

Artemisia

Conventional histories of art mention few female painters. As Germaine Greer famously pointed out in her 1979 book *The Obstacle Race*, this is more related to their lack of opportunity in a patriarchal and misogynistic society than to any lack of talent (see also Nochlin, 1971; 1988). Greer pointed to a “magnificent exception” to the rule that female painters do not become renowned: Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1656), a baroque painter, whose images continue to fascinate us with their conception and shock us with their power.

Life (Barker, 2022; Siciliano, 2017)

Artemisia was the daughter of Orazio Gentileschi (1563-1639), a painter working in Rome. Her mother died when she was 12 years old. Artemisia was not given any formal schooling, and only learned to write as an adult. However, she displayed a talent for painting and she helped her father with his work.

Orazio's skill was in the depiction of the human figure. He initially collaborated with Agostino Tassi, an expert in perspective: Orazio would supply the figures for Agostino's landscapes. Later Orazio became influenced by Caravaggio (1571-1610), imitating the dramatic lighting of his younger colleague, and, like him, using real models for his subjects. At the age of 17 years, Artemisia produced her first major work, *Susanna and the Elders* (1610), “a signal statement by a young female artist declaring her skill, knowledge, and gender” (Simon, 2017).

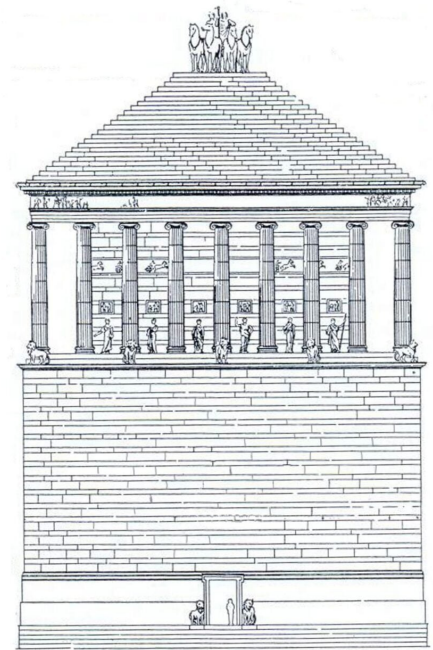
A year later, in May 1611, she was raped by Agostino Tassi. When Tassi refused to marry her, her father brought charges

against him for violating his family's honor (Cohen, 2000). During the 7-month trial, Artemisia was examined under torture. The judges found Agostino guilty and exiled him from Rome, though the sentence was never carried out. In 1613, Orazio Gentileschi arranged for his daughter to marry the painter Pierantonio di Vincenzo Stiattesi, and the couple moved to Florence.

In Florence, Artemisia became a successful painter. She enjoyed the patronage of the Medici family and became friends with Galileo Galilei. She became the first woman artist to be accepted as a member of the Accademia delle Arti del Disegno. She learned to read and to write. During her period in Florence she produced two versions of what was to become her most famous painting: *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1614). Her husband was unable to produce any work of note, and their relations became strained. Artemisia entered into a passionate affair with Francesco Maria Maringhi, a rich nobleman.

Artemesia returned to Rome in 1620. At that time, she became friends with the French painter Simon Vouet (1590-1649), who completed a striking portrait of Artemisia around 1625 (Locker, 2015, p 129). Hanging on a gold chain around Artemisia's neck is a medallion with an image of the Mausoleum of Helicarnassus. This tomb, constructed by Artemisia for her husband Mausoleus in 350 BCE, became one of the wonders of the world. Artemisia Genitileschi had been named after the ancient queen. Although many of the statues that adorned the tomb are now in the British Museum, nothing remains of the building which slowly crumbled under the effect of repeated earthquakes. The portrait shown below with an enlargement of the medallion, and a sketch of the Mausoleum.





In 1626 Artemisia moved to Venice in search of patronage. However, after a few years she moved on to Naples where she lived for the rest of her life, except for a brief visit to England in 1638 where she help her father Orazio with the decoration of the Queen's House in Greenwich. At that time, she likely painted the *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* which entered the collection of Charles I of England. In Naples Artemisa was one of a group of baroque painters who produced large canvases for the city's many churches. She likely died during the outbreak of plague in Naples in 1656.

Susanna and the Elders

The story of Susanna and the Elders is recounted in Chapter 13 of the *Book of Daniel*. Although earlier parts of Daniel are considered canonical by all Christian Churches, Protestants consider the later parts to be apocryphal, useful for edification but not divinely inspired.

According to the story the beautiful Susanna is surprised

while bathing in her garden by two lecherous elders. They ask that she lie with them. If not, they threaten to accuse her of adultery with a young man, something that would be punishable by death. Susanna refuses their blackmail, the elders bring their false charges before a court, and Susanna is condemned to death. However, a young Daniel interrupts the proceedings, and examines the two elders separately. Unable to keep to a consistent story, the elders contradict themselves. One says that the adultery occurred under an oak tree and the other describes it as under a mastic tree. The difference in size between the two trees clearly demonstrates that they are lying. Susanna is vindicated and the elders are condemned to death for bearing false witness.

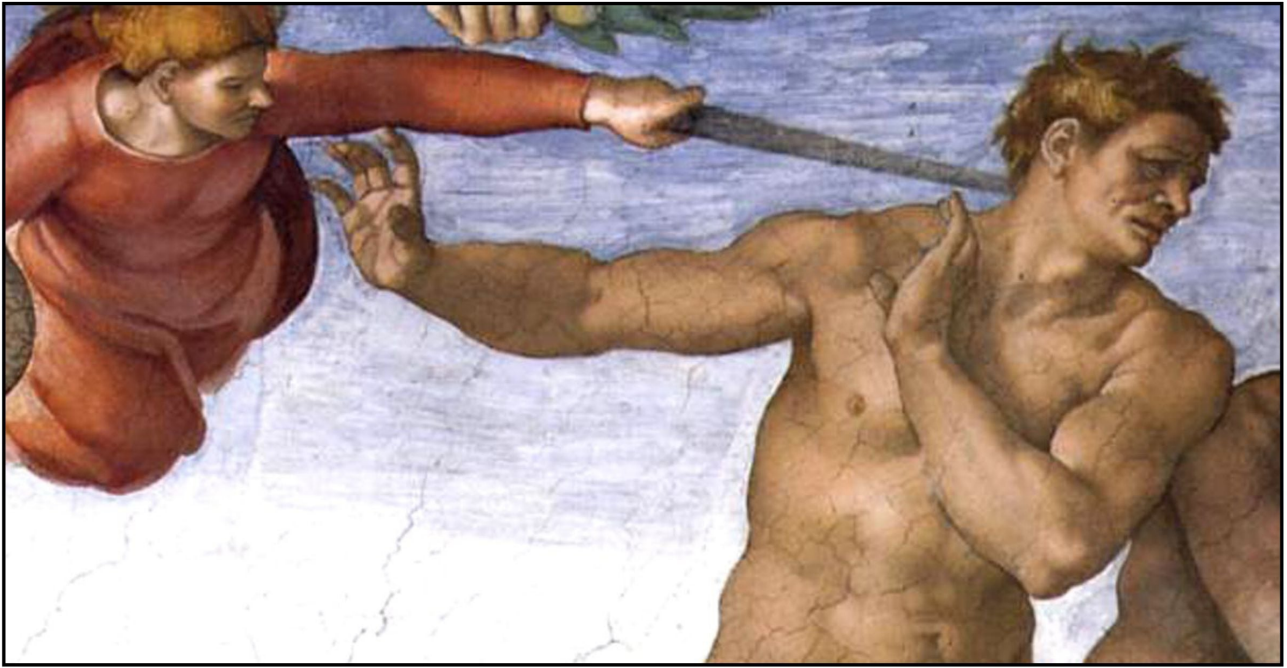
The story has been represented many times. The visual depiction of the nude Susanna being ogled and set upon by the lecherous old men is deeply disconcerting. The story is meant to demonstrate the evils of lechery, but the painting presents a beautiful naked female for the enjoyment of the viewer. In this context, Artemisia's 1610 painting is perhaps salutary. Susanna is obviously discomfited by the attentions of the elders. The image invokes more pity than lust.

The men in Artemisia's painting are younger than the elders of the story (Bel, 2005). The dark-haired man is not much older than Susanna. One wonders whether the two men may not represent Tassi and Orazio, or Tassi and his friend Cosimo Quorli. The painting predates the rape but Tassi was likely bullying Artemisia long before the final rape.

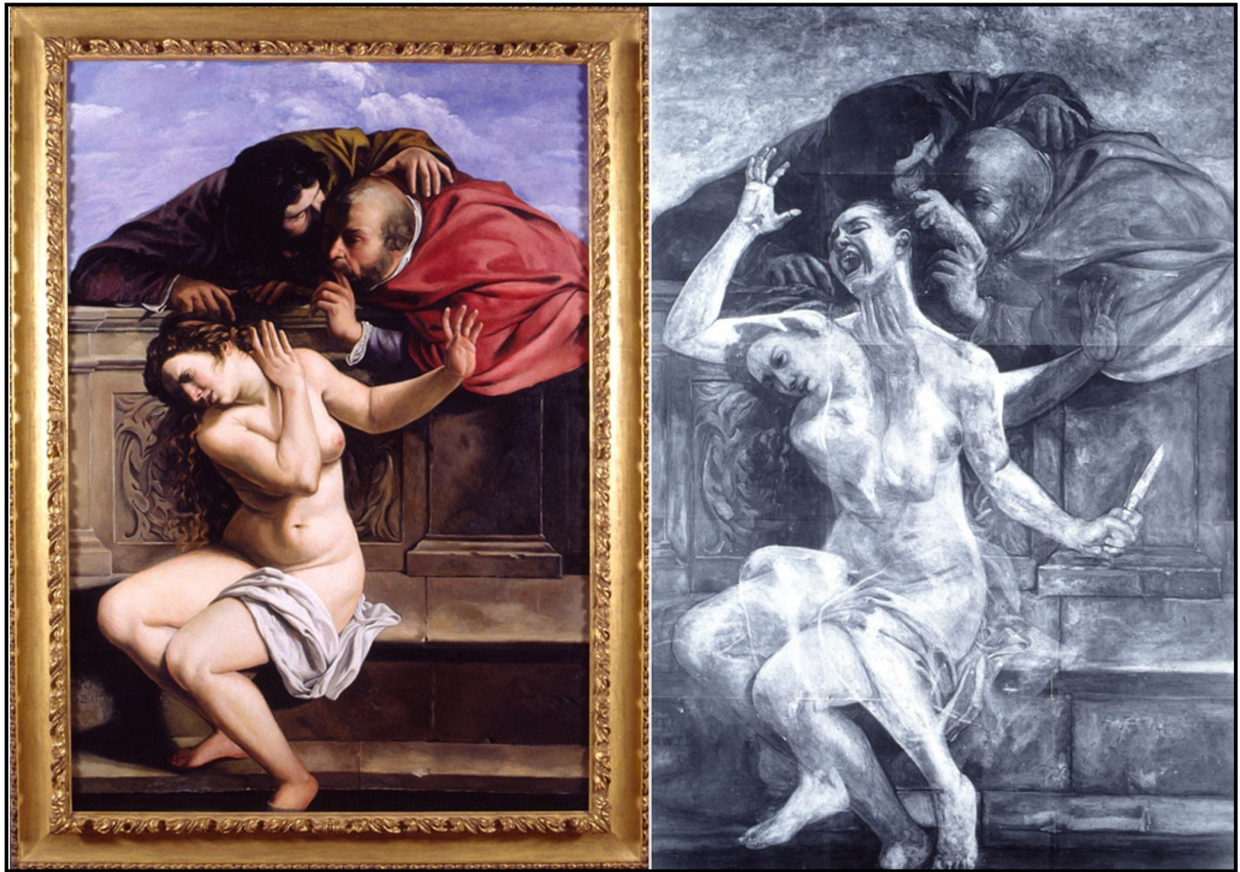
The painting shows Susanna seated on a stone bench. The usual treatment of this subject places her in a garden. Orazio and Artemisia both lacked talent for landscapes and gardens. Some have suggested that Tasso was supposed to mentor Artemisia in the principles of landscape and perspective. In which case, the bare bench perhaps states that Artemisia refused his teachings as well as his sexual advances.

The center of the painting shows an anxious tangling of arms. Susanna's gesture may have derived from the Michelangelo's painting of the Expulsion from Eden in the Sistine Chapel (1510). The painting is shown below together with the detail from Michelangelo.





In 1998, the American artist Kathleen Gilje meticulously recreated Artemisia's 1610 painting of *Susanna and the Elders*. She then produced an x-ray of her copy which revealed *pentimenti* of an earlier version of the picture: Susanna screaming with a knife in her hand. Everything is disturbed. The violence is transferred from the rapist to the victim. Though, like the *pentimenti* it was never realized.



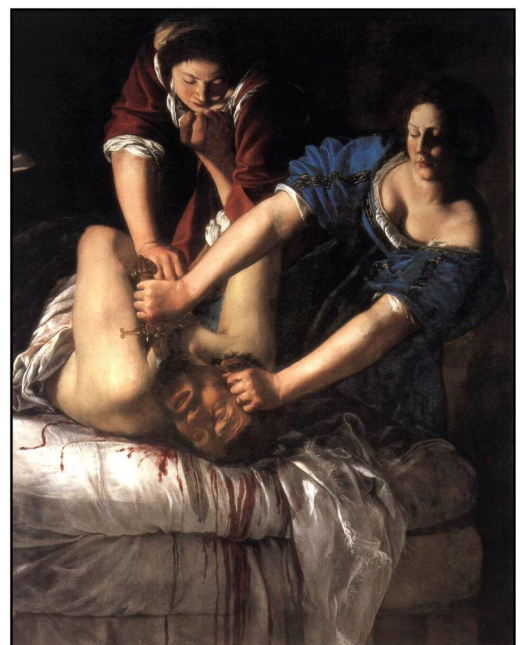
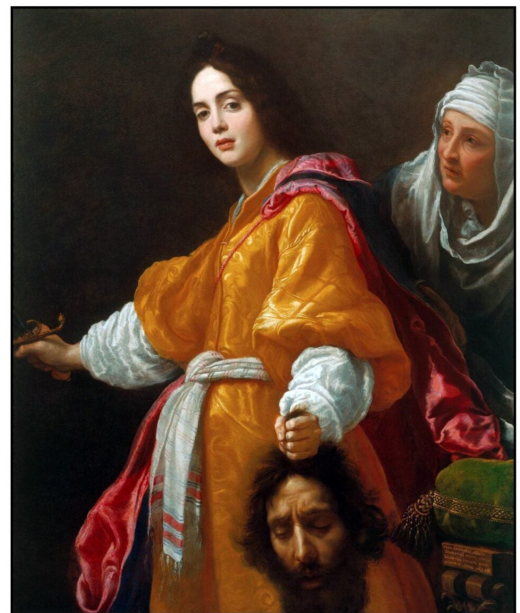
Artemesia painted many versions of *Susanna and the Elders*. The following is one from 1652. This Susanna is more composed than in the earlier painting. She is less afraid of the elders' advances and rebukes them for their lechery.



Judith and Holofernes

The *Book of Judith* is another scripture considered apocryphal by the Protestant churches. It recounts how the beautiful widow Judith arrays herself in all her finery and goes with her maid Abra to the camp of Holofernes, the Assyrian general besieging the Israelite city of Bethulia. She promises to help the Assyrians take the city. Holofernes is struck by Judith's beauty and invites her to dine in his tent. After he becomes drunk, Judith decapitates him with his own sword. Judith and her maid return to Bethulia with the severed head. The Israelites display the head upon the walls of their city. The Assyrians become demoralized and flee.

In the Renaissance and the Baroque eras, representations of Judith were used to depict the courage of the people who rise up against tyranny. The following illustration shows Donatello's 1460 sculpture (above left), Caravaggio's 1602 painting (below left), Cristofano Allori's 1613 painting (above right) and Artemesia's 1613 painting (below right).



Artemesia's first depiction of *Judith Slaying Holofernes* shown on the previous page was likely painted in 1612-13 just after Artemesia's rape and during the trial of Tassi. It is impossible not to see it as a response to her violation.

Artemisia's painting certainly derives in part from Caravaggio's but differs from this earlier representation in its realistic violence of the slaying. Judith and Abra have to work together to overcome Holofernes, who is dangerous even though he is drunk.

Artemesia painted a second version of *Judith Slaying Holofernes* in Florence. Although usually dated to 1620, Whitlum-Cooper (in Treves et al, 2020) proposes that it was painted early in her stay in Florence, probably using a tracing of the original painting. The main difference between the paintings is in the spurting of the blood as the sword cuts through Holofernes' carotid artery. Drops of blood stain the bosom of Judith and the bodice of her dress.



The following are comments by Germaine Greer (1979, pp 189-191):

The painting depicts an atrocity, the murder of a naked man in his bed by two young women. They could be two female cut-

throats, a prostitute and her maid slaughtering her client whose up-turned face has not had time to register the change from lust to fear. The strong diagonals of the composition all lead to the focal point, the sword blade hacking at the man's neck from which gouts of blood spray out, mimicking the lines of the strong arms that hold him down, even as far as the rose-white bosom of the murderess.

The excuse for such portrayal is, of course, the apocryphal story of Judith and Holofernes, which might equally well justify the portrayal of Jewish beauty (as it did for Rembrandt) or of a mistress's careless cruelty (as it did in the luscious version of Cristofano Allori). Artemisia Gentileschi's choice of depicting the act of decapitation itself had been made before, by Elsheimer and of course by her father's erstwhile friend, Caravaggio.

Artemisia's treatment of the same subject clearly refers to Caravaggio's painting, but in no spirit of emulation; rather she has decided to outdo her predecessor. The composition is swung around and tightened into a terrible knot of violence. The tension away from the act which divides Caravaggio's canvas is abandoned, for all the interest centres upon the ferocious energy and application of dark, angry Judith, who plies her sword like a peasant woman slaughtering a calf, in a claustrophobic oval of light filled with restless see-saw movement. There is no concession to decorative effect in the composition: the warm transparency of Artemisia's palette and her delicate chasing of linear effects, the rippling of the tufted hem of the bed-covering, the tinkle of blood against Judith's jewelled forearm, the sprouting of Holofernes' hair through her ropy fingers, are all expressions of callousness. The spectator is rendered incapable of pity or outrage before this icon of violence and hatred, while he is delighted by such cunning.

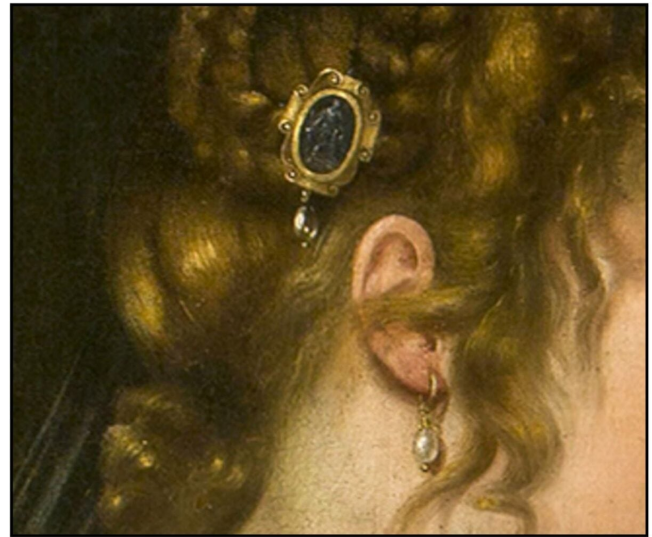
About a year later, in 1614, Artemesia produced a more subtle painting of *Judith and her Maidservant* (illustrated below) The painting represents a moment after the slaying of the Assyrian

general as Juditha and Abra are about to leave the tent. They hear a noise and stop. Judith puts her hand upon the shoulder of her maid to reassure her. They must wait until everything returns to silence before escaping from the Assyrian camp. Treves (2020) remarks

Judith's gesture of resting the sword on her shoulder has been read as a sign of victory and justice. But it is also a subtle reminder of the weight of the general's weapon, and the blade's dangerous proximity to Judith's exposed neck call to mind the decapitation that has just taken place. The sword's pommel is placed prominently towards us and refers to the recently committed brutality: its shrieking head recalls the screams of Holofernes

Another fascinating detail is Judith's hairpin which appears to be an onyx cameo representing a warrior-guardian. Garrard (2020, p 149) points out that the shawl draped round Abra's hips alludes to the expressive drapery on the back of Donatello's statue of Judith. Artemesia would have been well aware of Donatello's late masterpiece. which was displayed in the Loggia dei Lanza on the Piazza della Signoria in Florence.





Mary Magdalene

In 1616 or 1617, Artemesia painted a sumptuous *Conversion of the Magdalene*. The painting was likely commissioned by Maria Maddalena the Grand Duchess of Tuscany, in honor of her namesake saint.

Mary is wearing a magnificent yellow silk dress. Yellow was one of Artemesia's favorite colors. She may have learned how to portray yellow silk from Cristofano Allori, whose *Judith* (illustrated earlier) is also arrayed in shining yellow.

Mary Magdalene was an important subject for Artemesia. As Garrard (2020, pp 114-5) notes

Artemisia was well aware, and savvy Florentines could also have known, that Mary Magdalene's story broadly matched her own; a woman whose identity is stamped with a sexualized past turns a corner and takes up a new, respectable life.

In the painting, Mary sits at a table and pushes away a mirror, a symbol of vanity. On the mirror is written *Optimem Partem Elegit*: "She chooses the better part" (Christiansen & Mann, 2001). Since Artemesia admitted at her rape-trial that she had not learned to write, these words and the signature on the back of the Magdalene's chair may have been added by an

assistant (Christiansen & Mann, 2001). The quotation comes from Jesus' reply to Martha who complained that her sister Mary was not helping with the housework:

But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me.

And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things:

But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her. (*Luke 10: 40-42*)

The passage is difficult to interpret. Most commentaries suggest that Jesus is commending Mary for considering the spiritual rather than the physical. One cannot live by bread alone. However, the skeptic might side with Martha and suggest that one also cannot live without bread.

The jar at Mary's feet represents the ointment with which an unnamed sinful woman anointed the feet of Jesus:

And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment

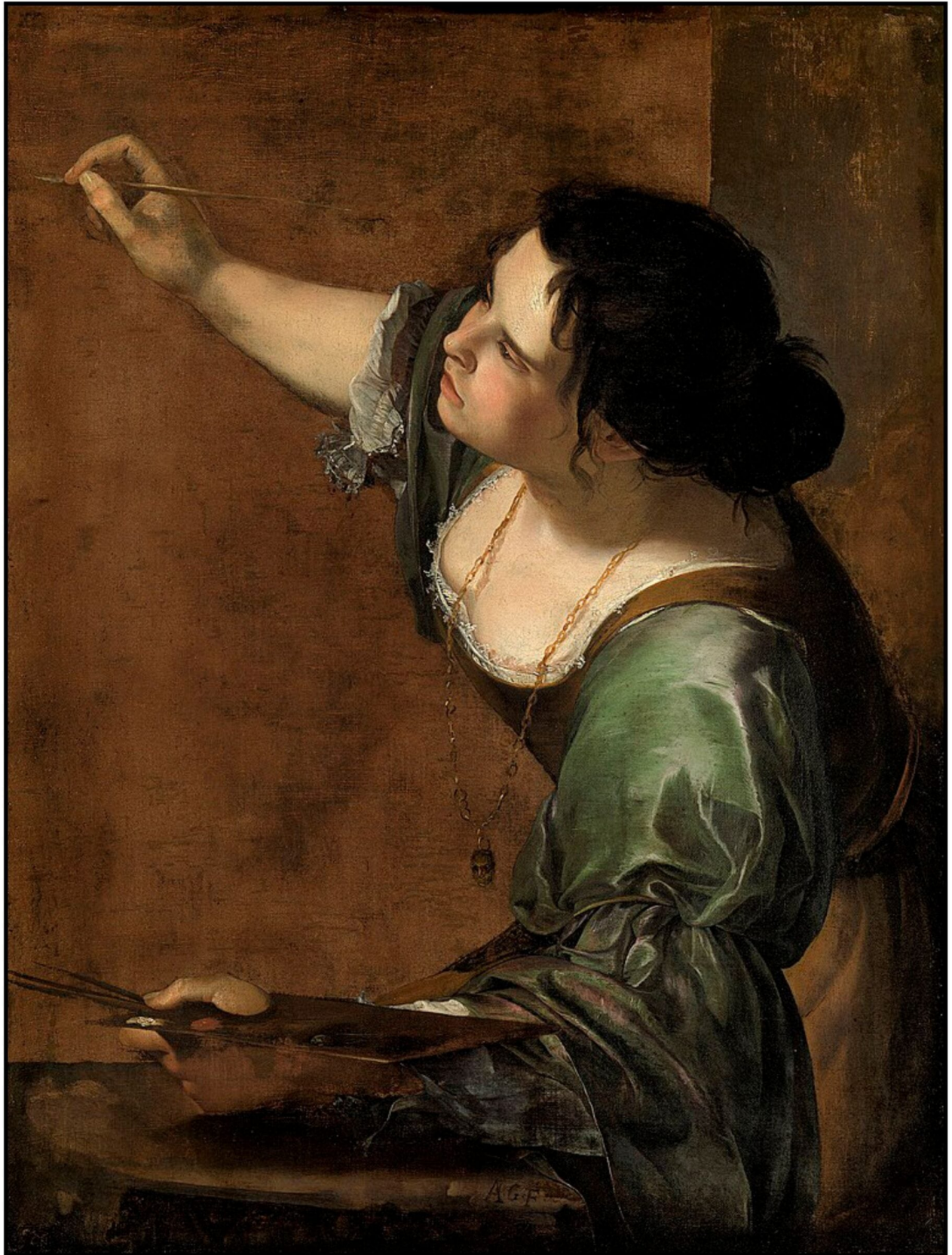
And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment. (*Luke 7: 37-38*).

Commentators have conflated Mary Magdalene with this sinful woman and with Mary the sister of Martha.



Self Portraits

Artemesia produced many self-portraits and many of the heroines in her history paintings are in part versions of herself. We can appropriately bid farewell to Artemisia with the beautiful *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*, a bravura display of her ability to capture a person at a moment of time. One wonders whether the tiny head suspended on the chain around her neck makes reference to Holofernes.



In recent years the contributions of female artists have become more and more recognized (Hessel, 2023; Morrill et al., 2019; Pollock, 2013). Several recent exhibitions have

highlighted the work of Artemisia Gentileschi (e.g., Christiansen and Mann, 2001; Treves et al., 2020). Artemisa remains one of the great painters, regardless of her gender.

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