

Gender, Art and Governance: Artistic Patronage Strategies of Female Rulers in The Renaissance

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Abstract. During the Renaissance, female rulers in Western Europe, operating within a traditional patriarchal society, faced numerous constraints when engaging in political affairs. To consolidate their rule and articulate political agendas, they frequently employed artistic patronage as an unconventional instrument of power. Through the interplay of art and politics, these female rulers successfully linked their personal image to monarchical authority and national interests. This enabled them to circumvent gender constraints through a circumspect strategy aligned with the era's context, thereby realising their political objectives. This paper examines the patronage practices of Elizabeth I, Kristina Augusta, and Catherine de' Medici, analysing their underlying political motivations to reveal art's profound role in power construction.

Keywords: Renaissance, female monarchs, patronage of the arts, Elizabeth I.

1. Introduction

During the Renaissance, influenced by humanist thought, women assumed more proactive roles in artistic patronage, often imbuing their patronage with stronger personal imprints. This era witnessed the emergence of numerous exceptional female rulers across Europe, who played pivotal roles in national politics. Despite their power, these female rulers still had to contend with tradition, continually refining their image to consolidate their position. Art, with its subtle influence, naturally became an important tool for female rulers. Their patronage of artists was often underpinned by political factors, shaping both artistic development and political trajectories.

Academia have long recognised the pivotal role women played in Renaissance patronage. Duchess Isabella d'Este of Ferrara stands as a quintessential example. Some scholars have examined Isabella's relationships with artists through her correspondence. For instance, J. M. Fletcher focuses on her decade-long artistic commission relationship with Giovanni Bellini, a master of the Venetian school, particularly revealing conflicts between the female patron and the artist's creative vision[1]. Other scholars explore how female patrons utilised art to transcend social constraints and establish authority within the male-dominated sphere of collecting. For instance, Jaynie Anderson contends that Isabella's curation of her "study" demonstrated systematic collecting awareness, with her choice of secular subjects challenging the stereotype that women exclusively sponsored religious art[2]. San Juan, R. M. further emphasises that the innovative nature of court women's patronage can only be understood by acknowledging the specific constraints they faced[3].

Studies on Isabella demonstrate that traditional political historiography often simplifies female rulers' patronage to mere material exchange or cultural consumption, failing to fully reveal its significance in navigating gendered power challenges. This oversight not only limits scholarly comprehension of early modern power dynamics but also obscures women's unique pathways to authority construction through patronage. This paper re-examines the political motivations embedded in the artistic patronage practices of female rulers, using Queen Elizabeth I of England, Queen Kristina of Sweden, and Queen Catherine de' Medici of France as case studies.

2. Artistic Patronage Practices of Female Monarchs

Elizabeth I left an indelible mark on art history through her generous patronage of cultural endeavours.

Elizabeth was particularly enthusiastic about theatre, not only hosting performances at court but occasionally taking to the stage herself.

During the Tudor period, theatre and drama lacked a unified regulatory framework, leading to chaotic performances where venues routinely exceeded safe capacities, posing significant safety hazards. The City Council, finding themselves powerless to address these issues, petitioned for the closure of all theatres. However, the Queen held such affection for the theatre that she likened the sovereign's position to a grand spectacle: "We monarchs stand upon the stage of the world, and the world is our audience." [4] The Privy Council countered the City of London's ban on performances by invoking "the Queen's fondness for the theatre." In the 3 December 1581 decree lifting the ban, the Privy Council stipulated that "rehearsals must take place in London's theatres to meet the standards of court performances" [5]. The City Council ultimately yielded to "the Queen's hobby." The Privy Council's decree effectively granted London's theatres a "royal charter" of protection, shielding them from arbitrary closure by municipal decrees. It is fair to say that the Queen's intervention ensured the survival of the theatres. This provided the fundamental precondition for the regularisation and commercial operation of theatre.

In 1583, when the City of London Council closed all theatres under the pretext of preventing the spread of plague, strictly forbade actors from performing in inns, and attempted to prevent them from staging performances in the suburbs of Middlesex and Surrey, the Privy Council selected twelve men from the Leicester's Men and other troupes to form the Queen's Men, placing them directly under the Queen's patronage. The Council compelled the City authorities to grant the troupe winter performance rights at the Bull Inn in Bishopsgate and the Great Bell Inn in Gracechurch Street. City councillors complained that inns and theatres were overrun by those claiming to be the Queen's actors. "[6] The establishment of the Queen's Men signified the birth of Britain's first professional acting company to receive royal patronage. From precarious itinerant performers, actors were elevated to become "the Queen's servants."

This stable professional security enabled them to devote themselves wholeheartedly to the performing arts, thereby laying the foundation for the deepening and transmission of acting techniques, and laid the groundwork for its refinement and transmission.

Beyond the Queen's Men, Elizabeth I's patronage of theatre was channelled through the nobility. Eschewing the conventional establishment of a dedicated royal troupe, she mandated each noble to sponsor a local company, intervening personally only when deemed necessary. This unconventional approach both reduced royal expenditure and shifted theatrical costs onto the nobility. The nobility of the Tudor era lacked substantial power, and by sponsoring troupes and plays that pleased the Queen, they sought her favour and tended to actively participate in such artistic patronage.

Queen Kristina of Sweden presents another exemplary case. Upon assuming personal rule, Kristina urgently sought to elevate Sweden's relatively marginalised court to Europe's foremost ranks, opting for the expedient route of "artistic importation".

Kristina held a particular fondness for theatre, transforming ballet from a mere symbol of elegance into a performance imbued with political significance in Sweden. *Le Monde Rejoït*, staged on 1 January 1645 to celebrate Kristina's coming of age and accession, marked a pivotal milestone in this evolution. The libretto portrayed the queen as the embodiment of virtue and a symbol of just warfare. She ascended the throne in place of Mars, the god of war, revered by all creatures blessed by heaven, earth, and sea. [7] The musical ensemble for the coronation performance was exceptionally distinguished, featuring French musicians Pierre Verdier, Pierre Guiroy, Pierre Gasse, Nicolas Bigot, Nicolas Picard, and the singer Alexandre Volon. As early as 1646, these artists collaborated with the French violinist Counioubri and the lute player Beshan, both resident in Stockholm, in performances [8]. These ballets at Kristina's court may be considered precursors to the 18th-century

ballet d'action. They integrated dance, music, poetry, and scenography more closely to serve a grand thematic vision, significantly expanding ballet's depth and boundaries as an independent art form.

In *La naissance de la paix* premiered in 1649, through a series of breathtaking scenes, this opera starkly contrasted virtue with unjust warfare. Panicked soldiers and destitute peasants ultimately witnessed the appearance of Pallas Athena, the goddess of wisdom and the arts, who brought the entire work to a close. This goddess symbolises just warfare, wisdom, and the arts. Similar themes resurface in the grand coronation ballet *Le parnasse triomphant* (1651), which explicitly declares that Sweden's military triumphs, the Peace of Westphalia, and the coronation's resounding success collectively herald the Muses' renaissance.[9]

Catherine de' Medici offers a quintessential example of Renaissance courtly widows engaging in cultural patronage. To a certain extent, her relationship between artistic patronage and the shaping of her own image was more direct. The most striking manifestations of her patronage intentions were the statues before her joint tomb with Henry II and the Valois tapestries.

Court minister Nicolas Houël observed that Catherine surpassed other queens precisely because she was an art patron. It was through her support that French architecture, painting, and sculpture flourished. She adorned Paris in particular with numerous memorable works. Shortly after Henry II's death, she commissioned Florentine sculptors to create an equestrian monument in his honour. A letter dated 3 July 1563 to Monsieur de Saint-Cyr concerns the commission of "portraits of the late King Henry and François II" by Philippe de' Lôme. Catherine not only reminded the addressee, "You were responsible for the late King's portrait," but also specifically emphasised the need to observe "the customary posture of our martial and conquering kings—always with hands raised high to show they are no idlers" [10]. Furthermore, she commissioned Lôme to construct a palace within the Tuileries representing her personal authority.

Antoine Caron's illustrations for the Artemisia biography and the Valois tapestries constituted significant components of her artistic patronage. Based on Houël's *the History of Queen Artemisia*, these illustrations depicted scenes of the historical heroine constructing her late husband's tomb and raising her children, themes also rendered in a series of tapestries. Léon de Groulx contends these tapestries were commissioned by the Queen Mother around 1575[11], confirming Catherine's adoption of Artemisia as her personal model and symbol. [12]Woven with gold and silver thread, wool, and silk, these tapestries depict the life of the French royal family and historical mythological tales. Notably, the Valois Tapestries provide clear representations of the Queen Mother and her family, replacing the more oblique allegories of Catherine de' Medici found in *the History of Queen Artemisia*.

Whether through Elizabeth I's patronage of theatre, Queen Kristina's introduction of court ballet, or Catherine de' Medici's commissioning of monumental tapestries and sculptures, these patronage practices demonstrate how art was actively incorporated into female monarchs' political agendas. However, to understand precisely how these female rulers shaped their public image and consolidated their authority through artistic works, we must delve into the works themselves.

3. Style, Symbolism and Authority in Artistic Works

Elizabeth I, Catherine de' Medici, and Queen Kristina employed painting, tapestry and theatre to translate abstract political concepts and personal authority into vivid visual symbols. The stylistic choices in these artworks

The stylistic choices in these artworks were not purely aesthetic selections, but rather carefully constructed political manifestos, thus presenting distinctive artistic characteristics.

Elizabeth I's *Rainbow Portrait*, created between 1600 and 1602 and now housed at Hatfield Palace in England, was painted by Marcus Giraerts. Its core purpose was to create an image that both met contemporary standards of feminine beauty and radiated monarchical authority. In the portrait, the Queen wears an elaborately decorated gown, whose intricate patterns of eyes and ears symbolise her omniscient and omnipotent rule.

Elizabeth's posture and countenance are embellished. Though painted during her reign's twilight years, Gheraert depicts the queen—then over sixty—as a full-cheeked, fair-skinned maiden. Her features are delicate and rounded, cheeks flushed with rosy colour, eyes bright, and lips small and rosy. Elizabeth wears a towering ruby and pearl crown, flanked by two outward-extending veils. Their edges are intricately beaded with pearls in a lace-like pattern, while waves of gauze softly frame the queen's eternally youthful countenance.

The Queen in the painting adorns her upper body with a motif of spring flowers in full bloom, while a serpent coils around her left sleeve, clutching a ruby in its jaws as a symbol of wisdom. Elizabeth thus signifies her governance through both heart and intellect. Moreover, the most striking feature of this portrait is the orange-red cloak draped over her floral gown. The cloak's vivid hue and eerie embroidery patterns steal the show, forming the portrait's focal point. Adorned with eyes and ears, its natural vertical folds are interspersed with unnatural horizontal creases, subtly suggesting the outline of a mouth. Together, these elements construct a symbol of her omnipresent rule.

Correspondingly, the painting's central motif, the rainbow, recedes to the periphery. It appears as the colourless, curved cylinder held in Queen Elizabeth's right hand, inscribed with the Latin maxim: "NON SINE SOLE IRIS" (No rainbow without the sun). Here, Elizabeth is likened to the sun, while the rainbow symbolises peace.

Kristina's case holds equal significance. For instance, the ballet staged shortly after her accession demonstrated her personal will. Lars Gustafsson notes this shift stemmed from Kristina's "personal political stance" – her determination to break free from the traditional constraints of securing succession through marriage.[13]

Les Passions Victorieuses et Vaincues premiered on 4 April 1649. Shortly before its staging, Kristina unequivocally declared her firm commitment to celibacy before the Swedish Riksdag. Thus, *Les Passions Victorieuses et Vaincues* may be viewed as a tool employed by Kristina to secure Swedish acceptance of her "unorthodox" stance. Drawing upon the ancient Roman legend of the Horatii and Curiatii clans, the play extols heroism and resolute courage, asserting that personal affections must yield to the interests of the state.

The Romans had waged war against the Etruscan Gurgites, yet the two peoples maintained marital ties. The conflict dragged on for years without resolution. Ultimately, both sides agreed to select three warriors each to engage in combat, with the outcome determining the ownership of Rome and Alba Longa. Rome chose the Horatii brothers, while the Etruscans selected the Curiatii. However, marital bonds existed between these two sets of brothers. Despite the women's protests, the Horatii resolved to send their three brothers into combat.

Camilla of the Horatii family must choose between her beloved and her homeland. Ultimately, Camilla accepts the inevitability of death, seeing it as the sole means to resolve the destructive force of passion.[14] The tragedy of the Horatii sisters reveals the misfortune when marriage conflicts with national interests. Kristina uses this to validate her commitment to celibacy, declaring that when the nation's interests are threatened, she will defend her country without hesitation. In *Les Passions Victorieuses et Vaincues*, f.2, Camilla said, "Either Alba shall perish with my love, or Rome shall perish with my joy... The blood of the Curiatii must be shed for Rome to ascend to its lofty place; Alba can only attain happiness through the death of the Horatii heroes. Which shall prevail—love or devotion? Whose triumph shall taste sweeter to me?"

Following the successive deaths of her husband and eldest son, Catherine de' Medici urgently sought to bolster her authority as Queen Mother and regent. The Valois Tapestries she commissioned thus became a crucial medium through which she employed art to assert her personal authority.

The common title of the Valois Tapestries derives from the grand festive events depicted in their backgrounds. The foreground focal point features life-sized figures from the French court. To clearly identify these foreground subjects, portraits are positioned at each tapestry's four corners. The artist ingeniously positioned these portraits upon the horizontal railings of a terrace, situated at the very forefront of the scene as if forming a viewing platform. Thus, these portraits—functioning as 'identity markers'—visually overlay the grand historical tableau. Consequently, they appear to tower above

the celebratory events unfolding behind them. They are not merely participants in history but its very witnesses.

Specifically, within the tapestry, members of the royal household are grouped together, functioning both as attentive observers of the celebratory events unfolding in the background and as 'hosts' for the audience viewing these entertainments. They appear standing, seated, or in half-length portraits, gazing upon the festivities. At times, they offer commentary or even direct their gaze towards the viewer, inviting them to share in the spectacle[15]. This composition ritualises the royal household's daily life while simultaneously separating its members from commoners. Their every action carries extraordinary significance, reinforcing the concept of divine right. They are not mortals; their authority descends from heaven, and thus their daily existence naturally differs from that of common folk. The Valois Tapestries are fundamentally a potent propaganda tool. They aim to repeatedly emphasise through visual language: "Behold, we are born rulers; our very lives constitute state affairs."

Antoine Caron illustrated *the History of Queen Artemisia* for Houël. As these paintings were originally tapestry designs, their narrative content is meticulously framed within intricate decorative borders.[16] Though the border patterns vary slightly between panels, they all incorporate motifs associated with Catherine. These idealised scenes reveal the courtly hierarchy: figures' positions—whether relative to the monarch or within the perspective—vividly signify their social standing. Artemisia's activities fall into three categories, each illustrating her logic of establishing new authority through relationships. The first group depicts her orchestrating and overseeing the construction of her husband's tomb and monumental memorials, thereby forging an eternal connection with the former king. The second group shows her supervising her son's education, binding herself closely to the new monarch. The third group records scenes of her governing alongside the young king, with other dignitaries present. By clearly displaying these relationships to the world, each set of illustrations establishes the Regent's authority. [17]In these portraits, Queen Artemisia consistently occupies a discreet position in the lower left corner. This seemingly marginalised figure nonetheless dominates the composition, a motif repeated in the Valois tapestries. This tapestry, likewise based on Caron's sketches, features Catherine's off-centre figure remaining a visual focal point through its stark black tones (following the death of Henry II, Catherine consistently appeared in official portraits wearing a black mourning veil and attired in solemn black garments). The sideways stance conveys both dignity and compliance with the ceremonial norms of the political climate. It simultaneously communicates that Catherine never exercised sole authority in state affairs, but governed jointly with her son[18].

Caron's stylistic aesthetic approach stretches Artemisia's figure while diminishing her son to miniature proportions. Mannerism served as the defining style of the Fontainebleau School, the principal artistic force of the French Renaissance, distinguished by its use of improbably stretched and distorted anatomical forms, dynamically charged compositions, and opulently intricate ornamentation. This exaggeration perfectly serves the creative intent—emphasising Artemisia's physical beauty without compromising her graceful demeanour. She must embody both the ideal woman and the virtues of an ideal male ruler. These were precisely Catherine's aspirations, the image she sought to establish through artistic works.

Undoubtedly, whether through mythical allegories, classical narratives, or Mannerist aesthetic techniques, these artworks transcended mere aesthetic value, becoming visual tools serving the power narrative of a female ruler.

4. Responding to Gendered Challenges to Power: The Political Motives Behind Female Monarchs' Artistic Patronage

In Renaissance Europe, patronage of the arts was not merely a display of cultural taste but an essential political survival strategy. Female monarchs often employed art to subtly embed their personal ambitions for rule within socially acceptable narratives, thereby addressing and overcoming the power challenges inherent to their gender. Catherine de' Medici's case is particularly illustrative.

In France, when the king died prematurely and the heir was still a minor, the queen dowager typically assumed the responsibility of regency. The regent's position was not directly inherited but depended on her relationship with both the predecessor and the king's heir. Yet lacking both royal lineage and succession rights, she could not simply emulate traditional male symbols of power to assert her authority.

In 1533, Catherine married Henry, the second son of King François I of France. Yet this union failed to grant her power commensurate with her status, for Henry II was deeply enamoured with his mistress, Diane de' Poitiers. Diane was formally recognised by Henry II as his "Chief Mistress". From the outset of his reign, following the traditional "first night" ritual, Henry II never shared a bed with his queen[19].

By virtue of Henry II's favour, Diane secured substantial political and economic advantages. Merely three months after the death of François I, the king bestowed the Château de Chenonceau upon her; a year later, he further granted her the title of Duchess of Valentinois. Beyond these significant favours, the king exempted certain of her estates from grain export duties, bestowed confiscated properties and fines upon her, and even granted her permission to fell ancient trees in the Forest of Delet for "completing the construction of the Anneslie estate"[19]. Even in the joust that proved fatal to Henry II in 1559, the king wore the black-and-white colours symbolising his lady Diane – colours she had worn since the death of her nominal husband.

Catherine held little influence in the French court during her early years. When rumours circulated that Prince Henry intended to divorce her, she secured the explicit protection of the elderly King François I, thereby safeguarding her position. Even after bearing the heir to the throne, Catherine could only barely match Diane in status.

In 1559, upon Henry II's death, Catherine finally entered France's power centre. Breaking with custom, she did not remain at the palace where the king died for the customary forty days, but immediately proceeded to the Louvre to attend to state affairs. This demonstrated her intent to secure a position at the heart of power. With the death of her eldest son, François II, in 1560, the succession passed to the ten-year-old Charles. This compelled the Queen Dowager to strengthen her own authority[16]. Although European history had seen instances of Queen Dowagers acting as regents, the French Salic Law's denial of inheritance rights to women and the threat of usurpation by the Guise family remained significant obstacles. This compelled Catherine to project the image of the most competent regent to consolidate the monarchical system.

The standards for the ideal wife proposed by Baldassarre Castiglione in *The Book of the Courtier* became a shared social ideal throughout Renaissance Western Europe: "Women must be twice as cautious as men... For a woman, the virtue of 'chastity' alone suffices; all other virtues may be disregarded... A woman may learn music, dance, and dabble in poetry, but must not delve too deeply lest she rival men, thereby undermining her foundational virtue—chastity and tranquillity." Catherine, a woman of the Italian Medici family, intervening in state politics clearly defied contemporary French aristocratic norms for women. Without recognition of her status, she risked threatening the royal family's image and interests.

To this end, Catherine adopted a dual strategy: meticulously crafting her public persona while establishing an official image.[16] Through culture and art, she reached domains beyond politics' grasp, subtly influencing the Valois populace to accept her regency. As Stephen O'Gorman observed: "That era deeply believed in art's power to persuade, transform, and perpetuate." [20]

As a foreign widow, Catherine understood that her continued favour with the French people hinged on their perception of her loyalty to the Valois dynasty as a testament to her devotion to France and its future. Commissioning the equestrian monument to Henry II stood as the most eloquent expression of her enduring commitment to her late husband's legacy and her fervent hope for France's destiny.[16]

Moreover, Catherine de' Medici's commission of portraits depicting her in black mourning attire carried profound political significance. The mourning garments symbolised "eternal mourning," emphasising her status as widow of Henry II and mother of the heir apparent. In the sixteenth century, black was the colour favoured by the Spanish Catholic Church. Wearing black conveyed religious

moral integrity, signifying wisdom while representing dignified, unostentatious economic standing. This sartorial convention was adopted by Henry II, who had been held hostage in Spain. Henry II frequently appeared in black attire at numerous occasions. Clad in black, Catherine mirrored her late husband, becoming his very embodiment. Moreover, her choice of black reflected her religious convictions and her resolve to uphold the Catholic Church's standing in France. This, in turn, helped secure Catholic support for her regency. The colour choice made her stand out strikingly in crowds; a glance at the assembly of royals in their vibrant attire revealed instantly who held true authority and commanded the greatest solemn presence.[21]

In 1562, courtier Nicolas Houël presented Catherine with his compiled work, *History of Queen Artemisia*. Artemisia represented the archetype of the ancient Persian female ruler. As Queen of Halicarnassus, she assumed sole authority upon the untimely death of her husband, Maussollos. During her reign, Artemisia exemplified the bearing of an authoritative sovereign[16]. Thus, she became Catherine's perfect official image. Houël incorporated and even altered events from Artemisia's biography into Catherine's life story, forging a tighter connection and unified image between the two. This blurred the boundaries between them, leading the populace to perceive Catherine, the Queen Mother, as the chaste, wise, and courageous Queen Artemisia who steered her nation to victory.

Skilled female rulers often drew upon historical figures or deities as their prototypes, an inherently astute strategy for power preservation. In Renaissance society, where women faced severe constraints in overt political participation, this practice provided them with a crucial cloak of legitimacy, shielding them from accusations of "violating the natural order of the sexes" or "moral corruption." Catherine employed Artemisia to project a dual image of loyal widow and wise regent, cloaking her ambitions in narratives of familial devotion and indomitable resilience.

More significantly, within the Renaissance's classical revival, the appropriation of these ancient symbols served not merely as a declaration of power but as a display of refined culture and exceptional erudition. Through patronage of the arts and architecture, they forged an enduring bond between political authority and civilisational ideals. Ultimately, in an era that forbade women from directly claiming power, they successfully constructed a socially accepted identity of rulership.

5. Summary

Renaissance female rulers ingeniously exercised political power within a male-dominated environment through the unique avenue of artistic patronage. The patronage of Elizabeth I, Kristina Augusta, and Catherine de' Medici demonstrates that cultural means served not only as political tools to transcend gender constraints but also as a method of governance deeply integrating personal authority with national image. Through artistic means such as visual representations, cultural rituals, and public performances, these female rulers constructed composite images of authority that combined feminine qualities with monarchical majesty. This strategy both accommodated contemporary social expectations and redefined modes of power expression. Art was not merely a supporter for aesthetic appreciation. The "indirect governance" achieved by female rulers through artistic patronage not only enriched the political culture of the Renaissance but also offers a fresh historical perspective on the interplay between power and art.

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