

Artemisia's Moment

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Smithsonian, May, 2002



HOLOFERNES' HEAD IS UPSIDE DOWN. HIS FACE WRITHES IN AGONY. JUDITH drives her knee into his rib cage as he fights wildly, pushing his fist against her maidservant's breastbone. As Judith slices Holofernes' neck, blood spurts from his throat and runs onto the white linen bedsheets.

Nearly 400 years later, even jaded citizens of the modern world are startled by this image—a painting of the key moment in the story of Judith, the Jewish widow who saves the city of Bethulia from attacking Assyrians by murdering their commander. To Italian art patrons of the early 17th century, with their taste for dramatic, even violent, imagery, the artist's gender and notoriety only heightened the painting's effect. Tarnished by scandal and hindered by a society that expected women to be either nuns or wives, Artemisia Gentileschi nevertheless became the most accomplished female painter of her time. She was, according to the inscription on artist Jerome David's engraving of her, "A miracle in painting, more easily envied than imitated."

Artist Orazio Gentileschi (above in a c. 1632 portrait by Anthony van Dyck) taught and promoted his daughter Artemisia (right in her c. 1615 – 1617 *Self-Portrait as a Lute Player*).



These days, after centuries of neglect, Artemisia is everywhere. *The New York Times* called her "this season's 'it' girl." A popular new novel, *The Passion of Artemisia* by Susan Vreeland, was published in January, and the following month, *Lapis Blue Blood Red*, a play about her, opened off-Broadway. (Several scholarly books, a catalogue raisonné and two other novels have also been written about her, and one of her works even figured in the plot of the *Masterpiece Theatre* series *Painted Lady* starring Helen Mirren. In 1997, she was the subject of a French film, *Artemisia*.) Most important, an exhibition of her works—and those of her once more-celebrated father, Orazio—at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art has gone a long way toward solidifying her reputation as a dynamic and original artist, one of the very few female painters of her time bold enough to tackle historical and allegorical themes.

"Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi: Father and Daughter Painters in Baroque Italy" features 51 paintings by Orazio and 35 by Artemisia. On view through May 12 at the Met before moving to the Saint Louis Art Museum (June 4 through September 15), this first retrospective of the father's and daughter's works highlights their divergent responses to Baroque influences.

Though in Artemisia's case the recognition is long over-due, the strong-willed self-promoter enjoyed considerable success in her own lifetime. Painter to dukes, princes, cardinals and kings, she was the first woman admitted to the prestigious Accademia del Disegno. "I have seen myself honored by all the kings and rulers of Europe to whom I have sent my works, not only with great gifts but also with most favored letters, which I keep with me," she wrote to her friend the astronomer Galileo in 1635. But her artistic achievements have had to compete with a real-life event. At the age of 17, she was raped by a colleague of her father's. The subsequent trial, and the 300-page transcript of it that survived, have shaped history's assessment of the artist.

ORAZIO GENTILESCHI WAS ONE OF THE FIRST PAINTERS TO respond to a new aesthetic bursting forth in Rome in 1600, Artemisia's 7th summer. The unveiling of a single commission—Caravaggio's two works on the life of Saint Matthew—introduced key elements of a new canon, eventually called Baroque. Until that summer, Orazio had supported himself, his wife and four children by executing rather bland commissions for various altarpieces and chapels in Rome. But thunderstruck by Caravaggio's vision, 37-Year-old Orazio enthusiastically embraced the younger artist's dramatic narratives, dynamic plays of light and shadow, energetic compositions, and close-ups of reality, such as a horse's rump or a rotting corpse. Caravaggio scandalized the art world by painting directly, in an unidealized fashion, from live models, some of whom, rumor had it, were prostitutes; rivals even claimed he had used the body of a drowned woman as a model for his stiffened, barefoot Mother of Christ on her deathbed.



Orazio's 1609 *Madonna and Child* is noted for its lyrical use of color and light, its Caravaggesque naturalism and its tenderness.

Orazio befriended Caravaggio and made the rounds with him of cheap taverns. But owing perhaps to the younger man's hotheadedness and Orazio's own "savage temperament," as one contemporary described it, the friendship was short-lived. Caravaggio's influence, however, was not. For Orazio's magnificent *Madonna and Child* (1609), he drafted as his models a neighbor from the parish of Santa Maria del Popolo, where he was living at the time, and her child. His naturalistic depiction of the Madonna, without halo or jewelry, tenderly nursing, reflects Caravaggio's influence and suggests a softer side to Orazio's character.



In her powerful rendition of *Susanna and the Elders*, painted when she was just 17, Artemisia portrays an anguished Susanna resisting the elders' lechery. Finished in 1610, it is her first known work.

ARTEMISIA WAS 12 YEARS OLD IN 1605, THE YEAR HER mother, Prudentia Montoni, died in childbirth. Orazio initially harbored no artistic ambitions for his only daughter—envisioning a life as a nun for her instead. But Artemisia's ambition and talent soon asserted themselves. By the time she was 15, under her father's tutelage, she had begun to assimilate Caravaggio's methods. For her earliest known painting, *Susanna and the Elders* (1610), she likely used a live model, possibly herself reflected in a mirror. Rendering a scene from the biblical story of Susanna, in which two elders lust after a young matron, Artemisia depicted a voluptuous nude woman contorted into a defensive posture by the advances of two conspiring lechers. The work would prove all too prophetic.

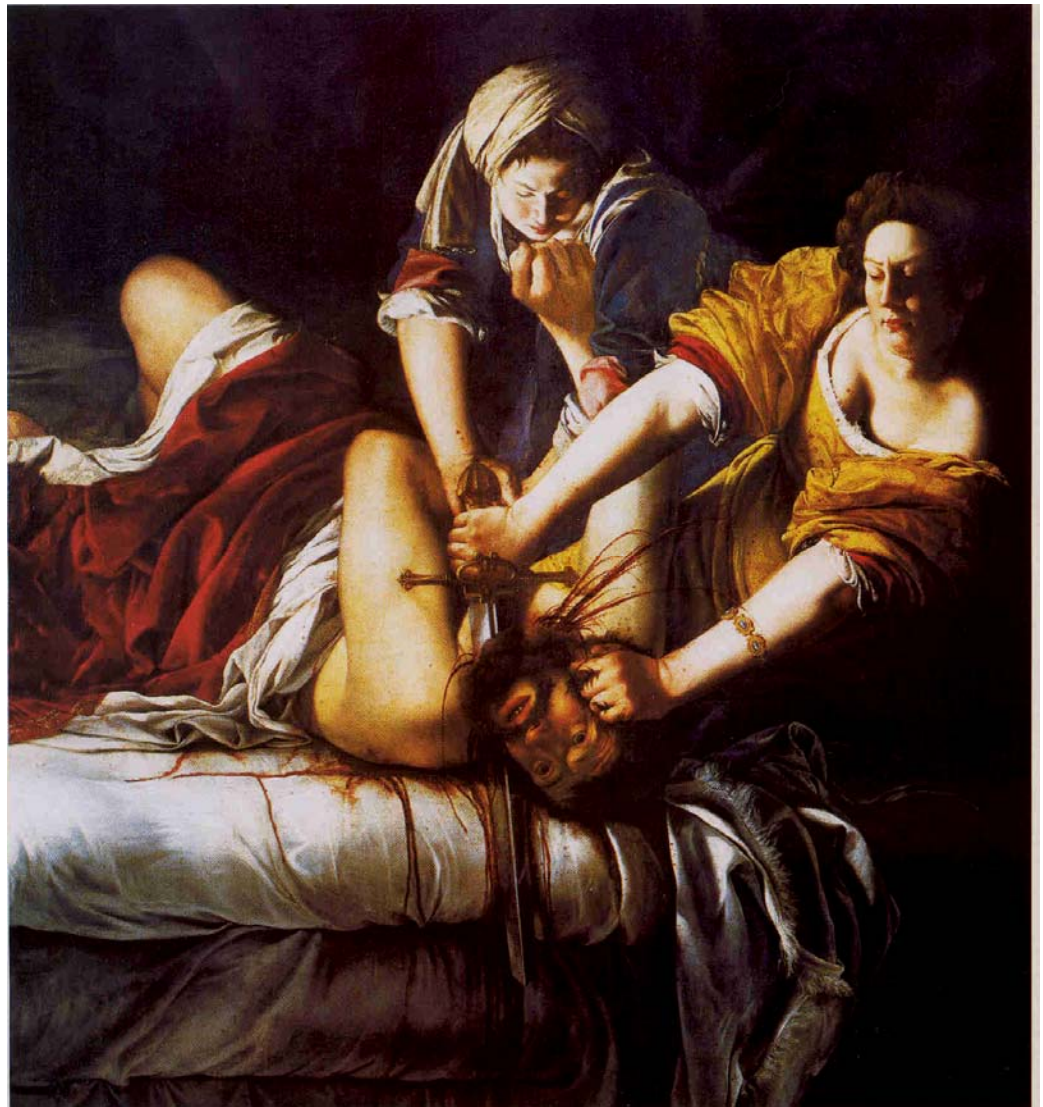
Although Orazio kept his daughter confined to his house, according to the custom among respectable Romans of the time, the Gentileschi domicile also functioned as his studio, with its constant traffic of models, colleagues and patrons. The proximity to men fueled rumors that marred young Artemisia's reputation. On May 6, 1611, gossip turned to real injury. Having entrusted his 17-Year-old daughter's supervision to a family friend, Orazio was away from the house when his business associate, and fellow painter, Agostino Tassi entered the home and raped Artemisia.

At the time, rape was viewed more as a crime against a family's honor than as a violation of a woman. Thus, only when the married Tassi reneged on his promise to marry Artemisia did Orazio bring charges against him. In

the ensuing eight-month trial, Artemisia testified that she was painting when Tassi came into the room shouting, "Not so much painting, not so much painting." He then grabbed the palette and brushes from her hands and threw them to the floor. She fought and scratched to no avail, finally attacking him with a knife. To establish her truthfulness, authorities administered a primitive lie detector test—in the form of torture by thumbscrews, a common practice at the time. As the cords were tightened around her fingers, she was said to have cried out to Tassi, "This is the ring you give me, and these are your promises. "

She must have passed the test; Tassi was convicted and sentenced to a five-year banishment from Rome (a punishment apparently never enforced). To get Artemisia away from Rome and the attendant scandal, Orazio arranged for her to marry a minor Florentine painter named Pierantonio Stiattesi. Shortly after the wedding, the newlyweds left for Florence, where Orazio had asked for patronage for his daughter from the grand duchess of Tuscany. "[She has] become so skilled that I can venture to say that today she has no peer," he had boasted to the duchess. "Indeed, she has produced works which demonstrate a level of understanding that perhaps even the principal masters of the profession have not attained."

Artemisia's work in Florence, where she perfected her sense of color in self-portraits and paintings such as the dazzling *Conversion of the Magdalene*, would mark the first step in her path toward artistic renown. By the time she left Florence in 1620 or 1621, still in her late 20s, she had painted at least seven works for the influential Grand Duke Cosimo II de' Medici and his family. But as she wrote to him, "troubles at home and with my family,"—the loss of three children and her husband's apparent infidelity and extravagant spending—had taken their toll.



In Artemisia's sensational 1620 version of *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, painted for Cosimo II de' Medici, blood takes center stage; a drop stains Judith's breast, rivulets darken the sheets. Details such as the delicate bracelet on her arm make the violence even more shocking.

Eager for a fresh start, she moved to Rome and took a house on the Via del Corso with her husband and daughter Prudentia (the only one of their four children to survive). Financial distress and her husband's jealousy, however, continued to erode her marriage. One night in 1622, after finding a group of Spaniards on his doorstep serenading his wife, Pierantonio allegedly slashed one of them in the face. He later walked out on Artemisia and Prudentia (who would also become an artist).

The single mother found commissions hard to come by (Roman tastes had changed while Artemisia was in Florence). In 1627, with hope for new patronage, she moved to Venice, where she received a commission from Philip IV of Spain to paint a companion piece to Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony van Dyck's *Discovery of Achilles*. Two years later, fleeing the plague of 1630 (which wiped out one-third of Venice's population), Artemisia moved on to Naples, then under Spanish rule. There she completed the first altarpiece of her career and a public commission for a major church—honors that had eluded her perhaps because of her gender. Over the years, Artemisia would repeatedly complain about the pitfalls of competing in an exclusively male domain. "You feel sorry for me because a woman's name raises doubts until her work is seen," she wrote to her last major patron, Don Antonio Ruffo, chafing at having to haggle over prices and constantly defend the value and originality of her art. "If I were a man," she declared, "I can't imagine it would have turned out this way."

ORAZIO HAD STAYED IN ROME WHEN ARTEMISIA LEFT FOR Florence and had gained a reputation as one of the finest painters in that city, winning commissions for important altarpieces and earning the patronage of the wealthy Savelli family. In 1621, at the invitation of Genoese nobleman Giovan Antonio Sauli, he moved to Genoa, where he embarked on the most significant phase of his career, painting a series of sensual compositions for Sauli: a *Penitent Magdalene*, a *Danae* and the multifigured *Lot and His Daughters*. It was here that he also painted his masterful *Annunciation*. "These are stunning works of art," says Judith Mann, curator of early European art at the Saint Louis An Museum and cocurator of the current exhibition. "They make you gasp as you walk into the room."



In Orazio's *Annunciation* (left), a depiction of the angel Gabriel kneeling before the Virgin Mary, an opulent red curtain, crisp white bedsheets and the Virgin's delicate gold scarf catch the light. Orazio's formal arrangement of the figures infuses the painting with a devotional solemnity. The painting suggests the stylistic divergence between father and daughter after each left Rome. Orazio tempered the drama he learned from Caravaggio with his own sense of refinement. His more formal compositions emphasize color and an accurate rendering of surface and texture rather than dramatic gestures. Artemisia created a sense of immediacy and used telltale details—such as the elegant bracelet circling Judith's murderous arm—as a counterpoint to her graphic depictions, thereby heightening the drama.

In Artemisia's circa 1625-1627 *Judith and Her Maidservant*, (right) a less grisly version of the death of Holofernes often cited as a case study of high Baroque, Judith and her servant pause, seeming to hear a noise outside Holofernes' tent. The shadowy interior is theatrically illuminated by a single candle.



Judith's hand shields her face from the glow, drawing attention to Holofernes' discarded iron gauntlet. The viewer's eye travels to the object in the maidservant's hands: Holofernes' severed head.



"Paintings of what you can't see, what you can't hear, abound in 17th-century art," says Keith Christiansen, curator of Italian paintings at the Met and cocurator of the exhibition. In a painting of the same theme done 20 years earlier (right), Orazio took a different tack. In his version, the women also look offstage, but their body language is more stylized. The folds of their dresses match, as do their profiles, as if the two assassins are in a dance. "Artemisia often takes the George Lucas route, aiming for theatrical effect," says Christiansen. "She wants you to be thoroughly repulsed. Orazio communicates this psychological moment in a formal way, making even the ugly head beautiful. He favors fabric; she favors

blood. He's the soft shoe to her stiletto."

Given Artemisia's early trauma, many modern viewers see such works as *Judith and Her Maidservant* and, most particularly, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, as revenge painting. But scholars disagree about the significance of the rape in her work. Wealthy patrons with a taste for violence and eroticism may have had as much to do with her subject matter as painful memories (and Judith was a popular subject with male artists also). Furthermore, as Mann notes, fewer than a quarter of Artemisia's known paintings feature vengeful women. "We don't give Artemisia her due if we see her in that rut," Mann says. "We are probably missing a lot because of that expectation." Also missing, alas, are most of the paintings on which her reputation as a portraitist was built. Only the *Portrait of a Gonfaloniere* (a civic magistrate) and a few self-portraits, such as *La Pittura*, remain. In *Self-Portrait as a Lute Player*, likely painted while Artemisia was in Florence, the artist, looking serenely beautiful, portrays herself as a musician in elegant Florentine dress.

AS ORAZIO ENTERED HIS 60s, HIS success in Genoa emboldened him to market his skills to Marie de' Medici, the queen mother of France and a member of the most prestigious family in Tuscany. It was at her request that he moved to Paris in 1624, where he executed paintings for her Palais du Luxembourg. Orazio's connection to the queen mother paid other dividends. Not long after her daughter Henrietta Maria married Charles I of England, Orazio was recruited by the duke of Buckingham, whom he had met at the wedding, to come to the court of the English king.

The 62-year-old Orazio was installed in spacious London quarters, given generous living expenses and invited to dinners with royalty. As the only Italian painter and one of the few Catholic artists in London, he found his way into the circle of the Catholic queen Henrietta Maria. She soon had him working on the most extensive project of his career—the ceiling of her house at Greenwich—a nine-canvas representation of allegorical figures.

In 1638 or 1639, after sidestepping a four-year summons from Charles I and an entreaty from her father, Artemisia finally moved to London herself. Her attempts to secure work from powerful connections in Italy had failed, and despite the disagreeable prospect of working for a Protestant king and the strain of the trip, she needed money badly.

Details of any reunion with her father—it would have been at least 17 years since they had seen each other—are lost. In February 1639, Orazio died at age 75, after 13 years of service to the court of Charles I, who honored him with a lavish funeral.

Artemisia remained in London for two years, until assurances of work brought her back around 1641 to Naples, where she lived until her death in 1652 or '53, producing works such as *Galatea* and *Diana at Her Bath* for Don Antonio Ruffo. When he offered her less than the agreed-on price for the Diana, Artemisia was incensed: "I think Your Most Illustrious Lordship will not suffer any loss with me," she wrote in 1649, "and that you will find the spirit of Caesar in this soul of a woman."

In 1653, shortly after Artemisia's death, two well-known poets, Pietro Michiele and Gianfrancesco Loredan, the latter of whom had once written love letters to her, collaborated in publishing a poem written in her voice: "In painting the portraits of this one and that one, / I acquired infinite merit in the world. / In carving the horns [of the cuckold] that I gave to my husband, / I abandoned the brush and took up the chisel. "

Although perhaps the sentiments of a rejected suitor, the lines aptly capture Artemisia's historic dilemma: for centuries her talent was overshadowed by the rumors and scandal surrounding her personal life. Now, she is getting the recognition she felt she deserved. "The works," she once declared, "will speak for themselves. "

Mary O'Neill wrote on Renaissance portraits of women in September, 2001.

This reading assignment continues with Artemisia, on being cheated.