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Italian Baroque Artist:

Artemisia Gentileschi

The narrative that often surrounds Artemisia Gentileschi has more to do with expansive fiction than with historical fact. Despite a prolific career, she shared the struggles of many women artists. They were celebrated as miraculous exceptions of the weaker gender, but were believed to lack the element of creative genius that produced greatness in their male counterparts. Between misogyny and incorrect attributions of her work, Gentileschi was virtually deleted from the early annals of art history: "Artemisia has suffered a scholarly neglect that is almost unthinkable for an artist of her caliber. The neglect began in her own time, when she was, like most women artists, notable more as an exotic figure in the art world than as an artist whose *oeuvre* might deserve definition and inventory." [[1]](#endnote-1) In the twentieth century, the artist has been variously romanticized and demonized in literature and in film. Her inclusion in art history has significantly expanded in the last thirty years, but the constructed persona continues to impose on the historical figure.

The city of Rome at the end of the sixteenth century was the epicenter of the Italian Baroque style. The reorganization of the city and the escalation in building projects provided work for artists in every medium. Artemisia Gentileschi was born into this vibrant scene on July 8, 1593. Her father, Orazio Gentileschi was a notable painter and fresco artist. Although Artemisia's birth was followed by three brothers, she alone would follow her father into the studio: "By 1612, when she was not yet nineteen years old, her father could boast of her extraordinary talents, claiming that in the profession of painting, which she had practiced for three years, she had no peer" [[2]](#endnote-2) Both father and daughter were followers of Caravaggio, whose use of realism, tenebrism and portrayal of intense emotional moments would become standards of the Italian Baroque. One of her early paintings, S*usanna and the Elders (1610),* effectively exhibits her technical skill and captures the precarious situation of the young heroine. It also demonstrates the exceptional coloring that would remain significant throughout Gentileschi's career.

A professional connection, made soon after the completion of her *Susanna*, would alter the course of the artist's life. Artemisia Gentileschi first came into contact with Agnolo Tassi through his collaboration her father. It was at Orazio's request that Tassi began instructing her in linear perspective. Tassi took advantage of his access to Artemisia, brutally raping her on several occasions. The events were chronicled in a trial that seems as much a violation as the acts that initiated it. Scholars continue to debate the extent to which stylistic changes in Gentileschi's painting were an overt response to her situation: "After the rape trial, Artemisia emerged as a self-directed and independent artist, whose style, now clearly separable from that of her father, began to exhibit a distinctly creative adaptation of Caravaggio's imagery into her own expressive purposes." [[3]](#endnote-3) Her painting, *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (c.1612), which now hangs at the Capodimonte Museum in Naples, exemplifies this more mature style. The heroine Judith is both virtuous and resolved as she dispatches the general. Coloration is emphasized as characters emerge dramatically from deep shadows. The new direction of Gentileschi's painting was accompanied by another significant change. Soon after the trial, Artemisia married artist Pietro Antonio di Vincenzo Stiattesi and moved to her husband's home in Florence.

Over the next few years, both Gentileschi and her husband made use of the facilities which housed the *Accademia del Disegno*. She is listed as a member of the Academy in 1616. This was an extraordinary accomplishment for a female artist because unlike other cities, the Florentine Academy had no previous female members. Connections to the powerful Medici duchy as well as community leaders may have lent her additional access to this traditionally male organization: "Artemisia's instant Florentine success is probably to be explained by her arrival as a protégée of a prominent Florentine, Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger, who was a strong advocate of Artemisia in Florence, and who may have been a close personal friend." [[4]](#endnote-4) During the first few years of her time in Florence, she worked on a variation of a previously visited theme. The painting *Judith and Her Maidservant* (c.1613), reveals a blend of her Roman origins and a consideration for Tuscan preferences. With dramatic lighting akin to Caravaggio combined with formal costume and fine clothing, this painting of a milder moment in the Judith story reflects the artist's adaptation to her new clientele. Gentileschi continued to live and work successfully in Florence through 1620. During this time she completed several canvases, many of which centered on biblical heroines. Another theme she began to explore was that of the allegory. This is particularly significant in seventeenth century Florence, where allegorical figures were much adored and could be found in every available medium.

For the next ten years, Gentileschi moved through Italy completing commissions. Though there is no definitive record of her travels, by following the trail of paintings scholar Mary Garrard has determined the artist spent time in Genoa and Venice before returning to Rome: "Gentileschi probably resided in Rome from 1622 to the end of the decade. Between 1624 and 1626, her name was included in the census of Santa Maria del Popolo, which showed her as living on Via del Corso." [[5]](#endnote-5) Few paintings from her time in Rome survive. Those that do show stylistic adaptation and experiments with idealism. The most significant painting of this period is *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (1630). The figure is painted with dramatic light and shadow, a return to the tenebrism of her earlier work and a revision of allegorical theme. Also significant is the confirmation that this is a portrait of the artist. For many years it has been debated, both if and when, Gentileschi modeled her heroines with her own features. While similarities certainly occur, no other work by the artist has been conclusively proven to be her likeness.

Around 1630, Gentileschi moved to Naples where the majority of her work centered once more on biblical themes. Commissions from several churches provided steady income and led to religious paintings like *The Annunciation* (1630), *Birth of St.John the Baptist* (c. 1633), and *SS.Proculus and Nicea* (c.1636). These paintings are stylistically separate from her earlier work. The lighting is less dramatic, background is much more prevalent and the scenes no longer intently focus on a few central figures: "To some extent Artemisia Gentileschi must have participated in the general shift of European art at mid-century, away from the early century's interest in intense emotional states - as seen in Caravaggio's *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* or Rembrandt's early self-portraits - toward a Cartesian systematization of the passions, epitomized in the philosophical calm of Poussin's pictorial world." [[6]](#endnote-6) Around 1638 Gentileschi traveled to the English court of King Charles I, likely to assist an aging Orazio in paintings for the ceiling of the Queen's House at Greenwich. The elder Gentileschi died in February 1639. Artemisia would remain in England for another two years, but with civil conflicts looming, she returned to Naples. Though she would work there for the remainder of her life, many of her paintings from this era would be attributed to other artists, most frequently to Bernardo Cavallino. Many of these recent attributions are highly contested and there seems to be little agreement, even between notable experts.

The probable year of Artemisia Gentileschi's death is 1652. In her lifetime she accomplished what no other female artist ever had: "For Sofonisba Anguissola, Lavinia Fontana or Elisabetta Sirani, it appears to have been enough to be accepted professionally; to attempt an innovative artistic contribution was unnecessary, perhaps hazardous." [[7]](#endnote-7) The rediscovery of Gentileschi's significance in the twentieth century has forced an assessment of previously held convictions. By correcting improper attributions, the expansive *oeuvre* of this artist has been revealed. Though there continues to be debate over many details, Artemisia Gentileschi has, at long last, taken her rightful place in history as a preeminent Baroque artist.

Bibliography

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1. Mary Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 13 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 32 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 34 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 63 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 103 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 6 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)