

Artemisia Gentileschi

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593 – c. 1656) was an Italian Baroque painter, today considered one of the most accomplished painters in the generation following that of Caravaggio. In an era when women painters were not easily accepted by the artistic community or patrons, she was the first woman to become a member of the Accademia di Arte del Disegno in Florence.

Artemisia was introduced to painting in her father's workshop, showing much more talent than her brothers, who worked alongside her. She learned drawing, how to mix colour, and how to paint. Since her father's style took inspiration from Caravaggio during that period, her style was just as heavily influenced in turn. Her approach to subject matter was different from her father's, however, as her paintings are highly naturalistic, where Orazio's are idealized; and she gained great respect and recognition for her work.

She painted many pictures of strong and suffering women from myth and the Bible – victims, suicides, warriors.



Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting
1638-9



Susanna and the Elders is the earliest known work of the young seventeen-year-old Artemisia, and a popular subject among Renaissance artists and patrons as it gave them licence to paint the nude in the context of a Biblical episode.

At the time some people, influenced by the prevailing misconceptions, suspected that she was helped by her father. The painting shows how Artemisia assimilated the realism of Caravaggio (without being indifferent to the language of the Bologna school, which had Annibale Carracci among its major artists.) It is one of the few paintings on the theme of Susanna showing the sexual accosting by the two Elders as a traumatic event.

Susanna and the Elders 1610

The story, from the Book of Daniel, is about a young Hebrew wife who is accosted by two lecherous elders while bathing and who, on having their advances rejected, charge her with meeting a lover under a tree. At her trial the young Daniel interrupts the proceedings, shouting that the elders should be questioned to prevent the death of an innocent. After being separated, the two men are cross-examined separately about details of what they saw but disagree about the tree under which Susanna supposedly met her lover. Included by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches it is regarded as apocryphal by Protestants.

In 1611 Artemisia's father Orazio' hired the painter Agostino Tassi to tutor his daughter privately. During this tutelage, Tassi raped Artemisia. Another man, Cosimo Quorli, was also involved. After the rape, Artemisia continued to have sexual relations with Tassi, with the expectation that they were going to be married and with the hope to restore her dignity and her future. Tassi reneged on his promise to marry Artemisia. Nine months after the rape, when he learnt that Artemisia and Tassi were not going to be married, Orazio pressed charges against Tassi. Orazio also claimed that Tassi stole a painting of Judith from the Gentileschi household. The major issue of this trial was the fact that Tassi had taken Artemisia's virginity. If Artemisia had not been a virgin before Tassi raped her, the Gentileschis would not have been able to press charges. During the ensuing seven-month trial, it was discovered that Tassi had planned to murder his wife, had engaged in adultery with his sister-in-law, and planned to steal some of Orazio's paintings. During the trial, Artemisia was subjected to a gynecological examination and torture using thumbscrews to verify her testimony. At

the end of the trial Tassi was sentenced to imprisonment for one year, although he never served the time. The trial influenced the feminist view of Artemisia Gentileschi during the late twentieth century. Artemisia was surrounded mainly by the presence of males since the loss of her mother at age 12. When Artemisia was 17, Orazio rented the upstairs apartment of their home to a female tenant, Tuzia. Artemisia befriended Tuzia; however, Tuzia allowed Agostino Tassi and Cosimo Quorlis to accompany Artemisia in Artemisia's home on multiple occasions. The day the rape occurred, Artemisia cried for the help of Tuzia, but Tuzia simply ignored Artemisia and pretended she knew nothing of what happened. Artemisia felt betrayed by Tuzia, and because Tuzia was the only female figure in her life, Artemisia's works contained a strong sense of the importance of solidarity and unity between women.

A month after the trial, Orazio arranged for his daughter to marry Pierantonio Stiattesi, a modest artist from Florence. Shortly afterward the couple moved to Florence, where Artemisia received a commission for a painting at Casa Buonarroti. She became a successful court painter, enjoying the patronage of the House of Medici and Charles I of England.

In Florence, Artemisia appears to have enjoyed significant success, maintaining good relations with the most respected artists of her time, and was able to garner the favours and the protection of influential people, such as Cosimo, II d' Medici and corresponded with Galileo.

In about 1618, while in Florence, Artemisia and Pierantonio had a daughter, Prudentia, also known as Palmira, named after Artemisia's mother, who died when Artemisia was 12. It is noteworthy that her daughter was a painter, trained by her mother, although nothing is known of her work.

The Italian critic Roberto Longhi, described Artemisia in 1916 as "the only woman in Italy who ever knew about painting, colouring, doughing, and other fundamentals". Longhi also wrote of *Judith Slaying Holofernes*: "There are about fifty-seven works by Artemisia Gentileschi and 94% (forty-nine works) feature women as protagonists or equal to men". These include her works of *Jael and Sisera*, *Judith and her Maidservant*, and *Esther*. These characters intentionally lacked the stereotypical 'feminine' traits—sensitivity, timidity, and weakness—and were courageous, rebellious, and powerful personalities.



***Judith and her Maidservant* 1613-14**



***Judith Slaying Holofernes* 1614-20**

Her best-known work is *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (a well-known medieval and baroque subject in art), which "shows the decapitation of Holofernes, a scene of horrific struggle and blood-letting". That she was a woman painting in the seventeenth century and that she was raped and participated in prosecuting the rapist, long overshadowed her achievements as an artist. For many years she was regarded as a curiosity. Today she is regarded as one of the most progressive and expressionist painters of her generation.

The account of the beheading of Holofernes by Judith is given in the *Book of Judith*, and is the subject of many paintings and sculptures from the Renaissance and Baroque periods. In the story, Judith, a beautiful widow, is able to enter the tent of Holofernes, an Assyrian general who was about to destroy her home, the city of Bethulia, because of his desire for her. Holofernes was overcome with drink, he passes out and is decapitated by Judith; his head is taken away in a basket (often depicted as being carried by an elderly female servant.)

She was esteemed by Michelangelo Buonarroti the younger (nephew of the great Michelangelo), who, busy with construction of Casa Buonarroti to celebrate his notable relative, asked Artemisia to produce a painting to decorate the ceiling of the gallery of paintings. The painting represents an "*Allegory of the Inclination (natural talent)*", presented in the form of a nude young woman holding a compass. It is believed that the subject bears a resemblance to Artemisia. Indeed, in several of her paintings, Artemisia's energetic heroines resemble her self-portraits.

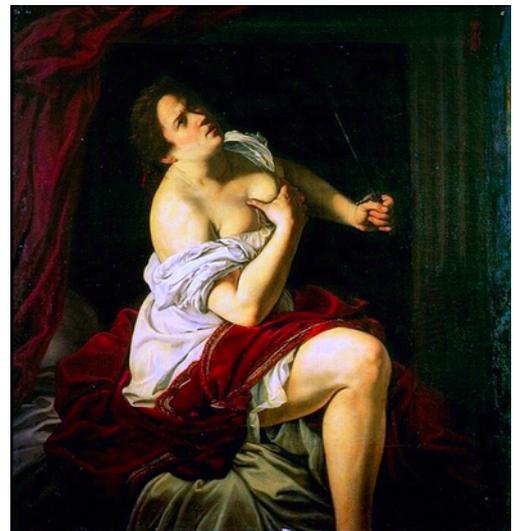


Allegory of Inclination 1615



Saint Cecilia c1616
The Patron Saint of music.

Lucretia was an ancient Roman woman whose fate played a vital role in the transition of Roman government from the Roman Kingdom to the Roman Republic. While there were no contemporary sources, accounts from Roman historian Livy (Livyus) and Greek-Roman historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus from the time of Emperor Caesar Augustus (63 BC – 14 AD) agreed that there was such a woman and that her suicide after being raped by an Etruscan king's son was the immediate cause of the anti-monarchist rebellion that overthrew the monarchy.



Lucretia 1620-21



According to Luke 1:26 the Annunciation of the birth of Christ to the Virgin Mary, by the Archangel Gabriel, occurred "in the sixth month" of Elizabeth's pregnancy with John the Baptist. Many Christians observe this event with the Feast of the Annunciation on 25 March, an approximation of the northern vernal equinox nine full months before Christmas, the ceremonial birthday of Jesus. The Annunciation is a key topic in Christian art in general, as well as in Marian art in the Catholic church, particularly during the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

The Annunciation 1630

The story of Lot and his daughters, from the *Book of Genesis*, was another popular subject among Renaissance artists.

Two men arrived in Sodom and were given food and shelter by Lot. Some male citizens arrived at his door and demanded that the strangers be handed over so that they might 'know' them (Have sexual relations with them.) Lot refused, offering to hand over his virgin daughters instead, to do with them as they would. The men accused him of being judgemental and threatened to force entry to his house. However, the two guests dragged him indoors and revealed themselves to be angels sent to destroy the wicked city. They urged Lot, his wife and his daughter's to flee.

However, on the journey his wife disobeyed the injunction not to look back and was transformed into a pillar of salt. Lot and his daughters went to Zoar, but fearing to dwell there went to live in a cave.

There the daughters thinking that no man would visit them there and they would remain childless, conspired to get their elderly father drunk and lie with him, that they might 'preserve the seed of the father,' which they did on subsequent nights. The older daughter conceived Moab meaning "from the father", father of the Moabites; the younger conceived Ben-Ammi, "Son of my people"), father of the Ammonites.



Lot and his Daughters 1635-38



In 1638 Artemisia joined her father in London at the court of Charles I of England, where Orazio became court painter and received the important job of decorating a ceiling (allegory of *Trionfo della pace e delle Arti* (Triumph of Peace and the Arts) in the Queen's House, Casa delle Delizie of Queen Henrietta Maria of France in Greenwich). Father and daughter were working together once again, although helping her father probably was not her only reason for travelling to London: Charles I had invited her to his court, and it was not possible to refuse. Charles I was a fanatical collector, willing to ruin public finances to follow his artistic wishes. The fame of Artemisia probably intrigued him, and it is not a coincidence that his collection included a painting of great suggestion, the "*Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*".

Probably produced during Gentileschi's stay in England between 1638 and 1639, the Self Portrait is now in the Royal Collection. The scene depicts Gentileschi painting herself as the "Allegory of Painting" and demonstrates rare feminist themes from a time when women seldom held jobs, let alone were well known for them. Gentileschi's portrayal of herself as the epitome of the arts was a bold statement to make for the period. Controversial in its time today it is somewhat overshadowed by many of her other, more dramatic and raw scenes reflecting the artist's troubling younger years,

In this version of Judith and Holofernes the precise moment painted takes place after the murder, when her maidservant places the severed head in a bag, while Judith checks around her. It is the second of three paintings that Gentileschi painted of the same moment, using a similar design.



Judith and Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes 1645

Gentileschi's status in popular culture, though she is much admired by among art historians, is deemed by American scholar Griselda Pollock to be less due to her work and more to the sensationalism caused by the persistent focus on the rape trial during which she was tortured. Pollock offers a counter reading of the artist's dramatic narrative paintings, refusing to see the Judith and Holofernes images as responses to rape and the trial. Instead, Pollock points out that the subject of *Judith and Holofernes* is not a revenge theme, but a story of political courage and indeed collaboration by two women committing a daring political murder in a war situation.



Cleopatra 1633–35

Pollock seeks to shift attention from sensationalism towards deeper analysis of Gentileschi's paintings, notably of death and loss, suggesting the significance of her childhood bereavement as a source of her singular images of the dying Cleopatra. Pollock also argues that Gentileschi's success in the seventeenth century depended on her producing paintings for patrons often portraying subjects they selected. She aims to place Gentileschi's career in its historical context of taste for dramatic narratives of heroines from the Bible or classical sources

As Artemisia grew older, we can see from this version of 'Susanna', forty years later than her juvenile piece, her work became more graceful and "feminine;" and while this was to some extent part of the general shift in taste and sensibility, it must also have resulted from the artist becoming more and more self-consciously a female painter.



Susanna and the Elders on a Balcony c1652

Contemporary female painters

For a woman at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Artemisia being a painter represented an uncommon and difficult choice, but not an exceptional one. Scholars have argued that Artemisia was at least partially aware of "her position as a female artist and the current representations of women's relationship to art." This is evident in her allegorical self portrait, *Self Portrait as La Pittura*, which shows Artemisia as a muse, "symbolic embodiment of the art" and as a professional artist. Before Artemisia, between the end of the 1500 and the beginning of 1600, other women painters had successful careers, including **Sofonisba Anguissola** (born in Cremona around 1530). Later **Fede Galizia** (born in Milano or Trento in 1578) painted still lifes and a *Judith With the Head of Holofernes*. Italian Baroque painter **Elisabetta Sirani** was popular for a brief period of time.

Other women painters also began their careers while Artemisia was alive. Judged on their artistic merits, Longhi's statement that Artemisia was "the only woman in Italy who ever knew about painting" is clearly false, and there is no doubt that Artemisia continues to be among the most highly regarded of women artists, and she has attained her place among the great Baroque artists.

