In my Monroe project proposal, I set out to “examine the social status of women in the context of Renaissance art.” In my research, I have found that Renaissance art reveals information about women’s social condition in various ways. As is to be expected, the visual content of art is revealing. Thus, the fine clothing and jewels displayed in female marriage portraits show the way in which brides were used as a means to display family wealth and honor. However, the very existence of particular objects can itself reveal a great deal about expectations for, and beliefs about, women. For example, the existence of decorated birth trays and other artistic objects associated with childbirth demonstrates the expectation for women to provide heirs and the belief in the power of visual stimuli to promote the conception of healthy and beautiful children. In addition, contemporary criticism of art made by Renaissance women evinces philosophical views that femininity is antithetical to artistic skill.

Scholars have also been varied in their approaches to interpreting Renaissance art. Some have used primarily objective methods, using primary sources and historical information to interpret the subjects of art works. Other have used concepts from psychology and the idea of the “male gaze” to develop nuanced interpretations of images. My synthesis of their work is an eclectic account of the lives of Renaissance women and their reflection in the world of Renaissance art.

Florentine Portraits of Women
Female portraits proliferated in Florence from 1440-1540, when portraiture became accessible to the merchant class (Brown, 2001). For many of these portraits, it is unclear what occasioned their commission, and there is some disagreement among scholars. Paola Tinagli asserts that most female portraits were posthumous commemorations of the sitter (Tinagli, 1997). The little evidence that can be found in account books and inventories associates portraits with the death of the sitter, and Domenico Ghirlandaio’s portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni can be confidently assigned to this category, as it bears the year of her death (Brown, 2001). However, Joanna Woods-Marsden disagrees with Tinagli’s generalization and argues that most female portraits were commissioned shortly after marriage. Although historical documents do not provide evidence that Florentines commissioned portraits to celebrate marriages, the elaborate hairstyles, expensive fabrics, and fine jewels worn by the women in many portraits can be associated with marriage. The women’s intricately bound hairstyles indicate their married status. Virgins and brides wore their hair loosely as a sign of their innocence; however, loose, unbound hair also had erotic connotations. Thus, married women wore their hair bound out of propriety. Emphasizing the rich adornment of the sitters, which corresponds to the sumptuous attire purchased by husbands for their brides, and citing sumptuary laws that prevented women from wearing expensive clothing and jewelry in public after a certain number of years of marriage, Woods-Marsden argues that most Florentine portraits of women were commissioned within six years after marriage.

Prior to 1563, when the edicts of the council of Trent set forth requirements for marriages sanctioned by the church, a priest was not necessary in order to make a marriage official (Bayer, 2008). Instead, the marriage was arranged through a series of negotiations between the men of
the two families, and was made public when the bride, dressed in all her finery, was escorted from her father’s house to her husband’s house (Brown, 2001). The husband was responsible for outfitting the bride for this procession, and the clothes and jewels could cost him the equivalent of half of the bride’s dowry. The display of wealth through the bride’s expensive attire was meant to proclaim the honor and status of the couple and their families, particularly the husband’s. Alessandra Strozzi advised her son Filippo to, “Get the jewels ready, and let them be beautiful, for we have found you a wife. Being beautiful and belonging to Filippo Strozzi, she needs beautiful jewels, for just as you have honor in other things, you do not want to be lacking in this” (Brown, 2001).

The feminist scholar Patricia Simons has argued that profile portraits used women as “object[s] of display within male discourse” (Simons, 1992). According to Simons, these portraits, which were painted by male artists and commissioned by male patrons, were oriented towards male viewers and depicted the female body purely for the male’s purpose of proclaiming his honor in a “display culture.” Simons defined a “display culture” as “a culture where the outward display of honor, magnificence, and wealth was vital to one’s social prestige and definition, so that visual language was a crucial mode of discourse” (Simons, 1992). Simons points out that women were rarely seen in public, either in person or in monumental public art, except during the marriage procession. On this occasion, the bride’s splendid attire was not meant to flatter her appearance, but rather to proclaim her husband’s honor; the fine fabric of her clothing often bore the emblems of her husband’s family. The jewels she wore were not hers to keep, and could later be sold by her husband if he needed liquid capital (Brown, 2001). This was done by Marco Parenti, who had all of his wife’s bridal clothes unpicked and sold each gem and
sleeve (Simons, 1992). Simons also discusses the passivity imposed by the profile pose, which she says gives the head “the quality of still life.” In Renaissance society, sight was considered the most powerful sense and was thought to emanate outwards from the eyes; thus, women could wound men with a piercing glance. The profile pose disabled women from causing harm with their eyes by preventing the sitter from looking at the viewer.

Despite these circumstances, there is reason to believe that the men who commissioned portraits also felt genuine affection for the women they saw fit to commemorate (Brown, 2001). This would have especially been the case with posthumous portraits commissioned in memory of loved ones who died young. Records show that the posthumous portrait of Giovanna Tornabuoni mentioned previously continued to hang in her husband’s bedchamber 10 years after her death, which suggests that the husband truly cared for his wife. A husband’s devotion to his wife and grief at her death can also be seen in a letter from Giovanni Tournabouni to his nephew where he writes, “I am so oppressed by grief and pain for the most bitter and unforseen fate of my most sweet wife that I myself do not know where I am” (Brown, 2001).

**Florentine Marriage Furniture**

When they married, the members of the middle and upper merchant classes of 15th century Florence commissioned painted furniture to decorate the couple’s bedroom (Tinagli, 1997). The items that were commissioned included the marriage bed, chests (cassoni), day-beds (lettuci), and decorative wall panels (spalliere). The imagery on this furniture included narratives from history, literature, and the Bible that served as moralizing examples of ideal behavior for
the couple to emulate. Thus, marriage furniture serves as an excellent vehicle for examining societal expectations of women through art.

In Renaissance society, men and women were expected to marry and produce children in order to sustain the population and maintain the social order (Tinagli, 1997). The stabilizing effect of marriage is a common theme in painted marriage furniture, and it is portrayed especially vividly in *spalliere* showing the story of Nastagio degli Onesti, which is taken from Bocaccio’s *Decameron*. In the story, Nastagio falls in love with a woman from his town, but she rejects him out of pride. Hurt, Nastagio spends his inheritance and retreats into the forest. Here, he witnesses a shocking scene. A naked woman runs past, chased by a knight and his hounds. The hounds catch the woman, and the knight slits her open and throws her insides to the dogs. The knight explains to the horrified Nastagio that he had been in love with the woman, but she had rejected him. The heartbreak caused the man to kill himself, and the woman had felt proud of her influence over him. After the woman died, the pair suffered the joint punishment of reenacting the hunting scene repeatedly for all eternity. After hearing the knight’s story, Nastagio sets up a banquet in the forest so that his beloved can witness the brutal hunting scene, and the sight convinces her to accept Nastagio’s love. This story urged men and women to put aside their individual preoccupations and accept their prescribed roles in the community. When Nastagio abandons his profligacy and his love forgets her pride, the married couple is rewarded with happiness in a well-ordered society.

The story of the rape of the Sabines, a popular subject for *cassone* panels, demonstrated the importance of women’s submission to men in order to replenish the population (Brown,
2001). The Sabines were the original occupants of the area that would become Rome. Their rape by the Roman conquerors established a new lineage and populated the new settlement (Brown, 2001 and Tinagli, 1997). The image of rape in Botticelli’s Primavera, which was also commissioned on the occasion of a marriage, provides a similar lesson (Zirpolo, 1991).

Obedience was one of the most important attributes of a good wife, and the virtue of obedience is illustrated in spalliere panels showing the story of Griselda, also from the Decameron (Tinagli, 1997). Griselda is mercilessly tested by her husband Gualtieri, who pretends to have their children murdered and their marriage dissolved. He sends Griselda back to her father’s house with little clothing to cover herself, then later asks her to return as a servant for his new bride. Through all of these trials, Griselda remains perfectly obedient. Seeing that Griselda has proven her obedience, Gualtieri restores her to her former place as his wife and reunites her with her children.

**Childbirth and Art**

Women were expected to continuously bear children, and various forms of art and decorated objects were created to aid and celebrate this important activity (Brown, 2001 and Musacchio, 1997). Some information about the experiences of elite women can be gleaned from the monumental works of art in churches that showed the birth of the Virgin or of John the Baptist (Musacchio, 1997). These images show an idealized scene in the setting of a contemporary patrician home, where the new mother lies in a richly decorated room filled with visitors and attendants. The lavish decorations, including embroidered bedding and painted tables
and chairs, are also mentioned in contemporary documents. Along with special clothing for the new mother and baby, these objects celebrated birth and motherhood.

Another decorated object related to childbirth was the ubiquitous desco da parto, a decorated bowl or tray that was used to bring food to the mother after her delivery (Brown, 2001 and Musacchio, 1997). Like the monumental paintings mentioned above, these are sometimes decorated with images of new mothers in their bedrooms, but the scenes are more intimate (Musacchio, 1997). The undersides of the trays are also decorated, often with images of naked male infants. These images have been linked to Renaissance beliefs in the magical influence of the maternal imagination.

Childbirth was not medically understood, and various rituals and talismans were used in the hopes of promoting the desired outcome—usually a healthy, attractive, male child (Musacchio, 1997). In addition, it was believed that the images women saw and imagined could influence the appearance of their children. Thus, women who were attempting to conceive were encouraged to look at images of beautiful people, such as the infants on the undersides of birth trays, as well as the nude reclining figures that were painted under the lids of many cassone.

**Female Artists**

The philosophical underpinnings of Renaissance art criticism considered women to be inferior to men, and the qualities of virtuoso artists to be inherently masculine (Jacobs, 1997). The few women artists who received the highest levels of praise from contemporary art historians were said to possess these masculine qualities and were considered wonders of nature.
Thus, although it was acknowledged to be possible for women to excel in art, artistic virtuosity remained purely masculine. Women artists were often criticized for producing overworked, rather than effortless, pieces that revealed *la donnesca mano* (a woman’s hand). Women were also criticized for only being able to produce straightforward portrait likenesses, rather than *invenzione*, or inventive compositions that demonstrated a creative vision.

During the Renaissance, women generally became artists by either training with family members who were artists, or by being born into noble families whose humanist ideals motivated them to educate women (Chadwick, 2007). The latter was the case for Sofonisba Anguissola (1532/35-1625), the first major woman artist of the Renaissance (Jacobs, 1997). Anguissola worked in the Spanish Court as Court painter from 1559-1573 (Chadwick, 2007). She was highly praised by her contemporaries, including the art historian Giorgio Vasari (Jacobs, 1997). Vasari wrote that the figures in one of her paintings “appear truly alive and lack nothing except speech.” This description of a work of art as containing life was the highest form of praise and was rarely applied to the work of women artists.

Anguissola was born in Cremona; however, most of the prominent women artists of the Renaissance came from Bologna (Chadwick, 2007). There were several factors that made Bologna a supportive environment for the development of female artists. Its university had admitted women since the thirteenth century, and the city was proud of the educated women that it had produced. In addition, the cult of St. Catherine was highly active in Bologna in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. St. Catherine had been a painter herself, and was the patron saint of Bolognese painters in the sixteenth century.
One of the female artists who emerged in sixteenth-century Bologna was Properzia De’Rossi (ca. 1490-1530) (Jacobs, 1997). De’Rossi was a sculptor in marble, an unusual medium for a woman artist. She was also distinguished by being the only female artist included in the first edition of Vasari’s *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*. She made several reliefs for the church of San Petronio in Bologna, including one depicting Joseph fleeing the attempted seduction by Potiphar’s wife. Vasari interpreted this scene from the Bible as a reflection of De’Rossi’s own experience of unrequited love. Vasari then went on to say that De’Rossi did not do any more work for San Petronio after completing these pieces. The scholar Fredrika Jacobs has interpreted Vasari’s account as linking De’Rossi’s unhappiness in love to her cessation of her work. This would imply that De’Rossi succumbed to the unproductive form of melancholy, rather than the the desirable form of melancholy that spurs artistic creation. However, Jacobs also notes that Vasari describes other, male artists as failing to reach their full potential because of unwise romantic pursuits.

**Conclusion**

Although it is subjective and challenging to interpret, art is a valuable source of historical information. As this paper demonstrates, an examination of societal expectations for women through the lens of Renaissance art provides a detailed picture. At the same time, a reexamination of Renaissance art in the context of women’s social status brings a new perspective to these celebrated works.
References


