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The Personal is the Political: Artemisia Gentileschi’s Revolutionary Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting

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In a double-degree program here at UK, I’ll graduate in December, 2009, with a BA in English (with a minor in French) and one in Art Studio, having completed honors in Honors and four years as an Otis A. Singletary Scholar. In addition, during the 2007/2008 school year, I was the recipient of the Université de Caen/Deauville Jumelage award, which allowed me to study abroad for a year in Caen, France. Though I was there to learn the language, I also took the opportunity to find a job as an English teacher at private school — an experience that continues to be rewarding almost a year later.

When I graduate, I will be serving in the Peace Corps, but upon my return to the United States, I plan to apply to graduate schools for a PhD in English so that I can go on to become an English professor at the university level. I am extremely interested in how art and literature relate to and/or can be made to relate to each other, which is why investigating the history of artistic issues in a literary context was so intriguing to me.

Throughout this paper, I was helped immeasurably by Dr. Peters, who pushed me further and harder than any other teacher ever had. Her influence was not only felt in her support of my own abilities, but also in the time she took to read and comment, in minute detail, on all aspects of this project. As I come to the end of my college career, I am only now realizing just what a rare and valuable trait it is in a professor to care deeply about the success of his or her individual students, and I am also aware that without her help, this paper would not have been even remotely as comprehensive as it ended up.

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Jane Peters, Department of Art

Artemisia Gentileschi has been the object of scholarly attention ever since the 1970s, when feminists began to reconstruct the contribution of women to the history of art. Gentileschi’s vigorous, gruesome depictions of Judith decapitating Holofernes have become a standard inclusion in the art historical canon. Using the example of Gentileschi’s 1635 self-portrait, La Pittura, Virginia Conn successfully contributes to current scholarship and debate by strengthening the argument that Gentileschi consciously manipulated and undermined not only 17th Century gender expectations, but also assumptions stemming from her personal history as the victim of rape. She shows how Artemisia took advantage of a unique point in history — from both sociological and symbolic perspectives — to manipulate her self-portrait. Virginia supports her contention that in La Pittura Gentileschi, by the ingenuity of her visual choices, forcefully asserts herself as a professional artist and equal in a male-dominated profession and society.

Artemisia Gentileschi’s painting La Pittura [1635 (fig. 1)], a depiction of the allegory of painting, almost universally recognized as a self-portrait, is unique in the canon of baroque self-portraiture — not because it was created by a woman, though that in itself rarifies the work considerably, but because the artist’s gender allowed her to produce an allegorical reference unavailable to her male contemporaries. (Garrard, 1989) In a society in which abstract ideas were generally represented by the female form, any male painter wanting to depict himself as art personified encountered a stumbling block that, due to her unique position, Gentileschi bypassed completely.

The success of Gentileschi’s self-portrait as an abstract representation, however, is secondary to its success as a personal statement. Gentileschi (1597—c.1651) is best-known to modern audiences (and, by all accounts, to the public of her day as well) not for her art, but for her widely-publicized and notorious rape trial (1611-1612). Many art historians have ascribed her appeal to being more closely linked to her persona as a public figure and victim than to any inherent enduring quality in her art, but when we bypass these prejudiced judgments, we find the type of creation in which the social circumstances of the artist are inextricably bound up with that of the art. To a certain extent, this is true of every artist and his or her oeuvre (see Picasso’s blue period paintings or the homoerotic imagery of Robert Mapplethorpe), but it is especially important to the aims of Gentileschi. Although she was certainly talented enough to have portrayed herself in any position or costume, she did not. eschewing the idea of overtly misrepresenting herself through the assumption of an imagined identity and superficial trappings.
in favor of a self-portrait that combined both her literal profession and the allegorical idea of personification.

Nevertheless, the idea of manipulating the way in which one appears and is, therefore, perceived is integral to a full understanding of Gentileschi’s work, as Jean-François Maillard (1973, p. 18) states. For example, why would a Baroque artist living in Italy — which at the time afforded its artists more agency, power, and respect than any other European nation — have cast herself as a painter, when she could have used her art to rise above her station? Her male counterparts certainly had no compunctions in doing so; self-portraits of this time by male artists frequently presented the subject in the costume of a nobleman. Meanwhile, if we look elsewhere in Europe, we notice other female artists also creating self-portraits as working artists, driven by necessity to establish themselves in a profession that society already recognized their male contemporaries as practicing. Gentileschi, however, incorporates and goes beyond simple gender dichotomies to produce a work that, while it shows her as realistically engaged in artistic practice, also subverts traditional power structures and establishes the artist as the very embodiment of creation in a way that no other painter was able—or dared—to do.

Initially, La Pittura seems to be a beautiful image that, nonetheless, contains little substance. Like a single bold stroke in a contemporary painting, it showcases the quietly determined form of the artist at work, the curve of her body a sweepingly elegant c-shape, her arm holding the paintbrush strong and sure above her head. Though the viewer faces her directly, she is turned in profile, engrossed in the hidden canvas before her in the same way that we, the viewers, are drawn in by her understated assuredness. La Pittura is an action shot, positioned as if the viewer were invisibly observing Gentileschi up close, which adds to our impression that we are viewing her in her “natural” state. We see her from the waist up only; there is no indication that she’s aware of our gaze, either in her demeanor or dress, which creates an intimate setting in which we can almost smell the dense oiliness of her paints or sense the heat coming from her body. In the actual process of artistic creation, she is tilted to the side, considering something in front of her before making her next stroke. Her hair, frizzled, is messily pulled away from her face — the hasty solution of one without time for niceties. Additionally, she wears no makeup, though she does make several concessions to femininity, notably in her dress, which features ruffles and a low-cut bodice. Her undeniably female form fills the page;
the only other objects within are the tools of her trade. These tools — a brush in her raised right hand, a palette in her lowered left — begin to emerge from the Caravaggio-esque shadows surrounding her, although her tenebrism in this painting is not as heavily worked. Because of this, her arm becomes gradually lighter as our eyes move from the upper left corner in which she applies paint, following the line of her body down to the palette held at the bottom. The brightest point is her upturned face, lit from a source that could be merely another of her tools or could stand in for the light of inspiration. The rust-colored background is the same hue she holds on her palette, and sets off the shifting green, blues, and browns of her dress. Around her neck, one can’t help but notice the glinting gold of a finely-worked chain, at the end of which dangles a heavy pendant depicting a mask.

The majority of the elements in her painting would have been immediately recognizable to her contemporaries, artistic or otherwise. Though they may be lost on a modern-day audience, the details are drawn largely from a text, extremely influential to artists of the 17th and 18th centuries (particularly in Italy), by Cesare Ripa, titled the Iconologia overo Descrittione Dell’imagini Universali cavate dall’Antichità et da altri luoghi, or more simply, the Iconologia. Written in 1593, it was an emblem book containing information about how to physically depict abstract ideas and virtues such as wisdom, night, eternity, or — most importantly to Gentileschi — art and painting.

According to the Iconologia, the elements that were to be included in a depiction of the allegory of painting (fig. 2) included: a pendant mask on a gold chain (to show the artist’s capability for imitation of what he or she sees in life), a green dress that shifted hues (to demonstrate the painter’s control of color), unruly hair (depicting “the divine frenzy of the artistic temperament,” as well as emotion and inspiration), the tools of a painter, a piece of cloth binding the mouth, meant to symbolize the non-verbal means of expression to which the artist was limited, and that the form — like other allegories of abstract ideas — be a woman. (Ripa, 1987) In La Pittura, Gentileschi has followed each guideline except for one: the gag. Nevertheless, while seemingly conforming to the proscribed guidelines, this self-portrait takes another artistic liberty besides not binding the mouth. Following the guidelines of the Iconologia, in most allegories depicting the artist, the tools — a brush and palette — are shown near the figure, but not in use. By showcasing herself as the artist at work, however, Gentileschi demonstrates that she is more than simply a figurehead for the concept of “art.” At a time when women were banned from the high art academies and rarely accepted as artists in their own right, this was an incredibly bold declaration that today’s viewers, disarmed by the intimacy of their proximity to the subject, are perhaps too quick to overlook. What could have been her reason for these alterations to a deeply-embedded artistic tradition?

The answer may lie in an observation by the leading scholar of Artemisia Gentileschi, Mary Garrard, who wrote “biographical experience and metaphoric expression are historically and specifically — not universally or deterministically — conjoined in Artemisia’s art [...].” (Garrard, 2001, XIX) meaning that Gentileschi’s personal experiences would have had a direct bearing on her artistic output. In Foucaultian theory, which argues for the effacement of the author in deference to the work, such a reading of Gentileschi’s output has traditionally been dismissed, despite the efforts of feminist revisionist historians to consider the very real effects of institutionalized victimization on women when carving space for the individual artist within the overarching social and artistic canons. Between these two competing ideologies, Gentileschi’s art has tended to become lost or, at best, marginalized as “female” art, outside of the dominant artistic canon. And, despite the fact that this marginalization was an active phenomenon during her lifetime, it has become more visible in our contemporary culture with the rise of feminist interpretation.
This new way of looking at art history has created two camps with relatively current views toward Gentileschi with, on one side of the argument for the worth of her art, the above-mentioned revisionist historians, and on the other, anti-feminist art historians who claim that though she has a compelling personal history, her art is worthless. Foremost among the latter is the art historian Francis Haskell, who is characterized by fellow art historian Anita Silvers as arguing that “Artemisia’s gender or other personal characteristics or history [are not] relevant […]. That Artemisia’s rape caused her anguish is an admissible hypothesis about her, […], but it is not thereby a fact about her art. The story of the artist is not the story of the artist’s art.” (Silvers, 1990, 365) He discounts the idea that circumstances outside of the art itself could in any way contribute to how it is produced and the genius inherent in it — a “purist” interpretation that theoretically effaces the creator in favor of the creation.

Haskell, however, goes on to demonstrate the double standards of which he is accused by Silvers by the way in which he refers to a male contemporary of Gentileschi’s, whose cause of death is uncertain, but is generally thought to have been suicide, due to his melancholic nature. He writes: “[…] Pietro Testa emerges as having possessed just those elements of originality, complexity, capacity for expressing personal suffering, and (almost) genius that, despite her great talent, were beyond the reach — or perhaps beyond the ambitions — of Gentileschi,” (Haskell, 1989, 38) thereby employing the same logical assumption with a male artist — that his personal suffering influenced and enriched his artistic life — that he denies to Gentileschi. In contrast, Silvers contends that the life of the artist is integral to his or her output, because it influences the way that the artist sees, interprets, and reproduces the world around him or her, thereby admitting Gentileschi’s personal history should be a valid point of reference when critiquing her oeuvre.

Although only her scholars are around to refute such gender biases today, in the seventeenth century, when she was living and working in the overwhelmingly male-dominated art world of baroque Italy, Gentileschi had similar double standards with which to contend. Due to her notorious rape, R. Ward Bissell states, “The conception of Artemisia Gentileschi as a woman of dubious rectitude, first provoked above all by the events of 1611-1612 [her rape and subsequent trial], was to have an effect on the nature of the commissions she was awarded and upon how her pictures were to be received.” (Bissell, 1999, 18) Branded thusly as a woman of sexual inclinations, with whom physicality was already associated, Gentileschi was to become valued not so much for her work as for her reputation and appearance.

“Another gender-distorted assumption traceable to Artemisia’s own time is that the artist and her art, as exempla of feminine beauty, constitute a seamless whole. Renaissance connoisseurs sometimes claimed to admire self-portraits by women as “double marvels,” of the painter’s art and her own beauty.” (Garrard, 2001, 7) Garrard’s comments here aptly sum up the situation in which Gentileschi worked and by which she was restrained, but that, also, she was able to masterfully exploit. As Bissell notes, “It was when writers acclaimed Artemisia Gentileschi’s physical attributes that they ran a special risk of doing her a disservice by

Figure 3. Drawing of the Hand of Artemisia Gentileschi with Paintbrush, Pierre Dumontstier le Neveu, 1625. British Museum, London.
emphasizing that aspect of her person at the expense of her mind (indeed by implying that she owed her art to her beauty) and by opening the way to those who associated female good looks with lasciviousness and a host of related negative qualities.” (Bissell, 1999, 40)

As I have argued, however, gender-based assumptions were the framework upon which Gentileschi built her reputation, by breaking them as often as she acquiesced to societal pressure for non-threatening, beautiful images of submissive women. The idea of beauty and skill in the person of Gentileschi can be seen in Pierre Dumonstier le Neveu’s drawing of Gentileschi’s hand (fig. 3), which is headed in archaic French by the inscription: “The hands of Aurora (goddess of the dawn) are lauded for their rare beauty. But these here must be a million times more so, for knowing how to create such marvels, which ravish discriminating eyes.” 2 The objectification of Gentileschi’s hand as a beautiful object, linked with its ability to itself create beautiful works, represents for Le Neveu the “double marvel” that was a female painter working within male-imposed confines and using them to her own advantage.

Gentileschi, then, must have garnered a certain degree of acclamation above and beyond that of her notorious violation, at least in her own time, by realizing that “identity [is] a ‘manipulative, artful process.’” (Pearson, 2008, 4) She would use this knowledge in that “identity [is] a ‘manipulative, artful process.’” notorious violation, at least in her own time, by realizing a degree of acclamation above and beyond that of her imposed confines and using them to her own advantage.

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Gentileschi, then, must have garnered a certain degree of acclamation above and beyond that of her notorious violation, at least in her own time, by realizing that “identity [is] a ‘manipulative, artful process.’” (Pearson, 2008, 4) She would use this knowledge in creating La Pittura, which strengthens its revolutionary message by grounding itself in a deceptively traditional visual language: the Iconologia. By using an allegorical reference that was widely understood, she was able to describe herself visually as a personification of painting, while rejecting the implications of female beauty that went along with it, effectively taking a stand against the term) feminist convictions, which, although they did not necessarily translate into action or power, were evident both in what Garrard describes as her subversively dominant female images (Garrard, 1989) and her personal statements to friends and patrons. These statements include the claims: “You will find the spirit of Caesar in this soul of a woman” and “I will show Your Most Illustrious Lordship what a woman can do.” Her security in her personal artistic prowess is quite evident in the calm assurance and competency felt by the viewer of La Pittura, in which her person is anything other than surrounded by splendor, as the Iconologia proposes for the idea of allegorical beauty. Instead, her self-representation draws upon centuries of earlier allegory related to intellectual skill and competence, rather than the fleeting attributes of loveliness.

In the artistic allegorical tradition, however, the allegories of painting (Pittura), architecture (Architettura) and sculpture (Scultura), were relative latecomers, not appearing until the first half of the sixteenth century. Before that, during the Middle Ages, accepted female allegorical representations were limited to the canonical seven liberal arts of the Trivium (dialectic, rhetoric, and grammar) and the Quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astrology), while painting, architecture, and sculpture represented the mechanical arts, or crafts. In the fifteenth century, poetry, philosophy, and theology were added to the list of liberal arts, but painting was still excluded. It was only when “the art of painting was understood to involve inspiration and to result in a higher order of creation than the craftsman’s product did it become appropriate to symbolize the art with an allegorical figure.” (Garrard, 1980, 101)

The reasons for this figure being represented as female are generally accepted to be twofold: first, as a matter of practicality, in Latin and the five romance languages these liberal arts concepts are feminine (la pittura [Italian], la peinture [French], la pintura [Spanish], a pintura [Portuguese], picture [Romanian]), thus, a feminine personification. Second, and more abstractly, as women were traditionally far removed from such pursuits, which involved higher learning and which were therefore almost exclusively the domain of educated men, a female figure represented the fact that these ideas were removed from the individual (the norm against which all was measured being, of course, masculine) and the manual labor involved in its production, rendering it an intellectual and aloof concept, rather than a base craft.

This female image, of course, created problems

for male painters, because it meant the depiction of themselves as the artist must necessarily remain separate from that of the personification of art. Many ingenious solutions were proposed in response to this, such as Poussin’s 1650 Self-Portrait, in which he alludes to pittura in a painting in the background, yet he and “art” are still necessarily separate. That female allegory was incompatible with male self-representation is obvious, but it also led to “[...] ambiguities which exist between the representation of women and women as representation in seventeenth-century culture.” (Johnson, 1993, 449)

That Gentileschi was able to harness this ambiguity to serve her own ends — and recognizably associate herself with the idea of art as concept in addition to the artist as practitioner — is evident in the fact that there exist a spate of paintings, both before and after the celebrated La Pittura, which depict her as this very allegory. Earlier examples, such as Jérôme David’s engraving (fig. 5), undoubtedly gave Gentileschi the basic idea for her own work because it presented her as a “famosissima pictrice,” a professional practitioner of her art. But Gentileschi alone was able to take her self-portrait and include both professional and allegorical elements in a single cohesive whole. That it was adopted and replicated by other artists is a testament to its validity as a visual language that contemporaries were unable to produce for themselves.

Therein lies the genius of La Pittura: an allegorical self-representation by a woman, who deliberately manipulated traditional methods of symbolism to convey a revolutionary message. Unlike her male contemporaries, so concerned with gaining status as nobles and men of intellect, Gentileschi first had to establish herself as capable of producing the very art that they were occupied with rising above. Although the eternal conflict between theory and practice would later be further developed by other artists (notably Velasquez and Vermeer), in the existing theoretical framework, Artemisia Gentileschi continues to stand, literally and metaphorically, in the foreground.

1 “Ces fêtes et ces déguisements, si bien décrits par J. Rousset, sont bien autre chose que de vulgaires mascarades: ils signifient à la fois une attitude existentielle, celle que l’on vient d’esquisser, et s’érigent parallèlement en mythologie politique. Ces fêtes et tout leur attrait nus introduisent au cœur même de ce que l’homme baroque face à lui-même et face à la société voudrait être, croit être ou plus exactement voudrait paraître.”

2 “Les mains de l’Aurore sont louées pour leur rare beauté. Mais celles-ci plus digne le doit estre mille fois plus, pour sçavoir faire des merveilles, qui ravissent les yeux del plus judicieux.”

Works Cited


Figure 5. Portrait of Artemisia Gentileschi as Pittura, unknown artist, c1630. Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, Rome. www.artemisiagentileschi.com