

Old Women and Art in the Early Modern Italian Domestic Interior,
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During the last decade, the humanities has experienced a welcome burgeoning critical interest in age. The art historian Erin J. Campbell contributes to this newly thriving current of studies in an innovative way with *Old Women and Art in the Early Modern Italian Domestic Interior*, a book that explores the significance of portraits of older women made for the specific viewing context of domestic interiors in Bologna in the second half of the sixteenth century. Visual representations of older women are largely glossed over in the existing art historical records of most human cultures. Campbell commences her highly specialized book by drawing attention to this broader scholarly error, candidly delivering the essential observation that unless all aspects of women's representation are examined in the history of art, "we risk making the study of women synonymous with the study of young, beautiful women" (2).

In the highly coherent introduction to *Old Women and Art*, Campbell lays out her central hypothesis: that early-modern Italian families used objects and spaces in new and increasingly sophisticated ways, and that, in the period and place her research centers on, portraits of older women created to be viewed in domestic interiors must be understood as "objects operating as finely calibrated social connectors and mediators" (3). From the outset, Campbell emphasizes that, instead of asking *who* is represented in an image, the book focuses on *how* the image represents and shapes the culture it was born from. In short, the portraits of older women studied throughout the book are to be understood "not so much as works of art, but as cultural performances" (4). The author recognizes the "paucity of empirical evidence" for these portraits as providing "an opportunity to engage with the images in a way that moves beyond biography or patronage to ask about the wider cultural meaning of the activity of picturing old women within the densely symbolic and affective social

environment of the home” (5). *Old Women and Art* demonstrates that, contrary to the depressingly timeless image of women disappearing into old age, the influence of these portraits extended well beyond the confines of domestic interiors to the larger civic community of sixteenth-century Bologna.

The book features five chapters. The first is dedicated to the thorough reconstruction of the “domestic meshwork” of the Bolognese home, done in order to emphasize the growing significance of the home in the early-modern Italian mindset and to accurately situate the portraits in their original habitat (17). The next two chapters, “Prophets and Saints” and “Matriarchs”, attend to the potential moral and spiritual functions of domestic portraits of older women. Here, Campbell introduces examples of the conduct literature of the period, employing these primary sources to demonstrate the trend of sixteenth-century Italian authors advising older women to set aside concerns about materiality and the physical world in order to fully devote themselves to God. Campbell also draws attention to how this conduct literature emphasized the important role that older women played in modeling familial and civic virtue. Portraits of older women by artists such as Giovanni Battista Moroni, Leandro Bassano, and Lavinia Fontana are subsequently persuasively shown to have operated in the home as “prescriptive images, pedagogical aids, and mediating objects to smooth the entry of women into old age” (50).

Importantly, here Campbell acknowledges that while these portraits do show “the symbolic power of old women as moral exemplars,” the respect afforded to these women was contingent upon their compliance with “a rigid code of conduct based on chastity, codes of dress, abstinence, and fasting” (83). These expectations for behavior are expanded upon in the fourth chapter, “Old Women in Frames”, where Campbell draws attention to the absence of idealization and embellishment in her chosen portraits. By closely examining the meanings that early-modern Italian culture attached to clothing, accessories, skin, and cosmetics, Campbell constructs a highly convincing argument for reading both the sitters’ lack of adornments and the painstakingly realistic depiction of their older skin as being featured as compelling signifiers of both individual and wider familial piety. A particularly interesting section of this

chapter features in-depth consideration of the significance of the clothing worn by widows in these portraits. Somberblack clothing was understood to convey older widows' "inner melancholy," while for young widows the dark clothing was expected to bring about the essential outcome of "extinguish[ing their] libido" (100).

The final chapter of the book, "Old Age, Women, and the Signs of Suffering", dedicates time to considering the question of why "visualizations of old women that displayed the physical signs of mortification" would "be particularly efficacious for family audiences" (143). The answer, Campbell argues, is the established "role played by Christian pain narratives" in early-modern Italy (144). The writings of Gabriele Paleotti, then the archbishop of Bologna, reveal a contemporary religious understanding of the naturally occurring pains of the aging body as being strongly linked to necessary penitence. In short, the older body suffered in order to achieve salvation. As female embodiment was irrevocably linked to sin and materiality to a greater extent than male embodiment, depictions of the older female body served as the most effective symbol to encourage both familial and civic piety. Campbell concludes that these domestic portraits can, therefore, be understood as "sacred pain performances" (143).

Old Women and Art in the Early Modern Italian Domestic Interior fulfills its opening promise to deliver a deeply contextual analysis of portraits of older women displayed in the domestic interiors of late Renaissance-era Bologna. Although the topic of the book is highly specialized, any reader desiring to formulate a socio-cultural study of age in any other human culture will find *Old Women and Art* an exemplary text that repays close attention. Campbell's methodological approach is exceptionally thorough, with the author dedicating time to careful reconstruction, deep archival documentation, and sensitivity to the lived experience of sixteenth-century Bologna. This approach is one that rewards, and one that can be adapted and productively applied to other cultures' interactions with old age.