Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653), was a painter so gifted, and of such high caliber, that she was included in my traditional art history education — traditional art history, of course, being the study of white men creating for the visual arts. To understand how important this inclusion was, you need to know that during my study of approximately 500+ years of art, I can only recall perhaps four female artists being a part of the curriculum.

Artemisia was bold in her depictions and strong willed in character. Her paintings and her personal life reveal an extraordinary woman who worked hard to secure a career which eventually found her a place in history. Her work has not just resonated over the last 400 years, but today is more relevant than ever in light of the MeToo movement. Despite success during her life time — she was eventually accepted by the Accademia delle Arti del Disegno and she received commissions from around Europe — there were many obstacles and her artistic acknowledgment was hard won. She was treated with disdain from her more "serious" male counterparts. Her work was often attributed to her father — during her life and after her death. And one incident was so severe in nature that it overshadowed her work, ruined her personal reputation, and changed her life.

Opposite Page: Susanna and the Elders, 1610, oil on canvas, 51 x 79 in, Collection, Pommersfelden, Germany
The Page: Judith Slaying Holofernes, 1620, oil on canvas, 58.5 x 108 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

BY LISA MIKULSKI
ARTEMISIA'S YOUTH

She was born in Rome on July 8th, 1593 to Prudentia Montone and Orazio Gentileschi, and it was her painterly father, Orazio, who under- took the training of his daughter as an artist. It wasn’t long before he recognized the genius that lay within his child. It was rare for a female to be working in the fine arts during the 17th century. The Gentileschi’s were not a particularly wealthy family, so it was due to Orazio being a professional painter which provided Artemisia with the opportunity to learn the craft. This was a not a time period when women were encouraged to pursue careers. Nonetheless, Artemisia was a painter, and that was exactly what she was going to do.

Her early orbit consisted of some of Rome’s greatest artists and this included the innundy master painter Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, known to us as Caravaggio. Caravaggio, my personal favorite and the artist which changed the course of my career, greatly influenced Artemisia’s work in the use of dramatic chiaroscuro — the vivid rendering of light and shadow on canvas.

At age sixteen, she produced one of her greatest works, Susanna and the Elders (1610). Artemisia’s subject matter was typical for Baroque painters — historical, religious, or military themes — but what makes her work truly remarkable are her interpretations of these themes. Male artists tended to depict women as shy, demure, sin and ribbon covered, characters. Artemisia’s women are strong, capable, and fierce. Her compositions are bold, close to the canvas, and in your face.

Having received her early training by her father, she sought to further her education seeking admittance into the art academies. Those schools, however, rejected her and it was decided that she would continue her work under the tutelage of one of her father’s associates, Agostino Tassi.

THE RAPE OF ARTEMISIA

It was at this point, that Artemisia’s life took a turn. Tassi raped the 17 year old Artemisia. Snaking his way into her bedroom, he forced himself upon Artemisia. She fought back. He then threw me on to the edge of the bed, pushing me with a shock. To make this story even more disconcerting, unbeknownst to her, Tassi was already married. Over the next several months, Tassi continued to have his way with the young artist and it wasn’t until he reneged on the proposal of Caravaggio’s pressed charges. The court hearing lasted seven months with Artemisia being tortured by sibille (a process where ropes were tied to her fingers and tightened) to determine her truthfulness. There were various witnesses who testified as to the vile character of Tassi — he had already been imprisoned twice before, once for incest and the second time for arranging to have his wife’s sister, he fathered children with her.

The judge eventually ruled in favor of Artemisia and Tassi was sentenced to five years in prison. He never served his time. As a result, humiliated and with her reputation in tatters, she fled to Florence.

Once in Florence, Artemisia saw immediate success and it was in that city that she began working on several versions of the Old Testament story of Judith and Holofernes. It was a theme which galled her, and she returned to it again and again over the course of seven years.

The story of Judith and Holofernes is about a woman who plots, with the help of her hand maiden, to kill a warlord who’s besieged her city. Judith, the heroine, slays Holofernes by beheading him and saves her people. It was a common theme in art history, but Artemisia gives it a whole new visage.

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Finally in 1620, on a 199 x 162.5 cm canvas, we see Artemisia’s final revenge.

FLORENCE AND ARTEMISIA’S REVENGE

Here is Judith and her hand maiden with their sleeves rolled up past their elbows. They are not demure but focused and resolute as they stand over the writhing body of Holofernes. The maid uses both of her hands to forcibly pin him down, and Judith has put her knee upon the man’s chest.

And there he is, Holofernes. Flat on his back, eyes wide open and aware, as Judith slices her sword across his throat. Blood spurs and gushes from him the white bed linens and spraying droplets across Judith’s bodice and breast.

The story of Judith and Holofernes may well have been a theme Artemisia simply choose, as did her male contemporaries. I know, however, that trauma changes a person. Forever. You can’t go back and that trauma must in some way be worked through.

"He then threw me on to the edge of the bed, pushing me with a hand on my breast, and he put a knee between my thighs to prevent me from closing them. Lifting my clothes, he placed a hand with a handful of his mouth to keep me from screaming."

I included the transcript from the hearing because I feel strongly that along with her artistic expression, readers need to hear Artemisia’s voice. It is my belief that she knew exactly what she was doing as an artist, did so deliberately, and like other survivors of abuse, she prevailed magnificently. Who says that one can not be a great artist and still express a personal narrative. Even a traumatic one. To think otherwise, is to diminish the strength and the reality of that artist. We are, all of us, a canvas of our experiences.

Sources:
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