

Women in Art Timeline - Week 1 The Middle Ages



Image, **Blessed Caterina da Bologna**, Ms. Ludwig IX 13, fol. 185v, J. Paul Getty Museum.

Saint Catherine of Bologna (1413-1563)

Italian artist Caterina Vigri, better known as Saint Catherine of Bologna - the patron Saint of artists, was a devoted nun, teacher, and artist known for depictions of religious subjects and devotional paintings. Before her life in the religious sect, she had served as a lady in waiting, where she learned to read and write. Her lady was executed after a discovered affair; this event is credited with turning Catherine towards her religious pursuits.

It was during her time at the Convent of Corpus Christi, Ferrara in the 1430's that her artistry flourished. Her devotion to the infant Christ inspired her in both writing and drawing, where she painted his image on the convent walls, as well as in her breviary, a book containing the service for each day. She embellished her breviary with contour drawings of Christ and other Saints using red, blue, green, and yellow hues with the intent to enhance devotion for herself and

Saint Catherine of Bologna's Breviary depicting Saint Francis of Assisi

symbol represents holiness, but as with other religious art, the rays of the sun are missing, seeming to suggest a focus on the inward spiritual experience of Saint Francis over his holiness. The symbol of the sun has been used to depict knowledge of the divine and understanding, also suggesting divine spirituality.



Image, Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Catherine of Bologna's Breviary, fol. 443r. Corpus Domini, Bologna.

Saint Catherine likely created this piece of art to communicate messages about her own spiritual beliefs and values. As a Poor Clare nun depicting a Franciscian Saint, she would have known their calling towards living a life of poverty, humility and devotion to Christ. Her portrayal of him could mean that she felt a connection to his life and teachings. The painting itself seems to communicate that spirituality enlightens all, no matter their rank or place in society. Simply creating art in her breviary allowed her the ability to participate in expression of religious experiences or events, thus modifying the known role of women as a participant rather than an observer of spiritual life. In participating in an arena absent of a female point of view, she chose her message about devotion and inward spirituality in expressing her deeply held values. This work found in the breviary of Saint Catherine followed similar artists of the time with regard to artwork being religious in nature, however, like our readings this week, challenges women's roles in society, religion, and more as active participants not passive observers.

I selected this piece, because I was brought up catholic, and have always loved stained glass, and religious art. I find the importance of this piece to be that it changes the role of women in the church, and brings spirituality inward, and more accessible to the people, versus the separation caused by having a priest as God's messenger.

Works Cited

- Arthur, K. G. (2023, July 1). *The art of Sister Caterina Vigri, Saint Catherine of Bologna*. Art Herstory. [Art Herstory - Saint Catherine of Bologna](#)
- Giraldi, G. (n.d.). *Saint Catherine of Bologna (The J. Paul Getty Museum Collection)*. Getty. <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103S79>