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CASVA

Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts

Women in the Archive

Biography is never far from the surface of art history. Despite many inaccuracies, Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (Florence, 1550 and 1568) retains its status as the first modern history of art. Life writing continued as the primary genre even for Vasari's critics, among whom Carlo Cesare Malvasia was the most prominent. His *Felsina pittrice* (Bologna, 1678), the subject of a CASVA research project, sets out to correct Vasari's bias in favor of the Florentine tradition and to write a documented history, but Malvasia did not challenge the importance of biography itself. Rejection came among eighteenth-century proponents of a pure history of style, and found reinforcement in Heinrich Wölfflin's "art history without names" in the early twentieth century. More recently, biographical approaches have enjoyed a revival.



Fig. 1. Lucas Emil Vorsterman after Sir Anthony van Dyck, *Orazio Gentileschi, state ii/vi, probably 1626/1641, engraving, Rosenwald Collection*

Whether their subject is Michelangelo Buonarroti or Michelangelo da Caravaggio, Paul Cézanne or Jean-Michel Basquiat, many CASVA fellows have been involved in biographical research.

Few early modern women artists have, however, enjoyed biographical treatment. During her 2017–2018 fellowship, Babette Bohn completed a book on women artists in seventeenth-century Bologna, investigating why the city provided such a favorable environment for their work. Outside Bologna, Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–after August 1654) is an exception in many ways. Anna Banti's renowned novel *Artemisia* (1947) is an imaginative reconstruction of the author's biographical research destroyed in Florence in 1944. Alessandra Lapierre's *Artemisia: The Story of a Battle for Greatness* (1998) is both a narrative biography and a novel; the archival material it contains makes it essential reading for the historian.

These genre-defying modern biographies reflect the continuing debate about the relationship between the life and the work. Again, the case of Artemisia Gentileschi is especially challenging. The inquiry instigated by her father in 1612 established that his colleague Agostino Tassi had raped her and dishonored the family. Modern publication of the trial documents led to a focus on Artemisia as both victim and heroine, who represented her revenge in paintings of powerful women defeating men. In response, it has been argued that all this should be set aside in favor of looking only at Artemisia's work. Yet the relationship between life and work is especially complex among painters in seventeenth-century Italy, when the embodied passions, their expression and representation, were

the very substance of life and art. Only more, rather than less, information from the archive can establish the experiences that formed Artemisia's artistic personality.

Artemisia Gentileschi was the child of an orphaned father. Orazio Lomi (1563–1639) was sent to Rome from Pisa at the age of twelve and left in the care of an uncle, whose name he took (fig. 1). He established himself as an artist, and he and his wife, Prudenzia Montone, baptized their first child Artemisia in 1593. The family was soon subject to the shocks of change. Orazio's manner was suddenly outdated by the audacious realism of Caravaggio. His almost-immediate response to Caravaggio is manifest in his work, and the documentary evidence for their relationship establishes that insults, violence, and the raw life of the studio were all around Artemisia as she grew up. Then, on December 26, 1605, her mother died in childbirth. At the age of twelve, Artemisia was responsible for her three younger brothers.

It was not obvious that Artemisia would learn her father's art. She was, however, extraordinarily talented and quickly learned the new way of working from models in the studio. It was a bad day for the Gentileschi family when Orazio introduced Agostino Tassi into his household, supposedly to teach Artemisia perspective, for he was an irascible character, a sexual predator. The widely held view that Artemisia's *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, now at the Capodimonte, capitalizes on her desire for revenge after her physical attack seems quite justifiable. Artemisia's expression of the reality of the moment exceeds anything produced by her father, or even Caravaggio.

Artemisia escaped from scandal to Florence in 1613. The recently discovered agreement of August 1612 for her marriage to Pierantonio Stiattesi reveals that Orazio provided his daughter with a generous dowry and the authority to control it. His hopes to follow her to Florence were dashed, however, when the grand duchess was warned about his bad character. After Orazio threatened the couple on their return to Rome in 1620, father and daughter went their different ways; Artemisia's husband also disappears.

My own archival work has revealed that between 1613 and 1618 Artemisia bore four children. Another scholar identified a fifth, tallying five pregnancies in as many years. By 1621 only one daughter survived. Others have tracked Artemisia's financial difficulties as she established her business and consolidated her relationships with notable Florentines, including Galileo Galilei. One extraordinary discovery has been the correspondence between Artemisia and her wealthy lover Francesco Maria Maringhi, through which we learn of her new literacy, her self-determination, and the complicity of her husband. These documented experiences give Artemisia greater agency, and make her success all the more remarkable.

Orazio Gentileschi's *Lute Player* (fig. 2) in the National Gallery of Art (once attributed to Caravaggio) presents a young woman, life-sized in three-quarter view, seated before a table supporting a still life of musical instruments ready to be played. Her golden dress is visibly mended and partially unlaced at the side for ease of movement as she supports the lute she is tuning. The woman's absorption is intensified by her turning away from us; as she listens, we can almost hear the reverberation of the strings. Whether or not it evokes Artemisia's presence, Orazio's scene conveys a domestic harmony that we now know the Gentileschi family never enjoyed. By contrast, Artemisia's own

Fig. 2. Orazio Gentileschi, *The Lute Player*, c. 1612/1620, oil on canvas, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

early version of the subject (fig. 3) is shocking in its directness and physical presence, demonstrating her mastery of Caravaggio's manner. Likely modeled on her own features, this musician demands our engagement.

Artemisia Gentileschi was the first woman to join the Accademia del Disegno in Florence. In his research project dedicated to the Accademia di San Luca in Rome, Peter Lukehart is investigating the career of the miniaturist and calligrapher Giovanna Garzoni (c. 1600–1670). Women could join the Roman academy from 1607 on, but Garzoni is among the first to leave a documentary trace. Once again, the archive provides a richer view of a female artist as a professional who paid her dues, received food when ill, gave alms to others, and left the academy income-producing properties.

In CASVA's third research project, History of Early American Landscape Design (HEALD), Therese O'Malley is also documenting invisible figures. The HEALD database contains hundreds of images and citations by and about women in the colonial and early national period, including botanists, horticulturalists, educators, and businesswomen, in addition to diarists whose observations have been critical to understanding the contributions of women in early America.

Vast bodies of data are accessible in our digital age. Yet the archive has scarcely begun to yield its riches. One danger of relying on the already accessible is that neglected populations remain so; a limited body of facts tends to perpetuate stereotypes. Evaluating and expanding the biographies of both famous and forgotten figures is part of a continuing conversation at CASVA.

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Fig. 3. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Self-Portrait as a Lute Player*, c. 1615–1618, oil on canvas, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT, Charles H. Schwartz Endowment Fund, 2014.4.1. Allen Phillips/Wadsworth Atheneum