

**[In]Visible: Paintings by Women Artists in the National Gallery, London:
An Interview with Letizia Treves and Francesca Whitlum-Cooper**

Susanna Avery-Quash, Letizia Treves, and Francesca Whitlum-Cooper

The National Gallery's recent acquisition of Artemisia Gentileschi's *Self-Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria* (Fig. 1) takes the number of works by female artists in the permanent collection to twenty-one.¹ Artists represented at the National Gallery include [Henriette Browne](#), [Berthe Morisot](#), [Rachel Ruysch](#), [Rosa Bonheur](#), [Catharina van Hemessen](#), [Elisabeth Louise](#)



Fig. 1: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Self-Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, c. 1615–17, oil on canvas, 71.4 × 69 cm. © National Gallery, London.

¹ For more on Artemisia Gentileschi's *Self-Portrait*, see <<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/artemisia-gentileschi-self-portrait-as-saint-catherine-of-alexandria>>; and <<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/rare-self-portrait-by-artemisia-gentileschi-now-on-display>>. For videos about the painting's conservation, see <<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLvb2y26xK6Y6F2GH6yosrsgGcCmgaNNjp>>; they are also accessible via the painting's page and special feature on the gallery's website noted above [all accessed 4 March 2019].

Vigée-Lebrun, Judith Leyster, Rosalba Carriera, Marie Blencourt, Vivien Blackett, Madeleine Strindberg, Maggi Hambling, and Paula Rego.

In this interview at the National Gallery, Susanna Avery-Quash (Senior Research Curator in the History of Collecting) asks Letizia Treves (The James and Sarah Sassoon Curator of Later Italian, Spanish, and French 17th-Century Paintings) and Francesca Whitlum-Cooper (The Myojin-Nadar Associate Curator of Paintings 1600–1800) about the experiences of women artists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and how their work was received during their lifetimes and later.

SAQ: What was it like to be a woman artist in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and how exceptional was it?

LT: Germaine Greer famously described Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1653) as ‘the magnificent exception’. Although it was certainly unusual for women in seventeenth-century Italy to become professional artists (as opposed to amateurs), Artemisia wasn’t alone in doing so — nor was she the first. Famous precedents include Sofonisba Anguissola (1530–1625), who specialized in portraiture (and self-portraits); Lavinia Fontana (1552–1614), who gained notable success painting portraits and small paintings on copper; and Elisabetta Sirani (1638–1665), whose period of activity overlaps with Artemisia’s (though her life was cut short in her twenties), who set up the first school of painting for women. What sets Artemisia apart is that she didn’t limit herself to portraiture and still life, but tackled the same biblical and historical subjects as her male contemporaries. It’s fair to say that women who became professional painters rarely attained the same fame and reputation as men during their own lifetimes, but Artemisia is an exception in this regard.

FWC: Across Europe, the eighteenth century saw more women working as professional artists, but the fact that the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture in Paris felt the need to limit the number of women who could hold membership at any one time to just four tells you quite a lot about the anxieties these women artists provoked! Even when they were awarded membership to the Académie royale, they received none of the privileges their male counterparts enjoyed, such as studio space within the Louvre or access to life drawing classes. Nevertheless, that didn’t stop artists such as Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755–1842) or Adélaïde Labille-Guiard (1749–1803) becoming extremely successful. They both worked as portraitists — the gallery owns Vigée-Lebrun’s *Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat* (NG1653) (*Fig. 2*) — but there were still life painters too, such as Anne Vallayer-Coster (1744–1818) in France or Mary Moser (1744–1819) in England. But stereotypes about women artists being less accomplished than men certainly persisted. At the start of the French Revolution, Vigée-Lebrun fled France for Italy — her position as Marie Antoinette’s favourite painter put her in



Fig. 2: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat, after 1782, oil on canvas, 97.8 × 70.5 cm. © National Gallery, London.

jeopardy. When called before the Revolutionary authorities to justify her absence, her husband explained that she had gone to Italy to learn how to perfect her art, despite the fact that she'd been earning an extremely successful living as an artist for some fifteen years!

SAQ: How would women artists have received their training? What restrictions were imposed, if any?

LT: Most women painters were either the daughters or wives of established artists. Family workshops had existed since the Renaissance (and not just in Italy) — the Bellini family in Venice and Brueghel family in Flanders are just two well-known examples — but these generally followed a pattern of father-to-son training and rarely involved female members of the family. Artemisia was trained in Rome by her father Orazio, alongside her three brothers (who were clearly not as talented). Other women painters who received similar 'in-house' training included Lavinia Fontana, whose father Prospero was active at the court of Pope Julius III in Rome, and Elisabetta Sirani, whose father Giovanni Andrea had been one of Guido Reni's leading pupils in Bologna.

FWC: Many eighteenth-century women artists also came from artistic families — clearly being around art from a young age made it easier for a woman

to receive instruction since women weren't allowed to attend life drawing classes or take up apprenticeships. Vigée-Lebrun had her earliest training with her father, who was also a painter. Other artists, like Vallayer-Coster or Angelica Kauffman (1741–1807), had fathers who worked in some sort of artistic field, even if they weren't painters, and this must in turn have helped them in the early stages of their careers. Venetian artist Rosalba Carriera (1673–1757) probably began by making designs for the lace trade and decorating snuffboxes, but she went on to become internationally renowned for her pastels; the National Gallery has her 1720s pastel *Portrait of a Man* (NG3126) (Fig. 3). Her works were avidly collected by connoisseurs across Europe: she's probably the only woman artist in the eighteenth century to have a room in a princely collection named after her — the 'Rosalbakabinett' in Dresden, which held more than one hundred of her pastels. Yet despite this great celebrity, and the mobility of her works which she sent right across the Continent, she herself was unmarried and therefore not able to travel without her brother-in-law acting as her escort. **LT:** And travel was important for artists wishing to gain favour outside of their native cities. Artemisia moved to Florence immediately after her rape

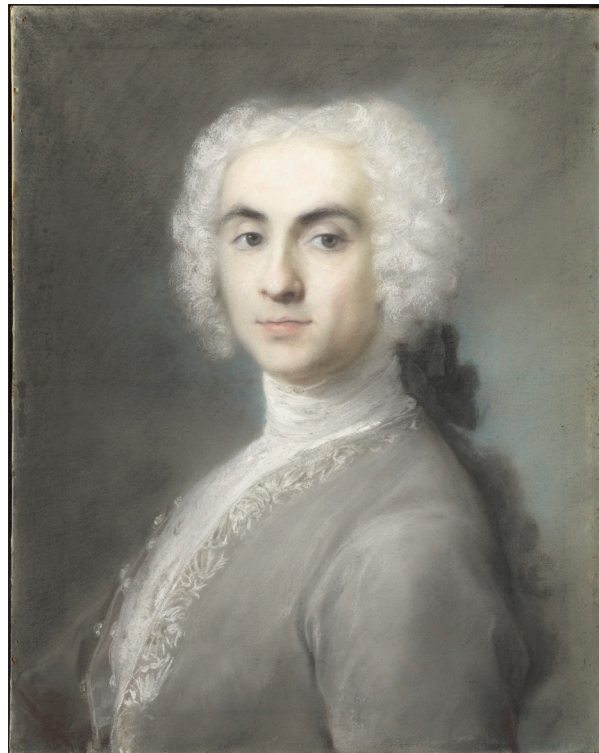


Fig. 3: Rosalba Carriera, *Portrait of a Man*, 1720s, pastel on paper, 57.8 × 47 cm.
© National Gallery, London.

trial, but only because she'd been married off to a minor Florentine artist — Pierantonio Stiattesi, the brother of her defence lawyer. For Artemisia this move marked an important moment in her career — it got her out of Orazio's house (and studio) and set her on her way to becoming an independent artist. It was in Florence, after all, that she became the first female member of the Accademia delle Arti del Disegno (in 1616) and established her reputation. In the Gentileschi-Stiattesi household it was Artemisia who was the main breadwinner, being the more celebrated artist of the two. She suffered financial pressures throughout her life, particularly following the estrangement from her husband. In the 1630s Artemisia was especially concerned about financing a dowry for her adult daughter, and in 1649 she wrote to Don Antonio Ruffo saying quite plainly that she was bankrupt ('son fallita'). Artemisia is all the more extraordinary for having succeeded despite the artistic, financial, and reputational pressures of being a woman artist, particularly one without stable employment at court or a wealthy husband at her side.

SAQ: How did the life of a woman artist differ from that of a man's?

LT: It's frequently forgotten in talking about women artists that, as well as being professional painters, they were also mothers. Lavinia Fontana gave birth to an astonishing eleven children and Artemisia had five children over a period of just five years in Florence, just as her career was taking off. Her daughter Prudenzia, named after Artemisia's own mother (whom she'd lost when she was twelve), is the only one who survived to adulthood. She too became a painter and although no certain works by her are known, Artemisia actively promoted her daughter's work through her own contacts and patrons.

FWC: At the same time, some women artists didn't marry. Carriera had two sisters, one of whom married an artist and the other assisted in her studio. I think for her, marriage would have meant giving up her artistic career — you get the sense from her correspondence that there wasn't the possibility of doing both. Aside from the details of their family life, women artists certainly had much less freedom than men — whether that was in relation to travel, as with Carriera, or in terms of academy membership and the opportunity to study from a model or even to train with someone outside their own family. But some women artists used their femininity to their advantage. Vigée-Lebrun, for example, produced wonderfully informal, tender portraits of Queen Marie Antoinette and her children, which in turn won her numerous commissions from other members of the French court. It was Marie Antoinette who secured Vigée-Lebrun's membership to the Académie royale — she was admitted without having to go through any of the normal admission procedures, much to the annoyance of her male colleagues!

LT: Your point about women painters using their femininity — or their singularity — to their advantage is also true of Artemisia. She was a renowned beauty and seems to have used her own image frequently, especially in Florence where a number of self-portraits are recorded. Artemisia was fully aware of the appeal such paintings had for collectors, particularly as her fame grew, and she explicitly offers her self-portraits to Cassiano dal Pozzo in Rome and Don Antonio Ruffo in Messina to include in their ‘galleries’ of eminent and illustrious painters.

FWC: Yes, there’s definitely an appeal in the eighteenth century too about owning a work painted by a woman. Owning a pastel by Carriera was extremely desirable. People talked of wanting to *possess* a work by Carriera, especially her self-portraits, even though her biographers repeatedly noted rather bluntly that she was not an attractive woman. And we know, too, from correspondence, that some of her collectors found themselves experiencing this blurring of boundaries between what was in the frame and the woman who painted it. People frequently connected her depictions of women with Carriera herself, even when she wasn’t painting a self-portrait.

LT: That’s also true of Artemisia. Her works often feature a female heroine and there was certainly a strong market for her pictures during her lifetime. Male viewers must have experienced a frisson in knowing that a certain semi-nude Susanna, Judith, or Cleopatra was painted by a woman and (in some cases) even resembled the artist. Artemisia was fully aware of the appeal and erotic potential of this, particularly since she was widely admired by contemporaries for both her beauty and her talent.

SAQ: What circles did women artists move in? What were their networks of influence?

LT: Artemisia worked for the highest echelons of European society, including the Grand Duke of Tuscany, the Duke of Bavaria, Philip IV of Spain, and Charles I of England. In Florence she moved in important circles, working for the Medici and frequenting eminent figures such as Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger (great-nephew of the celebrated Michelangelo) and the astronomer Galileo Galilei. The familiarity Artemisia displays in her correspondence with dal Pozzo and Ruffo shows just how close she was to these notable collectors — in a letter to Ruffo in 1649, Artemisia defiantly declares, ‘I will show Your Most Illustrious Lordship what a woman can do.’ These influential men were not only her patrons, they also mediated on her behalf and sent her money.

FWC: Although she rarely left her native Venice, Carriera’s pastels were collected across Europe — by kings, nobles, connoisseurs, and other artists. Many of her letters survive and reveal that she was in correspondence with courts and collectors from Paris to Sweden to Dresden! She had membership of the academies in Paris, Florence, and Bologna, so there was a

real prestige to her connections and reputation. Vigée-Lebrun was similarly well connected. In exile from the French Revolution, she travelled to the cities and courts of Europe, working prolifically, winning admission to the academies of Rome, Parma, Bologna, St Petersburg, Berlin, and Geneva. She really had an incredibly international reputation and audience, and made a great success of this period outside of France. Both these women's careers absolutely refute the notion of women painting at home in a very modest, domestic, or amateur way.

SAQ: What was the perception of women artists in their own day?

LT: There seems to have been an ambivalent attitude to women artists in seventeenth-century Italy. A letter of 1637 written by the painter Giovanni Lanfranco (published by Patrizia Cavazzini) illustrates this perfectly. Lanfranco had sold a painting to a patron who, on returning to Rome, was teased for having bought a mediocre picture described in derogatory terms as being a workshop piece, or even 'the work of a woman'. After reluctantly agreeing to the canvas being returned and reimbursing his client, Lanfranco poses the question that if indeed the painting had been the work of a woman, would it not have been worth three times as much, 'bad as it was'? Thus a woman painter's work might have been considered more valuable than a man's, even if it was notably inferior in quality.

FWC: It was a complex business, for eighteenth-century artists and critics, to acknowledge the skills of women artists while simultaneously noting the limitations of their gender. After years of urging by her collectors, Carriera spent a year in Paris between 1720 and 1721, during which she was much feted and awarded membership to the Académie royale. Yet the Parisian art world — which was almost exclusively male at that point — found it difficult to reconcile her skill and her gender. Charles-Nicolas Cochin managed to remind his readers that the fame of women artists rested on their rarity more than their skill, in the same paragraph that nominally set out to celebrate Carriera's fame, lauding her as 'the glory of her sex'! Gender really was unavoidable in the discussion of female artists' work in the eighteenth century, but perhaps that's not so different from today...

SAQ: How would you describe the legacy or posthumous reputation of the women artists you've discussed here?

LT: Like Caravaggio and Orazio Gentileschi, Artemisia was greatly admired during her lifetime but was forgotten over the following centuries. She's only properly been re-evaluated over the last fifty years or so and today she's considered not only the most celebrated female painter in seventeenth-century Italy but also one of the most important women artists of all time. She continues to inspire novels, plays, documentaries, and feature films.

FWC: Neither Carriera nor Vigée-Lebrun suffered quite the same neglect that Artemisia did, but it's only since the 1980s, as with so many women artists, that they've been subject to the same rigorous scholarship as many of their male contemporaries. There's still a long way to go!