A room-by-room inventory of the Palazzo Sacchetti in Rome, dating from 1639, reveals the presence of four large easel paintings in the sala (entry room) of the apartment of the family matriarch, generally accepted to be Cassandra Ricasoli-Ruccellai. The Sacchetti was a family with prominent Florentine roots, but during the second half of the sixteenth century, Giovanni Battista Sacchetti (1540–1620) resettled his clan in Rome, and it was the second youngest of his sons, Matteo (1593–1659), who married Cassandra in 1637. The four paintings, three by Pietro da Cortona, The Rape of the Sabines (fig. 1), The Sacrifice of Polyxena (fig. 2), and The Triumph of Bacchus (fig. 3), and a copy after Nicolas Poussin’s The Triumph of Flora (fig. 4), are widely acknowledged to have been commissioned or acquired by the eldest of Giovanni Battista’s sons, Marcello (1586–1629), an avid collector and key figure in the intellectual circle of Pope Urban VIII.

However, the 1639 inventory raises crucial and as yet unexplored issues of reception and ideological function with regard to these four works, as by this date, Marcello had died, and the paintings had gained not only a new location and a new audience but also a new function and an iconographic potency not necessarily envisioned by the original patron. The presence of the paintings “nella sala dell'appartamento della Signora” suggests a smaller, more private audience than the one that had been envisioned prior to the publication of the inventory in 1991. The majority of scholars, most prominently Donald Posner, assumed not only a more public audience for these paintings but also one that was largely male, and whose members would have been more likely to view the female subjects of the paintings as titillating and “aimed to thrill.”

Instead, the placement of the four works in the sala of Signora Sacchetti’s apartment guaranteed a predominantly
female audience, as contemporary accounts indicate that, for the most part, women in Baroque Rome were removed from public life. They were encouraged to spend a majority of their time confined to their homes, an environment in which the separation of men and women was rigidly maintained as well. Drawing on previous studies that employ the interpretive lens of reception theory wed with feminist concerns over how gender shapes the viewing experience, I will consider how a Baroque female spectator, differently from her male counterparts, might have understood these paintings, all of which depict subjects ideally suited for a female audience, providing models of exemplary womanhood, wifely duty, and maternal fecundity. The location and arrangement of these paintings in 1639 demands that they be examined within the larger history of didactic domestic imagery produced for and consumed by women during the early modern period.

In his early seventeenth-century treatise, Considerazioni sulla pittura, Giulio Mancini stressed the power of painting to shape and mold its viewers. He advised art patrons and collectors that when decorating their palazzi “discrimination should be used not only in placement, but also in what sort of person should be shown the paintings. Those who see them should be differentiated as to disposition and temperament, age, sex, usage, and the way of life one desires to maintain, augment, diminish, correct, or change for the opposite.” Mancini clearly was attuned to issues of reception, acknowledging the didactic power of art and the importance of selecting work that would best suit its primary viewer and achieve those instructional ends. Mancini’s ideas were very influential among his contemporaries, specifically patrons of the arts, and his ideas were well known in Rome due to his role as papal physician, a position that allowed him access to the various members of the intellectual and courtly circle surrounding Urban VIII, which included the Sacchetti brothers.

This strongly held belief in the capacity of art to influence its viewers is echoed by Renaissance marriage manuals, two of the most influential being Francesco Barbaro’s De Re Uxoria (1415) and Leon Battista Alberti’s Della Famiglia (ca. 1433–34). The majority of these widely circulated manuals positioned women as pliable, weak, and in need of constant moral guidance, and like Mancini’s treatise, many advocated the use of images to reinforce the ideal behavior a woman should aspire to in order to be considered a good wife and mother. Rudolph Bell’s 1999 encyclopedic investigation of these advice manuals confirmed the extent to which the texts prescribed a restrictive ideal of wifely behavior, with the virtues of silence, chastity, subservience, and sacrifice constantly stressed. A simple formula for a happy and harmonious marriage was repeated endlessly in manual after manual. The husband commanded and a model wife complied; she was advised to be an “obedient, speechless, reproductive extension of her husband.”

Given this fervent conviction that a woman’s behavior must be shaped and guided, coupled with faith in art’s influence over its viewers, it comes as no surprise that in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy, it became a common practice to decorate the apartments of patrician women with elaborately painted furniture and objects designed to morally edify their female audience. Two of the most common domestic objects gifted to brides and wives were cassoni (wedding chests) and deschi da parto (birth trays), and while both were practical, they also functioned didactically, visually reinforcing societal expectations of ideal behavior and attributes through their imagery.

Cassoni frequently featured narratives derived from classical antiquity, the Old Testament, and even contemporary writers like Boccaccio that centered on heroines considered worthy of emulation, their actions evoking the virtuous qualities to which a Renaissance woman should aspire. The imagery on deschi da parto was often more pointedly domestic in nature, specifically focusing on pregnancy and childbirth, so as to “encourage her to fulfill her societally prescribed maternal role.” Jacqueline Musacchio has discussed at length the early modern belief in sympathetic magic and how certain images and objects were believed to possess a mediating force, allowing a woman a certain level of control over pregnancy, encouraging conception, and protecting her from the risks of childbirth. As a result, fifteenth- and sixteenth-century birth trays are populated by pudgy, naked infant boys who serve not only as fertility symbols but who also visualize the fervent hope that the tray would “inspire” the woman who possessed it to give birth to a prized male heir.

Following their placement in the apartment of the family matriarch, the Sacchetti canvases became heirs to this long-standing tradition of domestic decoration designed to edify its female audience. Given the strength of the existing visual and literary traditions, it seems unlikely that the choice of artworks for Signora Sacchetti’s sala was incidental. As illustrated by Mancini and others, specific subjects were considered appropriate and desirable for the decoration of an apartment of a patrician wife in Baroque Rome. Thus further evaluation of these four themes—the
rape of the Sabine women, the sacrifice of Polyxena, and the triumphs of Bacchus and Flora—and the message(s) they conveyed to a seventeenth-century female audience, is warranted.

The rape of the Sabines was a popular subject for domestic decoration in early modern Italy, featured on numerous cassoni, due to its connections to the origins and rituals of marriage. In order to secure wives for his soldiers and consequently to ensure his city’s survival, Romulus, the legendary founder of Rome, invited the Sabines to participate in a celebration. On Romulus’s signal, the Roman men seized the Sabine women, the precise moment depicted by Cortona. Both Marcantonio Altieri and Baldassare Castiglione, two widely read writers of the sixteenth century who explicitly connected contemporary marriage ceremonies to the rape of the Sabines, praised the Sabine women as exemplars for their role in uniting, strengthening, and populating Rome.

In her investigation of fifteenth-century Italian images of the Sabines, Musacchio focused on the childbearing aspect of the myth more explicitly than previous scholars, emphasizing not only how the narrative highlights the importance of procreation in ensuring the continuation of family lineage but also the role childbirth plays in contributing to the greater civic good. Musacchio’s contention is that during the early modern period the legendary history served “to reinforce a woman’s own perception of her identity as wife and mother,” thus making Cortona’s Sabines ideally suited for placement in the apartment of Signora Sacchetti.

In contrast to the rape of the Sabines, the sacrifice of Polyxena was an infrequently represented narrative in early modern art. However, the details of Polyxena’s life and death were widely known in the seventeenth century through a variety of classical, medieval, and Renaissance sources. Following the Trojan War, Pyrrhus, the son of the Greek hero Achilles, sacrificed Polyxena, the daughter of the king and queen of Troy, Priam and Hecuba, in order to appease his father’s ghost and to allow the Greeks to sail home.

Ovid recounted the death of Polyxena in his Metamorphoses, highlighting her unwavering courage and chastity, and Polyxena is also one of the notable women featured in Boccaccio’s Concerning Famous Women, praised for her fortitude and “sublime spirit.” She is portrayed as an exemplary figure who bravely faced her cruel fate, a heroine ideally suited for domestic decoration. And yet, Posner (rightly) described Cortona’s heroine as “a pathetic, meek Polyxena who goes dutifully to the slaughter.” Indeed, with her pleading expression and exposed breast, Cortona’s heroine appears to be a passive and sexualized woman resigned to her fate, one who neither fights for her release nor protests her innocence, distancing her from the fearless heroine described by Ovid and Boccaccio. Thus, while at first glance Cortona’s Polyxena may not appear to be worthy of emulation, a closer look reveals that she exemplifies the courageous heroine type familiar to, and preferred by, a seventeenth-century Italian audience.

Polyxena’s compliance with this ideal female Baroque (stereo)type is illustrated by her close iconographic relationship to her fellow sisters in heroism as they were presented in seventeenth-century Italian art. For example, Posner noted...
that Polyxena’s upturned face and exposed breast, as well as her submissive and resigned demeanor, mirror a number of Guido Reni’s classical heroines, notably Lucretia and Cleopatra. Cortona’s depiction of Polyxena also conforms to the same female behavioral model advocated by countless marriage manuals. She possesses virtues that were nontreathening to the established social order, she is neither self-assertive nor independent but passively accepting of her fate. This type of vulnerable and obedient woman fit comfortably within the scope of appropriate female behavior as determined by seventeenth-century culture at large, and though not originally intended for Signora Sacchetti, Polyxena was a heroine ideally suited for female viewership.

Also germane to my discussion of Cortona’s painting and its reception by Signora Sacchetti is a romantic plot twist involving Polyxena and Achilles that was advanced in various versions of the legend, most notably in *The Trojan Women*, a tragedy by the Roman writer Seneca that was well-known in the seventeenth-century. Seneca was one of the first classical authors to propose that Achilles intended for Polyxena to become his wife, a narrative element that (partially) justified the heroine’s brutal sacrifice, as the impending marriage in the afterlife connected her surrender and death to wifely obedience. As Achilles’s dutiful bride, Polyxena’s actions parallel those of the Sabines, women who, while remaining loyal to their fathers and brothers, obey their husbands above all. The placement of the two paintings in Signora Sacchetti’s apartment illustrates not only their perceived capability to morally edify, but the pairing also offers the opportunity to consider just how closely these subjects were linked by contemporary ideas concerning appropriate behavior for patrician women.

Like the legends of the Sabines and Polyxena, the subjects of the two other paintings in the sala, the triumphs of Flora and Bacchus, had their origins in antiquity. Triumphs, originally staged as grand public processions honoring victorious Roman generals, were revived in Renaissance and Baroque Italy to celebrate rulers and heads of state. The theme of the triumph was also explored in art and literature, and it was considered appropriate for domestic decoration, as two of most common triumphs, those of love and chastity, glorified marriage and its virtues. Triumphs were common on cassoni, and appeared on deschi da parto as well.

In Cortona’s *The Triumph of Bacchus*, the god of wine appears as a nearly nude youth perched atop a triumphal cart, accompanied by his female devotees, the maenads, as well as a group of satyrs and the drunken Silenus. By depicting Bacchus as a child, Cortona downplayed any sexual or erotic overtones associated with the god, placing a more pointed visual emphasis on his gift of the grape, and by extension bountiful production, giving the painting a harvest-oriented focus.

Flora, the subject of the second Sacchetti triumph, is surrounded by putti, river gods, dancing women, and other mythological figures who have been “touched by her power.” As recounted by Ovid in his calendar-poem the *Fasti*, this power includes the ability to facilitate conception. Juno, queen of the gods, found herself pregnant with the god...
Mars after Flora touched a flower to her bosom. Additionally, Ovid described Flora’s pursuit by the west wind Zephyr and her simultaneous transformation upon capture from the nymph Chloris into both the goddess of springtime and his bride, thereby linking her to marriage as well as fertility and maternity.

Thus, both triumphs celebrate fecundity and abundance, not only through their central protagonists, but also through additional imagery that reinforces this focus. The female repoussoir figure in the right foreground of The Triumph of Bacchus bares her breasts, highlighting the source of her nurturing and maternal power. The similarly placed female river god in The Triumph of Flora reclines with an overturned urn wedged between her legs, an emphatic assertion of the locus of her generative power. Additionally, the cavorting putti in the Flora and the cherubic and playful baby satyrs who devour grapes and gambol in the wine vats of the Bacchus are similar to the frolicking baby boys found on deschi da parto.

This focus on fertility and bounty was not atypical for depictions of Bacchus and Flora in the early modern period, owing to their seasonal identities. Bacchus embodied the autumn harvest, and Flora the blossoms of spring. Serendipitously, the iconography also evokes the appropriate behavior and duties of a seventeenth-century wife, making
the images ideally suited for their “new” role as decoration for the apartment of the family matriarch, a woman whose main “job” was to procreate. Like the nymph Chloris, who blossomed into the goddess Flora through her amorous union with Zephyr, the Sacchetti family must have hoped that Cassandra (and her womb) would “blossom” upon her union with Matteo. The two were married in 1637, but the birth of their first child, Giovanni Battista, did not occur until two years later in 1639. The importance of the birth of a boy to carry on the family name cannot be overstated. Giovanni Francesco, the youngest Sacchetti brother and the designated secular head of the household after the death of Marcello in 1629, had himself died childless earlier in 1637. Upon Giovanni Francesco’s death, Matteo inherited his brother’s familial responsibilities, including an ever-increasing pressure to produce the next generation of Sacchetti heirs. The fate of the Sacchetti lineage rested squarely on Cassandra’s shoulders.

In focusing on the 1639 inventory of the Palazzo Sacchetti and its revelation concerning the placement of *The Rape of the Sabines*, *The Sacrifice of Polyxena*, *The Triumph of Bacchus*, and *The Triumph of Flora* in the *sala* of the Sacchetti family matriarch, I have proposed a new way to interpret these paintings, one that situates these heroines and triumphs within the larger history of didactic imagery and literature used in the service of family politics and gender ideology during the early modern period. Seventeenth-century society believed strongly that images had the power to shape and mold, and thus Cassandra Sacchetti was presented with subjects that I believe are linked by their perceived capability to morally edify, reinforce wifely obedience, and encourage fertility. Images were mirrors used by women to compare and adjust their behavior, and the placement of these paintings in Signora Sacchetti’s apartment converted them into visual advice manuals, ones that she would “read” every day in the hopes that they would help transform her into an exemplary wife and mother.

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For Alison, who, in a “Women in Art” course over twenty years ago (!), helped open my eyes to a way of practicing our discipline that was fiercely and unapologetically feminist, an approach that continues to inform both my scholarship and my teaching. During my four years at Carleton College, Alison helped me to realize that art history was to be my life’s work, as well as my enduring passion. She taught me what it means to be a great teacher and mentor, and I am grateful for her continued presence in my life and proud and honored to call her my colleague and friend.

*Katherine Poole-Jones is Assistant Professor of Art History at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Her scholarship focuses on Medici grand-ducal patronage, specifically Ferdinando I (r. 1587–1609) and his connection to the family’s chivalric brotherhood, the Order of Santo Stefano. Her current research interests include the artistic and cultural exchange between Italy and the Ottoman Empire during the early modern period, and more locally, public sculpture in St. Louis, and the city’s 1904 World’s Fair.*

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1. Pietro da Cortona, *The Rape of the Sabines*, ca. 1629–30, oil on canvas, 280.5 x 426 cm. Rome, Musei Capitolini, inv. no. PC 137 (artwork in the public domain)

Figure 2. Pietro da Cortona, *The Sacrifice of Polyxena*, ca. 1623–24, oil on canvas, 273 x 419 cm. Rome, Musei Capitolini, inv. no. PC 143 (artwork in the public domain)

Figure 3. Pietro da Cortona, *The Triumph of Bacchus*, ca. 1624–25, oil on canvas, 144 x 207 cm. Rome, Musei Capitolini, inv. no. PC 58 (artwork in the public domain)

Figure 4. Copy after Nicolas Poussin, *The Triumph of Flora*, ca. 1628, oil on canvas. 165 x 241 cm. Rome, Musei Capitolini, inv. no. PC 247 (artwork in the public domain)
BIBLIOGRAPHY


1 Jörg Martin Merz, Pietro da Cortona: Der Aufstieg zum führenden Maler im barocken Rom (Tübingen: Ernst Was-muth Verlag, 1991), 96. Although questions remain concerning the precise location of each of the four paintings within the sala, they were the sole monumental works of art in the room. For the complete 1639 inventory, which was first published by Merz, see 293–95.

2 For Sacchetti genealogy, see Merz, Pietro da Cortona, 78–79, and Irene Fosi, All' ombra dei Barberini: Fedeltà e servizio nella Roma barocca (Rome: Bulzoni, 1997), 242.

3 Marcello Sacchetti was Cortona's first prominent patron, as well as a supporter of Poussin during the French artist's early years in Rome. For Sacchetti patronage, see Francis Haskell, Patrons and Painters: A Study in the Relations Between Italian Art and Society in the Age of the Baroque (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), 38–41; and Merz, Pietro da Cortona, 80–103.

4 Ibid., 294.


7 My interest in issues of audience, reception, viewership, and the way that gender impacted each of these during the early modern period has been influenced by such scholars as Mary Garrard, Lilian Zirpolo, and Paola Tinagli (all cited later in this essay), but I owe the biggest debt to the dedicatee of this volume, Alison Kettering, whose "Ter Borch's Ladies in Satin," Art History 16 (1993): 95–124, first introduced me to the concept of a "gender-differentiated
response" to art.


9 Enggass and Brown, Italian and Spanish Art, 33.

10 Paola Tinagli, Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, Identity (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 21–26. See also Ian Maclean, The Renaissance Notion of Woman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Merry E. Wiesner, Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Mary Rogers and Paola Tinagli, Women in Italy, 1350–1650: Ideals and Realities (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), esp. 12–25. Although the validity of the ideas concerning women and the prescriptions for ideal behavior proposed by these manuals were certainly challenged in some circles by the seventeenth century, they were still widely accepted. Mary Garrard illustrates their persistence in Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), specifically 141–79.


12 Chapter One, “Women, Men and Society: Painted Marriage Furniture,” 21–46, in Tinagli, Women in Italian Renaissance Art, provides a succinct overview of cassoni, their sources, subjects, function, and ideological meaning. Tinagli relies on a number of prominent cassoni scholars, including Paul Schubring’s seminal study of 1915, as well as more contemporary writings by Ellen Callman and Brucia Witthoff. Additional key texts include: Cristelle L. Baskins, Cassone Painting, Humanism, and Gender in Early Modern Italy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Graham Hughes, Renaissance Cassoni: Masterpieces of Early Italian Art; Painted Marriage Chests 1400–1550 (London: Art Books International, 1997); and most recently, Andrea Bayer, ed., Art and Love in Renaissance Italy (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008).


14 Jacqueline Musacchio, The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999) is the essential source for deschi da parto and other objects related to the pregnancy and childbirth.

15 Tinagli, Women in Italian Renaissance Art, 30–31. See also Baskins, Cassone Painting, 103–27, on the use of the Sabine narrative in the service of contemporary family politics and gender ideology in the Renaissance. In fact, Merz, Pietro da Cortona, 96, suggests that Cortona’s Sabines was commissioned for the wedding of youngest Sacchetti son, Giovanni Francesco (1595–1637), to Beatrice Tassoni Estense in 1631.

16 Jacqueline Musacchio, “The Rape of the Sabine Women on Quattrocento Marriage-Panels,” in Marriage in Italy, 1300–1650, ed. Trevor Dean and K. J. P. Lowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 67–68; Plutarch’s Life of Romulus in his Lives and Livy’s The Rise of Rome were two classical sources frequently consulted when depicting the Sabines.


18 Ibid., 81–82.

19 Ibid., 82.


24 Ibid., 404–5.

25 Concerning the difficulties examples of female heroism posed during the early modern period, see Garrard, Chapter 2, “Historical Feminism and Female Iconography,” in *Artemisia Gentileschi*, esp. 147–49. Actively courageous and assertive heroines were, of course, depicted in Italian Baroque art, mostly notably by Artemisia Gentileschi and Elisabetta Sirani, but theirs are exceptions to the rule.


27 Jane Costello was the first scholar to note these “kindred subjects,” exemplars of feminine fortitude and virtue that were “matched” by Cortona, much like heroines on cassoni chests; Costello, “The Twelve Pictures ‘Ordered by Velasquez’ and the Trial of Valguarnera,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 13 (1950): 245–46.


30 Ovid, *Fasti*, ed. and trans. James George Frazer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931), 276–79. Juno’s discussion with Flora largely revolves around issues of conception, from the goddess’s concern over her potential barrenness to her fear that her maternal power is no longer needed in light of the “birth” of Minerva, in which the goddess sprang fully formed from the head of Zeus.

31 Ibid. 274–77.


33 Cassandra Sacchetti would give birth to six more children over the next eleven years of her marriage, two boys and four girls; Fosi, *All’ombra dei Barberini*, 242.
