

Artemisia Gentileschi: The Art of Defiance

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Abstract

Artemisia Gentileschi was one of the greatest female artists of the seventeenth century. Nearly 400 years later, she continues to surprise scholars and art historians alike with her personal life, including overcoming a traumatic rape and financial issues. People are often struck by the surprisingly captivating nature of her works, like *Susanna and the Elders* and *Judith Slaying Holofernes*. This research paper produces a thorough examination and explanation of her early life leading into Florence, including how significant factors may have influenced her works, such as different Italian clothing styles varying from city to city, and her personal experience with sexual assault. This paper argues that Artemisia defied expectations throughout her life by rejecting others' claims that her works were a coping mechanism for her sexual assault and rejecting preconceived ideas of a typical woman artist. Gentileschi demonstrates that we should not view work through the lens of the artist's experiences, but the artist themselves.

1. Introduction

The importance or meaning of an artist's work is a topic that is often contentious. Some art historians spend too much time focusing on the meaning of the artwork, extrapolating a completely different meaning than what the artist was originally trying to convey. This is particularly true for the seventeenth-century Italian painter, Artemisia Gentileschi. As is widely known, women from the seventeenth century did not have access to the same rights as men. Women could not own land and struggled to be recognized as artists of their time. Notably, Gentileschi was a successful artist during her time. Art historians are still uncovering her works. Artemisia has constantly challenged current and past art historians' preconceived notions of what it means to be a woman in a male-dominated field, defying expectations placed upon her by today's society and society 400 years ago. However, her artwork is sometimes

overlooked or overshadowed by events in her personal life.

Born on July 8, 1593, Artemisia Gentileschi grew up in Rome, a cultural hotspot for any aspiring artist. She was born to her mother, Prudence, and a well-known artist, Orazio Gentileschi. Shortly after losing her mother at the age of 12, Artemisia started painting with her father in his workshop. Orazio was a respected artist of his time, holding relations with the famous Baroque painter, Carravaggio, and the Carracci Family. At the time Artemisia was growing up, Orazio had been drawn to study the style of *Carravagism*. This style, spearheaded by Caravaggio himself, focused on using live models to study form and transfer the artist's ideas to real life. Accompanied by the style of *Chiaroscuro*, creating extreme lights and darks within a painting, *Carravagism* was the perfect representation of true, Baroque-style art, of which Orazio had a great interest.

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Studying with her father, Artemisia completed her first masterpiece at the age of seventeen, titled *Susanna and the Elders* (Fig. 1). Currently, it is one of her most formally recognized works by art history professionals and civilians alike. The painting was not considered an original idea because many versions of *Susanna and the Elders* had been created in the past. This subject had been seen and painted many times before, much like the concept of Madonna and Child. But what made her work stand out above the others was the sophistication that accompanied it. In the painting, Susanna is not unaware of the two men behind her, but she is instead fully aware and reacting to them. Mary Garrard, an American art historian, raised the point in her 1989 Book, “Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art,” that instead of seeing the painting through the eye of the predator, we see it through the eyes of the victim, a unique perspective for this subject. This lays the groundwork for the rest of Artemisia’s life, and is followed by her infamous rape trial, which instantly overshadowed her prior success.

2. Methods

This research paper uses various scholarly sources to create a background and basis for the life of Artemisia Gentileschi. Sheila Barker’s “The Excellence of Women in the Medici Court” and Caroline Murphy’s “The Economics of the Woman Artist” help to provide an understanding of the lives of women, specifically female artists, in 17th-century Italy. Elizabeth Cohen’s scholarly journal provides valuable insight into Artemisia’s rape trial, something essential to discuss when arguing that her artwork should not be viewed as a response to rape. The article by DeLamarter and Westervelt dives further into the psychological impacts on rape victims, which gives us a

thorough look into why this is such an important topic to bring up within this paper. Mary Garrard and Rebecca Mead both provide scholarly articles as sources for Artemisia’s life. For this paper, much of Artemisia’s general background was sourced from these. Finally, the images are sourced from the gallery websites from which they each reside and provide us with visual examples of Artemisia’s work.

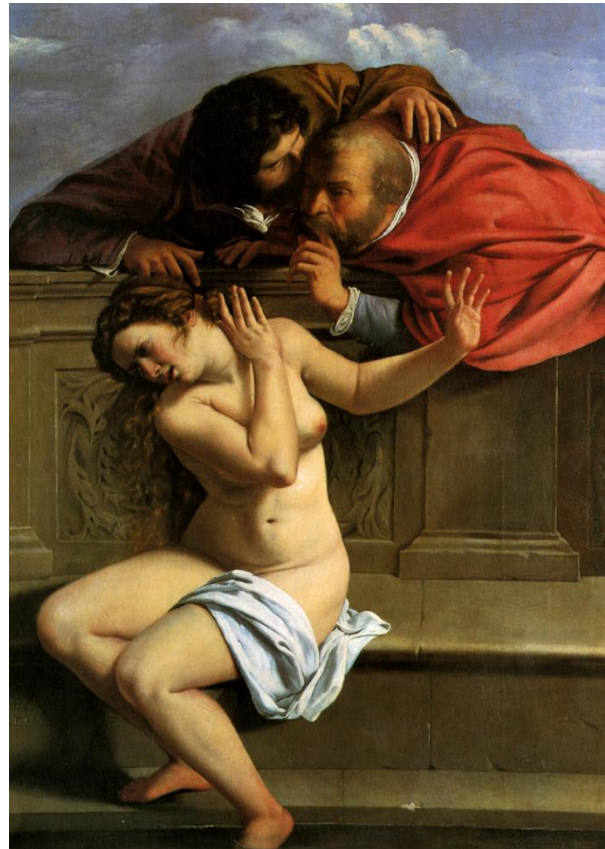


Figure 1. *Susanna and the Elders*, Artemisia Gentileschi, circa 1610, oil on canvas, 170 cm × 119 cm (67 in × 47 in), Schloss Weißenstein, Pommersfelden.

3. Women in the Art World

As stated before, Artemisia can be considered the exception when discussing acclaimed female artists of the past. Women in the art world were rare. Woman artists at the time likely had a connection to other male artists or were from a wealthy family. Exceptions did exist, such as the female artist Properzia de’ Rozzi, who “apparently

had no family, a vital component of a woman's support network" (Murphy 22). The main issue for female artists at the time was the fact that they were typically paid significantly less than their male counterparts for commissions, mostly because "Business transactions could imperil what was deemed a woman's most valuable commodity—her honor" (Murphy 22). Women like Properzia de' Rossi and Sofonisba Anguissola, both popular women in art at the time, struggled to receive funding for their sculptures and paintings. However, for her work at San Petronio, de' Rossi was paid an equal amount to other male artists for her work. She died less than three years after this accomplishment in 1529.

As is true today, being an artist at this time was more than for the love of making and creating works. Artists had to make a living, just like any other career. This career did not only involve making beautiful works for people to see. Making art profitable involved bartering for deals on fabrics, paints, and other supplies, as well as brokering deals for your works. This presents one of the main reasons that we see fewer women in the art world at the time. Women were discouraged from anything to do with business, making it more difficult for them to practice art as a profession.

There were some clear aspects that helped Artemisia Gentileschi's success, besides her incredible talent. As her father was a well-known artist at the time, he knew artists like Caravaggio and Agostino Tassi. Through her father, Artemisia had access to artists' materials and could gain knowledge of the subject from a young age. After she married in 1612, Artemisia moved to Florence with her husband. Her husband, Perantonio Stiatessi, was from Florence and had much of his family living there at the time. Artemisia used these connections within her husband's family to foster connections in Florence, further

spearheading her into popularity.

4. The Rape of Artemisia

A friend and colleague of her father's, Agostino Tassi, was a merited artist in his own right. By this time, Tassi already carried a poor reputation for unspecified crimes. However, he proved to be an excellent associate of Orazio's and was close to the Gentileschi family, both in relations and proximity. In 1611, when Artemisia was seventeen years old, Tassi raped her in her home during a rare moment when the two were unaccompanied. After he had taken her virginity, Tassi promised to marry her, so that she would be kept pure. Tassi did not keep this promise.

At this time, the idea of rape as a concept was not how we think of it today. Now, the act is considered a vile violation of a person's rights and consent. People who have experienced this trauma can be severely impacted, affecting their familial, platonic, and romantic relationships. In the United States, trials in the present day consist of a judge and a jury, in which the jury focuses on the credibility of both the victim and the defendant (DeLamarter, Westervelt 4). Our intuitive understanding today of the psychological factors in these trials and the act itself is far removed from conceptions of rape in the seventeenth century. For Artemisia, this was a violation of her body and a violation of her social standing. Tassi's agreement to marry Artemisia was the only thing that kept this crime from being reported. However, in 1612, Orazio Gentileschi called for a prosecution trial against Agostino Tassi for the rape of his daughter. The trial lasted around seven months and included countless hours of interrogation involving both Artemisia and Tassi. It concluded with Tassi being prosecuted for his crime, but for unknown reasons, his sentence was never legally enforced. He fled Rome, avoiding

any punishment for his crime.

5. Artemisia's Time in Florence

Artemisia's time in Florence is undoubtedly when we see the greatest shift in her personal life and her career. Soon after the rape trial ended, she married a Florentine man by the name of Perantonio Stiatessi. She and Stiatessi moved to Florence quickly after their marriage. There are many speculations about why she ended up in Florence. Due to the timing of this event being directly after the trial, Artemisia may have fled Rome to avoid the stain her reputation might have faced. It is also possible that they moved to Florence to be close to Stiatessi's family members living there at the time. Regardless of the reason, Artemisia had moved across the country by 1613, gaining Florence citizenship through her marriage to Stiatessi, and moving into her father-in-law's home.

Having Florence citizenship was the first step in gaining notoriety within the Florence artistic community. However, she faced many challenges throughout these years in Florence. She had become pregnant with her first child, who died in infancy. Artemisia lacked proper artistic materials, making it difficult for her to complete her works. Because of various financial struggles (Barker 11), she began reaching out to her family in Florence and even started going by the family name, Lomi. Using this last name helped her gain popularity and good standing in Florence, as the Lomi family was well-known and well-established there. Her uncle, Aurelio Lomi, provided paints of impeccable quality in these early years of her Florentine career. Her husband's family was also a huge resource for her throughout this time. Her father-in-law, Vincenzo Stiatessi, was a renowned seamstress in the area and allowed her to use his credit at silk merchants and even gave her a room

in his home where she could work. With his skill, he also crafted various detailed and intricate pieces of clothing for Artemisia, which helped her obtain her brand of the opulent, Caravaggesque painting style. Integrating these clothes into her paintings also gave them a distinct Florentine style, as the clothes her father-in-law made were on trend for the time in Florence. In current times, this can help us identify the period and location of certain works. Artemisia's increasing status in Florence led to more commissions. Artemisia's image and artwork became one of picturesque Florentine beauty, accentuated by rich clothing and expensive materials.

Artemisia had a talent when it came to attracting customers. This included dedication to her craft and small schemes to drum up business. More than once, she had been rumored to establish large credit accounts with merchants throughout Florence. When she couldn't pay these debts, she instead offered to paint works for them, in exchange for clearing her debts. In doing this, Artemisia hoped to generate buzz about her artworks and to gain larger commissions. Her works, such as *Self-Portrait as a Lute Player* (Fig. 2), are thought to have been commissions of this time.



Figure 2. *Self-Portrait as a Lute Player*, Artemisia Gentileschi, 1614, oil on canvas, 77.5 × 71.8 cm (30 ½ × 28 ¼ in), Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. Charles H. Schwartz Endowment Fund 2014.4.1

6. The Art of Defiance

Through this small snapshot of Artemisia's early life, we know that she was not just an artist. She was a daughter, a wife, a mother, and a woman. Throughout difficult experiences, such as suffering a rape and struggling to make ends meet in Florence, she kept creating art. Inspired by other great painters of her time, she created her own interpretation and version of Baroque-style painting.

Art historians often hypothesize that Artemisia's experiences led her to expressions of rebellion in her works, such as in *Susanna and the Elders* (Fig. 1), and her famous version of *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (Fig. 3). In both works, she depicts common subjects of the time; however, she does so in an attention-grabbing way. These paintings portrayed a sense of aggression that had not been seen before. The assumptions made by historians could be correct; often, artists paint what they know or what they feel. However, many tend to let the events of her life dictate how her paintings are viewed. I argue that we must not lose sight of the broader picture of these works to examine any meanings behind what Artemisia represented. Artemisia's art style is one of defiance. We see this in the dramatic comparison to other works of the time. While other artists created more conservative works, both in message and in imagery, Artemisia challenged artistic convention, and social conventions for women. A woman painter from the seventeenth century who is still renowned today is rare. Artemisia's works are still being discovered and discussed throughout the art world.

7. Conclusion

Artemisia's style and artworks are more than psychological distillations of her traumatic past.

Her artwork was made to defy the expectations previously formed by her male counterparts about what female art could or should look like. From the history of her life to her artistic style, she forces us to look through the lens she carefully crafted. This lens was not meant to show her history of sexual assault or her financial struggles, but to send the message that women in art should not be looked down on, and that their work can defy expectations.

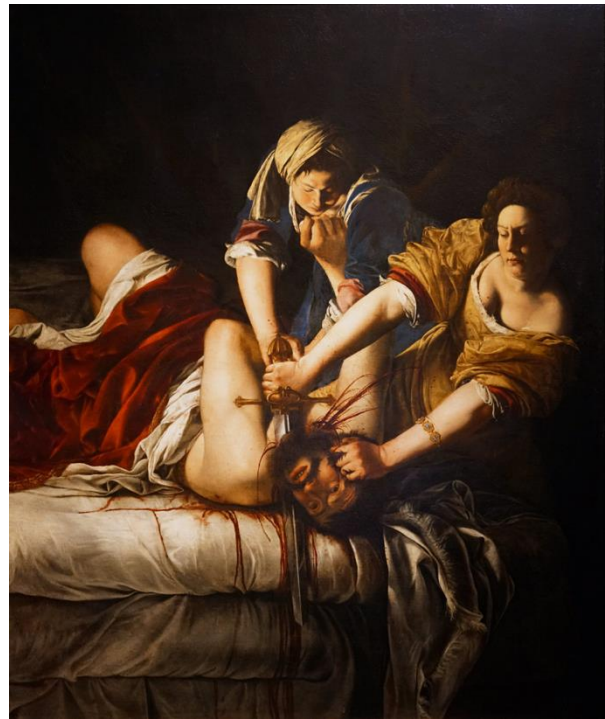


Figure 3. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1620–21, oil on canvas, 162.5 x 199 cm (Uffizi Gallery, Florence; photo: [Steven Zucker](#), CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

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