Class 2 : Behind the Veil

Introduction

1. Class title 1 (Nelli: *Madonna*)
2. Kassia: *Hymn*
3. Kassia (against background of San Vitale in Ravenna)

That was to lay down a kind of marker, as it were. The music was by the earliest female composer who signed her work, **Kassia** (810–65), a Byzantine Greek credited with several dozen compositions, all for the Orthodox Church. She is also recorded as writing poems and epigrams, and also of being a great beauty. Apparently she was a top candidate in the selection of a bride for **Emperor Theophilos**, but she may have been too smart for him, since he married someone else and she went back to the convent!

3z. Convent cloister

As did everybody else in this class. Why a whole class on convents, though? We might tend to think of nuns taking up hobbies to fill up their time, which puts composition and painting on a par with needlework or knitting. But in fact many women took the veil precisely because it gave them the *opportunity* to paint or compose: workshops and materials, other women to perform, and the assurance of food and lodging for life.

4a. Timeline: composers

Kassia is the first in my survey of art produced by religious women over a span of twelve centuries, displayed here on a timeline. Let me tell you what to expect. First, here are the three other musicians we shall hear: **Raffaella Aleotti**, **Sulpitia Cesis**, and **Isabella Leonarda**. I imagine you will not have heard of any of them—but I hope that, by the end of class, you will agree that the grace and luminosity of their music make them eminently worth hearing, regardless of gender. Sorry, by the way, that the pictures are so generic; nuns did not usually sit for portraits, so most of these are imaginary.

4b. Timeline: writers

Here I have added two writers: **Saint Teresa of Avila** and **Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz**. They are striking for the intensity of their vision, bordering closely on physical passion.

4c. Timeline: painters

Now three painters: **Maria Ormani**, **Plautilla Nelli**, and in our own lifetimes, **Sister Corita Kent**. All are good, right up there with most of the male painters of their time, but I would not claim an exceptional status as I would for some of the others. But this is important. Throughout this course in general, I'm going to try to avoid comparing the work of the women in any field to their male contemporaries; it is

not a competition; the important thing is to get their work out there. Few of the artists I show may break new ground—which is a male concept anyway. But all have character; they are original simply because they are themselves. Enjoy each artist, writer, or composer for who she is, and recognize her special qualities on their own terms.

4d. Timeline: Hildegard

I have one more figure to add, the remarkable **Hildegard von Bingen**, who excelled in *all* the categories I mentioned. She is the subject of my first standalone section.

A. Abbess of Every Art

5. Section title A (Hildegard statue)

The first of my truly featured artists today, **Hildegard von Bingen** (1098–1179) also comes way at the beginning, though not so far back as Kassia. Let's hear her first through her music. This is a clip from a film I'll be showing more of in a moment; Hildegard is bidding farewell to one of her dying sisters. Listen to the music, though; how might you describe it?

6. Hildegard: *Lament* (from V*ision*)
7. Margarethe von Trotta: *Vision* (2009), still

How about that music? It is a kind of Gregorian chant, but unusually expressive and wide in range. The notes are not merely a way to keep the singers in line with the text, but to reveal the emotion behind it.

That was a film by **Margarethe von Trotta** (b.1942) called *Vision*, about the life of the polymath **Hildegard von Bingen**, Abbess of the abbey of **Rupertsberg**, and often referred to in her lifetime as "The Sybil of the Rhine." It is a serious film, and I'll be showing more of it in a moment, but its trailer makes it seem a lot more sensational than it really is. So, as a break from musical examples that might otherwise develop too great an odor of sancitity, let me play it now. It emphasizes the opposition she received from the male hierarchy; it is something we shall see repeated twice more.

8. Margarethe von Trotta: V*ision, trailer* — shorten if needed
9. Hildegard: *Self-Portraits*

Hildegard was intensely learned, and unafraid to challenge male scholars on their own terms. She was a composer, as you heard; she was also a poet and a painter—these are effectively self-portraits. On the larger one, you see the flames of divine inspiration—more like compunction—descending on her head. And this does not seem to have been a mere metaphor. Modern scholars have concluded that she was subject to excruciating migraines. Certainly, in the left-hand picture she seems to be gazing straight into the flames. She wrote her visions down in Latin in a number of literary works, and either she or scribes working closely under her direction illustrated them. Here are a few of these images.

10. Some Hildegard paintings

You will see some of these again as I play one of her shorter antiphons (hymns), "O frondens virga" (O budding stem). Although she wrote principally for the sisters in her own convent, I am taking the sound track from a recording by the all-male group **Chanticleer**, largely because the sound of the *men's* voices going up towards heaven is more indicative of the extraordinary vocal range she demanded.

11. Hildegard von Bingen, "O frondens virga"
12. *Ordo Virtutum* title

My own acquaintance with Hildegard comes from the fact that she wrote an opera of a kind: *Ordo Virtutum,* or the Circle of Virtue. OK, it is not opera as we now understand it, but the first morality play by more than a century, sung throughout (with the exception of the Devil), and with action and characters. The plot is basically that a Soul (***Anima***) comes to seek admission in the company of the Virtues, but she is tempted away by the earthly delights promised by the **Devil**. There then follows a roll-call of the **Virtues** (21 as I remember) in which they arm themselves to fight off the Devil when he appears again. Sure enough, Anima reappears, penitent, and when the Devil tries to reclaim her, the Virtues bind him and cast him out. I will play these two scenes in two different production. The one with the Devil's defeat will come from the **Margarethe von Trotta film**; I like it because of its simplicity, and the fact that she sets it as I did my own two productions, as something improvised by the nuns in their abbey. The first excerpt, though, comes from an Australian group called **The Song Co**. Rather than the stone walls of a convent, they conceive of the Virtues as being in some golden heaven, and the visual values are as far from that austerity as possible. But it is still a wonderful production. After I have shown them both, let's compare them.

13. Hildegard: *Ordo Virtutum*, Devil 1 (The Song Co.)
14. Hildegard: *Ordo Virtutum*, Devil 2 (from Vision film)
15. — stills from both the above

Let's talk about the piece itself, and what you thought of the two productions.

B. The Studio Cell

16. Section title B (Ormani MS) — omit Ormani if needed

Although celebration of the Offices, with or without singing, was the essential component of monastic life, most nuns also engaged in some form of work. What this was depended very much upon the order, the traditions of that particular convent, and the talents of the nuns in it. And some convents developed specialties, such as music, manuscript illumination, or even painting, so that young women with that particular talent might choose to go there, much as one might choose a college—though these were colleges from which you never graduated. The convent of **San Gaggio** in Florence, for example, must have specialized in manuscript illumination, as this page from a Breviary of 1453 attests. But look more closely; there is something about it that is highly unusual.

17. Beviary page, zooming to Ormani self-portrait

This manuscript is signed with a self-portrait of the scribe, hands folded in devotion, but nonetheless looking out frankly at the reader. Dated 1453, it is the first self-portrait of any female artist of the Renaissance that we have. And she signs it: MARIA, HANDMAID OF GOD, DAUGHTER OF ORMAN, AND THE WRITER OF THE BOOK. We know a bit about her family background. Her name was **Maria Ormani degli Albizzi** (1428–70); the death date is conjectural. Like many women who went into convents, including Hildegard, she was the well-educated younger daughter of a wealthy family. Her father was a nobleman, but of the opposite party to the Medici, so he had to flee Florence when they returned. Maria did not go into exile with him, but took the veil instead. But that's pretty much it; we have a couple of other manuscripts that she copied, but no other works of art. That face looking out at us from the foot of the page remains only a tantalizing glimpse. Most of the women artists of this period—and there must have been hundreds, if not thousands—have similarly disappeared from history.

18. Plautilla Nelli: *Self Portrait*
19. Plautilla Nelli: transformation to *Saint Catherine*

But there is one exception: **Plautilla Nelli** (1534–88), living a little more than a century after Maria Ormani. Like Maria Ormani, she also left us a small self-portrait, but unlike Maria she also produced many larger works, such as this one of Saint Catherine, the patron saint of her order. Her contemporary, the art historian **Giorgio Vasari**, wrote: "*and in the houses of gentlemen throughout Florence, there are so many pictures, that it would be tedious to attempt to speak of them all*." Not only did Nelli have patrons who were willing to commission and pay for works for themselves and as gifts for churches, she maintained a studio of around half-a-dozen assistants, much as the great male masters were doing. She painted both large-scale subjects with many characters and more intimate devotional images.

20. Plautilla Nelli: *Pentecost* and *Head of a Woman* (drawing)
21. Jane Fortune

The revival of interest in Plautilla Nelli, and the availability of works like these to be interested in, is largely due to the work of the woman shown here, the late American philanthropist **Jane Fortune** (1942–2018), one of the many guardian angels who will spread their wings during this course. As a part-time resident in Florence, she became interested in the work of women in the arts, and started raising funds to promote them. Her foundation, now called **Advancing Women Artists**, started by restoring Nelli's *Lamentation*, which I'll show you in a moment, and has recently completed a four-year restoration of her huge *Last Supper*, which I'll also show. But first let's watch part of a video about this work; please excuse the horribly intrusive music!

22. Plautilla Nelli restorations, video documentary — shorten if needed
23. Plautilla Nelli: *Lamentation* (1550, Museo di San Marco, before and after restoration)

Let's look at some of that in more detail. The restoration of the *Lamentation* that was mentioned in the video was mainly a matter of cleaning off the grime of centuries and returning to the original colors. In some ways, the bright palette and the lovely landscape in the background seem more like painting of the previous century, the *quattrocento* or Early Renaissance rather than the High Renaissance or

cinquecento. This is not surprising; these were the works that Nelli would mostly have seen around her. The composition is fairly standard for the time, and the bulky robes of the male figures are highly reminiscent of the older artist **Fra Bartolommeo** (1472–1517), another religious, and a member of Raphael's circle.

24. Drawings by Fra Bartolommeo and Plautilla Nelli

This is the result of a surprising bit of good luck that was briefly mentioned in the video. Fra Bartolommeo bequeathed his drawings (200 or more) to one of his pupils, who was also a monk. This pupil had heard of Suor Plautilla, and directed that the drawings should go on his death to "the nun at Saint Catherine's who paints." So Plautilla Nelli inherited this priceless stash, virtually an instruction manual in painting right there; it may have been a reason why she attempted work on such as large scale. And she was not a bad draftsman herself. The video also pointed out that the nude figure of Christ might have been copied from a Bartolommeo drawing. This is important, for no female artist, and certainly no nun, would have had access to nude male models. And study from the nude remains a central part of the training of artists to this day.

25. Plautilla Nelli: *Lamentation* (repeat, with detail of landscape)
26. Plautilla Nelli: *Lamentation* (detail of female figures)

I admit that I have been pointing out the traditional elements of the picture, and the influence of others. But this is not a value judgement; I am merely sketching a pedigree. So I'd like you to look at this picture for what it is. What do you like about it? What aspects tell you anything about the personality of the painter? [For me, I like to think the freshness of landcape is entirely her own. And there *is* that particular empathy with the female figures.]

27. Plautilla Nelli: *The Last Supper*, before and after restoration

The restoration of Nelli's monumental *Last Supper* (c.1568), which was completed in 2019, was a much more demanding task than the *Lamentation*, as you will see from this before-and-after comparison. But it is important, for the *Last Supper* is Plautilla's only signed work and, at 23 feet wide, by far her largest. I said that this was not a competition, and I imagine she merely wanted to serve God, but how could she not have been aware of **Leonardo** and others in the back of her mind? I have prepared a video scanning the picture from left to right. And to make up for the dreadful music earlier, I have supplied something that, though not on topic, is at least of the time and written by another nun. More on that in a moment.

28. Plautilla Nelli: *The Last Supper*, with Raffaella Aleotti: *Congratulamini mihi*

C. Angel Voices

30. Section title C (Flinck: Annunciation to the Shepherds)

The music I put with the *Last Supper* was "Congratulamini mihi" (Rejoice with me) by **Raffaella Aleotti** (1570–1646). Trained as a musician in her youth, she entered the convent of San Vito, Ferrara at the age of 20, and within a few years she became director of an universally admired ensemble consisting of 23 singers and what was for the time a pretty full orchestra. About the same time, in 1593, she published in Venice a collection of motets for up to nine voices and instruments. I had a hard time choosing which composer to feature here, because there was at least one other Italian convent composer working around the same time, **Sulpitia Cesis**, whose music is equally beautiful. I'll play one work by each.

31. Plautilla Nelli (attrib): *Annunciation*, with text of *Ego flos campi*

This Raffaella Aleotti piece is *Ego flos campi*, part of the *Song of Songs*. Although a love song in its original Biblical context, Christians have taken to associating the image of the lily with the purity of the Virgin Mary. So it is not inappropriate to pair this with a detail from an *Annunciation* from the Uffizi, previously unidentified but now attributed to **Plautilla Nelli**. This is a live performance by a London group called the *Marian Consort*. Although it includes men, Aleotti would probably have used women with low voices.

32. Raffaella Aleotti: *Ego flos campi*
33. After Jacopo Bassano: *The Annunication to the Shepherds*

Now to another *Annunication,* this time the angel appearing to the shepherds. This is the work of my second composer, **Sulpitia Cesis** (1575–1625), who published a book of motets in 1619. But very little is known about her; even these dates are conjectural. I have translated the first four lines; after that, the setting becomes too complex. The picture is Dutch, actually, by **Govaert Flinck** (1615–60), a pupil of Rembrandt's. It just was easier to adapt than contemporary Italian ones. [This is a problem I have had with this whole class: the actual creators are female, but I often have to use the work of men in order to present them.]

34. Sulpitia Cesis: *Angelus ad pastores*
35. Class title 2: Their Stories Restored

D. Encounters with Divinity

36. Section title D (Bernini: *The Ecstasy of St Teresa*; 1652, SM della Vittoria, Rome)

If you are looking for feeling, you can't get much more intense than this. It is clearly a woman in the throes of passion, and I would have said sexual passion. But whose intensity is it: the sculptor, **Gianlorenzo Bernini** (1598–1680), or the subject, **Saint Teresa of Avila** (1515–82)? Is it simply another case of a male artist exploiting a woman—sexualizing her? Or is it a faithful—albeit spectacular—depiction of something Teresa had set down in words a century earlier? If so, then *both* are extraordinary, the sculptor *and* the writer. Teresa herself was not a visual artist, but she was a writer and a poet, and her journals offer a very frank account of her spiritual experiences, including this description of an ecstatic encounter with an angel of God. Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1652) merely gives this description a physical form.

37. — the same, with Teresa's text
37z — the same, with Hildegard flame pictures

I am struck by how similar this is to Hildegard's depictions of her own visions. In one case, it is flames entering the head, in the other, a spear penetrating the body. A more sexual image, certainly. But this was a period in which religious emotions are expressed in intense metaphor. We'll hear in a moment another nun putting a spiritual struggle in militaristic terms; **John Donne** ends his sonnet "Batter my heart" with the words "*for I, / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me*;" and we shall see it again with the Mexican nun **Sor Juana Inés**.

38. Statue of Saint Teresa at Avila

There is another sculpture of Saint Teresa in her home town of Avila, more modern and a lot more restrained; I don't know the sculptor. I like it because, while her left hand is totally open to divine inspiration, her right holds a pen; it establishes her in terms of her main activity, as a writer. She published an autobiography and two books about the spiritual life, which together make a guidebook along the journey towards spiritual perfection, and all are based upon very personal experiences such as the one she described. But she was no mere theorist. Dissatisfied with the laxity of the Carmelite Order in her day, she founded new branches of the order returning to basic monastic principles, and convinced two male colleagues to do the same. It is probably this, rather than her mystical experiences, that led to her unusually rapid canonization only 40 years after her death.

39. Prayer of Saint Teresa
40. "Shepherd, shepherd, hark that calling"

It was a fairly minor part of her output, but she was also a poet. The famous prayer shown here was scribbled in a prayer-book during a service; this is a facsimile. And here is one of her lyrical poems, in a translation by **Arthur Symons**, another take on the *Annunciation to the Shepherds.* No need to read it now; I'll give it to you line by line as we listen to this 1947 musical setting by the English composer **Lennox Berkeley** (1903–89) for the contralto **Kathleen Ferrier**. If the Bernini schulpture was in

Technicolor, this is in pastels—but it has a striking radiance nonetheless. The "Bras" she refers to is presumably her sheepdog.

41. Lennox Berkeley: "Shepherd, shepherd, hark that calling" (1947)

E. To Arms, Warlike Spirits!

42. Section title E (John Duncan: *Saint Joan and her Scottish Guard*, Edinburgh)

This picture is quite anachronistic: its painter is too late, **John Duncan**, a late 19th-century Scottish symbolist; its subject is too early, **Joan of Arc**, who lived in the middle ages. But at least it shows a woman taking up arms—and that is the subject of the first excerpt from my next featured composer, **Isabella Leonarda** (1620–1704). She too was a nun, but this is an entirely different world from canticles in a cloister. The words are on the screen; tell me what you think this is about.

43. Isabella Leonarda: *Ad arma, o spiritus rebelles*

45. Isabella Leonarda, portrait with text of the above

What did you think? At first hearing, I thought it might almost be a battle-song of militant feminism. The words are probably by Leonarda also. But in fact, it seems to be a song for the Virgin Mary conquering the powers of Hell. She portrays herself as *non*-warlike; it is the forces of the Devil whom she is challenging to take up arms. Nonetheless, the song strikes me as intensely dramatic; this is a composer who, in another context, might well have been writing opera. And in fact, Leonarda's 200-plus works include some instrumental sonatas that are entirely secular. Here are the first two movements of her *Sonata Duodecima* for violin and continuo, played by **Rachel Podger** and **Daniele Caminiti**. Listen especially to the almost unmetered slow opening, and share how it speaks to you.

46. Isabella Leonarda: *Sonata Duodecima*
47. — still from the above

What did you feel? I usually ask "What did you think?" but in this case *feel* seems the more appropriate word. It seems to me that the instruments share an intense but deep feeling, and are searching for ways to bring it to the surface. If there is one thread connecting the women in this second hour, I would say it is the intensity of their feeling.

F. With Blood, With Ink

48. Section title F (Young Juana)

Here is a love poem, a sonnet, written by the young Mexican woman to the left, **Inés de Asbaje y Ramírez de Santillana**; we may call her **Inés**. Inés was a prodigy, learning Latin by age 3, handling the family accounts at age 5, writing poetry by age 8, then learning Greek and Nauhatl, and teaching by age 13. She was sent to the Viceregal court in Mexico City, where she was taken under the wing of two successive Vicereines; they gave her exposure, and her fame spread. Clearly along the way, she also fell in love; the sonnet captures perfectly the mixture of delight and terror we have surely all felt.

49. Miguel Cabrera: *Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz*

But in 1667, at the age of 19, she entered a convent, taking the name by which history knows her: **Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz** (1648–95). And it was as a nun, not a young girl at court, that she published this and many other love poems. So the question arises: who is its subject? There are three possibilities: some young man she met in her pre-convent days; her patroness, the Vicereine **Maria Luisa, Countess of Paredes**; or God. We can dismiss the first, I think; Inés rejected several marriage proposals and entered the convent to give herself freedom from such ties. The second is more plausible; Maria Luisa continued to visit her in the convent, and a lot of her letters have a similar erotic tinge. But this was an age, as I said before, where poets often used erotic language to express their debt to their patrons; think of Shakespeare in his earlier Sonnets. My money, though, is on God. The language and intensity are strikingly similar to **Teresa of Avila** describing her encounter with the Angel.

50. Juana Inés: from the *First Villancio*

If we look at one of her poems that is specifically about God, a section of the *First Villancio* (1689), we do not see any erotic tinge, but there is still that visionary intensity. It is really quite a feat to cast the Nativity and Passion of Christ in terms of the four primal elements, Fire, Air, Water, and Earth. One can see why Juana Inés was called “The Tenth Muse” and “The Phoenix of America.” With the help of the Vicereine Maria Luisa, Juana Inés continued publishing poetry and drama, making the convent in effect the intellectual salon of the capital. Then the Viceroy was recalled to Spain, and without a patroness Sor Juana was at the mercy of the Archbishop, who wanted to stamp out such independence, especially in a woman. So he made her burn her library and sign an oath in her own blood to renounce writing. She died of the plague a year later.

51. *With Blood, With Ink*, still from the Fort Worth production

Two former students of mine, **Peter Krask** (b.1965) and **Daniel Crozier** (b.1965), wrote an opera on her story, *With Blood, With Ink*, which I have directed twice with Peabody singers. In 2015, it had its professional premiere at the Fort Worth Opera. Throughout the opera, Sor Juana is played by two singers: the Dying Juana and her younger self, until they finally merge. Unfortunately, I am having trouble with the video of that, so I am playing an excerpt in sound alone, scene 6, just over halfway

through. I chose the scene because of the visionary dream related by the older woman, which is virtually a direct translation of Juana's own work. At the same time, Young Juana is wrapping up what may be her last collection of poems and sending them to Maria Luisa to publish. The video shows the visionary poem on the main part of the screen—this is what I mainly want to show you; I am putting Young Juana's letter into the subtitles.

53. Crozier and Krask: *With Blood, With Ink*, scene 6 [3:38]

G. Rule of Engagement

54. Section title G (Sister Corita Kent)

My last artist from the convent is, I imagine, an icon from our various youths: **Corita Kent** (1918–86). Let's have the video, *An Introduction to Corita,* begin her story.

55. Introduction to Corita, clip 1
56. Sister Corita Kent: *The Woman at the Well* (serigraph, 1955)

I'll show one more clip from this video in a moment. On either side of it, let me put up a few of her serigraphs (screen prints), the earlier ones of which have speifically religious subjects, later branching out into moral, social, and political concerns. Starting with this one, *The Woman at the Well*, the lower-caste Samaritan woman that Jesus addresses in the *Gospel of Saint John*. She does not attempt to give the story; her interest seems to be in the humanity of this anonymous woman—any woman.

57. Sister Corita Kent: *Benediction* (serigraph, 1955) — skip some examples if needed
58. Sister Corita Kent: *Gloria* (serigraph, 1960)

Even early on, she starts using text in her work, sometimes as an almost abstract element, as in *Benediction,* sometimes more extensive quotations from the Bible, as here in *Gloria*, or some favorite poet such as **Walt Whitman** or **E. E. Cummings**. Many of her later works are on the edge between paintings and poster poems.

59. Sister Corita Kent: *Pentecost* (serigraph, 1955)
60. Plautilla Nelli: *Pentecost*
60z— both of the above

Here is a rather more abstract subject, **Pentecost**, the time 50 days after the Resurrection of Jesus when the Holy Spirit descends upon his followers in the form of little flames, a sign that God will remain with them even after Christ has departed. You may remember that I showed **Plautilla Nelli's** version of the subject, but did not comment at the time. I would now ask you to compare them. For me, the difference is that while Nelli's is static, Kent's is active; these are people on the march, and those vertical forms to the right, which might be the arms of a stylized menorah, are equally suggestive of utility poles in an American city street. Which is the cue for my second clip:

61. Introduction to Corita, clip 2
62. Sister Corita Kent: *Green Up* (serigraph, 1966)

As the video suggested, from 1964 or 1965, Sister Corita began to take on contemporary social subjects. Not all were overtly political; *Green Up,* for example, has an environmental theme, remarkably early for such a subject. But like **Juana Inés** in Mexico, Corita fell foul of the local Cardinal, who accused the **Sacred Heart College** of being too liberal, and eventually shut it down. His main wrath fell on Sister Corita, whose work he called blasphemous. [It is interesting that all three women to whom this happened—Hildegard, Juana Inés, and Corita—were all *writers*.] There was no question of signing a blood oath to recant; she left the order in 1968, and moved to the East Coast, continuing to work in a secular capacity as simple **Corita Kent**. Now she was free to address subjects such as the Vietnam War and the assassination of her heroes **John and Robert Kennedy** and **Martin Luther King**. But this engagement with the secular world did not make her any less religious; for her, the sacred and the secular were one and the same thing.

63. Corita Kent: *Only You and I* (1969)
64. Corita Kent: *It Can Be Said of Them* (1969)
65. Kent/Baez: *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?*
66. Class title 3 (Behind the Veil No Longer)