

July, 2011 OOM – Kay Miller

“The Lute Player,” Artemisia Gentileschi, 1615-17, #L2002.321 – G341



Questions:

1. How does the artist portray this woman? Let's analyze this portrait –
 - Start with the musician's hands and arms [realistic; correct hand positions' jointed dimpled hands and powerful arms – both iconic for Artemisia].
 - Then, her dress [large field of costly aquamarine and gold, Florentine dress used to date composition]. Then her instrument [realistic, details resemble other Artemisia works].
 - Next, her face and expression [gorgeous skin, direct gaze, wary, seductive, mournful?].
 - Impact of light and dark [*chiaroscuro*, ala Caravaggio].
 - Use of diagonals [lute and body positions suggest motion].
 - Finally, her body position and low-cut bodice. Taken together, what is the effect of these attributes?
2. The woman is playing an instrument called the lute. The subject of young, beautiful women playing musical instruments - associated with lust and sexuality – was popular in the 17th c. What indications of do you see that that might have been the intent in this work?

3. This painting has been described as a self-portrait of Artemisia Gentileschi. There has been great scholarly debate about whether Artemisia, who overcame rape, a notorious public trial and lingering gossip about her virtue, would have portrayed herself in such a seductive pose.
4. She is looking directly at the viewer. What effect does that have on you?

Key Points:

- 1) Italian Artemisia Gentileschi was the most important female artist of the 17th century and arguably the most influential woman painter in history [Art historian R. Ward Bissell]. She survived rape, ostracism and public scandal to become the first female in the history of Western art with unquestionable significance [Garrard]. Her paintings are filled with expressive subtlety, uncompromising naturalism and visual wit. As a woman she was initially barred from academies. So her artist-father, Orazio Gentileschi, taught her to paint. She reinterpreted popular themes concerning "female heroes" by creating physically commanding women who triumph through virtue, challenging 17th c. artistic conventions and greatly expanding the ways in which women are portrayed. She is the only known female follower of Caravaggio, adapting his dramatic *chiaroscuro*, depiction of unidealized models and bold interpretations to her own distinctive style. She was the first woman to live exclusively by her brush.
- 2) Her very name – Arte-mis-sia – means "Let art be for me."
- 3) Despite Artemisia's almost 40 years of virtually uninterrupted professional activity as a painter, Bissell in his 1999 catalogue raisonne attributes just 53 paintings to her. "*The Lute Player*," purchased at auction in 1998, is among a handful of Artemisia works to come to light in recent years; it takes the total known Artemisia works to 54. Scholar Mary D. Garrard, who wrote the monumental 1989 monograph "Artemisia Gentileschi," responded [in a recent series of July, 2011 emails]:

"As for why this and other AG paintings have remained unknown for so long, we are still in the early stages of recovering her oeuvre. Many works mentioned in documents have not yet been traced, and though some progress is being made, as in the case of the Artimino "Luteplayer," [at the MIA] many recent attributions of works to AG are not convincing to me. But there must be authentic works still to be

discovered, and I look forward to seeing more credible attributions come along."

- 4) Artemisia was a celebrity whose patrons including the Medici court, as well as the kings of France, England and Spain. To become successful, she had to work against the "old boys club" of her day and the strictures women endured at a time that respectable women were either wives or nuns. She broke the rules and succeeded brilliantly. On at least one occasion, she was paid three times more than her male counterpart for work on Casa Buonarroti *galleria* in Florence, by her patron Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger. ["Artemisia Gentileschi," Mary D. Garrard, p.44] In his 1628 literary tribute to her, Venetian Antonio Colluraffi called her a greater painter than Apelles, greater than Zuxis and "rival of the sun." ["Life on the Edge," Cropper," Mann, p. 268]
- 5) Artemisia wasn't the only female artist in this era, but most of the others were pigeonholed into portraits, still life and devotional paintings, while her paintings included monumental historical, religious and mythical subjects. In depicting heroines, she created what might be called an androgynous ideal with characters that are unmistakably female, yet display 'masculine' vigor and heroic resolve. Because she was competing with top-flight male artists, her paintings were also consistently different than those of female contemporaries. Among pre-modern women artists she provided the most consistently original interpretations of traditional themes.[Garrard, pp. 5-7]
- 6) Despite all this, Artemisia "suffered scholarly neglect that was almost unthinkable for an artist of her caliber" [Garrard, p.3]. The first serious scholarship on her began with a ground-breaking 1916 article by Italian critic Roberto Longhi, who described Artemisia as "the only woman in Italy who ever knew about painting, coloring, doughing and other fundamentals." The first exhibition dedicated to her work was in 1991 at the Casa Buonarotti in Florence. Since then, art historians have worked passionately, even obsessively to identify her *oeuvre*, supplementing what they know about her from the 28 letters she wrote, as well as noble patron's inventory lists. Archival research on the Gentileschi family has produced a history rich in court orders and libels, as well as a hefty transcript from the 1612 rape trial. These records have helped scholars reconstruct her life, personality and artistic practices, and to identify her works that have been lost or attributed to other painters.
- 7) Artemisia has become a figure of intense debate among scholars and immense speculation not only about which works she painted but about her

motivation behind them. Since the 1970s, she has been a centerpiece in books on women artists and a *cause célèbre* for feminists. Frequent connections have been made between her life and the violence of her work. Like her heroines in "*Susanna and the Elders*" (1610), "*Judith Slays Holofernes*" (1620), and "*Lucretia*" (1621) [pictured below], Artemisia was raped. She was just 17 when Agostino Tassi, an artist-friend of her father whom Orazio had hired to teach her perspective, broke into the upstairs room where she was painting and raped her. She tried to save herself by stabbing him with a knife. Garrard suggests that in her more violent paintings, Artemisia worked out rage at Tassi and the trial, during which she was cast as a woman of easy virtue and tortured to shake her testimony.

Historian Elizabeth Cohen sees it differently. Comparing Artemisia's treatment at trial with similar cases in 17th c. Italy, Cohen writes that rape in early modern Italy was not considered gender oppression or even an attack on the woman. Rather, the rape was considered an assault on her father's honor, bringing shame to his entire family. The trial, Cohen said, was really about Tassi's failure to marry Artemisia. [Cropper, p. 264].

Bissell writes that such works were probably commissioned and their subjects determined by the patron. He suggests that Artemisia was simply exploiting 17th c. patron's taste for the dramatic and violent. [Bissell, p. 8]

- 8) Two themes predominate in Artemisia's letters to patrons: 1) awareness of being a woman at a specific time in her life and career. And 2) her stated humility, paired simultaneously with pride at her achievements: "You feel sorry for me because a woman's name raises doubts until her work is seen," she wrote to her last major patron, Don Antonio Ruffo, chafing at his haggling over the price of a work. "If I were a man, I can't imagine it would have turned out this way." And, "I will not bore you any longer with female chatter. The works will speak for themselves." [Garrard; also Cropper, p. 271]
- 9) Artemisia was by all accounts feisty and self-assertive. She was also shrewd at business. Even in financial difficulty, she strongly resisted negotiating the price of her paintings. She did not quote prices before paintings were completed. She refused to relinquish drawings, since other artists had stolen her conceptions to obtain the commissions she sought. She complained about the expense of models and took pride in varying her works, even on repetitive themes. She aggressively adapted her style to meet contemporary trends, local tastes and patron's desires "with a dazzling virtuosity equaled by few male contemporaries." [Garrard, p.6; also "Reclaiming Female Agency," Garrard, p. 75]

- 10) She so often used fields of lush, shimmering gold that the color came to be called "Artemisi gold."
- 11) Among attempts to defame Artemisia during the trial were accusations that she had seen and drawn from male models at a time that respectable women remained out of the sight of unrelated men, even in their own homes and that she taught young male students to paint. "There is ample evidence that by 1612 Artemisia had been painting for several years in a household where models came and went, that she painted while her father was not present, and that she was able to teach youths to paint in her father's absence, and in a way that was based on the study of the model. She probably used a live model – possibly herself for "*Susanna*."

Her iconic version shows the heroine's anguish, not the villains' anticipated pleasure – so typical in male renditions. Cropper argues that "*Susanna*" was "from the very beginning scandalous": It was a large painting organized around a female nude gazed upon by men and painted by a nubile 17-year-old female. "It was on this knife-edge between the already scandalous and the accomplished and skilled painter that Artemisia's fame balanced throughout her life." [Cropper, p. 274-5]

- 12) Her dramatic art and life also have inspired a number of historical novels, including "The Passion of Artemisia," by Susan Vreeland (2002) and "Artemisia: A Novel," by Alexandra Lapierre; an off-Broadway play, "Lapis Blue Blood Red," and the controversial 1997 French film, "Artemisia. All take liberties with the facts of her life. Praised as a genius, but decried for usurping an artistic providence thought to be exclusively male, she was (according to the inscription on Jerome David's engraving), "A miracle in painting, more easily envied than imitated."



"Artemisia," by Jérôme David

Historical Background:

For a century, Florence had been the center of the Renaissance. By 1600, a new aesthetic was taking hold in Rome: the drama of Caravaggio in what would be termed the Baroque. Caravaggio painted in a direct, unidealized fashion from live models – including common street people and prostitutes.

The new baroque style stressed naturalism/verisimilitude – “Telling the truth about what you see.” It employed contrasts of light and dark (*chiaroscuro*) to heighten drama and depict rich, textured surfaces. By placing figures near the picture plane, Baroque painting drew viewers in, inviting them to participate in the mysteries of the infinite and eternal. It brought movement and drama through asymmetrical composition, diagonals and recession. It evoked emotionalism and preoccupation with passions of the soul. [Debbi Hegstrom, class notes] The Counter-Reformation encouraged the dramatic expression of religious experience through a greater naturalism in painting and a more direct appeal to the emotions through music and action in drama. [Cropper, Met catalog, p. 273]

By the period that Artemisia was probably serving as an apprentice to her father (1605-1610), Rome was a newly transformed and vital city. Pope Sixtus V's master plan created large architectural spaces in the artists' quarter where the Gentileschis lived. New churches were springing up all over Rome in the wake of the Counter-Reformation, leading to an explosion of painted decorations in palaces and churches, on canvas and in fresco. [Garrard, pp. 14-15]

Women were not allowed normal paths to artistic careers: academy training, work under more than one established master, travel, memberships in guilds or study of nude models. So Artemisia's apprenticeship to her father would have been her only route to the profession. Respectable women were not seen outside the home, except to attend mass. Artemisia, however, profited from exposure to other artists, setting out on at least one occasion by carriage to visit the three main churches in Rome, where large papal projects were underway, and Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, completed 20 years before. [Garrard, pp. 16-18]

Artemisia Gentileschi (jen-tee-LES-kee) bio: (1593-1652/3)

Artemisia was born in Rome on July 8, 1593, the only daughter of Orazio and Prudentia Monotone Gentileschi. She was active in Florence, Naples, Venice and London. Like most women artists of this era, she was the daughter of an artist, the painter Orazio Gentileschi who taught her at home. He was one of the first and most important of Caravaggio's followers.

Her mother died in childbirth when Artemisia was 12.

Although Orazio later became quite successful, in Rome he was too poor to keep a servant. ["Artemisia in Her Father's House," Cavazzini, p. 284] As a girl in a non-aristocratic household, Artemisia is unlikely to have had extensive formal education. At age 19 she declared at the rape trial that she could barely read and could not write. [Garrard, p. 17] She gained these skills as an adult, penning letters to patrons and friends like Galileo in an elegant hand.

Orazio had repeatedly tried to convince her to become a nun. But she was artistically precocious, painting her iconic "*Susanna and the Elders*" [image below] in 1610 when she was just 17. Orazio kept Artemisia confined to his house, according to Roman custom of the time. She had almost no freedom of movement.

But Orazio's house also functioned as his studio with the constant traffic of models, colleagues and patrons. Proximity to men fueled rumors that marred Artemisia's reputation. "Orazio had clearly used Artemisia as a model, inducing rumors that he had her pose in the nude. Beautiful and provocative, with her unkempt hair and low-cut dresses, she stirred the imagination of many men..." Neither Orazio nor Artemisia had any compunction about superimposing her features on a naturalistic and inviting nude body prominently displayed. [Cavazzi, p. 286]

She may have personally known Caravaggio, who sometimes shared studio props with her father and may also have been his drinking buddy ["Artemisia and Orazio Gentileschi," Mann, Met catalog, p. 255]. Bissell has called Artemisia one of the two most important Caravaggisti to reach maturity between 1610 and 1620.

Artemisia's biography has often been read in her paintings. One event in her "personal history provides a parallel between art and life that is too extraordinary to be passed over," Garrard writes ["Feminism and Art History," p. 163]. On May 6, 1611, she was raped by Agostino Tassi, whom her father had hired to teach Artemisia perspective. Tassi, a disreputable character but a great artist employed by popes and nobility, had been imprisoned earlier for incest with his sister-in-law and was charged with arranging the murder of his wife.

Orazio brought suit after Tassi refused to marry Artemisia and apparently carted off a large "Judith" painting, possibly by Artemisia. Orazio described the rape as an ugly act that brought grave and enormous damage to himself. (Tellingly, Orazio did not bring suit until after he and Tassi completed a joint project.)

In 17th c. Italy, as in biblical times, a raped woman was damaged goods, spoiled for marriage to anyone but her violator. The only honorable course for

Artemisia in Rome at the time was for her to marry her attacker. ["Feminism and Art History" Garrard, p. 163].

In echoes of modern-day rape trials, it was really the 19-year-old Artemisia, who was put on trial. She testified that she was alone and painting when Tassi assaulted her, saying "Not so much painting, not so much painting." She resisted the rape, wounding him with a knife. During the trial she was examined by midwives to determine if she had been "deflowered" recently or long before. She voluntarily submitted to torture with *sibille*, metal rings or thumbscrews, tightened around her fingers, to prove the truth of her testimony. Artemisia's statements never wavered.

During the thumbscrew torture, Artemisia cried out at Tassi, "This is the ring you give me, and these the promises." Implicit in her admission that she thought of herself as Tassi's wife following the rape is the probability that she continued to have sex with him. Tassi's defense was that someone else deflowered her and he convinced others to testify falsely against her. ["Feminism and Art History," p. 163] [See Garrard's 1989 monograph, "Artemisia Gentileschi" for the trial transcript.]

Numerous attempts were made during the trial to defame Artemisia, all of which Bissell calls Tassi's "conspiracy of slander," including:

- Marco Antonio Coppinino testified that Artemisia a whore and that he had heard in various shops that she "was a beautiful woman, that her father did not want to marry, made her pose in the nude and liked for people to look at her."
- When Giovan Pietro Molli of Polermo went to Orazio's house to model, he saw Artemisia *there in the rooms where work was done*.
- Pietro Hernandez, a Spaniard, testified that he had seen Artemisia, his son's godmother, teaching a young man named Nicolo Bedino to paint.
- Bedino testified he had ground colors for Artemisia to use in her canvases while her father was away working.

Their testimony was refuted by Orazio. Artemisia's accusations against Tassi were corroborated by a former friend of his who recounted Tassi boasting about his sexual exploits at her expense.

After a very public, scandalous trial lasting seven months, Tassi was sentenced to eight months in prison. He may have subsequently have been acquitted though some scholars say that's a misreading of the record. Artemisia acquired a licentious reputation that has persisted to this day.

Garrard says that Artemisia's response to the rape is expressed in the dark and bloody "*Judith Decapitating Holofernes*" in the Uffizi [below], painted shortly

after her marriage and move to Florence. It depicts a key moment in the Apocryphal Book of Daniel in which Judith, a Jewish widow, saves her city of Bethulia from attacking Assyrians by seducing, then murdering their commander, Holofernes.

In Artemisia's hand, Judith's decapitation of Holofernes appears a vengeful pictorial equivalent for the punishment of Tassi. Garrard further suggests that Artemisia's "*Susanna*" is was an allusion to sexual harassment and the threat of rape which she probably experienced in 1611 from Tassi, who had been trying to seduce her, asserting she'd already been deflowered by a servant. Her treatment of "*Susanna*" was unorthodox and provides a perfect vehicle for the expression of the sexual victim's point of view. ["Feminism and Art History," p. 165].

Artemisia painted at least six versions of "*Judith and Holofernes*," using Caravaggistic naturalistic rendering, strong contrasts of light and shadow and use of contemporary models. In "*Judith with her Maidservant*," Artemesia emphasizes the psychological complicity of the two figures. All portray powerful women in works of ferocious energy and sustained violence. [Garrard]

Scholars disagree about the significance of the rape in her work. Wealthy patrons with a taste for violence and eroticism may have had as much to do with her approach as painful memories. Less than a quarter of her known paintings feature vengeful women. [Mann, Met catalog, p. 249]

Seeking a safe haven for Artemisia, Orazio wrote from Rome in 1612 to the Dowager Grand Duchess Cristina in Florence, that Artemisia "has in three years become so skilled that I can venture to say that today she has no peer; indeed, she has produced works which demonstrate a level of understanding that perhaps even the principal masters of the profession have not attained."

After failing to get Artemisia to join a convent, Orazio arranged a marriage to salvage her honor and give her a social environment in which to function. [Cropper, p. 267]. On Nov. 29, 1612, two days after Tassi's court condemnation, Artemisia was wed to Florentine artist Pietro Antonio de Vincenzo Stiattesi, a lesser artist. In Florence, her status as an independent artist really began.

She was introduced into Florentine circles by court poet and playwright Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger [nephew of the great Michelangelo], was friends with the leading Florentine painter Cristofano Allori and was supported by Cosimo II, a Medici and Duke of Florence. She also was friends with Galileo. This resulted in a surprisingly smooth acceptance by the male-dominated Florentine artistic establishment.

Her Florentine period (1614- 1620) – during which **"The Lute Player"** presumably was painted - was active and productive. In 1616, Artemisia became the first woman to be admitted to the exclusively male Accademia del Disegno, a remarkable honor for a woman in this era. The academy was founded in 1563 by Vasari and Cosimo I as a vehicle for increasing the social status of artists, elevating them from the medieval guild system. "Only on a high social level, with the support of a princely patron like the Grand Duke (Cosimo II), could a female artist like Artemisia 'unique in this profession,' as Orazio had described her, have taken a seat in the Accademia del Disegno." [Garrard, pp. 34-35]

Around 1618 she had a daughter, Prudentia, then a second daughter sometime after 1624. By the time she left Florence in 1620 or 1621, still in her late 20s, she had painted at least seven works for the Grand Duke Cosimo II de' Medici. But she wrote to him of "troubles at home and with my family," including the loss of three children. Her husband's apparent infidelity and extravagant spending also had taken their toll. ["I Have Made Up My Mind to Take a Short Trip to Rome," Richard E. Spear, Met catalog, p. 335-6]

During the 1620s, Artemisia worked in different Italian cities, including Genoa and Rome, to which she moved with her husband and daughter, Prudentia. One night in 1622, after finding a group of Spaniards on his doorstep serenading his wife, Pierantonio allegedly slashed one of them in the face. He later walked out on Artemisia and Prudentia, leaving Artemisia a single mother [Met catalog chronology p. XVII].

Roman tastes had changes and Artemisia had trouble securing commissions. She moved to Venice, where she received a commission from Philip IV of Spain. Two years later, fleeing the plague of 1630 (which wiped out a third of Venice), she moved to Naples, then under Spanish rule. There, she painted the first altarpiece of her career, an honor that had previously eluded her.

For a canvas on the life of John the Baptist for the hermitage of Saint John at the Buen Retiro in Madrid, she adopted a humble, natural style. "Her capacity to do this reflects the high level of Artemisia's critical sophistication at the moment of her great influence on Neapolitan painting. A commission to a woman to paint an altarpiece was not unheard of – the Bolognese Lavinia Fonta (1552-1614) had painted several. But it was still highly unusual and in Naples in the mid-1630s Artemisia was commissioned to paint no fewer than three for the cathedral at Pozzuoli." [Cropper, p. 269]

Naples was then the largest city in Europe, after Paris. There, Artemisia manipulated her growing fame through a network of patronage and protection of the nobility. She maintained the patronage through her own letters and her brothers, who were sent throughout Europe in her service. [Cropper, p.269]

She wanted to return to Florence and, in a "game of favors," sent the Duke Francesco I d'Este unsolicited paintings, telling him she would rather work for him than for the English crown. She even asked her friend Galileo Galilei (then in exile) to intervene on her behalf. [Cropper, p. 269] The duke did not respond.

In 1638 or 1639, after failing to secure new patronage in Florence, she joined her father – whom she had not seen for about 17 years – in England, where he was in the service of Charles I. Orazio died in Feb. 1639. There is no secure record of Artemisia between 1639 and 1642. She remained in London for two more years, until assurances of work from Don Antonio Ruffo brought her back to Naples around 1641. There, she was again enjoying fame, often for paintings of virtuous and heroic women [Cropper, p. 270-1]

Baptismal record show she had at least four children, including daughters Prudentia and Lisabella, son, Cristofano and a second son.

She died in 1652 or 1653 from unknown causes.

"The Lute Player" (1615-17):

- Portrait of a serenely beautiful musician in elegant Florentine dress. She has a wide, clear gaze and soft, curly hair. Her fingers are long, fully rounded, with the dimpled knuckles characteristic of Artemisia's characters. She sits up against the picture plane, looking directly at the viewer as she plays the lute. The decorative motif on the lute face and the metallic edging of the sash recall ornamental flourishes found in Artemisia's Rome "*Cleopatra*." The lavish materials of her head scarf and sash, with the sumptuous detailing of the sleeves of the blue dress, further support a Florentine origin. ["Artemisia Gentileschi's Florentine Inspiration," Roberto Contini, Met catalog, p. 322]
- This is a **newly discovered** work, unknown in modern times until it appeared at the Sotheby's London sale of July 1998. It is on loan to the museum from the Curtis Galleries, which purchased it and soon after loaned it to the MIA. It was among 35 of Artemisia's works in the 2002 Met exhibit: "Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi: Father and Daughter Painters in Baroque Italy." [There is an excellent catalog, available in the MIA library.]
- Was presumably painted during her time in Florence and is believed to have been owned by the Medici family. It may have been a commission from the Grand Duke Cosimo II de' Medici himself. [Contini, p. 322]

- **The subject** of young women or men playing musical instruments was popular among artists in Rome during the second and third decades of the 17th c. Caravaggist artists from Northern Europe were especially fond of this theme. Young female musicians were portrayed by such painters as Gerrit van Honthorst and Dirck van Baburne, often with overt erotic connotations. Musical instruments were associated with lust and sexuality. The lutenist's full breasts and the formal similarity with van Honthorst's "Smiling Girl, A Courtesan Holding an Obscene Image," raise the question of whether Artemisia intended to make such an association. It is likely that she is presenting herself in costume, playing a role. [Contini, p. 324]
- **Presumed to be a self-portrait.** This identification was based on the strength of its presumed identity with the listing of a self-portrait of Artemisia playing a lute, mentioned in a Villa Medici at Artimino inventory of 1638. Its presumed Medici patronage suggests that it was commissioned once Artemisia had established herself in the Florentine art world. While there is clearly an Artemisia "type" in her early paintings, she employs a range of physical features, and not all of them appear to be drawn from the same model. [Contini, p. 322]
- Contini finds a likeness in Jerome David's engraving of Artemisia's face:



- **Stylistic similarities** with other works Artemisia painted in Florence help identify it as a self-portrait. These include "The Allegory of Inclination," [below] painted for Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger in 1616. This is

similar to "*The Lute Player*" in the type of eye, the handling of the hair and the configuration of the hands. The facial type links it a well to the "*The Lute Player*." [Contini, p. 322]



"The Allegory of Inclination," Artemisia Gentileschi, 1615-16 Casa buonarroti, Florence

From Email correspondence between Kay Miller and Prof. Mary D. Garrard, comparing the two Artemisia pieces that follow regarding dating "The Lute Player." [Images are immediately below.]

- Kay: To my eye, there also appear to be stylistic similarities between "*The Lute Player*" in Minneapolis and her "*St. Catherine*," c. 1614-15, at the Uffizi. [Both pictured below.] Putting the two images side by side the musician appears to be a more artistically advanced version of the same woman come alive, with her gaze shifting toward the viewer in the latter. I see similarities in the **1/2 length body position**; the **drape** of the gown and white undergarment; the **shape** of the eye, ear, mouth and lip; the **angle** of her neck; the full **hair**, hairline and how the hair falls; even the **shadowing** of the distant eye. In "*The Lute Player*," the hands seem more active, articulate and believable in their ability to play the instrument. (The hands also seem more mannerist to me.) Also, the body is fuller and the skin tones more alive. The translucent fabric across the breast of "*St. Catherine*" seems replayed in the turban fabric of "*The Lute Player*."

- In her recent email to me, **Garrard responded:**

*"I agree with your perceptive comparison of the Luteplayer and the St. Catherine, especially the parallels you observe in drapery, physiognomy, and hair description. Artemisia's style development from Rome to Florence is, however, **not so simple a linear** trajectory. **Her ability to depict characters in movement who seem alive is visible already in the Susanna and the Naples Judith.** In contrast to these works, the Spada Luteplayer and Uffizi St. Catherine seem stiff and archaic, indeed almost zombie-like. I have argued tentatively that such images of female characters **might betray a selective response to her personal trauma**, but I wouldn't push such an argument too far. Even so, the difference between the Minneapolis Luteplayer and the Spada Luteplayer is telling -- it's not so much a difference of technical skill in bringing a figure to life, but of a **new intention to establish a relationship between the woman and the viewer.**" [emphasis mine]*



"The Lute Player," c. 1615-17, Minneapolis



"St. Catherine of Alexandria," 1614-15, Artemisia Gentileschi, Uffizi, Florence

Is it a self-portrait?

- Cavazzini writes that Artemisia "in her claustrophobic environment, became obsessed with her own features and repeated them time and again in her paintings, a mirror making up for so many constraints."
- Garrard has her doubts. ["Reclaiming Female Agency," p. 63]. She calls it a gender stereotype to suggest the Artemisia, locked in a claustrophobic Roman household became obsessed with her own features and painted them repeatedly.
- She also questions whether Artemisia would have presented herself in the "eroticized *decolletage* of the "The Lute Player": "Would the Artemisia who escaped from gossip-ridden Rome to the relative dignity of marriage and court status in Florence risk restigmatization as a seductive woman by presenting herself in this guise?" ["Reclaiming Female Agency," Garrard, pp. 66-67].
- The wall label from the Metropolitan Museum's installation of the "Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi" exhibition in 2002, stated that "*The Lute Player*" painting's erotic overtones were appropriate both to the traditional association of music and love. And also to Artemisia's reputation "not simply as a painter," but as a beautiful and seductive woman.
- "That Artemisia became famous for painting virtuous and heroic women and female nudes might seem at first more compromising for her fame, both during her lifetime and for posterity. It implies that she was prepared to specialize her production for the market, and it suggests, as Harris has put it, that she was prepared to depict 'what 20th century feminists have labeled 'woman as sex object' for a male audience.'" [Cropper, p. 271] Another scholar, George Hersey suggests that Artemisia succeeded because the collector would be titillated by the beautiful absent artist



"Portrait of Artemisia Gentileschi," artist unknown, c. 1614-1620



"La Pittura," Artemisia Gentileschi, c.1630
Royal Collection, Kensington Palace, London

Color/style:

From email correspondence with Garrard:

- Kay: There is a great deal of **ultramarine blue** in "*The Lute Player*" - perhaps even a comparable amount to that used in the Naples "*Judith*." Does that suggest that "*The Lute Player*" was a commissioned work? Do we know who commissioned it? Would she have gotten an advance to do it? Do we know how much she would have been paid for such a work and how that compared to other esteemed artists of the day? **Garrard's email response:**

"To a degree, the Minneapolis "Luteplayer" resembles other Florentine works in the richness of dress and ornament, yet it doesn't present a strong affinity for ornament per se as the Penitent Magdalen. That would point to possible differences in patronage. Though both paintings have Medici connections, we don't know how the Luteplayer got into Medici collections, and it could as well have been acquired post hoc as commissioned. One might also distinguish between official commissions from the Grandduke Cosimo II and private commissions from Florentine aristocrats in the court circle.

*"I know it was my own argument, but I would hesitate to make the amount of **ultramarine blue** in a painting a firm indicator of ducal patronage. There are some records of payments to Artemisia, especially from Don Antonio Ruffo toward the end of her life, as you can find in the Letters Appendix to my book. From the Florentine period, there are precise figures for all the pictures in the Casa Buonarroti, which don't appear in my book but I comment (p. 44) on the fact that **AG was paid more than many of the CB artists.**"*

- **Strong, jointed, firmly structured musician's hands.** Women's strong hands and arms are among the distinguishing characteristics - a "trademark" that Garrard suggests is a powerful tool even more than her own image to help art historians identify Artemisia's paintings, distinguishing them from male painters to whom they have been attributed. Her lute player's hands show mobility and agility that are relatively rare in images of female hands of this era, Garrard writes ["Reclaiming Female Agency," Garrard, p. 64]:

"In Artemisia's world, female figures hammer and paint, grab and hold, push and shove, with extraordinary ease. Their hands and arms are exceptionally strong, more than adequate for the job to be done," Garrard

writes. **Her women use their hands** to take on the world and confront adversity: These are not soft, white, smooth and fragile hands of women pictured in works by most male Renaissance and Baroque artists. Rather, Artemisia's fingers grasp objects, make strong fists, move in full rotary motion and break backward to show the strain of exertion - just as men's hands do. [Garrard, p. 65].

"When painting hands, Artemisia appears to think from inside her own body. It's not necessarily that she copies her own hands (though an artist always has this option), but when she draws a female hand, she seems to experience it kinesthetically, feeling its capacity to move," Garrard writes.

- **Compare** "The Lute Player's" hands with one painted of Artemisia's right hand by another artist:



"Right Hand of Artemisia Gentileschi Holding a Brush,"

Pierre Dumontier, 1625, British Museum

- **Reuse of a canvas.** X radiographs taken at the time of the Sotheby's sale show an inverted female head beneath the left sleeve, an indication that the picture was painted over. Records from her Florence years show debts Artemisia accumulated. During those years, Artemisia may have commonly reused canvases.
- Compare Artemisia's believable "*Lute Player*" with Manet's "*Spanish Singer*" (1860) – 245 years later. Manet's work was highly criticized for portraying an ordinary, poor Parisian imitating a Spaniard. The player was left-handed playing a guitar strung for a right-handed player. And his body

position was all wrong for comfortable playing. How realistic, by comparison is Artemisia's musician?



“Why is “The Lute Player” important?”

In an earlier email, Garrard said that the MIA was lucky to have it. But she answered this prime question in an email:

“Well, you've answered that from your own interest in it. It's simply a beautiful painting, which if by Artemisia gives us a new dimension to consider in her already complex art.”

- Mary D. Garrard



"Susanna and the Elders," Artemisia Gentileschi, 1610, Pommersfelden, Schloss Weissenstein.



"Judith Slaying Holofernes," Artemisia Gentileschi, 1620, Naples



"Lucretia," Artemisia Gentileschi, 1621, Genoa, Palazzo Cattaneo-Adorno



"Judith Beheading Holofernes," Artemisia Gentileschi, 1620, Uffizi, Florence

Email from Kay Miller to Mary D. Garrard (July 1, 2011):

Dear Prof. Garrard,

I have been reading your works intensively over the last several days and a few additional questions about "*The Lute Player*" which your writings have inspired. (Additionally, I have read Judith Mann's entry, as you recommended.) At the risk of imposing, I am hoping you will help me better understand this painting:

- To my untutored eye, there appear to be stylistic similarities between her "*St. Catherine*," c. 1614-15, Uffizi (noted in your 1989 book, which I own), and "*The Lute Player*," 1615-17, Minneapolis.

Putting the image of our painting side by side with the one in your book (stacked below), it appears that the musician is a more artistically advanced version of the same woman come alive, her gaze shifting toward the viewer in the latter. I see similarities in the **1/2 length body position**; the **drape** of the gown and white undergarment; the **shape** of the eye, ear, mouth and lip; the **angle** of her neck; the full **hair**, hairline and how the hair falls; even the **shadowing** of the distant eye. In "*The Lute Player*," the hands seem more active, articulate and believable in their ability to play the instrument. (The hands also seem more mannerist to me.) Also, the body is fuller and the skin tones more alive. The translucent fabric across the breast of "*St. Catherine*" seems replayed in the turban fabric of "*The Lute Player*."

- Does "*The Lute Player*" also reflect the stylistic connection between Artemisia's Roman and Florentine styles - as well as her developing skill in portraying hands and arms - and in having characters come alive?

- You had detailed in your 1989 book that the Pitti "*Judith*" displays Artemisia's response to Florentine taste by dressing Judith in elegant, richly ornamented garments. Does "*The Lute Player*" also reflect this change?

- There is a great deal of ultramarine blue in "*The Lute Player*" - perhaps even a comparable amount to that used in the Naples "*Judith*." Does that suggest that "*The Lute Player*" was a commissioned work? Do we know who commissioned it? Would she have gotten an advance to do it? Do we know how much she would have been paid for such a work and how that compared to other esteemed artists of the day?

- The full, shadowed arms and garments in "*The Lute Player*" and Naples "*Judith*" feel similar to me - with the volume of blue, gold details, white undergarments

- Do the attributed dates on "*The Lute Player*" (1615-17) and Naples "*Judith*" (1612-13) make sense? Does it feel to you that there is any connection between the two?

- You mentioned that the MIA is quite fortunate to have this painting. Would you say, briefly, what significance you attach to it? In what ways does it contribute to our understanding of Artemisia?

- Do we know why it was unknown for so long? How many paintings of hers do you believe still exist in private collections that the public has never seen?

Thank you, Prof. Garrard, for all the work you have done on this wonderful artist. You have inspired the serious study of her work by generations of students, feminists and art lovers. I am enormously grateful for your scholarship.

Warm regards,

Kay Miller

Email response from Mary D. Garrard emails, July 4, 2011:

I agree with your perceptive comparison of the *Luteplayer* and the *St. Catherine*, especially the parallels you observe in drapery, physiognomy, and hair description. Artemisia's style development from Rome to Florence is, however, not so simple a linear trajectory. Her ability to depict characters in movement who seem alive is visible already in the *Susanna* and the Naples *Judith*. In contrast to these works, the Spada *Luteplayer* and Uffizi *St. Catherine* seem stiff and archaic, indeed almost zombie-like. I have argued tentatively that such images of female characters might betray a selective response to her personal trauma, but I wouldn't push such an argument too far. Even so, the difference between the Minneapolis *Luteplayer* and the Spada *Luteplayer* is telling -- it's not so much a difference of technical skill in bringing a figure to life, but of a new intention to establish a relationship between the woman and the viewer.

To a degree, the Minneapolis *Luteplayer* resembles other Florentine works in the richness of dress and ornament, yet it doesn't present a strong affinity for ornament per se as the *Penitent Magdalen*. That would point to possible differences in patronage. Though both paintings have Medici connections, we don't know how the *Luteplayer* got into Medici collections, and it could as well have been acquired post hoc as commissioned. One might also distinguish between official commissions from the Grandduke Cosimo II and private commissions from Florentine aristocrats in the court circle. I know it was my own argument, but I would hesitate to make the amount of ultramarine blue in a painting a firm indicator of ducal patronage. There are some records of payments to Artemisia, especially from Don Antonio Ruffo toward the end of her life, as you can find in the Letters Appendix to my book. From the Florentine period, there are precise figures for all the pictures in the Casa Buonarroti, which don't appear in my book but I comment (p. 44) on the fact that AG was paid more than many of the CB artists. I imagine the figures came from Procacci -- see bibl and notes to this section -- but don't recall them precisely now.

For more on the economics of painting commissions in 17c Italy, see Richard Spear and Philip Sohm, eds., *Painting for Profit: The Economic Lives of 17th-Century Italian Painters*, 2010; and Patrizia Cavazzini, *Painting as Business in Early 17th-Century Rome*, 2009.

As for why this and other AG paintings have remained unknown for so long, we are still in the early stages of recovering her oeuvre. Many works mentioned in documents have not yet been traced, and though some progress is being made, as in the case of the Artimino *Luteplayer*, many recent attributions of works to AG are not convincing to me. But there must be authentic works still to be discovered, and I look forward to seeing more credible attributions come along.

Why is the *Luteplayer* important? Well, you've answered that from your own interest in it! It's simply a beautiful painting, which if by Artemisia gives us a new dimension to consider in her already complex art. I encourage you to continue with your questions and reasoning -- who knows where that may lead?

Resources:

"Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art," Mary D. Garrard, Princeton University Press, 1989. Garrard's monumental 1989 monograph on Artemisia brought together for the first time all the known documents relating to the artist. It includes a transcript of the rape trial.

"Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art," R. Ward Bissell, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999. [definitive critical reading and catalogue raisonne. At the time Bissell wrote this massive work, he identified 53 autographed paintings he felt were correctly attributed to her. "The Lute Player" was unknown to him. It would have constituted the 54th.]

"Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi," Keith Christiansen & Judith W. Mann, *Father and Daughter Painters in Baroque Italy*," catalog from Met's 2002 exhibit of 51 paintings by Orazio and 35 by Artemisia. Includes quoted essays: "Life on the Edge," by Elizabeth Cropper; "Artemisia in Her Father's House," by Judith W. Mann; "Artemisia and Orazio Gentileschi," by Judith W. Mann; "Artemisia Gentileschi's Florentine Inspiration," by Roberto Contini (this includes a description of the MIA loan, here called "Self-Portrait as a Lute Player"); and "I Have Made Up My Mind to Take a Short Trip to Rome," Richard E. Spear, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001.

"Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism," Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, University of California Press, 2005. [Available at the MCAD library.]

"Women, Art and Society," Whitney Chadwick, Thames & Hudson World of Art, 2002.

"Becoming Artemisia: Afterthoughts on the Gentileschi Exhibition," Keith Christiansen, *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, Vol. 39 (2004), pp. 10, 101-126.

"Esther Before Ahasuerus," Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Vol. 29, No 4, Dec. 1970.

"Feminism and Art History," Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, Harper & Row, 1982.

"Artemisia's Moment," Mary O'Neill, *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 2002.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artemisia_Gentileschi

"The Voices of Women Artists," Wendy Slatkin, University of Redlands, Prentice Hall, 1993.