

**Artemisia Gentileschi and Elisabeth
Vigée-Lebrun:
Female Art and Experience**

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ABSTRACT:

Two female artists from different influential periods of art will be discussed: Artemisia Gentileschi, active in 17th-century Baroque Rome, and Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun in 18th-century France, prior to and after the French Revolution. An examination of how the artworks of Artemisia Gentileschi and Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun demonstrated female virtues, challenged societal views, and put forth a voice of gender identity in male-dominated cultures, centuries apart. Through historical context, formal analysis and discussion of examples of their artworks, the topic of gender identity and female voice will be addressed as well as how those themes manifested within their artworks.

Artemisia Gentileschi and Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun: Female Art and Experience

Throughout the centuries, male viewers, artists and art historians have scrutinized women artists and their works. The cases of Artemisia Gentileschi and Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun make excellent examples of women artists during a time of strict conservatism towards the female gender, but centuries apart. Artemisia Gentileschi worked in Italy in the 1600's producing history paintings of scenes from the Old Testament in the style of Caravaggism practiced by her father, Orazio Gentileschi.¹ Although she was given a humanist education, she lived in a time period when daughters were thought of as assets belonging to a patriarchal family.² Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's artistic identity was defined by her social rank in French society before and after the French Revolution, where women's social activities became increasingly restricted in the public sphere.³ Despite the restrictions on women's rights and freedoms during their respective time periods, artworks of Artemisia Gentileschi and Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun depict strong female virtues that challenge societal views and put forth a voice of gender identity.

17th -century Rome was recognized as a major center of art where Caravaggio influenced several generations of artists of his time and after through his

¹ Chadwick, Whitney. 2007. *Women, art, and society*. London: Thames & Hudson. p. 105

² E. Cohen, "The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History," *Sixteenth Century Journal* (2000), p. 57.

³ Chadwick. *Women, art, and society*. p. 139

styles of naturalism, tenebrism, use of color, as well as a propensity for portraying historic scenes.⁴ Orazio Gentileschi, a contemporary of Caravaggio was at the forefront of this style, dubbed Caravaggism, which would later be seen in Artemesia's artwork. Artemisia Gentileschi, the only daughter out of four children was chosen by her father Orazio, to carry on in his footsteps of being a painter.⁵ During that time period, apprenticeships were not often offered to female artists, therefore it is likely that if Orazio did not train her himself, she would never have been able to gain legitimate commissions in Rome and be considered a practicing artist.⁶ This situation is reflective of the barriers that women experienced when trying to gain access into the profession of being an artist during the 17th-century and this will be present again with Vigée-Lebrun and her experience before and after the French Revolution of 1789.

The lack of female identity in the face of 17th-century Italian familial and societal structure can be studied further through Artemesia's experiences. Artemisia was raped during her teens by Agostino Tassi, a colleague of her father. After enduring the rape by Tassi, she was subjected to the further ordeal of a long trial. The trial was not pursued by her father until almost a year later and proved to be a very lengthy affair that some may argue was so scandalous it overshadowed her

⁴ Dewald, Jonathan. Ed. 2004. "Caravaggio and Caravaggism," *Europe, 1450-1789: Encyclopedia of the Early Modern World*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. p.387

⁵ Rabb, Theodore K. 1993. *Renaissance lives: portraits of an age*. New York: Pantheon Books. p. 179.

⁶ Rabb, *Renaissance Lives*. p. 179.

status as an artist.⁷ The trial turned out to be less about defending Artemisia's honor or gaining justice and more about "Tassi's relationship to Orazio Gentileschi's legal property"-- Artemisia herself.⁸ During that time, social persona was of the utmost importance, since ideal daughters were deemed pure and suitable for marriage which was often a political and social tool to link two families together. However, Agostino Tassi did not end up marrying Artemisia, thus ending in a public trial pursued by Artemesia's father. While the experience of being raped tarnished her social persona, it also influenced the emotions portrayed in her artwork, and informed her sense of gender identity.

The drama in Artemisia's life was matched by the drama present in the artwork of the time period as well. The ideal of naturalism lead to a change in subject matter during the seventeenth century.⁹ Instead of scenes of passive female beauty, scenes of heroic women at their virtuous peaks exhibited in an expressive manner came into fashion, prompted by the Counter Reformation, where tales of the Old Testament and Catholicism were experiencing revival.¹⁰ Artemisia partook of this tradition, and in nearly sixty paintings, most had women in featured roles.¹¹ Events of her life and their psychological implications have often been considered when interpreting her artwork.

⁷ E. Cohen, "The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History," *Sixteenth Century Journal* (2000), p. 47.

⁸ Chadwick. *Women, art, and society*. p. 105

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.106

¹⁰ Chadwick. *Women, art, and society*. p. 106

¹¹ Rabb, *Renaissance Lives*. p. 183

Female empowerment and intellect expressed through art can also be seen in 18th-century France through the work of Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun. In the case of Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and her place in late 18th and early 19th-century French society, restrictions on women's activities in the public sphere of society influenced her artwork and status as an artist. The 18th-century posed the introduction of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his stance on the proper place of women in the home. His views and their effects on French society prior to and post-revolution cannot be overestimated.¹² Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun had a career as a portraitist and history painter both before and after the French Revolution. Prior to the Revolution in 1789, she was an influential force in the art world and held a position in the Academy. After the Revolution, when women were no longer admitted to the Academy, she was denied the prestige that accompanied membership.¹³ This tumultuous time was further influenced by Rousseau's beliefs that a woman's place should be in the domestic sphere as mothers and out of the public eye- an outlook resulting from demands of social and political pressures in a time where public and private spheres was shaping up more rigidly.¹⁴ The Old Regime prior to the Revolution depicted women as sexually liberated and powerful, being present and popular at the royal court and salons. The Revolution, however, did not seem to benefit women in granting them more liberties and freedoms. Rather, social and gender roles became

¹² Sheriff, Mary D. 1996. *The exceptional woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the cultural politics of art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 3

¹³ Sheriff. *The exceptional woman*. p. 4

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

more rigid, with a woman's job being to raise virtuous children and remain in the household.¹⁵

Even before the Revolution, and the influence of Rousseau and other voices of the Enlightenment, male attitudes towards women in the social sphere as artists and influential members of society had been mostly negative.¹⁶ The Enlightenment argued that the influence of aristocratic women in court and salons and their insertions into the "traditional male domains of politics have degraded and effeminized French culture."¹⁷ Therefore, they believed that the most appropriate place for women was to be in the home. Vigée-Lebrun, an artist with a prominent reputation, obviously did not stay inside the home; however, she was a mother, and she often painted portraits of herself in the domestic sphere exhibiting that role with great skill.¹⁸ In addition to her pronouncing her role of motherhood, she often portrayed motherhood through her commissions, a notable one being for Marie Antoinette.¹⁹ This is perhaps why Vigée-Lebrun is an extraordinary female artist during that time period of gender scrutiny, for she is trying to represent both sides of her identity, one as a skilled artist with neoclassical intellect, while also strategically emphasizing an "ideal of womanhood that transcended class lines."²⁰

¹⁵ Andrea, Alfred J., and Carolyn Neel. 2011. "Women and the French Revolution," *World History Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO. p. 191-193

¹⁶ Hyde, Melissa Lee, and Jennifer Dawn Milam. 2003. *Women, art and the politics of identity in eighteenth-century Europe*. Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate. p. 6

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Hyde, Melissa Lee, and Jennifer Dawn Milam. *Women, art and the politics of identity in eighteenth-century Europe*. p.7

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.144

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Vigée-Lebrun chose self-portraiture as the vehicle to preach her womanly virtue. Hyde and Milam in the introduction of *Women, Art and the Politics of Identity* discussed the deliberate awareness of the artist's portrayal of a subject matter to either avoid scrutiny by the public or to depict a desired image of womanhood that will reflect upon their own reputation.²¹ Although they were referring to 18th-century Europe, this also applies to Artemisia Gentileschi's artistic reputation in 17th-century Rome as well. While female artists of the 18th-century, such as Vigée-Lebrun, sought to establish her honorable feminine reputation through images of motherhood, Artemisia attempted to assert female virtues through portrayals of strong female heroes from narratives.



Figure 1: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Self Portrait of the Artist and her Daughter*, 1789

In the case of Vigée-Lebrun, the portrayal of herself as a mother served to confirm her understanding of societal expectations upon her sex while also demonstrating her skills in the Neo-classical style. In *Self Portrait of the Artist and her Daughter* (Figure 1), Vigée-Lebrun has portrayed the still intimacy and bond between herself and her daughter while also reminding the audience of her knowledge of the classics by wearing classical fashion. This portrait is Neo-classicism in full

²¹ Hyde, Milam. *Women, art and the politics of identity in eighteenth-century Europe*. p.9

force, with the symmetrical pyramid formation of the two bodies, as well as the balanced lines “to give an impression of movement in immobility.”²² Perhaps Vigée-Lebrun is relating the portrayal of motherhood to the “creative impulses of artistic creation.”²³ This work could be considered feminist, since it was created in a time where artistic production by women was not encouraged. Here, however, Vigée-Lebrun seems to challenge the male-dominated art sphere with an image painted in the Neo-classical style of David, but of a subject matter that only a female can produce with such authority and authenticity.

In the same way that Vigée-Lebrun attempted to both challenge and soothe male judgment by being a skilled artist portraying the womanly subject of motherhood and virtue, Artemisia Gentileschi exhibited the female voice in her artwork through the expressive style of Caravaggism. Artemisia, a female in a male dominated field featured a feminist message in her artwork through the representation of female experiences. While art historian Bissell claims that by labeling Artemisia as feminist, it would segregate her from the rest of the Baroque and disregard her creative process, Mary Garrard argues the opposite: that her feminine experiences lead her to have a specific voice that is exhibited in her artwork.²⁴ Artemisia’s female experience was particularly emphasized in *Susanna and the Elders* painted in 1610.

²² Greer, Germaine. 1979. *The obstacle race: the fortunes of women painters and their work*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux. p. 272

²³ Hyde, Milam. *Women, art and the politics of identity in eighteenth-century Europe*. p.11

²⁴ Garrard, Mary D. 2001. *Artemisia Gentileschi around 1622: the shaping and reshaping of an artistic identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press. p. 17



Figure 2: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610



Figure 3: Guido Reni, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1620

During the 17th-century, certain Old Testament narratives were depicted, not so much portraying the narrative, but rather emphasizing the climactic scenes featuring violence and voyeurism, elements which mirrored the drama and movement of the Baroque.²⁵ The dynamics of the gaze, representation of a powerful male position posed next to the resistant but vulnerable female, are crucial themes in the narrative of *Susanna and the Elders*, with an erotic subtext.²⁶ In Artemisia's *Susanna and the Elders* (Figure 2), she stresses female victimization in the face of immoral lechery. Scholars have often noted Artemisia's portrayal of hands and their active nature, which serves to pronounce the female protagonist's agency.²⁷ Garrard argues that the painting resonates back to Artemisia's struggles with her rape by

²⁵ Chadwick. *Women, art, and society*. p. 108-9

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Mann, Judith Walker. 2005. *Artemisia Gentileschi: taking stock*. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols. p. 113-115

Agostino Tassi, and that the representation of Susanna as clearly disturbed by the Elder's advances differs greatly from Reni's (Figure 3) and other artists' depictions of a receptively seduced Susanna.²⁸

In a time period where powerful and climactic moments of Old Testament narratives were portrayed, Gentileschi chose to portray women in a heroic and virtuous light, especially when studied next to her male predecessors, one being Guido Reni.²⁹ A pivotal work that can be compared directly to Artemisia's is Reni's *Susanna and the Elders*, from 1620 (Figure 3). The distinctive style of Caravaggism can be seen in his portrayal of light and shadow and the movement of the figures. Artemisia's portrayal of the female protagonist is strikingly different in that she is resistant while the female in Reni's work seems curious and meek, barely



Figure 4: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*, 1630



Figure 5: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat*, 1782

²⁸ Garrard, Mary D. Artemisia Gentileschi around 1622. p. 77

²⁹ Chadwick. Women, art, and society. p. 108-9

attempting to conceal herself. Guido Reni's representation has a very erotic undertone, an element that is not seen in Artemisia's rendition in 1610.

Both Artemisia and Vigée-Lebrun painted self-portraits expressing their identity as painters during their respective time periods. The way they portray themselves provide an interesting study of their intention to establish a strong gender identity. Artemisia identified herself with Pittura, the "divine frenzy of the artistic temperament."³⁰ With the alignment to Artistic identity itself, she is placing an immense importance on her artistic ability. *The Self Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (Figure 4) is rendered in the style of Caravaggism, with an emphasis on the study of light and shadow. In the painting, you can see Artemisia's strong and active hands, this time directed to a canvas. Her unruly hair channels the personification of Pittura, while also representing her as a woman with sensual appeal. Garrard argues that Artemisia's association with Pittura emphasizes her artistic creativity, and also gives Pittura her living feminine form via the representation of herself.³¹ In the work, she shows her engagement in high art and also admits her status as a craftsman, demonstrating both her theory and practice.³² She exhibits engagement with the artwork, and her intense focus emphasizes the cerebral aspect of art.³³ Garrard explains that her hand holding the brush alludes to the ideal, while her other hand holding the palette and paint refers to craft.³⁴ With the self-portrait, she

³⁰ Garrard. Artemisia Gentileschi around 1622. p. 57

³¹ Garrard. Artemisia Gentileschi around 1622.

p.61-68

³² Ibid., p.69

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

establishes herself as a major creative force that also has the skill of creating artwork. In a time period where women were not considered artists worthy of emulation, she aligned herself with the essence of artistry itself, representing her gender.

Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun's self-portrait (Figure 5), on the surface seems to be the artist's overt identification with her feminine identity.³⁵ However, similar to Artemisia, it appears that Vigée-Lebrun wanted to portray herself as a proficient artist who happened to be a beautiful woman.³⁶ The self-portrait exudes feminine beauty, with her fashion and adornments, as well as the soft hair and the depiction of herself outdoors. However, even in her time period, she was getting praise that aligned her with masculine attributes such as intellect, force, and desire (as stated by Riviere).³⁷ In the particular case of Vigée-Lebrun, one must think of her in the role of the artist creating the artwork. While it is beautiful, she made it so, showcasing that her beauty and the beauty of her art are inseparable. Her identity and ability as an artist is therefore reinforced within this painting and in any other representations of herself.³⁸

While Artemisia and Vigée-Lebrun may not be similar in terms of their time period and their artistic style, they both succeeded in establishing female identity in their artwork that challenged societal views and norms. Female identity and experience was of lesser importance in their time periods, where oppressive

³⁵ Sheriff. *The exceptional woman*. p. 199

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 200

³⁸ Sheriff. *The exceptional woman*. p. 201

patriarchal ideals attempted to contain women in the domestic sphere under male dominance. The artworks of both Artemisia and Vigée-Lebrun showcase immense skill in the style of the Italian Caravaggist Baroque, and French Rococo and Neo-classical movements of their respective time periods, while also representing the female experience through much of their artworks. Vigée-Lebrun's artwork delivered messages of feminine powers and maternal bliss in an effort to soothe masculine criticism while also proclaiming her artistic mastery and her continued prominence in the public sphere. Artemisia made a place for the female experience in her Old Testament narratives and celebrated feminine artistic creativity. So while the two artists are conveying different messages through their artwork, they are both exploring the presence of female agency and identity in an oppressive patriarchal society through artworks that represent female virtues and experience.

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Sources for Images:

Figure 1:

Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Portrait of the Artist with her Daughter*, 1789

<http://www.friendsofart.net/en/art/louise-elisabeth-vigee-lebrun/self-portrait-with-daughter-1>

Figure 2:

Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610

<http://www.artemisia-gentileschi.com/susanna.html>

Figure 3:

Guido Reni, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1620

<http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/guido-reni/susanna-and-the-elders-1620>

Figure 4:

Artemisia Gentileschi, *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*, 1630

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Figure 5:

Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat*, 1782

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