I found during my research that mentioned the positive and seemingly progressive environment of early modern Bologna, which allowed women like Elisabetta to thrive.

Those articles left Hagglund with questions she wanted to explore—"Was Bologna actually a place where women were afforded more opportunities compared to other city-states at the time? And if so, was this true for women of all social classes?"

Hagglund decided that exploring that topic—"the myth of Bologna" as she termed it—would be one of the central themes driving her research for a senior honors thesis. She had been interested in doing one since it was first mentioned to her by her honors academic advisor, Frank Congin, director of academic programs for the Honors College. Students who wish to graduate with honors from Kent State’s Honors College must complete and successfully defend a senior honors thesis/project.

"I figured a thesis would provide some practical experience for grad school," Hagglund says. "And I was really excited to have the opportunity to research a topic I could choose and explore on my own.

"Exploring this topic allowed me to combine my diverse academic interests—such as art, history, culture, literature and women’s studies—and use an interdisciplinary approach," she says. "I think having a broader perspective and using different disciplines is key to understanding the experiences of women in the past. And it helps to expand our knowledge of history for all underrepresented groups."

A week or two after she’d been in touch with the two thesis advisors who had agreed to help her with the project—Matthew Crawford, PhD, associate professor in the Department of History, and Gustav Medicus, PhD, associate professor in the School of Art—the pandemic hit. It made her research more challenging than she had expected.

"Choir link was closed for a long time, so for a while I was just waiting to order books," Hagglund says. "Thankfully, the Honors College had some scholarship funds, and my advisors were able to help me as well with gathering research materials and purchasing books. But a lot of what I could gain access to was digital. Gaining access to Italian sources was particularly difficult, and I was not able to access as many primary and secondary sources as I had initially hoped. But at the end of the project, I felt I had been able to conduct some really thorough research, especially when considering the circumstances."

Hagglund’s work with thesis advisors Crawford and Medicus took place over three semesters, beginning her junior year—and because of the pandemic they did not have a single in-person meeting until after her thesis was complete and her defense had taken place.

"I had many supporters throughout the thesis process, but Dr. Crawford and Dr. Medicus both sacrificed so much time and energy into helping me succeed," says Hagglund, who graduated in May from the Honors College with university honors and distinction in history. "They championed my voice but also challenged me to produce a thesis I would be proud of. Although I am so honored to be recognized for this award, I really would not have made it through the process without their guidance and support. They stuck with me through it all."

"Having a broader perspective and using different disciplines is key to understanding the experiences of women in the past. And it helps to expand our knowledge of history for all underrepresented groups."

Hagglund participated in a 20-minute presentation of her thesis at the National Collegiate Honors Conference in Orlando, Florida, in October. "I was able to fly down, with the support of Kent State’s Honors College, to present my research alongside two of the other three Portz Scholars and accept my award," she says.

"Presenting at the conference was a rewarding experience but getting to meet the other Portz Scholars and hear about their research was the highlight of the trip for me. Our research interests overlapped, and I was so inspired by their projects. And getting to present in person and engage with other students and educators meant a lot to me, given most of my research was undertaken in quarantine last year."

Currently, Hagglund is a master’s student in Baroque art at Boston University’s Department of History of Art & Architecture. "I hope to continue this research in grad school," she says. "At the very least, I want to continue focusing on the women artists of the Baroque period. But my program encourages interdisciplinary studies, so I am hoping to continue my approach with that as well. I have a passion for this research, so I will try my best to continue it in some capacity."

Other factors allowed women of the time to take a greater role in society. "Bologna was second only to Rome in the eyes of the Catholic Church, which protected the city from a lot of warfare and fostered a desire for independence and identity outside the church," Hagglund says. "And the legacy of the University of Bologna was also a point of pride since it is the oldest university in Italy and maybe all of Europe. Women were seemingly allowed to attend at varying levels since its founding. Having an educated female populace was a part of Bolognese pride and identity at the time."

Hagglund is excited to have the opportunity to research a topic she could not necessarily in the same way.

"Rich women, women with familial ties and educated women had much more influence in the city as compared to women working in the silk trade," she says. "The booming silk trade of the city in the seventeenth century relied heavily on the labor of women and girls. The conditions were typically pretty bad and the pay a fraction of what their work was worth. However, when compared to other textile trades in nearby cities, women in Bologna were much more involved in all levels of production and were likely paid a little more than what was typical (although that doesn’t actually mean much).

"Women in religious realms seemed to have a separate kind of importance to the identity of the city," Hagglund adds. "Having a Bolognese native in the 15th century, Caterina de’ Vigni, as the Catholic patron saint of artists added to the city’s support of women artists.” (Catherine of Bologna was a Poor Clare nun, writer, teacher, mystic and artist who was venerated for nearly three centuries in her native Bologna before being formally canonized in 1712.)"