



Artemisia Gentileschi

(1593-1656)

What is so unusual about this woman with a paint brush in her hand?

Artemisia Gentileschi is the first woman artist to be so accomplished that she was admitted to the highly distinguished and exclusively male club of famous artists known as the Accademia di Arte del Disegno of Florence, Italy. She was a favorite of the Medici Court and was invited to help decorate the Buonarotti Gallery by Michelangelo's nephew. Eventually she migrated to England to help her father Orazio, decorate the ceiling of Marlborough House, the residence of King Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria.

But it is not for these works that Artemisia is most well known. From her first signed debut in the art world with her painting of Susanna and the Elders (1610), to one of her last major works, Corsica and the Satyr (late 1640s), she is most recognized for her depictions of heroic women escaping from or taking revenge upon evil doing villains. The theme she returns to again and again is that of Judith slaying Holofernes, literally cutting off his head with a sword, shedding enormous spurts of blood, or furtively carrying his head wrapped in a cloth and escaping from his guards.

At least twice she painted pictures of Lucretia, the Noble Roman Lady who committed suicide after being raped by King Tarquin. That death resulted in the overturning of the Monarchy and the establishment of the First Republic of Ancient Rome (ca. 500 BC). She also depicted Sisera assassinating the Canaanite Jael, by driving a tent peg into his brain! And she did all these works of art with great mastery over the baroque chiaroscuro techniques first expounded by Caravaggio. (In fact, if you compare Artemisia's versions of the beheading of Holofernes with Caravaggio's earlier painting, his appears tame and stilted, with an almost embarrassed Judith holding the sword at arm's length, while her's show a determined Judith literally standing over him with blood pouring all over her hands.)

What was the motivation behind so much passion and gore, you may wonder.

Well, at the age of seventeen, Artemisia was briefly left in the tutorship of her father's assistant, Agostino Tassi, and was raped repeatedly by him, an act which resulted in a seven month long trial and two bouts of torture to ensure her truthfulness. Initially her reputation was in tatters, but her determined refusal to change her testimony resulted in Tassi's conviction, imprisonment for one year, and banishment from Rome, their home city.

Eventually she married, had children and was invited by the various courts of Naples, Genoa, Venice and England, to pursue her art, to great praise and appreciation by all who employed her. Just before Cromwell led the Revolution in England which temporarily overturned the Monarchy there, Artemisia returned to Naples and continued working. It is believed she died in the Great Plague of 1650-53. She left many paintings behind, some of which are on display in Art Museums all over the world.

A number of books and a movie have been devoted to her life over the years. Not surprisingly, when her full story came out, she became a heroine to women everywhere, and in 1993, a Frenchwoman, Alexandra LaPierre, wrote a novel, entitled *Artemisia*, directly quoting from transcripts of the rape trial and a number of her letters. It was translated and published by Grove Press in this country in 2000, and quickly became an "International Bestseller".