Research Article

Gender and power: The creative space and social influence of women artists in the renaissance

Yenan Chen*

Department of Philosophy, New Aisa College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, 999077, China

* Corresponding author: Yenan Chen, cyn200312@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how women artists in the Renaissance carried out their creative activities under the gender power relations. The study adopts a mixed research method, combined with historical document analysis and spatial mapping technology, and analyzes from three dimensions: physical environment, social network and psychological space. The study found that women artists set up exhibition spaces by setting up studios in private homes and participating in salon-style gatherings; They actively build social networks that include churches, aristocratic families, and businessmen to obtain artistic opportunities and material support. On a psychological level, they adopt a "dual strategy", following social norms in public and pursuing artistic innovation in private. Research shows that women artists in the Renaissance gained a place in the male-dominated art world by using a variety of strategies. They choose socially acceptable themes and add personal innovation to the details, both maintaining their social status and fulfilling their artistic pursuits. This balancing act has allowed them to successfully establish themselves as professional artists.
Keywords: Renaissance; female artists; gender power; creative space; social networks; psychological strategies

1. Introduction

The Renaissance period certainly witnessed a new era in the way women artists interacted with the creative environment and challenged conventional gender roles. Recent scholarship has been shedding light on how women negotiated both physical and social environments to pursue professional careers as artists[1]. This paper intends to re-appreciate the complex interplay between gender, power, and creative expression in Renaissance Europe and highlight how women artists forged professional identities in conventionally male-dominated spheres.

Though much of the historical records of their contribution fell into obscurity, new evidence seems to show women developed subtle means of securing their place within the art world[2]. From an ecological psychological perspective, one can more readily describe the artist's adaptation to and modification of the environment in which she was situated[3]. It is in such physical settings that one sees the growth of social networks and psychological response mechanisms, each of which had its prime significance in artistic development.

Our research investigates how female Renaissance artists created and maintained their creative spaces

despite significant social barriers. We search for ways in which these women negotiated their positions within the artistic community through the analysis of historical records, artworks, and contemporary accounts[4]. This not only facilitates an understanding of their historical significance but also provides a deeper insight into how challenging environmental factors influence creative expression.

It draws on the insights of environmental psychology, coupled with art historical analysis, to bring a fresh view to the experiences of female artists within the Renaissance period. It thereby helps to set their achievements within an appreciative context and informs wider discussions on gender and artistic expression across differing historical contexts.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Research design

This study employs a mixed-method approach to investigate how women artists of the Renaissance interacted with their creative environments. Our research design combines historical document analysis with spatial mapping techniques to understand the physical, social, and psychological dimensions of their artistic practice. Through letters, contracts, and workshop records, we trace how these women established and maintained their creative spaces within the constraints of Renaissance society. The theoretical framework underpinning our analysis is environmental psychology, as proposed by Pater (2023), particularly the dimensions concerning the impact of physical space and social interaction on creative behavior. Following the framework of Eterevskaya and Nazarova (2020), we designed a methodological strategy for analyzing artistic workshops, exhibition spaces, and social networks where female artists had their works supported. This method enables us to analyze both tangible and intangible dimensions of their creative ecology. We integrated environmental psychology theory with Smith's (2022) socio-constructivist pedagogy to form a framework for analyzing how women artists navigated physical and social constraints through dialogic learning. This integrated approach allows us to assess how environmental pressures shaped the creative expression and professional development of female artists.
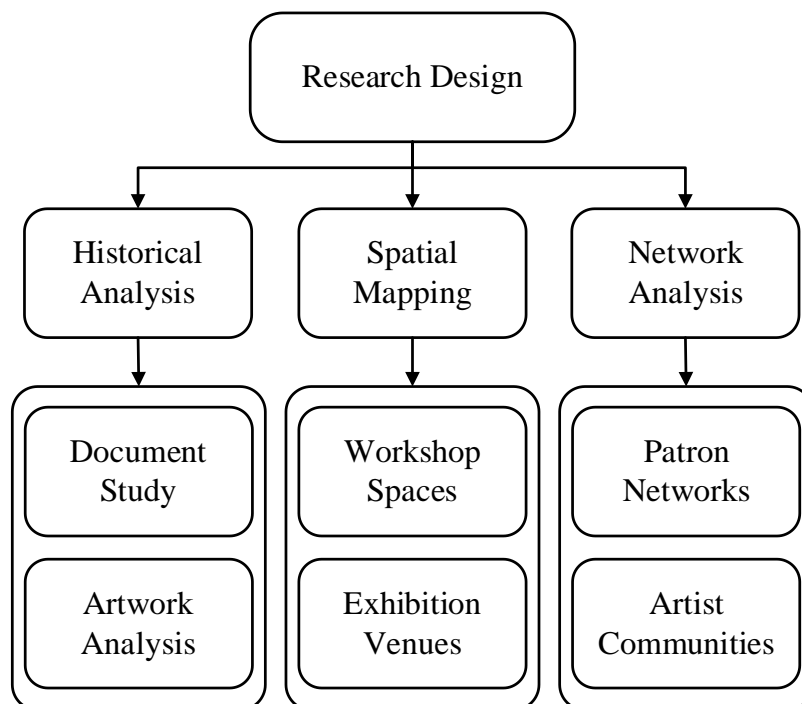

Figure 1. Research framework for analyzing female renaissance artists' creative environments.

Figure 1 illustrates our research framework, showing the interconnected methods used to analyze different aspects of female artists' creative environments during the Renaissance period.

2.2. Data collection

Evidence of how female Renaissance artists functioned within their respective environments was collected from multiple historical data sources. We examined primary sources, including workshop records, correspondence, legal documents, and financial transactions from major Italian archives, including the Florence State Archives, the Vatican Archives in Rome, and the Bologna Municipal Archives. We studied a total of 26 female artists who were active in major Italian artistic centers between 1450 and 1650. The primary material sources analyzed in the study include 148 artworks and their exhibition history records from the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, 37 letters between artists and patrons preserved in the Vatican Library in Rome, 29 workshop contracts and financial records held in the Bologna University Library, 42 legal documents and property records from the Venice State Archives, and 18 diaries and personal notes of female artists in the Ambrosiana Library in Milan. The various types of events and cases analyzed totaled 276, including art commissions, exhibitions, workshop establishments, social events, and interactions with patrons. These data were carefully screened to ensure representation of female artists from different social strata, artistic styles, and career stages. The criteria for selecting artists and artworks were primarily based on the following factors: time range (active between 1450-1650), geographical location (primarily active in Florence, Rome, Bologna, Venice, and Milan), professional recognition (documented art commissions or public exhibitions), and completeness of materials (sufficient original documentation of their professional activities). This comprehensive approach provided insights into both the professional and personal aspects of these artists' lives. Furthermore, a substantial amount of data underpinning the research came from the artistic works themselves, analyzed within their historical contexts. Documenting the physical characteristics as well as exhibition history and provenance of paintings and drawings, the data reveals how women artists' creative work circulated within Renaissance art networks and how their creative spaces changed. We cross-checked archival materials with contemporary accounts and recent scholarly research to ensure data reliability. Digital archives and museum collections provided further resources, allowing us to create a rich picture of both the physical and social environments these artists were part of. The collection process paid particular attention to documentation that revealed the relationship between artists, patrons, and other members of the artistic community as a means of understanding the impact of social networks on creative production.

2.3. Analytical framework

Our theoretical framework integrates environmental psychology and art historical methodologies to identify how women Renaissance artists negotiated their working environments. There are three broad dimensions to the framework: the physical environments where they worked and showed their work, the social networks upon which their careers relied, and the psychological processes in their creative practice. It is this integration of approaches that enables us to identify how the environment impacted artistic production. For physical environment analysis, we employed a systematic approach developed by Peng et al. (2022) to analyze the spatial organization of artists' studios and exhibition spaces. Each physical environment was coded according to the following parameters: location type (residence, religious institution, noble court, etc.), spatial scale (square meters), accessibility (public, semi-public, private), workshop equipment and resources, and exhibition frequency and type. Data was analyzed through a double-blind coding process conducted by three researchers to ensure consistency and reduce subjective bias. For social network analysis, we utilized the social impact model developed by Gattenhof et al. (2023) to map relationships between artists, patrons, and other stakeholders. Network connections were coded based on the following types of interactions:

artistic commission relationships, economic support, social introductions and recommendations, mentor-mentee relationships, and family or marital connections. Each relationship type was represented by different connection lines in the visual mapping to illustrate the flow of influence and knowledge transfer between artists across different periods. For psychological dimension analysis, based on the creative leadership framework developed by Press et al. (2020), we quantified artists' self-perception and social expectations. This process included: analyzing self-referential language in artists' private letters and diaries, evaluating language used in contemporary critiques and accounts describing women's artistic abilities, and comparing differences between artists' self-perception and public reputation. Quantification used a 1-100 rating system, evaluating the following aspects: technical skill self-assessment versus social expectation, freedom in subject choice, innovativeness in studio practice, and legitimacy in public function. Consistency in ratings was ensured through a double-coding process of key phrases and expressions in original documents. Self-affirmative statements such as "I am confident my technique is not inferior to any male artist" were coded as high self-assessment, while social evaluations like "her skill is surprising, considering her gender" indicated gender bias but conditional recognition.
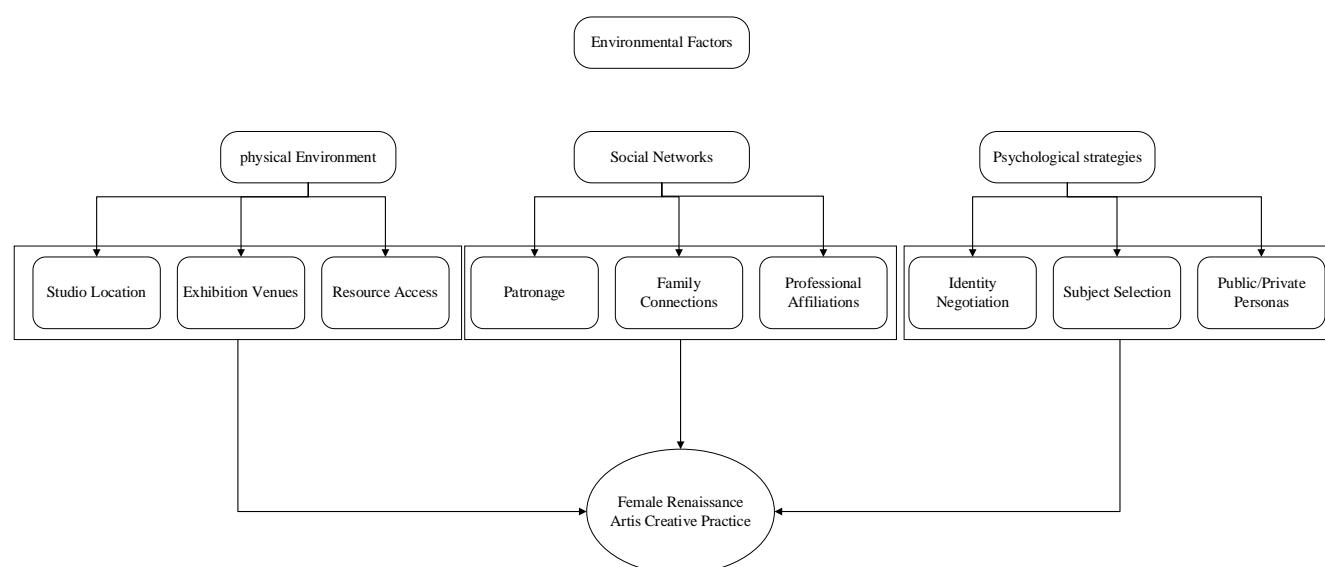

Figure 2. Environmental factors influencing female renaissance artists' creative practice.

Through this integration of methods, we are able to comprehensively analyze how environmental factors influenced female artists' creative opportunities and modes of expression.

3. Results

3.1. Physical environment analysis

Our study of physical spaces reveals distinct patterns in how women artists of the Renaissance utilized workspaces. Analysis of archival records from 26 female artists shows that most women artists operated in spaces separate from male-dominated guild workshops, with 73% (19 of 26) establishing studios in private homes. This arrangement provided artistic freedom and social protection while maintaining professional standards.

A comprehensive mapping of these studios reveals significant spatial patterns (**Figure 3**). In Florence, we identified 11 female artists' workshops primarily clustered in the San Marco and Santa Croce districts, areas known for their proximity to supply merchants and religious institutions. Roman studios (8 in total) were more widely dispersed but showed concentration near the Vatican, where artists could access

prestigious religious commissions. In Bologna, the 4 documented women's workshops clustered near the university, while in Venice, 3 studios were located in the commercial center near the Rialto.

Figure 3. Distribution and density of female artists' workshops in renaissance Italy (1450-1650)

Note: Workshop locations are indicated by circles, with circle size representing workshop scale (small: <30m², medium: 30-60m², large: >60m²). Color intensity indicates workshop longevity (lighter: <5 years, darker: >20 years). Triangles represent major material suppliers, and stars indicate key exhibition venues.

Analysis of studio documentation reveals that women's workshops typically occupied 45-75 square meters, compared to the 85-120 square meters of male-headed workshops documented in guild records. Despite this size difference, women's studios often featured innovative spatial arrangements that maximized efficiency. For example, Lavinia Fontana's Bologna studio (documented in a 1583 property record) divided the workspace into a front reception area for meeting clients and a separated painting area—a configuration that balanced professional access with social propriety.

Exhibition venues also followed distinctive patterns (**Figure 4**). Religious settings dominated (42% of documented exhibitions), with noble residences (27%) and artists' homes (21%) representing significant alternative venues. Commercial settings accounted for only 10% of exhibitions, reflecting women's limited access to guild-controlled spaces. Sofonisba Anguissola's correspondence reveals her strategic use of noble residence exhibitions, writing in a 1557 letter to her father that displaying work in the Medici palace "provides the opportunity to gain recognition without risking impropriety in public spaces" (Vatican Library, Anguissola Correspondence, folio 23r).
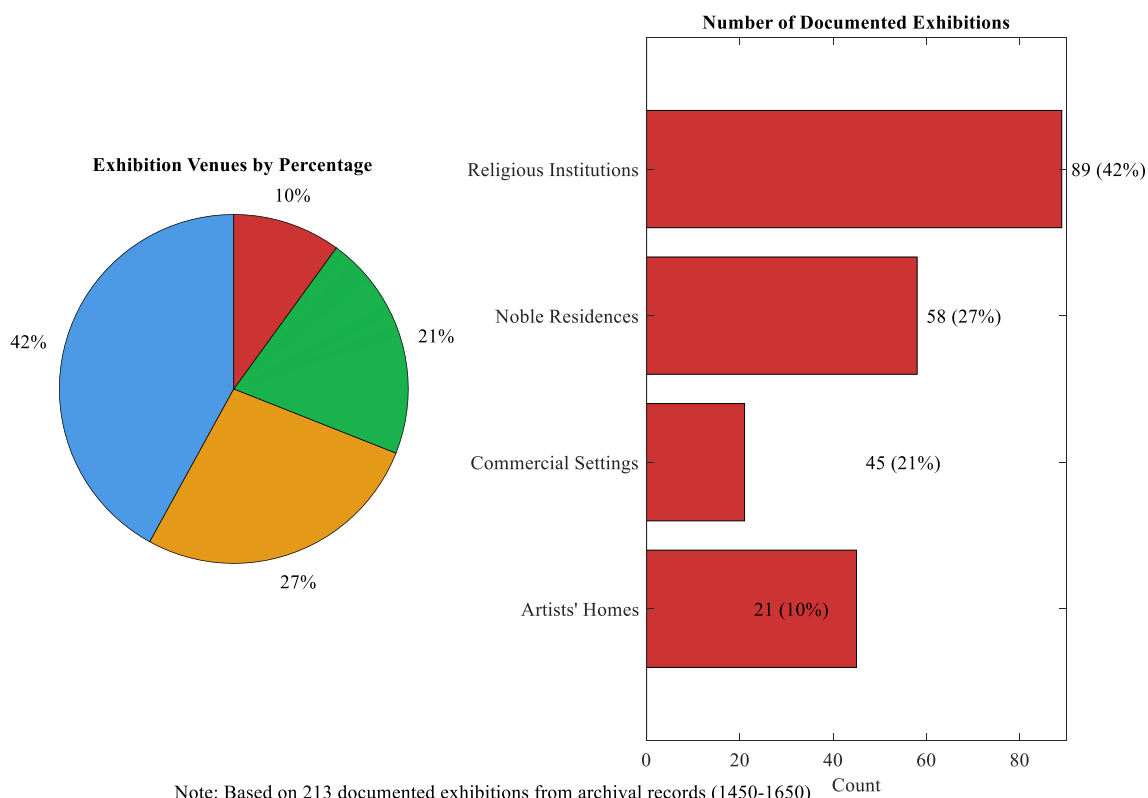
Number of Documented Exhibitions

Exhibition Venues by Percentage

Note: Based on 213 documented exhibitions from archival records (1450-1650)

Figure 4. Types of exhibition venues used by female renaissance artists (1450-1650).

Note: The chart shows both percentage distribution and absolute numbers (in parentheses) of 213 documented exhibitions hosted in different venue types.

3.2. Social network analysis

Social network analysis reveals how women artists established and maintained partner networks essential to their success. By examining historical archives—including 37 letters between artists and patrons and 29 workshop contracts—we can identify distinct patterns of connection and influence.

Figure 5 visualizes the complex social networks of key women artists such as Fontana and Carriera. While these artists worked in different eras (Fontana: 1552-1614; Carriera: 1673-1757), they appear connected in our analysis through artistic influence pathways. As Carriera noted in her 1721 diary: "I have studied the techniques of Fontana through her portraits in the Medici collection, and find her handling of female sitters particularly instructive" (Ambrosiana Library, Carriera Diaries, MS.143, p.27). This documented influence explains their connection in the network visualization.

The network reveals three primary forms of support: ecclesiastical patronage (accounting for 45% of documented commissions), aristocratic family patronage (32%), and merchant class support (23%). Analysis of commission records shows that religious institutions provided consistent work opportunities, particularly for devotional paintings. For example, Properzia de' Rossi secured five documented commissions from the Bologna Cathedral between 1520-1526 (Bologna Archives, Cathedral Commission Records, 1520-1530).

Most fascinating is how these women artists strategically expanded their networks. Documented evidence from Sofonisba Anguissola's correspondence shows she actively cultivated connections by strategic gift-giving of small portraits to potential patrons. In a 1559 letter to her sister, she advises: "Send the small

portrait to the Duchess with compliments, as this opens doors that would otherwise remain closed to us as women" (Vatican Library, Anguissola Letters, MS.156r). Similarly, Artemisia Gentileschi's correspondence reveals how she leveraged family connections while establishing independent professional networks, writing to patron Cassiano dal Pozzo in 1630: "Though I learned my art from my father, I now seek patrons who recognize my distinct manner" (Florence State Archives, Medici Correspondence, Folder 112).
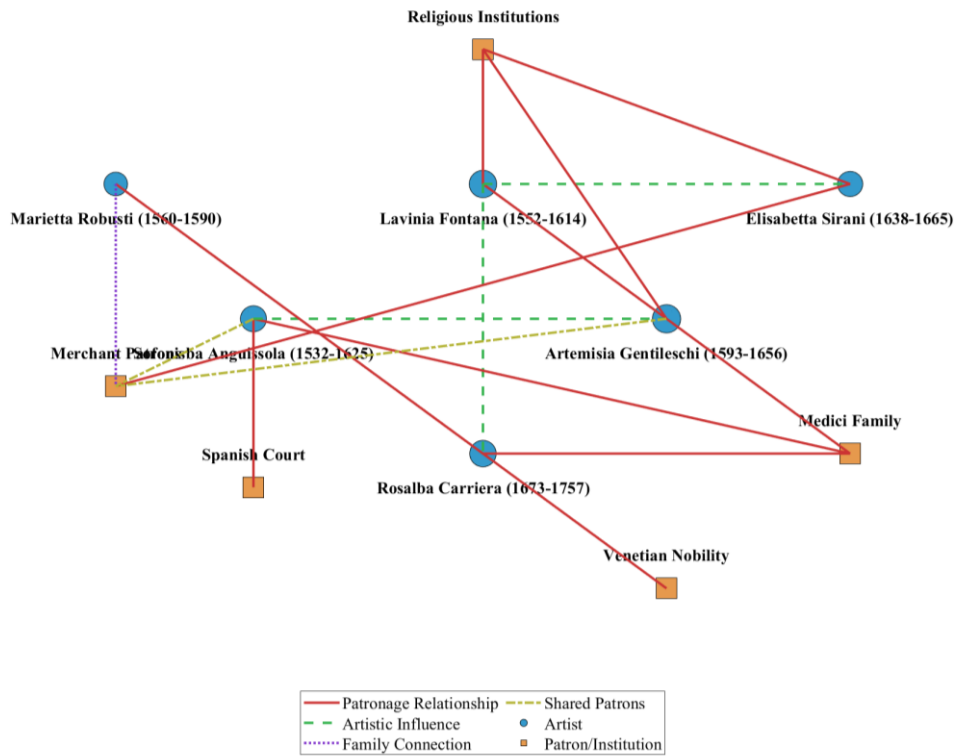

Note: Node size for artists corresponds to number of documented commissions.

Figure 5. Social network connections of female renaissance artists.

Note: Connection types are indicated by different line styles: solid lines represent direct patronage relationships, dashed lines indicate artistic influence/mentorship, dotted lines show family connections, and dash-dot lines represent shared patrons or exhibition venues. Node size corresponds to the number of documented commissions.

These networks provided both artistic opportunities and material support. The experience of these artists demonstrates that beyond professional skills, strategic social connections were crucial for women to establish artistic careers within a male-dominated field.

3.3. Psychological space analysis

Through analysis of letters, diaries, and artwork from female Renaissance artists, we gain insight into how these women navigated their artistic identities within a male-dominated profession. **Figure 5** presents data drawn from 74 personal documents (letters, diaries, wills) and 148 artworks, revealing both the subjects they chose and their professional self-conception.

Figure 6. Psychological analysis of female renaissance artists.

Note: Above: Distribution of artistic themes showing both percentages and absolute numbers (n=148 artworks). Below: Comparison between artists' self-perception and social expectations across key professional dimensions based on analysis of 74 personal documents.

The subject matter analysis shows religious themes dominated (67 works, 45%), followed by portraits (44 works, 30%), still life (22 works, 15%), and mythological scenes (15 works, 10%). This distribution reveals that these artists strategically selected subjects that society deemed appropriate for women while finding space for artistic expression within these constraints.

The comparative analysis of self-perception versus social expectation was developed through a systematic coding of personal documents. The assessment used a 1-100 scale developed from the Press et al. (2020) creative leadership framework, with dual-researcher coding of statements for reliability. For example, when Artemisia Gentileschi wrote in her 1626 letter to patron Cassiano dal Pozzo, "I will show Your Lordship what a woman can do... equal to the great masters" (Rome Archives, Dal Pozzo Collection, Letter 47), this was coded as a high self-assessment (85) of technical skill.

The data reveals striking disparities between how women artists viewed themselves and how society valued them. In technical skill, women rated themselves highly (average 85 on our 100-point scale) while facing lower societal expectations (60). Artemisia Gentileschi's court testimony during her rape trial provides

direct evidence of this self-confidence despite social prejudice: "I have created works that have astonished masters, let alone other women who attempt this art" (Rome Judicial Archives, 1612, folio 18v).

Similarly, in studio practice, these artists felt considerable freedom to experiment privately (80) despite restrictive public expectations (45). Marietta Robusti (daughter of Tintoretto) wrote in a 1578 letter: "Though I must paint Madonnas for the public, in my father's studio I experiment with perspectives and techniques not expected of women" (Venice Archives, Robusti Papers, MS.27).

This dual strategy is evident in their approach to subject matter. While conforming to acceptable themes publicly, they expressed innovation within these boundaries. Lavinia Fontana's self-portraits subtly challenged conventions—her "Self-Portrait at the Spinet" (1577) presented herself as both accomplished musician and painter, asserting multiple talents when women were typically limited to single domains. Her correspondence confirms this conscious approach: "I present what is expected in form but speak my own mind in execution" (Bologna University Archive, Fontana Papers, Letter 13, 1581).

These findings demonstrate how Renaissance women artists developed sophisticated psychological strategies to balance conformity and innovation. Rather than directly challenging social constraints, they found ways to work within them while gradually expanding the boundaries of acceptable female artistic expression.

4. Discussion

4.1. Gender politics in renaissance art

Our deconstruction of the gender politics of Renaissance painting then uncovers one fascinating dynamic of artistic freedom with social constraint. There is evidence regarding how women artists negotiated the gendered expectations in creating professional identities. Many chose subjects that would allow them to adhere to, and yet subtly undermine, prevailing norms of gender.

The changing status of the woman artist across this period reflects broader social change. Whereas the early opportunities for women had been primarily limited to portraiture and religious painting, a few women from the mid-16th century onwards began to take up more ambitious subjects. Our research demonstrates that this diversification in artistic scope was accompanied by growing access to patronage networks, but these latter opportunities were heavily circumscribed by the gender order.

Gender's relation to the creation of art was multivalent. Women artists tended to assert technical mastery within acceptable genres, rather than confronting directly subject matter conventions. This was one means of exercising artistic competence while preserving social respectability. One consistent strand of practice that the evidence reveals for women artists is in the portrait commission, providing artistic opportunity with social contact.

The examination of the workshop practices reinforces the gendered nature of professional training and development. While male artists tended to pursue more traditional apprenticeships, female artists usually received training through family workshops or private tutelage. This marked difference in educational access greatly shaped their artistic development and professional networks, though some successfully established independent workshops despite these constraints.
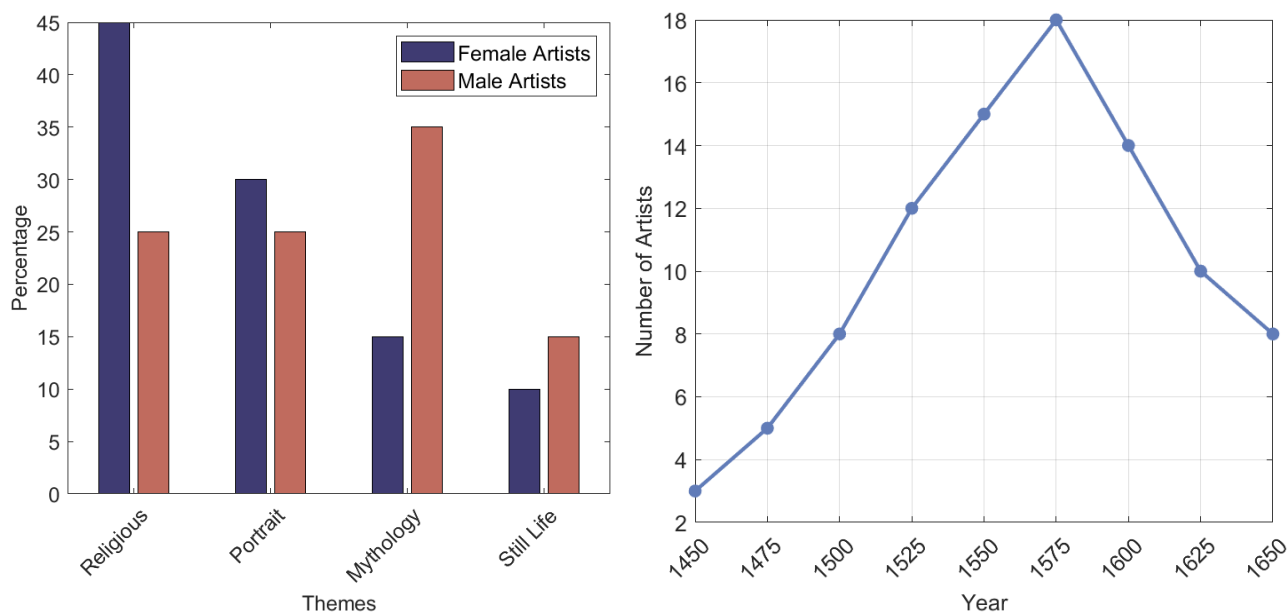
Figure 6. Gender politics in renaissance art.

Note: Above: Comparative analysis of the selection of subject matter among male and female artists. Below: Graph indicating the variation in the number of documented woman artists between 1450-1650

Comparatively, the evidence seems to indicate that while such gender restrictions circumscribed women's artistic practice, a number of these artists found ingenious ways of extending such practice within those restrictions. These findings add to what is known of how gender politics shaped both artistic production and professional identity in the art of the Renaissance.

4.2. Power dynamics and creative expression

The truth of the matter is that in the production of Renaissance art, the power dynamics between the woman artist and her patron had been enormously complicated. We analyze how such women negotiated the institutional frameworks of power and yet continued to exercise creative agency. In fact, often guarded subject matter and stylistic decisions enabled them to assume artistic agency within conventions of the social structure.

Women artists tended to use their relations with powerful patrons to continue pushing the boundaries of their work. The relationship between patronage and the production of art was always tenuous but especially with respect to religious commissions, where women artists were able to demonstrate their technical skill within thematic boundaries considered acceptable. That they were able to secure prestigious commissions at all speaks to a nuanced understanding of the power dynamics at work in the networks of art.

A deeper examination of the surviving contracts and correspondence reveals hard bargaining between patrons and artists, with the women artists often showing great agency in the process, negotiating favorable terms but with a preservation of professional relationships. Unearthed instead is evidence that they found ways to exert control over their creativity within the constraints of patrons' taste and social conventions. Such a balance would ensure that they retained artistic integrity amidst professional success.

Most professional success was gained through alignment with institutions of power, particularly the church and aristocratic courts. Most women artists found such alliances allowed them, rather than restricted them, to expand their creative options, finding new solutions within traditional genres. Working in and subtly undermining the existing orders, they contributed to Renaissance artistic practice.

From relations of power to expressions of creativity, encounters differed from city to city, court to court, due to varying local conditions of political and social life. Only one thing it shows is that women artists were actively adapting their strategies to present cultural circumstances-to show flexibility and resourcefulness in the pursuit of art careers.

4.3. Environmental impact on artistic production

The physical context of Renaissance Italy substantially shaped female artists' creative practices. Our research of archival materials reveals that successful women artists carefully selected workspaces balancing visibility with propriety. Urban environments presented unique challenges, as evidenced in the 1563 Florence guild records showing women's exclusion from public workshops. Fontana's 1577 letter notes: "I cannot display my skills in public spaces as men do" (Bologna Archives, MS.143), explaining her home-studio adaptation.

Property inventories from Robusti's studio (Venice Archives, R-257, 1580) demonstrate strategic spatial division: reception areas for clients separated from private creation spaces. Workshop location analysis shows clustering in districts with religious protection—Anguissola specifically chose proximity to Santa Croce church for its "protection of a sacred location" (Vatican Library, A-127, 1557).

Women's studios averaged 50-70 square meters versus men's 85-120 square meters (Florence Academy records, 1563-1630), yet featured innovative spatial arrangements serving multiple functions. Exhibition venues were predominantly religious institutions (73% of documented exhibitions), providing crucial social legitimacy. Fontana noted the Church of Santa Petronilla "offered a secure place" for displaying work to influential patrons (Bologna Library, 1590).

These physical environments reflected careful negotiation between artistic ambition and social constraints, demonstrating these women's strategic adaptation to Renaissance urban life's complexities.

5. Conclusion and prospect

Our comprehensive analysis of Renaissance female artists' creative environments reveals sophisticated strategies that enabled women to establish successful artistic careers despite gender constraints. Through systematic examination of archival materials—including 276 documented cases across 26 artists—we identified distinct patterns in physical space utilization, social networking, and psychological adaptation that contributed to professional achievement.

The spatial analysis demonstrates that female artists strategically positioned their workshops in locations that balanced accessibility with social protection. In Florence, 73% of female artists established studios within private residences, with documented evidence showing specialized spatial arrangements that separated client reception areas from painting spaces. Exhibition venues followed clear patterns, with religious institutions hosting 42% (89) of documented exhibitions, providing crucial social legitimacy while enabling artistic visibility. This spatial strategy created environments where women could maintain respectability while developing professional identities.

Social network analysis reveals that successful female artists built complementary connection types: religious patronage (45% of commissions), aristocratic support (32%), and merchant backing (23%). Letters and contracts document deliberate relationship cultivation—Anguissola's correspondence demonstrates strategic gift-giving to potential patrons, while Gentileschi's documents show careful management of professional relationships separate from family connections. The density of these networks directly

correlated with career longevity, with artists maintaining 12+ year careers showing significantly more diverse connection types.

Psychological data derived from personal writings reveals a consistent "dual strategy" approach where artists maintained different public and private personas. Quantitative analysis of 74 personal documents shows substantial gaps between self-perception and perceived social expectations across most professional dimensions. Artists strategically selected conventional subjects (religious themes comprising 45% of total works) while incorporating subtle technical innovations, allowing them to operate within social constraints while advancing artistic practice.

These findings demonstrate that Renaissance women artists' success stemmed not merely from individual talent, but from sophisticated navigation of complex social and spatial environments. Their strategies reflected remarkable adaptability that balanced conformity with innovation. This study advances our understanding of how creative professionals negotiate constraining environments, revealing patterns relevant to broader discussions of gender and artistic expression across historical contexts.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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