

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS OCTOBER 5, 2020 ISSUE

# A FULLER PICTURE OF ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI

*The pioneering painter survived a rape, but scholars are pushing against the idea that her work was defined by it—and celebrating her rich harnessing of motherhood, passion, and ambition.*

**By Rebecca Mead**

September 28, 2020





*In Artemisia's "Judith Beheading Holofernes," the heroine is a deft butcher.*

The story of Susanna and the Elders, related in the Book of Daniel, was a popular subject for artists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and no wonder. Susanna, a virtuous, beautiful young woman, is bathing in her garden while two older men spy on her. The men suddenly accost her and demand that she submit to rape; if she resists, they warn, they will ruin her reputation by claiming that they caught her with a lover. The tale offered painters an irresistible opportunity to replicate a similar kind of voyeurism. Tintoretto depicted the scene several times; in a version painted in the fifteen-fifties, which hangs in Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum, he portrayed Susanna as serene and abstracted, towelling a raised foot and regarding herself in a mirror, unaware of a bald man who is

concealed behind a rose trellis and peering between her parted thighs. In a treatment by Rubens from half a century later, on display at the Borghese Gallery, in Rome, Susanna is shown reaching for a shawl, realizing with horror that she has been exposed to two leering men. Sometimes the violence threatened against Susanna is indicated in the tableau: in a version by Ludovico Carracci that hangs in the National Gallery in London, one of the elders is tugging at Susanna's robe, pulling it off her body. Giuseppe Cesari (known as Cavaliere d'Arpino) made a painting that enlists the viewer's participation in the lasciviousness it represents: its naked subject looks almost seductively out from the canvas, coolly brushing her golden hair.

A very different Susanna is offered by Artemisia Gentileschi, who was born in Rome in 1593, and who painted the scene in 1610, when she was seventeen. In her version, two men emerge from behind a marble balustrade, violently interrupting Susanna's ablutions. Her head and her body torque away from the onlookers as she raises a hand toward them, in what looks like ineffectual self-defense. Strikingly, her other hand shields her face. Perhaps this Susanna does not want the men to identify her or see her anguish; it's equally likely that she does not want to lay eyes on her persecutors. In its composition, execution, and psychological insight, the painting is remarkably sophisticated for a girl in her teens. As the scholar Mary Garrard noted, in a 1989 appraisal titled "Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art," the painting represents an art-historical innovation: it is the first time in which sexual predation is depicted from the point of view of the predated. With this painting, and with many other works that followed, Artemisia claimed women's resistance of sexual oppression as a legitimate subject of art.

As one of the first women to forge a successful career as a painter, Artemisia was celebrated internationally in her lifetime, but her reputation languished after her death. This was partly owing to fashion: her naturalistic mode of painting went out of style, in favor of a more classical approach. Seventeenth-century scholars barely mentioned her. When she registered, it was as a footnote to her father, Orazio Gentileschi, a well-regarded artist who specialized in the kind of historical and mythological scenes in vogue at the time. (Academics tend to refer to Artemisia by her first name, in order to distinguish her from her father.) Her work received little substantial critical attention until the early twentieth century, when Roberto Longhi, the Italian art historian, wrote a grudging assessment, calling her “the only woman in Italy who ever understood what painting was, both colors, impasto, and other essentials.”

In the second half of the twentieth century, Artemisia was reconsidered. A turning point was the inclusion of half a dozen of her works, among them the 1610 “Susanna and the Elders,” in a landmark survey, “Women Artists: 1550-1950”; curated by the art historians Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, it opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1976, later travelling to the Brooklyn Museum. Although individual works of Artemisia’s had been on view in museums, this was the first time they were seen as a group, their cumulative power recognized. In the years since, Artemisia has come to be counted among the most important Baroque artists, especially after a 2001 show at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, which explored her work alongside that of her father. This October, a retrospective exhibition at the National Gallery in London will bring together about thirty of her pieces, from



museums and private collections across Europe and the United States.

The show, whose opening was delayed by the coronavirus pandemic, is organized in broad chronological order, and features Artemisia's most significant achievements. (More than a hundred and thirty works have been ascribed to her hand, but only about half that number are universally agreed to be hers.) Among the paintings included is "Self-Portrait as St. Catherine of Alexandria," from the National Gallery's collection, in which the subject gazes at the viewer, her brow dimpled in concentration, while wearing a gauzy turban and other finery. The painting, recently rediscovered, was acquired by the museum in 2018, for nearly four and a half million dollars. It is only the twenty-first work by a female artist to enter the gallery's collection.

The reevaluation of Artemisia's work has included a newfound appreciation of her technical skill, especially her command of chiaroscuro—a heightened juxtaposition of light and shadow. Chiaroscuro is most commonly associated with Caravaggio, who was an acquaintance of Artemisia's father, and whom she may have encountered as a young adolescent. (Caravaggio notoriously fled Rome in 1606, after killing another man in a duel.) One of Artemisia's greatest paintings, "Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes" (completed in the sixteen-twenties, and now owned by the Detroit Institute of Arts), offers a masterly execution of the technique, with its subjects illuminated, mid-action, by raking lamplight. In the background are virtuosic examples of still-life painting: a burnished brass candlestick, a draped velvet curtain.

Letizia Treves, the curator of the forthcoming National Gallery show,

notes, “In Artemisia’s lifetime, she had a kind of pan-European celebrity that places her on a level with later artists such as Rubens or Van Dyck.” Treves cautions, however, against overstating Artemisia’s place in the Baroque pantheon. Artemisia was an artist who adapted to fashion rather than setting it. “I can’t name a single Artemisia follower,” Treves says. Of course, this may well have been connected to her gender: what male artist of the period would have acknowledged being her disciple?

Artemisia’s reëmergence is also tied to a greater awareness of her life story, which was at least as eventful as that of Caravaggio. In 1611, the year after she painted “Susanna and the Elders,” Artemisia was raped by a friend of Orazio’s: the artist Agostino Tassi. The assault has inevitably, and often reductively, been the lens through which her artistic accomplishments have been viewed. The sometimes savage themes of her paintings have been interpreted as expressions of wrathful catharsis. The fascination with her work on these terms is understandable, given the continued prevalence of sexual violence against women, and the dismissal of women’s accounts of it. In 2018, when Brett Kavanaugh was elevated to the Supreme Court despite the testimony of Christine Blasey Ford, who said that Kavanaugh had assaulted her when they were both teen-agers, a particularly bloody work by Artemisia—“Judith Beheading Holofernes,” which hangs in the Uffizi Gallery, in Florence—was widely shared on the Internet, as commentary. It shows the Biblical heroine with her sleeves rolled up over muscular arms, her mouth set, deftly butchering the Assyrian general.





*“You really think they’ll come back to the hill after they’ve gotten used to working remotely?”*

Cartoon by Kendra Allenby



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Artemisia’s life story has inspired more than one fictional reimaging, beginning in 1947, with a work by Anna Banti—the pen name of the Italian novelist and critic Lucia Lopresti, who was married to Roberto Longhi. (Susan Sontag, in an admiring essay from 2004, wrote that Banti’s protagonist is “liberated by disgrace.”) A 1997 film, by the French director Agnès Merlet, made the questionable suggestion that Tassi was a partially welcome seducer. Five years later, the American writer Susan Vreeland published a novel that hewed to the feminist line of Artemisia’s rape as a defining trauma. (“I stepped up two steps and took my usual seat opposite Agostino Tassi, my father’s friend and collaborator. My rapist. . . . His black hair and beard were overgrown

and wild. His face, more handsome than he deserved, had the color and hardness of a bronze sculpture.”) Joy McCullough’s 2018 novel, “Blood Water Paint,” captured Artemisia’s perspective in charged language:

the woman in the bath  
is no exalted doll.  
She is all light and terror,  
the Susanna I finally summon  
from stories,  
from first fire,  
and finally,  
from paint mixed with  
my own sweat.

A raft of recent papers by academics, however, have objected to portraying Artemisia as if she herself were a two-dimensional mythological figure—a victim exacting revenge through brushwork. As more of her personal history is unearthed by scholars, a more complex picture emerges. And Artemisia’s art is increasingly being appreciated for the knowingness with which she made use of elements of her life—not just sexual violation but also motherhood, erotic passion, and professional ambition. Artemisia recognized that being a woman offered her a rare perspective and authority on many artistic subjects. “You will find the spirit of Caesar in the soul of a woman,” she once assured a patron. Such insight makes Artemisia feel, four hundred years after she lived, like one of our more self-aware contemporaries.

**A**rtemisia had a sheltered childhood, in the most literal sense of the term: as a girl, she spent most of her time within the walls of

her family home, as Rome's streets were not considered a safe or appropriate space for her to journey through alone. She was the eldest child in her family, with three younger brothers; at the age of twelve, she became their principal caregiver when her mother, Prudentia di Montone, died, in childbirth. Artemisia received no academic education and was functionally illiterate until her twenties, when she finally had the opportunity to learn to read and write—the latter never without error. But as a child she was allowed to draw, and her gifts were noted early on. As Orazio wrote to one of his patrons, the Grand Duchess of Tuscany, in 1612, she “has in three years become so skilled that I can venture to say that today she has no peer.”

Artemisia served an apprenticeship in her father's studio, with his paintings as her primary exemplars. Unlike male aspiring artists, she was unable to visit many of the churches and public buildings where the work of contemporaries had been commissioned, but in her local church, Santa Maria del Popolo, on the Piazza del Popolo, she would have seen two remarkable Caravaggio paintings: “Crucifixion of St. Peter,” in which the elderly martyr is being raised, upside down, on a cross, and “Conversion on the Way to Damascus,” in which a young, muscled St. Paul is sprawled on the ground after receiving a heavenly vision. Artemisia had access to Orazio's materials and to his models. She is thought to have sat herself for Orazio's “Young Woman with a Violin (St. Cecilia),” painted around 1612, which shows a musician with a cleft chin, a rounded cheek, and an alert expression.

She would have learned to reproduce her own features, too, with the use of a mirror. The fact that Artemisia's female characters often are, like her, russet-haired, with full cheeks, has led many of her paintings



to be described as self-portraiture. Even Artemisia's male figures have sometimes been linked with the female visage characteristic of her work. In 2018, a painting that shows David sitting triumphantly next to Goliath's severed head—long attributed to the Baroque artist Giovanni Francesco Guerrieri—came to auction. A collector at an auction in Munich acquired it for just a hundred and nineteen thousand dollars; in a subsequent forensic examination of the canvas, the London-based conservator Simon Gillespie discovered Artemisia's signature on the hilt of David's sword. Given Artemisia's recent auction history, the work is now likely worth several million dollars. In an essay published this past March in the arts journal *The Burlington Magazine*, the scholar Gianni Papi suggests that the figure of David “projects the distinctive proud and cool virility we find in so many of Gentileschi's heroines,” and persuasively compares the defiant expression of the Biblical hero to that of an apparent self-portrait that can be found in the Palazzo Barberini, in Rome.

Letizia Treves, of the National Gallery, told me that Artemisia's face “has been read into every heroine she ever painted,” adding, “I don't think she's *every* Judith or Susanna.” Treves argues that it is Artemisia's depiction of female bodies, rather than her replication of her own face, that most strongly expresses her understanding of what it was like to be a woman. “The way she portrays the female body is very naturalistic—more so than her father's,” Treves said. “This is someone who really knows the hang of a woman's breast—who has a real sense of how a woman's body behaves.” In a pioneering 1968 essay, the art historian R. Ward Bissell wrote of the “uncompromising sensuality” of the recumbent nude depicted in “Cleopatra” (1611-12), describing the figure's physique as “almost animalistic.” Treves

particularly admires Artemisia's representation of the nude female body in "Danaë" (c. 1612), which is now in the St. Louis Art Museum. Creases around the figure's armpits and swells in the stomach reveal an awareness of the way a woman's flesh settles and subsides. By contrast, Orazio's "Danaë and the Shower of Gold," painted in the early sixteen-twenties and now at the Getty, features bed linens so realistic that the viewer feels she could climb between them, but the princess's breasts defy gravity with an almost comical perkiness.

**A**lthough the young Artemisia remained largely cloistered in her father's studio, she was nonetheless vulnerable to attack there by Tassi, a successful artist; some scholars suggest that Orazio had engaged him to tutor Artemisia on perspective. (In "Blood Water Paint," McCullough plausibly suggests that Artemisia was, in part, a victim of her father's professional opportunism: Orazio hoped that Tassi would bring him in on a commission.) The decision to publicly accuse Tassi of rape was made not by Artemisia but by her father, who sought to force Tassi to marry her. The official record of the trial, which is housed at the Archivio di Stato, in Rome, includes Artemisia's vivid account of her ordeal. Tassi, she claims, pushed her inside her bedroom and locked the door. "He then threw me onto the edge of the bed, pushing me with a hand on my breast, and he put a knee between my thighs to prevent me from closing them," reads a translation provided by Mary Garrard in her 1989 book. Tassi placed a hand over Artemisia's mouth to stop her from screaming; she fought back, clawing at his face and hair. In the struggle, she grabbed Tassi's penis so roughly that she tore his flesh. Afterward, she grabbed a knife from a table drawer and said, "I'd like to kill you with this knife

because you have dishonored me.” Tassi opened his coat and taunted her by saying, “Here I am.” Artemisia hurled the knife at him. “He shielded himself,” she tells her interrogator. “Otherwise I would have hurt him and might easily have killed him.”

The Roman archive contains trial transcripts for other women who were raped. Elizabeth Cohen, a scholar who has examined the transcripts, argues that the crime of rape had a different cultural connotation than it does now, and was understood less as a violent act against a woman than as a besmirching of her family’s honor. Cohen contends that characterizations of Artemisia as an outraged proto-feminist, with even her early art expressing enraged resistance, are anachronistic. A seventeenth-century woman would not have conceived of her body with the “corporeal essentialism” that a woman does today, Cohen writes: “Artemisia spoke of her body during the trial, but as the material upon which a socially significant offense had been committed.” According to the transcript, at least, Artemisia’s outrage is couched in terms of having been dishonored, rather than having been assaulted. After Tassi raped her, he immediately assured her that he would marry her, and she reports that “with this good promise I felt calmer,” and confirms that, believing his nuptial pledge, she consented to have sex with him on numerous occasions thereafter.

Orazio’s goal of coercing Tassi into making good on his word to marry Artemisia would be unthinkable in a rape trial today.

Artemisia’s testimony was, for the most part, by the book: she knew, or had been instructed on, which points she needed to make in order to meet the standards for conviction. Like other unmarried accusers of rapists, she was obliged to undergo examination by a midwife, to

verify that she was no longer a virgin. Nonetheless, the force of Artemisia's character emerges. At the time, to insure that rape accusations were truthful, alleged victims were required to submit to a form of torture: cords were wrapped around their hands and tightened like thumbscrews. "It is true, it is true, it is true," she repeated as the cords were tightened. The transcript notes that she interrupted her litany to address Tassi directly, with a mordantly ironic reference to the bindings around her fingers: "*This* is the ring that you give me, and these are your promises."

Tassi was found guilty but he was sentenced only to a brief period of exile, which he ignored. He did not have to marry Artemisia—it emerged in the courtroom that he had already married someone else. During the trial, her father arranged for her to marry Pierantonio Stiattesi, a minor artist in Florence. Stiattesi was the brother of Giovanni Battista Stiattesi, a friend of Orazio's who had testified against Tassi in the trial, asserting that he had confessed to having taken Artemisia's virginity. Artemisia apparently found her husband something of a nonentity, and after about a decade together they separated; most traces of Stiattesi have since been lost. Nevertheless, the betrothal, intended to remove her from the city of her scandalous past, was the making of Artemisia. It gave her an opportunity to establish herself as an artist independent of her father, and her status as a married woman offered her something she had never truly experienced: liberty.

**A**rriving in Florence in the winter of 1612-13, Artemisia initially set up her studio in the house of her father-in-law, a tailor. Over time, she seems to have established a studio apart from the family

home, where, among other things, she could more easily work on large-scale canvases. Embarking on a period of abundant creativity, she executed several of the paintings for which she served as her own model—among them “Self-Portrait as a Lute Player,” which hangs in the Wadsworth Atheneum, in Hartford, Connecticut. Some art historians believe that this work was commissioned by the Grand Duke Cosimo II de’ Medici, in whose collection it was later recorded. The Duke’s eye would have been drawn to the sensitivity and animation of the face, but also to the delicacy and articulation of the hands, shown mid-strum on the instrument.

In July, 1616, Artemisia became the first woman to be admitted to the prestigious Accademia delle Arti del Disegno. With the respectability of marriage guaranteeing her the freedom to circulate socially, she got to know intellectuals, performers, and other artists, including Galileo and the poet Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger, a great-nephew of the Renaissance master. The poet commissioned her to paint part of the ceiling in a gallery dedicated to Michelangelo at the family estate. Her contribution, “Allegory of Inclination,” depicts a female nude sitting on a tuft of cloud.

Around the time she moved to Florence, she made her first iteration of Judith beheading Holofernes, which can now be seen in the Capodimonte Museum, in Naples. In this version and in the one at the Uffizi, a maidservant, Abra, forcefully holds Holofernes down while Judith confidently hacks away at his neck. Treves says of the paintings, “Artemisia is subverting a well-known traditional subject and empowering the women in a way that hasn’t been done before.” (The painting at the Uffizi, now prominently on display there, was for



decades hidden from public view, presumably on the ground that it was distasteful. The nineteenth-century art historian Anna Brownell Jameson wrote of wishing for “the privilege of burning it to ashes.”) Treves says that Artemisia’s renderings of the tale offer “a picture of sisterhood—of these two women doing this extraordinary thing.” By contrast, Caravaggio’s treatment of the story, in a work that hangs in the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica, in Rome, focusses on the horrified face of Holofernes, and depicts Judith as a pallid girl gingerly holding a sword and grasping her foe’s curly hair at arm’s length. She hardly seems to have the oomph required for decapitation.

Artemisia bore five children, between the years of 1613 and 1618, making her execution of large-scale paintings during that period all the more impressive. It was not just a matter of physical endurance: three of her children died in infancy, and a fourth, Cristofano, born in 1615, died before the age of five. Only her daughter, Prudenzia, born in 1617 and named for Artemisia’s mother, lived into adulthood. Such repeated maternal loss—and the risk that successive pregnancies then posed to a woman’s life—is unimaginable today. Twenty-odd years after the birth of her children, Artemisia received a commission from Philip IV of Spain to paint a Biblical work, “The Birth of St. John the Baptist.” Artists from Tintoretto to Murillo had painted the scene, but Artemisia’s version underlines her intimacy with the dynamics of the birthing room. She depicts a capable cluster of midwives—sleeves pushed up, basins in hand—tending to the infant while his mother, Elizabeth, lies wan and exhausted, barely visible in the dim background.

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*“I don’t even know what a cat-eat-cat world would look like!”*

Cartoon by Ngozi Ukazu



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**T**he turmoil of Artemisia’s early life—and the remarkable evidence of it that survives—has inevitably overshadowed the less sensational, and less documented, narrative of what followed. Nevertheless, her later career was extraordinary, and it is reasonable to conclude that the fact of having been raped was less significant to Artemisia’s sense of self than some of her modern champions have suggested. She swiftly became recognized as one of the most

accomplished artists of her day, and retained her preëminence for decades; she was often strapped for cash, however, and never stopped hustling for commissions. (Her assurance that her work demonstrated the “spirit of Caesar” was delivered, in part, to justify a painting’s high price.) Artemisia, for all her renown, rarely painted for public spaces. She did little work for the Church, although an early *Madonna and Child*, painted around 1613, the year her first child was born, suggests what she might have done had churches commissioned devotional themes from her. *Mary swoons, eyes closed, as the infant Jesus reaches for her cheek, his eyes locked on her face with palpably needy attachment.*

After half a dozen years in Florence, Artemisia returned to Rome. The city’s census report of 1624 suggests that she and her husband had by then parted, and that she was self-supporting. She began associating with Flemish, Dutch, and French painters who also lived in Rome. Treves suggests, “It may be she was hanging out with the foreigners because she felt a bit like an outsider herself.”

In the late sixteen-twenties, Artemisia went to Venice, seeking fresh patronage. In 1630, she settled in Naples. She received commissions from, among others, the Infanta María of Spain, who was spending time in the city. Artemisia cultivated such ladies of the court with gifts of beautiful gloves, which she had sent from Rome. Naples became her base for much of the rest of her life, although she disliked the city, which was crowded, poor, and violent. In a letter to Andrea Cioli, a minister at the Medici court, she complained of “the warlike tumults, the badness of life, and the expense of things.” In the next two decades, she continued to secure influential clients among the Italian

nobility and foreign royal houses. Her paintings entered the collections of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, King Philip IV of Spain, and King Charles I of England. Much remains unknown about her later life, though, including the date and cause of her death.

Artemisia's final documented act is a payment made in Naples in August, 1654, against an overdue tax bill. She was reputed to have been buried in the city's Church of San Giovanni dei Fiorentini, her grave marked by a stone inscribed, simply, "HEIC ARTIMISIA": "Here lies Artemisia." But any such stone had disappeared by the time the information was written down, in 1812, by the Italian historian Alessandro da Morrona, and the church was destroyed in the twentieth century. Given the absence of later documentation, scholars theorize that Artemisia died in 1656, when the plague swept through Naples, killing a hundred and fifty thousand residents—half the city's population.

Her last known dated work, from 1652, is a large canvas in which she revisits *Susanna and the Elders*, one of her earliest themes and one to which she had returned repeatedly. As in the 1610 version, Susanna is seated on a balustrade, but this time there is a tenebrous sky, rather than a clear blue one. In this iteration, she does not turn away from the two onlookers: she faces them. The painting was rediscovered a dozen years ago by Adelina Modesti, a professor who found it, badly damaged, in the archive of the Pinacoteca Nazionale, in Bologna. In a monograph, Modesti argues that Susanna's raised left arm and uplifted hand deflect the elders' "intrusive male gazes" from her body, which is draped in translucent fabric. It could be argued, though, that this *Susanna* draws the elders' attention away from her body not by blocking their gaze but by meeting it with her own—staring at them

just as they stare at her, and obliging them to acknowledge her as a human being.

I ncreasingly, Artemisia is celebrated less for her handling of private trauma than for her adept management of her public persona. Throughout her career, she demonstrated a sophisticated comprehension of the way her unusual status as a woman added to the value of her paintings. On a formal level, her representation of herself in the guise of different characters and genders prefigures such postmodern artists as Cindy Sherman. Unlike Sherman, however, Artemisia had few female peers. She was not the only woman working as an artist during the early seventeenth century: a slightly older contemporary was the northern-Italian portraitist Fede Galizia, born in 1578, whose father, like Artemisia's, was also a painter. But Artemisia must often have felt singular. In a series of letters written to one of her most important patrons, the collector Antonio Ruffo, she wittily referred to her gender: "A woman's name raises doubts until her work is seen," and, regarding a work in progress, "I will show Your Illustrious Lordship what a woman can do." In 2001, the scholar Elizabeth Cropper wrote, "We will never understand Artemisia Gentileschi as a painter if we cannot accept that she was not supposed to be a painter at all, and that her own sense of herself—not to mention others' views of her—as an independent woman, as a marvel, a *stupor mundi*, as worthy of immortal fame and historical celebration, was entirely justified." On art-adjacent blogs, Artemisia's strength and occasionally obnoxious self-assurance are held forth as her most essential qualities. She has become, as the Internet term of approval has it, a badass bitch.



Recent research has also complicated the understanding of Artemisia's moral character, rendering her less blandly heroic. In 2011, the art historian Francesco Solinas was exploring the archive of the Frescobaldis, a Florentine banking dynasty, when he discovered a cache of letters written by Artemisia, including some sent to Francesco Maria Maringhi, a Florentine nobleman. It turned out that she had had a torrid affair with Maringhi when she was in her mid-twenties, and five years into her marriage. Several of the letters are included in the National Gallery show; in the exhibition's catalogue, Solinas writes that they "reveal a passionate, adventurous and even libertine way of life." In one letter, Artemisia addresses Maringhi as "my dearest heart"; in another, she chastises him for writing only two lines to her—"which if you loved me would have gone on forever." In a third, she refers to a self-portrait in Maringhi's possession and warns him not to masturbate in front of it. (Sadly, the exact portrait is not identified.) In the same letter, she saltily expresses her satisfaction that he has not taken any other lovers, other than his "right hand, envied by me so much, for it possesses that which I cannot possess myself."

Another work by Artemisia that has only recently been rediscovered, having been in a private collection in France, is "Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy" (c. 1620-25). The subject reclines voluptuously, her eyes closed, her face turned up to the light, a silky white chemise slipping carelessly from her ample shoulder. The painting, which ostensibly depicts Mary Magdalene in the reveries of devotion, is less spiritual than erotic: her interlaced fingers may be motionless, but her slight smile seems labile, indicating that Artemisia understood a woman's sensuality from the inside out.

The Frescobaldi archive also contains correspondence written to

Maringhi by Artemisia's husband, Stiattesi. Evidently, he was aware of the liaison, and hoped that her highly placed lover would help advance her career. In one letter, Stiattesi apologizes to Maringhi that Artemisia cannot write to him herself; their house, he explains, is perpetually full of cardinals and princes, and she is so busy that she barely has time to eat. Solinas describes Artemisia as "extraordinarily courageous, manifestly unscrupulous, opportunistic and ambitious." Art historians now contend that the energy and the passion that can be glimpsed in her letters—and even in her testimony at the rape trial—are the same qualities that infuse her work with such vitality.

Artemisia's fame in feminist circles started with the dissemination of her bloodiest and most distressing images. Her variations on the theme of the murderous Judith remain irresistible iconography, and her differing treatments of Susanna offer a forceful lesson about the power of the apparently powerless. (In the Bible, Susanna does not submit to rape, and, in a trial, the elders' scandalous accusations against her are proved false.) Such tales of resistance remain as riveting, and as necessary, in the twenty-first century as they were in the seventeenth.

But, in recent years, Artemisia's academic admirers have turned their attention to one of her quieter paintings. In the late sixteen-thirties, Artemisia travelled to England, where her father had become a court painter. Several works that she painted there entered the Royal Collection, among them "Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting," also known as "La Pittura." Such works traditionally depict the allegorical figure as a woman. In Artemisia's version, which will be prominently placed in the National Gallery exhibition, the woman has abundant, mussed hair and plump cheeks, a brown apron tied around

her waist and the billowing green silk sleeves of her dress pushed up past her elbows. Rather than looking out of the frame, as is typical with self-portraits, the figure is looking at a prepared canvas, with a raised brush in one hand and a palette in the other. She bends forward, not elegantly but with the command of an experienced artist. As scholars have pointed out, no male artist could have attempted this clever visual doubling, in which Artemisia combined a realistic portrait of herself at work with an allegorical representation of the art form that she so ardently and successfully pursued. This is an Artemisia for today: accomplished, original, and contentedly absorbed in her vocation. ♦

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THIS WEEK'S