

UNDRESSING THE RENAISSANCE WOMAN: THE FEMALE NUDE IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ITALY

This dissertation reorients the development of the Renaissance female nude by shifting attention away from the nude as a pictorial genre of the High Renaissance intended for a male audience and toward the conditions under which images of naked female bodies were first encountered, handled, and made meaningful by women in fifteenth-century Italy. I demonstrate how the diverse functions of domestic objects adorned with nude imagery, including *cassoni*, ivory combs, betrothal boxes, *deschi da parto*, and the Venetian *restello*, invited the active participation of the female beholder. By revealing how objects decorated with nude female figures often participated in the self-care and reproductive processes of the female body, this project positions the fifteenth-century female nude as a generative site for the cultivation of female subjecthood rooted in embodied experiences. I contend that the female beholder was a formative agent in the development of the Renaissance nude and as the anticipated audience, women may have impacted stylistic decisions undertaken by fifteenth-century artists. Acknowledging the ways in which female viewers determined the meaning of some of the earliest female nudes created in Renaissance Italy can reshape how we imagine the gendered reception of the female nude in the sixteenth century and beyond.

The first chapter reexamines the function and reception of recumbent nude figures painted inside Florentine marriage chests by centering the role of the female gaze. I argue that the reproductive function of the nude female image anticipated an active female beholder, which invites us to reconsider the meanings of later, sixteenth-century recumbent nudes inspired by the *cassone* figures. The second chapter focuses on ivory combs, betrothal boxes, and *deschi da parto* to illustrate how repeated, tactile encounters with images of the female nude accompanied

women's practices of grooming, adornment, betrothal, marriage, and childbirth. I propose that the images decorating these objects may have contributed to a gendered form of subjecthood rooted in female embodiment, memory, and self-care. The third chapter centers Giovanni Bellini's *Allegory of Prudence*, originally painted for a Venetian *restello*, to explore how female viewership, northern European artistic influence, and gendered artistic discourse shaped the evolution of the Venetian female nude.