



13-02 ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI

Artemisia Gentileschi,
Self-Portrait as the
Allegory of Painting,
c.1638-9

- This is one of about 200 talks I am recording on the History of Western Art. The talks are divided into sections and this is Section 13 on the Baroque and this lecture is on Artemisia Gentileschi.
- This is a portrait she painted when she was 45 years old and an established artist known throughout Europe. She is painting herself as the personification of painting.

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- <https://www.rct.uk/collection/stories/artemisia-gentileschi>

BIO:ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI

1593: Artemisia Gentileschi was born on July 8 in Rome, the eldest child of Prudenzia di Ottaviano Montoni and the Tuscan painter Orazio Gentileschi¹². She was baptized two days after her birth in the church of San Lorenzo in Lucina. Artemisia's early life was steeped in art, as she was raised in a family of painters. Her father, grandfather Baccio Lomi, and uncle Aurelio Lomi were all well-known artists². Following her mother's death in 1605, Artemisia was primarily raised by her father, who introduced her to painting in his workshop

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1610: At the age of 17, Artemisia completed her earliest surviving work, "Susanna and the Elders," demonstrating her remarkable talent and the influence of Caravaggio's style, which she had absorbed through her father's work 1. Despite having only three years of formal training, Artemisia's skills were already exceptional, with her father boasting that she was peerless among her peers 1. Her approach to subject matter differed from her father's, as she took a highly naturalistic approach compared to his more idealized works.

1612: A pivotal and traumatic event occurred in Artemisia's life when she was raped by Agostino Tassi, one of her father's colleagues 3 4. This incident led to a seven-month trial that would have a lasting impact on Artemisia's life and work. During the trial, it was revealed that Tassi had a history of sexual violence, having been previously accused of raping both his sister-in-law and one of his wives 4. The court proceedings were grueling for Artemisia, who had to undergo physical examinations and torture with thumbscrews to "verify" her testimony 3. Despite Tassi's denials and attempts to discredit Artemisia, he was ultimately convicted and sentenced to two years in prison, though his verdict was later annulled 4.

1613: Following the trial, Artemisia married Pierantonio Stiattesi, a Florentine painter, and moved to Florence⁵. This move marked the beginning of a new chapter in her life and career. In Florence, Artemisia flourished as an artist, enjoying the patronage of Cosimo de' Medici, the grand duke of Tuscany, among others 5. Her time in Florence allowed her to develop her unique style and establish herself as a formidable artist in her own right.

1627: Artemisia's reputation continued to grow, and she received a commission from King Philip IV of Spain, demonstrating her international acclaim 5. Throughout her career, she befriended many artists, writers, and thinkers of her time, including the famed astronomer Galileo. Artemisia's work during this period showcased her mastery of dramatic lighting, naturalistic style, and powerful depictions of female figures.

1630: Artemisia settled in Naples, where she would spend much of the remainder of her life⁵. Around this time, she painted one of her best-known self-portraits, "Self Portrait as the Allegory of Painting," which exemplifies her skill and self-awareness as an artist. In Naples, Artemisia continued to receive commissions and produce remarkable works, such as "The Birth of St. John the Baptist" in 1635.

1638: Artemisia traveled to England to work with her father on a series of paintings commissioned by Queen Henrietta Maria for her home in Greenwich⁵. This collaboration with her father in her later years demonstrates the enduring connection between Artemisia and Orazio, despite the challenges they had faced earlier in her life.

1652: Artemisia Gentileschi died in Naples, leaving behind a legacy as one of the most accomplished artists of the Baroque period⁵. Throughout her life, she had managed to overcome the societal limitations placed on female artists and achieved success in a male-dominated field. Today, Artemisia Gentileschi is celebrated not only for her powerful artwork but also for her resilience and ability to triumph over the prejudices of her time.

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Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Susanna and the Elders*, c. 1610, 170 x 119 cm, Schloss Weißenstein collection, Pommersfelden, Germany

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- She was born on July 8 **1593** in Rome, the eldest child of Prudenzia di Ottaviano Montoni and the Tuscan painter **Orazio Gentileschi**. She was baptised two days after her birth in the church of San Lorenzo in Lucina.
- Her early life was **steeped in art**, as she was raised in a family of painters. Her **father, grandfather** Baccio Lomi, and **uncle** Aurelio Lomi were **all well-known artists**. Following her mother's death in 1605, Artemisia was primarily **raised by her father**, who introduced her to painting in his workshop.
- This was painted in **1610** when she was 17, Artemisia completed her **earliest surviving work, *Susanna and the Elders***, demonstrating her remarkable talent and the **influence of Caravaggio's style**, which she had absorbed through her father's work. Despite having **only three years** of formal training, Artemisia's skills were already **exceptional**, with her father boasting that she was **peerless among her peers**. Her approach to subject matter **differed from her father's**, as she took a **highly naturalistic approach** compared to his more idealized works.
- This is based on the story of **Susanna and the Elders is from the Bible**, chapter 13 of the Book of Daniel. Two elders are shown disturbing a young married woman named Susanna. Susanna had gone out to the garden one day to bathe. The elders were hiding in the garden. They demanded sexual favours, which she refused. The men threatened to ruin her reputation, but Susanna held fast. The

two elders then falsely accused Susanna of adultery – a crime that was punishable by death. When Daniel, a wise young Hebrew man, questioned them separately, details in the two elders' stories did not match. Their conflicting stories revealed the falsehood of their testimony, thus clearing Susanna's name. The two elders were sentenced to death.

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Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Danaë*, c. 1612, 41.3 x 52.7 cm, Saint Louis Art Museum, United States

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- This painting of the mythological story of Danaë appears to be a **self-portrait** of the Gentileschi when she was nineteen. It must have been difficult for her to learn to draw from the nude male figure although she may have been able to observe male models in her father's studio. She **had an advantage** in depicting female nudes due to informal **access to female models**, which was rare for male artists at the time. Her paintings of women, particularly nudes, were characterized by great naturalism and skill in depicting the female figure. Artemisia chose ordinary people as models and avoided idealization, similar to **her idol Caravaggio** but with an even more realistic approach. It's likely that Artemisia **used her own body** as a model, as this was a common practice for female artists who had limited access to nude models
- This story is from the Roman writer Ovid's (43 BCE - 17/18 CE) *Metamorphoses* and it tells the story of the daughter of King Acrisius of Argos. There was a prophecy that his grandchild would cause his death, and he therefore imprisoned his daughter to prevent a potential pregnancy. Zeus overcame this challenge by transforming himself into a shower of gold, entering the room and seducing Danaë. She subsequently bore a son Perseus, who went on to kill his grandfather when he became an adult.
- The year this was painted **1612** was traumatic and life changing year for Gentileschi. **She was raped by Agostino Tassi, one of her father's colleagues.**

This incident led to a seven-month trial that would have a lasting impact on her life and work. During the trial, it was revealed that Tassi had a history of sexual violence, having been previously accused of raping both his sister-in-law and one of his wives. The court proceedings were gruelling for Artemisia, who had to **undergo physical examinations and torture with thumbscrews** to "verify" her testimony. Despite Tassi's denials and attempts to discredit Artemisia, he was ultimately convicted and sentenced to two years in prison, though his verdict was later annulled.

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Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Judith Beheading Holofernes (Second Version)*, c. 1612-13, 158.8 × 125.5 cm, National Museum of Capodimonte, Naples, Italy

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Judith Beheading Holofernes (Second Version)*, c. 1612-13, 158.8 × 125.5 cm, National Museum of Capodimonte, Naples, Italy

- The day after the trial concluded, with her reputation in ruins her father managed to arrange a marriage to **Pierantonio di Vincenzo Stiattesi**, a Florentine painter, and they moved to Florence. The marriage restored her honour following the public scandal of the trial and the marriage marked the beginning of a new chapter in her life and career.
- In Florence, Artemisia **flourished as an artist**, enjoying the patronage of Cosimo de' Medici, the grand duke of Tuscany, among others. Her time in Florence allowed her to develop her unique style and establish herself as a formidable artist in her own right.
- She had five children but only one, Prudenzia survived to adulthood:
 - 1613: Giovanni Battista was born on September 21. He lived for only about a week.
 - 1614: Agnola was born in December but died within a few days, before she could be baptized.
 - 1615: Cristofano was born on November 8. He died in April 1620, aged four-and-a-half years old.
 - 1617: Prudenzia (also known as Palmira) was born on August 1. She was the only child who survived to adulthood.

- 1618: Lisabella was born on October 13. She died on April 9, 1619, at about nine months old.
- Gentileschi painted many versions of Judith and Holofernes and this is the earliest, now in Naples.
- ***Judith Beheading Holofernes*** (1612), depicts the dramatic biblical episode from the Book of Judith. The painting captures the precise moment when Judith, a Jewish widow, **decapitates the Assyrian general Holofernes** with the assistance of her maidservant Abra. **This act of bravery saved her city, Bethulia, from destruction.**
- X-rays reveal that she made several adjustments during its creation, including repositioning Judith's arms for greater compositional balance.

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Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, 1612, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

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- The composition is **strikingly dynamic**. Judith's arms are crossed as she wields a sword to sever Holofernes' neck, while Abra holds him down. The physicality of their actions and the **gory detail of blood spurting** across the white sheets emphasize the brutality of the act. Judith's expression is **calm and determined**, contrasting with Holofernes' face contorted in agony. The choice to depict **both women as young and strong** departs from traditional portrayals, which often showed Abra as elderly.
- Symbolism is woven throughout the scene. Judith's richly adorned **yellow dress signifies her wealth and status**, while her actions represent **virtue triumphing over vice**. The red drapery over Holofernes' body may symbolize his impending death and the violence of war.
- This painting was likely **commissioned by Grand Duke Cosimo II de' Medici** during Gentileschi's time in Florence. It reflects her mastery of Caravaggesque techniques, particularly her use of chiaroscuro to heighten drama.

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Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, c. 1599, 145 × 195 cm, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica

- This is a version of the same story painted in 1599 by Caravaggio. Caravaggio's version emphasizes psychological tension. Judith is portrayed as **young and hesitant**, her expression a mix of **determination and revulsion** as she leans back while wielding the sword. **Holofernes's face captures his shock and agony**, while the **elderly maid**, grotesque and detached, waits with a bag for the severed head. The composition is theatrical, with figures arranged in a shallow space lit by Caravaggio's signature chiaroscuro. The **blood spurts are restrained** compared to later depictions, focusing more on the psychological drama than physical violence.
- (CLICK) **In contrast**, Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* is far **more visceral and dynamic**. Judith and her maid Abra work together with physical exertion to overpower Holofernes. The women's rolled-up sleeves and determined expressions highlight their strength and resolve. Gentileschi employs chiaroscuro to emphasize the brutality of the act, with blood spurting vividly across the canvas. This relentless physicality reflects Gentileschi's personal experiences, including **her rape trial**, leading many to **interpret the painting as an expression of female empowerment** or catharsis. Maybe she was imagining what she would do to **Agostino Tassi**.

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Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Judith and Her Maidservant*, 1614, 114 cm × 93.5 cm, Palazzo Pitti, Florence, Italy

- Another take on the beheading. Here we see Judith and her maidservant with Holofernes head in a basket.
- They appear to be on their guard. They are still in the enemy camp and perhaps have heard a noise outside. Gentileschi employs an **unusual compositional choice**: Judith's hand **rests protectively** on her maidservant's shoulder, emphasizing their **partnership** and shared purpose. This depiction of **female solidarity was rare** for the time and reflects Gentileschi's progressive approach to portraying women in art.
- The artist's attention to detail extends to the **characters' costumes**. Judith's black bodice with gold trim complements her maidservant's reversed palette of gold with black trim, creating a visual harmony that underscores their unity despite their social differences.
- Curiously, Gentileschi's maidservant, traditionally depicted as an elderly woman by male artists, is **portrayed here as a young woman** close to Judith's age. This choice adds to the sense of camaraderie between the two figures.
- In the story Judith and her servant did escape and she took the head to the city leaders and told them to prepare to attack in the morning. The Assyrians were thrown in disarray when they discovered their general dead and lost the battle.
- The painting's provenance is noteworthy: it was first documented in the

collection of Grand Duchess Maria Maddalena of Austria in a 1638 inventory. Over time, the canvas has undergone **several alterations** and was likely significantly larger when first created.

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Attributed to Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Salome with the Head of Saint John the Baptist*, 1610-15, 84 × 92 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, Hungary

Attributed to Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Salome with the Head of Saint John the Baptist*, 1610-15, 84 × 92 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, Hungary

- This painting depicts the **biblical story of Salome**, who requested the **head of John the Baptist** as a **reward for her dance**. Gentileschi's interpretation is notable for its composition and emotional depth.
- Unlike many depictions by male artists of the time, Gentileschi's Salome is **shown in direct contact with John's head**, carrying it on a silver platter. This portrayal gives **Salome agency and ownership of her request**, a revolutionary concept for women in art during this period.
- I should add that the painting's **attribution** to Artemisia Gentileschi is **not definitive**, which is why it is often described as "Attributed to" her. This uncertainty is because of the **lack clear provenance**.
- Despite these uncertainties, the painting's powerful composition and treatment of the female subject align with Artemisia Gentileschi's known style and themes.

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School of Marcantonio Raimondi, Holy Family, c.1515-34. Royal Collection Trust.

- Artemisia Gentileschi's ***Madonna and Child*** (c. 1613-14), housed in the Galleria Spada, Rome depicts an intimate moment between the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus.
- (CLICK) The composition **draws inspiration** from a **print attributed to the School of Marcantonio Raimondi**, demonstrating Gentileschi's engagement with portable artworks, which were more accessible to female artists with limited mobility in 17th-century Italy. Interestingly, X-ray analysis reveals that Gentileschi likely incorporated elements from a Florentine painting she encountered after 1612, suggesting a complex creative process.
- Gentileschi's interpretation **diverges from the source material** in several ways. She extends the child's reach to touch Mary's neck and tucks his right elbow within her enfolding arm, enhancing the sense of connection between mother and son. The artist also employs Caravaggio's chiaroscuro technique to dramatic effect, creating a sculptural quality through deep shadows. (CLICK)
- A curious detail is the **thin white hem** of Mary's chemise, visible at her **wrist and neckline**, which echoes the white fabric enfolding Jesus – possibly a subtle **allusion to his future shroud**. The painting's provenance includes an 1837 engraving showing **more elaborate drapery**, which was **later revealed to be**

overpaint during a 1969-1970 restoration.

- The work's **attribution** was **confirmed in 1992** through archival research, uncovering a 1637 inventory record that traced its history.

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Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Allegory of Inclination*, 1615–1616, 152 x 61 cm, Casa Buonarroti, Florence, Italy

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Allegory of Inclination*, 1615–1616, 152 x 61 cm, Casa Buonarroti, Florence, Italy

- Artemisia Gentileschi's *Allegory of Inclination* (1615-1616) decorates the ceiling of the Galleria in Casa Buonarroti, Florence. This oil on canvas was commissioned by **Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger** as part of a series glorifying his great-uncle, the Renaissance master Michelangelo Buonarroti.
- The painting depicts "Inclination," representing inborn creative ability, as a young nude female figure seated on clouds. She holds a mariner's compass and is guided by a star above, symbolizing Michelangelo's natural disposition towards artistic greatness. Interestingly, the figure's features resemble Gentileschi's self-portraits, suggesting she may have used herself as a model.
- In a quirky turn of events, the nudity of the figure **embarrassed Leonardo Buonarroti**, Michelangelo the Younger's great-nephew, who commissioned **Baldassare Franceschini** (known as "el Volterrano") to **paint swirling veils and drapery** over parts of it in 1684, altering the original composition.
- Gentileschi created this work while **recovering from the birth of her second child**, demonstrating her dedication to her craft. The painting's provenance includes an 1837 engraving showing more elaborate drapery, later revealed to be overpainted during a 1969-1970 restoration.
- The use of a **compass and star** in the composition may also **allude to Galileo Galilei**, a contemporary of Gentileschi, nodding to the scientific advancements

of the time. The star specifically references the Star of Magi, adding a religious dimension to the allegory. Gentileschi met Galileo in 1612 and they began a friendship that lasted many years. Both were **members of the Accademia delle Arti del Disegno** (Academy of the Arts of Drawing) in Florence, with **Galileo joining in 1613** and **Artemisia becoming the first woman** to be invited to join in **1616**.

- In 2022, a restoration project named "Artemisia UpClose" began, using advanced imaging techniques to virtually restore the painting's original appearance **without removing Franceschini's additions**, offering a unique glimpse into the artwork's history

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Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656),
Self-Portrait as a Female Martyr, 1615,
31.7 x 24.8 cm, private collection

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Self-Portrait as a Female Martyr*, 1615, 31.7 x 24.8 cm, private collection

- Artemisia Gentileschi's ***Self-Portrait as a Female Martyr*** (1615) is a striking oil on panel work currently held in a private collection in the United States. This painting is one of only two known works by Gentileschi executed on wood panel.
- Her portrait was very much in demand across Europe because of her outstanding artistic abilities and her unusual status as a female artist in the seventeenth century.
- The artist depicts herself as an **unspecified female martyr**, gazing out at the viewer with a solemn yet resolute expression. She holds a **palm frond**, a common **symbol of martyrdom** in Christian iconography. Interestingly, technical examination has revealed that this painting **began as a straightforward self-portrait** before Gentileschi decided to transform it into a depiction of a martyr saint.
- The work's creation coincided with a **tumultuous period in Gentileschi's life**. She had **recently moved to Florence** and it was still only three years **after her highly publicised rape trial in Rome**. Additionally, she was recovering from the **birth of her second child** at the time of painting, demonstrating her dedication to her craft amid personal challenges.
- Gentileschi's choice to **portray herself as a martyr** has sparked debate among

art historians. Some interpret it as a reflection of her **personal tribulations**, while others argue it was a strategic move to **align herself with revered female figures** in a bid for artistic recognition.

- The painting's provenance includes an 1837 engraving showing more elaborate drapery, which was later revealed to be overpaint during a 1969-1970 restoration. This discovery provides insight into changing attitudes towards modesty in art over the centuries

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-Portrait_as_a_Female_Martyr



Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Self-Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, c. 1616, 71.4 × 69 cm, National Gallery, London

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Self-Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, c. 1616, 71.4 × 69 cm, National Gallery, London

- Artemisia Gentileschi's ***Self-Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria*** (c. 1616) is a striking image now housed in the National Gallery, London. The painting depicts the artist in the **guise of Saint Catherine**, a 4th-century Christian martyr known for her **intellect and resilience**.
- Interestingly, technical examination has revealed that this work **began as a straightforward self-portrait** before Gentileschi decided to transform it into a depiction of the saint. This transformation involved **adding a crown, halo, palm frond, and the iconic broken wheel** – Saint Catherine's primary attribute.
- **The broken wheel**, studded with iron spikes, alludes to the **saint's attempted torture**, from which **she miraculously escaped** when the wheel broke. Gentileschi holds a martyr's palm between her thumb and forefinger, symbolizing victory over death. These elements not only identify the subject as Saint Catherine but also resonate with the artist's own experiences of resilience in the face of adversity.
- The painting was likely created during Gentileschi's time in **Florence**. In Florence, she seems to have **frequently used her own image** in her works, possibly as a **form of self-promotion** in her new city.
- The painting's provenance includes a significant **restoration in 2018** when it was acquired by the National Gallery for **£3.6 million**.

- The work is part of a **series of female martyr paintings** Gentileschi created after her trial.
- This was painted in 1616 and in 1618 Artemisia began a **passionate love affair** with **Francesco Maria Maringhi** (1593-after 1653, pronounced "ma-ring-e"), a wealthy Florentine nobleman. This relationship continued well beyond her time in Florence and he **helped secure commissions** and **provided financial support** as well as acting as enabling her to succeed in a male dominated world. Their relationship was **intensely passionate** and her portrayal of **strong, defiant women** may reflect the complexities of their relationship.
- Interestingly, Artemisia's **husband**, Pierantonio Stiattesi, was **aware of her affair** with Maringhi and even corresponded with him. He tolerated the relationship, likely because **Maringhi provided financial support** to the couple

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-Portrait_as_Saint_Catherine_of_Alexandria



Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Venus and Cupid*, 1625, 96.52 × 143.83 cm, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, United States

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Venus and Cupid*, 1625, 96.52 × 143.83 cm, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, United States

- Artemisia Gentileschi's ***Venus and Cupid*** (1625–1630), also referred to as ***Sleeping Venus***, is now in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, United States. The work portrays Venus, the Roman goddess of love and beauty, reclining on a luxurious bed draped in **ultramarine blue sheets**—a pigment derived from powdered lapis lazuli, which was extraordinarily expensive at the time. This detail suggests the painting was commissioned by a **wealthy patron**.
- Venus is **depicted asleep**, her serene posture accentuated by naturalistic body movements. She wears only **a thin transparent linen** around her thigh, emphasizing vulnerability and intimacy. **Her son Cupid** stands beside her, **fanning her with peacock feathers**—a symbol of **immortality and divine beauty**—presumably to keep pests away. Cupid's expression is one of adoration as he gazes at his mother. The background features a **moonlit landscape** with a circular temple, reminiscent of the **Temple of Venus** at Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli, adding mythological depth.
- Interestingly, **Venus's facial features** bear a **striking resemblance to Gentileschi herself**, leading some scholars to speculate that she used her own likeness for the goddess. This self-referential approach adds an intriguing layer to the painting.
- The work's provenance includes its documentation in private collections in Rome during the 1980s before being acquired by the Adolph D. and Wilkins C.

Williams Foundation and gifted to the museum. The painting's expensive materials and mythological narrative highlight Gentileschi's ability to adapt her style to meet patron demands while maintaining artistic sophistication.

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Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* (Detroit), 1623–1625, 187.2 x 142 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts, United States

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes* (Detroit), 1623–1625, 187.2 x 142 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts, United States

- Artemisia Gentileschi's ***Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes*** (1623–1625) is now in the Detroit Institute of Arts.
- She shows the **aftermath of the beheading**, with Judith still brandishing the sword and **pausing in alarm**. Holofernes' severed head lies at her feet, a grim reminder of her recent act.
- Interestingly, **this work began as a straightforward self-portrait** before Gentileschi transformed it into the biblical narrative. Her decision to depict Judith, often seen as a symbol of **virtue triumphing over vice**, may have been influenced by her own experiences, including her infamous rape trial in Rome.
- The painting's provenance includes **ownership by Prince Brancaccio in Rome** before being jointly acquired by Alessandro Morandotti and Adolph Loewi. In 1952, it was purchased by Leslie H. Green and subsequently gifted to the Detroit Institute of Arts.
- Gentileschi's interpretation of this subject is unique in its naturalism and clear sympathy for the fear and apprehension of the female protagonists. As in the other examples of this story that she painted the maidservant who is traditionally depicted as elderly by male artists, is **portrayed as a young woman** close to Judith's age, emphasizing their partnership.

- Artemisia's reputation continued to grow, and in **1627** she received a **commission from King Philip IV of Spain**, demonstrating her **international acclaim**. Throughout her career, she befriended many artists, writers, and thinkers of her time. Artemisia's work during this period continued to show her mastery of dramatic lighting, naturalistic style, and powerful depictions of female figures.

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Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Esther before Ahasuerus*, 1628–1635, 208.3 × 273.7 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, United States

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Esther before Ahasuerus*, 1628–1635, 208.3 × 273.7 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, United States

- Artemisia Gentileschi's ***Esther before Ahasuerus*** (1628–1635, pronounced "uh-HAS-A-rus"), housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, depicts a pivotal moment from the Old Testament **Book of Esther**. The painting captures the dramatic scene where Esther, the Jewish queen, approaches King Ahasuerus to **plead for the lives of her people**.
- Esther broke court etiquette by approaching the king and so risked death. Gentileschi's shows **Esther fainting** and being supported by her maidservants. This softened the king's order to execute all Jewish people in the Persian Empire by allowing them to defend themselves.
- The painting's composition draws attention to the power dynamics at play. **Ahasuerus is seated** on his throne, symbolizing his authority, while Esther is supported by her maidservants, risking her life by approaching uninvited.
- Interestingly, Gentileschi's portrayal of Ahasuerus as a **"dandy" figure** subtly **undermines his apparent power**, hinting at **Esther's eventual triumph** through her cunning and courage. This nuanced characterization reflects the artist's deep understanding of the biblical narrative and its underlying themes.
- The work's provenance and commission details remain unclear, but it was likely created during Gentileschi's **time in Naples**. The painting demonstrates her mastery of chiaroscuro, a technique she learned from Caravaggio's followers,

creating a dramatic interplay of light and shadow that heightens the scene's tension.

- Gentileschi paid a lot of **attention to detail** to bring the **story to life**. Note the folds of the fabrics as well as in Ahasuerus's boots, and she even made the **stitches on the hem of Esther's dress** so exact that they almost look real. Gentileschi's attention to detail is also visible in the cracks of the marble ground as well as the fur trim on Ahasuerus's boots, and even in the detailing of the paws that adorn the king's chair

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esther_Before_Ahasuerus_\(Artemisia_Gentileschi\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esther_Before_Ahasuerus_(Artemisia_Gentileschi))



Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1653), *Cleopatra discovered by her servants*, 1633-35, 117 × 175.5 cm, private collection, Rome, Italy

Sleeping Ariadne, Vatican Museums, long called Cleopatra

- This work is believed to have been painted **when she was in Naples** and may have been a collaboration with her pupil **Onofrio Palumbo** as she increasingly relied on him in old age.
- ***Cleopatra discovered by her servants*** (1633-35) is currently in a private collection in Rome, depicts the dramatic moment of the Egyptian **queen's suicide discovery**. The painting captures Cleopatra's **lifeless body** on a bed, with two female attendants entering the scene, one of whom appears to be weeping.
- A **small snake** moving away on the sheet alludes to the **asp**, traditionally believed to be the instrument of Cleopatra's death. The **bright blue mantle** partially covering Cleopatra's nude form adds a striking visual element. The **queen's crown has fallen** from her wavy golden hair, symbolizing her **loss of power**.
- Gentileschi's interpretation is **unique** in **portraying the aftermath** rather than the act itself, a departure from more common depictions of Cleopatra's death. The artist's attention to detail is evident in Cleopatra's rigid posture, indicating the onset of rigor mortis and demonstrating Gentileschi's quest for realism.
- (CLICK) Gentileschi's portrayal of Cleopatra draws **parallels** with the Roman

sculpture *Sleeping Ariadne*, which was believed to be Cleopatra in the 17th century. This reference demonstrates the artist's knowledge of classical art. (CLICK)

- Interestingly, the painting's **attribution was not always clear**. Until the 1980s, it was thought to be the **work of Massimo Stanzione**. Some scholars suggest it might represent a collaboration with her pupil Onofrio Palumbo or reflect the influence of her Neapolitan contemporaries.

NOTES

- The painting's provenance includes its first recorded appearance at the Matthiesen Gallery in London in the 1980s, before being purchased by its current owner in 1987.

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cleopatra_\(Artemisia_Gentileschi,_Rome\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cleopatra_(Artemisia_Gentileschi,_Rome))

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sleeping_Ariadne



Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *The Birth of St. John the Baptist*, c. 1635, 184 × 258 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *The Birth of St. John the Baptist*, c. 1635, 184 × 258 cm. Museo del Prado

Depicted people John the Baptist, Elizabeth, Zechariah

- Gentileschi **moved to Naples in 1630** on the invitation of the Spanish Viceroy Fernando Afán de Ribera, Duke of Alcalá (1583-1637) and she remained there for the rest of her life except for about **four years in England**. While in Naples she painted many more works with a religious theme as they were in high demand.
- ***The Birth of St. John the Baptist*** (c. 1635), housed in the Museo del Prado, depicts a pivotal moment in Christian history. The painting illustrates the scene from Luke 1:57-64, where Elizabeth has just given birth to John the Baptist.
- It was one of six paintings portraying St John's life for the chapel of the hermitage dedicated to this saint in the grounds of the Buen Retiro Palace for the Viceroy in Madrid. Four of the paintings were by Massimo Stanzione.
- Zechariah, John's father, is shown writing "His name is John", a pivotal moment in the biblical narrative. This act broke Zechariah's divinely imposed muteness, which had lasted throughout Elizabeth's pregnancy as punishment for his doubt in the angel Gabriel's prophecy.

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Orazio Gentileschi (1563-1639) and Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1652), *An Allegory of Peace and the Arts*, c. 1635-8, 479 cm (sight diameter), now in Marlborough House, The Mall, London

Orazio Gentileschi (1563-1639) and Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1652), *An Allegory of Peace and the Arts*, c. 1635-8, 479 cm (sight diameter), Marlborough House, The Mall, London

- In 1638, Artemisia **joined her father in London** at the court of **Charles I** of England, where Orazio had become **court painter** and received the important job of decorating a **ceiling allegory of Triumph of Peace and the Arts** in the Queen's House, Greenwich built for **Queen Henrietta Maria**. This collaboration with her father in her later years demonstrates the enduring connection between Artemisia and Orazio, despite the challenges they had faced earlier in her life.
- Orazio arrived and started work in **1626** and Artemisia joined him in **1638** to help as her father was dying. He died in February 1639 and the ceiling was installed in the autumn.
- The ceiling, made up of this **central tondo** flanked by eight other canvases, celebrates the reign of King Charles I and shows how **peace reigned and the liberal arts flourish** under his benign governance. **All twenty-six figures** in the ceiling, apart from one, are **female**, embodying the power of women in a residence which was stamped with Henrietta Maria's taste and patronage.
- The central figure is **Peace**, crowned with olive leaves, presiding over a gathering of female figures representing the liberal arts. **Victory**, adorned with a golden crown, rests her foot on a cornucopia, symbolizing prosperity. **Wisdom**, armed and bearing **Medusa's shield**, introduces the **Trivium**, the lower division

of the seven liberal arts: We see **Grammar** sharpening **Rhetoric's** sword, while **Logic** holds a snake and flowers.

- The **Quadrivium** is represented by **Astrology** with a book of stars, **Arithmetic** (with a numbered tablet), **Music** (holding a wind instrument), and **Geometry** with dividers and a globe.
- The surrounding panels feature the nine Muses, while corner roundels depict personifications of Sculpture, Architecture, Painting, and Music (represented by Apollo). This last figure is the sole male presence in the composition.
- Some art historians, including Mary Garrard, believe Artemisia contributed to up to six of the paintings in the allegory. The ceiling was later moved to Marlborough House in the 18th century, where it remains today.
- This collaborative work marks Orazio's final masterpiece, completed shortly before his death in 1639, and represents a significant moment in Artemisia's career during her brief time in England.

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Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting (La Pittura)*, 1638–1639, 96.5 x 73.7 cm, Royal Collection Trust, London, United Kingdom

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting (La Pittura)*, 1638–1639, 96.5 x 73.7 cm, Royal Collection Trust, London, United Kingdom

- Around this time, in England, she painted one of her best-known self-portraits, ***Self Portrait as the Allegory of Painting***, which exemplifies her skill and self-awareness as an artist.
- It is in the Royal Collection and is a remarkable fusion of **self-portraiture and allegory**. It depicts the artist as the personification of Painting itself, a concept derived from **Cesare Ripa's "Iconologia"**.
- The painting's uniqueness lies in its dual nature as both self-portrait and allegory, a concept **only possible for a female artist of the time**, as allegorical personifications were limited to female figures
- The work portrays Gentileschi in the act of painting, with her **sleeves rolled up** and a brown apron over a fine green silk dress, emphasizing both her practical approach and artistic status. Her **disheveled hair** symbolizes the "**divine frenzy**" of artistic creation, while her intense gaze reflects **deep concentration**.
- Intriguingly, the painting's execution posed **significant technical challenges**. To capture her three-quarter profile, she likely employed **multiple mirrors set at 45-degree angles**, allowing her to paint without reversing her hand. The work is extremely accomplished and is economically painted work with few alterations made during painting, known as **pentimenti**.

- The symbolism in the painting is rich and multifaceted. **A chain with a mask pendant** around her neck represents **imitation**, a key aspect of painting in the period. The luminous tones of her **breast symbolize both femininity and truth** in the image.
- While the painting's commission details remain unclear, it was **acquired by King Charles I** later sold during the Commonwealth sale and later reacquired for Charles II after the English Civil War. This provenance underscores the work's significance and Gentileschi's status as a renowned artist in 17th-century Europe.

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Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Susanna and the Elders* c.1638-40, 189.0 x 143.2 cm, Royal Collection

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– c. 1656), *Susanna and the Elders* c.1638-40, 189.0 x 143.2 cm, Royal Collection

- For my last painting we return to the subject of the first painting I showed you, ***Susanna and the Elders***.
- This late painting by Artemisia was rediscovered in the Royal Collection after being misattributed at least two centuries ago.
- This rediscovered painting forms a significant addition to Artemisia's body of work and sheds fresh light on her creative process and **her time in London** in the late 1630s, working alongside her father at the court of Charles I and Henrietta Maria.
- ***Susanna and the Elders*** is part of the Royal Collection and displayed at **Holyrood Palace, Edinburgh**, depicts the biblical story from the **Book of Daniel**. The painting was likely **commissioned by Queen Henrietta Maria** during Gentileschi's time in London, where she worked alongside her father, Orazio, at the court of Charles I.
- The narrative centres on Susanna, a virtuous woman falsely accused of adultery by two elders after she refuses their advances while bathing. Her **interpretation departs from earlier, more voyeuristic depictions** by male artists. Instead of focusing on Susanna's nudity, she **emphasizes her distress and vulnerability**. Susanna is shown turning away in anguish as the elders loom over her, their shadows heightening the scene's oppressive atmosphere.

- The painting has an intriguing history. **Misattributed for centuries** to the "French School," it languished in **storage at Hampton Court Palace** until its rediscovery in **2023** by Royal Collection Trust curators. Conservation work revealed its original composition beneath layers of dirt and overpainting, including a "CR" (Carolus Rex) brand confirming its royal provenance.
- She returned to Naples when the English Civil War started where she remained artistically active until **her death in 1656**. It was once believed **she died in 1652 or 1653** but there is now evidence she was still **accepting commissions in 1654** and some now believe **she died in 1656** in the **great plague** that swept Naples and wiped out a generation of artists.

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13-02 ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI

Artemisia Gentileschi,
Self-Portrait as the
Allegory of Painting,
c. 1638-9

- She has left behind a legacy as one of the most accomplished artists of the Baroque period.
- Throughout her life, she managed to overcome the **limitations placed on female artists** and achieved success in a **male-dominated field**. Today, Artemisia Gentileschi is celebrated not only for her **powerful art** but also for her resilience and ability to **triumph over the prejudices** of her time.
- Before I go, one final image...



"A painting in the style of Artemisia Gentileschi" by Google ImageFX

- I couldn't leave you without showing an image created by an AI system as part of my ongoing research. This is Google Image FX created from the simple description "A painting in the style of Artemisia Gentileschi"
- Thank you and goodbye for now.