Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*

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Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Saint Catherine of Alexandria* (fig. 1) is the first work by the artist, widely regarded as the most celebrated female painter of 17th-century Italy, to enter a public collection in Sweden. Prior to its re-emergence on the New York art market in 1995, the painting was completely unknown, having lain hidden in a private collection in the United States for at least two generations.¹ First published by Ward Bissell in his 1999 monograph of Artemisia as a work tentatively attributed to the artist’s Neapolitan follower Paolo Finoglia (1590–1645), the painting has subsequently won general acceptance as an autograph work.² After its purchase by the Nationalmuseum, while it was being made ready for public display, a campaign of technical investigation was undertaken as a contribution to the ongoing effort to better understand the artist’s working practice.³

Born in Rome in 1593 as the daughter of the Tuscan painter Orazio Gentileschi (1563–1639), an important follower of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571/2–1610), Artemisia trained in her father’s workshop and established a reputation that allowed her a life of independence rare for a woman of her day. Under Orazio’s tutelage, she learned to apply the methods pioneered by Caravaggio, painting directly from the model and introducing dramatic contrasts of light and dark, and combining a refined and elegant personal manner with Caravaggio’s powerful sense of realism. In the course of her long career

Fig. 1 Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1654), *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, c. 1627–30(?). Oil on canvas, 90 × 75.4 cm. Purchased with funds from a donor who wishes to remain anonymous. Nationalmuseum, NM 7538.
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she moved between Rome, Florence, Venice, London and finally Naples, where she spent most of the last twenty years of her life. Over a career spanning more than forty years, while she continued to paint her hallmark representations of powerful women, her style changed, becoming more polished and idealised and further from her Caravaggesque beginnings.

The Nationalmuseum’s painting shows a young woman in three-quarter length standing before a building in ruins. Turned slightly to the left while gazing steadily at a point outside the frame in the distant landscape on the right, she projects psychological intensity even though she is at rest. She wears a fashionable red silk gown over a puff-sleeved white chemise, exquisite pearl-drop earrings, and a cloth headband wound loosely around her auburn locks. A palm frond lies on a flat stone in the foreground, indicating that she is a martyr saint. Her hands rest on top of a large tome held upright, an emblem of erudition associated with Saint Catherine of Alexandria, the Christian saint martyred in the early fourth century AD, when portrayed as a patron of education and learning. Her legend, as recounted by Jacopo de Voragine in the popular Golden Legend, tells how Catherine defended the Christian faith before fifty pagan philosophers and was subsequently sentenced to death by the Emperor Maxentius.4 Bound to two sets of revolving wheels studded with iron spikes and nails, Catherine was rescued from the instrument of her torture through divine intervention, but was later beheaded. Her noble birth – and alleged royal status, as the daughter of King Costus of Alexandria – led to her frequent portrayal in sumptuous clothing and jewellery. Devotional images of Saint Catherine and other early Christian martyrs were extremely popular among early-17th-century patrons in Counter-Reformation Italy. Artemisia turned to the subject on more than one occasion, particularly in Florence in the mid 1610s, where a predilection for paintings of this subject may have been connected to the presence in the city of Caterina de’ Medici, the sister of Grand Duke Cosimo II:

Fig. 2 Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1654), Saint Catherine of Alexandria, c. 1615–17. Oil on canvas, 78 × 61.5 cm. Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence.

Fig. 3 Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1654), Self Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria, c. 1615–17. Oil on canvas, 71.4 × 69 cm. National Gallery, London, NG6671.
earlier, more traditional devotional images, Artemisia portrays a half-length figure of the saint with the usual attributes – halo, crown, spiked wheel – that allow us to easily identify her as Catherine. In the Nationalmuseum’s painting, on the other hand, these conventional attributes are absent, while the ruin behind the saint is probably a subtle allusion to her name, the meaning of which is explicated in the Golden Legend: “Catherine comes from Catha, which means total, and ruina, ruin; hence ‘total ruin.’ The devil’s building was totally demolished in Saint Catherine...” But the emphasis here is on the saint’s book, in a configuration which, while not unprecedented in renderings of the Egyptian saint, is more resonant with contemporary images of classical figures such as the sibyls (fig. 4). The earliest representations of Catherine holding a book, a chaste model of wisdom and authority, appear in early 14th-century Italian art produced for the religious communities of the Benedictines and Dominicans. Catherine’s book came to signify a particular brand of wisdom, based on the canonical legend of her dispute with the fifty philosophers summoned by Maxentius to debate with her. Divinely inspired, and using words as weapons, the eloquent Catherine successfully defended Christianity. Later images of reading virgin martyrs, found in 15th- and 16th-century paintings and books of hours (fig. 5), helped promote the idea of these holy women as pious intellectuals, suitable role models for the aristocratic...
modelled flesh tones, and the play of light and shadow on the face and neck – surely a chiaroscuro effect learned from her father. Other traits shared in most of these works include the handling of the highlights in the soft, wavy hair, and the morphology of the hands – the dimpled knuckles, plump fingers tapering off in pointed fingertips with rounded, deeply embedded nails – which are unquestionably those of Artemisia. The saint’s features seem so specific that some writers have viewed this as a portrait of a particular individual in allegorical guise. Giovanni Baglione, writing as early as 1642, stated that Artemisia excelled in the genre of portraiture, and Garrard has recently identified the sitter of the Nationalmuseum's Saint Catherine as Adriana Basile (c. 1580–1640), a celebrated singer and composer (fig. 7), whose portrait Artemisia is known to have painted. That Artemisia frequently painted her own image taking on different guises – either as the fruit of her own invention or at a patron's request – is well documented. Whether the Saint Catherine is in fact a "disguised" portrait, or simply a favourite model, is open to debate. By presenting Catherine through the image of a contemporary woman who imagines herself to be the saint, Artemisia shows her deep understanding of Caravaggio's radical innovation: to bring the holy figures to life by embedding their timeless message in the look and dress of modern women and men.

Artemisia's artistic identity is far from fixed, and opinions differ widely as to the exact date and sequencing of her canvases. Generally attributed either to her Florentine period (1613–20), based on its stylistic affinities with Florentine prototypes (facial type, rich fabrics), or to her first Neapolitan period (1630–35), when landscapes begin to occur with some frequency in her work, the Nationalmuseum's Saint Catherine was recently reassigned by Grassi to her Venetian sojourn towards the end of the 1620s (1626–30). While the original owner of the picture and the circumstances of its creation remain unknown, recent study of women who could own them. Juxtaposing the Nationalmuseum's Saint Catherine with Artemisia's Florentine renderings of the saint, we are reminded of her boast to her Sicilian patron, Don Antonio Ruffo, that her talent consisted in varying the subjects of her paintings. No matter how exaggerated her claim, it suggests that she was proud of her ability to produce different versions of a given theme, rethinking the subject each time.

The singularity of the Nationalmuseum’s painting in Artemisia’s oeuvre, from both a stylistic and an interpretative point of view, led initially to its authorship being wrongly doubted. Were it not for Catherine’s distinctive physiognomy – the shape of her eyes, her wide forehead, full cheeks, ample chin and bow lips – which bears more than a superficial resemblance to Artemisia’s Florentine works such as the Self Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria in the National Gallery or the Self-Portrait as a Lute Player (fig. 6), we might struggle to read them as the work of a single painter. Especially distinctive are the soft, densely

Fig. 6 Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1654), Self-Portrait as a Lute Player, c. 1615–17. Oil on canvas, 77.5 × 71.8 cm. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Ct.
Artemisia’s links with the literary Accademia de’ Desiosi in Venice, in which learned women played a prominent role and the nature of woman and her social capabilities were a hotly debated topic, might strengthen a Venetian origin for the unique conception of the subject.17 Parallels can be drawn between the painting’s unusual outdoor setting and composition – an architectural backdrop behind the figure on the left, opening into a landscape on the right – and those of Christ Blessing the Children (fig. 8), a picture recently assigned to Artemisia’s years in Venice (c. 1628–30).18 At the same time, the loose, feathery brushwork in the blue-toned landscape of the Saint Catherine seems evocative of her Roman works such as Susannah and the Elders of 1622 (fig. 9).19 By the mid 1620s in Rome, unlike in Naples and Florence, the chiaroscuro-based work of the Caravaggists was becoming old-fashioned. Like other artists working in the city, Artemisia sometimes tempered the intense naturalism and dramatic lighting of her figures with a softer, more idealised manner. If the lighter, clearer palette of the Saint Catherine seems remote from the artistic voice of Artemisia’s formative years, it is worth remembering that early critics did not focus on Caravaggio’s influence on her art, but instead highlighted her chromatic virtuosity.20 The expressive subtleties she displays in this picture are matched by an accomplished and refined mode of painting, especially in the rendering of fabrics. Throughout her oeuvre, Artemisia used the behaviour of cloth to convey expression, introducing tension by gathering crumpled folds into dynamic patterns, distinguishing fabrics of different weights – from the diaphanous veil over Catherine’s shoulders to the sharp-edged folds of her crisp linen chemise and heavier silk taffeta gown.21 X-radiography and infrared reflectography imaging provided insights into Artemisia’s painting process and the few modifications made to the figure of Saint Catherine as the work progressed. Although there is no clear evidence of a comprehensive transfer of a fixed design – as might be
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Fig. 8 Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1654), Christ Blessing the Children, c. 1628–30. Oil on canvas, 135 × 98.5 cm. Arciconfraternita dei Santi Ambrogio e Carlo, Rome.
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Fig. 9 Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1654), Susannah and the Elders, signed and dated 1622. Oil on canvas, 161.5 × 123 cm. The Burghley House Collection, Stamford, UK.
in her *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy* from c. 1620–25 (private collection). Using a dark preparatory layer, the warm brown hue of the preparation was skilfully exploited as a visible component, creating an emotionally charged atmosphere and conferring a unifying element to the finished painting, in the way so famously developed by Caravaggio and adopted by his followers.

Artemisia applied her paint *alla prima*, modelling forms directly on the dark ground and using mostly opaque paint mixtures in just one or two thin layers. She worked up to the highlights, leaving the dark preparation completely exposed at the edges of forms and in the deepest shadow, while it served as a mid-tone where thinly painted over. This is most evident in the chiaroscuro modelling of Catherine’s face, neck and hands suggested by schematic traced lines – the possibility remains that signs of this technique are undetectable. Infrared reflectography revealed some dark brushed lines in the saint’s face, but it is difficult to establish whether these are associated with an initial laying-out of the design or a refining of contours during the painting process. In the landscape on the right, close to Catherine’s left shoulder and the sleeve of her gown, there are several broad, *abbazoo*-like brushstrokes of a paint containing radiopaque pigments that might relate to an initial placement of the figure (fig. 10). While the interpretation of these markings is uncertain, Artemisia clearly reworked this area before painting the current version of the dress or defining the final position of the figure. The most noticeable adjustment is the reduction in the amplitude of the red gown, resulting in a narrower sleeve on the right-hand side (fig. 11). A semicircular area of vigorously brushed dark strokes of the background, in earth pigments, stops abruptly at the point at which the hair was to be painted. This might at first sight be interpreted as a major *pentimento*, but there is no evidence that a different head was initially painted below the completed image of the saint.

Artemisia’s painting of Catherine’s red gown with its pale highlights and rich, purple shadows, set against the cool white chemise, and the deep shadow of the background ruin contrasted against a sun-drenched landscape, show complete mastery of the chiaroscuro style. The painting shares Artemisia’s typical method of constructing forms and building up paint layers, as seen, for example, in her *Mary Magdalene in Ecstasy* from c. 1620–25 (private collection). Using a dark preparatory layer, the warm brown hue of the preparation was skilfully exploited as a visible component, creating an emotionally charged atmosphere and conferring a unifying element to the finished painting, in the way so famously developed by Caravaggio and adopted by his followers. Artemisia applied her paint *alla prima*, modelling forms directly on the dark ground and using mostly opaque paint mixtures in just one or two thin layers. She worked up to the highlights, leaving the dark preparation completely exposed at the edges of forms and in the deepest shadow, while it served as a mid-tone where thinly painted over. This is most evident in the chiaroscuro modelling of Catherine’s face, neck and hands.
In the shadows this was followed by a paint principally containing red lake, making a translucent purple glaze that would allow the reddish-orange underpaint to contribute to the depth of colour. FORS analysis of the pigments identified aluminium in the deep-red particles, which suggests the substrate of an insect-derived anthraquinone lake pigment, probably cochineal. Although the red glazes have faded to some extent, the pigments employed indicate that the gown was always intended to be a considerably more vibrant, purple hue. The combination of purple and yellow, also seen in Christ Blessing the Children, was particularly favoured by Artemisia.

Artemisia Gentileschi’s Saint Catherine of Alexandria is a masterpiece by the artist painted at the height of her creative powers, probably in the 1620s, in Rome or Venice. As such it constitutes a significant addition to the Nationalmuseum’s Italian Baroque paintings collection, marking a key moment in the evolution and spread of Caravaggio’s influence, and its acquisition strengthens the Museum’s representation of female artists.

Macro X-ray fluorescence spectrometry gives us a basic idea of the pigments that are present in the paint layers. The palette proved to be somewhat limited and, in addition to lead white and carbon black, it is dominated by earth pigments: umber, sienna, green and red earth, yellow, red and brown ochre. The thinly applied ground is made up of two distinct layers: a lower, reddish layer and an upper brownish one, containing earth pigments such as brown ochre, umber or red earth, mixed with lead white. The medium of the preparation and paint layers was not analysed, but it would normally have been linseed oil, whose drying properties would have been improved by the lead white and earth pigments present in the ground layer. Expensive ultramarine blue, mixed with variable amounts of lead white and a powdered glass, possibly smalt, was used in the sky and landscape. Catherine’s book showed a mixture of yellow and red earth pigments, while the yellow highlights in the vegetation and the gold setting of the saint’s pearl-drop earring were formed using lead-tin-antimony yellow, a relatively unusual pigment that has been associated with Italian 17th-century painting and particularly with works produced in Rome. The presence of these more stable yellow pigments means the effect of fading is not as marked as it might have been.

While the dense flesh painting that Artemisia learned from her father and employed in her Florentine paintings was retained in the Saint Catherine, the controlled refinement and saturated appearance of colours resulting from the sophisticated layering technique of those earlier pictures were increasingly abandoned in favour of a more summary application of paint, and she eventually mastered the Venetian technique of laying in the structure of drapery folds in broad strokes of white paint, over which local colour was painted as a glaze. In Saint Catherine’s red gown, she began by applying a medium-rich reddish-orange underpaint containing earth pigments to block out the area of the gown, after which a slightly thicker paint layer was applied, consisting of an organic red lake pigment and red ochre mixed with variable amounts of lead white to produce the mauve highlights.

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Notes:

1. Oil on canvas, 90 × 75.4 cm, NM 7538. Purchased at Sotheby’s, London, 4 December 2019, lot 13, with funds provided by a donor who wishes to remain anonymous. Provenance: Priv. coll., Palm Springs, CA, 1940s; sold, Sotheby’s, New York, 24 April 1995, lot 66; sold, Christie’s, New York, 6 April 2006, lot 247; priv. coll., UK. Bibliography: Raymond Ward Bissell, Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art: Critical Reading and Catalogue Raisonné, University Park, PA, 1999, pp. 332–333, no. X.27 (Paolo Finoglio?); Alessandro Grassi, Artemisia Gentileschi, Pisa 2017, p. 183, ill. (dated 1626–30); Viviana Farini (ed.), Artemisia e il pittori del conte: La collezione di Giangirolomi II Acquaviva d’Aragona a Conversano (exh., Conversano, Castello e Chiesa di San Giuseppe), Cava de’ Tirreni 2018, under no. 36; and Mary D. Garrard, Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism in Early Modern Europe, London 2020, pp. 121–122, fig. 30 (dated c. 1615–20). The original support is a single piece of relatively coarse plain-weave linen canvas, with a thread count of 12–14 warp and 8–9 weft threads. The canvas is currently stretched on a modern keyable stretcher; the original tacking margins have been removed, probably during the lining procedure. Broad capping along the top and bottom edges, and slightly less pronounced at left, suggests that the painting has essentially retained its original format, apart from a few centimetres of canvas missing at right.


3. Close observation using ambient, raking and transmitted light, with and without microscopy, was combined with a variety of technical analyses that allowed identification of the materials used: X-ray fluorescence (XRF), ultraviolet (UV)-excited luminescence, fibre-optic reflectance spectroscopy (FORS), and multispectral and hyperspectral infra-red reflectography (IRR). All IRR examinations were carried out by the Nationalmuseum staff photographer Cecilia Heisser, using an Osiris camera (Opus Instruments, Norwich, Great Britain), InGaAs line array, 900–1700 nm, and Dedolight DLH652, Tungsten G9.5 / max. 650 W. X-radiography was carried out by Magnus Mårtensson of the Swedish National Heritage Board (RAÄ), using a GE Eresco 42 MF4 portable X-ray unit. Elemental point and mapping analysis was carried out by Tom Sandström of the Swedish National Heritage Board (RAÄ), using micro-X-ray fluorescence, Artax 800 (Bruker), with a Mo X-ray tube and polycapillary lens. Identification of colourants was carried out with Raman microscopy, BWTek in Raman Plus, using a 785 nm laser. A more comprehensive report on the results of these examinations will be published separately.


8. Voragine 1993 (as in n. 4), at p. 334.

9. No such figure by Artemisia has yet been identified, but references to paintings of sibyls by Orazio and Artemisia do occur in a 1627 inventory of the Roman art collection of Giovanni Battista Bolognetti: “Una sibilla con un scigutatore in testa del Gentileschi” and “Una altra sibilla con un libro in mano della Gentilescha” (items 11 and 12); see L. Spezzaferro and A. Giammaria, Archivio del Collezionismo Romano, Pisa 2009, pp. 129–130.


12. Treves et al. 2020 (as in n. 5), no. 10, ill.


15. Artemisia’s Hartford Lute Player, generally dated c. 1615–17, has been convincingly identified with a painting described in a 1638 inventory of the Villa Medici at Artimino as a “portrait of Artemisia playing the lute by her own hand”. The Medici also owned a (lost) painting in which she represented herself as an Amazon warrior (Florence, Archivio di Stato, Guardaroba Medicea 532, Inventario Artimino 1638, fol. 16v). See Gianni Papi in The Burlington Magazine, 142 (2000), pp. 452–453; Mann in Christiansen and Mann 2001 (as in n. 7), pp. 52–56; and Jesse M. Locker, Artemisia Gentileschi: The Language of Painting, New Haven, 2015, pp. 125–160.

16. Grassi 2017 (as in n. 1).


18. Grassi 2017 (as in n. 1), pp. 183–184, ill. (1629–30); and Francesco Solinas, “‘Bella, pulita, e senza macchia’: Artemisia and her letters”, in Treves et al. 2020, at p. 53, fig. 27 (c. 1628–30).

19. There is no evidence that the landscape was painted by another hand. For the Burghley House picture, see Treves et al. 2020, no. 22. The figure of Susannah was perhaps based on an etching of the subject by Annibale Carracci (c. 1590–95), which may also have inspired the pose of Saint Catherine’s upper body.

20. Modesti in Barker 2017 (as in n. 13), pp. 136, 139.


24. Lead–tin—antimony yellow has been identified in the following paintings by Artemisia: Judith Beheading Holofernes (Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples); Joel and Sisera (Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest); Judith Beheading Holofernes (Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence); and Self Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria (National Gallery, London); see C. Seccaroni, Giallorino: Storia dei Pigmenti Gialli di Natura Sintetica, Rome 2006; and Keith et al. 2019, p. 10.