, with 2½ ounces of silver, florins 10; an embroidered overdress of fine wool cloth, with 9 oz of silver, florins 25. . . .

And the list goes on to note the inclusion of items made of gold, silk, lace, and crimson. Through this list it is clear to see that dowries consisted of expensive and important items that amounted to a great deal of money. And everyone in Florentine society at the time knew how important dowries were.

**The Importance of Dowries**

Imagine elegantly dressed men and women performing dances under a beautifully decorated tent. Picture a band playing music while guests enjoy refreshments. Think of the décor, music, and food around the room. There were all of

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18 Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy 1350-1650*, 127.
the elements and festivities that took place during a Florentine wedding.¹⁹ And weddings rituals themselves happened in three phases over a few days, sometimes even over weeks or months.²⁰ But in Renaissance Florence, marriage was not just about the festivities. These unions represented the new status of two families in society, and they were meticulously negotiated and highly celebrated public events for people in the community.²¹ In addition, marriages for the upper class were not negotiated between male heads of household alone; they were often negotiated in detail through professional marriage brokers to ensure strong alliances and long lasting ties between two families that would hopefully benefit both sides.²² If a family could not put up the money to celebrate in style, show off its wealth, and make important alliances, members of the community would look down upon it.

But these extravagant weddings and detailed negotiations were not the only aspects of Florentine marriages. There was something else that played a huge role


²¹ Cohen and Cohen, *Daily Life in Renaissance Italy*, 17.

for families of all classes: the dowry. As mentioned earlier, dowries often consisted of very expensive items and even cash, and it was a long process to settle a dowry, but once it had been settled, the first formality of a wedding was for the husband-to-be and the father in-law to sign a wedding contract, which they did before a number of male witnesses. But you may wonder where the bride was at this crucial time in her life: she was not permitted to participate in the signing.²³

Though dowries were a must if a family wanted their daughter to wed, it was not easy for families to afford them, particularly in fifteenth century Florence. Many people were facing financial hardships because of the struggling finances of the Florentine government.²⁴

In the mid-1420s the Florentine government was in major financial crisis. In the first two decades of the fifteenth century the city of Florence had incurred a debt of about 2 million florins,²⁵ and the government needed to come up with a solution to the problem. Its immediate resolution to help ease the debt was to set up the Monte

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²³ Cohen and Cohen, *Daily Life in Renaissance Italy*, 205.


delle Doti, a dowry fund, which was put into place in 1425. The dory fund helped ease debt by providing a stream of income for the city to use as needed.

This investment fund allowed a father to deposit money once a daughter was born. Over time the fund would grow through interest, and once it was time for the girl to marry, her father would be given a much larger sum of money. With interest rates of about eleven to thirteen percent, after a period of seven-and-a-half years, 100 florins would increase to 250. After fifteen years 100 florins would increase to 50026 and so on. This gave people in lower classes a chance to marry their daughters and meet the high standards that were expected for a marriage to occur.27 It also allowed lower class families the chance to invest money to pay for a dowry that would place their daughters in well-connected families. But lower class people were not the only ones using the dowry fund. Upper class families in the fourteenth century usually spent between 400 and 1,000 florins for a dowry. By the early fifteenth century dowries were more than 1,000 florins. And


by the late fifteenth century dowries were anywhere between 1,000 and 1,500 florins.\textsuperscript{28}

This was all good news for the Florentine government, as it was making money off of the investments while also promoting a significant number of marriages that likely would not have happened otherwise.\textsuperscript{29} But the \textit{Monte delle Doti} did not only make money for the government and encourage marriage, it also had another major ripple effect. Dowry fund legislation stated that a husband could not receive a dowry until the marriage was consummated,\textsuperscript{30} and such legislation promoted procreation which would in turn help grow a decreasing population. The combination of this type the legislation and the financial assistance the dowry program provided, created a consciousness in the minds of Florentines, as they began to link the wellbeing of the city to the creation of families.\textsuperscript{31}

The dowry fund was not a complete success in its early stages, and there were modifications made to the rules. Soon after its inception, an option was added that would

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\textsuperscript{28} Najemy, \textit{A History of Florence: 1200-1575}, 229.
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\textsuperscript{29} Musacchio, \textit{The Art and Ritual of Childbirth}, 19.
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\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
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\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
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allow a father to wait until a daughter survived the most
critical early years of life before making a deposit into a
fund. But even with such changes, it did not catch on right
away. In the first years of the Monte delle Doti only
fifty-six girls were enrolled.\(^3\text{2}\) This may have been due to
the fact that if a daughter did not survive to marriage
age, the father’s deposit and the interest were fortified.
This prompted yet another modification to the rules. In
1433 the government agreed to return deposits to fathers or
brothers if a daughter or sister died before marrying.\(^3\text{3}\)
After this modification, the number of families enrolling
in the dowry assistant program grew dramatically. Just two
months later 879 deposits were made into the fund with a
total worth of 67,000 florins. Nine years later almost
350,000 florins worth of deposits had been made, and by
1450 that number went up to about three million florins.\(^3\text{4}\)

When the dowry fund finally took off, it became
crucial to the marriage arrangement strategies of
Florentine families. The fund lasted for about 150 years,
and in this time accounts were opened for about 30,000

\(^3\text{3}\) Ibid.
\(^3\text{4}\) Ibid.
girls. By 1480 about one fifth of all households in the city had girls with dowry accounts.\textsuperscript{35} It was more common for wealthy families to open dowry accounts, as they were the ones who were able to afford them. And over the lifetime of the fund, about 310 accounts were opened for girls from elite families. However, the fact that these families had the money to invest was not the only reason they did so. Steady inflation of dowries within the upper class and the larger number of children wealthy families had also contributed to the opening of so many accounts.\textsuperscript{36} But despite the popularity of the Monte delle Doti, it eventually became a burden on the government.

The dowry fund’s financial problems began not too long after its creation. One of the most significant problems was the inability of the Florentine government to pay back matured funds. From 1441 to 1448 the government was forced to take measures to address this growing problem, and in 1478 the dowry fund was drastically altered. The first measure taken was to limit the amount an investor could

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.

make, which in turn placed a ceiling on a dowry’s value at maturity and prevented the dowry fund from going bankrupt.\textsuperscript{37}

Another measure was enacted that placed even stricter rules on the amount of money that could be invested by different groups of people. Florentine citizens’ legitimate daughters could have a maximum Monte delle Doti of 1,200 florins; illegitimate daughters’ dowries could not exceed 500 florins; dowries for legitimate daughters of peasants could not exceed 400 florins; and illegitimate daughters of peasants were banned from having any dowry account at all.\textsuperscript{38}

The Monte delle Doti received deposits well in the sixteenth century, but the combination of the freezing of dowry funds, the increasing costs, the constant fluctuation of Florence’s finances, the political instability, and the inability of the government to pay back mature funds all contributed to the eventual fall of the system.\textsuperscript{39}

Though the Monte delle Doti did eventually crumble, its popularity speaks highly to the importance Florentines placed on family connections and the family unit, as the family unit was central to social life in the city and the

\textsuperscript{37} Molho, \textit{Marriage Alliance in Late Medieval Florence}, 51.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 52.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 77.
bond of a family was the strongest connection in the city’s social structure as a whole.\textsuperscript{40} The family was also the entity to which an individual owed his or her primary obligation, as the status and the condition of a family determined the course of an individual’s life. It was the family’s status that decided a one’s position in society and the family also provided political, economic, and social connections.\textsuperscript{41}

There were many decisions that a family made for an individual as well. A father chose a son’s wife (but the choice of a bride was limited to a family of similar rank). And when a son was out of the house and starting family of his own, he was still tied to numerous family obligations. When it came to marrying a daughter, the head of household (usually a father or brother) would consult with other relatives about the choice of a husband,\textsuperscript{42} but the girl usually had no say. Other important decisions, such as purchasing land or drafting a will were also never done


\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 91.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
without consulting other men in the family.\textsuperscript{43} But, again, the women were not involved and most likely had no say.

Such tight connections to family may have been restrictive for an individual, but for men there were also benefits to having these close ties. A man could expect help from relatives when in financial need or when in need of other types of support.\textsuperscript{44} But in this society that was so closely structured around family, the most important and most vital area of family business, as illustrated in the previous section, was the dowry marriage contract. This is proven in private records of Florentine society, as there are numerous accounts of births and deaths, but space devoted marriage negotiations usually make up the bulk of these records.\textsuperscript{45} With so much emphasis put on dowries, marriage, and the family unit, it is important to discuss marriage statistics and the creation of new families, as dowries and marriage had more of an impact on a woman’s life than a man’s.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 92.
Marriage and Population Decline in Renaissance Florence

The average age of marriage for Florentine women was about 17 or 18, and the majority of women in the city married by their early twenties. Why was there so much pressure on girls to marry young? As mentioned before, one of the main reasons was to make sure that their purity and virtue were not compromised. Of the women who did not marry, most joined the convent. The statistics for men, however, were very different. The average marriage age for a Florentine man was about 30 years, and this vast age difference between men and women resulted in a high number of widows. In 1427 twenty-five percent of women over the age of twelve were widows, and few remarried. Such marriage statistics had a major impact on Florentine society, as they were one factor that contributed to low birth rates in the city.

Another factor that impacted birth rates in Florence had to do with the fact that about twelve percent of men did not marry at all. And there was yet another, more significant factor. The onset of numerous plagues played a major role in the decline of the population.⁴⁶

At the peak of Florence’s prosperity the city was home to between 90,000 and 120,000 people.\textsuperscript{47} This demographic drastically changed in the fourteenth century due to the onset of the Black Death. By 1380 the population of the city was about 55,000, only a fraction of what it was before 1348. Twenty years later, in 1400, Florence was hit with yet another round of plague resulting in an estimated 12,000 deaths. When three more rounds of disease swept through the city in 1417, 1422-1424, and 1430, another ten percent of the population perished. This combination of plagues and the marriage statistics mentioned above resulted in a population decline, as people were dying and women were not producing enough children to grow it at a rate that would counter the downturn. For most of the fifteenth century the population of Florence did not exceed 40,000.\textsuperscript{48}

One other factor to consider when discussing Florence’s population decline is the fact that most children who survived birth did not survive into adulthood. This was due to the risks associated with pregnancy and

\textsuperscript{47} Molho, \textit{Marriage Alliance in Late Medieval Florence}, 27.

birth, lack of knowledge, and the lack of medical care available at the time.

The Importance and Risks of Childbearing

When becoming a bride in Renaissance Florence elders were very aware of the importance of childbearing and the need for a successful pregnancy. There was also an awareness of the physical beauty of women, as many families wanted beautiful wives for their sons partly because there was an interest in the beauty of future children. Beauty was also thought to help promote a successful pregnancy, as it was thought that the shapeliness of a woman’s body equated to her ability to carry and birth healthy children.\textsuperscript{49}

And it may come as no surprise that the birth of sons took priority over the birth of daughters. Here again the marriage dowry comes into play as an explanation for such a bias. The money needed to make a significant marriage arrangement and then provide an expensive dowry to the future husband of a daughter put a great deal of pressure of a girl’s family,\textsuperscript{50} and if a lower class family had numerous daughters, the pressure on the parents to provide

\textsuperscript{49} Musacchio, \textit{The Art and Ritual of Childbirth}, 20.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
dowries could sometimes drive them to such extremes as abandoning their baby girls.\textsuperscript{51}

The birth of a daughter, however, was not always bad news. If a family already had a healthy son, having a daughter was less of a concern. In addition, if a daughter was born to a wealthy family that was able to afford a dowry at the time of marriage, the daughter’s family could look forward to gaining prominent in-laws and in turn raising their status in society.\textsuperscript{52} But no matter the status of a family, bearing sons was always seen as the better outcome, especially for the mother. This was due to the fact that the birth of a son securely established a woman in her husband’s family and in many cases helped a wife win the affections of her husband.\textsuperscript{53} But there were numerous risks associated with pregnancy at the time.

Poor health and unsanitary conditions were two factors that made childbirth very dangerous. And there was also the reality that many women spent most of their childbearing years pregnant (partly because there were no contraceptives

\begin{footnotes}
\item[51] Ibid., 21.
\item[52] Ibid., 20.
\item[53] Ibid., 21.
\end{footnotes}
at the time), which took great tolls on their bodies.\textsuperscript{54} For these reasons, the arrival of a new baby, though an exciting and welcome time, was also a time of worry. The delivery of a baby was very dangerous for both the mother and the child, as a smooth and health delivery was very uncertain.\textsuperscript{55}

The doctor Stefano de la Turri illustrated the worrisome nature of a baby’s arrival as he reported on the condition of a pregnant Clarice, the wife of Lorenzo de Medici in 1478. The doctor stated:

\begin{quote}
At 21 hours she had a slight temperature, and I think it was the same on Sunday and on Saturday, so I think that the disturbance of the fever has caused this flux. During the night she had no symptoms, nor pain in the belly like the other night. . . . This morning she has no fever, and from examining her urine it seems she had a slight catarrh. She has taken to heart, and says that since I arrived she does not feel in danger anymore. This is very good for the health she must regain. . . .\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

Babies were most typically delivered in the home, and if possible or affordable, a midwife would accompany the mother through her labor and delivery. The midwife knew methods that would steer the baby along, and in the case of

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 24.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Cohen and Cohen, \textit{Daily Life in Renaissance Italy}, 179.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Rogers and Tinagli, \textit{Women in Italy 1350-1650}, 173.
\end{footnotes}
an emergency, she knew how to get a baby out by force. Midwives at the time would also provide the mother with herbal medicines to try to ease labor pains. But none of these methods or such assistance offered much security or assurance that a healthy baby would be delivered.⁵⁷ Though there were male physicians working at this time, they were not usually present during childbirth as a means to preserve a woman’s modesty.⁵⁸ In extreme cases a surgeon may have been called, but the room would have had to be darkened and the man would have had to dress disguised as a woman.⁵⁹ Women also relied on protection from patron saints such as Saint Margaret, the patron saint of childbirth. Relics and charms believed to have special powers were also used⁶⁰ to help a woman through labor and delivery. If a baby was born successfully, it was washed, bundled up, and either given to its mother or put in a cradle.⁶¹

As a whole, however, there is not much known about childbirth in Florence during the Renaissance. It was an

⁵⁷ Cohen and Cohen, Daily Life in Renaissance Italy, 180.
⁵⁸ Rogers and Tinagli, Women in Italy 1350-1650, 167.
⁵⁹ Ibid.
⁶⁰ Ibid., 168.
⁶¹ Cohen and Cohen, Daily Life in Renaissance Italy, 180.
event that centered on women and was conducted by midwives, female attendants,\(^6^2\) and friends of the mother-to-be,\(^6^3\) and these women left few records.\(^6^4\) Men did attend births on occasion, but for the most part they played little role in the field of women’s healthcare. In addition, few male doctors specialized in obstetrics and the number of men who studied in this field was very small.\(^6^5\)

Besides the fact that few records were kept, there was a great deal of misunderstanding connected to childbirth. Female physiology, pregnancy, and childbirth were surrounded by a great deal of superstition and folklore, which was in part due to the fact that the most recognizable and most familiar images of conception were those of the Annunciation.\(^6^6\) In addition, the citizens of Florence were surrounded by these ideal images at home and in church, and such misinformation would have likely made


\(^{63}\) Ibid.

\(^{64}\) Ibid., 22.

\(^{65}\) Ibid.

\(^{66}\) Ibid.
the complexities of pregnancy and childbirth difficult to comprehend for the majority of people. 67

**Raising Children**

If a child made it into the world successfully, there were a number of traditions that took place after its birth. First was the baptism where a child’s arrival was acknowledged and the infant gained his or her social identity and became a Christian. Godparents were the ones who played a central role in the baptism, not the parents of the child. It was the midwife or family friends that took the child to the baptistery for the ceremony. 68 Sometimes the father would attend, but the mother of the baby was not allowed to be present. This was partly due to the fact that she was still recovering from childbirth. But more than that, she was thought to be unclean because of the birth. Tradition dictated that after delivering a child, the mother was not to enter a sacred place until a churching ceremony was performed. These ceremonies often happened about forty days after a birth and were meant to purify mothers. 69

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67 Ibid.


69 Ibid., 181.
After recovering from childbirth, babies belonged in the woman’s world. But women had many responsibilities in the home in addition to caring for children. And often, childcare was not thought of as the most important. Very few mothers had the ability to devote a great deal of time to their children. Older children and younger ones had to share their mother’s attention with other people in the household and other obligations their mother’s needed to take care of.\(^70\) Many times the care of infants fell to grandparents, servants, or female siblings.\(^71\)

If a child survived infancy, and grew old enough to move about and speak, they made it to a new phase of life. And until the age of six or seven, children remained mainly in the women’s household realm. And until this time, a child’s father often played a very small role in a child’s life.\(^72\) It was up to the mother and other women in the home to care for the children. But young girls and boys were not separated. In fact, they often shared common spaces in the home.\(^73\)

\(^{70}\) Ibid., 184-185.

\(^{71}\) Ibid., 185.

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 190.

\(^{73}\) Ibid.
After the age of six or seven, things began to change for boys and girls. It was around this age that boys and girls began learning the first steps of their future adult roles. And it was at this time that fathers began to take a more active role in their male children’s lives.\textsuperscript{74} They began to educate their sons or watch over any training that their sons received. In Florence, when girls reached the age of six or seven, their fathers began contributing to the dowry fund that was often paid into for about ten years.\textsuperscript{75} With the training of boys and the start of a dowry fund for girls, it was at this young age that gender differences began to come about. Before this age, girls and boys had a lot in common: they wore similar clothes, played similar games, and were not separated in any major way.\textsuperscript{76}

The teenage years required children, particularly girls, to take on more moral and sexual responsibility. And this was when the differences between male and female became more apparent. For girls, sexual maturity meant a major change in lifestyle, as it was the beginning of their

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 191.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
lives of restriction. In order to lower the risk of losing their virtue before marriage, an adolescent girl’s public movements were very controlled. But the actual application of such restriction did vary by class. A wealthy family may have been able to afford to keep their daughters secluded, but often, poorer girls had to work and were vulnerable to possible abuse.

It was the ancient Romans that deemed the age of twelve as the official age of female puberty, and that same belief remained in the fourteenth century. In the fifteenth century elders noticed that sexual maturity happened later, but the church did not change the age of “official” female sexual maturity. It became the minimal age of consent that a girl could marry. This also meant that it was the legal age that they could consent to sex.

An adolescent girl’s age of maturity combined with the fact that women were seen as people with poor self-control made it so, under the law, a young girl who lost her virginity or became pregnant did so willingly.

\[77 \text{Ibid., 193.} \]
\[78 \text{Ibid., 194.} \]
\[79 \text{Ibid., 193.} \]
\[80 \text{Ibid., 194.} \]
Women and the Religious Household

In addition to raising children and taking care of the household, religion was another major part of women’s lives in the Renaissance. It was something that the whole family participated in, and though men ruled much of everyday life in Renaissance Florence, it was usually the women who set and maintained the religious tone and devotion in the household. Religion played a central role in daily life, and many homes, even poor ones, contained paintings of saints or the Virgin Mary. Shrines, crosses, and the story of Christ were found all over town. In fact, it was Saint Francis of Assisi who initiated the setting up the nativity scene during Christmastime.

Women were incredibly devout, which was illustrated in some of the titles of Saint Bernardino’s sermons. Women attended these sermons in large numbers in both Siena and Florence, and their titles displayed the importance this Dominican preacher placed on women in his audience. A few examples include, “How marriage should be considered,” and “The proper love that should exist between a husband and

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81 Kaborycha, A Short History of Renaissance Italy, 86.

82 Ibid., 81.

83 Ibid., 86.
wife.” St. Bernardino explained to women how they should incorporate the teachings of the Bible into their everyday lives. He also praised them for their devotion to God and for the work they did as wives and mothers. Bernardino’s sermons also illustrated the active role women took in caring for their families and loved ones and performing charitable deeds.

At the time, this kind of praise and recognition was important for women to hear, as in the Middle Ages women were often told that they were evil and sinful. It was thought that maintaining their virginity as nuns was the one and only way they would go to heaven. Saint Bernardino gave them a different view. He let them know that their piety and nurturing of loved ones were holy acts. Though women may have found some reassurance in the words of Saint Bernardino, it seems that they were not recognized or respected in society overall, at a time when views on humanity were supposedly changing.

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84 Ibid.
85 Ibid., 86-87.
86 Ibid., 87.
87 Ibid.
In addition to being the ones who maintained a religious household, women were also the ones who taught their children about Christianity. Mothers or nurses taught children prayers and shared both inspirational and cautionary religious tales. Florentine girls who belonged to wealthy families and were deemed destined for the convent usually moved into the cloisters at age six or seven, then took vows and became novices at age nine or ten. By age thirteen they made their final vows and forever lived as nuns. But it was often not the girls’ choice to live such a life.

**Workingwomen**

As has been mentioned before, options for women in many areas of life during the Renaissance were very limited and finding employment outside of the household was no exception. There were few options available outside of marriage and joining a convent (which will be discussed briefly in the next section). In northern Europe at the time, it was not uncommon for women to become artisans or to run a business, but in Italy, it was much different. A

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88 Cohen and Cohen, *Daily Life in Renaissance Italy*, 192.
89 Ibid.
90 Kaborycha, *A Short History of Renaissance Italy*, 93.
woman was able to work in the home sewing or spinning wool, and she could also help her husband in the shop if he was a shopkeeper, but other than that women were barred from joining any guilds or starting businesses of their own.\textsuperscript{91} The most common occupation for a woman outside of the home was to be a domestic servant for another family. And young girls from the countryside would often come to the city for this kind of work. Their duties would include cooking and cleaning, fetching water from the well, and taking care of the animals. In exchange for their work, they would be fed and clothed. When they were old enough to marry, they would often be provided with a dowry.\textsuperscript{92} But there was another type of domestic servitude among women that was even more common than being a house servant, and that was wet-nursing. Wet nurses were the most highly paid domestic servants.\textsuperscript{93}

During this period, it was common practice for women in the elite class not to breastfeed their children.\textsuperscript{94} Instead, once a child was born, women of means to hired wet nurses to carry out the task. And there were a number of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{92} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{93} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{94} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
different reasons for this practice. One major reason for hiring wet nurses was so that the wives of wealthy men could continue to have more children. Breastfeeding was known to be a natural form of contraception, and because of the high infant mortality rates at the time, those in the elite class wanted to be sure that their women were producing as many children as possible. This was a way to try to ensure that a male heir would be born.\textsuperscript{95} A second reason wealthy families hired wet nurses was due to the belief that if a mother had intercourse while producing milk, the milk would harm the baby. In addition, husbands would have been required to abstain from sexual relations during this time, and many were not willing to do so.\textsuperscript{96} And because of the pressure to have a many children and produce a male heir, women in Renaissance Florence would have up to fifteen or twenty pregnancies in their lifetimes.\textsuperscript{97}

An example of the male view of the importance of a male heir is illustrated in the words of Leon Battista Alberti’s \textit{Della famiglia}, in which a number of different men give their opinions on the matter. It is said that:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{97} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
He who has struggled to acquire wealth, power, and land will find it very hard not to have a real heir and keeper of his name and memory. Nobody can be more suited than true and legitimate offspring to enjoy his position and authority, and the fruit and benefit of his labour.  

Partly because of the higher wages paid and partly because of the pressure for women to produce an heir, wet nursing was a popular occupation for working class Florentine women. Fathers who approved of a wet nurse’s health and character set up agreements with these women to care for children, and once an agreement was set, an infant was often sent to the wet nurse within days or weeks of birth.  

In some cases wet nurses lived in the countryside, a considerable distance away from their employer’s families. Children would live with their wet nurses for anywhere between eighteen to 24 months. Some families were able to afford live-in wet nurses, but this was a significantly more expensive option, as wet nurses in the city cost more than those in the countryside.

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98 Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy 1350-1650*, 139.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid., 241.
Problems of wet nursing did exist, as this was an occupation that required a supply of women with milk who did not have children of their own. In reality, in order to become a wet nurse a woman would have had to have her own child in order to produce milk. So what happened to the children of wet nurses? It is likely that these children either passed away or they were sent to their own wet nurses. It is also possible that some wet nurses abandoned their infant children in order to take a job that would allow them to make enough money to support their families and to support the children they already had.102

Though hiring a wet nurse was common practice in Renaissance Italy, it is not certain how the mothers felt about giving up the task. It is generally known that some women in the upper class considered it to be a lower-class occupation. But others may have felt differently. Women at the time were surrounded by paintings of the Madonna with her baby to her breast. This image may have given them the desire to do the same with their own children. But no matter how women may have felt about the situation, they

102 Ibid.
had no say in the matter. For these and other reasons, humanists and religious writers of the time criticized wet nursing, but the practice existed anyway, as it allowed parents to produce more children. And because of the social, political, and economic importance the upper class placed on producing children, the government passed legislation that allowed for families to receive money to help pay for wet nurses.

Widows

As mentioned earlier, in the year 1427, about twenty-five percent of women over the age of twelve were widows. And as we have seen, women’s options in life during the Renaissance were limited compared to the choices and freedoms men enjoyed. From marrying to raising children to the choice of employment, women had no say in most aspects of their lives. But what if a woman became a widow? What was life like for her then? In Renaissance Florence death was a part of daily life. The loss of a child, the loss of a family member, or the loss of a spouse was a frequent

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103 Kaborycha, *A Short History of Renaissance Italy*, 93.

occurrence.\textsuperscript{105} But there was one common reason that widowhood was so common at this time: girls were married in their teens, and often husbands were much older than their wives.

In the Renaissance, widowhood was different for different classes of women. If a poor woman, such as a cloth worker’s wife, lost her husband, it often meant complete loss of everything. These women became destitute, begging on the streets to try to provide for their families alone. A women married to a craftsman who had belonged to a guild may have received some financial help from the guild. And widows of wealthy men were able to lead better lives with more options for survival,\textsuperscript{106} but none of the options were simple or easy.

Legally a wealthy widow had her dowry returned after the death of her husband and was free to choose whether she wanted to remarry, live with her deceased husband’s family, return to her parent’s home, or live on her own. But there were social and physiological factors that went along with each choice,\textsuperscript{107} and these things played a part in a wealthy widow’s complicated decision.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 92.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
If a wealthy widow did decide to remarry, her children became a part of her husband’s family. The major problem this posed was that it was not uncommon for the husband’s family to keep the mother from seeing her children.\textsuperscript{108} If they decided to keep her away, she had no way to fight back. Choosing to live with her husband’s family was also often not an easy choice. If this was the route a wealthy widow took, there was a good chance that she would lead a lonely life as an unwanted member of the household who was seen as a dependant.\textsuperscript{109} If she decided to go back to her parent’s house, it was not guaranteed that she would be welcomed with open arms, as it was not uncommon for a woman’s parents to see the return of their daughter as a burden.\textsuperscript{110} If the family was able to find a suitable match, the widow may also be pressured to remarry so that her family may gain financially from another union. Finally, if a wealthy widow chose to live alone, she was often seen as

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
a disgrace in society.\textsuperscript{111} This was mainly due to the belief that being a woman alone and unsupervised was immoral.\textsuperscript{112}

In addition to the options mentioned here, there was one other option for widows who had a certain amount of wealth. They had the choice to join the convent. In Renaissance Italy, convents were not just a place of quiet devotion and a life dedicated to God. Convents were also a socially acceptable and respectable place where widows could live out their lives. They were also places that provided social interaction for women and girls.\textsuperscript{113} (As mentioned earlier, in the case of unmarried girls, a convent life was chosen if no other options were available to them.)\textsuperscript{114}

In a convent life, women and girls not only cared for the sick, but they were also able to participate in activities such as gardening, embroidery, singing, acting, and preparing food and medicines. Nuns also had the freedom to read and write and study Latin works. But if a widow (or an unmarried girl) was to choose to become a nun, there was

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
no turning back. She was bound to this life, as after she took her vows, she was never to leave the cloistered walls of the convent. Though visitors were allowed, they were only allowed to speak through a barred widow in the convent’s “speaking room.”\textsuperscript{115}

But the experience of living in the convent was not always the same for every woman. A wealthy widow or a girl from a well-to-do family may have had a servant to wait on them.\textsuperscript{116} They may also have had more comfortable rooms than other nuns. But this was not always the case, as some convents were stricter than others. There were convents that required nuns to live a life of silence and did not allow those who came with more money to live any differently than anyone else. Often, nuns lived in very simple conditions and even had to deal with cold and hunger and living in very close quarters.\textsuperscript{117} This may have been a very difficult life for those who chose to join a convent from the start, but it was likely even more difficult for a

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 92-93.

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 93.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
girl who has no other option, or for a widow who was not
used to such living conditions.\textsuperscript{118}

Women in Old Age

Old age for women in Renaissance Italy was often much
harder than it was for men. Women were not likely to enjoy
a comfortable old age for a number of reasons. Though older
women technically had a claim to their dowries, many became
poor, as they did not always receive their dowries back.
There were also very few opportunities to work, and if one
did work, their capacity to carry out their duties declined
as they aged. Sometimes the heads of households sent older
women away, while others were made to beg for survival.
Sometimes older women lived with their grown children, but
it was more common that they would be forced to live alone
or in a household with other poor women their age. But
during the Renaissance there was an increase in charitable
hospitals for the elderly that gave food and shelter to
those who needed it.\textsuperscript{119}

Older males on the other hand fared much better. They
were more likely to have money and there were more
opportunities for work. They often continued to lead their

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{119} Cohen and Cohen, \textit{Daily Life in Renaissance Italy}, 209.
households or the households of their children and servants. They also had the option to remarry and continue to produce children.\textsuperscript{120}

Conclusion

In Renaissance Florence more than in other parts of Italy at the time, life was particularly hard for women. Rules were more restrictive, and options were few. And whether it was the lack of options given to girls and women, or the treatment of widows, it is clear that women were not seen as equals in any way. It is also clear that a double standard existed among men and women when it came to rules of morality and virtue.

From the time a girl turned six or seven until she became an elderly woman, she had to endure many hardships. Her freedom was suppressed, she was not able to make major life decisions for herself, she took great risk in delivering children, and she was thought to be a creature of sin. This may be most clearly illustrated by the amazingly intense and involved dowry system and by the obligations placed on girls by both their families and their husband’s families once girls were either considered ready to marry or actually married. But it is this

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
combination of factors that makes Renaissance Florence so fascinating, as it was an enlightened culture that in many ways seemed to have been in the dark about some important social and humanistic values.

We have seen here what life was like for the women of Italy, and particularly Florence, in the fifteenth century, and but how were they depicted in the many paintings and portraits that were created at the time? Do the depictions of women match up to the ways they were viewed and treated in everyday life? That is what we will explore in the next chapter.
CHAPTER THREE

WOMEN IN ART IN RENAISSANCE FLORENCE

In the previous chapter the importance of marriage for women in fifteenth century Florence was discussed. Marriage was the most important part of a girl or woman’s life and it was what most girls were raised for. In fact, it was such an important cultural institution, and so important to the people of Florence, that marriage and family lineage played a major role in the artwork of the time. And as we know, paintings were an important part of the lives of people living in the city.

During the fifteenth century, painters developed skills that helped them convey emotion, which allowed viewers to connect with the images presented. And although these images do give us insight into what life was like at the time, they also cause a problem, as these depictions showcased the ideals of private life instead of the realities. They do not portray what people, specifically women, looked like, or how people truly acted. This is especially true of Florentine art.¹

Women made up the subject matter of Florentine paintings that were greatly admired, such as Botticelli’s Primavera\textsuperscript{2} and Venus and Mars; Leonardo’s Mona Lisa; and Titan’s Venus of Urbino.\textsuperscript{3} And these paintings are just a few examples of reality being filtered through the ideal concepts of beauty. In many cases this ideal beauty was based on how Italians understood the divine.\textsuperscript{4} And the perfect beauty illustrated was created through the artist’s idea of a beautiful and perfect woman.\textsuperscript{5}

The type of paintings mentioned above by Leonardo and Botticelli appeared everywhere. It was used not only to decorate walls, but many other parts of the home as well. There were four types of artwork that were also found in homes and spoke very specifically to women: painted marriage furniture, portraiture, religious paintings, and pregnancy and childbirth-related art, including birth trays and bowls.

\textsuperscript{2} Paola Tinagli, \textit{Women in Italian Renaissance Art}, 1.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 2.
Painted Marriage Furniture

Representations of women did not just appear in traditional paintings or portraits, but also on painted furniture found in many fifteenth-century Renaissance homes. At the time, this furniture was painted with images that told stories from the Greek and Roman era, from fourteenth-century literature, and from the Old Testament.\textsuperscript{6} These pieces are important because they tell the story of fifteenth-century culture and about the conditions in which people lived. The images illustrate everything from shopkeepers to the wealthy and politically elite of Florence and Siena.\textsuperscript{7} But, in addition to portraying people in society, these pieces illustrate women through ideal models of behavior.\textsuperscript{8} This is true not only in standard painted furniture, but also in painted marriage furniture.

The commissioning of marriage furniture served as a right of passages in the lives of men and women. The most important pieces were the marriage bed, chests (cassoni), day beds, and painted panels that were placed above the wainscoting of different rooms. Giorgio Vasari, writer,

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
painter, architect, and historian, commented on how remarkable and rich such painted furniture was when he described the marriage chest. They were large wooden cassoni created in the shape of sarcophagi with lids of different shapes and stories painted on the front and sides, along with coats of arms of families to whom they belonged.\textsuperscript{9}

The cassoni, which were called forzieri in Florence, were lavishly decorated and very expensive. The bride’s father paid for the chests until about the middle of the fifteenth century, after which the groom or the groom’s father paid for them.\textsuperscript{10} Other pieces of furniture were also commissioned by the groom’s family in order to furnish the groom’s home.\textsuperscript{11} The images on the chests were chosen not only for decoration, but also because certain images were thought to be auspicious to the marriage, acting as examples of the ideal ways in which couples, especially women, should conduct themselves.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 23.
Much of the furniture described above ended up in the bedroom, as the bedroom was the heart of the house for wealthy Florentine couples in the fifteenth century. It was the place where a couple not only slept, but where they received guests. For these reasons the most lavishly decorated and most expensive furniture was commissioned for this room. The cassone was commonly one of the centerpieces in the bedchamber. It was commissioned before a wedding and was carried during the wedding procession. It represented the taking of the bride from her family’s home to her husband’s home. This procession was what made a marriage public to society as a whole, and the procession also displayed the wealth and power of the two families that were joining together. The original purpose of the cassone, however, was to hide the extravagant dowry from public view.

So what was the central message presented to women through works of art on marriage chests and other pieces? One of the most prominent was obedience. As mentioned in chapter two, obedience was one of the main requirements of all moral Florentine women in the fifteenth century. A

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13 Ibid., 27.

14 Ibid.
woman was to be obedient toward her husband, other male members of her family, and to her parents. Women were thought to be weak and therefore in constant need of moral guidance.\textsuperscript{15} They were reminded of this ideal in every aspect of their lives, and artwork was no exception. And this type of ideal depiction spilled over to portraits in the second half of the fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{16}

**Portraiture**

In fifteenth century Florence the portrait was a popular type of art and illustrations of women were often painted. Early in the fifteenth century these images were painted as profiles without any eye contact, which made it difficult to make a connection with the subject.\textsuperscript{17} But in the middle of the century, there was a change. Artists began to paint women facing forward. This change allowed for full eye contact between the subject and the viewer,\textsuperscript{18} and it was an important shift because the beauty of women was of great interest among the elite. It became fashionable among those in this social circle to not only

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 23.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 4.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
read and write poems about beautiful women, but to also commission and collect art, which represented beautiful women.¹⁹

In comparison, male portraits painted in fifteenth century Florence were often visual interpretations of what was happening with the political system at the time.²⁰ They relied on a limited amount of characterization of the subjects, modesty of clothing, and types of decoration and design worn by the subjects. In his writing On Painting, Leon Battista Alberti wrote in the mid-1430s that the male portraits he saw in Florence succeeded in representing the well-known and worthy man.²¹

When it came to women, we know the portraits had to follow a strict set of ideals in Florentine society in the fifteenth century. They were expected to play a much different role than men, and this reality played a part in the way they were painted.

A woman’s most important role in society was centered around marriage, children, family, the home, and on her role as wife and mother. Portraits of women also celebrated

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¹⁹ Ibid., 5.
²⁰ Ibid., 48.
²¹ Ibid.
women of wealth whose contribution to society was seen mainly as making connections between families through marriages, and the preservation of families through the birth of male heirs.\textsuperscript{22}

At first glance it may seem that Florentine portraits of women were easy pieces to interpret, but that was not always the case. Although portraits were representations of a woman’s likeness, many of the portraits of women were dynastic images that symbolized family lineage, or what family a woman belonged to. This was one of the most important points stressed in these works. And many of the pieces were commissioned posthumously to remind family members of the woman’s place in the family.\textsuperscript{23} This may tell us that even after a woman passed away, she never escaped her role or her place in a male dominated society, as even these posthumous images portrayed social ideals, which was true for almost the entire fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{24}

Reflecting the concept of ideals, the fact that there was a shift in how men and woman were depicted in portraiture at the time seems to suggest that there was a

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 49.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
desire to keep society’s ideals of women from changing. It seems that society may have wanted the stability of the ideals, which femininity represented, going throughout generations.  

As for the content of the pieces themselves, these images stressed certain qualities of the women they portrayed. They clearly illustrated such things as extravagant jewels, the details of headdresses, braided hair placed away from the face, all things that emphasized a woman’s face and beauty. Details such as symbols woven into clothing showed the lineage to which a woman belonged and the elaborateness of her clothing and jewelry illustrated both her social status and her wealth.

It is interesting to note here when talking about the clothing and jewels illustrated in portraits, that there were laws dating back to the thirteenth century that dictated the type of clothing that was appropriate for men and women. In the fifteenth century, however, these laws

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25 Ibid., 50.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
seemed to have been modified for social and economic reasons and because of changes in morality.\(^{28}\)

But when the laws were enacted, they went as far as to control the expenditure on clothes and dictate the types of clothes and ornaments that could be worn in public by people of different classes.\(^{29}\) Members of the wealthiest families were allowed to use and wear more expensive fabrics and jewels.\(^{30}\) This is why the clothing and jewels represented in a women’s portrait were of such importance.\(^{31}\) They showed who a woman was, how wealthy she was, and most importantly, what family she was married into.

These laws existed because it was thought that spending a great deal of money on clothing could threaten the accumulation of wealth by diverting money to expensive fabrics and embroidery\(^{32}\) rather than the sorts of investment that would benefit the city. It was also thought that the cost of lavish clothes for women would discourage men from

\(^{28}\) Ibid.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 51.

\(^{30}\) Ibid.

\(^{31}\) Ibid.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 50.
wanting to marry them. But this may have left some conflicted, as it has been said that the Renaissance culture was one of display, where political and moral influence, and respect and authority were gained through what people saw on the outside. And clothing helped gain such respect for many people. And through works of art, among other things, a person showcased their status.

Specifically for women, their clothes and jewelry were one of the few ways in which they were able to showcase their husband’s wealth and social class, especially in public and on formal occasions. Portraits depicting such clothing and ornaments were a way of solidifying these symbols, and therefore, the symbols of a woman’s lineage and status.

Though many of these portraits were painted to illustrate all the displays mentioned above, they still managed to show a woman’s unique characteristics through subtleties such as the shape of her eyes or tilt of her head or the arrangement of her hair. These details helped

33 Ibid., 51.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 50.
emphasize beauty, but as noted before, they represented ideal beauty, not the reality of beauty.

**Religious Paintings**

Another important depiction of women in art came in the form of religious images. Religion was central to the lives of people in the Renaissance and its influence was evident in all aspects of life. And images of the Virgin Mary and female saints gave a feel for the way women (and men) experienced religion. But, for women, images of female saints presented a problem: They also presented to women examples of virtues and a dedication to religion that was impossible to match.

Religious pieces demonstrated piety and belief in the salvation of the soul, and the purpose of these paintings was for the glorification of God. But it is interesting to note that one thing that religious portraits did have in common with other images was that the painters emphasized fashionable clothing and gowns, headdresses, and even jewels. A great example of such a religious portrait is

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37 Ibid., 6.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., 60.
that of *Pala Sforzesca* painted for the church of Saint Ambrogio in Milan.

At the center of this piece the Virgin, holding the Child, stretches her arms out toward Beatrice d’Este, the wife of Duke Ludovico Sforza. In the painting, Beatrice is shown in profile kneeling and facing her husband. She is wearing yellow-gold satin clothing incorporated with blue and black velvet stripes. Her sleeves are adorned with ribbons and bows, her neck is adorned with jewelry, and her headdress is decorated with pearls.\(^{40}\) These luxurious elements of Beatrice’s dress speak to the importance, even in religious works, of the role clothing and jewels played portraying power and elegance and a woman’s place in society.\(^{41}\) Her kneeling position shows not only her devotion to her religion, but the fact that she is so focused on her husband may have also been a way to illustrate the type of devotion that was expected by a wife to her husband at the time.

The type of luxury depicted in some Italian religious paintings was not always considered appropriate in this realm, particularly in Florence. In the city of Florence,

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\(^{40}\) Ibid., 62.

\(^{41}\) Ibid.
the explicit showing of such luxurious clothing and jewels was thought to be inappropriate for these kneeling religious pictures. In Florentine images of religion all women seem to portray a level of humility and prayer. They wear white cloths over their heads and they look restrained and dark. The clothing worn by these women still looks to be expensive, yet not overtly luxurious.\textsuperscript{42} In comparison to the keeling portrait of Beatrice d’Este, the image of Florentine banker Francesco Sassetti and his wife Nera Corsi follow the Florentine conventions.\textsuperscript{43} In this painting Nera Corsi is shown kneeling with her hands joined in prayer, joining the Virgin in worshipping Christ.\textsuperscript{44}

The fact that Florentine paintings were presented in a more conservative manner than those found in other parts of the country may speak to the very conservative views about gender in Florence at the time. And speaking of inequality, there was another area of life that was surprisingly unequal in fifteenth century Florence, and that was pregnancy and childbirth.

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 63.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\end{footnotesize}
Pregnancy and Childbirth-related Art

In addition to marriage, pregnancy and childbirth were central to the lives of married women in fifteenth century Florence, and there were pieces of art that illustrated the importance of this aspect of women’s lives and the gender inequalities that existed.

Men and women of the Renaissance believed that certain objects and images influenced pregnancy and childbirth, which was crucial at this time when large families were important for both political and economic reasons. Art and ritual also made people believe they could regulate the sex of their child. This was important, as the birth of a son was desired over the birth of a daughter for many families.

Births were also highly celebrated, as this was a time of high risk for both mother and child. As mentioned in chapter two, plagues and lack of medical knowledge made this a very dangerous part of life. Through art and rituals, Florentines thought they could control the risks of childbirth and the health risks faced by newborns, even

45 Geraldine A. Johnson and Sara F. Matthews Grieco, eds., Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 42.

46 Johnson and Matthews Grieco, Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy, 42.
though this control, like the portraits and religious depictions mentioned earlier, were really an illusion.\textsuperscript{47}

Expectant mothers were well aware of the risks to their lives and their children, so much so that they wrote their wills before the end of their pregnancies. In addition, a woman’s family insured the expectant mother in order to cover her dowry in case she died during childbirth.\textsuperscript{48} This again shows that women were thought of more like property than anything else. For these reasons, anything that could provide protection to women was greatly desired, even though in most cases the protection did not actually exist.

One type of item that was believed to provide protection and comfort to mother and child were scenes of religious images. In churches, scenes of the events of childbirth emerged showing the birth of the Virgin or John the Baptist. These pieces provided comfort through familiarity of the images. And they also provide something historically significant for us: evidence of the practices that took place in the bedchamber after a birth.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 43.
An example this type of art is *The Birth of John the Baptist* by Domenico Ghirlandaio. In this painting a richly decorated and organized room is filled with caregivers and aristocrats tending to the mother and child.\(^5^0\) In the room are embroidered sheets and pillows, painted furniture, and trays of food and drink. Other items that were found in birthing chambers were birthing chairs and intricate tablecloths.\(^5^1\)

But the bedchamber was not the only thing to be elaborately decorated, as in this painting; the new mother was also adorned with luxurious clothing and detailed head coverings.\(^5^2\) When babies were born they were adorned with swaddling cloths and gowns specially made for baptisms.\(^5^3\) Special objects, including relics and charms, celebrated successful births and also decorated both the mother and the child. Charms and relics were also used to decorate the bedchamber after a birth. All this décor was in honor of

\(^{5^0}\) Ibid.
\(^{5^1}\) Ibid.
\(^{5^2}\) Ibid.
\(^{5^3}\) Ibid.
the birth and to promote the new role of a woman as a mother.\textsuperscript{54}

In addition to the bedchamber, other parts of Florentine homes were also luxuriously and carefully decorated for the event of a birth. Detailed fabrics, linens, and clothing were used for the occasion, and food and drink were prepared. In 1471 a man by the name of Giovanni Buoninsegni bought candles to help light up an image of the Virgin Mary that hung in his home so that visitors would pass by it when coming to see his wife after she had given birth. Inventories from the time show that many private Florentine bedrooms contained devotional images.\textsuperscript{55} But artwork that was in the home during a birth did not always belong to the homeowners. At times paintings were borrowed for the event. Such an example can be seen with Venetian artist Lorenzo Lotto who paid for artwork to be brought via boat through the canals for his great-niece as she was preparing for her child’s birth.\textsuperscript{56}

With all of this special display and art and ritual for mother and child, the event of childbirth actually also

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{55} Musacchio, \textit{The Art and Ritual of Childbirth}, 45.

\textsuperscript{56} Johnson and Matthews Grieco, 43.
played a major role in the social lives of men. It has been noted that these occasions were used as politicized affairs.\textsuperscript{57} The gatherings were male orchestrated events\textsuperscript{58} and something they encouraged so that they could cultivate both familial and political ties.\textsuperscript{59} And this cultivation came in the form of gift exchange. Though the gifts were technically meant for the new mothers, the types of gifts that were given were dictated by lineage and social and political connections. Men also paid for the presents.\textsuperscript{60}

Sets of silver forks and spoons, expensive fabrics, and goblets were some of the things that were received from visitors. But just as with dowry exchanges, women had no real place in these gift exchanges. It has been suggested through records kept by men that the women were really just passive recipients.\textsuperscript{61} Such an example can be seen with the story of Tommaso Guidetti. Records show that he kept a list of all of the gifts his wife, Lisa, received after she gave birth to their child. He made this list so that he could pay back any obligations if and when the time came. This

\textsuperscript{57} Musacchio, \textit{The Art and Ritual of Childbirth}, 46.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
seems to have been quite a common practice. And it is yet another example of the lack of control and the lack of voice women had in fifteenth century Florence.

Another example of the male control of the event of childbirth can be seen in the story of Lorenzo Morelli. In 1478, Lorenzo Morelli gave golden damask as a gift to his brother-in-law, a member of the powerful Ridolfi family of Florence, whose wife had given birth to a baby boy. Although Morelli gave the gift in the name of his wife, he was using the gift-giving opportunity as a way of building up his wife’s family’s obligations to him.

In some cases, a woman would be the bearer of gifts to new mothers, but this usually only happened if a woman was widowed and her son was unavailable. And even then, any gift she gave was a way of upholding the reputation of her husband’s family. An example of this can be seen with the story of Alessandra Strozzi. In a letter to her son she noted that she had sent eight lengths of cloth as a gift to a new mother. Alessandra was a widow and head of her family, as there were no men to take on the role. She sent

\[62\] Ibid.

\[63\] Ibid.

\[64\] Ibid.
the cloth as a way of upholding and continuing the reputation of her husband’s noble Florentine family.\textsuperscript{65}

As we have seen, gift exchanges included many different types of items and were intricate events, but there were two types of art that are known to have originated in the ritual of childbirth in the Renaissance: birth trays and bowls. In many cases these items were bought before a women gave birth and stayed in the home for many years, until they were handed down to younger generations.\textsuperscript{66}

**Birth Trays and Bowls**

In Tuscany, from the early fourteenth century until the seventeenth century, painted wooden bowls were a feature of the bedchamber during childbirth. They were used to deliver food and drink to women in labor, and many of these trays and bowls included paintings of the Virgin or Saint John. A painted wooden birth tray from 1428 belonging to Bartolomeo di Fruosino shows a mother lying in bed with a covered birth tray on the bed sheets.\textsuperscript{67} Other trays show images of caregivers carrying special bowls into the

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{66} Johnson and Matthews Grieco, 45.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
bedchamber and handing them to the new mother.\textsuperscript{68} This art shows the practical purpose of these bowls and trays, but they also served another purpose. Some of these items were thought to protect women during this risky time.

On the reserve sides of these trays and bowls were often paintings of naked children, most of whom were boys. Some were shown sitting, some holding drums and bows, and others with small animals and plants. It may seem like an odd choice to have these children illustrated on such vessels, but it may be that they symbolized the Renaissance belief in the power of imagination during childbirth, as texts from the time record this type of thinking.\textsuperscript{69}

It was thought that a positive imagination would help with a successful delivery. But, it is also possible that women believed a positive imagination would result in the birth of a male. Writings also show that people believed these images encouraged conception.\textsuperscript{70} It also seems that these items were used a great deal in the event of a birth,

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 47-48.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 48.
as contemporary inventories described them as bad, and even broken.\textsuperscript{71}

Birth trays and bowls also included confinement scenes of mothers-to-be, and these paintings were done in great detail. Because of the personal and intimate nature of these types of pieces and because of their constant use, birth trays and bowls likely created more positive reinforcement for women in the Renaissance than did religious paintings.\textsuperscript{72} Making sure a woman’s imagination was positive during conception, pregnancy, and labor was very important to people at the time, as it was thought that grotesque and negative objects would harm a mother and baby and would result an unattractive child.\textsuperscript{73} Pregnant women were warned to stay away from these negative objects and images.\textsuperscript{74}

Showing positive images on such heavily used items as birth trays and bowls therefore was a way to help a mother sustain positive thoughts and to make sure her children were born beautiful. And here again we see another way in

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 45.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 47.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 48.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
which Florentines emphasized beauty and the ideal, though it was in reality an impossible thing to control and an unfair thing to demand.

An example of the belief of negative images and their effect on newborn children can be seen in a statement made by Florentine Benedetto Varchi, a humanist in the court of Cosimo I de’ Medici, when he said to the Florentine Academy in the mid-1500s that maternal imagination was one of the main causes of unsuccessful births.\(^7^5\) Leon Battista Alberti also wrote about this belief in his 1452 work *De re aedificatoria*. In it he said that whenever a man and his wife come together, it is best to only hang portraits of dignified men who have handsome appearances, as this may have an influence on the fertility of the mother and the appearance of the baby.\(^7^6\) It is interesting to note here that Alberti emphasized that images of men should be displayed.

The artwork related to pregnancy and childbirth, and the event itself, is one area of life that some may have assumed belonged to women. Though the acts themselves made this a “woman’s world,” the control of the event of birth

\(^7^5\) Ibid.

\(^7^6\) Ibid., 49.
clearly belonged to men, as they were in charge of celebratory gatherings and used them for their gain where possible. In addition, it is easy to see that the emphasis on the ideal in terms of having an attractive child played a large role in the event of pregnancy and childbirth, just as the ideal played a major role in portraits and religious works. This leaves us back to the question of whether women in Italy, and specifically in Florence, really had a Renaissance at all.
CHAPTER FOUR

DID ITALIAN WOMEN HAVE A RENAISSANCE?

The Renaissance in Florence was an interesting, unique, and important part of Italy’s history. The city started out as a small riverside town and formed itself into a bustling urban center by the beginning of the fifteenth century. This says a lot about the strength and innovation of its people. But while all of this development was happening, while humanists were speaking, writing, painting, and sculpting, it seems to have been a male-centric phenomenon. When one asks what, if anything, changed for women, the answer is not much. From medieval times through the fifteenth century, women lived in much the same way as they always had. And when we look at women’s history, it is interesting to observe the impact a male dominated atmosphere had on the women who lived alongside them.

As we have seen, leading up to the fifteenth century, Florence was beginning to grow and develop associations that would eventually turn into a government. Then, differences between political groups eventually created the popolo, which enacted laws, taxes, and other regulations. In the thirteenth century, the podesta came to power and
Florence’s mercantile economy also began to grow. Guilds were created, bridges were built, the cloth trade was booming, and the population was growing. But very little of this development included or involved women. Though they were a part of the city, they were in the background and had very little control of what was happening around them.

Once married, women were made to carry out their obligations to their husbands and risked their lives in childbirth. In addition, most were not allowed an education, nor did they have the option to work outside the home. But they were always expected to meet the unrealistic ideals of behavior and beauty that men set for them. And these male ideals were not just spoken, but carried out through dowry obligations, in everyday life, and in multiple forms of artwork. American historian Joan Kelly-Gadol, writing about women in this period in a 1977 essay, also questioned whether or not women really had a Renaissance.

Kelly-Gadol believed that there was no Renaissance for women in Italy in the fifteenth century, and she based this belief on the following criteria: the regulation of female
sexuality;\(^1\) the type of work women performed compared with men; women’s access to property and political power; women’s access to education; the role women had in shaping society; and ideology about women.\(^2\)

Kelly-Gadol noted that at the time of the Renaissance, Italy was advanced compared to the rest of Europe\(^3\) due in part to the fact that the country had a strong mercantile economy and had consolidated itself into states. This allowed for a reorganization of society and the development of the cultural expansion that took place.\(^4\) But these changes had a very different impact on women than they did on men. Instead of bettering women’s lives, these developments intruded on women and their freedoms. This happened at different levels depending on what social class a woman belonged to. But no matter where they fell on the social ladder, women as a whole experienced few options for the way they wished to live their lives.\(^5\)

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1 Joan Kelly-Gadol, *Did Women Have a Renaissance?*, University of Puerto Rico, [http://humanidades.uprrp.edu/smjeg/reserva/Historia/hist6052/Prof%20Maria%20Fatima/Kelly-Gadol,Joan_DidWomenHaveaRenaissance.PDF](http://humanidades.uprrp.edu/smjeg/reserva/Historia/hist6052/Prof%20Maria%20Fatima/Kelly-Gadol,Joan_DidWomenHaveaRenaissance.PDF) (accessed March 10, 2012).

2 Joan Kelly-Gadol, *Did Women Have a Renaissance?*

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.
As has been noted earlier, girls were raised and prepared for marriage and then made to follow the strict regulations of the Monte delle Doti dowry system in the city of Florence. In addition, when women were married, they were under the control of their husbands. If they did not marry there were few choices left for them. Either a woman joined a convent or she was ridiculed and thought of as a lower-class citizen. If she lost her husband, she was then under the control of either her son or another male member of her family. Independence was rare.

To go along with the lack of freedom and the negative impact of the Renaissance on women, Kelly-Gadol states that the regulation of female sexuality and the lack of work and educational options had a lot to do with the constriction women faced. There was strict regulation of female sexuality, as chastity and purity were very important. And much of this regulation was based on the Christian values of the time that set the tone and the belief that women had to be guided through life in an attempt to keep them pure and able to live a life of honor.

Along with this theme of living a life of honor, we have seen that the artwork that illustrated women and the important events in women’s lives, such as pregnancy and
childbirth and marriage, presented the ideal. They did not portray realities of women’s lives.\textsuperscript{6}

There was also strict regulation about educating women so as to control the kind of work women were and were not permitted to do. Many women did not have access to any education.\textsuperscript{7} This allowed men to gain and keep power. Everything in a woman’s life was regulated, from whom she would wed to what she wore. In addition, the art, literature, and philosophy of Renaissance Italy was shaped and based on the attitudes of men. This means that there was no direct knowledge (or very little direct knowledge) about women’s lives from the women themselves).\textsuperscript{8}

In the years since Kelly-Gadol wrote her essay, others have also sought to answer the question of whether or not women really experienced a Renaissance, and the perspective may have shifted a bit, as historians have become more aware that Italy as a whole had many different laws and traditions and diversity of culture connected to the lives of women.\textsuperscript{9} But it is clear that women did not experience the

\begin{itemize}
  \item Paola Tinagli, \textit{Women in Italian Renaissance Art}, 187.
  \item Joan Kelly-Gadol, \textit{Did Women Have a Renaissance}?
  \item Ibid.
  \item Paola Tinagli, \textit{Women in Italian Renaissance Art}, 186.
\end{itemize}
same change in culture or the same level of enlightenment that men did, especially in fifteenth century Florence.

So if women did not have a Renaissance, did they have any space of their own? It doesn’t seem as if they did, as men played a major part in even the most intimate aspects of women’s lives, including pregnancy and childbirth, one area where one would think women could control. This was partly due to the fact that in Florence at the time, gender and power were very closely allied, and it was the male gender that had the most power. This ties back to Kelly-Gadol’s belief that there was regulation of female sexuality.

When it came to the belief systems connected to gender, politics and religion also played a major part in what “spaces” women could occupy, and it also had an effect on what women could do. Florentine women were forbidden to take part in government or hold public office. Women were not even allowed to enter government buildings. They were banned because government installations were considered a

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12 Ibid., 313.
masculine “space”. If a woman were a witness to a crime or accused of a crime, she would be questioned outside the appropriate government location.\textsuperscript{13}

Another “space” where women were not often seen was in the streets of Florence. There was a level of discomfort among men at the notion of women making themselves visible to people outside the walls of their own homes.\textsuperscript{14} Women were also confined to the home to express mourning. Though they were allowed to display their grief, they were required to do so at home, behind closed doors.\textsuperscript{15}

Dominican Friar Girolamo Savonarola and Archbishop Antonio of Florence were very concerned about women being seen outside the home or wandering about in the streets without proper male supervision.\textsuperscript{16} This was such a concern that that Archbishop Antonio went so far as to state that a wife should rarely go outside the home, or into the piazzas. He believed that they should also refrain from telling stories to each other or talking at windows. He went on the say women should only leave the house to go to

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 314.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 315.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 313.
church, and then only in the company of an appropriate man.\textsuperscript{17} Friar Savonarola also stated similar sentiments when he noted that widows should not seek amusement through conversation with men, they should not wander the streets, nor should they stand in their windows to be seen by the outside world.\textsuperscript{18}

As stated by Bishop Antonio, churches were one “space” where women were expected to be. Preachers and other men encouraged women to attend Mass. But even then, women were separated from men. In 1476 the male-run Works Committee decided that there was a need to separate men and women in church, so a curtain made of course cloth was implemented in churches to enclose women worshipers and keep them apart from male members of a congregation.\textsuperscript{19} This type of separation was displayed in woodcut artwork in Savonarola’s \textit{Book of Revelations}, as the piece illustrates men on the south side of church and women on the north side, separated by a partition.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{itemize}
\item[Ibid.]
\item[Ibid.]
\item[Ibid., 319.]
\item[Ibid.]
\end{itemize}
Though women were partitioned in churches, there were a few that were there to be seen, but only by other women. Church was a place where older women observed unmarried girls, looking for suitable brides for their sons, nephews, or other male relatives. 21 Other than churches, there were very few places outside the home where women could feel comfortable and where their presence was accepted. One exception to this was that upper class women did travel to the countryside in times of plague, and sometimes to escape the summertime heat in the city. 22

On the topic of women’s space, it is interesting to note that women of lower classes had more freedom than those in the elite. Lower class women generally moved around the city of Florence at times, as they would sometimes work as silk spinners and do other similar jobs in Florentine shops. 23 It was also mentioned in chapter two that lower class women served as house servants and wet nurses. But most women of fifteenth century Florence saw the world from the windows of their homes or from the

21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 324.
23 Ibid., 322.
windows of their convents. This was not the ideal, but reality for women in fifteenth century Florence.

Looking at these realities that women faced in Florence in the fifteenth century, it can be said that life was not easy for much of the female population. They lived in a world where they were watched, controlled, and expected to live by rules and regulations that were created by men. They were expected to be able to live up to what was thought to be an ideal way of life. And with all of the realities in mind, the lack of freedom, no access to education, and the lack of liberties as a whole, it is hard to say that women experienced any sort of Renaissance at all. In order for them to have such an experience, the women of Renaissance Florence would have had to have been included in the awakening with true freedom and liberty, the same freedom and liberty that men were given.

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24 Ibid., 328.
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