

ARTEMISIA'S REVENGE



A

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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, 170 x 119 cm, Schönborn Collection, Pommersfelden, Germany

This Page: *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1620, oil on canvas, 146.5 x 108 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

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 undertook 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 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 incendiary 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, silk 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.

According to the court transcripts (1612), which are still available today:

"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 handkerchief on my mouth to keep me from screaming."

"I scratched his face," she testified, "and pulled his hair, and before he penetrated me again, I grasped his penis so tight that I even removed a piece of flesh."

But she was physically outmatched.

After Tassi was done with her, she rushed to a drawer and retrieved a knife. "I'd like to kill you with this knife because you have dishonored



Self-portrait as the Allegory of Painting, 1639, oil on canvas, 98.6 x 75.2 cm, Royal Collection Trust, UK



Judith and her Maidservant, 1619, oil on canvas, 114 x 93.5 cm, Galleria Palatina, Florence, Italy

me," she shouted. He opened his coat, taunting her, and said, "Here I am." She came at him with the knife but he shielded himself. "Otherwise," she said, "I might have killed him."

So angry and devastated was Artemisia, that Tassi took her hand and promised to marry her thus restoring her honor. According to transcripts, she said his promise did, in fact, "calm her". Remember, Artemisia was very young and I have to believe also, in a state of 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 that Orazio pressed charges.

The court hearing lasted seven months with Artemisia being tortured by sibilite (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 murdered. There were other charges leveled against him as well. He was believed to have raped his first wife and then while living with 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 commissioned artist, he was protected by Pope Innocent X. Artemisia, however, humiliated and with her reputation in tatters, fled to Florence and was quickly married off to Pietro Stiattesi.

FLORENCE AND ARTEMISIA'S REVENGE



Once in Florence, Artemisia saw immediate success and it was in that city where 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.

Finally in 1620, on a 199 x 162.5 cm canvas, we see Artemisia's final 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 spurts and gushes from him covering the white bed linens and spraying droplets across Judith's bodice and breast. With her left hand, she grabs a hold of his head, hair entangled between her fingers, as she completes the deed.

One more important element. The face of Judith is a self portrait of Artemisia, and the wide eyed frenzied face of Holofernes is that of ... well Tassi, of course.

I do not wish to sensationalize the work of Artemisia Gentileschi for she is, first and foremost, an exceptional artist. Much has been made of the rape of Artemisia whereby some scholars feel the violation of the artist and its pursuant court hearing overshadows her fine work. They believe that to attribute this work to her trauma is to belittle her talent. I wholeheartedly disagree.

The work 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 exorcised.

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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