

A Box Full of People: Sister Anna Vittoria Dolara's Portraits and Female Agency during the Napoleonic Occupation of Rome

Abstract

This study explores the Dominican nun Anna Vittoria Dolara, focusing on her artistic contributions through an analysis of a series of portraits housed in a box originally located in the Convent of Santi Domenico e Sisto. Executed predominantly during the Napoleonic occupation of Rome, these portraits embody Dolara's strength and creative vitality amidst political and social upheaval. After the suppression of her original convent, Dolara resettled at Santi Domenico e Sisto, where she resided until the end of the occupation in 1814. An accomplished intellectual, Dolara distinguished herself not only as a painter but also as a poet, chronicler, and member of the Arcadia Academy, being renowned also for her proficiency in French and Latin. Her chronicles – *Memorie del Ven. Monastero de' SS. Domenico e Sisto Dall'Epoca della Repubblica a tutto l'Anno 1817* – offer a crucial firsthand account of the challenges faced by a female religious community during this period. It provides insights into daily life within the convent and contextualizes the broader historical and personal narratives of those she portrayed and with whom she engaged. By conducting a comprehensive analysis of archival documents and primary sources, this research provides a critical assessment of Dolara's portraits and introduces previously unidentified works, including a drawing and two sonnets she authored. Furthermore, it highlights overlooked figures such as Maria Paola Bollviller, a nun and artist who promoted the restoration of certain artworks within her convent.