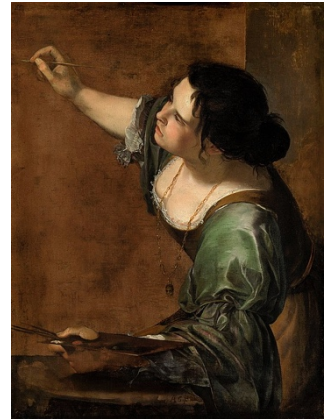


IL PROFESSORE

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593 - circa 1655)

This month's essay is about Artemisia Gentileschi, who was one of the few successful women painters of the Baroque period. She was the most important woman painter of Early Modern Europe by virtue of the excellence of her work, the originality of her treatment of traditional subjects, and the number of her paintings that have survived (though only 34 of a much larger corpus remain, many of them only recently attributed to her rather than to her male contemporaries). Contemporary critics both praised and disdained her work; she was recognized as having genius, yet she was also seen as monstrous because she was a woman exercising a creative talent thought to be exclusively male. Because of this misogynistic prejudice, as art historian Mary D. Garrard has stated, Artemisia "has suffered a scholarly neglect that is almost unthinkable for an artist of her caliber."

Artemisia Lomi Gentileschi was born in Rome on July 8, 1593. She was the eldest of five children and the only daughter born to Orazio Gentileschi and his wife, Prudenzia di Ottaviano Montoni. Orazio Gentileschi was a painter from Pisa, who had arrived in Rome sometime in the late 1570s. After his arrival, he befriended the notorious Caravaggio, and took inspiration from his innovations. From these, he derived the habit of painting real models without idealizing or sweetening them, thus transfiguring them into powerful and realistic human dramas. *(At right, Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting.)*



Artemisia (she is usually referred to as "Artemisia" rather than "Gentileschi" to distinguish her from her father) was baptized two days after her birth in the church of San Lorenzo in Lucina (in central Rome). In 1605, her mother died when Artemisia was 12 years old, and it was probably around this time that she began painting. She was introduced to painting in her father's workshop, showing much more enthusiasm and talent than her brothers, who worked alongside her. She learned drawing, how to mix colors and how to paint. Her father also introduced her to the working artists of Rome, especially to Caravaggio, whose chiaroscuro style (i.e. contrast of light and shadow) greatly influenced Artemisia's work. Other than artistic training, she had little or no schooling; she did not learn to read and write until she was an adult. However, by the time she was 17, she had produced one of the works for which she is best known and her earliest signed and dated work, the stunning interpretation of *Susanna and the Elders* (1610). The story is taken from the Old Testament's *Book of Daniel*: Susanna was a beautiful woman tormented by two elders who falsely accuse her of adultery after she rejected having sex with them. The painting manages to convey this conflict in a vivid manner, showing how well Artemisia had assimilated the realism of and the effects used by Caravaggio. *(See below.)*



In 1611, Orazio received a commission to decorate the Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi in Rome, alongside another painter, Agostino Tassi. Hoping to help his 17-year old daughter refine her painting techniques, Orazio hired Tassi to tutor her in developing perspective in her paintings. This gave Tassi one-to-one access to Artemisia and during one of their tutoring sessions, he raped her. With the expectation and also Tassi's promise that he would marry Artemisia in order to restore her dignity and secure her future, she began a sexual relationship with him. After several months, Tassi reneged on this promise to marry. When Orazio realized that the promise was off, he brought charges against Tassi. He accused Tassi of rape and breach of contract. The trial took seven months, during which Artemisia was tortured to test the truthfulness of her testimony and forced to undergo a humiliating gynecological examination. The court ultimately found Tassi guilty and sentenced him to five years banishment from Rome, which he never served. (Many speculate his punishment was not enforced because he was a favorite artist of Pope Innocent X).

During and soon after the trial, Artemisia painted her most famous painting, *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1612-1613), clearly a cathartic expression of her own rage and violation. The story portrayed in the painting is taken from the Old Testament's *Book of Judith*. It depicts Judith in the act of saving the Jewish people by killing the Assyrian general Holofernes. The painting shows a close-up of this brutal scene—Judith slicing Holofernes's throat while her handmaiden helps to hold him down. This image was depicted by many artists throughout the Baroque period; typically, artists represented the character of Judith as either the temptress, who uses her wiles to lure a man whom she later kills, or the noble woman, who is willing to sacrifice herself to save her people. Artemisia's depiction is unusual in its insistence on Judith's strength. The artist does not shy away from depicting her Judith as struggling to sever the head of Holofernes, which results in an image of action that is both evocative and believable.



A month after the long trial ended, in November 1612, Artemisia married a Florentine artist, Pietro Antonio di Vincenzo Stiattesi, and the couple moved to Florence soon after. In Florence, she returned to the subject of Judith, completing *Judith and her Maidservant* (1613 or 1614) that depicts Judith holding her sword and her maid holding a basket containing Holofernes's severed head. Again, her treatment of the familiar subject matter is both unexpected and original. (Artemisia returned often to the story of Judith and her slaying of Holofernes in her artistic career. We are aware of six paintings that she did in her career dealing with the story. She did a second different version depicting the actual murder, *Judith and Holofernes*, in 1620-21. In addition, she again revisited Judith's story in the painting *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes*, 1625, that conveys a sense of danger and mystery through its use of light and shadow, and shows Judith and her maid attempting to flee Holofernes's tent with his severed head).

As an artist, Artemisia enjoyed significant success in Florence during her six-year stay there. She became the first woman to be accepted into the prestigious Accademia delle Arti del Disegno (the Academy of Arts of Drawing). This allowed her to purchase her artistic supplies without the permission of her husband and to sign her own contracts. She maintained good relationships with the most respected artists of her time, and was able to garner the favor and the protection of influential people, beginning with Cosimo II de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany and especially with his mother, the Grand Duchess, Christina of Lorraine. Artemisia's involvement in the courtly culture in Florence not only provided access to important patrons, but it widened her education and exposure to the arts. She learned to read and write, and became familiar with musical and theatrical performances. Such artistic spectacles aided her in depicting lavish clothing in her paintings.

Other significant works she did during this Florentine period include: *La Conversione della Maddalena* (The Conversion of the Magdalene, 1616-18) and *Self-Portrait as a Lute Player* (1616-18) (right). While in Florence, she gave birth to five children, although by the time she left the city in 1620, only two were still alive: her oldest, a daughter named Prudentia (who survived into adulthood and became an artist like her mother) and her second son, Cristofano (who died at the age of five soon after the family left Florence).



In 1615, Artemisia received the attention of Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger (a younger nephew of the Renaissance genius, Michelangelo). Busy with the construction of the Casa Buonarroti to celebrate his noted great uncle, he asked Artemisia—along with other Florentine artists—to contribute a painting for the ceiling. (Artemisia was then in an advanced state of pregnancy).



Each artist was commissioned to present an allegory of a virtue associated with Michelangelo, and Artemisia was assigned the *Allegory of Inclination* (left). (In this instance, she was paid three times more than any other artist participating in the series). The painting depicts a nude female figure representing “Inclination,” or inborn creative ability. Seated on a cloud, she holds a mariner’s compass and is guided by a star above. The figure’s features are very similar to self-portraits in Artemisia’s works. (The figure’s nudity proved to be embarrassing to the commissioner’s great-nephew Leonardo di Buonarroti, who later commissioned Baldassarre Franceschini to paint clothes over parts of the figure in 1684).

Around this time, Artemisia started a passionate affair with a Florentine nobleman, Francesco Maria di Niccolò Maringhi. Their affair is documented by a series of letters from Artemisia to Maringhi. Unconventionally, Artemisia’s husband, Stiattesi, knew about the affair and used his wife’s love letters to correspond with Maringhi himself. It seems that Maringhi was partially responsible for keeping the couple financially solvent, a problem that was a frequent concern for them due to Stiattesi’s mishandling of money.

These financial problems, along with widespread rumors circulating about Artemisia's affair, triggered disagreements between the couple and in 1621, Artemisia returned to Rome without her husband. Here, she continued to be influenced by the innovations of Caravaggio and worked with several of his followers.

She was not as successful in Rome as she had hoped. She was a single mother raising her young daughter while working in a very competitive field, especially for a woman. She was able to get some commissions, but except for a few paintings, not much was coming her way. Although it is sometimes difficult to date her paintings, it is possible to assign certain works that she did to these years in Rome (1620-c.1626), among them *Portrait of a Gonfaloniere* (1622), *Penitent Magdalene* (1625), *Lucretia* (1623-25), *Allegory of Painting* (1620s), and *Judith and Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes*, 1625 (discussed above).

It is difficult to follow Artemisia's movements in the late 1620s. However, it is certain that between 1626 and 1627, she moved to Venice, perhaps in search of richer commissions. While she was in Venice, many verses and letters were composed in appreciation of her and her works. Knowledge of her commissions during the time is vague, but her *The Sleeping Venus* (or *Venus and Cupid*, 1628-30), and her *Esther Before Ahasuerus* (1628-30) (*right*) show her assimilation of the lessons of Venetian colorism.



In 1630, Artemisia moved once again in search of new and more lucrative job opportunities. This time she settled in Naples, which was a city rich with workshops and wealthy art lovers. It is possible that she was invited to Naples by the Duke of Alcalá, Fernando Enriquez Afan de Ribera, who had several of her paintings and thus had knowledge of her work. Many other artists, including Caravaggio, had stayed in Naples for some time during their lives. Her Neapolitan debut is represented by the *Annunciation* (1630). (With the exceptions of a trip to London and some other journeys, Artemisia resided in Naples for the remainder of her career).



In Naples, Artemisia started working on paintings in a cathedral for the first time. *San Gennaro nell'Anfiteatro di Pozzuoli* (Saint Januarius in the Amphitheater of Pozzuoli, 1636-7) (*left*) was painted for the choir in Pozzuoli Cathedral. The work shows the moment that the Christian martyr Januarius and his followers are thrown to a group of wild animals in the amphitheater in Pozzuoli; however, they lick the saint's feet rather than attack them and Januarius is unharmed because of the miracle. *Saints Proculus and Nicea* and the *Adoration of the Magi* were also commissioned from her at the same time by the local bishop, Martin de León Cárdenas. All three were hung above the choir stalls in the Cathedral.



During this early Naples period, Artemisia painted the *Birth of Saint John the Baptist* (1633-35) and *Corisca and the Satyr* (1630-35) (left). In these paintings, she again demonstrated her ability to adapt to the novelties of the period and to handle different subjects, instead of the usual Judith, Susanna, Bathsheba, and Penitent Magdalenes, for which she already was known.

In 1638, Artemisia was invited to the court of Charles I of England in London where her father had been the court painter since 1626. Orazio had made his name as the only Italian painter in

London and one of the first artists to introduce the style of Caravaggio to England. Orazio had received the important task of decorating a ceiling allegory of *Triumph of Peace and the Arts* (below right) in a house of Queen Henrietta Maria's in Greenwich. Artemisia worked alongside her father on this project; her assistance was necessary to help complete this significant project, especially since Orazio was elderly and unable to do some of the required painting on the ceiling. She painted most of the Muses in the allegory, most notably Clio, the Muse of History. (Orazio died soon after they started work together, in 1639 at the age of 75). Despite the fact that they had not seen each other for more than 17 years, there is little record of Orazio and Artemisia's reunion. While in London, she painted some of her most famous works, including her *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (1638).



Artemisia appears to have remained in London for several years after her father's death, working on her own commissions, although there are no known works that we can assign with certainty to her in England after 1639. She had definitely left England, however, by the time the Civil War broke out in 1642.

Little is known of her later movements, although correspondence with her patron Don Antonio Ruffo of Sicily suggests that she returned to Naples. The last surviving letter between the two is dated 1650 and implies that she was still actively working at this point. She most likely painted at least five variations on the David and Bathsheba story and perhaps another Judith.

It was once believed that Artemisia died in 1652 or 1653. However, modern evidence has shown that she was still accepting commissions in 1654, although she appears to have been increasingly dependent on her assistant, Onofrio Palumbo. We have no record of what happened to her at the end. Some historians have speculated that she died in the devastating plague that swept Naples in 1656 and virtually wiped out an entire generation of Neapolitan artists. Others speculate that perhaps she took her own life around this time.

THE LEGACY OF ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI

Artemisia Gentileschi's legacy has been controversial and complex. Although well-respected and well-known during her lifetime, after her death she was almost entirely omitted from art historical accounts of the Baroque period. This is partly because her style was often similar to that of her father and many of her works were misattributed to him. Her work was rediscovered in the early 1900s and was particularly championed by the Italian Caravaggio scholar Roberto Longhi. Both academic and popular accounts of her life and painting, however, were colored by exaggerated and overly-sexualized interpretations. This is partly due to a sensationalized novel about Artemisia published by Longhi's wife, Anna Banti, in 1947.

It is true that many of her paintings focus on the subject matter of the “determined woman” fighting off the dominant male protagonist. A theme that could be attributed to her personal experiences of the rape and rejection by other male artists. This has appealed to her popular audience in the age of Women's Liberation and the “#Me Too” Movement.

But another view of her work has emerged as well. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist art historians such as Mary Garrard and Linda Nochlin began to reassess this understanding of Artemisia Gentileschi and to change her academic and popular reputation. Art historians began to focus on her significant artistic achievements and her influence on the course of art history rather than on her biography. They pointed to her use of color, shadow, darkness, and light in her works that highlighted the visual tension of her paintings. These artistic attributes contribute to the portrayal of women as strong characters in the paintings; they are shown as taking situations into their own hands. Artemisia's choice of the particular biblical and mythical characters also enhances the theme that she wishes to convey. In the catalogue for the influential 1976 exhibition “Women Artists: 1550-1950”, the art historian Ann Sutherland Harris argued that Artemisia Gentileschi was “the first woman in the history of western art to make a significant and undeniably important contribution to the art of her time.” Some critics have argued that this assessment is a bit overstated, but it can't be denied that there is a great amount of truth in it as well.

A complete list of the works of Artemisia Gentileschi here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_works_by_Artemisia_Gentileschi

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: *Biography.com* website; *Encyclopedia Britannica* website; Rockefeller, Hall W. “Biography of Artemisia Gentileschi.” *ThoughtCo* website, August 28, 2020; *The Art History Archive: Biography & Art* website; *The Art Story* website; *Wikipedia*.

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