

<https://association-radar.org/spip.php?article6959>



Art Review

“I will show your illustrious Lordship what a woman can do”

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Sunday 27 December 2020

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Dave Kellaway reviews the current [National Gallery exhibition](#). The Gallery is currently closed but hopes to reopen on 6 January 2021, the exhibition is scheduled until 24 January 2021.

<https://association-radar.org/IMG/png/twin.png>

The pictures above tell the biblical story of Judith, a Jewish widow, who saved the city of Bethulia from the Assyrians by killing their general, Holofernes. It was a popular subject for artists at the time. Caravaggio, who was a big influence on Artemisia, painted the version on the left in 1599. If you compare his version with the one painted by her (on the right) you notice how much more she captures the extreme violence and the physical effort involved. Judith, in Caravaggio's picture, is leaning back, almost avoiding the blood splatter whereas here the blood flicks onto her breasts. Artemisia paints the young maidservant as a very active 'sisterly' participant helping to hold down Holofernes, for Caravaggio she is old and is much further away from the action peering over Judith's shoulder. The facial expressions are different too, for Artemisia there is a steely determination, in the other version she is more trepidant or fearful.

Caravaggio had visited her father's, Orazio's, studio when Artemisia was growing up and learning her trade. So this picture reflects the framework of Caravaggio's baroque revolution where pictures became astonishingly naturalistic, using ordinary people as models, striking diagonal compositions to convey movement and vivid contrasts of light, colour and darkness. But the extra intensity of this iconic picture is undoubtedly influenced by Gentileschi's real life experience.

Aged eighteen she was raped by an artist friend of her father, Agostino Tassi, who gave her the false impression that they would marry. In those days this was often the way such matters were resolved by men. But when Tassi did not follow through, Orazio Gentilesechi pressed charges hoping this would force Tassi to marry his daughter or pay a big dowry.

One of the highlights of the exhibition is to see the actual transcript of the trial. You can read that Artemisia, having to submit to the torture of cords being tightly bound around her fingers to 'prove she was telling the truth', cried out 'e vero, vero, vero (it's true, true...)' Tassi was found guilty and condemned to exile which was never really enforced. Artemisia went into an arranged marriage brokered by a significant payment by her father.

Since the rediscovery of her work in the early twentieth century, much of the focus has been on this painting and the idea of her as a proto-feminist painter executing this as revenge art. Clearly her life experience did have an influence on this particular picture but this exhibition deliberately tries to broaden out the narrative and show that her work cannot be pigeonholed in this way.

It shows her drive and resilience. Her arranged marriage did not work out. She had to support her family so she carefully marketed her unique selling point as an accomplished female artist. Her own image was used in many of her pictures, for example as Saint Catherine, the martyr killed on the spiked wheel. Clients were keen to have an image of the notorious painter.

Her portrayal of female agency in her pictures mirrored her own independence. She was one of the few women to move among the intellectual and artists of the day like the scientist Galileo or the poet Michelangelo. Artemisia lived and worked in the great cities of the period – Rome, Florence, Venice, Naples. She even spent some time with her father in London where she helped him paint the ceiling of the Queens House (now in Marlborough House). She took a lover, a wealthy Florentine, and one of the most moving exhibits are the original letters to him.

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Girls were not taught to read and write, even in an artistic family, so she had to learn herself and her poor grammar and spelling are shown on these pages. One references both her art and a real passion when she entreats her lover to wait for her and not to masturbate before any of her self-portraits.

Although artists today are constrained by the art market, there is a lot more freedom to choose your own subject and style. In the 17th century you had to find commissions and there were two main sources – the Catholic Church to help spread its teachings or the rich nobles or merchants. In the latter case, the clients wished to express their political or economic power in recording the image of them, their families and their estates. This could include their political or military victories. Also there was a particular market for nudes, mostly women, for their private chambers to cater for the male gaze and erotic stimulation. Of course the nudes had to be dressed up as classical or biblical stories. ‘High art’ was a cover for more prosaic desires.

[https://association-radar.org/IMG/jpg/judith_and_maid_servant.jpg]

The greatness of Artemisia is that she was able, to some degree, to subvert the narrow confines of these genres and the male gaze by inserting images of real female agency and sisterly solidarity into her pictures. Just to give a couple of examples from the exhibition. Look at her picture of Judith and her maidservant just after they had decapitated Holofernes (above). Judith’s arm rests on the maidservant’s soldier as they both look out to the right of the picture maybe assessing their escape route.

Another example is the Birth of John the Baptist (below) where the whole focus of the picture is on the four women caring for the new born while Zacharia, the father, is shunted off to the far left.

[https://association-radar.org/IMG/jpg/artemisia_gentileschi_-_birth_of_st_john_the_baptist_-_wga8559.jpg]

Birth of John the Baptist

If you look through the whole catalogue you see that she regularly painted female protagonists: Cleopatra, Esther, Bathsheba, Mary Magdalene, Lucretia, Jael, Clio, Corisca, St Catherine and Susannah. Most of the time they are active, sometimes they kill men or on occasion kill themselves.

This female visibility and the way women are portrayed is different from the way the great male painters worked. Women were not portrayed just as victims. The curators of the show succeed in reframing the conventional image of Gentileschi as the victim painting her own revenge. That iconic picture of Judith was a key painting but has to be judged on its aesthetic, artistic merits and not just on the back story. It has to be located within her entire work.

Artemisia was clear about her own role. She did have a sort of proto-feminist consciousness. She wrote to a Sicilian patron: “I will show your Illustrious Lordship what a woman can do (...) You will find the spirit of Caesar in the soul of a woman.”

Objective conditions limit what is possible in different periods of history. But progressive thinking, ideals or limited experiences of liberation can emerge in the field of ideas and art centuries before they can be realised on a mass level. More visionaries and thinkers hidden from history like her will also probably be discovered. Socialists and feminists always learn and are inspired by those who glimpsed a different world years before our time. We include the great works of humanity in any construction of a better future. In her way Artemisia is similar to Mary Wollstencroft in the 18th Century or the Levellers in the 16th. Here is a contemporary portrait of her by Simon Vouet:

https://association-radar.org/IMG/jpg/portrait_of_artemisia_lomi_gentileschi_by_simon_vouet_ca.1623-1626.jpg

Simon Vouet (1590-1649) – Potrait of Artemisia Lomi Gentileschi

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Whether you can get to the exhibition or not, just take a few minutes to look at her wonderful art online. All her pictures can be found free on the internet. There are films and documentaries about her on [YouTube](#).

Source [Socialist Resistance](#).

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