

Artemisia Gentileschi

Artemisia Gentileschi was born in Rome, on July 8, 1593, the first child of the painter Orazio Gentileschi and one of the greatest representatives of the school of Caravaggio. Artemisia was introduced to painting in her father's workshop, showing much more talent than her brothers, who worked alongside her. She learned drawing, how to mix color and how to paint. Since her father's style took inspiration from Caravaggio during that period, her style was just as heavily influenced in turn.

The first work of the young 17-years old Artemisia (even if many suspect that she was helped by her father) was the *Susanna e i Vecchioni* ("Susanna and the Elders") (1610), located in the Schönborn collection in Pommersfelden. The picture shows how, under parental guidance, Artemisia assimilated the realism of Caravaggio without being indifferent to the language of the Bologna school (which had Annibale Carracci among its major artists).

In 1612, despite her early talent, Artemisia was denied access to the all-male professional academies for art. At the time, her father was working with Agostino Tassi to decorate the "volte" of Casino della Rose inside the Pallavicini Rospigliosi Palace in Rome, so Orazio hired the Tuscan painter to tutor his daughter privately. The unfortunate effect was that Artemisia was raped by Tassi. Even though Tassi initially promised to marry Artemisia in order to restore her reputation, he later reneged on his promise and Orazio reported Tassi to the authorities.

In the ensuing seven-month trial, it was discovered that Tassi had planned to murder his wife, had committed incest with his sister-in-law and planned to steal some of Orazio's paintings. During the trial Artemisia was given a gynecological examination and was tortured using a device made of thongs wrapped around the fingers and tightened by degrees – a particularly cruel torture to a painter. Both procedures were used to corroborate the truth of her allegation, the torture device in the belief that if a person can tell the same story under torture as without it, the story must be true. At the end of the trial Tassi was imprisoned for just one year. The trial has subsequently influenced the feminist view of Artemisia Gentileschi during the 20th century.

The painting representing *Giuditta che decapita Oloferne* ("Judith decapitating Holofernes") (1612-13), displayed in the Capodimonte Museum of Naples, is impressive for the violence portrayed, and was interpreted as a wish for psychological revenge for the violence Artemisia had suffered.

One month after the trial, in order to restore her honor, Orazio arranged for his daughter to marry Pierantonio Stiattesi, a modest artist from Florence. Shortly afterwards the couple moved to Florence, where Artemisia received a commission for a painting at Casa Buonarroti and became a successful court painter, enjoying the patronage of the Medici and Charles I. During this period, Artemisia also painted the *Madonna col Bambino* ("The Virgin Mary with Baby"), currently in the Spada Gallery, Rome.

Whilst in Florence, Artemisia and Pierantonio had four sons and one daughter. But only the daughter, Prudenzia, survived to adulthood – following her mother's return to Rome in 1621 and later move to Naples. After her mother's death in 1651, Prudenzia slipped into obscurity and little is known of her subsequent life.

In Florence, Artemisia enjoyed huge success. She was accepted into the *Accademia del Disegno* ("Academy of Drawing") (the first woman to have such privilege); she was also able to maintain good relations with the most respected artists of her time, such as Cristofano Allori, and to be able to conquer the favours and the protection of influential people, starting with Granduke Cosimo II de' Medici and especially of the Granduchess Cristina. She was in good relationship with Galileo Galilei with whom she remained in epistolary contact for a long time. Among her estimators there was Buonarroti the young (nephew of the great Michelangelo): busy with construction of a mansion to celebrate the notable ancestor, he asked Artemisia to produce a painting to decorate the ceiling of the gallery of paintings.

The painting represents an allegory of *Allegoria dell'Inclinazione* ("Allegory of the Inclination") (natural talent), presented under the form of a young nude woman who holds a compass. It is believed that the attractive woman resembles Artemisia itself, who -

as the mundane informants of the period say - was extremely beautiful. Actually it happens often, in her paintings, that the appearance of the curvy and energetic heroines is similar to her portraits and self-portraits: often those who ordered her paintings wished to have an image of the author, whose fame was rising. The success and the fashion radiating from her figure fueled many rumours about her private life.

From this period we remember the *La Conversione della Maddalena* ("The Conversion of Maddalene") and the *Giuditta con la sua ancella* ("Judith with her Handmaid") of Pitti Palace and a second one, a larger version of the *Giuditta che decapita Oloferne* ("Judith decapitating Holofernes") in the Uffizi Gallery of Florence.

Despite the success, due to an excess of expenses by her and her husband, the Florentine period was full of problems with creditors and with her husband. These problems lead to her return to Rome in 1621.

Artemisia arrived in Rome the same year her father Orazio departed for Genoa. It is believed by some that Artemisia followed her father (and that would explain the persistence of a resemblance of style which, even today, makes difficult to understand exactly who of the two made some paintings), but there is not enough evidence to prove this.

Artemisia remained in Rome, trying to find an home and raising her daughters. In addition to Prudenzia (born from the marriage with Pierantonio Stiattesi) she had another natural daughter, probably born in 1627. Artemisia tried, with almost no success, to teach them the art of painting.

Rome in that period was highly influenced by the style of Caravaggio (many similarities in fact do exist between her style and the style of Simon Vouet), but during the papacy of Pope Urbano VIII both the classicism of the Bolognese school and the baroque style of Pietro da Cortona were highly successful as well.

Artemisia joined the Academy of Desiosi. She was celebrated with a portrait carrying the incision "Pincturare miraculum invidendum facilius quam imitandum". In the same period she became friend with Cassiano dal Pozzo, a humanist, collector and lover of arts. However, despite her artistic reputation, her strong personality and her numerous good relationships, staying in Rome was not as lucrative as she hoped. The appreciation of her art was narrowed down to portraits and to her ability with biblical heroines: she no longer got the rich commissions of fresco paintings and altars. It is very difficult, due to the absence of enough documentation, to follow the movements of Artemisia in this period. It is certain that between 1627 and 1630 she moved to Venice, perhaps in search of richer commissions, as she received numerous letters of appreciation from intellectuals during her stay in Venice.

Although it is sometimes difficult to date her paintings, it is possible to assign to this period the *Ritratto di gonfaloniere* ("Portrait of Gonfaloniere"), today in Bologna (the only known example of her capacity as portrait painter); the *Giuditta con la sua ancella*, ("Judith with her maidservant") today at the Detroit Institute of Arts (notable for her mastery of the "chiaroscuro" effects of the candle lights, for which Gerrit van Honthorst, Trophime Bigot, and many others were also famous in Rome); the *Venere Dormiente* ("The Sleeping Venus"), today at Princeton; the *"Ester ed Assuero"* ("Ester and Assuero") located at Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (testimony of her assimilation of the venetian luministic lessons)

In 1630 Artemisia moved to Naples, a city rich with workshops and art lovers, in search of new and more lucrative job opportunities. Many other artists, including Caravaggio, Annibale Carracci, Simon Vouet had stayed in Naples for some time in their lives, and at that time, Jusepe de Ribera, Massimo Stanzione were working there and later, Domenichino, Giovanni Lanfranco and many others. The Neapolitan debut of Artemisa is represented by the *Annunciation* in the Capodimonte Museum. Later she permanently relocated to Naples and stayed there - except for only a brief trip to London and some other journeys - for the rest of her life. Naples was for Artemisia some kind of second homeland where she took care of her family (both her daughters got married in Naples). She received letters of appreciation, was in good relations with the *Vicere' Duca d'Alcalà* and started relations with many renowned artists, among them Massimo Stanzone, with whom she started an artistic collaboration based on a real friendship and artistic similarities.

In Naples for the first time Artemisia started working on paintings in a cathedral, dedicated to San Gennaro nell'anfiteatro di Pozzuoli ("*Saint Januarius in the amphitheater of Pozzuoli*") in Pozzuoli. During her first Neapolitan period she painted *Nascita di San Giovanni Battista* ("*Birth of Saint Giovanni Battista*") located in the Del Prado Museum in Madrid, and *Corisca e il satiro* ("*Corisca and the satire*"), in a private collection. In these paintings Artemisia again demonstrates her ability to renew herself with the novelties of the period and handle different subjects instead of the usual Judith, Susanna, Betsabee, and Maddelene penitenti, for which she was still known anyway.

In 1638 Artemisia joined her father in London at the court of Charles I of England, where Orazio became court painter and received the important job of decorating a ceiling (allegory of Trionfo della pace e delle Arti ("Triumph of the peace and the Arts") in the Casa delle Delizie of queen Enrichetta Maria in Greenwich.

After so much time, father and daughter were again working together, but probably helping her father was not her only reason. But it is sure that Charles I convoked her in his court, and it was not possible to refuse. Orazio suddenly died in 1639. Charles I was a fanatical collector, willing to ruin public finances to follow his artistic wishes. The fame of Artemisia probably intrigued him, and it is not a coincidence that his collection included a painting of great suggestion, the Autoritratto in veste di Pittura. In London, Artemisia had an autonomous activity which she continued to follow for a while even after the her father's death (although there are no known works assignable with certainty to this period). We know that in 1642, when the civil war was just starting, Artemisia had already left England. Nothing much is know about her subsequent movements. Historians know that in 1649 she was in Naples again, corresponding with Don Anontio Ruffo of Sicily who became her mentor and good commitment during this second Neapolitan period. The last known letter to her mentor is dated 1650 and makes clear that she was still fully active. Artemisia died in 1653.

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