

WRITING ENRICHMENT ACTIVITY

SOFONISBA ANGUISSOLA (c. 1532–1625)

Sofonisba Anguissola was born in Cremona, Italy, around 1532. She had five sisters and one brother. Her father was a nobleman who provided his daughters with a humanist education. As the oldest daughter, Anguissola studied painting with several well-respected teachers. She then used her training to mentor her sisters. In fact, four of her sisters also became artists.

Anguissola's father wanted to help her gain recognition, so he sent her work to a number of scholars and artists. One artist was Renaissance painter Michelangelo. He was impressed by Anguissola's work, but he challenged her to branch out. He suggested that she paint even more difficult subjects. While highly regarded by some, others still hesitated to praise a woman artist. Some people credited her teacher or her father for her artistic success. Despite these obstacles, however, Anguissola's work became famous. She sold her paintings to many prominent individuals.

Anguissola traveled to Spain in 1559 to become a court painter to Philip II and Queen Isabella of Valois. There, she instructed the queen and two of the queen's daughters in the techniques of painting. While in this position until 1573, she painted many portraits of members of the royal family.

As one of the first woman artists to gain notice, Anguissola brought many new ideas to painting. She did not imitate the subjects of male painters of the time. Instead, she focused on scenes of everyday domestic life. Her paintings told stories, a style that later became known as the "conversation piece." Anguissola's painting *Three of the Artist's Sisters Playing Chess* also proved notable. It showed educated and intelligent girls involved in an activity commonly thought of as a game for boys.

Anguissola's self-portraits usually showed her wearing a simple hairstyle and plain clothing, with little jewelry. This contrasted with the elegant styles typically worn by women of the time. In this way, she showed herself to be a serious, mature person. Background objects such as books and musical instruments hinted at her knowledge of culture. Anguissola also helped inspire and encourage future women artists. She served as a role model for other successful women artists of her time, such as Lavinia Fontana. She also supported arts education for young women.

Activity

Using print or online resources, create a brochure that describes one of Sofonisba Anguissola's paintings. Your brochure should explain what is shown in the painting and discuss the importance of the work.