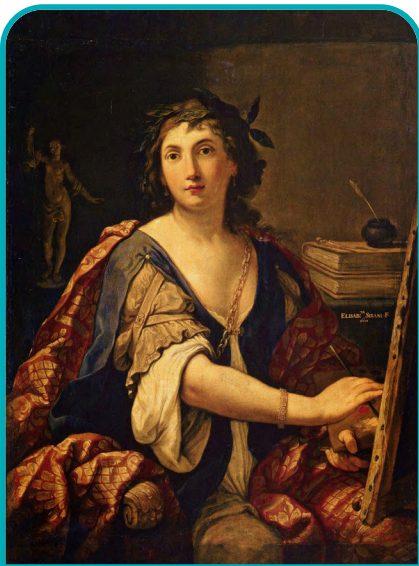




## The Legacy of Elisabetta Sirani: Art, Fame, and Mystery

**This week's female artist is the fascinating Elisabetta Sirani (1638-1665).** She was born in Bologna on January 8th 1638 to Margherita and Giovanni Andrea Sirani. Fortunately for her, her father Gian'Andrea Sirani was a favourite pupil of Guido Reni and took over his practice



Elisabetta Sirani - Self Portrait

as teacher and master in the first Life School in Bologna. Naturally, Elisabetta studied under her father and, therefore, absorbed the technique of Guido. She also studied the paintings of other great Bolognese baroque painters such

as Annibale Carracci, Simone Cantarini and Carlo Cignani. She was well-educated, liked music and was familiar with the Bible, lives of the Saints and classical mythology, all of which provided subject matter for her paintings.

By 1654, when she was only 16, she took over the running of her father's workshop, as Giovanni Andrea had become incapacitated by Gout. I am not sure why Gout was so prevalent in previous centuries and caused so much trouble. Joseph Banks in the late 18th Century, for example, would take to a wheelchair for several months at a time. Enough on Gout!

From this moment on, Elisabetta, the eldest of four children became the family's main breadwinner by a combination of income from her portraits and other commissions and tuition

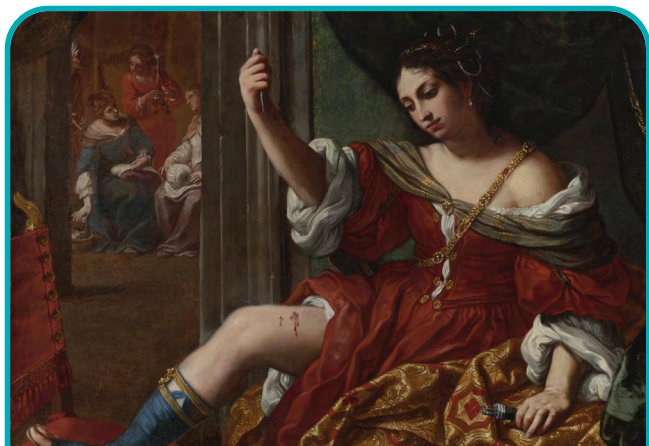
fees. She had more than a dozen pupils and set up the first lay, as opposed to convent, school for women artists. She was also a prolific painter, as well as celebrated teacher. She produced over 200 paintings, 13 altarpieces, 15 etchings and hundreds of drawings. In fact, she was so prolific that many people accused her of using pupils to paint the pictures, which was, after all, standard studio practice. However, Elisabetta tended to sign her pictures and in order to rebuke the accusations that she did not paint them herself, invited her accusers on May 13th 1664 to her studio to watch her paint a portrait in a single sitting!

She became a celebrity and anyone of status visiting Bologna would ask to be invited to her studio to watch her at work. Her clientele was made up of Kings, Princes, Dukes, Cardinals, rich merchants and the church, not only



Elisabetta Sirani - Madonna and Child

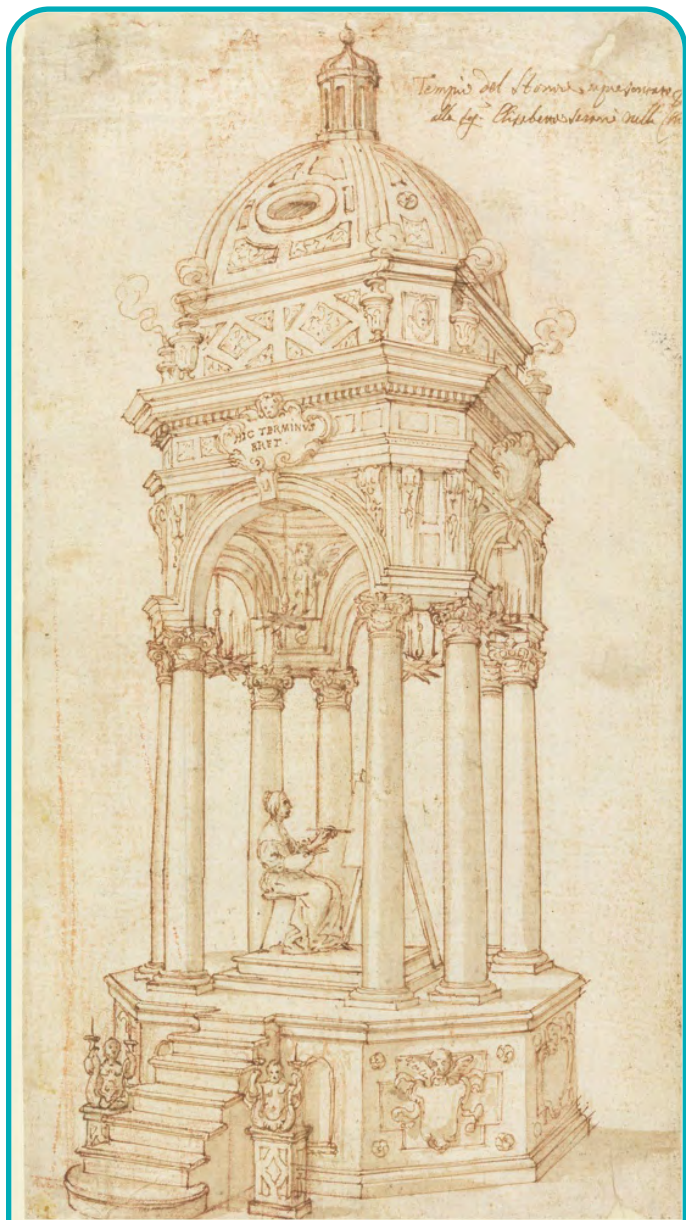
from Bologna but across Europe. All of this is surprising, as she was dead by the age of 27. The cause of her death is the subject of mystery and speculation. Some say she was poisoned by a jealous maid, others that she developed ulcers because of her excessive workload.



Elisabetta Sirani - Portia wounding her thigh

In any event, the city of Bologna went into mourning at her death and she was given a most elaborate funeral. A massive catafalque was created with a life size sculpture of Elisabetta inside it. There was music composed in her honour by the most famous musicians in Bologna and orations and poems written in honour of the "Lamented Paintbrush". She was buried in the Basilica of San Domenico in Bologna, in the same tomb as Guido Reni, who had been her father's tutor.

A word on the Catafalque (temple of honour) What we are looking at is a design for the catafalque by Matteo Borboni (c.1610-1667) who oversaw the decorations for her funeral. The finished monument was made of wood painted to look like marble and the life-size statue of Elisabetta at her easel was made of wax. This gives you some idea of the scale of the temple and the high regard in which Elisabetta "Gem of Italy" was held.



A drawing of Elisabetta's Catafalque by Matteo Borboni (1610-1667)



Elisabetta Sirani Timoclea killing the Captain of Alexander the Great

If you are lucky enough to own one of her paintings, make sure it is properly insured. An average Madonna and Child is worth between £50,000 and £80,000. The top price at auction is \$505,000 for "Portia wounding her thigh", sold at Sotheby's New York in 2008.