Oh, Susanna: Exploring Artemisia’s Most Painted Heroine

Kerry S. Kilburn
ARTH 318
Dr. Anne H. Muraoka
Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1656?) was unique among Baroque artists. Not only was she a woman, she was a woman who eschewed still lifes and whose work extended beyond small devotional paintings to include the large history paintings considered the height of artistic – and until then, exclusively male - achievement. Among her many trademarks, Artemisia was known for creating series of paintings representing variations on a single theme. She painted four “Judith and her Maidservants,” for example, five or six “Penitent Magdalens,” and six “Bathshebas.” Although she prided herself on the originality of each painting, writing to Don Antonio Ruffo that “... never has anyone found in my pictures any repetition of invention, not even of one hand,” each of these series includes at least one repeated image type (Fig. 1). She also painted a series of eight “Susanna and the Elders,” of which five are currently known (Fig. 2). Compared to the other series, this one is unique: it contains the largest number of paintings executed over the longest period of time with no repetition of image types. Although unique, this series of paintings can be understood in terms of several signature features of Artemisia’s style and oeuvre: growth and change in her artistic style over time; her practice of portraying heroic female protagonists; her specialty of painting erotic female nudes; and her narrative originality.

Susanna’s story is told in the Book of Daniel (13:1-64). She was the wife of Joakim, a wealthy man, and walked in their garden every day at noon. Two elders, who met daily at Joakim’s house, saw her and lusted after her. They eventually told one another of their desire and plotted to surprise Susanna while she was alone. Their opportunity came one day when she decided to bathe in the garden. The elders hid and, after she sent her maids to lock the garden door and go to the house for supplies, rushed up to her. They told her that she must have sex with them or they would accuse her of adultery with a fictitious young man. Susanna told them that she would rather “... fall innocent into (their) power than to sin in the eyes of the Lord” (Dn.
13:23). She called out for help, the elders followed through with their threat, and Susanna was brought to trial for adultery. She wasn’t allowed to speak on her own behalf, but called upon God for justice. The young Daniel, sensing something amiss, questioned the elders separately and discovered a discrepancy in their story. They were found guilty of lying and stoned to death, and Susanna was redeemed.

The Susanna story has been a powerful symbol in Christianity at least since the time of Hippolytus, who saw Susanna as the Church and the Elders as Jews and pagans. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Susanna story was enacted as sacred drama for feast days and special liturgies, and Susanna frequently appeared on Florentine brides’ wedding chests, possibly as an example to new brides to emulate Susanna’s chaste behavior. By the sixteenth century, representations of Susanna and her story began to change, with Susanna appearing nude or nearly so, and the prevailing (male) interpretations of her story beginning to focus on either Susanna as a temptress, enticing the elders with her beauty, or Susanna as a potentially willing participant in the elders’ scheme, unable to resist her own sexual instincts. By the late Renaissance (and beyond), regardless of any deeper meaning, the story became an excuse to portray the female nude.

Artemisia’s “Susannas” span nearly her entire career. The first, the 1610 Pommersfelden painting, is her first autograph work and the starkest and most Caravagggesque of the five. Susanna, nude except for a sheet draped across one leg, is seated on a bench backed by a masonry wall over which the elders loom. The traditional garden setting is missing, and Susanna twists away from the elders with her face expressing agony and shame. The second painting, the 1622 Burghley House “Susanna,” differs markedly in style and content from the Pommersfelden painting. Here a more idealized Susanna covers herself more completely and sits at the end of the
bench and wall, past which a garden is visible. The elders, still positioned close to and above her, are off to one side and less directly over her than they are in the Pommersfelden painting.\textsuperscript{x}

Artemisia apparently painted another “Susanna” in 1627, but it has been lost; the next painting we have is the 1636 London “Susanna.”\textsuperscript{xi} The only “Susanna” we know of that includes significant background architecture, this painting also places Susanna farther from the picture plane than do the other four. The wall is replaced with an open balustrade, while the elders are again placed to the side, and somewhat more distant from Susanna than we see in the other paintings.

Two more lost “Susannas” were painted in the 1630s. The 1649 Brno painting uses the same balustrade as the London painting, and an extensive landscape – the only one of its kind in this series – is visible in the background. Susanna’s arms echo those in the Pommersfelden painting, but her head and body position are different, as is the position of the two elders, who are more separate from one another than they were in any of the previous paintings. Artemisia painted her last “Susanna” in 1652, likely no more than four years before her death. Here again we see the bench and balustrade from the London and Brno paintings, with just a hint of a garden behind the balustrade. The elders are relatively distant from Susanna and from one another.

Examining these paintings as a series, the viewer must note the obvious differences in both style and narrative content among them, most notably the differences between the 1610 and subsequent paintings. The stylistic differences are a function of Artemisia’s growth as an artist at a time when artistic tastes were changing and diversifying. Broadly speaking, they represent a shift from her early Caravaggism to a more classical idealism in a Bolognese style. More specifically, they derive from a variety of influences garnered from her travels and her interactions within the artistic and literary circles in Florence, Venice, and Naples.
We see Artemisia’s Caravagesque roots quite clearly in the Pommersfelden “Susanna,” with its figures pressed close to the frontal plane, strong chiaroscuro, minimal background, and harsh realism. In 1612 or 1613 she traveled to Florence, returning to Rome in 1620. By the time she painted the 1622 Burghley House “Susanna,” her paintings revealed such Florentine practices as greater idealism, highly polished surfaces, and more sophisticated colorism. We still see some traces of her early Caravaggism in this work: the figures are still pressed close to the picture plane and Artemisia uses a strong chiaroscuro to heighten the drama of the narrative. Susanna is much more idealized, however, and new classical elements have been added to the background, demonstrating not only a Florentine but also a Bolognese influence, likely because the work was painted for the Bolognese Ludovisi family.

Following a six-year stay in Rome, Artemisia traveled to Venice, where she lived for three years, then moved to Naples, where she lived from 1630-1639 and again from 1642 until her death. Throughout this time – the rest of her career – Artemisia’s work continued to show a trend toward increasing idealism and classicism. In addition to a general shift in taste away from Caravaggism, Artemisia was influenced, as early as the late 1620s, by the very specific preferences of two important groups: her Spanish and Neapolitan patrons. Spanish patrons, in particular, expected female painters to produce soft, lyrical, and seductive works, and Artemisia was able to adapt a style already tending in that direction to meet those expectations. Neapolitan painters and patrons, likely because they were Spanish subjects, also had an affinity for a similar naturalistic, soft, coloristic, “feminine” style. Rather than be marginalized artistically, Artemisia chose to abandon her Caravaggism and embrace these new styles. We can see this particularly well in the 1636 London “Susanna,” which Riccardo Lattuada called “...
. perhaps one of the finest accomplishments of Neapolitan painting in the first half of the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{xvii}

Jesse Locker notes that, from about 1640 until her death in Naples, the quality and style of Artemisia’s paintings fluctuated dramatically, which he speculates was a function of a combination of factors.\textsuperscript{xviii} We see this fluctuation clearly when we compare the 1659 Brno “Susanna” to the 1654 Bologna painting. Ward Bissell uses such phrases as “tired variations,” “histrionic,” and “expressive artificiality” to describe the Brno painting, with its oddly posed Susanna and awkward composition,\textsuperscript{xix} even Mary Garrard, one of Artemisia’s staunchest proponents, referred to its style as “strange and incomprehensible.”\textsuperscript{xx} The Bologna “Susanna,” on the other hand, is graceful both in Susanna’s pose and in overall composition; Locker refers to it as a “splendid work.”\textsuperscript{xxi}

Artemisia’s style may have changed over the course of this series, but her commitment to portraying Susanna as a heroic and virtuous women did not.\textsuperscript{xxii} Of course, Susanna is the heroine of her story, but by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, her imagery stressed her sensual and erotic appeal rather than her chastity and virtue (Fig 3).\textsuperscript{xxiii} Across her series, Artemisia uses three devices to demonstrate Susanna’s commitment to her own heroism in the form of that chastity and virtue. The first is the most obvious: Susanna recoils or turns away from the elders, signaling her rejection of their proposition. This approach is used to greatest effect in the 1610 Pommersfelden painting. Susanna’s legs and torso indicate that she had been sitting facing away from the elders, while her shoulders indicate that she had turned toward them to speak. So quickly does she turn her head away that it precedes her shoulders, resulting in the twisted contrapposto that helps signal her distress. We see a dim echo of this in the 1649 Brno painting, in which Susanna has flung her arms out to shield herself (as in the Pommersfelden painting) and
thrown her head back as far as it will reach to escape the two men. More subtle still is the Susanna in the 1652 Bologna painting, who is leaning away from the elders with one arm held up to hold them off. Finally, in the 1622 Burghley House painting, Susanna has completely turned away, showing her back to the elders.

The second device, seen only in the 1636 Bologna painting, is confrontation. Here Susanna has turned to the elders and rested one arm calmly in her lap while raising the other in a simple “no” or “halt” gesture. Her equally calm face registers no surprise, fear, or anguish. The third device is the subtlest, and involves conflating two moments in the narrative: the moment when the elders accost Susanna and the moment when, during her trial, “(t)earfully she turned her eyes to Heaven, her heart confident in God” (Dn. 13:35). At that moment, Susanna places her faith and trust in God, knowing He will reward her for her virtue. Babette Bohn credits Ludovico Carracci with the first such reinterpretation of the story in his ca. 1598 painting, the most salient feature of which is Susanna turning her eyes upward to heaven and into the light symbolizing God’s presence. We see this device beautifully executed in the 1622 Burghley House painting and equally effectively, if less beautifully, in the 1649 Brno painting. It is also suggested in the 1636 London painting: once Susanna turns away from the elders, she will face fully into the light of God’s mercy.

Although Artemisia portrayed her Susannas as virtuous and chaste, she also met her patrons’ expectations by painting them as erotic nudes intended for the male gaze. The 1652 Bologna and 1649 Brno paintings demonstrate the simplest way to accomplish this: Susanna may be showing her resistance, but she is still gracefully posed and either nude (Brno) or erotically draped (Bologna) to entice the male viewer. Although the same applies to the other three paintings, Artemisia added to their erotic appeal by quoting well-known classical works.
With their twisted bodies and raised arms, both the 1610 and 1636 Susannas reference Eve from Michelangelo’s “The Fall and Banishment” on the Sistine Ceiling (Fig. 4). As Eve, Susanna becomes both the seduced and the seductress, and the core assumption of the painting becomes whether or not she will give in to her own sexual instincts. Even clearer is the enticement offered by the 1622 “Susanna,” in which Artemisia quotes the crouching Venus Anadyomene, a well-known classical figure associated with luxurious eroticism (Fig. 5).

Her ability to portray Susanna as simultaneously virtuous and erotic is an example of Artemisia’s celebrated narrative originality, which includes her willingness to rethink convention and ability to deploy sophisticated literary conceits in the service of that originality. The 1610 Pommersfelden “Susanna” demonstrates that her ability to tell stories from a unique perspective was present from the beginning of her career: its treatment of the Susanna story is unique in both composition and emotional content, using a harsh realism and ominous setting to show viewers, for the first time, a young woman in deep emotional distress.

Artemisia used an additional and subtle narrative device in the 1610 painting and repeated it in her 1649 Brno “Susanna.” In both paintings, Susanna’s arms quote those of Michelangelo’s Adam from “Expulsion of Adam and Eve” on the Sistine Ceiling (Fig. 4) and, according to Mary Garrard, to the nurse’s arms on a relief of “Orestes Slaying Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.” In both works, the gesture carries an implication of judgment. Susanna will be judged for her alleged transgression, but the ultimate judgment will be of the elders themselves. Thus, a single gesture encapsulates the central turning point of the story.

The 1636 London “Susanna” is another example of a narratively unique depiction of Susanna’s tale. Here, rather than seeming shocked, distressed, or fearful, Susanna appears to be calmly confronting the elders with a simple gesture of denial. The elders appear to have drawn
back in response: they are not looming over her or standing as close as they are in the other paintings. Although she is naked and seated below them, Susanna appears in control of the encounter. This treatment is in keeping with the Biblical text in that, after making her decision to deny the elders, it is Susanna herself who claims agency over her fate when she “... crie(s) out with a loud voice ...” to summon her servants (Dn. 13:24). Interestingly, this was the first “Susanna” Artemisia painted after returning from Venice, where the “questione della donna” – the question of the status, abilities, and roles of women – was being actively debated by her contemporaries. Advocates on both sides used historical figures as exemplars; Susanna was upheld as an example of a chaste and virtuous woman. Is it coincidence that Artemisia also portrays this Susanna as stronger than the men who attempt to harm her?

Artemisia demonstrates her ability to tell old stories in new ways, not only in these individual paintings, but also through the series as a whole. Viewed in the order in which they were painted, we can see that no two are alike enough to be called repetitions of the same type. But the series can also be read in a different order, one that reveals each painting as a different moment in Susanna’s fully heroic narrative (Fig. 6).

Read this way, the story begins with the 1652 Bologna painting, which shows Susanna first being startled by the elders’ appearance in the garden. The elders have just begun to approach; she has flung up a hand and leaned back, but only slightly. She has not begun to turn away. As they come closer and begin to speak, she flings her head back in horror (the 1649 Brno painting) before turning away in shame (the 1610 Pommersfelden painting). Having made her decision, and trusting in God, she confronts the elders and tells them her decision (the 1636 London painting); her forcefulness startles them into backing away temporarily. Finally, even as
the elders insistently loom over her again, she turns away and surrenders herself to God (the
1622 Burghley house painting).

This reading is not intended to suggest that Artemisia deliberately set out to create a
sequential narrative of Susanna’s story. Rather it points out how attuned Artemisia was to that
story: each time she painted it, she could envision and realize a unique moment and perspective
from the tale. This begs the question of why – what led Artemisia to create so many original
representations of this story? We can’t know the answer with any certainty. We don’t know, for
example, how many of the paintings were commissioned and how many were painted on
speculation. We also don’t know how much control she had over the compositions even when we
know something about the paintings’ histories (as in the 1610 Pommersfelden and 1622
Burghley House works, for example).

We do know, however, that Artemisia brought her characters most fully to life when she
felt some sort of identification with them. And while we shouldn’t overemphasize it, we can’t
deny the parallels between Susanna’s story and Artemisia’s own experience as a victim of sexual
violence. Could Artemisia identify more with Susanna than with, for example, Bathsheba (the
other female nude of her later years)? Could that, as a consequence, enable her to mine
Susanna’s story for a longer series of separate, more nuanced, moments? Does Artemisia give us
a clue when we compare the face of the 1622 Susanna to the portrait of Artemisia painted by
Vouet at about the same time (Fig. 7)? Whether autobiographical or not, whether eroticized and
idealized or not, we must recognize that Artemisia brings a heroic Susanna fully to life through
this series.
Endnotes

i The date of Artemisia’s death is uncertain. The last documentary evidence of her life is a signed contract dated 1654; the 1656 plague in Naples is a likely cause of her death. See Jesse Locker, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Language of Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 178.


v Edward J. Olszewski, “Expanding the Litany for Susanna and the Elders,” *Notes in the History of Art* 26, no.3 (Spring 2007), 42.

vi Cristelle L. Baskins, “‘La Festa di Susanna’: Virtue on Trial in Renaissance Sacred Drama and Painted Wedding Chests,” *Art History*, 14 no. 3 (September 1991), 329-331.


ix Because it was her first work and completed when she was only seventeen years old, debate still exists over the extent to which her father, Orazio, participated its planning and execution. See, e.g., Garrard *Artemisia Gentileschi: Female Hero* 185; Keith Christiansen, “Becoming Artemisia: Afterthoughts on the Gentileschi Exhibition,” *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 39, (2004), 102-105.

x X-ray analysis reveals that the left side of this painting was revised (painted over), although debate remains over both the extent of the repainting and whose hand was responsible. See, e.g., Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Catalogue Raisonné*, 348-350; Mary Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi Around 1622: The Shaping and Reshaping of an Artistic Identity* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001), 89-113;

xi The extent to which this painting is a collaboration among Artemisia, Bernardo Cavallino, Domenico Gargiulo (thought to have painted the garden and possibly the architecture), and Viviano Codazzi (who possibly painted the architecture) remains under debate. For the purposes of this paper, I assume that Artemisia, if she did not paint the figures herself, at least approved the design. For discussion see, e.g., Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Catalogue Raisonné*, 266-267; Riccardo Lattuada, “Artemisia and Naples, Naples and Artemisia,” in Christiansen and Mann, *Orazio and Artemisia*, 384-385; Locker,*Language of Painting*, 118.

xvi Locker, *Language of Painting*, 42.
xviii These include economic and political turmoil in Naples, Artemisia’s own declining health, and her increasing dependence on workshop assistants. Locker, *Language of Painting*, 4.
xix Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi, Catalogue Raisonné*, 293
xxii Artemisia was known for her portrayals of heroic female protagonists; see, e.g., Richard Spear, “I have made up my mind to take a short trip to Rome,” in Christiansen and Mann, eds., *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi*, 338 and Babette Bohn, “Death, Dispassion, and the Female Hero: Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Jael and Sisera*,” in Mieke Bal, ed., *The Artemisia Files* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 127.
xxiii Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Female Hero*, 188.
xxiv Bohn, “Rape and the Gendered Gaze,” 270
xxvi Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: Female Hero*, 191
xxv Garrard, *Artemisia: Female Hero*: 47, 92
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Mann, Judith. “Susanna and the Elders.” In Christiansen and Mann, Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi, 355-358.


Spear, Richard. “‘I have made up my mind to take a short trip to Rome.’” In Christiansen and Mann, Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi, 334-343.
Images

Figure 1. Examples of repeated image types by Artemisia Gentileschi. 1a: *Penitent Magdalen*. (L) ca. 1625-26. Oil on canvas, 1.22 x .96 m. Seville, Cathedral; (R) ca. 1625-26. Oil on canvas, 1.365 x 1.00 m. Private Collection. 1b. *Judith and her Maidservant*. (L) ca. 1640-45. Oil on canvas, 2.35 x 1.72 m. Cannes, Musée de la Castre. (R) ca. 1645-50. Oil on canvas, 2.72 x 2.21 m. Naples, Museo di Capodimonte. 1c: *Bathsheba*. (L) Ca. 1650-52. Oil on canvas, measurements unknown. Formerly (destroyed) Gosford House, Scotland, Earl of Wemyss. (R) Pietro (Pierre) Fevère tapestry (after Artemisia Gentileschi, *Bathsheba*, ca. 1650-52. Oil on canvas, 2.86 x 2.14m. Florence, Palazzo Pitti, storage), 1665, Petraia, Villa Medici. From Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi Catalogue Raisonné*. Figures 191, 192, color plates X, XI, figures 199, 200 respectively.

Fig. 1a.
Fig. 1b.

Fig. 1c.
2b.
2c.

3a:
3b:

3c:
Fig. 5. Example of the crouching Venus Anadyomene. Roman after Greek original, “Lely’s Venus,” 2nd Century AD. Marble, 1.20 m. Available from the British Museum website http://www.britishmuseum.org (accessed 19 March 2015).
Fig. 6. Narrative reading of Artemisia’s “Susanna and the Elders” series, beginning with the moment when the elders first approach. 6a: 1652 Bologna: the elders first approach to Susanna’s surprise. 6b: 1659 Brno: Susanna recoils in horror at their proposition; 6c: 1610 Pommersfelden: Susanna turns away in shame and anguish; 6d: 1636 London: Susanna confronts the elders with her decision to turn them away; 6e: 1622 Burghley House: Susanna turns her back on the elders and gives herself up to God’s judgment. This is brilliant.
Fig. 7. Comparison of 1622 Burghley House Susanna to Simon Vouet’s portrait of Artemisia painted at around the same time. 7a: 1622 Burghley House Susanna, detail. 7b. Simon Vouet, “Portrait of Artemisia Gentileschi,” c. 1625. Oil on canvas, 35 3/8 x 28 in. (90 x 71 cm). Private collection. From Locker, *Language of Painting*, 21.