

Portrait of the artist's sisters playing chess critical thinking sample

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Muzeum Narodowe, Poznan, Poland

The painting depicts three young women (girls) gathered around a chessboard with an older appearing woman looking on. The two girls in the utmost foreground appear to be playing each other in the chess game. The girl on the left, the tallest one, is staring straight at the viewer and smiling. The girl on the right, middle height, is looking at the girl on the left and has her hand raised, perhaps conceding the game or questioning a move. The way her mouth is represented suggests that she is speaking. The question of why the girl on the right has her hand raised is enhanced in the viewer's mind by the depiction of smallest girl in the middle ground with a bemused smile focused on the girl with her hand raised. The woman on the far right is looking in on the game with an impartial smile. She would appear to be a maid or nanny given her white attire which contrasts with the rather ornate, baroque garb of the girls. The background image is a landscape with water, hills and what appear to be structures. This background image is framed by foliage and the tall woman in white.

The symbolism of the painting suggests young women of both aristocratic bearing and leisure in late sixteenth century Italy. "The three Anguissola women are members of a natural nobility capable of entertaining themselves, their status emphasized by the rich surface detail on their brocaded clothes and the fine Turkish carpet set over their table" ("Sisters"). Further, they are playing chess which "was seen as game of 'brains, skill and memory'. This gentility made it socially acceptable for

educated women, unlike some other pastimes Chess and backgammon were popular among the upper classes” (“ Sisters”).

“ Portrait of the Artist’s Sisters Playing Chess” by Sofonisba Anguissola is a painting – oil on canvas.

In terms of form, it is interesting that Anguissola decided to entitle her painting “ Portrait,” which traditionally, and in the sixteenth century, would suggest something posed and formal, and perhaps, rigid. One can observe that this painting has a rather formal structure. The two taller figures on the right give the painting balance and framing. The lines created by the table are converging, thereby creating the depth of field that manifests in the middle ground positioning of the shortest girl and the maid, as well as the distant landscape. Mass and volume are also critical in this painting for establishing depth of field. Everything in the foreground appears larger. The distant landscape is rendered “ distant” by the small representation of what are really large landscape components.

The mass and volume given to the girl on the left suggest her place of dominance in the painting as well as the family. Her direct gaze at the viewer heightens this effect. The clothing colors of the girls are somewhat muted, but nonetheless, lavish, especially in contrast to the white clad woman on the right. The girls’ hands and faces are bright against the mostly dark background – perhaps enhancing the “ portrait” title of this painting. The human figures are proportional and balanced. They look like real people which makes this painting typical of the Renaissance period.

The Renaissance constituted a revolution in the art world. Beyond dimensionality and depth of field, Renaissance painters were students of human anatomy, and therefore, painted people as they look in real life. In conjunction with this feature of The Renaissance, naturalism is employed in addition to realism. Despite the formal structure of this painting, the girls appear quite natural – like any rich girls playing a game in the sixteenth century. Indeed, Anguissola “ captured the spirit of the age:” “ A boon to historians, the depictions Sofonsiba painted of home life to hang in their Cremona palazzo preserve minute autobiographical details of furnishings, hairstyles, dress, art objects, and activities. Social scientists study her domestic pictures to learn the family's economic status as well as the nature of the Anguissolas' private behavior, gender expectations, and relations among her parents and siblings’Chess’ (1555) introduced naturalism to the traditionally stiff, sometimes pompous home scenarios produced by her contemporaries” (Encyclopedia).

One of the most significant inclusions in this painting is the depiction of smiles on the girls’ faces. This is a feature not seen before The Renaissance in portraiture, and actually, not seen again for a long period afterward. The Mona Lisa may portray the most famous Renaissance smile, but Anguissola employed the smile in many of her works. “ In The Chess GameAnguissola introduced a new element into portraits: laughter. Smiles were rare in portraits then, but Anguissola was always experimenting with a warm and lively style. Even in court, where portraits had to be serious, she worked in

traces of grins and quirky personalities. Not for another one hundred years did other portrait painters show people in happy moods” (Krull).

Of course, it must be mentioned, too, that Anguissola was a woman artist of some repute in a time period when painting was considered “ a man’s job.” As a woman she could not carry out the anatomical studies as DaVinci or Michelangelo (one of her mentors) did, and she could not paint nudes (Fulmer). Through her painting style (even genre) what Anguissola accomplished, in this painting, and her body of work, is a representation of subjects in a natural, realistic way. This makes her paintings, not only significant to the art world, but to historians and anthropologists as well.

Works Cited

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