Artemisia Gentileschi and Her Times

■ By Lucy Gordan

On until May 7th at the *Museo di Roma* in the Palazzo Braschi overlooking Piazza Navona is the blockbuster temporary exhibition *"Artemisia Gentileschi e Il Suo Tempo" ("Artemisia Gentileschi and Her Age")*. Even during her lifetime Artemisia was already one of the first women artists to achieve recognition in the male-dominated world of post-Renaissance art. In fact, she was both praised and disdained by contemporary critical opinion, recognized as having genius, yet seen as monstrous because she was a woman exercising a creative talent thought to be exclusively male. In an era when female artists were limited to portrait painting and imitative poses, she was the first woman to paint major historical and religious scenarios. Her favorite subjects were Judith and Holofernes, Mary Magdalene, the Annunciation, St. John the Baptist, and Cleopatra. In 1616 she was the first woman to become a member of the *Accademia del Disegno* in Florence.

The Annunciation.
Below *Judith with Servant*

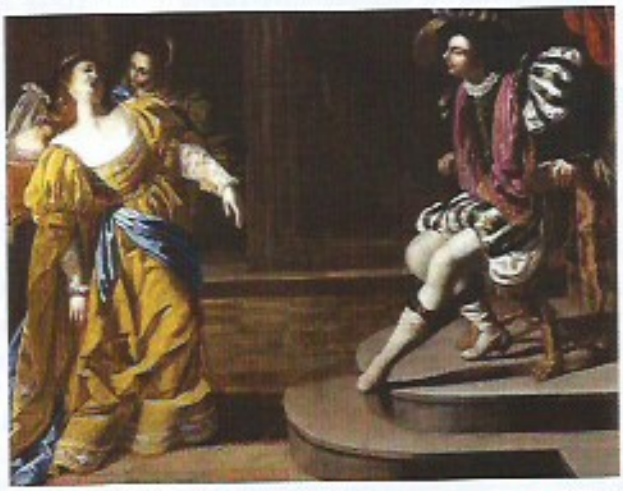
About one third of the 95 paintings on display (on loan from some 80 different museums and private collections and many never before in Rome) in Palazzo Braschi's newly opened exhibition area are by Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653). The others are by contemporary artists she knew or by younger painters she influenced. Some of the paintings are on loan from other museums in Rome and from elsewhere in Italy: Bologna, Cerreto Guidi (a town 19 miles west of Florence), Cesena, Cosenza, Florence, Lecce, Milan, Naples, Novara, Pistoia, Venice, and Vicenza. Several others are on loan from private collections or from museums around Europe. Those from the United States are *Danaë* (c. 1612) from the St. Louis Art Museum; a *Self Portrait as a Lute Player* (c. 1616-1617) from the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut; *Lot and his Daughters* (1620-c. 25) from the Toledo Museum of Art; *Esther and Ahasuerus* (1626-29) from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, all four by Artemisia; *Apollo and Marsia* (1616-1620) by Bartolomeo Manfredi from the St. Louis Art Museum; *The Sybil* (c. 1618-21) by Orazio Gentileschi, Artemisia's father, from the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston; and *Amphitrite's Triumph* (c. 1648) by Bernardo Cavallino, from the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.

Like the earlier monographic exhibitions devoted to her (Florence 1991, Metropolitan, Palazzo Venezia in Rome and St. Louis 2001/02, and Milan 1212) *"Artemisia Gentileschi and Her Age"* is biographical and chronological, but here includes works by other artists who influenced her or whom she influenced. The exhibition is divided into five sections: the different places she lived: Rome (1593-1613), Florence (1613-1620), Rome again (1620-1627), then, after a brief time in Venice, Naples (1629-38), London (1638-1640), and Naples again (1640-53).

Artemisia was born on Via Ripetta near *San Giacomo degli Incurabili* in Rome in 1593, the oldest of four children and the only girl. She was baptized on July 10 at *San Lorenzo in Lucina*. Her mother, Prudentia Montone, died during childbirth when Artemisia was 12 and was buried in *Santa Maria del Popolo*. Her father was the well-known painter Orazio Gentileschi (1563-1639), who was Artemisia's first teacher. He was a friend of Caravaggio, whose *chiaroscuro* style (contrast of light and shadow) heavily influenced Artemisia's style. Her style was also influenced by Annibale Carracci and the Bologna School, confirmed in her first work *Susanna e i Vecchioni (Susanna and the Elders,* 1610) in the Schönborn Collection in Pommersfelden and on loan here.

In 1611, Orazio, who was working with Agostino Tassi on decorating the vaults of the *Casino delle Rose* in the Palazzo Pallavicini-Rospigliosi, turned over Artemisia's training in perspective to his colleague, who raped Artemisia in her own bedroom

on Via della Croce. Afterwards Artemisia continued to have sexual relations with Tassi with the expectation that they were going to be married and thus restore her dignity and her future. When Tassi reneged on this promise because he was already married, Orazio pressed charges. During the ensuing sensational seven-month trial, *Wikipedia* tells us, "it was discovered that Tassi had planned to murder his wife, had engaged in adultery with his sister-in-law, and planned to steal some of Orazio's paintings... Artemisia was subjected to a gynecological examination (to determine whether she'd been "deflowered" recently or a long time before) and torture using thumb screws to verify her testimony. In the end, Tassi was sentenced to imprisonment for one year, although he never served time. He accepted exile instead. (The transcripts of the trial still exist today.)



Esther and Ahasuerus; below, *The Conversion of Mary Magdalene* and *Susanna and the Elders*

The scandal that followed made it impossible for Artemisia to win aristocratic and ecclesiastical commissions in Rome, so Orazio married her off on November 29th, 1612 at the church of *Santo Spirito in Sassia* to a much older and mediocre painter Pierantonio Stiattesi, who was heavily in debt to him, and the mal-assorted couple moved to Florence, where they had a daughter named Prudentia after Artemisia's mother.

That she had been raped and participated without much success in prosecuting the rapist long overshadowed her talent and achievements as an artist. Yet in Florence she was esteemed by her fellow artists, Cristofano Allori to name one, Cosimo II de'Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany and the Grand Duchess, Christina of Lorraine, Michelangelo Buonarotti the younger, the artist's great-nephew, and Galileo Galilei, with whom she corresponded by letter for a long time. Here she painted her several versions of her masterpiece *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (on display here are hers from the *Uffizi* in Florence and *Capodimonte* in Naples while shamefully missing for comparison is Caravaggio's version in Palazzo Barberini less than a mile away). In fact, her notable works from this period are filled with defiant and violent women often exacting vengeance on male evil doers, perhaps on account of repressed vengeance or as a cathartic expression of her rage and violation. It explains why the great art historian Roberto Longhi wrote: "There are about 57 works by Artemisia Gentileschi and 94% (49 works) feature women as protagonists or equal to men." Indeed many, like *The Lute-Player*, are self-portraits.

In 1621, Artemisia returned to Rome to escape from her ever increasingly debt-ridden husband, and over the next decade, perhaps with some support from her father, gained the esteem of the so-called *Caravaggisti*: Carlo Sarceni, Bartoleomeo Manfredi and Simon Vouet, all of whom have works here. However, Rome was not as lucrative as she'd hoped, so she moved to Venice in search of richer commissions. One of her Venetian works *Ester ed Assuero (Esther and Ahasuerus)* from the Met, testimony to her assimilation of Venetian luminism, is displayed here.

Again in search of new and more lucrative commissions, in 1630 Artemisia moved to Naples. Jusepe de Ribera and Massimo Stazione, both with paintings on display here, were working there. Naples was a kind of second home for Artemisia, and she remained there for the rest of her life except for a year-long (1638-40) stay in London to help her sick father. Orazio, who had become a painter at the court of Charles I of England, had received the important job of decorating a ceiling (allegory of *Trionfo della pace e delle Arti, Triumph of Peace and the Arts)* in Queen Henrietta Maria of France's house, *Casa delle Delizie*, in Greenwich. Artemisia and her father were working together again, but the real reason for her journey to London was Charles I's invitation. He was a fanatical collector willing to ruin public finances to follow his artistic wishes. Moreover, his collection already included the *Autoritratto in veste di Pittura (Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting)*.

Orazio died suddenly in 1639, and it is known that Artemisia left England no later than 1642, but nothing is known about her subsequent movements until 1649 when she was in Naples again, where she grew increasingly dependent upon her assistant, Onofrio Palumbo, whose painting of *St. Augustine* is on display here. Her exact date of death is unknown, perhaps not until 1656 when a devastating plague swept Naples. Buried in the Church of *San Giovanni dei Fiorentini (St. John of the Florentines)* in Naples, she was so famous that her tombstone reads "*Heic Artemisia*" with no surname. Unfortunately, the church was destroyed during World War II.

Although very famous during her lifetime, Artemisia was forgotten after her death and only rediscovered in the middle of the 19th century. According to *Wikipedia*, the first novel based on Artemisia might be George Eliot's *Romola* (1862-63). A later and clearer use of Gentileschi's story was written by Anna Banti, wife of the previously mentioned art historian Roberto Longhi. Her first draft of the manuscript, dated 1944, was lost during the war. Three years later she started writing *Artemisia* again in an "open diary form," in which, according to *Wikipedia*, "she maintains a dialog with Artemisia, trying to understand why she finds her so fascinating." Mary D. Garrard published the first scholarly monograph, *Artemisia: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* in 1989. Numerous biographies, scholarly essays, a TV documentary, a play, and even a movie have followed. The most recent is the 2016 novel *Maestra* by L.S. Hilton.○