

The University of Washington

Artemisia Gentileschi:

realism, entrepreneurship, interoception, psychology– painting *natura humana*

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At the head of the persistence of Absolutism, the Catholic Revival, and the Counter Reformation, there lies a transfixing cultural and artistic movement: Baroque. The artworks of the movement themselves are characterized by the melodrama, grandeur, richness in color, intense light and dark shadings, and classicism. Yet, perhaps even more rousing, lie the stories and ingenuity of the artists behind those terms. Caravaggio— a murderer, Bernini— a violent abuser, Rembrandt— clinically bipolar, Velasques— an enigma, Vermeer— a troubled melancholiac, Le Brun— a sexual deviant, and Sirani— a woman. They were magicians of their mediums but held secrets darker than the corners of the chiaroscuro they employed. Artemisia Gentileschi was no exception. However, becoming the first woman to join the legendary Florentine Academy of Art, *Accademia del Disegno*, in 1616, employed by princes, heads of state, major churches, and even kings, she was an illustrious idol.¹ A relentless pioneer of the very depths of Baroque symbolism, meaning, and technique, somehow history has only ever considered Gentileschi through the lens of her experiences— instead of her benefactions to the movement.

Despite the easy misdirects when analyzing the great artists of our past, we must look to examine them of their own merit and contributions to their respective art movement as a whole. Not as a woman, not according to a modern standard of feminism, or more importantly, *morality*— only in acknowledging Artemisia Gentileschi's surpassing physical realism, her perspicacious entrepreneurship, and her profound psychological realism can we truly understand just how much of a contribution her work gave.

New Depths of Physical Realism

Examining Gentileschi's works under these terms brings to light a notion few have been considerate enough to legitimize: Artemisia's physical realism and understanding of the human body and its execution of movements surpassed that of her peers (arguably, even Caravaggio himself). Her bodies recognized the impacts of gravity, pigment, and physical demands.

Social Recognition

It is clear from documentations of the time that Gentileschi's technical ability was some of the most accomplished of her era. Her father, Orazio Gentileschi, a distinguished mannerist and naturalist painter (as well as a close friend of Caravaggio's), noted that "indeed, [Artemisia had] produced works which demonstrate a level of understanding that perhaps even the principal masters of the profession have not attained."² Orazio had originally intended the convent life for

¹Ffolliott, Sheila. Review of *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Language of Painting*, by Jesse M. Locker. *Early Modern Women* 10, no. 2 (2016): 191-194.

² Giovanni Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori et architetti* (Rome: nella stamperia d'Andrea Fei, 1642), 'Vita di Horatio Gentileschi, Pittore', p. 360.

his daughter, a much kinder option for women of the time, but upon seeing her work he knew she was destined for an artisan career. Seeing as Artemisia Gentileschi achieved fame a mere three years after the production of her first work in 1609, her father's thinking was justified.

Her work became of civic influence, especially for poets and philosophical academics within Italy's social sphere, as the three professions shared a common language of metaphor and expression. She had a "*dotta mano* [learned hand]," and "*ingegnoso* [ingenious]" painting, as the Neapolitan poet Girolamo Fontanella described, confirming she was a "*maestra perfetta*."³ The wording of 'maestra' evolved from the previous male honorific term 'maestro,' the evolution equating Artemisia to the level of the most distinguished artistic geniuses of the period and beyond. Furthermore, Fontanella was examining the inspiring factor her works seemed to contain, that element the viewer can't quite place at first when surveying Gentileschi's paintings.

Similar verbal qualifiers could be heard from the Medici family, namely the Grand Duke of Tuscany Cosimo II, who declared Artemisia the rightful recipient of "the highest glory, having, as has been demonstrated, produced for many," including the Genoese nobleman (Pietro Gentile), a major contemporary collector and nephew to the great Renaissance artist (Michelangelo Buonarroti), the Roman scholar (Cassiano dal Pozzo), as well as the kings of both England and Spain. Still, the Grand Duke adds, she created "paintings that are admirable, original, and masterful."⁴ This 'highest glory' he spoke of was the recognition and comparison to the renowned painter of Ancient Greece, Apelles. In a time of such return to classics, to be compared to *antiquities' greatest painter* by the ruling Medici family who quite literally funded the Renaissance? Well it's a testament not just to Artemisia's high regard within the public eye as a result of her artistic ability to translate these mythic scenes, but to her very ability itself. She made her pieces come to life, demonstrating a sensation that the viewer can't simply hear, or smell, or touch. She painted what the id, ego, and superego sense— the very essences of humanity: human nature. Artemisia Gentileschi captured fundamental dispositions of what it is to be human— ways of thinking, feeling, *being*— that express the innateness of who we are.

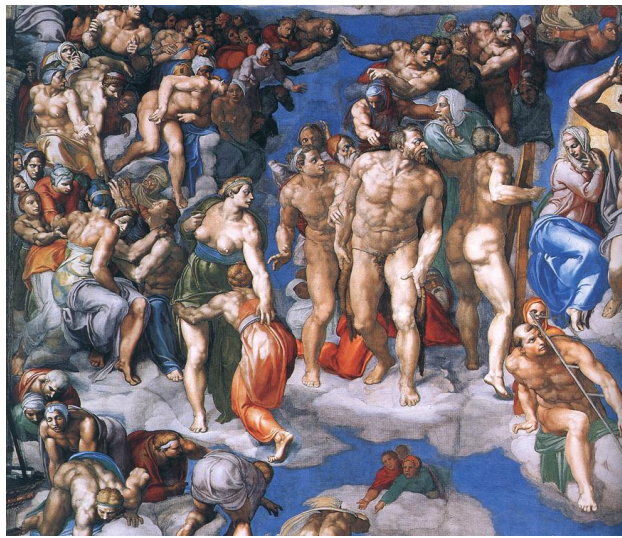
How can one individual touch the world over with such depth? Via focus and exacting implementation of key visual components surrounding the human body; *accuracies* her compatriots overlooked.

³ Locker, "Artemisia Gentileschi: The Language of Painting," p. 112.

⁴ Locker, "Artemisia Gentileschi: The Language of Painting," p. 462.

Gravity

The verbal intensifiers provided by erudites, academics, and poets alike provided a door to that fundamental question which Fontanella introduced to us: what is it, that factor one can't put into words, in Gentileschi's art that differentiates it from fellow painters of the Baroque movement? Intense physical realism. The first level of this precision is the involvement of the effects of gravity on the female figure. Oftentimes, in looking at paintings by male artists (of all movements, let alone Baroque), feminine body structures appear almost free of anatomical correctness— more simply known as the *men-with-breasts phenomenon*.⁵ Most notably, an example of these free floating bosoms appears in one of the most well-known works of Michaelangelo, “The Last Judgment.”



Segment of Michaelangelo's “The Last Judgment” [Figure 1]

Looking at the sectioned piece of “The Last Judgment” [figure 1], the partially nude female in the blue/ green tunic appears almost to have two of Artemis' infamous bull testicles simply plastered on. Seeing the previous examples set by painters, when examining one of Artemisia Gentileschi's nude works that first broke onto the art scene, *Danaë* (c. 1612) [figure 2], it was an almost altogether unfamiliar and humanizing impact of femininity.

⁵ Burke, Jill. “Men with Breasts (or Why Are Michelangelo's Women so Muscular?) Part 1.” JILL BURKE - Art Historian | Author | HISTORICAL CONSULTANT, May 20, 2011. <https://jillburkerenaissance.com/2011/02/11/men-with-breasts-or-why-are-michelangelos-women-so-muscular-part-1/>.

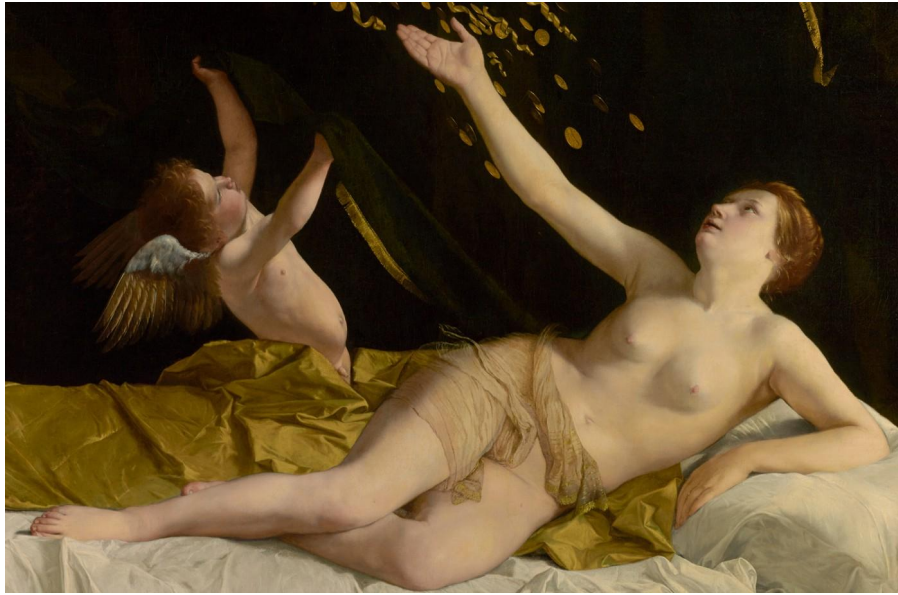


Danaë by Artemisia Gentileschi [Figure 2]

The painting illustrates a commonly depicted Greek tale (past artisans of the scene include Titian and Tintoretto) in which Danaë, the daughter of King Acrisius of Argos, is locked in a tower bedroom so as to keep her from fulfilling a prophecy of becoming impregnated and giving birth to a son who would kill Acrisius. The image reveals the moment when Zeus, who fell in love with Danaë, transformed himself into a golden rain to inseminate her. Without even breaking into the emotional significance of the piece, the physicality of it provides room for muscle, breast tissue, nerves, fat, and connective tissue to meet in an inclusive model of the female nude. For instance, the combination of the sloping of Danaë's exposed breasts, the shift in the directions of the nipples according to her bodily positioning, and the shading that underlines her chest is one of the first appearances and acknowledgments of the weight of the body.

Furthermore, looking towards the figure's left armpit, the folds under her chin, where her neck and shoulder meet, the lower portions of the stomach and hips, and the **cellulite marks** on the upper and mid divisions of Danaë's thighs, *we see curves, creases, and dimpling*— results of contortion and downward forces acting on Danaë. These are a set of accuracies other painters did not afford the work in the past because they saw such levels of realism as an imperfection and a deterrent to viewers, instead of the bewitching verisimilitude it truly represented. Even Gentileschi's own father, Orazio, put forth a preference for pin-up-esque idealized curves, floating breasts, and arbitrary, irregularly placed nipples on his version of Danaë [figure 3].

Artemisia's confrontational juxtaposition between beauty and *authentic* beauty allowed her paintings to become an active versus passive conception in her audience's minds.



Danaë by Orazio Lomi Gentileschi [Figure 3]

Pigment

The inclusion of gravity was not the only marker of Gentileschi's knowledgeable anatomical realism, but her expertise in veristic pigmentation and lifelike skin tones. The combined usages and placements of pinks, greens, or yellows provided a breath of life (or death) behind the heroines of her paintings. Take Artemisia's representation of Danaë [figure 2]. There's slight rosininess circulating through the knees, feet and toes, hands, chin, cheeks, nose, and eyes—the exact locations where flushing from widened blood vessels genuinely occupy the body. Her astute attention to the body's complexion can be more obviously pointed out in Gentileschi's works *Mary Magdalene* (c. 1616-1618) [figure 4] and *Mary Magdalene as Melancholy* (c. 1622-1625) [figure 5].



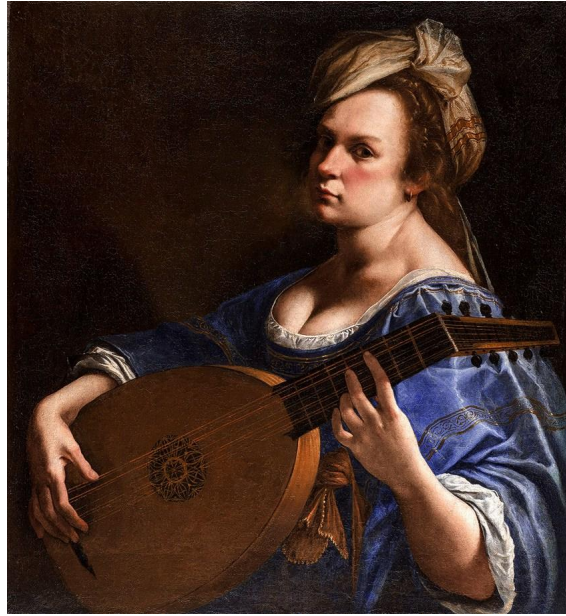
Mary Magdalene [figure 4] and Mary Magdalene as Melancholy [figure 5] by Artemisia Gentileschi

The first [figure 4], renders a penitent Magdalene following her contemplation of turning away from a life of sin and luxury in order to embrace Christian virtues and become one of Jesus' followers. The second [figure 5], pictures the melancholic resolution of Magdalene letting go, her slouched stature coming to terms with the decision to renounce worldly values and decorum. Both pieces hold emotional significance well beyond the somatic expression, however, Gentileschi's attentiveness to the physical state of the body following the psychological reaping both Mary's underwent is astounding. Artemisia's use of dramatic chiaroscuro highlights the reddening on the two woman's faces. Surrounding their noses, cheeks, and eyes, there is an intensified pinkness, revealing to the viewer that the women had spent long hours crying. On top of that, Gentileschi ever so slightly swells the eyes. Such puffiness further supports the onlooker's recognition of two *real* women—rather than painted figures—who have truly been sobbing and toiling for a prolonged time.

This legitimization of emotional stature through acute corporeal representations and pigmentation are yet another example of Artemisia Gentileschi's expert understanding and acknowledgement of not just the human body but *human nature*, thus, contributing to her unprecedented physical realism.

Physical demands

Another addition to Gentileschi's level of realism, is her consideration for the physical demands and requirements of tasks. In particular, Artemisia's painting *Self-Portrait as a Lute Player* (c. 1615-1617) [figure 6] demonstrates a unique regard towards authentic representations of not just the instrument, but the intimate knowledge of the positioning necessary to play it.



Self-Portrait as a Lute Player by Artemisia Gentileschi [figure 6]

The player's right hand fingers are situated on paired strings, with the thumb and forefinger set to pluck a rhythm. Meanwhile, the left are expertly placed to form a real chord. The positioning is that of someone well-informed on lute playing itself. Additionally, the instrument (accurately drawn with a 5 course lute— meaning 5 rows of paired strings— common for the time)⁶ is held tightly upright with confidence, the player's right arm even cascading over the edges of the appliance with such firm grip. The musician's fingernails are also kept short, another contingency for any stringed instrument player. Each of Gentileschi's unheard of attentions to detail assist in bringing the lute player to life for the viewers. Even the slightly rosy cheeks and nose to suggest the entertainer had been drinking, as was a universally associated aspect of any performer, are include to accentuate the life-like sensations of the artwork.

Artemisia Gentileschi also brought forth another, more unparalleled, approach to the physical aspect of her subjects in her expression of *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (c. 1612- 1613; Florence) [figure 7].

⁶ The National Gallery, London. "Artemisia." Artemisia | Past exhibitions | National Gallery, London. Accessed November 20, 2022. <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/exhibitions/past/artemisia>.



Judith Slaying Holofernes (Florence) by Artemisia Gentileschi [figure 7]

In the past, painters depicted Judith's beauty or bravery or remorse in lieu of the procedural physicality from the process of beheading itself. Caravaggio expanded on the detailing of the event, choosing to picture the beheading itself, in great detail, but he still opted to emphasize Judith's beauty and virtue [figure 8].



Judith Beheading Holofernes by Caravaggio [figure 8]

Not only did Artemisia Gentileschi expand on Caravaggio's influential choice to paint the graphic act of beheading, but she was the first to call attention to the reality of the undertaking. It would take two, young, burly women to hold down such a large man who was fighting for his life. Caravaggio's work maintained the emphasis on a dainty noble Judith with a maidservant who stands aside, but Gentileschi's piece underlines the ardor of the task by necessitating the involvement of Judith's maidservant; Thus, she depicted Judith's accomplice as young and actively participating, not old and idly standing in the background. Artemisia demonstrated women *working together*. It was well-recognized that Judith's tale was an ode to women triumphing over men,⁷ but for the *first time* it unified the gender in the piece without selectively allowing for the strength of some but not all. The picture is *alive*. Rolled up sleeves, furrowed brows, and *whitened knuckles* from gripping the sword and head with great force? Key aspects to convey the rigorous task before the women.

Gentileschi also developed on Caravaggio's realism of the spurting, severed artery by adding more velocity and volume to the blood, deepening the blood's un-oxygenated crimson, as well.

Each of these applied aspects of Artemisia Gentileschi's works— gravity, pigmentation, physical requirements— coalesce in each of her paintings, giving way to the slow reveal of what once appeared intangible: the depictions of the heart of human nature.

Perspicacious Entrepreneurship

Another advantage born of this *maestra*, was a clear presence of Gentileschi's sagacious ambition and acute marketing skills. It was not, by any means, Artemisia's competency and prowess with a brush that earned her notoriety alone. She artfully navigated the process of creating awareness and interest to captivate her patrons via her choice of models, methods of signature, and specified engagement with the prospective clientele.

Models

Like many Baroque artists, Artemisia Gentileschi dabbled in self-portraits and self-features in her work. Gentileschi produced a few official self-portraits, with just 3 surviving, but only *one* features her as her true self.⁸ However, in nearly every work produced by Gentileschi, she modeled the women herself. Why? Well, for the artist, her face didn't appear to be the center of the message of the pieces, merely a messenger to convey the psychological trials

⁷ Scarparo, Susanna. "Artemisia': The Invention of a 'Real' Woman." *Italica* 79, no. 3 (2002): 368–376.

⁸ Judith W. Mann, 'Identity Signs: Meanings and Methods in Artemisia Gentileschi's Signatures', *Renaissance Studies*, 23.1 (2009), 71–107.

and endeavors of her subjects. The same way Raphael or Michaelangelo or Carravaggio would pepper self-portraits into sideline characters of their paintings without it commanding the central insight of the work, Gentileschi emboldened that notion.

Art critics related this use of herself as a model to a lack of finances, as Jesse M. Locker initially prefaced in his analysis of the artist *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Language of Painting*. But testimony from both Joachim von Sandrart, a baroque art historian and painter (1675), and Filippo Baldinucci, an Italian art historian and biographer (1681–1728), confirmed Artemisia's international prestige and economic success, claiming "*sua gran gloria e guadagno*."⁹ Meaning, 'her great glory and [financial] gain.' Past critics had focussed on economic data of Artemisia's career without considering the literary evidence (from clients and enthusiasts alike) *against* those balance sheets. They had especially failed to consider the financial conditions of the city in which Gentileschi was living as a whole. As Locker later pointed out in a postscript of his novel, Naples was "in the midst of war and political turmoil [not to mention facing multiple plagues]," and given the "consistently high status of her patrons and admirers [...] her [documented] financial difficulties [...] should be read as indicative of the city's— rather than the artist's— challenging [economic] position."¹⁰ Thus, her supposed self-contradictory usage of herself as a model wasn't a product of economic struggle, but a strategic method to market her brand— her *self*— to future patrons. She made herself a *signature*; and that signature became the basis for her baroque 'buzz marketing' campaign. There was great curiosity surrounding an artist of her caliber, and even more so given her unique position as a female painter already achieving such renown. Works featuring Artemisia's own image became highly desirable... and she knew it.

Utilizing herself as a model allowed Gentileschi to establish herself as a major art talent and *recognizable* virtuoso. She stimulated the 'buzz marketing' as a way for the audience to be on the inside of this movement— for them to participate and interact in an easter egg hunt of recognizing her portrait and therefore *knowing* it was an *Artemisia Gentileschi*. That entrepreneurial technique focussed on maximizing the word-of mouth potential for her campaign and product. And it *worked*. Gentileschi's promotional astuteness ushered collectors in the house of Buonarroti and Medici to lead the pursuit of her modeled works, gaining the artist a level of prominence granting her entry to the *Accademia del Disegno*.¹¹

⁹ Filippo Baldinucci, 'Vita di Artemisia Gentileschi', in *Notizie de' professori del disegno, da Cimabue in qua* (Milan: Società Tipografica de' Classici Italiani, 1812) Decennale I, Part III (Secolo IV, MDLXXX to MDXC), p. 256. Baldinucci's biography of Artemisia Gentileschi is translated in Dabbs, *Life Stories of Women Artists*, pp. 147–50.

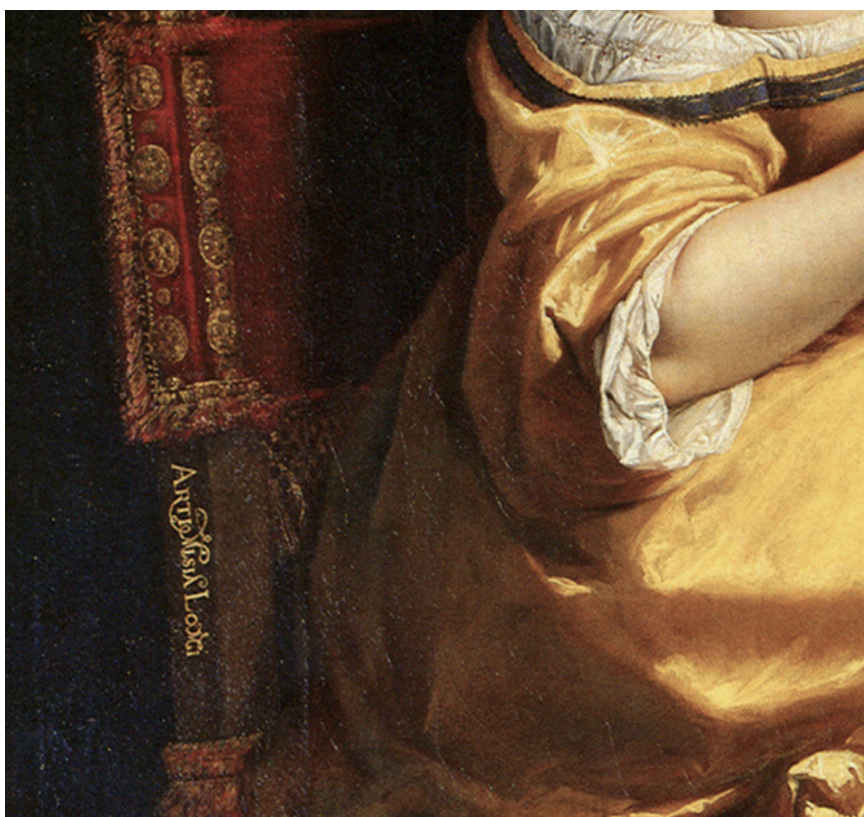
¹⁰ Jesse M. Locker, "Col Pennello di Luce": Neapolitan Verses in Praise of Artemisia Gentileschi', *Studi Secenteschi*, 48 (2007), p. 245.

¹¹ Bissell, R. Ward. "Artemisia Gentileschi-A New Documented Chronology." *The Art Bulletin* 50, no. 2 (1968): 153–68. [page 158]

Signatures

Artemisia Gentileschi's substantiation of herself through characteristic signatures was but an introduction to the enterprising honorarium of the imperturbable handwritten ones. The aesthetic enterpriser selected key portions— and movements to direct the eye to them— to quite literally leave her mark on the painting. Of course, a signature could declare the piece as undoubtedly her, but it was the manner in which Gentileschi chose to sign that revealed her marketing ingenuity.

To start, Gentileschi signed 19 of her pieces—indisputably identifying approximately 40% as her own¹²— in particular, a sufficient part of those signatures were made in a *golden paint*, of her own creation— namely, *Mary Magdalene* [Figure 9].



Signature Section of Mary Magdalene by Artemisia Gentileschi [Figure 9]

Artemisia did a considerable amount of work with jewel tones in and ratifying her distinction of color (as was previously verified with her life-like skin tones, use of pigmentation, and macabre blood tones), so the introduction of a specified gold was merely a furtherance of her expertise. The gilded paint, in particular, accentuated what her signatures read: “*Artemisia Lomi.*”

¹² Mann, Judith W. “Identity Signs: Meanings and Methods in Artemisia Gentileschi’s Signatures.” *Renaissance Studies* 23, no. 1 (2009): 72.

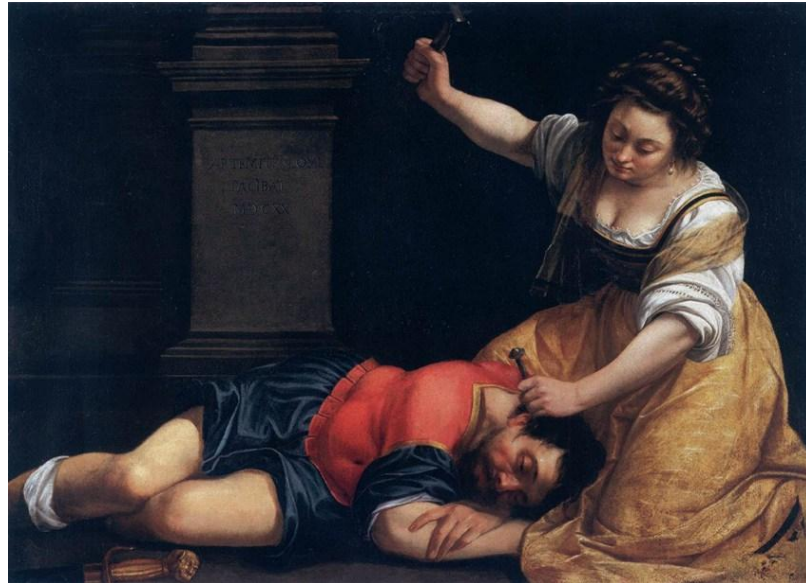
Judith M. Mann, a senior curator of European art for the Saint Louis Art Museum, underscored the meaning behind this maneuver as a “linkage.” ‘*Lomi*’ was the original Tuscan name of Gentileschi’s family, but more consequentially, the moniker connected Artemisia to her uncle, Aurelio, an already renowned painter in the Florentine region whose art scene she was looking to break into. The Roman ‘*Gentileschi*’ removed her from the enhancement of that association to possible benefactors.¹³ But why in this specific gold? It was an allusion to the Lomi’s own intricate goldwork. Gentileschi’s grandfather, Giovanni Battista di Bartolomeo Lomi, was a Florentine goldsmith; hence, Artemisia’s decision to incorporate her filigree signature served to emulate the tradition of Florentine goldwork and intimately linked her to the Florentine heritage—winning over the support of the people of *Firenze*.¹⁴ Her signatures served as artistic authorship, each one pointed, each one leaving an indelible mark.

For instance, her signature of *Judith Slaying Holofernes* [refer to figure 7] read, “*EGO ARTEMITIA/LOMI FEC,*” marking her first employment of the word choice ‘*ego*,’ stating to the world ‘Artemisia’ was not just a signature, but a statement. “*I, Artemisia Gentileschi, made this.*” This statement of autonomy, power, and agency allowed Gentileschi’s painted signatures to transform her name from a simple label to an enhancement of her identity as an artist, simultaneously cultivating intrigue for her patrons.

Finally, Artemisia would lead the viewer’s eye in a manner that controlled the audience’s interaction with her works, directing their focus towards her signature. Specifically, in her painting *Jael and Sisera* (c. 1620) [figure 10], Artemisia depicted the Kenite lady-assassin with her arm held out at an awkward, almost extreme angle for the swing she is lining up.

¹³ Mann, Judith W. “Identity Signs: Meanings and Methods in Artemisia Gentileschi’s Signatures.” *Renaissance Studies* 23, no. 1 (2009): 79-83.

¹⁴ Mann, Judith W. “Identity Signs: Meanings and Methods in Artemisia Gentileschi’s Signatures.” *Renaissance Studies* 23, no. 1 (2009): 89.



Jael and Sisera by Artemisia Gentileschi [Figure 10]

Jael is in the midst of an ultimate act of bravery, preparing to execute the Canaanite General Sisera in an intense act of bravery. The *chiaroscuro* intensifies Jael's arm against the pitch black background, leading the viewer's eye to the one space that isn't caliginous: a stone inscribed "*ARETEMITA LOMI/FACIBAT/MDCXX*," or "was being made by Artemisia Lomi." The use of the imperfect tense of the Latin verb '*Facibat*' draws a reference to Pliny the Elder (a Roman author and philosopher) who used "*Faciebat*" to signify an expression of ongoing artistic creation. Gentileschi's art was not a stagnant piece of a singular story, and nor was the artist—herself and her work—confined to a singular meaning. The art and her signature were a declaration to Artemisia's gender, and, more importantly, her ambitions—the placement of which enlightened the audience to the promise, gender, and talent of the artist who created it. That knowledge spoke to the audience and would only enrich their experience of a portrayal of female vigor and valor.

Engagement

Throughout her career, Artemisia Gentileschi remained a conscious manipulator of her reputation, her work, and clientele. However, it is in her methods of correspondence which she demonstrated yet another level of how extensive her strategic entrepreneurial abilities would prove to be.

Artemisia made a point of establishing connections with each of her potential patrons. In some cases, it would be through cultural gestures—like the aforementioned allusion to Florentine goldwork—and in others the interaction would prove to be more direct. For instance, while trying to establish a more permanent working relationship with the Medici Family, she painted

Self-portrait as a Lute Player. First and foremost, the painting utilized her face as a model which would increase her distinguishability, but also featured the calculated subject selection of a musician. The Grand Duke and his wife were known for their love of music, and even hosted *seven* elaborately built stages of stringed sections at their wedding.¹⁵ Thus, Gentileschi chose to depict herself as an informed and authentic representation of a musician, making an appeal to the Grand Duke's passion. The effort proved fruitful, as by the time Artemisia left Florence (only in her late twenties), she had completed 7 works for the Medici court and even painted the *Allegory of Inclination* (c. 1616) in a series of frescoes in the Casa Buonarroti to honor Michaelangelo's life. This was merely the start of Gentileschi's rise to international fame, as the Medici's patronage furthered Artemisia's baroque 'buzz marketing,' gaining her intercontinental notability with patronage from Philip IV, the King of Spain, and Charles I, King of England.

Furthermore, Artemisia Gentileschi would even send her works to prospective clients, knowing that once they laid eyes on the masterpieces of physical realism, chiaroscuro, and new psychological depths, they would be sure to finance the accomplishments. For example, in 1625 Artemisia shipped an arrangement of her works to solicit the patronage of Francesco I d'Este of Modena, the Duke of Modena. She included a letter for the Duke which told of her growing preeminence, stating she had "served all the major rulers of Europe, who appreciat[d her] work," adding that the awarded paintings would "provide the [sufficient] evidence of [her] fame." Duke Francesco expeditious reply revealed that he indeed "recognized [...] the beauty [Artemisia's] skill', and that he would "compensate" Gentileschi for her "*merito* [meaning her 'worth']".¹⁶ In a letter to the Sicillian collector and politician Don Antonio Ruffo, Artemisia described this recurring induced phenomenon. She eloquently explained that "A woman's name raises doubts until her work is seen," so, she continued, "I will show Your Illustrious Lordship what a woman can do."¹⁷ Such unyielding and invigorating responses were exactly the marks of Gentileschi's entrepreneurial ingenuity that allowed her to reach such heights of fame. In a letter to Galileo, her peer at Accademia del Disegno, she wrote, "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."¹⁸ The writing expresses Artemisia Gentileschi's pride at

¹⁵ Carter, Tim. "A Florentine Wedding of 1608." *Acta Musicologica* 55, no. 1 (1983): 98–104.

¹⁶ Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), Appendix A, letters 6a and 6b, pp. 380–381.

¹⁷ Artemisia Gentileschi to Don Antonio Ruffo in Messina, dated Naples, 13 November 1649. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero*, Appendix A, letter 25, p. 397.

¹⁸ Mann, Judith W. "Identity Signs: Meanings and Methods in Artemisia Gentileschi's Signatures." *Renaissance Studies* 23, no. 1 (2009): 74–92.

both the manor in which she skillfully pursued her patrons, but especially her success in establishing a relationship, those “most favored letters,” with them in the end.

Artemisia Gentileschi’s ready insight and understanding of the demands she would need to successfully market herself for her art career held a depth and confidence that was far more profound than critics were ready to give her credit for. Her drive for establishing ubiquitous influence by deploying herself as a model, leveraging her signatures to enhance her artistic authorship and identity, and engineering her interactions with potential employers were not the results of a happenstance success story, but of a conscious, effective, entrepreneurial genius. Artemisia needed a seat at the table— one she commended of her own volition— and just a foot in the door would allow her all the room in the world to bring into existence her creations of lyrical depth; from there, she was off and running.

Psychological Realism

The intense physical realism, the extensive entrepreneurial endeavors to get her foot in the door? Two major contributions served to pilot Artemisia Gentileschi's ultimate climax of her endowment to the Baroque movement: her profound psychological realism. Utilizing fervent interoception, Gentileschi provided the audience with an advanced understanding and visible reputation of a collection of abstract *senses* to perceive the *internal state* of the body— be it conscious or unconscious. Her keen understanding of the human psyche allowed Artemisia to elevate the exploration and depiction of such steadfast aspects of human nature as choice, motherhood, autonomy, and sacrifice.

Choice

Similar to Artemisia’s gentle but substantial evolution of the female nude, her presentation of feminine characters developed the heroines of these mythic tales from mere morals of past stories into complete emotional profiles of individuals. The most predominant instance of this change lies in the juxtaposition between Gentileschi and Caravaggio’s *Penitent Mary Magdalene*. Caravaggio’s *Penitent Magdalene* (c. 1594-15950 [Figure 11], depicted Mary as kneeling on a low stool, head bowed towards loose, empty arms, hair unkempt, pearls lying broken on the floor, and a single tear streaking down her cheek.



Penitent Magdalene by Caravaggio [Figure 11] (left) and Mary Magdalene by Artemisia Gentileschi [Figure 4] (right)

The small, slumped figure is quiet and subdued, almost bowing her head in admission of subservience to the failures that were her sins in life. She is arrested with melancholy, whilst looking at arms that appear as if they *should* be cradling a child but instead she is left with nothing. The character represents a conclusion of emotions— a relent to the hopelessness and sorrow that has overtaken her and a passive acceptance of what is to come: the path of redemption. Mary is at the center of the scene, but she does not command it. She's unobtrusive to the viewer, confined in her journey of religious contemplation. Gentileschi's adaptation, however, takes up *space* [refer to figure 4]. Artemisia paints the character not in muted browns, crunched amongst mousy shadows, but in a golden shift, with a wild and alive emotional journey. Mary isn't restricted to a crouched portion of the canvas, but stretches across almost the entirety of the piece. Artemisia's dramatic *chiaroscuro* also intensifies not just Mary's physical presence, but highlights the flushed cheeks and swollen eyes to accentuate the emotional one as well. The character is undergoing an active hurt, rather than an acquiescent one. Her face is not resigned to melancholy and averting the eyes like Caravaggio's, but looks forward from that painting with pensive brows as if to suggest the ongoing pain of this journey. Furthermore, her arms reach not to a shape of maternal woe, but towards her breast. It represents a symbol of her femininity as an individual contributor to society, not a second-class citizen who's foremost purpose lies with what

they can produce, rather than who they are. For the first time, Gentileschi painted these historic women of morality as 3-dimensional active subjects— *they command the emotional landscape of the piece rather than just existing in it.*

Motherhood

Now, Artemisia Gentileschi did not ignore the maternal presence of human connection, and how could she? The artist held a strong sense of connection towards the expression and analysis of human's natural, but fundamental dispositions and characteristics. Something so centered at the very fabric of every individual was sure to be a must for Artemisia to investigate. In her work, *Madonna and Child* (c. 1613) [Figure 12] she sought to capture the complexity of the female form through an exploration of matrescence.



Madonna and Child by Artemisia Gentileschi [Figure 12] (left) and *Madonna and Child* by Orazio Gentileschi [Figure 13] (right)

Unlike previous expressions of the form, Artemisia's art did not focus the expression of motherhood as centering around the child's relationship with the breast (as can be seen in her father, Orazio's, work). Gentileschi, by contrast, emphasized the connection between *mother* and child. She adds a warmth and comfort to her expression, not simply through the pink, newborn-esque tones, but with the shared eye contact of a mother and her baby boy. The composition is not that of the Virgin Mary and Jesus, rather a rendition of any nurturing mother.

Additionally, Artemisia made the infant an active participant in the painting, as well. The child reaches out to lovingly touch its mother's cheek, such a primal human response, effectively transforming the work from serving a religious purpose like all the others, to articulating the intimacy of the maternal scene. It is an illustration of the essence of humanity—of giving and sustaining life— and little could be more overpoweringly heartfelt. Gentileschi conceptualized principal moments of life in a wholly new manner.

Autonomy

Artemisia's continual expression of cardinal aspects of human nature also explored the poignancy of autonomy. Explicitly, in her painting of *Cleopatra* (c. 1633-1635) [Figure 14].



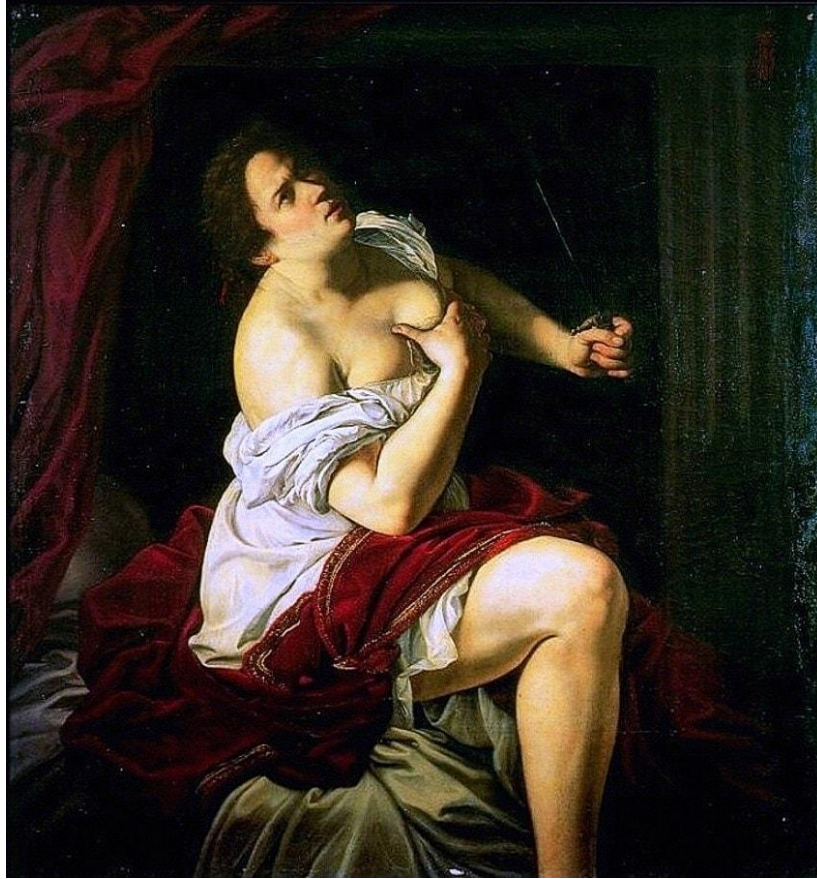
Cleopatra by Artemisia Gentileschi [Figure 14]

In the scene, two of Cleopatra's servants discover her suicide, a reaction to allow her to avoid the humiliation of being flaunted as a Roman prisoner following Octavian's military triumph over her lover. The initial strikingness of the painting resides in Gentileschi's dedication to physical realism— the way the body is stiffening in rigor mortis, the skin nearly white with the onset of death, the blue hue taken on by Cleopatra's lips, the whites of the eyes as they roll back into the ruler's head, the diamond shaped head of the poisonous adder, and her head itself rolled back off of the wrist as if it had been previously resting there, *waiting* for the venom to set in.

As much as it is a depiction of death, the painting makes Cleopatra's decision come alive. The next notable aspect of the work is Artemisia's use of nudity. Critics saw this choice as a demonstration of conformity to the painter's male clients, inadvertently placing the female centers as the objects of male desire. However, that holds feeble backing. Has anything Gentileschi has ever done been inadvertent? As any viewer can derive from Gentileschi's previous art works, very little was ever executed by accident. Every color, position of the arm, inclusion of dimpled fat, served a message-conveying purpose central to the understanding of the portrayal. Even here, Gentileschi positions the body in a manner suggestive of the Hellenistic statue *Sleeping Ariadne* (which 17th century Europe thought to be a depiction of Cleopatra). So, it would be naive to cast aside all of Gentileschi's past dedications to the psychological journey of her paintings to allow nudity for commodities sake. Hence, the specific cases of nudity and their *varying* symbolic meaning can't all be lumped into one reasoning. In the case of Cleopatra, the choice of nudity is not even Artemisia's, but Cleopatra's herself. The woman had her rule and dignity scraped and snatched by rumors from her male counterparts. But suicide held the opportunity of relief, of the eternal freeing of her soul. Nudity is the form of freedom, of being human at its core, of *autonomy*, and it is the state Cleopatra wishes to live in for eternity. The act of suicide provided access to a type of psychological freedom or safety achieved. And in that realm of freedom, the subject regains the right to *be* beautiful, to *be* nude, and to have sovereignty over their afterlives. Nudity's inclusion is not so easy as a mere sexualization; rather, it is the artist's expression of remorse at Cleopatra's inopportunity of psychological freedom, and the final realization of that right.

Sacrifice

Finally, Artemisia Gentileschi's surreal level of assiduity to the accurate conveyance of the emotional landscape of her paintings is perhaps most extraordinarily presented in her artwork *Lucretia* (c. 1620) [Figure 15].



Lucretia by Artemisia Gentileschi [Figure 15]

Lucretia is the tale of a proud, virtuous woman from Greek mythology who was sexually violated and decided to take her own life to exemplify her refusal to live with a ‘tainted’ honor and to protect the honor of her kinsmen. The reason this depiction is so significantly groundbreaking is the level of interoception that Artemisia executes. Interoception, as defined by psychologists Philippe Courtet and Sébastien Guillaume, is “the ability to effectively perceive the physiological condition of the body,” therefore allowing the detection of “bodily sensations in a *conscious* way.” When people are grappling with the anguishing decision to take their own life, they experience an absence of interoception. In suicidal patients, people will feel disconnected from their physical self and, thus, may not feel a sense to care for it. As such, they are more likely to induce self harm.¹⁹

¹⁹ Courtet, Philippe, and Sébastien Guillaume. “Learning from Artemisia’s Lucretia: Embodied Suffering and Interoception in Suicide.” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 11 (January 31, 2020).

In Gentileschi's *Lucretia*, the woman can be seen— clothes ripped and pulled from her body— with a hand forcefully grabbing her breast and the other holding a dagger. This clutching to her breast demonstrates her shifting psyche and disconnection from herself, from her femininity and the assault on it. Her contorted face weighs the pain of the decision in one hand with the relief of death she hopes a dagger will bring. It illustrates a heart wrenching struggle. Lucretia has already let go of the notion of protecting her physical self— afterall, that safety was already stolen from her— so any physical harm she causes herself cannot compare to the hurt she has already experienced. Gentileschi brought light to the serious role of pain, self-awareness, and interoception in the role of suicide. This representation of such an innate level of human response only further highlights the level of Artemisia Gentileschi's understanding of the psychological trials of her subjects that is astounding to this day.

Artistic Ability Beyond Experience

Artemisia Gentileschi clearly demonstrated a profound understanding of the human psyche, as is beyond elucidated by her paintings, and yet still art critics continue to relate the emotional landscapes of her pieces to a solitary event in the artist's life. If we were to acreddit her ability *purely* to experiences of her life, it would be like saying any artist can singularly derive meaning from what they've experienced. Now, did Artemisia undergoing certain life experiences like losing a child, participating in a haughty affair, caring for her father, and surviving a sexual assault potentially add a depth of empathy, emotion, or understanding to her pieces that she would not have had otherwise? Perhaps. It is impossible for any individual to walk through life unchanged by the circumstances they encounter. However, the art historians and critics limited Gentileschi's talents to solely one event: the trauma of rape. It is from the records not of countless letters from internationally renowned patrons, poets, academics, and associates of Gentileschi, but the delimited documents of the rape trial that from which they would base all future analysis of the artist. According to those restrictions, they set all of Artemisia's paintings to the confines of being 'autobiographical' surrounding just one event from her life, disregarding her raw talent, her shrewd businessmanship, and her unimaginable skill to convey essences of humanity. Fewer than a quarter of the artist's known works feature vengeful women, so we, as viewers, simply cannot give Artemisia her due if we see her in that stagnation. And perhaps that abominable history did shape an aspect of her work here or there; but to confine the totality of Artemisia Gentileschi to one incident? Is Caravaggio's artwork limited to his murders? Bernini to his homophobia? Rembrandt to his insanity? Vermeer to his depression? Le Brun to his sadistic bedroom habits? No.

Artemisia Gentileschi's Due

Artemisia Gentileschi's oeuvre goes far beyond the experiences to which history has tied her. At the center of reviewing this artist, one must come to the concluding question: Is it possible to separate the context of the life of the artist from their work? Is it right? Despite the ineptitude of past governing art critics and historians, Gentileschi was an ingenious pioneer to the mastery of chiaroscuro, the evolution of physical realism, the dexterity of sharp-witted entrepreneurship, and the breathtaking expansion of portrayals of profound psychological realism. Gentileschi studied the very depths of humanity in her contributions to the Baroque art movement. Her subjects acknowledged the physical impacts of gravity, pigmentation, and physical requirements; Artemisia herself developed individualized marketing techniques on par even to the standards of modernity— with self-models, signatures, and clientele interactions— concentrated on building her baroque ‘buzz,’ and beyond the material talents, Artemisia Gentileschi was able to break down and manifest abstract levels of the conscious and subconscious emotional landscape of human nature. Artemisia Gentileschi was a *maestra* of unquantifiable extent, and still, somehow, history renounced her to a singular trauma. Yet, in delving into the benefactions of this artist, it is not Gentileschi who was short changed, but *history*. In reviewing the *dotta mano* of Artemisia Gentileschi, it has become unequivocally obvious that not only is it *possible* to separate the work of an artist from the context of their life, it is something we *owe* to both ourselves and our history.

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