



The Iconography of Artemisia in Susan Vreeland's *The Passion of Artemisia*

Susan Vreeland'in *Artemisia'nın Çilesi* Romanında Artemisia
İkonografisi

Asya Sakine Uçar*

Abstract

The *Passion of Artemisia* by Susan Vreeland focuses on Artemisia Gentileschi, a revolutionary Italian painter from post-Renaissance period known for her idiosyncratic approach to painting with unprecedented portrayals of potent and defiant women. This study aims to show how Vreeland's novel turns into an iconotext providing not only visual representations from Artemisia's oeuvre consisting of Biblical, mythological and historical heroines, but also offers a distinctive perspective into the personal and artistic vision of the painter in conveying her own history of sexual harassment and violence. With a focus on certain female figures from Artemisia's paintings, this study employs an ekphrastic and iconographical analysis in ascertaining how these images enact her own sexual ordeal which is explicitly expressed in depictions of revenge or suppressed anger. This study argues that by constructing such a narrative, Vreeland explores and projects the gender dynamics offering a counterpoint to the

Geliş tarihi (Received): 02.10.2023 Kabul tarihi (Accepted):10.04.2024

* Assistant Professor Doctor, Iğdır University Faculty of Science and Letters Department of Western Languages and Literatures. Iğdır-Türkiye/ Yrd.Doç.Dr. Iğdır Üniversitesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi Batı Dilleri ve Edebiyatları Bölümü. Iğdır-Türkiye. ucar.as@yahoo.com. ORCID ID: 0000 0002 9653 2911

prevalent narratives and patriarchal norms that often depict women as passive, submissive, or objects of desire. Thus, the exploration of Artemisia's art within the context of iconotexts suggests a deeper and alternative engagement on the enduring relevance of Artemisia's art and its impact on contemporary understandings of gender in challenging the constraints imposed on women and creating a space for alternative narratives of women's lives.

Keywords: *art, Artemisia, iconotext, iconography, gender*

Öz

Susan Vreeland tarafından kaleme alınan Artemisia'nın Çilesi romanı, Rönesans sonrası dönemde yaşamış ve özellikle güçlü, meydan okuyan kadınları kendine özgü yaklaşımıyla resmeden devrimci İtalyan ressam Artemisia Gentileschi'ye odaklanır. Bu çalışma, Vreeland'ın romanının, Artemisia'nın İncil, mitoloji ve tarihten ilham aldığı kahramanlarından oluşan eserlerinden görsel temsiller sunmakla kalmayıp, aynı zamanda ressamın kendi cinsel taciz ve şiddet deneyimini aktarırken kişisel ve sanatsal vizyonuna dair ayırt edici bir bakış açısı sunan bir ikon metne nasıl dönüştüğünü göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, Artemisia'nın resimlerinden belli başlı kadın figürlere odaklanarak bu imgelerin intikam ya da bastırılmış öfke tasvirlerinde açıkça ifade edilen kendi cinsel çilesini nasıl yansıttığını göstermek için ekfrastik ve ikonografik bir analiz kullanmaktadır. Bu çalışma, Vreeland'ın bu anlatı ile kadınları genellikle pasif, itaatkâr ya da arzu nesnesi olarak tasvir eden yaygın anlatılara ve ataerkil normlara karşı toplumsal cinsiyet dinamiklerini sorgulayan bir bakış açısı sunduğunu savunmaktadır. Dolayısıyla, Artemisia'nın sanatının ikono metinler bağlamında incelenmesi, kadınlara dayatılan kısıtlamalara meydan okuyarak ve kadınların yaşamlarına dair alternatif anlatılar için bir alan yaratarak Artemisia'nın sanatının kalıcı önemi ve çağdaş toplumsal cinsiyet anlayışları üzerindeki etkisi üzerine daha derin ve alternatif bir etkileşim önermektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: *sanat, Artemisia, ikon metin, ikonografi, cinsiyet*

Introduction

Susan Vreeland's 2002 novel *The Passion of Artemisia* focuses on 17th century Italian painter Artemisia Gentileschi, one of the few female artists from post-Renaissance, an era dominated mostly by male artists. The novel does not only recount the life of the painter and her artistic process but also highlights her struggles as a woman starting with the rape case, her indictment by the patriarchy and the judicial system represented by the papal court. Taking an actual, historical personage, Vreeland dramatizes and fictionalizes grapples of a woman as an aspiring artist, mother, wife and rape victim. In doing so, Vreeland constructs an iconographic and ekphrastic narrative inspired and informed by Artemisia's idiocratical portraits rendered in a more human and relatable way than her male counterparts. The passion of Artemisia transforms into a promising art which is chronologically evoked in the book through certain visual references providing an insight into understanding Artemisia's artistic productions in her oeuvre each of which represents silenced and repressed voices shedding

light on her own personal and professional challenges.

Iconography- iconotext- Artemisia

It is an undeniable fact that much of the popularity of Artemisia today is due to Mary Garrard who published *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* in 1989 which is a substantial text in bestowing an esteemed status for Artemisia Gentileschi in art history and even accept her one of the Old Masters. Artemisia's life elicits a rich source for new fictional reconceptualizations and adaptations like movies, plays or novels and Garrard offers the first scholarly attempt of inquiry regarding the life and artistic milieu of her. Vreeland in her creation of an iconotext on Artemisia's life and career, stays true to the historical figure but also makes her still relatable to present day by exploring the gender roles in 17th century. Deriving his major inspiration from discussions surrounding images and texts, Peter Wagner coins the term *iconotext* in the sense that it "can apply to pictures showing words or writing, but also to texts that work with images" (1996: 17). Iconotexts most notably exemplified by Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* or Susan Vreeland's first novel *The Girl in Hyacinth Blue* prominently feature paintings or painters and explore the relationship between visual art and written narratives. Through these iconotexts, readers are not only presented with visual descriptions of paintings but also gain insight into the personal and artistic visions of the painters themselves. Vreeland grants her readers to visualize or see those iconic images described in her novel in accordance with the traditional sense of ekphrasis, literary description of a visual work of art, aiming to evoke vivid imagery in the minds of readers. Therefore, the novel bridges the gap between text and image, offering a richer and more comprehensive experience for the reader. But, in a broader context, Artemisia's own sense of perception on the canvases which ensues an adaptative and revolutionary attitude on certain figures and events unveils a personal iconography. The most notable and standard definition of iconography as "branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of arts" (1939: 3) is prescribed by Erwin Panofsky putting emphasis not only on descriptive study of images but also the indirect meaning to be denoted from the cultural and historical milieu. Artemisia's distinctive artistic choices manifest a lucrative opportunity for an insightful and contentious axiom of female iconography as she "chose the most ambitious category of picture, the istoria-multifigure narratives of subjects taken from the Bible and mythology- and within his category selected deliberately shocking subjects- female nudes, grisly beheadings- for realistic portrayal" (Locker, 2015: 1). Accordingly, throughout the novel, Vreeland highlights *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, *Susanna and the Elders*, *Allegory of Inclination*, *Cleopatra*, *Lucretia*, *Mary Magdalen* and finally *Self Portrait as Allegory of Painting* from her oeuvre in that each work is elaborated with pictorial details making a huge part of the plot and creating an artistic and aesthetic frame. Those references also suggest reexamination of the iconography of those compelling images and ascertain historical scenes relating to character's own personal infamy in mirroring and constructing her selfhood. As Artemisia is known for her portrayal of powerful and complex women in her artworks, her paintings often depicted female figures in moments of strength, agency, and vulnerability, challenging traditional notions of femininity and the roles assigned to women in society.

The dramatic narratives of tragic heroines and the pivotal moments from their lives have been the source of many conflicting and varying interpretations that are fashioned into aesthetic and moral conducts. The hallmark of Artemisia's art is the powerful depictions of women presenting a different perspective on female iconography, one that defied the expectations and offered a counterpoint to the prevalent narratives that often portrayed women as passive, submissive, or objects of desire. Instead, Artemisia's heroines embodied resilience, determination, and a fierce spirit making it hard to find complicity with patriarchal traditions of female sexuality, gender roles in her art. Mary Garrard remarks and evidences this challenge saying "...until Artemisia came along, few images presented a picture of gender relations from a discernibly female point of view" (2010: 10) which cannot go unnoticed considering the victimization she had to face. In a sense, her images are autobiographical enacting either her own sexual ordeal or the aftermath trauma which is explicitly expressed in depictions of revenge or suppressed anger catalysing Artemisia's own story into "an almost emblematic tale of fall and redemption" (Benedetti, 1999: 44) as she finds an exclusive way of redeeming both herself and her heroines. In the novel also, Vreeland creates "a chronological pilgrimage, leading the reader from painting to painting, playing on the double meaning of the title: each painting may be seen as a landmark connected with a particular kind of pain..." (Lanone, 2006: para. 6). By incorporating Artemisia's own iconography into her narrative, Vreeland captures the essence of her artistry, reveals her unique perspective and explores the dominant ideologies imposed on women in the 17th century.

Artemisia's iconic images

Vreeland opts to begin her narrative with the rape trials as the first chapter entitled "Sibille" inexorably makes a reference to a painful procedure of test squeezing and damaging the fingers but "designed to bring truth to women's lips" (2002: 3). Such a torture using thumbscrews to verify one's testimony echoes how Artemisia herself, despite being a victim of sexual assault, is physically and metaphorically put on trial notwithstanding being already hurt and overwhelmed in every sense. She keeps reminding herself that she is not on trial, Agostino Tassi, her father's friend and collaborator, her rapist is on trial. That physical torture is also meant to be a blow on her identity, virtue as she is silenced and violated once again but most importantly she is kept from painting, especially her Judith, a biblical heroine who beheaded the powerful Assyrian general who laid siege to the city of Bethulia according to *The Book of Judith* in the Old Testament. "Through rape survival, Artemisia is said to have developed a feminist consciousness that expresses itself in her paintings, especially in the striking violence of her repeated renderings of "Judith and Holofernes"" (Cohen, 2000: 53). Judith is a young widow but she bravely takes action to save her people by going to the camp of Holofernes, presenting herself as a willing captive. Artemisia narrates how she is drawn to this heroine who saved Jewish people by pretending to seduce the tyrant Holofernes, getting him drunk and finally cutting off his head. Artemisia depicted Judith in two different versions, the first one being painted around 1611-12, the time period she was raped and the second one approximately in 1620 which is housed in Uffizi Gallery in Florence today.



***Judith Beheading Holofernes*, (1620), Artemisia Gentileschi, Uffizi Gallery, Florence ¹**

Judith features in countless works of art but what sets Artemisia's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* apart from the rest is the fact that the kind of woman she wants to depict is not angelic or elegant. She remembers how disappointed she was when her father first showed Caravaggio's Judith. "She was completely passive while she was sawing through a man's neck" (Vreeland, 2002: 12).



Judith Beheading Holofernes, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (c.1598-9), Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica at Palazzo Barberini, Rome (Garrard, 2020: 141)

It is particularly evident that the role of gender has a major influence on the creation and treatment of the same subject begetting a stark contrast in the way they are examined. The difference between the two paintings display how the same narrative, mostly created by men, can transform into a different statement from a female perspective as rather than a depiction of violence, fascination with it is highlighted in Artemisia's version given the circumstances of the creation of her art work. Baroque painters generally leaned on Biblical stories and figures as they were predominantly financed by wealthy families or the church which tried to reinforce religious doctrines. Artemisia is also a Caravaggist in the sense that she "looked closely at bodies, posed them to convey intensity of fraught emotion, pathos, determination and suffering as well as the capacity to inflict a visibly carnal violence" (Pollock, 2005: 188). Artemisia's Judith savagely and adamantly slays the head with no feelings of terror or hesitation coinciding with her own anguish and harassment while Caravaggio's heroine keeps her distance from the bloody act. In her work "I am Artemisia", Stephanie Russo questions the longstanding presumption that "women's art reflects their individual experiences, whilst men's art is perceived as universal" (2022: 237). Artemisia's art displays a visual account of her personal redemption but it also strongly resonates with universal aspects of female artistry by presenting those empowered, assertive women through her own lens. The focal point of female art is usually restricted with domestic issues, still lifes, however Artemisia evidences that it is possible to find modern and still valid views of sexual violence and affirms a relatable framework for sexual trauma. While approaching the analysis of artworks by both male and female artists, the impact of gender, cultural observances, individual experiences on artistic creation and representation cannot be overlooked. Apparently Judith

fulfills Artemisia's repressed desire of killing her rapist. The discrepancy between the two paintings generally hinges on the facial expression of Judith. In Vreeland's novel, Artemisia paints two vertical furrows between Judith's brows like Caravaggio had done to illustrate how hard it is for her to murder someone. But seeing Agostino's threatening and highly cagy face in court next day, she paints the furrows out, giving Judith a more determined, vengeful and unapologetic expression. By a majority, representations of Judith highlight her heroic deed, courage and honor in order to liberate her people whereas Artemisia directly "focuses on the masculine and militaristic qualities she embodies, hence the representation of Judith decapitating her enemy" (Auvray, 2020: 2). Moreover, while the handmaid Abra portrayed in Caravaggio's version is an old lady standing by Judith, Artemisia's maid is actively engaged in the action, trying to hold Holofernes while Judith is cutting the neck with blood spurting all over, stressing female bond. According to Auvray's contention, apart from Caravaggio, in traditional portrayals of the Judith narrative before Gentileschi, Abra was often depicted as an older woman, serving merely as a contrast to highlight Judith's youth and beauty. (2020: 2-3). However, Gentileschi deviated from this convention by presenting Abra as a young woman, approximately the same age as Judith and she is an equal participant in the act which underscores a shared determination and also challenges the traditional portrayal of women as passive and secondary in Biblical accounts.

Biblical heroines like Judith and Susannah are quintessential examples in testifying to the gender roles placed on women ever since. In Vreeland's novel there is no artistic and ekphrastic mention of *Susanna and the Elders* (1610), an early work from Artemisia's artistic career concerned with sexual violence and female victims, as Artemisia's Susanna belongs to a time period before the narrative sequence Vreeland opts for. Artemisia's three versions of Susannah are painted at three different periods of her life namely; 1610, 1622 and 1649. However, through a fictitious female figure named Sister Graziela who also becomes a mother figure for Artemisia who lost her mother at a very early age, Vreeland creates a dialogue in which Graziela compares Artemisia to Susanna. While referring to *Susanna and the Elders*, she says: "you showed your intimidation at the lewd looks of those two men, her vulnerability and fear. It shows you understood her struggle against forces beyond her control. Beyond your control, Artemisia" (Vreeland, 2002: 19-20). Graziela provides psychological and spiritual comfort for Artemisia and even counsels to paint out the pain. By referencing the story of *Susanna and the Elders*, she acknowledges and highlights Artemisia's ability to empathize with Susanna's vulnerability, fear, and the external pressures that are beyond her control, just like Susanna.



***Susanna and the Elders* (1610), Artemisia Gentileschi, Schloss Weißenstein, Pommersfelden, Germany (Christiansen and Mann, 2001: 297)**

The painting depicts the story of Susannah taken from *The Book of Daniel*, who is the wife of a wealthy Jewish man. Susannah is another representative of female virtue and chastity according to Biblical doctrines as she is assaulted while bathing by two elder men and threatened with spreading false news of adultery if she refuses to surrender. Facing such a dilemma of accusations due to false testimony or giving in to the sexual demands of those malicious men, Susannah chooses to resist in order to protect her honor and chastity which is a key asset for men not just in Old Testament stories but in Renaissance Italy as well. Although Susannah's innocence is testified ultimately, the conviction of the elders is ironically attributed to their false testimony rather than sexual assault. The story has dramatic resonances with Artemisia who is falsely accused by her rapist who claims Artemisia was already not a virgin prior to the assault, as the forcible violation of a virgin can only account for a crime and punishment. Regrettably, the case is dismissed, Tassi is pardoned but banished from Rome only to return within a year thanks to his powerful patrons. The historical accounts of the real rape case reveal that the private negotiations continued toward a settlement ending in marriage and although Tassi was sentenced, he evaded punishment (Cohen, 2000: 49). Tassi employs

the common strategy of the rapists throughout history; denying the accusations and casting doubts on the reliability of the victim herself. Artemisia's inauspicious sexual experience and the anachronistic readings of it give countenance to adopt a posture to restore her reputation and honor in particular through the gallery of potent women from her collections as she tries to go beyond the stipulations of the laws and the conventions of the time constraining a woman's body and sexuality. Unlike many Susannah images, Artemisia's compositional choice is different from the male counterparts. Her Susannah turns away from the elders who loom above her, her position indicates a clear "no" as the narrative focus of her portrayal is the distress of this woman not the pleasure seeking men. The distress and vulnerability of Susannah become the primary focus, overshadowing the lascivious intentions of the elders. Gentileschi's unique compositional choice challenges the dominant male gaze prevalent in earlier depictions of the story and offers a reinterpretation shifting the power dynamics.

The rape and the ensuing public contempt that Artemisia is destined to like many rape victims, force her into a sort of banishment as well. After being raped by Agostino Tassi, his father's close friend and colleague and the aftermath public trial, she is hurriedly married to a Florentine painter Pierantonio Stiattesi and moves to Florence. In Florence, in her first attempt to seek admission to the Academia, Artemisia shows her canvases of *Judith*, *Susanna* and *Woman Playing a Lute* but faces harsh criticism that her expressive singularities on Biblical stories in particular puts her out of the conservative emulations, as "that deliberate flamboyance applied to biblical themes diminishes the spiritual content" (Vreeland, 2002: 63), in just the same way as the sensuality emphasized in the lute player through the associations of music and love. She understands how undesirable it is for the tradition-bound members of the academy to contemplate her views. Instead, Artemisia focuses on her marriage which proves to be affectionate in the beginning and grows stronger when she gives birth to her daughter Palmira. However, Artemisia's yearning to paint and create remain strong, even as she also poses as a model for her husband's artworks. On one occasion, Pietro uses Artemisia as a model for a *Madonna and Child* painting. Yet, when Artemisia sees the finished piece, she realizes that the depiction of her is significantly different from her own likeness. For Pietro it is her reputation that deters him from a realistic portrayal. "I can't have a tainted woman for the Madonna" (2002: 75). He deems it unfitting to depict a woman with a stained reputation as the Madonna literally illustrating the societal prejudices and constraints as Artemisia's reputation as a rape victim affects not only her personal life but also her artistic representation. At the time the rape laws centered almost entirely on the women's bodies like a commodity owned by their father and the notoriety of the seven-month long trial obliquely and irrevocably tarnishes Artemisia's honor and reputation. First she has to overcome the trauma and torture of sexual violence and then break conventions in becoming a successful artist and even the first woman painter to be accepted to Academia del Disegno at a time not so welcoming to female artists.

Artemisia's career spans over different parts of Italy; Rome, Florence, Venice, Naples and finally London where she painted with her father at Greenwich. In Florence, Artemisia's encounter with Michelangelo Buonarroti and being commissioned by him coincides with

a period in her career when she paints *Inclinazione* (*Allegory of Inclination*) as a tribute to Michelangelo who is deeply ingrained in history of art.



Figure 110. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Allegory of Inclination*. Oil on canvas. Casa Buonarroti, Florence

***Allegory of Inclination* (1615-1617), Artemisia Gentileschi, Casa Buonarroti, Florence (Christiansen and Mann, 2001: 314)**

“*Inclination* was a reiteration of Susannah, declaring the presence of the artist in her work, whose very subject in this case was the personification of an artist’s peculiar inclination toward making art” (Christiansen and Mann, 2001: 278). Although it is a beautiful artistic production, she does not feel the same satisfaction and pleasure she felt for Judith or Susanna upon finishing it. As it turns out, the painting did not tell a story or enable Artemisia to display her *invenzione*. “I had gotten paid for craft, not for art” (Vreeland, 2002: 91). She recognizes that she had been paid for her craftsmanship rather than her artistry, which is a total disappointment for her. Originally, the painting depicts a nude woman seated in heaven holding a compass and it is on the ceiling of the galleria in the Casa Buonarroti, established by Michelangelo the Younger. The figure represents the inclination to produce art paying homage to Michelangelo’s legacy. However, Vreeland highlights the irony that Artemisia did not feel that she was truly expressing her own art, which was built on a vision of female heroines and their stories. Interestingly, *Inclinazione* was later censored, with the female figure’s body being covered with drapery further emphasizing the constraints and limitations imposed on Artemisia’s artistic expression, particularly regarding the representation of the

female form. Despite the mixed feelings surrounding *Inclinazione*, Artemisia's talent and perseverance earned her membership in the Academy in the same year she painted the piece marking an important milestone in her career, acknowledging her contributions as a female artist and allowing her to navigate the art world with more recognition and opportunities.

While constructing her story, apart from Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger, Vreeland incorporates her associations with real historical figures like Galileo, Cosimo de Medici II. On her first meeting with Galileo, Artemisia has an interesting conversation about the next work she is commissioned by the archduchess, a portrait of Mary Magdalen, the woman who had to take on the sins and "make a practice of continual repentance" (2002: 122). Like Susannah and Judith, Artemisia painted a number of Magdalen portraits but Vreeland makes it very conspicuous that the alluded painting is the one probably painted between 1616-1618 in Florence and distinctively signed as Artemisia Lomi, her ancestral name.



St. Mary Magdalen (161-1618), Artemisia Gentileschi, Pitti Palace, Florence²

As an iconic Biblical figure, Magdalen epitomizes Christian devotion and repentance. As a penitent prostitute and loyal follower of Jesus, Magdalen has persisted in many visual depictions. Artemisia once again wants to "discover and display another side than the conventional belief of a sinner struck by unpremeditated conversion or spontaneous repentance" (2002: 122). She even claims to draw a thinking body like Masaccio's *Adam and Eve* in the Brancacci Chapel. For Artemisia, Magdalen represents the kind of woman who

was capable of expressing a reasoned thought, engaging in speeches or inquiry with Jesus unlike many Biblical women who could conceivably postulate faith and spirituality. Having a vibrant, meditative mind devoid of bodily constraints is the point that makes Magdalen closer and identifiable. She wants to capture the moment right before the conversion which is more intriguing to depict. “Then she could still be in gorgeous gown that these Florentines would love. Her unconfined hair could show a barely repressed sensuality” (2002: 137). Her Magdalen is contradictory and ambiguous; she is teary probably because of the shame of her past and fearful of renouncing everything she had known but she seems not to have yet put aside earthly pleasures wearing silk and jewelry and sitting on a red velvet chair. Mary Garrard argues that “Mary Magdalen’s story broadly matched her own: a woman whose identity is stamped by a sexualized past turns a corner and takes up a new respectable life” (2020: 114-115). During and soon after her residence in Florence, Artemisia remarkably develops and projects a sophisticated view on gender tenors. Gentileschi’s complex portrayal of Mary Magdalen can be seen as an exploration of the nuances of female experiences reflecting the internal conflicts and contradictions that women may face when trying to navigate public notions, personal desires, and the search for redemption or a new path in life.

As she begins to have success, win patronages and eventually becomes the first woman painter to be elected to the Academy before her husband, Artemisia feels herself caught in the grip of being a painter and wife. Her staggering relationship with Pietro and finding out his infidelity forces Artemisia to leave Florence with her daughter Palmira. She receives a letter from a Genoese merchant Cesare Gentile. Artemisia’s famous depiction of nude Cleopatra holding a snake in her hand and *Lucretia*, the one she most dislikes painting concur in this period. Obviously Artemisia does not feel a desire to celebrate a woman who killed herself in order to escape the shame of rape. She hates the dominant vibe in previous *Lucretia* paintings, like Flipping Lippi’s version in the Palazzo Pitti, in which the act of killing is enacted as ennobling although there is nothing appealing in it other than a false and unnecessary martyrdom in Artemisia’s eyes. On the other side, widely accepted as the most famous depiction, Titian’s *Tarquin and Lucretia* dramatizes the rape moment unlike Artemisia who capitalizes on the aftermath contemplation. The narrative of *Lucretia* also revolves around rape but unlike Susannah she succumbs to it. When Tarquinius slips into her bedroom, he threatens her with death unless she yields to him. *Lucretia* helplessly gives in only to tell this disgrace to her father and husband next morning. When she realizes that “her example might excuse the actions of women who could claim that a sexual encounter was a rape in order to escape punishment” (Garrard, 2020: 86), she commits suicide plunging a knife into her breast as an exemplary chaste woman. In her depiction, Artemisia centers on the moment of decision for *Lucretia* which is a departure from precedent, eroticized versions. While in one hand she is holding a dagger, in the other she is grasping her breast suggesting a dismal and precarious prospect of suicide.



ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI IN ROME AND VENICE 363

Lucretia (1623-1625), Artemisia Gentileschi, Private collection Girolamo Etro, Milan (Christiansen and Mann, 2001: 363)

Lucretia's distress extends to Artemisia's visceral frame of mind. "It became more and more troubled the more I worked. I wanted her troubled. Disturbed and disturbing." (2002: 198). Vreeland concentrates on how turbulent it becomes for Artemisia to place the dagger as aiming it at her breast seems wrong. She even demands "Speak to me Lucretia. What would you have me do?" (198). As Artemisia finds no one to speak for her, she finds her own voice through art, and that art bestows those misrepresented female figures with voices as well. She eventually decides to locate the dagger upright. Her Lucretia is not what everyone thinks her to be; she is totally hers; she is not nude but in disarrayed clothes, there is no blood and above all she is not dead. There is a complete sense of obscurity. "A victory of ambiguity.... we would never know what she did" (203). Unlike her male contemporaries who portray Lucretia in an erotic manner, Artemisia puts emphasis on her anguish. "Once again, Gentileschi has vividly represented a wronged woman refusing to be the pawn of a male aggressor; a heroine that will go to extreme lengths and violent action in order to maintain her dignity" (Russell, 2017). Therefore, the portrayal of Lucretia is another portrayal that Gentileschi draws inspiration or facet from and aligns with her broader artistic themes of highlighting strong, resilient women who assert their own narratives.

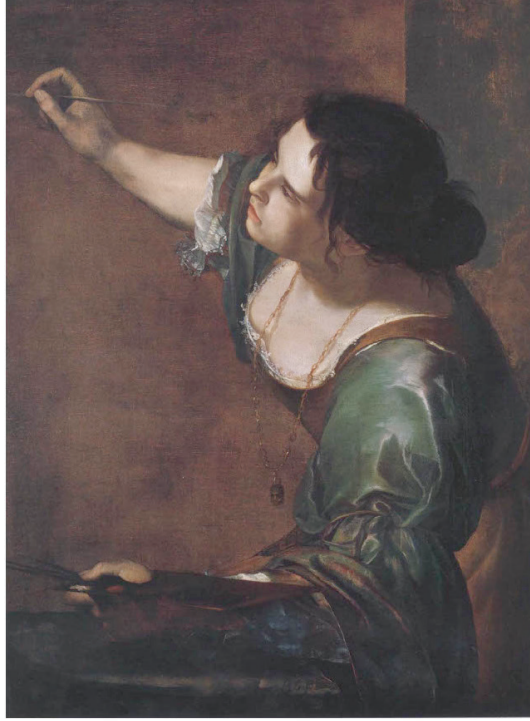
Apart from Artemisia's artistic range, her relationship with her father is a fundamental

and crucial point to be discovered and Vreeland entitles the final two chapters of her book “Orazio” and “Artemisia” staging their reconciliation. Artemisia visited England in 1638 upon the invitation of Charles I and in the novel also the estrangement between the father and daughter ends in London as the two work together on the ceiling paintings of Greenwich. The ending of the novel features Orazio advising his daughter to create a self-portrait titled *An Allegory of Painting*. Artemisia promises to use Michelangelo’s brush to execute the painting, symbolizing her commitment to her art and her desire to assert herself as an artist. This self-portrait, in which Artemisia holds a brush and palette, depicts her in the act of painting “accompanied by several, though not all, of the attributes of the female personification of *Painting* as set forth in Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia*” (Garrard, 1980: 97) which was a popular book in providing allegorical interpretations for various concepts, including the arts.

The figure of Painting is a passionate young woman, her dark brown eyes looking up to the light, light that emphasizes intellect and body as it falls on her forehead, and upon her full breast. This shining breast is framed by the lines of the gold chain—that token of esteem usually given by patrons to male painters. The figure holds her brush up to the edge of the actual canvas as if to begin to paint the empty canvas behind her, but she is caught in a moment of meditation or inspiration... (Christiansen and Mann, 2002: 278)

Pittura, as the personification of painting was actually introduced and popularized by Giorgio Vasari, an Italian artist and art historian during the first half of sixteenth century. His depiction of Pittura as a female figure was also very symbolic in emphasizing the creative spirit, inspiration and intellectual capacities. The emergence of female personifications in Italian art during the sixteenth century reflected evolving attitudes towards women’s roles in society and the recognition of their creative contributions. While these allegorical figures might still reflect certain gender stereotypes prevalent at the time, they provided a platform for acknowledging and celebrating women’s involvement in the arts.

In Artemisia’s self-portrait, *La Pittura*, she adheres to several elements prescribed by the *Iconologia* for depictions of the allegory of painting. According to the *Iconologia*, these elements include a pendant mask on a gold chain, a shifting green dress, unruly hair, the tools of a painter, and the requirement that the allegory be represented by a woman. However, Gentileschi deviates from one guideline: the gag that is typically depicted, symbolizing the non-verbal means of expression to which artists were thought to be limited (Conn, 2009: 25).



Self-portrait as the Allegory of Painting (1638-39), Artemisia Gentileschi, Royal Collection, London (Christiansen and Mann, 2001: 419)

By not including the gag, Gentileschi challenges the limitations placed on artists, particularly female artists, in terms of their freedom of expression. In most allegorical representations of artists, the tools of the trade, such as a brush and palette, are shown near the figure but not in use. However, Gentileschi showcases herself actively engaged in painting, demonstrating that she is more than just a symbol for the concept of art, once again asserting her identity as an artist in the artistic process. By using the widely understood allegorical reference, Gentileschi presents herself visually as a personification of painting while rejecting the implications of female beauty that often accompanied such depictions. She strategically chooses and combines elements from the *Iconologia* to convey her message, consciously avoiding the elements associated with traditional notions of beauty. This deviation from gendered expectations can be seen as a deliberate rejection of the classifications and limitations imposed on her as a female artist. It demonstrates her refusal to conform to traditional norms and her determination to purport her voice and presence within the art world.

Referring back to Artemisia's hesitations in creating the *Allegory of Inclination*, where she oscillated between the realms of art and craft, her self-portrait in the allegory of painting becomes a way for her to reconcile these two fields. The portrait serves as a reflection of her

art as a unified whole and a self-assertion of her professional artistry within a male-dominated profession. The figure in the painting can be seen as “a stand-in for women artists in general” (Garrard, 2020: 222), symbolizing their presence and artistic capabilities in the face of societal challenges. The inseparable link between the artist and their work, the blurred boundaries between the artist, model and the art of painting are highlighted through Artemisia’s active, complete and passionate immersion in the act of painting. In other respects, Artemisia’s self-portrait “evokes the contrast between Theory and Practice” (Garrard, 1980: 109). Her pose, with one arm raised upward is a testimony to the dedication of the practical aspect of her craft rather than theoretical concepts or external associations. By painting herself in the image of *La Pittura* or fusing the allegory of painting with herself, Artemisia distinctively creates a female personification of art challenging the conventions of her time.

Conclusion

The female chastity is always at odds with female sexuality and Artemisia’s life is alike fraught with the same challenges; however, her way of reconciling those notions and reconstructing a self is actualized through art, its transformative power and figurative empowerment of women. For that reason, it can be concluded that Artemisia’s artistic practices have an appeal for all generations and centuries as by choosing to portray these powerful female figures and their experiences, she challenged the common canon and encouraged a reevaluation of established narratives. In a similar manner, Vreeland also constructs a narrative that is intrinsically drawn to Artemisia’s revolutionary art paralleling the same contention in inserting a female perspective endowing a renewed voice both for the artist and her tragic heroines. *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, *Susanna and the Elders*, *Allegory of Inclination*, *Lucretia*, *Mary Magdalen* and *Self Portrait as Allegory of Painting* are highlighted for their rich pictorial details as personal resonances are embedded within each composition. It could be drawn that the complex relationship between her personal traumatic experience as a rape victim and the struggles as a female painter trying to find place in a male dominated profession, is transcribed into her artistic choices which have become a means to examine and question existing notions of femininity and gender paradigms. Such that, Artemisia is now considered a pioneer of feminist art with her unique artistic liberty in empowering women and the iconoclast stance towards the stereotypes of her time. Through the lens of Artemisia’s distinctive artistic choices, discussions surrounding female iconography can be enriched with insightful and contentious perspectives as her paintings provide a valuable opportunity to reframe the art historical discourse and dismantle the exclusionary biases and practices that shaped the art world for centuries in the portrayal of women.

Endnotes

1. The image of the painting is used within the permission and authorization of Courtesy Ministry of Culture (Su concessione del Ministero della cultura), Uffizi Gallery. <https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/judith-beheading-holofernes#gallery>
2. The image of the painting which is part of Palatine Gallery Collection in Pitti Palace is used within the permission and authorization of Courtesy Ministry of Culture (Su concessione del Ministero della cultura), Uffizi Gallery. <https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/artemisia-saint-mary-magdalene#gallery>
3. The account for the elements for an allegory of painting is paraphrased from Virginia L. Conn's article "The Personal is the Political: Artemisia Gentileschi's Revolutionary Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting" (2009: 25).

Research and Publication Ethics Statement: This is a research article, containing original data, and it has not been previously published or submitted to any other outlet for publication. The author followed ethical principles and rules during the research process. In the study, informed consent was obtained from the volunteer participants and the privacy of the participants was protected.

Araştırma ve yayın etiği beyanı: Bu makale tamamıyla özgün bir araştırma olarak planlanmış, yürütülmüş ve sonuçları ile raporlaştırıldıktan sonra ilgili dergiye gönderilmiştir. Araştırma herhangi bir sempozyum, kongre vb. sunulmamış ya da başka bir dergiye değerlendirilmek üzere gönderilmemiştir.

Contribution rates of authors to the article: The first author in this article contributed to the 100% level of preparation of the study, data collection, and interpretation of the results and writing of the article.

Yazarların makaleye katkı oranları: Bu makaledeki birinci yazar % 100 düzeyinde çalışmanın hazırlanması, veri toplanması, sonuçların yorumlanması ve makalenin yazılması aşamalarına katkı sağlamıştır.

Ethics committee approval: The present study does not require any ethics committee approval.

Etik komite onayı: Çalışmada etik kurul iznine gerek yoktur.

Financial support: The study received no financial support from any institution or project. Finansal destek: Çalışmada finansal destek alınmamıştır.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Çıkar çatışması: Çalışmada potansiyel çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.

References

- Auvray, H. (2020). Judith Slaying Holofernes: Artemisia Gentileschi's feminist expression of revenge violence? Paper presented at UBC Undergraduate Art History Symposium, Vancouver.
- Benedetti, L. (1999). Reconstructing Artemisia: Twentieth-century images of a woman artist. *Comparative Literature*, 51(1), 42–61. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1771455>
- Christiansen K. Mann J. W. Gentileschi O. Gentileschi A. Museo di Palazzo Venezia (Rome Italy) Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York N.Y.) & St Louis Art Museum. (2001). *Orazio and artemisia gentileschi*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Yale University Press.
- Cohen, E. S. (2000). The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History. *The Sixteenth Century Journal*. 31(1), 47-75. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2671289>

- Conn, V. L. (2009) The Personal is the Political: Artemisia Gentileschi's revolutionary self-portrait as the allegory of painting, *Kaleidoscope*, 8(6), 23-29.
- Garrard, M. D. (2020). *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism in Early Modern Europe*. Reaction Books.
- Garrard, M. D. (1980). Artemisia Gentileschi's self-portrait as the allegory of painting. *The Art Bulletin*, 62(1), 97-112. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3049963>
- Lanone, C. (2006). Pain, paint and popular fiction: *The Passion of Artemisia* by Susan Vreeland, *Études britanniques contemporaines*. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/12343>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.12343>
- Locker, J. M. (2015). *Artemisia Gentileschi: The language of painting*. Yale University Press.
- Panofsky, E. (1939). *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic themes in the art of renaissance*. Oxford University Press.
- Pollock, G. (2005). Feminist dilemmas with the art/life problem (In Mieke Bal, Ed.) *The Artemisia Files: Artemisia Gentileschi for Feminists and Other Thinking People*, (pp. 169-206). University of Chicago Press.
- Russell P., Gentileschi A. (2017). *Delphi complete works of Artemisia Gentileschi (Illustrated)*. Delphi Classics.
- Russo, S. (2022). "I am Artemisia": Art and Trauma in Joy McCullough's Blood Water Paint: [Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1656); visual artist]. (In J. Fitzmaurice, N. J. Miller, & S. J. Steen, Eds.) *Authorizing Early Modern European Women: From Biography to Biofiction* (pp. 235–248). Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv24650fw.22>
- Vreeland, S. (2002). *The Passion of Artemisia*. Viking.
- Wagner, P. (1996). *Icons - Texts - Iconotexts: Essays on Ekphrasis and intermediality*. De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110882599>



Bu eser Creative Commons Atıf 4.0 Uluslararası Lisansı ile lisanslanmıştır.

(This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License).