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Appreciating Artemisia

The Renaissance is not just a significant period in which great happenings took place. Rather, it represents a heavily sought after, idealized way of life that emulated the great empires of the past and brought their glory and opulence into the present. The themes, techniques, and styles of the Renaissance still inspire countless artists today, just as they did Artemisia Gentileschi. She deeply admired the stories and historical figures that the old masters brought back to life through color, light and depth. She hoped to do the same, in her own way and in her own style. Not only was she a talented painter, she was also a gifted mind who revolutionized the way that females were depicted in art through her heroine portraits. Artemisia became a prominent Renaissance-esque painter in the Baroque period due to how she incorporated realism and naturalism in her heroine feature portraits while still maintaining respect for the traditional aspects of the subject matter she was depicting.

Artemisia Gentileschi was born in Rome in 1593, daughter to Orazio Gentileschi, the famous Baroque artist (Art History Archive). Artemisia was introduced to and trained in painting by her father. She was deeply influenced by his work, as well as other prominent Renaissance masters, specifically Caravaggio. Artemisia quickly came into her own as a talented artist, completing her first commission when she was seventeen years old. In order to further her artistic career, her father hired a private tutor, Agostino Tassi. Not long after she came under his tutelage, Tassi sexually assaulted the young artist. When it became clear that Tassi had no intention of marrying Artemisia, Orazio pressed charges in an attempt to restore his daughter’s dignity and reputation. The case was taken to trial and Tassi was sentenced to prison, but he never served time. The experience had a great impact on Artemisia’s life and work, and she began to narrow her focus to independent women of mythology and biblical stories.

Shortly after the incident, Artemisia married Pierantonio Stiattesi, an artist from Florence. They moved to Florence and started a family, both engaging in successful careers thanks to the plethora of commissions offered by the Medici and royalty alike. Artemisia was able to shed the shackles of her past and embrace the new life and success that Florence offered. She became a prominent court painter and made influential friends, such as Galileo. It was in Florence that she painted one of her most notable works, “Judith Slaying Holofernes.” She was the first woman to be accepted into the
Academia delle Arti del Disegno del Firenze, the renowned art academy with such illustrious members as Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci.

Unfortunately, bliss did not last long for Artemisia and Pierantonio. Soon financial troubles caught up to them, putting stress on their marriage. Artemisia left him, taking herself and her daughter, Prudentia, back to Rome hoping for a fresh start. Alas, her success in Florence did not follow her to Rome, as she found it difficult to live as a female artist with no connections. In reaction to difficult times, her style became less defiant and intense and focused on traditional portraiture.

Artemisia led a tumultuous life compared to other women of her time. Her work and technique reflected the constant changes in her life, which served her well as it displayed a multi-faceted and capable artist. Between her early career, her marriage and divorce, and her constant traveling, Artemisia experienced plenty of events that strongly impacted her life and her work. It is clear when examining her work that Artemisia had a fascination with women and their potential for heroism. After Artemisia’s mother died when she was only twelve years old, she spent most of her life around men. She had no real female interaction until her father took in a renter, a woman by the name of Tuzia. The two became fast friends, and Tuzia served as a sort of mentor to Artemisia. Their relationship was shattered, however, when, on the day that Agostino Tassi took advantage of her, Tuzia ignored her calls for help. This abandonment deeply affected Artemisia as it caused her to examine more closely the relationships among women and discover the importance of female solidarity and community (Benedetti 47).

Although the incident had the potential to destroy her life and the possibility of a career, she moved forward and threw herself into a world rarely charted by women. Not only did she survive, she thrived: “The story of Gentileschi’s triumph over events that could have condemned her to failure constitutes a kind of positive counterpart to the image of female talent doomed to destruction by a male-dominated world” (Benedetti 45). Artemisia is a woman to be emulated and admired for her grit and her fearlessness for not only pursuing a career commanded by men, but for also expressing her views in a confrontational but beautiful manner. Now seen as a feminist icon since her renewed fame in the 1970’s, she is recognized for her great strides in attempting to change the view of women in the seventeenth century. She did so by presenting historical women as strong individuals capable of all things that men are. As Edward L. Goldberg said, “In the years that followed, she produced some of the most compelling images of female heroism and female victimization in art” (547).

Artemisia started her artistic career with full force: “Her earliest known work, the
signed and dated ‘Susanna and the Elders’ in Pommersfelden, shows her as a talented, self-assured and stylistically independent artist at age seventeen” (Lippincott 444). Having been trained by her father in the techniques and styles of the Renaissance and been heavily focused on Caravaggio, Artemisia was expected to create works identical to her father’s and to those of the famous Old Masters of the Renaissance. However, Artemisia managed to find common ground between both her traditional training and her more nuanced ideas. Through “Susanna and the Elders,” Artemisia showcases a unique, feminist style while also emulating the classic themes of the past.

Although Artemisia is considered to be a Baroque artist because of her time period, her interest in the Old Masters resulted in a style extremely reminiscent of Renaissance themes and techniques. The Renaissance was all about incorporating the old with the new and bringing the beauty of Greek and Roman classicism into a modern setting. She drew upon all the ancient resources she had, while still developing a style uniquely her own, evocative of the past and the present. As Kristen Lippincott writes,

Her style demonstrated a sophisticated blend of the finest aspects of Italian art spanning the previous century: Caravaggistic realism and dramatic lighting, bold compositions reminiscent of Bolognese classicism and High Renaissance Rome and the sumptuous details of the mid-sixteenth century Tuscan Maneira. (444)

She used techniques like chiaroscuro and tenebrism that were introduced by Caravaggio, but opted for a more realistic and naturalistic depiction of life and people.

Artemisia capitalized on the opportunity that the Renaissance gave her to transform the past. More often than not, female subjects in paintings were depicted as weak, unintelligent and impulsive beings with no character depth in order to highlight the stronger male figures:

In Renaissance and Baroque art… acts of female heroism often suffered an extreme dislocation of the meaning. The staunchly moral Susanna was thus transformed into a lubricous tease, the dutiful and patriotic Judith into a deceitful courtesan, and the virtuous and home-loving Lucretia into a perverse débauché. (Goldberg 547)

In an effort to restore these women’s reputations and give them the honor and credit they deserved, Artemisia depicted them as strong, self-sufficient women with no need or want for male intervention.
The quest for redemption Artemisia undertook only furthered her now famous feminist image: “Artemisia as an innovatively protofeminist figure, whose brilliant re-interpretations of traditional subjects produced unprecedented characterizations of women in Italian painting” (Bohn 275). Her ability to weave the stories of the Renaissance with the techniques of the present was intriguing and engaging to art buyers: “Her innovative approach to religious and classical iconography would have pleased those patrons who yearned for a taste of the ‘new’” (Lippincott 444). Nobody was quite
ready to let go of the beauty that the Renaissance offered, yet they were still interested in the ever-changing artistic climate, and Artemisia successfully bridged that gap.

One of the finest examples of Artemisia's heroine works is “Judith Beheading Holofernes” from 1620. It is also one of her most famous pieces of art simply because of its gruesome and aggressive nature. It draws the fascinated viewer in with its blood and gore: “Judith is in the act of cutting the head from Holofernes’ neck, a work so well realized and expressed with such vivid colors that whoever sees it is filled with revulsion” (Locker 30). Here, Judith and her maidservant are seen decapitating the Assyrian general Holofernes because he and his troops are about to storm Judith’s city, Bethulia. Holofernes took a liking to Judith, a widower, and invited her to his tent and got drunk, giving Judith the opportunity to kill him before he could kill her people.

The image is full of physical tension, shown through the sharp angles and twisted movements. The dark colors and intense contrasts give the painting an ominous, sinister feel. The strength of Holofernes is shown by his immense size, making it all the more impressive that the two women were able to overpower him. But the real focus of the painting is the blood exploding from the general’s neck, signaling a suspended moment in time. The painting is pure movement, restless energy flowing through it and manifested in the brutal action of slowly separating head from body. The violence of the painting is strictly anti-feminine, which is exactly what Artemisia wanted to achieve (Locker 31). There is a certain formidable aura surrounding Judith, clearly observable in her contorted facial features. The painting is clearly modeled after Caravaggio’s own interpretation of the story and draws heavily from his use of deep contrast. She again combines the fantasies and techniques of the Renaissance with the themes of the modern world and woman. Because it is thought that Holofernes took advantage of Judith, many critics believe this is actually a self-portrait (Garrard 98). The story would serve as a perfect opportunity for revenge, fulfilling Artemisia’s need for vengeance.

Another integral painting in Artemisia’s repertoire is one of her later paintings, “Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting” from 1638. In this exquisite work, Artemisia took her crusade for women a step further by putting herself in the spotlight. In mythology, the arts were represented as female figures, Muses or Graces. Painting, too, was represented by a woman, giving Artemisia the perfect vessel to further establish herself as a prominent artist amongst the men around her: “Because of her identity as a woman, Artemisia was in a position to take creative advantage of the allegorical tradition, and to make a statement that was at once more humble and more profound” (Garrard 107). She put herself in a position of which no man was capable, giving herself
immense power and authority as the allegory of painting herself: “The artist emerges forcefully as the living embodiment of the allegory” (Garrard 106). Artemisia successfully presented herself, a woman, not only proficient in her profession, but flourishing in it. She seamlessly combined her womanhood with her trade, “uniting in a single image two themes that male artists has been obliged to treat separately, even though these themes often carried the same basic message” (Garrard 97).

While Artemisia Gentileschi may not be as world-renowned today as some other male artists equal in talent and exposure, she deeply impacted artists who came after her and their understanding of the Renaissance. She quite literally added a woman’s touch to a profession so dominated by men and to a movement that had the tendency to overshadow the strength of the female figure. Artemisia showed that the female form should not be just admired for its beauty, as it was in the Renaissance, but also for its strength and spirit. She proved that women are more than just beings of grace and propriety, and that they are capable of overcoming any adversity in their way. Artemisia possessed a remarkable capability for emulating and honoring the past while still experimenting with her modern ideas and techniques, truly encapsulating the spirit of the Renaissance. Through her beautiful and eye-opening works, Artemisia Gentileschi joined the legacy of the masters before her and became a true Renaissance woman.

Works Referenced


