Caterina van Hemessen

Caterina van Hemessen (1528 – after 1587) was a Flemish Renaissance painter. She is the earliest female Flemish painter for whom there is verifiable extant work.

While not an especially gifted artist Van Hemessen is often given the distinction of creating the first self-portrait of an artist, of either gender, depicted seated at an easel. This portrait, created in 1548, which shows the artist in the early stages of painting a portrait, now hangs at the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung in Basel.[1] Other paintings by Hemessen are in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and in the National Gallery, London.

A number of obstacles stood in the way of contemporary women who wished to become painters. Their training would involve both the dissection of cadavers and the study of the nude male form, while the system of apprenticeship meant that the aspiring artist would need to live with an older artist for 4-5 years, often beginning from the age of 9-15. For these reasons, female artists were extremely rare, and those that did make it through were typically trained by a close relative, in van Hemessen's case, by her father.[2]

Life

As with many Renaissance female painters, she was the daughter of a painter, Jan Sanders van Hemessen (c. 1500-after 1563), who was likely her teacher. She went on to create portraits of wealthy men and women often posed against a dark background. She is best known for a self-portrait painted in Basel. She inscribed the painting with the year, 1548, and her age, 20 years.[3] Her success is marked by her good standing in the Guild of St. Luke and her eventual position as teacher to three male students.

Van Hemessen gained an important patron in the 1540s, Maria of Austria, who served as regent of the Low Countries for her brother Charles V. In 1554, she married Christian (or Chrétien) de Morien, an organist at the Antwerp Cathedral, which was at that time an important post. In 1556, when Maria resigned her post and returned to Spain, Caterina and her husband also moved, on invitation of her patron, to Spain. And two years later, when Maria died, Caterina was given a sizeable pension for life. Caterina and her husband returned to Antwerp. She was mentioned in Guicciardini's Description of the Low Countries of 1567 as one of the living women artists. She died after 1587.

She mainly created portraits characterized by realism. The sitters, often seated, were usually seen against a dark or neutral ground. This type of framing and setting made for an intimate portrait. There are no extant works later than 1554, which has led some historians to believe her artistic career might have ended after her marriage.

Selected works

- *Portrait of a Lady* [4], 1551, National Gallery, London
• *Portrait of a Lady in 16th Century Dress*, Bowes Museum
• *Young Woman Playing the Virginals*, 1548, Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz Museum

**Notes**

[1] Kemperdick, 15  

**References**

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