



# Suor Plautilla Nelli

## Florence's first-known woman painter

A discovery in a Florentine market led Jane Fortune to her first invisible artist, and the birth of the AWA. Here is the story of the first invisible female painter

**A**t an antique book fair in Florence, just over thirteen years ago, I chanced upon a book, *Suor Plautilla Nelli (1524–1588), The First Woman Painter of Florence*, (Ed. Jonathan Nelson, 1998). Based on a symposium sponsored by Georgetown University at Florence's Villa Le Blaze in 1998, it was the first book written about Nelli in 70 years, the previous one, having been authored by Giovanna Pierattini, in 1938. I had not heard of Nelli, but as a Renaissance nun and the first recognized woman painter of Florence, she fascinated me.

### Plautilla Nelli

The self-taught artist was just fourteen, when she entered the Dominican convent

of Santa Caterina da Siena in Florence's Piazza San Marco, now a museum, where her masterwork *Lamentation with Saints* is currently on display. In 1538, when Nelli took her vows, the convent still devoutly adhered to Fra' Girolamo Savonarola's (1452–1498) reformist principles which deeply influenced the nuns' spiritual journey and shaped their convent life, for he promoted devotional painting and drawing by religious women as a way for them to avoid sloth. Thus, the convent—founded in 1496 by noblewoman Camilla Bartolini Rucellai (1465–1520), who also became a cloistered nun—grew renowned for its nun-artists, many of whom were daughters of prominent Florentine artisans.

Nelli, born Pulisena Margherita Nelli, was, instead, the daughter of a successful fabric merchant, Piero di Luca Nelli, whose ancestors originated from the Tuscan area of Mugello. There is a modern-day street in Florence, Via del Canto de' Nelli, in the San Lorenzo area, named for her family, and the new sacristy of the church of San Lorenzo is the original site of her family's home. After the death of her mother, and her father's second marriage, both occurring within six months of each other, Nelli and her sister, Costanza (Suor Petronilla), entered the convent. (Her sister, a nun scribe, is known for transcribing *Vita di Frate* the biography of Savonarola, still in print today.)



*Suor Plautilla Nelli's Last Supper, XVI century, Santa Maria Novella Complex, Florence*

The fire-and-brimstone preacher, who 'affirmed the value of religious art and exhorted artists to eliminate all elements that distracted from sacred themes' (Andrea Muzzi, 1996) was of paramount importance to Nelli's career, especially in a context like 16th century Florence where laywomen had virtually no chance of gaining artistic commissions from either church or state. Nelli became part of a vital art community and spiritual sisterhood, which she eventually led, serving thrice as the convent's prioress. Indeed, she executed monumental religious works, which were most unusual for women to paint during this time period. She also trained other nuns as artists, thus providing income for her order from the sale of paintings to outside patrons.

### Nelli's paintings

My decision to help support the restoration of Nelli's *Lamentation with Saints* in 2006 was the first step in a growing quest to protect and preserve works of art by women in Florence. Nelli's masterwork depicting the raw emotional grief surrounding Christ's death had grown dull with the passage of time, but after its restoration, it became a vibrant image, which emoted astounding raw emotional power. The red eyes, swollen noses and visible tears of the painting's characters are

haunting and evoke feelings of compassion that linger long after one views the painting.

Certainly, Nelli's painterly hand tugs at my heartstrings. Yet, *Lamentation with Saints* was only the beginning. Sixteenth-century art historian Giorgio Vasari writes of Nelli: 'throughout Florence, there are so many [of her] pictures that it would be tedious to attempt to speak of them all' (1568). 'So, where are all these works?' I wondered, once the restoration was completed. According to contemporary art

historians, besides the San Marco painting, only two others were attributed to Nelli: *Pentecost*, in the church of San Domenico, in Perugia and *Last Supper*, hosted in the refectory of Santa Maria Novella monastery in Florence since 1853 (not on public view). Surely, there had to be others? And why was so little known about Florence's first woman artist? Even my Italian friends had never heard of her. It was time, I decided, for that to change! I made a personal commitment to bring Nelli's artistic oeuvre to a wider audience and to preserve her



*Saint Catherine Receives the Stigmata, during restoration by R. Lari*





The restoration of Suor Plautilla Nelli's Saint Catherine with a Lily



Suor Plautilla Nelli, Saint Catherine with a Lily, XVI century  
San Salvi Museum, Florence

works through restoration. By founding the Advancing Women Artists Foundation (AWAF), I wanted to play a role in establishing Nelli's rightful place in Florence's cultural and artistic history. Nearly 430 years have passed, it's time she got her due!

### Influences

Undeniably, Nelli was a well-respected artist in her time. She studied and copied the paintings of several masters who worked for the Dominicans, such as Andrea Del Sarto (1486–1530), Angolo Bronzino (1503–1572) and Mariotto Albertinelli (1474–1515). These artists' works were easily available to her because, until 1545, she had access to the outside world and could leave the convent as she pleased. (It wasn't until the Council of Trent (1545–1563) that all convents were enclosed (*clausura*), physically isolating the nuns within the confines of their own complexes.)

Nelli was further influenced by the drawings of Fra' Bartolommeo (1472–1517) also a devoted follower of Savonarola. He painted several portraits of the preacher (his most famous one can be found in the San Marco Museum, Florence). Fra' Bartolommeo bequeathed his drawings to another Dominican friar, Fra' Paolino da Pistoia (1490–1547), who was his mentor and the official painter of the congregation of San Marco. The latter left Bartolommeo's original drawings to Nelli, according to Vasari who cites '...a nun who paints...', in the second edition of his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1568).

This native Florentine 'nun who paints' became, what I call, my first 'invisible woman'. Her story struck me like a revelation: if Nelli was not well-known and she is the first known woman painter of Florence, then how many other women artists are similarly

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'invisible'—with their works hidden or decaying for centuries in Florence's museum storages and churches? And don't these works merit 'a space of their own', so the public can see and celebrate them as a vital, albeit forgotten, part of Florence's cultural and artistic heritage? Nelli became my muse and inspiration for the book *Invisible Women: Forgotten Artists of Florence* (2009) which spotlights the 140 plus paintings and sculptures by women exhibited in Florence's museums and includes an extensive inventory, listing the over-2,000 works languishing unseen in the city's museum storages - many of which are in dire need of restoration.

### Nelli's Last Supper

One such work is Nelli's *Last Supper*, the only known last supper painted by a woman artist. In urgent need of restoration, it will soon become the Advancing Women Artists Foundation's next restoration project, which will take an estimated two years to complete. We are looking forward to new information about



Nelli that is sure to emerge from this conservation project and we aim to continue developing a benchmark to uncover lost or incorrectly attributed works.

Nelli's *Last Supper* is part of an important city-wide phenomenon in Florence, famous for its art on this theme, mostly produced in the Renaissance for church refectories. Thus, with this painting, she joined the ranks of major artists like Andrea del Sarto, Domenico Ghirlandaio and Alessandro Allori, who created stunning renditions of this subject for the monasteries of San Salvi, Ognissanti and Santa Maria del Carmine respectively.

Originally hung in Nelli's convent in the room where the nuns had their meals, her horizontal work is 16 feet long. Her rendition of Christ and the apostles is worthy of mention. Nelli's religious vocation obviously prohibited her from studying the nude male, thus her male figures have softer, more feminine characteristics than those of her male colleagues. Unlike most *Last Suppers* created in her era, it is an oil-on-canvas work, rather than a fresco, since fresco painting was considered a 'man's job'. Another rarity: though it was uncommon for women during that time to sign their works, Nelli includes her very visible signature.

In the upper left-hand corner of this magnificent and mystic work, she places a petition-of-sorts: 'S. Plautilla, Orate Pro Pictora', (Pray for the Painter). Interestingly, '*pictora*', in Latin, means 'paintress', emphasizing the fact that the painting's maker is female. Some art historians zero in on the detail with which

she 'sets' the *Last Supper* table as a factor that further emphasizes the painter's gender. Nelli's choice of food, which she placed on a creased white linen tablecloth, follows the regulations of her convent and suggests the economic level it enjoyed. There are no forks, only knives, Chinese porcelain bowls, fava beans (*bacelli*), water, wine, salt cellars, bread and lamb. Somewhat similar to a peasant meal, it is painted with very descriptive realism.

### Restoration

The *Last Supper* restoration will soon become the keynote project in a long string of 'Nelli restorations' supported by the Advancing Women Artists Foundation in

the last few years. Happily, recent research efforts surrounding the Florentine artists' life and works have paid off! Nine of her drawings depicting the human figure were discovered at the Uffizi's Prints and Drawings Department and restored in 2007 (written permission is necessary to view them). Additionally, since 2006, six 'new' Nelli paintings have emerged from oblivion including San Salvi's small but intense *Pained Madonna* and a lovely *Saint Catherine with a Lily* (restored 2013). Nelli's works distinguish themselves from those who influenced her because of the heightened sentiment visible in each of her characters' expressions and the very red lips of her female figures. In touching ways,

Suor Plautilla Nelli, *Pained Madonna*, XVI century, San Salvi Museum, Florence



Suor Plautilla Nelli, *Lamentation with Saints*, XVI century, San Marco Museum, Florence





Photographs © Marco Badiani

*San Salvi's Director and AWA's Founder unveiling Nelli's Saint Dominic Receives the Rosary*

her works, like these small-scale examples, exude a devotional nature with simplicity and clarity—values that Savonarola preached and promoted.

*Saint Catherine Receiving the Stigmata*, which showcases Nelli's noteworthy chiaroscuro techniques is another newly attributed work, as is Nelli's *Saint Dominic Receives the Rosary* which commemorates Virgin Mary's apparition to the founder of Nelli's order. Rescued from storage and restored in 2009, both paintings can now be viewed in the San Salvi Museum, a suggestive ex-monastery on the outskirts of Florence. The attributed, often overlooked, *Crucifixion* in the Certosa di Galluzzo Monastery is the third central panel in this series. It is our hope that this three-piece work will eventually be united as the artist originally intended.



*St Catherine before restoration*

I firmly believe that many more 'invisible' works by Nelli are awaiting rediscovery, after all, Vasari insists she painted prolifically for 'the houses of gentlemen in Florence', as well as for the convent, where she dwelled for over fifty years. May the quest continue! ●

## Advancing Women Artists Foundation

Florence played mother to Michelangelo and Leonardo Da Vinci, but she also nurtured dozens of women whose works still grace her collections, bearing witness to the creative talents of her many lesser-known daughters - Suor Plautilla Nelli, Artemisia Gentileschi, Elisabetta Sirani, Irene Duclos Parenti, Lavinia Fontana.

The creative experiences of women artists in Florence spans nearly five centuries; the halls of the city's museums offer a sprinkling of representative works that inspire the art lover to learn more about conserving their treasures—rescuing them from oblivion and the merciless grip of time. Advancing Women Artists Foundation, is an American not-for-profit organisation, committed to identifying, restoring and exhibiting artwork by women in Florence's museums and storehouses.

*'Although Florence upholds the irrefutable worth of its most famous artists, defending their legacy as one of the most significant examples of outstanding human expression, the city's long line of women artists, their lives and works, equally exemplifies the unstoppable strength of the creative human spirit'.*

Dr. Jane Fortune, AWA Founder and Chair

Visit: [www.advancingwomenartists.org](http://www.advancingwomenartists.org) or [www.facebook.com/advancingwomenartists](https://www.facebook.com/advancingwomenartists) for more information.

## Flying

A number of airlines fly to Florence, including British Airways, United, Lufthansa, Air France, American Airlines and Alitalia.

## Visas

If you are an EU citizen, you do not need a visa. If you are a non-EU citizen you will need a valid passport and depending on your country of origin, you might need a visa; you could obtain a visa through the Italian Consulate nearest to your residence.

## Getting around

Italy has an excellent public transport system of buses and trains, both within the cities and between cities. Italy has many regional airports and the main domestic carrier is Alitalia. Car hire is readily available and there is an extensive network of motorways.

## Holidays

(In 2015): January 1 (New Year's Day), January 6 (Epiphany), April 6 (Easter Monday), April 25 (Liberation Day), May 1 (Labour Day), June 2 (Republic Day), August 15 (Assumption), November 1 (All Saints' Day), December 8 (Immaculate Conception), December 25 (Christmas Day), December 26 (St Stephen's Day)

## Weather

Given its long boot-like shape and varied geography, the weather in Italy varies considerably from north to south.

In central Italy, beyond the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines, the climate is milder and wetter with a less pronounced difference between summer and winter temperatures.

Summer lingers longer and city centres, such as Florence, Siena and Rome can experience stifling humidity especially during July and August.



## Essentials

**Time difference:** GMT + 1

**Language:** Italian is the official language, with English widely spoken in the cities and main tourist areas. Dialects are spoken in different regions.

**Electrical current/ plugs:** Plug sockets have either two or three round pins with a current of 230V AC, 50Hz.

**Culture:** Italians are warm and welcoming, while quite traditional.

**Water:** Tap water is safe to drink in Italy, although bottled water is readily available.

**Politics:** Italy is a republic with a Head of State.

## Money

**Currency:** The currency in Italy is the Euro (EUR; symbol €) = 100 cents. Notes are in denominations of €500, 200, 100, 50, 20, 10 and 5. Coins are in denominations of €2 and 1, and 50, 20, 10, 5, 2 and 1 cents.

ATMs are widely available throughout Italy. Look for the 'Bancomat' sign for machines with multilingual interfaces. Pick pocketing and petty thievery can be problematic in tourist areas, so take care to keep belongings secure and be vigilant when making cash withdrawals.

**Credit cards:** MasterCard, American Express, Cirrus, Maestro and Visa are widely accepted.

Traveller's cheques are widely accepted. To avoid additional exchange rate charges, travellers are advised to take traveller's cheques in Euro, Pounds Sterling or US Dollars.

For more information please visit [www.italiantouristboard.co.uk](http://www.italiantouristboard.co.uk)

*Dr. Jane Fortune during the unveiling of Nelli's newly restored Saint Catherine*

