

Artemisia Gentileschi

Our very own Shirley Taylor presented a fascinating insight into this amazing painter of the early 16th century.

Artemisia is the most celebrated female painter of the 17th century. She worked in Rome, Florence, Venice, Naples and London, for the highest echelons of European society, including the Grand Duke of Tuscany and Philip IV of Spain.

Artemisia was born in Rome, the eldest of five children and only daughter of Orazio Gentileschi, under whom she trained. Artemisia's earliest signed and dated painting, 'Susanna and the Elders' is from 1610. Although a subject painted by many artists, Artemisia was the first to portray it through a woman's eyes. A year later Artemisia was raped by the painter Agostino Tassi, an acquaintance and collaborator of her father's. An infamous trial, meticulously recorded in documents that survive, ensued in 1612. In order to prove she was telling the truth she was subjected to torture not unlike the use of thumbscrews. Tassi was found guilty and banished from Rome, though his punishment was never enforced.

Following the trial Artemisia married a little-known Florentine artist by the name of Pierantonio di Vincenzo Stiattesi, and left Rome for Florence shortly thereafter. There she had five children and established herself as an independent artist, becoming the first woman to gain membership to the Academy of the Arts of Drawing in 1616. During this time Artemisia painted some of her greatest works. These included *The Conversion of the Magdalene*, *Self-Portrait as a Lute Player* and *Judith and her Maidservant*. Artemisia painted a second version of *Judith beheading Holofernes*, which now is housed in the Uffizi Gallery of Florence. The first, smaller *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (1612–13) is displayed in the Museo di Capodimonte, Naples. The principle subjects, Judith and Holofernes are said to resemble Artemisia and Agostino. Despite her success, financial excesses borne by her for her husband led to problems with creditors, and she fell out with her husband. She returned without him to Rome in 1621. Her paintings were highly regarded as they saw subjects from a female perspective, and she used bold colours and light exceptionally well. She also portrayed a passion and tension in many of her paintings that had a "wow" factor at the time.

Artemisia returned to Rome in 1620, beset by creditors after running up debts, and she remained there for 10 years (except for a trip to Venice in 1628). Whilst she continued to produce excellent paintings her style started to soften at this time. Perhaps the events earlier in her life had led her to paint with such passion.

From 1630 she settled in Naples, where she ran a successful studio until her death. She briefly visited London in 1639, perhaps to assist her ailing father on the ceiling painting of the Queen's House in Greenwich (now at Marlborough House in London), but was back in Naples the following year. The precise date of her death is not known but a recently discovered document records her still living in Naples in August 1654. Some have speculated that she died in the devastating plague that swept Naples in 1656 and virtually wiped out an entire generation of Neapolitan artists.