

Issue 1

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FOR LOVERS OF TRAVEL, ARCHAEOLOGY AND ART

*Judith beheading Holofernes*



# Art, Intrigue & Artemisia

## Gentileschi's Florentine years: 1613-1620

Jane Fortune, author of *Invisible Women, Forgotten Artists of Florence*, tells the story of one such artist, the remarkable Artemisia Gentileschi

**T**he words, “passion”, “drama”, “torture” and “art”, describe the life of Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1652/3), one of the world's greatest Baroque artists; a life that has all the chiaroscuro trappings of a romance novel. Even her exotic name, “Artemisia”, captures one's attention. She was named after a Greek queen from the IV Century, Queen of Caria, Artemis, who was responsible for the building of the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, in honour of her husband.

Queen Artemis, a strong woman full of intrigue, was ahead of her time, in a man's world, as was Artemisia Gentileschi. The latter was among the first women artists to achieve success in the seventeenth century, and brought to her work an electric sense of narrative drama and a unique perspective that both celebrated, and humanized, strong women characters.

Today, she is regarded as one of the most progressive painters of her generation, particularly since her interpretations of powerful and brave women in history (such as Cleopatra, Diana, Bathsheba and Mary Magdalene) was unprecedented.

Her father, Orazio Lomi Gentileschi (1563-1639) was an Italian Baroque painter who came under the influence of Caravaggio, famous

for interpreting his revolutionary painting style. From when she was a young child, her father trained Artemisia, the oldest of his four children, in his workshop/studio in Rome. Her school book training, though, was limited and she did not learn to read or write until she was an adult. Even with these obstacles, she became famous for grand scale works depicting biblical or mythical heroines, as in her first work, *Susanna and the Elders* (1610, Schonborn Collection, Pommersfelden, Germany) painted when she was seventeen.

Many attributed this work to her father, whose works are more idealized and hers more naturalistic, because the critics felt no one that young could paint such a dramatic and sensitive painting. Much later her signature was found in the painting in the shadow cast by Susanna's legs, leaving no question that the work was hers. The painting, which depicts a young woman being sexually harassed by the elders of her community who falsely accused her of adultery, was painted before her traumatic rape experience, two years later.

### Trial and torture

Because she was a girl, she could not attend an art academy, so her father hired Agostino Tasso, a co-worker, as her private tutor. At the age of nineteen, he raped her and promised to marry her, although he was married.

Her father later brought suit against Tassi and a seven-month criminal trial ensued, during which Artemisia was forced to publicly recount the rape and undergo torture – metal rings, thumbscrews, which were tightened around her fingers to assure she was telling the truth.

Tassi was found guilty and was sentenced to one year in prison, which he did not serve. Shortly after the trial, Artemisia Gentileschi's father arranged for her to marry a minor Florentine painter, Pierantonio Stiattesi, and they moved to Florence in 1613.

The trauma of the rape and the trial had a definite impact on her paintings – her graphic depictions were symbolic attempts to deal with her pain. The heroines

in her paintings, especially *Judith*, the Jewish heroine who beheaded Holofernes, an invading Assyrian general, are powerful women exacting revenge on a male.

### Life in Florence

Upon her arrival in Florence, Michelangelo Buonarroti the younger, a great nephew of Michelangelo Buonarroti the Great, commissioned Artemisia, then in an advanced state of pregnancy, to paint *Allegory of the Inclination* in the Casa Buonarroti, Michelangelo's home in which he never lived.

Completed in 1615, this painting is located on the ceiling in the second floor gallery. This was part of a series of fifteen personifications dedicated to the life of his great uncle, Michelangelo, and she was paid three times more than any other artist who participated in painting this series. The subject of the allegory said to resemble Artemisia, is of a young woman holding a compass. Artemisia's energetic and dramatic heroines often bear a resemblance to their creator. The figure was originally nude, but later her lap was partly painted with a drapery by another artist.

### Medici patronage

While in Florence, Artemisia became good friends with the astronomer, Galileo Galilei, presumably because of his connection to the Medici

*What makes us particularly happy about this project is that a painting relegated to the deposits of the Pitti Palace is now, after our restoration, deemed fit for public exhibition*

court. Their friendship lasted until his death through written correspondence after she left Florence.

In 1616, she became the first woman to be inducted as a member of Florence's Accademia dell'arte dei Disegno, Europe's first academy for drawing, where Galileo was also a member. Although drawings by her are rare, a charcoal drawing of St. John the Baptist's Decapitation can be found in the archives of the Uffizi's Gabinetto di Disegni e Stampe in Florence.

She achieved widespread creative success under the patronage of Grand Duke Cosimo II de' Medici and the Grand Duchess, Cristina di Lorena, wife of Ferdinando I de' Medici.

While women artists at that time were generally limited to portraiture and still-life painting, Artemisia became famous for grand-scale works, depicting biblical and mythological heroines (no frail female ever graced her canvases). *Judith and her Maidservant* (1614), housed in Palazzo Pitti's Palatine Gallery, in the Sala dell'Iliade, is a stunning example of Artemisia's realism. It is one of six variations she painted on that subject (one version is in Michigan's Detroit Museum of Art). Her style was strongly influenced by Caravaggio's use of chiaroscuro, which shows a painterly contrast between light and dark.

### Work in Florence

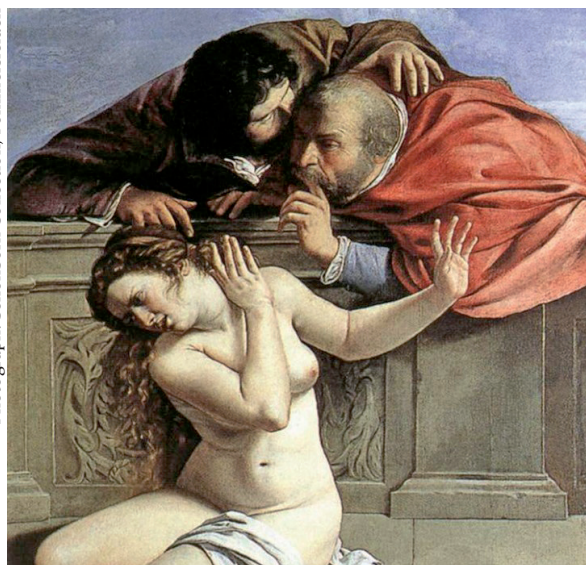
Other works by Artemisia Gentileschi in the Sala della Allegorie in the Palazzo Pitti's Palatine Gallery, include *Madonna and Child* (1615) and *The Conversion of the Magdalene* (1620), also known as *The Penitent Magdalene*, which showcases the richness of the deep gold (called 'Artemisia gold') and the dark green of Magdalene's dress, newly developed colours she had not used in her earlier works. The work is thought to be the portrait of Maria Maddalena, the wife of Grand Duke Cosimo II de' Medici, and Gentileschi's patron in Florence. Her signature "Artemisia Lomi", her uncle Aurelio's last name, is on the

chair. In Florence, she signed her works, 'Lomi', rather than Gentileschi, because of her strained relationship with her father caused by the rape trial.

The Uffizi Gallery's Sala del Carravaggio holds Gentileschi's most well known work, *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (1620), a terrifying scene of female retribution, filled with power and intense violence. Artemisia is said to have painted it as revenge for her rape (it is worth noting that the blood spurting in a wild arc from Holofernes' neck illustrates her friend Galileo's discovery of 'the parabolic path of projectiles'). The Uffizi version is larger than the earlier one (1612-1613) she painted, hanging in the Museum of Capodimonte in Naples. In the eighteenth century, the Florence version became the property of the Grand Duchess Maria Luisa de' Medici, but she found it so horrible to look at that she hid the work, which was not seen again until an exhibition in 2000 at the Uffizi Gallery.

Also, in the same room at the Uffizi Gallery, is her

Photograph: Schönborn Collection, Pommersfelden



*Suzanna and the Elders, 1610*

*Saint Catherine of Alexandria* (1619), commissioned by the Medici family. This work was damaged in the 1993 Mafia bombing, which exploded in one of the streets behind the Uffizi Gallery. The debris from the bomb cut a vertical slit along the saint's right hand and damaged Saint Catherine's face and eye and was restored in 1994. This work, once displayed in the Accademia, was not originally recognized as a work by Artemisia Gentileschi until the 1960s.

Gentileschi's *Minerva/Sapienza* (1615) was probably commissioned by Maria de' Medici and is said to

represent her daughter-in-law, Anne of Austria. The painting, which is the property of the Polo Museale Fiorentino, hangs in Florence's Procura Generale della Repubblica (not open to the public) located on the via Cavour.

### After Florence

Though Artemisia and her work were quite popular in Florence, financial and marital problems forced her family in 1621 to return to Rome. In 1622, her husband was not listed as a household member and he is lost to the annals of history. In Rome, for eight years, her painting style matured and the sophistication in her imagery of the female figure brought her considerable artistic success which lasted her lifetime.

She moved to Naples from 1630-1638, and from 1638 to 1640 she joined her ailing father in London, where they painted together for the first time in fifteen years. After her father's death in 1639, she moved back to Naples, where she lived until her death. She is reputed to be buried in Naples in the church of St. Giovanni dei Fiorentini, which was destroyed in WWII.

She left thirty four paintings and 28 letters, and though she enjoyed a successful career, after her death she was forgotten. This was until two decades ago when a renewed interest in her by feminist art historians, saw Artemisia recognized as one of the greatest female artists.

Mary Garrard's, *Artemisia Gentileschi - the Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, published in 1989, was the first book devoted to her, and in 1991 her first exhibition was held in Florence at the Casa Buonarroti in Florence, more than 300 years after her death.

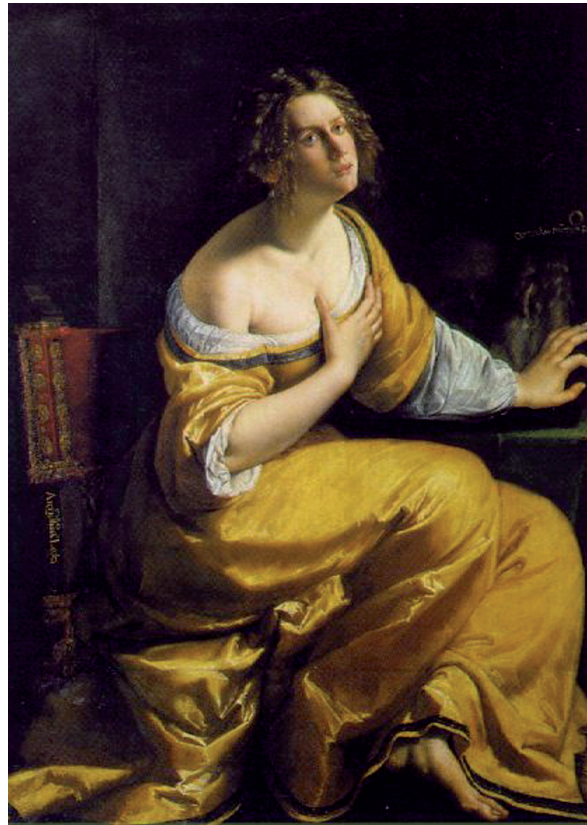
Gentileschi fought for the right to be a successful woman artist centuries before the women's equal rights movement, and it is her life struggles that makes her recognized as one of the world's greatest artists. In her words: "my illustrious lordship, I will show you what a woman can do", and that she did!●

### About the Author

Author, lecturer, art collector and philanthropist, Dr. Jane Fortune is author of *To Florence, Con Amore, 90 Ways to Live the City; Invisible Women, Forgotten Artists of Florence* and *Art by Women in Florence: A Guide Through 500 Years*. Her book *Invisible Women, Forgotten Artists of Florence* was the basis of a PBS (Public Broadcasting System) documentary of the same title, and the documentary won a coveted Emmy in 2013.

She is the Cultural Editor of *The Florentine*, the English Speaking News magazine in Florence, and is known in Florence as 'Indiana Jane' because of her efforts to identify, rescue and restore art treasures by women, in Florence's storages and museums. She serves on several Museum Boards of Trustees in the United States.

Her next book, *When the World Answered: Women Artists for Florence After the 1966 Flood*, with Linda Falcone, will be published October 2014. It is about thirty-one, of one hundred and seven, works by women artists that were donated to the city of Florence to replace works of art destroyed in the 1966 Flood. The city of Florence promised the artists that their works would be housed in a yet-to-be built Contemporary Museum of Art – that promise was made 48 years ago, while the works have been languishing, never seen, in storage. On June 24, 2014, the 'Museum of the 1900s' was finally inaugurated in Florence – this book is their story.



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Penitent Mary Magdalene*, 1620 c., Palatina Gallery, Pitti Palace

## Advancing Women Artists Foundation by Jane Fortune

My passion, as an author and researcher, is to rediscover works of art, by women, languishing, for centuries, overlooked and unseen, in the deposits of the museums in Florence. I am very fortunate: I live in Florence several months a year.

In 2007, I founded the Advancing Women Artists Foundation (AWA) whose mission is to preserve, conserve and restore 'lost' works by women artists, and find a "space" in a museum in Florence to hang the restored works.

During my five years of research for my book, *Invisible Women, Forgotten Artists of Florence* (2009), I had read that Gentileschi's work, *David and Bathsheba* (1635) was considered 'lost', last known to be in the "deposits" of the Uffizi Gallery. After a year of asking the women museum directors (there are 31 in Florence) to search their storages, the work was discovered in the Pitti Palace's attic storage, languishing, unseen, for 372 years!

Gentileschi painted six other versions of this subject and the Florence painting is closest to the one in Potsdam, Germany, where Bathsheba's servant is white. In her Pitti version the servant is African. It is not known how this work

became part of the Medici collection, but documents show that it hung in the grand duke's apartment in 1662. Also, in 1662, it was given to Pietro Fevere, the then head weaver of the Florentine tapestry workshop, so he could reproduce the painting into a tapestry (the tapestry is in storage in the Pitti Palace). The painting was returned to the Pitti Palace, but never again was it hung in the Granducal apartments.

The work, at first glance, seems to be a tranquil scene from the Old Testament when King David first sees the married Bathsheba as she is bathing. But how deceiving! David's subsequent seduction of Bathsheba and the events that followed are thought to be the beginning of a curse on the House of David.

Artemisia's painting, particularly Bathsheba's face and body, was in a state of considerable deterioration; much of the paint had flaked off because of improper storage conditions and humidity damage. Restorers Nicola Ann MacGregor, Sandra Freschi and Elisabetta Codognato undertook the daunting task in restoring *David and Bathsheba*.

The Pitti Palace Palatina Gallery's former director, Serena Padovani, who directed the restoration, said about the delicate process: "Our task was to consolidate the painting's remaining colour and improve the composition's legibility, lowering the numerous lacunae [missing pieces of paint] with neutral tones, so to obtain an image that is recomposed, rather than repainted." One use of these neutral tones was on Bathsheba's missing eye, and is somewhat disturbing when first viewing the work.

The restoration took over a year and just before its unveiling to the public (in 2008, in the Pitti Palace's Sala Bianca), the restorers found a surprise. For months they had been looking for David, who eluded them. As they finishing putting the final touches on the work, a dim silhouette

emerged from the balcony – it was King David. The royal protagonist was found!

It is perhaps in the words of one of the restorers, Nicola Ann MacGregor, who embodies the unique nature of this project: 'In all the 38 years of my career as a conservator in Florence, this is the first time I have ever restored a painting by a female artist.

Being a woman myself, of course, this enhanced the sense of "bonding" nearly always established between the restorer and the author of the painting he or she is working on.

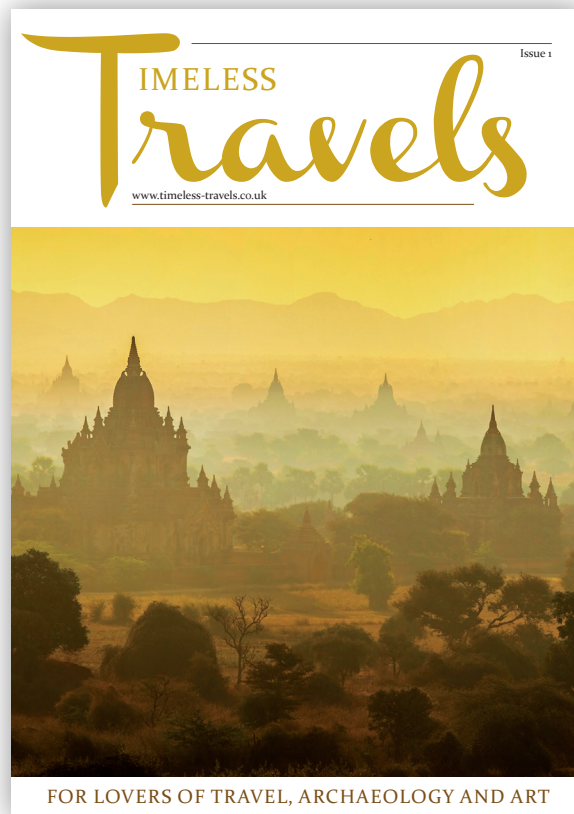
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For more information [click here](#).

Watch the restoration of the painting of David & Bathsheba:



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