

## 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.



***Susanna and the Elders*** (1610) 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.

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 out of fidelity to her husband, 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, thus establishing her innocence. 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 gynaecological examination and torture using thumbscrews to verify her testimony. Metal rings were placed around her fingers and tightened while she spoke, causing agonizing pain and potentially jeopardizing her blossoming painting career. Tassi, on the other hand, was not required to undergo a similar experience. 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.

The painting of **Cleopatra**, (1611-12) shows the Egyptian queen as an ordinary, mature woman, devoid of idealisation. In an age when the nude was often depicted as a perfected example of feminine beauty in the pose of a mythological Venus, Gentileschi courageously exposes the fleshy reality of the model's swelling stomach, sagging breasts and heavy thighs. This is a queen no longer clothed in the raiments of power and majesty but a vulnerable woman alone in the moments before she commits suicide by submitting to a poisonous snakebite. A common theme for artists of the period, the artist may have drawn



upon Plutarch's account which described her death from the bite of an asp. The pose is based upon that of a Roman statue now known as **Sleeping Ariadne**, which had been thought to represent Cleopatra wearing a snake-like piece of jewellery on her arm.

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 twelve. 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** (1613-14), and *Esther*. These characters intentionally lacked the stereotypical 'feminine' traits—sensitivity, timidness, and weakness—and were courageous, rebellious, and powerful personalities.

*Judith and her Maidservant* depicts the moments after the biblical heroine Judith has assassinated the general Holofernes, and is fleeing his tent with her servant Abra. The subject is one that Artemisia portrayed several times during her career and this portrayal is based on an earlier work by the artist's father. The dark setting of the scene is brightened by the red and gold tones in the fabrics - colours which Artemisia used frequently during her time in Florence. The viewer is reminded of the violence which preceded this moment by the screaming head depicted on the pommel of the sword, thought to be a mythological figure such as Medusa.







Her best-known work is **Judith Slaying Holofernes** (1614-20) (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 passed out and was decapitated by Judith; his head was taken away in a basket, often depicted as being carried by an elderly female servant.

Like her earlier version of the work, [Judith](#) is thought to be a self-portrait. This connection may relate to Artemisia's disturbing experience at the hands of her Agostino Tassi. During the trial, Artemisia recounted the altercation with Tassi and her effort to defend herself, stating "After he had done his business he got off me. When I saw myself free, I went to the table drawer and took a knife and moved toward Agostino, saying, 'I'd like to kill you with this knife because you have dishonoured me.'"

In this later version of Judith and Holofernes, a detail was added by Artemisia that supports the idea that Artemisia identified with Judith. On the bracelet Judith wears is a depiction of Artemis—a Goddess who guarded her virginity carefully against those who tried to dishonour or rape her; those that threatened this met a violent end.

She was esteemed by Michelangelo's nephew, Michelangelo Buonarroti the younger, 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)** (1615), presented in the form of a nude young woman holding a compass. It is believed that the subject, as in several of her paintings of energetic heroines, bears a resemblance to herself.



The **Saint Cecilia** (c.1616), painted in her "Florentine period", depicts the patron saint of music playing a lute, with an organ, a customary attribute for her and confirming the subject, in the background. After her arranged marriage, Artemisia moved to Florence with her new husband Pierantonio Stiattesi, where she completed many of her early paintings like Saint Cecilia. It could be argued that this was one of her most successful periods as an artist. During this time she became a court painter, enjoying patronages of Charles the first and the House of Medici. She maintained good relationships during this period with a number of artists around her, such as Cristofano Allori, and created a significant network around her of her peers.

**Lucretia** (1620-21) depicts the ancient Roman heroine, known for her beauty and modesty, and the wife of Roman consul and general Lucius Tarquinius Collatinus at the moment of her suicide. The decision to take her own life was made after she was blackmailed and raped by Sextus Tarquinius (Tarquin) a cousin of her husband, who threatened her with murder and the public humiliation of her corpse if she resisted. Given the risk of defamation she gave in to his sexual demands, but afterwards reported the attack to her husband and father before taking her own life. In doing so, she retained her

honour and virtue (according to Roman beliefs). Her suicide led to a rebellion that brought down the Etruscan monarchy and marked the beginning of the Roman Republic.

The painting shows Lucretia in three-quarter view seated alone in a darkened room on a bed, with her eyes cast upwards and a distressed expression. The figure is facing to the right and strongly lit from the left, highlighting her face, exposed chest and right leg, as well as the blade of a dagger. Both the red velvet bedding and her clothes are in disarray, in reference to the recent act of violence. With a powerful and realistic physicality, she grasps her left breast with her right hand, with the dagger in the other. Contemporary depictions of Lucretia by male artists often portrayed her in an erotic manner, while Gentileschi distinguished her work by depicting a brave, anguished woman.



Artemisia Gentileschi is known as one of the most gifted followers of Caravaggio. His style is characterized by the juxtaposition of extreme darks and lights, known as tenebrism. In *Lucretia*, Gentileschi distinctly employs this method by contrasting a bright, almost glowing Lucretia against a dark, shadowy setting. This style creates a somber tone while heightening the drama of the scene. The light centred on Lucretia may also symbolize her virtue and purity. Garrard observes a return to this Carravaggesque approach as coincident with her return to Rome from her years in Florence, where she had adopted a maniera style.

It is one of a number of paintings of Gentileschi that focus on virtuous women ill-treated by men. Her 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 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.



***Venus and Cupid (Sleeping Venus)*** c. 1626) depicts Venus, sleeping on a blue bed covering and rich crimson and gold tasseled pillow. She wears nothing except a thin wisp of transparent linen around her thigh. Her son Cupid fans her with richly coloured peacock feathers to keep pests from annoying or waking her as she drifts off to sleep. He is gazing at her with an adored, raptured expression. In the background, at the left, painted by a specialist landscape artist, there is a window looking out onto a moonlight landscape where can be seen a small circular temple to the goddess, reminiscent of the one dedicated to Venus near Hadrian's villa in Tivoli, just outside of Rome. Venus's face has full

cheeks, heavy lids, a prominent nose, and small protruding chin—all features of Gentileschi's own face. The body movements are natural: Venus's hand rests lightly on her side, her legs are gently laid together. The work blends together realism and classicism through its iconography and the artist's style.

The picture was probably commissioned by an important and wealthy patron; Gentileschi used two layers of lapis lazuli, an expensive material for artists to obtain, to paint the blue sheets.

The absence of sufficient documentation makes it 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; there many verses and letters were composed in appreciation of both her and her works. Knowledge of her commissions during the time is vague, but *The Sleeping Venus*, and her *Esther and Ahasuerus* are testimony to her assimilation of the lessons of Venetian colourism.

In 1630, Artemisia moved to Naples, a city rich with workshops and patrons, in search of new and more lucrative job opportunities.



The subject matter depicted in *Esther and Ahasuerus* (late 1620's-30s) is the biblical scene of Esther going before Ahasuerus to plead for her people; however, the style of the clothing and setting is more contemporary with Gentileschi's time. The significance of the way she depicts both Esther and the king speaks to her style and ideals. Esther is shown in better lighting, while Ahasuerus is in shadow, and the king is also depicted with an extravagant feathered hat and fur-trimmed boots that are also bejewelled. Esther, meanwhile, is depicted in more elegant and refined clothing, marking her out as the protagonist of the scene, endowing her with greater agency, while conveying the message of her high status as a biblical heroine.



The background colouring is somewhat subdued, emphasising the golden yellows and vibrant blue sash of Esther's dress. A red scarf around the king's shoulders draws our eye across the void between the two protagonists in the drama. A diagonal line running through the right shoulder edge of Esther's dress and across her thigh forms a V with the diagonal running up through the king's leg, uniting and holding together the two halves of the composition. Great attention is paid to details, such as the folds of the fabrics, the fur trim on Ahasuerus's boots, the realism of the stitches on the hem of Esther's dress, the cracks of the marble ground and in the detailing of the paws that adorn the king's chair.



In *The Annunciation* (1630) two brightly-illuminated figures are portrayed in a dark room. The woman on the right is standing, bowing slightly with her right hand to her heart. The angelic figure on the left, clad in sumptuous saffron robes, kneels with a lily held in the right hand, while pointing upwards with the left. Light pours from a shaft above the figure, with winged cherubic heads circling. A small piece of paper on the ground to the extreme right of the painting shows the artist's signature and date. The image portrays the moment in the Gospels when the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she is to be the mother of God.

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 story of *Lot and his Daughters* (1635-38) 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. 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.



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.



Probably produced for Charles during Gentileschi's stay in England between 1638 and 1639, the ***Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*** (1638–39) is now in the Royal Collection. The scene depicts Gentileschi painting a portrait of herself as the "Allegory of Painting" and demonstrates rare feminist themes from a time when women seldom held jobs. 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.

As Riccardo Lattuada suggested in the "Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi" catalogue, "It seems hard to imagine that Artemisia, in making an image of Painting, did not reflect on the special significance this allegory held for her as a woman artist."

By the time Gentileschi made the *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*, she'd received perhaps the greatest honour bestowed upon the era's painters: induction into the Accademia del Disegno, being the first woman to receive the distinction, changing the course of her life. With this distinction she could buy paints and supplies without a man's permission, travel by herself, and even sign contracts. In other words, through painting, she had gained freedom. Gentileschi would go on to separate from her husband and live and work independently, primarily in Naples and London, for the rest of her life. All the while, she supported her two daughters, who also went on to become painters.

In this late version of Judith, ***Judith and Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes*** (1645), 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.

Gentileschi's status in popular culture, though she is much admired by 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.



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.

The ***Cleopatra*** of 1633–35 represents the death of the queen of Egypt between 51 and 30 BC. According to popular belief, she committed suicide by allowing herself to be bitten by an asp (Egyptian cobra), although according to various Roman historians she used a poison.





In the image, Cleopatra appears half-naked, lying on a bed and partially covered by an indigo blue quilt, while in the background two maids appear in a tearful attitude, having just discovered her corpse,. The crown that she wore on her head has fallen on her pillow and she wears a pearl hanging from one ear. On the bed, beneath her body is the snake and a bouquet of flowers. Although described in the languor of death with purple lips giving proof of death, the representation of her naked body is not lacking in sensuality; rather it is a stylized nude in keeping with the can-ons of the genre dating back to Renaissance classicism, with a special influence from The

Venetian artist, Giorgione. The lighting of the scene denotes the Caravaggist influence, with the queen's body bathed in a diaphanous light and the background where the maids appear in twilight. The chiaroscuro is especially noticeable on the queen's face, with one half illuminated and the other dark. The effigy of the queen appears with her mouth open showing her teeth and her eyes also half-open, reminiscent of Caravaggio's Saint Mary Magdalene in ecstasy.

The work may be categorised as tenebrist naturalism, assuming its most characteristic features: expressive use of light and chiaroscuro, dramatic scenes and figures asserting a deep knowledge of anatomy. In the 1630s, established in Naples, her style adopted a component more classicist, without completely abandoning naturalism, with more diaphanous spaces and clearer and sharper atmospheres, although chiaroscuro continued to be an essential part of the composition, as a means of creating space, giving volume and expressiveness to the image.

As Artemisia grew older, we can see from this version of **Susanna and the Elders** (c.1652) painted forty years later than her juvenile piece, when she was approaching sixty, 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 sits on a balcony or terrace, semi-nude, raising an arm to repulse the men's advances as she recoils backwards from their suggestions. The horizontal line of the rail separates her psychologically as well as physically from her tormentors. Here it is her face which is cast in shadow, while those of her tormentors are in full sunlight, maybe to suggest that in due course their actions will be exposed to the light of day. A faint glow surrounds the head of Susanna, perhaps an implication that Gentileschi would canonise the 'heroin' she had painted in at least four known works, and represented in the guise of many other women who have shown moral courage, risen to the challenge of noble if violent acts and finally overcome their suffering.

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 was increasingly dependent upon her assistant, Onofrio Palumbo. Some have speculated that she died in the devastating plague that swept Naples in 1656 and virtually wiped out an entire generation of Neapolitan artists.

The research paper "*Gentileschi, padre e figlia*" (1916) by Italian critic Roberto Longhi described Artemisia as "the only woman in Italy who ever knew about painting, colouring, drawing, 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 Mayservant*, and *Esther*. These characters intentionally lacked the stereotypical "feminine" traits—sensitivity, timidity, and weakness—and were courageous, rebellious, and powerful personalities.

Longhi wrote:

Who could think in fact that over a sheet so candid, a so brutal and terrible massacre could happen [...] but—it's natural to say—this is a terrible woman! A woman painted all this?... there's nothing sadistic here, instead what strikes the most is the impassibility of the painter, who was even able to notice how the blood, spurting with violence, can decorate with two drops the central spurt! Incredible I tell you! And also please give Mrs. Schiattesi—the conjugal name of Artemisia—the chance to choose the hilt of the sword! At last don't you think that the only aim of Giuditta is to move away to avoid the blood which could stain her dress? We think anyway that that is a dress of Casa Gentileschi, the finest wardrobe in the Europe during 1600, after Van Dyck."

### 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** (born in Bologna in 1638, died aged 27) 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.



**Sofonisba Anguissola**  
*Self-portrait  
at the Easel*  
1556



**Fede Galizia**  
*Judith with the  
Head of Holofernes*  
1596



**Elisabetta Sirani**  
*Self-Portrait as  
Allegory of Painting*  
1658