

Rembrandt and Artemisia Gentileschi

A Comparison of Exceptional Portrayals of the Female Nude

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It is not difficult to determine that the paintings of Rembrandt are different from those of his contemporaries. Many factors explain how the young artist of the early 17th century produced paintings of female nudes with an unusually psychological dimension so that the female character seems less interested in being the subject of the male viewer and more interested in being an independent and thoroughly individualized woman. A combination of circumstances may explain Rembrandt's unique approach, the influence of Italian artists in particular. The early female nudes of Rembrandt are comparable to those of Florentine Artemisia Gentileschi in that not only did they deviate from traditional representations of women but did so in a way that empathized with the female subject. They explored the female nude in a more intimate manner, so she is removed from her role as serving the male viewer and therefore becomes elevated, independent and approachable. Rembrandt may have come into contact with reproductions and possibly examples of Gentileschi's work which seem to have been inspiration for his own paintings. To demonstrate that Rembrandt may have adopted the style of Artemisia for his female subjects this essay will identify the connections between the two artists in order to legitimize their similarities, demonstrate their distinct separation from predecessors and contemporaries such as Rubens, and discuss their similar empathetic responses toward the female subject.

I

It is likely that Rembrandt was quite familiar with Italian art and therefore would have been familiar with paintings of Gentileschi and other Italian artists. The relationship between Rembrandt and the Italian artists legitimizes the possibility of a connection between himself and Artemisia Gentileschi whose empathetic female nudes may have directly influenced that of Rembrandt. He borrowed extensively from Italian paintings and prints, and his famous remark to

Constantin Huygens that he “didn’t need to go to Italy since in Amsterdam he could see all the Italian pictures he wanted” suggests that he had access to Italian art dealers and prints.¹ One important source for Netherlandish artists was the writing on art theory by Karel Van Mander who was sensitive to the beauty of Italian art and advocated its techniques to young Dutch painters. Van Mander had visited Italy and was also an artist in his own right. He lived during the transitional period after Mannerism characterized by a search for new forms of expression and new interpretations of traditional themes.² Van Mander realized the need for a textbook to educate Dutch artists on the foundations of painting, and he went to work analyzing the artistic theories of Leonardo Da Vinci, Vasari and others. Throughout the first section of Van Mander’s *Het Schilderboeck* titled *Den Grondt* or “The Principles,” the author repeatedly discussed the benefit of studying nature and especially Italian art. One example of his insistence on studying nature was in the section on emotions in which Van Mander said, “the painter needs to look closely and to thoroughly observe characteristic appearances.” He urged students to “bring from Rome the just manner of drawing and the good painting from the city of Venice,” for it was his goal that Netherlandish artists rival those of Italy and be credited with successfully painting figures and not only landscapes.³ Van Mander urged young artists to carefully and diligently study the human form in order to discredit the Italian stereotype of the Dutch painter who, in Italian minds, could not successfully depict the human figure.⁴ It is likely that Rembrandt had

¹ Garrard, Mary, “Artemisia Gentileschi: the Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art,” Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989, 3-244.

² Van de Wall, Constant and Van Mander, Karel, “Dutch and Flemish Painters,” translation from the *Schilderboeck*, Arno Press, 1969, xxix-lxvii.

³ Honig, Elizabeth A, and Van Mander, Karel, “The Foundation of the Noble Free Art of Painting,” New Haven, 1985, 2-76.

⁴ Lehmann, Ann-Sophie and Roodenburg, Herman, “Body and Embodiment in Netherlandish Art,” Zwolle, Waanders Publishers, 2008, 7-9.

access to the writings of Van Mander and that they encouraged his appreciation and study of Italian art as well as influenced his own work.

Another valuable link to Italy was Pieter Lastman, Rembrandt's teacher and mentor. Lastman spent several years in Italy which was very important in instructing him as an artist. Rembrandt was clearly receptive to this instruction, for we see him borrowing from Lastman's compositions. Rembrandt began to draw inspiration from his master in the 1630s; the decade in which he created his *Andromeda* and his first *Susanna*, both of which can be favorably compared to the works of Artemisia Gentileschi in terms of theme. In 1647 Rembrandt painted another *Susanna* similar to Lastman's painting of the same theme thirty years earlier (Images 1 and 2). The divisions of the compositions are very similar and they have the same balance of figures, garden setting and background architecture. *Susanna* is crouching in each painting with one hand covering herself and the other raised, with the two elders directly behind her. Although he only studied under Lastman for six months, Rembrandt found real solutions for his later paintings as demonstrated in the comparison of the *Susanna* works. Lastman taught him how to rework traditional themes and turn previously neglected narratives into new living compositions. Rembrandt took the basic composition of *Susanna* from Lastman but invested it with movement and emotional intensity. Instead of sitting stagnant by the bath, *Susanna* is in motion and looking out at the viewer. The elder bending behind her grabs her clothing, which creates much more tension than the scene of Lastman in which the two men stand a safer distance from the naked *Susanna*. Lastman owned countless graphic works, series of plates, illustrated bibles and other illustrated books which Rembrandt probably had access to. Lastman prepared his own paintings with plenty of documentation through studying other works and written sources, and he then

showed them to Rembrandt. One has to wonder if Rembrandt may have discovered through Lastman the works of Artemisia and her father Orazio Gentileschi.⁵

It is important to establish the reasons of how and why Rembrandt knew of Artemisia's work because it provides a framework that supports stylistic and thematic similarities in their paintings. Without providing evidence for Rembrandt having knowledge of Artemisia, it is difficult to legitimize the possibility of him using her work as inspiration for his female nudes. The two artists seem worlds apart, especially because of national affiliations and gender differences, but there are enough variables to suggest a connection between the two. Gentileschi influenced many of her male contemporaries such as Cavallino and Vouet, and according to Mary Garrard, possibly even Rembrandt and Velazquez.⁶ Artemisia and Rembrandt painted relatively at the same time (she was thirteen years older than he), so it is not far off to say that Rembrandt could have heard about the fearless Italian woman who painted in such a grand manner. In 1610, before Rembrandt had made anything of real significance to his career, Gentileschi finished her well-known *Susanna and the Elders* (Image 3). In its unusually naturalistic and expressive character in portraying a highly unclassical female nude, this painting may have been one of several of her works that encouraged Rembrandt in a direction he was already headed.⁷

Rembrandt and Gentileschi also may have had connections through specific people. The artist Joachim von Sandrart knew them both. From 1628 to 1635 he traveled in Italy and visited Artemisia. There he painted her a replica of one of his own pictures and later, according to Garrard, praised her greatly in his *Teutsche Academie*. A little later, he was in Amsterdam, in

⁵ Tumpel, Astrid, and Schatborn, Peter, "Pieter Lastman, the Man Who Taught Rembrandt," Zwolle, Waanders Publishing, 1991, 11-84

⁶ Garrard, 1989, "Artemisia Gentileschi: the Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art."

⁷ Garrard, 1989, "Artemisia Gentileschi: the Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art."

close contact with Rembrandt, whom he described as an ignorant man who had not visited Italy, who opposed and contradicted “our rules of art.” Judging by Sandrart’s interaction with Artemisia, one can imagine that he might have spoken to Rembrandt about the female prodigy or shown him replicas and possibly even examples of her work as something to strive towards. The two artists also shared a connection through Anthony Van Dyck, an art dealer and famous painter whose friends, brothers Cornelis and Lucas de Wael, were Flemish art handlers in Genoa and who no doubt traded in Holland. Van Dyck was well acquainted with Artemisia’s father Orazio whom he first met in Genoa in 1621. Garrard claims that Van Dyck must have known Artemisia and that he seems to have been familiar with her *Susanna* as well as her *Lucretia*, to judge from the *Susanna* he painted a few years after his stay in Genoa. Van Dyck visited Holland twice in the late 1620s and early 1630s, just before Rembrandt painted his *Andromeda* and his *Susanna*.⁸ Both Van Dyck and Sandrart could have introduced Artemisia’s works to Rembrandt.

Mary Garrard, in a brief section of her book on Artemisia, discusses the possibility of Rembrandt’s artistic relationship with the Italian woman. She concentrated heavily on the visual connection between Artemisia’s *Lucretia* and *Cleopatra* (Images 4 and 5) in Genoa and Rembrandt’s *Cleopatra* drawing as well as a connection between his *Samson* and her *Judith*. Seeing the works in Genoa could very well have played an important role in the development of Rembrandt’s naturalism. These figures would have surely interested Rembrandt as, according to Garrard, they “presented images of the naked female then almost unique in European art: full-bodied, lumpy and plain-featured.”⁹ Like many of Gentileschi’s female subjects, her *Lucretia* (Image 4) seems to portray the female heroine in a way that identifies her as a heroine in the eyes of a woman rather than the typical, eroticized heroine of the male imagination; an idealized

⁸ Garrard, 1989, “Artemisia Gentileschi: the Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art.”

⁹ Garrard, 1989, “Artemisia Gentileschi: the Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art.”

woman who exemplifies virtue and power but who is unreachable and separated from the realm of reality. There were several other 17th century artists who portrayed their female subjects in a natural manner but those of Artemisia and Rembrandt identify with the woman in a more intimate way, exploring her inner psychology and removing her from her role as serving the male viewer. She becomes elevated, independent and approachable in such a way that male and female viewers alike are confronted with the opportunity to empathize with her.

Garrard suggested that the visual link between Orazio Gentileschi's *Danae* and Rembrandt's version of the same theme implies that Rembrandt had seen this work by Artemisia's father (Images 6 and 7). Rembrandt borrowed the raised arm and frontal pose of Orazio's subject, and Rembrandt's intimate bedroom setting more closely resembles that of Orazio's painting more than any other. They are quite similar in their layout, but Rembrandt replaced the idealized *Danae* of Orazio with a more realistic woman. If Rembrandt had seen Orazio's painting in the 1620s it is likely that he was also familiar with Artemisia's two Genoa works (Images 4 and 5) as all three of them were in the same location. Orazio's painting may have inspired Rembrandt's *Danae*, and the paintings of Artemisia in Genoa may have given him inspiration and encouragement to paint her as a real woman instilled with actual life.¹⁰

II

Creating an effective link between Rembrandt and Artemisia as artists is vital in order to lay a foundation of the similarities between their actual works. This section will discuss the similar handling of the body between the two artists and how their treatment exemplified a hybridization of the natural and ideal that went beyond that of artists such as Gossaert and Rubens. The early paintings of Rembrandt, and surely those of Artemisia, surprised and excited

¹⁰ Garrard, 1989, "Artemisia Gentileschi: the Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art."

their contemporaries who were used to smooth, beautiful and idealized female bodies. The 17th century brought about an unprecedented attentiveness to daily life and observed reality, and especially in the Netherlands this resulted in more lifelike depictions.¹¹ The criticism which inevitably came to Rembrandt was due not to his use of nudity but rather the type of female he chose to represent. Like that of Artemisia, his female subject deviated from traditional standards even though it was still somewhat constricted within traditional parameters. Their works seem to be a discovery of female nature through utilizing an unidealized female subject. She is an ordinary woman with wrinkles, flaccid breasts, a full belly and is nothing like the classical Venus who had previously served as the generic female model.¹² The body became a meeting place for tensions between the natural or “real” and the idealized, and according to Chapman, “a place where artists claimed allegiance to the peasant body or the elite body.”¹³

The hybridization of idealization and naturalism that we see in the work of Rembrandt and Artemisia did not begin with these two artists but they did advance it. A more individualized naturalism had been seeping into history painting before Rembrandt and Artemisia. Even though they may not have been the first to paint naturalistic figures, one can say that they developed the idea so that it could further grow. Rembrandt and Artemisia can be connected stylistically through their differences from their contemporaries and predecessors. For example, Stephanie Schrader has observed that, “Jan Gossaert was credited as being the first artist to bring Italianate style and subject matter to the Low Countries in the mid-16th century.”¹⁴ Schrader specifically

¹¹ Chapman, H. Perry, “The Wooden Body: Representing the ‘Manikin’ in Dutch Artist’ Studios,” *Body and Embodiment in Netherlandish Art*, Zwolle, Waanders Publishers, 2008, 189-199.

¹² Sluijter, Eric J., “Rembrandt’s Early Paintings of the Female Nude: Andromeda and Susanna,” *Rembrandt and His Pupils: Papers Given at a Symposium in the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, 2-3 October 1992*, Stockholm, Nationalmuseum, 1993, 31-46.

¹³ Chapman, 2008, “The Wooden Body: Representing the ‘Manikin’ in Dutch Artist’ Studios.”

¹⁴ Schrader, Stephanie, “Gossaert’s ‘Neptune and Amphitrite’ and the Body of the Patron,” *Body and Embodiment in Netherlandish Art*, Zwolle, Waanders Publishers, 2008, 41-53.

focused on one piece by Gossaert, his *Neptune and Amphitrite* (Image 8). The work clearly has an overall classical character which recalls figures in prints by the German artist Albrecht Dürer, known for his introduction of classical motifs in the north. In an analysis of the painting, Schrader identified that Gossaert maintained naturalistic motifs of the Netherlandish tradition within a generally classicized composition. As one can see in his Neptune, Gossaert was known for investing his nudes with an abundant amount of facial and body hair. Every strand of their bushy, golden hair is articulated, their pink cheeks and slightly open mouths emphasize the life of the colossal figures, and Gossaert has even gone so far as to individualize their erect nipples, implying that they are cold standing within the airy classical architectural frame. The hybridization of Gossaert in comparison to that of Rembrandt and Artemisia showcases just how much they advanced the idea of working naturalism into a classical composition. In *Neptune and Amphitrite*, Gossaert truly has introduced the commencement of the hybridization of Italianate and Netherlandish art that would be further developed by artists of the next century including Rubens, Rembrandt and Gentileschi.¹⁵

Rubens must be considered in order to understand how Rembrandt and Gentileschi differentiated from their contemporaries and therefore how they were similar to one another in that departure. Rubens was an artist who exemplified the teachings of Van Mander and the outcome of the tension or compromise between the natural and idealized. Unlike Rembrandt and Gentileschi, Rubens still relied heavily on the classical body and a repertoire of recognizable poses, but similar to these two artists the bodies are transformed (though much more slightly) to also be naturalistic and expressive. Rubens paintings of *Susanna* and his *Perseus Freeing Andromeda* (Images 9, 10 and 11) feature idealized female figures with beautiful, luminescent

¹⁵ Schrader, 2008, “Gossaert’s ‘Neptune and Amphitrite’ and the Body of the Patron.”

skin and a pleasant face contrary to the average nudes of Rembrandt and Artemisia who appear more like natural women. Especially in his earliest image of *Susanna*, (Image 11) Rubens relied more on expression to make his subject seem true to life. She looks up at her attackers with an expression of fear, pink cheeks, raised eyebrows, and an arm outstretched in defense. Yet Rubens' *Susanna* still does not evoke the emotional power like that of Rembrandt or Gentileschi. Their paintings were charged with the combination of a realistically portrayed woman and intense expression with all focus on the female subject, as exemplified in their representations of *Susanna* (Images 3 and 12). In his later works, Rubens did manage to create a woman more similar to that of Rembrandt and Artemisia, with an appearance closer to a "real" woman, "cellulite and little fat rolls included without, however, being burdened with characteristic imperfections such as bulkiness and corpulence."¹⁶ On the other hand, Rembrandt and Gentileschi were not as concerned with burdening their subjects with imperfections.

Van Mander wrote extensively in the "Principles" of his *Het Schilderboeck* about the importance of naturalism within a sort of classical framework. Within this he gave a long chapter on color, specifically skin color, and its vitality to lifelikeness. Rubens truly characterizes painting that relies on nature but stays within a classical framework, especially in the treatment of skin color.¹⁷ Lehman, in his study of the "colours of the naked", analyzed this intriguing contrast of individualized idealism in portraying skin color advocated by art theorists of the 17th century. In German and Netherlandish painting manuals, including that of Van Mander, it was advised that artists develop an ideal skin tone for different types of people: children, women, old people, dead people, etc. Even though Van Mander repeatedly emphasized naturalism, it seems

¹⁶ De Clippel, Karolien, "Defining Beauty: Rubens Female Nudes," *Body and Embodiment in Netherlandish Art*, Zwolle, Waanders Publishers, 2008, 111-131.

¹⁷ Chapman, 2008, "The Wooden Body: Representing the 'Manikin' in Dutch Artist' Studios."

that he could not get away from this medieval workshop tradition that had become embedded in a theoretical framework.

Lehman identified both Rubens and Rembrandt as being artists who took the representation of skin to new levels of realism so that producing lifelike flesh color became a foundation of painting. Yet Rembrandt seems less tied to these theoretical treatises and more apt for experimentation.¹⁸ Rembrandt's *Andromeda* (Image 13) demonstrates that he went much further than Rubens in integrating an individualized naturalism. The figure still maintains a contrappasto stance and he partially undressed her to in order to display the female form, but more than simply giving her lifelike skin and a realistic expression Rembrandt has given her all the features of an everyday woman. Her face is less than beautiful, there are wrinkles in her skin and her sagging breasts and belly do not live up to the idealism of Rubens' voluptuous nudes. Like Rembrandt, Artemisia's figures maintain fairly classical poses but she has painted them with the naturalistic features of real women. Her *Susanna*, *Lucretia* and *Cleopatra* (Images 3, 4 and 5) exhibit a sort of awkwardness with heavy legs protruding forward, average faces distorted with expressions appropriate to the moment and less than idealized bodies. Like the expressions in the faces of his nudes, Rubens' perfection of natural skin color was another way to contribute a naturalistic element to an otherwise idealized figure. Rembrandt and Artemisia also focused on proper skin tones but in collaboration with other elements to create a more naturalistic depiction. Clippel alluded to the fact that Rubens seems to have answered Van Mander's call for a softer and silkier nude.¹⁹ Van Mander's hero was Titian, but one must wonder if Rubens would have outranked the Venetian master in his mind as a colorist.²⁰ In comparison, the art theorist might

¹⁸ Lehman, Ann-Sophie, "The 'Colours of the Naked' in Workshop Practice and Art Theory, 1400-1600," *Body and Embodiment in Netherlandish Art*, Zwolle, Waanders Publishers, 2008, 87-103.

¹⁹ De Clippel, 2008, "Defining Beauty: Rubens Female Nudes."

²⁰ Lehman, 2008, "The 'Colours of the Naked' in Workshop Practice and Art Theory."

have been troubled with the individualized naturalism of the nudes painted by Rembrandt and Gentileschi that still maintain some hybridization but emphasize a more realistic and imperfect body than that of Rubens.

Rembrandt and Gentileschi, in contrast to Rubens, opted for a much more deliberate naturalism. The comparison of Rubens to these two artists truly accentuates their deviation from not only their predecessors but from their contemporaries who were striving towards a similar goal of naturalism, individuality and inner female psychology. More often than not, Rubens can be identified with the more Italianate style even though he is often put on the same stylistic plane as Rembrandt. Rembrandt and Gentileschi rejected the classical body in favor of using ordinary, even old or ugly people as models, whereas Rubens used the classical body as his foundation and added naturalistic elements such as fleshy, lifelike skin and intense expression to give his figures life. Rubens relied mostly on classical sculpture as his reference, but Rembrandt and Gentileschi used live models to create a radically new kind of truthfulness to nature. Rubens hung on to the classical theory that the bodies of ancient Greeks and Romans were actually closer to the “perfection of creation from which humankind has since declined.” The idealized eroticism of Rubens’ beautiful, fleshy and voluptuous nude women was surely helpful in earning for his paintings commercial value and popularity. He was most willing to adhere to the needs of his patrons and, according to Clippel, was requested by one man to make Susanna “so pretty that she would enamor even old men,” which was not difficult to do.²¹ In most cases, live models functioned to allow the artist to be able to represent an ideal body from memory after repeated drawings, but it seems likely that Rembrandt and his female compatriot utilized their sitters for more than that. Artemisia probably had better access to female models since it was more illicit than institutional for men, but Rembrandt had professional models, his friends and as his wife

²¹ De Clippel, 2008, “Defining Beauty: Rubens Female Nudes.”

Saskia sit for him in the studio (which she did on several occasions). According to Anat Gilboa, “Rembrandt is known to have used both professional models as well as people from his private circle.”²² Sources indicate that Rembrandt had an almost scientific interest in the nude, which probably assisted in his naturalistic depictions.²³ The attention to detail in his early drawings as well as the fact that he had four flayed arms and legs anatomized by Vesalius attests to his commitment to naturalism.²⁴ For Rembrandt and Artemisia, making the figure “seem” lifelike by giving it vivid flesh color and expressive movement was not enough, for even then, Rubens’ figures still maintain a classical idealism in their pleasant expressions and voluptuous bodies.

An important influence to the dramatic compositions and naturalism of Rembrandt and Gentileschi’s work was the Italian Baroque artist Caravaggio, a pioneer in developing a new artistic focus on the individuality of characters unlike the over-used idealized subjects of the 15th and 16th centuries. Rembrandt and Artemisia both share an attention to Caravaggio whose work exhibits a heightened dramatic effect, intense emotions visualized in the action and expression of characters as well as an increased naturalism when compared to earlier depictions of the human body. Several paintings of Rembrandt and Gentileschi concentrate on one moment of the narrative, which was not unusual, but they did so in a way that heightened the suspense and drama of that moment. In her *Susanna* (Image 3), Artemisia heightened the suspense of the composition and placed emphasis on one moment of terror by showing the two elders whispering to one another as she jerks away in defense. Her *Lucretia* (Image 4), unlike most depictions which show the dagger already in her breast, the heroine is portrayed contemplating her suicide. Like the other works of Artemisia, it represents an unusual but heated moment that truly accentuates the subject’s humanity. Similar is Rembrandt’s first painting of *Susanna* (Image 12)

²² Chapman, 2008, “The Wooden Body: Representing the ‘Manikin’ in Dutch Artist’ Studios.”

²³ Gilboa, Anat, “Images of the Feminine in Rembrandt’s Work,” Delft, Eburon Publishers, 2004, 12-158.

²⁴ Chapman, 2008, “The Wooden Body: Representing the ‘Manikin’ in Dutch Artist’ Studios.”

who is caught in a moment of surprise, having just realized someone is watching. The image depicts the moment that she clumsily begins rise from a seated position, startled and frightened.

Gentileschi was the only known female follower of Caravaggio, and she adapted the bold Caravaggesque realism in a more expressive manner that differed from that of her male contemporaries. It is likely that Rembrandt first learned of Caravaggio's tenebrism in the north where there was a strong following of Caravaggists in the early 17th century, especially in Utrecht, including artists such as van Honthorst who was known for his chiaroscuro. The dramatic lighting and compositions of Rembrandt's works may have been derived from these northern Caravaggists which then inspired his interest in Artemisia who was doing many of the things that he was interested in. In her writings on Rembrandt, Garrard states that it was "surely the Caravaggism of Artemisia's first *Judith Slaying Holofernes* that appealed to Rembrandt and influenced both the explicit violence and the dramatic composition of his *Blinding of Samson* of 1636," the same year that he painted *Susanna and the Elders* and not long after his *Andromeda*.²⁵

III

The subjects of Perseus and Andromeda as well as Susanna provide an important visual connection between the Dutch master and Artemisia. The subject of Andromeda has its origins in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and is one of the most frequently represented subjects in Dutch art and specifically the engravings of the Goltzius circle.²⁶ In the myth Andromeda has been chained to a rock to be devoured by a sea-monster in order to appease the gods. Heroic Perseus then comes to rescue her after asking her father if he might marry the maiden.²⁷ The paintings and engravings prior to Rembrandt show a traditional Andromeda: chained nude to a rock, waiting calmly for her hero. None of them exclude both the monster and Perseus except for Rembrandt's unique

²⁵ Garrard, 1989, "Artemisia Gentileschi: the Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art."

²⁶ Sluijter, 1993, "Rembrandt's Early Paintings of the Female Nude: Andromeda and Susanna."

²⁷ Gilboa, 2004, "Images of the Feminine in Rembrandt's Work."

composition. The *Perseus and Andromeda* by Vasari (Image 14) as well as that of Annibale Carracci (Image 15) are good examples of the traditional depiction of the subject. Both artists tried to include all of the characters in the plot in one scene in order to give the fullest account of the story. There is an overabundance of detail which distracts from the main ideas of the actual text, and every element of the compositions are idealized. Andromeda is depicted as if she has hardly experienced any trauma at all, and instead of serving the actuality of the text, her sensual, naked body serves only to please the male eye. The subject was popular because it offered the opportunity to depict a beautiful and alluring, fully exposed female nude as the focus of the painting. It was often used as a showcase for the artist's expertise in anatomy of the female as exemplified by the Andromeda in paintings by Vasari and Carracci who hardly seems vulnerable as she flaunts her beauty without any shame.²⁸

Rembrandt undoubtedly had these representations in the back of his mind and consciously strayed from them. In analyzing Rembrandt's depiction it is obvious that Andromeda has been straining and it is safe to assume that the artist has emphatically depicted her painful situation like no one before (Image 13).²⁹ Lastman relied heavily on literary sources to inform his paintings and it is probable that Rembrandt also used texts as references for these themes.³⁰ Despite the homeliness of Rembrandt's Andromeda, his portrayal of her is more true to the text than any other. In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid spoke of the beauty of the maiden but also her fear and her shame: "trickling tears warme from hir eyes adowne hir cheeks did flow...and lyke a fearfull maid shee durst not speake unto a man. Had not hir hands been staid she would have hid hir bashfull face....with great abundance of hir teares...but not so wretched as the maid

²⁸ Sluijter, 1993, "Rembrandt's Early Paintings of the Female Nude: Andromeda and Susanna."

²⁹ Sluijter, 1993, "Rembrandt's Early Paintings of the Female Nude: Andromeda and Susanna."

³⁰ Tumpel, 1991 "Pieter Lastman, the Man Who Taught Rembrandt."

who wrongly for hir mothers fault the bitter raunsome paid [*sic*].”³¹ The words paint their own picture but not of an oblivious beauty posing elegantly beside a rock; instead they describe a rather wretched woman, crying in fear and shame and distressed that she must take punishment for the wrongs of her mother. Mostly due to their naturalism, the works by Artemisia Gentileschi also are claimed to be more representative of the actual narratives they portray.

An important element of the Andromeda narrative in the actual text that is often overlooked in artistic terms is the explanation of why she has been punished. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the reader is given just a few lines that distinguish this history. “Andromad for hir mothers tongue did suffer punishment [*sic*],” and also, “but not so wretched as the maid who wrongly fir hir mothers fault the bitter raunsome paid [*sic*].”³² These two lines of text indicate the possibility that Andromeda was a heroine who took punishment for her mother, not unlike Lucretia who sacrificed herself in the name of chastity, Cleopatra who committed suicide to avoid shame as the political prisoner of Augustus, or Susanna who also was willing to sacrifice her life to keep her honor and fidelity to her noble husband. What these themes all have in common is their heroic female subject who sacrifices her life either for another or to keep her virtue, not only that but they were all subjects painted by both Rembrandt and Artemisia (except for Cleopatra which was only depicted in an etching by Rembrandt but painted by Artemisia). Even though most of these themes were very popular among painters, it is interesting that not only did both artists portray all four of them but in a manner that places emphasis on the female subject in such a way that evokes empathy with her situation.

In support of the argument that Artemisia and Rembrandt focused on the same themes of heroic women, we have evidence that Artemisia probably did paint an Andromeda as well. The

³¹ Nims, John F., “Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: the Arthur Golding translation, 1567.” Paul Dry Books, 2000, 106-112.

³² Nims, 2000, “Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: the Arthur Golding translation, 1567.”

last period of Artemisia's career was dominated by her relationship with Don Antonio Ruffo of Sicily, who was a major figure in 17th century patronage. He acquired many paintings by Italian artists, and with special presence, by Rembrandt as well. He owned Rembrandt's famous *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer*, painted in 1653. According to Garrard, Artemisia was one of the first artists he collected. In a letter to Ruffo she wrote of two paintings she was working on for him at the time: "One of them represents Andromeda, when she was freed by a certain knight on the flying horse Pegasus, who killed the monster that wanted to devour that woman. In between there is a most beautiful landscape and most splendid seascape; in short, it is a most beautiful painting."³³ According to Vincenzo Ruffo, this painting never actually came into Don Antonio's possession, but nevertheless this letter implies that not only was Artemisia interested in painting an Andromeda but that she had actually started it.³⁴ The fact that she specifically said that it "represents Andromeda" suggests that Andromeda was the focus of the painting or that she may have stood alone. In most of Artemisia's other compositions containing female subjects, the woman takes precedence not only in the narrative but in the format of the painting so it is not unrealistic to assume here that her proposed Andromeda would have done the same. With that, one can only imagine how similar Artemisia's Andromeda might have seemed to Rembrandt's depiction based on their other paintings of similar themes.

As has already been discussed and as is easily identifiable, Rembrandt's version deviated from traditional standards. In his *Andromeda* (Image 13), Rembrandt focused on the individual woman and her emotional circumstances by omitting all other characters and creating a heavy contrast between dark and light. Like the figures of Artemisia, Rembrandt's *Andromeda* lacks the elegant contrappasto and pathetic unfocused expression that one can see in 16th century

³³ Garrard, 1989, "Artemisia Gentileschi: the Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art."

³⁴ Garrard, 1989, "Artemisia Gentileschi: the Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art."

interpretations, especially that of Cesari, Vasari and Annibale Carracci (Images 14 and 15). Even the two depictions of Rubens seem far off from Rembrandt's portrayal of the theme (Images 16 and 17). Like Rembrandt's painting, Rubens' interpretations are responsive to the treatises on detail of Van Mander who claimed that "good masters mostly avoid the principles of abundance or copiousness, and create delight in sobriety and few details."³⁵ Yet beyond that, the *Andromeda* of Rembrandt is much different than the nudes of his contemporary that exhibit somewhat more emotion than previous works but still display their beautiful bodies as the focus of the painting.

As well as parting from the visual tradition of the *Andromeda* subject it also seems that Rembrandt consciously deviated from the guidelines of Van Mander who issued a sort of idealized framework that could be varied to an extent through natural observation. Over and over Van Mander emphasized drawing from life, studying from life and observing life but not without reminding the reader of certain rules and principles that they must not do without. He said that artists must have a good understanding of anatomy, and indeed Rembrandt has, but he also didn't hesitate to add that one must not neglect "the plump and polished softness of life," exemplified in the women of Rubens. He mentioned a particular set of measurements for proportion and also repeatedly advised against uncomfortable or unnatural poses as they "are not pleasing," and that the body must "be rendered artfully." Van Mander more specifically went on to say that "although the arms and legs are somewhat freer, one must be aware that the position is not to be praised if the hand reaches so high that the elbow is lifted above the shoulder."³⁶ Rembrandt's depiction of *Andromeda* fits in a very general way to the treatises of Van Mander in terms of emphasis on nature but lacks the framework of idealization that makes it a beautiful image and pleasing to the eye. Rembrandt's *Andromeda* may not have exemplified the plump, soft and

³⁵ Honig, 1985, "The Foundation of the Noble Free Art of Painting."

³⁶ Honig, 1985, "The Foundation of the Noble Free Art of Painting."

artfully rendered woman that this art theorist speaks of and that Rubens paints. Her stretched and wrinkled skin, homely face, sagging breasts and belly as well as her uncomfortable and awkward position would probably not have set well in the mind of Van Mander who emphasized modesty and grace for a lady, especially one of telltale beauty and virtue in the face of danger.

Artemisia's female nudes also exhibited awkward poses and expressions that did not necessarily flatter the female body. Her *Lucretia* (Image 4) sits heavily and uneasily on a bed with an athletically muscular leg protruding awkwardly into the foreground of the composition. She is no seductress but a woman emotionally distraught and anxious. There is a significant amount of tension in the image, emphasized by her wrinkled forehead, stiff back, left hand tightly gripping her dagger and her right hand awkwardly pressing her breast hard against her body. Not only is her unusual pose different from other representations but Artemisia depicted a moment of the narrative that was completely new at the time. Lucretia is in contemplation or questioning as to whether she should commit her suicide. Most representations show her with the knife already in her breast. In a more idealized representation (as is normal for Rembrandt's later years), the Dutch master made two paintings of Lucretia in a contemplative state in which she is almost intensely meditative, a similarity to Gentileschi even much later in his career (Images 18 and 19).³⁷

The other important theme is Artemisia's and Rembrandt's respective treatments of Susanna and the Elders. Susanna was the beautiful wife of a wealthy and prominent Jew. Two community elders became secretly attracted to the beautiful Susanna and plotted to seduce her. As she was in the garden preparing to bath they snuck up on her and demanded that she submit to them or they would publicly denounce her as an adulterer, a crime punishable by death. She resisted and they spread the rumor as promised. Susanna was sentenced to death but the elders

³⁷ Garrard, 1989, "Artemisia Gentileschi: the Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art."

were found out before she went to die.³⁸ This was a theme depicted since early Christian times but as the Renaissance progressed, depictions of Susanna as a symbol of innocence and purity were replaced by one scene focused on the nude heroine being surprised by the lustful elders. Her purity continued to be emphasized, now more so through surrounding objects than anything as well as by her beautiful yet unattainable body. The idealization of the female body and the symbolism of her opalescent skin is most relevant in the *Susanna and the Elders* of Tintoretto (Image 20). Similar to Andromeda, the popularity of the theme during the Renaissance was due to the prominence of a beautiful female nude in the narrative and the sensual and purely secular appeal of her bathing in a garden. The eroticism could be heightened with the presence of the two men, which was often the most common depiction. This is exemplified in Tintoretto's version from which the viewer probably reaped great pleasure in seeing the old man watching the oblivious and gorgeous Susanna. As time progressed, the images became further eroticized until it seemed that the male view had entirely removed the image from its traditional meaning and distorted it into something completely different; a story that focused on secondary themes of temptation and seduction rather than a moral message. The irony of a biblical theme serving as an example of chastity transformed into a celebration of sexual opportunity is difficult to miss. In general Susanna was hardly ever depicted in any distress, and even if she was, this was often offset by an elegant pose to display her body. Garrard emphasized that all of the images of Susanna created by men were linked by a misguided assumption: "that her [only] dilemma was whether or not to give in to her sexual instincts."³⁹

Contrary to this, Artemisia purposefully took her Susanna completely out of the lush, sexually allusive garden environment and focused the narrative on Susanna and her plight

³⁸ Garrard, 1989, "Artemisia Gentileschi: the Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art."

³⁹ Garrard, 1989, "Artemisia Gentileschi: the Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art."

against the two greedy elders (Image 3). Even though his Susanna remains in the garden, Rembrandt does provide two of the most sympathetic treatments of the theme (Images 2 and 12).⁴⁰ Like Artemisia he portrays a concern with her youth, innocence and vulnerability that relates more to the original biblical story than any other renditions. A very important deviation in his first *Susanna* (Image 12) is her isolation without the presence of the elders. She is absolutely helpless in this rare depiction of the very moment that she realizes she is being watched. Her face is more visually pleasant than that of his *Andromeda*, but Rembrandt emphasized her fear and surprise by showing her mid-motion as she rises suddenly with a start, agitated, stepping clumsily on her slippers.⁴¹ Like the addition of the slippers, the stone balustrade of Artemisia's portrayal reinforces Susanna's discomfort and the awkwardness of the scene (Image 3). Even with the inclusion of the two elders, Artemisia's focus is still on the plight of the heroine and not the anticipated pleasure of the villain. In Rembrandt's painting, like the depiction of *Andromeda* and the several female figures of Artemisia, the focus is specifically on her facial expression and her gesture which reminds the viewer that this narrative is about her chastity and her fear and not the erotic escapades of the elders. Also similar to Rembrandt's *Andromeda* the viewer here serves as a voyeur to an intimate scene yet is faced with the moral decision of eroticizing her or with feeling the guilt of moving this young woman to fear and shame. The image therefore becomes a contest between good and evil or of virtue and vice.

An interesting subject for discussion, especially in comparing Rembrandt and Artemisia, is the pose of their figures of Susanna. Garrard claims Rembrandt purposefully depicted Susanna in the pose of the crouching Venus or *Venus Doidalsas* whose association with the bath connects her with Susanna on an amorous or erotic level (Image 12). Because of the erotic implications of

⁴⁰ Garrard, 1989, "Artemisia Gentileschi: the Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art."

⁴¹ Sluijter, 1993, "Rembrandt's Early Paintings of the Female Nude: *Andromeda* and *Susanna*."

the pose, Gentileschi avoided this model and all traditional allusions to Venus. The position of her arms has been decisively changed and her body awkwardly twisted to allow for a clear portrayal as an emotionally distressed young woman (Image 3).⁴² But Eric J. Sluijter contradicted her in saying that the chasteness in Rembrandt's version is emphasized by her crouching position and the determined attempt to hide her body with both arms.⁴³ It is noticeable that both of Rembrandt's depictions of Susanna actually do a better job of covering herself than the Susanna of Artemisia or probably any Susanna for that matter. All three of them defy Van Mander's suggestion that "one should especially avoid covering up the naked body with the arms, so that it is always (if possible) free from interruption."⁴⁴ Both images of Susanna portray a certain naturalism that distinguishes them from their predecessors. Artemisia's Susanna has a wrinkle at her groin, wrinkles on her arms and neck, a very natural breast, awkwardly proportioned legs and a very realistically depicted feminine mid-section. Rembrandt's Susanna also has wrinkles, a disproportioned middle and awkward legs. Just as Rembrandt created suspense by isolating the figure and showing her reaction to an unseen suspect, Artemisia developed a similar effect of anxiety by representing the intimidating threat of rape by depicting the whispers of her tormenters, a powerful effect that is more psychologically disturbing than the actual act of violence.⁴⁵

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The female nudes of Rembrandt in the early to mid-17th century seem to be an unusual addition to the rich Netherlandish artistic tradition. In careful analysis of art dated back to the Renaissance one can distinguish a hybridization of naturalizing elements within idealized nudes

⁴² Garrard, 1989, "Artemisia Gentileschi: the Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art."

⁴³ Sluijter, 1993, "Rembrandt's Early Paintings of the Female Nude: Andromeda and Susanna."

⁴⁴ Honig, 1985, "The Foundation of the Noble Free Art of Painting."

⁴⁵ Garrard, 1989, "Artemisia Gentileschi: the Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art."

that began as a subtle compromise between Italian idealism and Dutch naturalism but was fully realized in the works of Rembrandt van Rijn and his female Italian counterpart, Artemisia Gentileschi. She not only lived at the same time as the Dutch master and painted several of the same subjects, but shared a distinguished and exceptional artistic style that focuses on empathizing with the female subject. This stylistic connection between Rembrandt and Artemisia is difficult to identify in the work of others during this time. Distance and gender may not have been able to discourage an artistic connection between the two painters. As they searched for a new more expressive method of painting during a transitional period that needed revival and fresh ideas, Rembrandt may have found, within the work of Artemisia, encouragement in a direction he was already headed.

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Image 1
Pieter Lastman, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1607-1614



Image 2
Rembrandt, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1647



Image 3
Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610

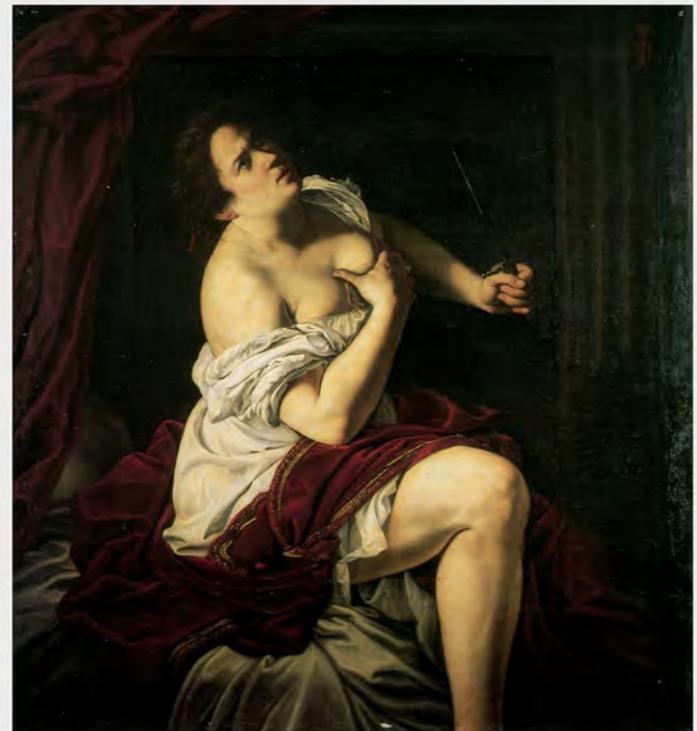


Image 4
Artemisia Gentileschi, *Lucretia*, 1621



Image 5
Artemisia Gentileschi, *Cleopatra*, 1621-22



Image 6
Rembrandt, *Danae*, 1636



Image 7
Orazio Gentileschi, *Danae*, 1623



Image 8
Jan Gossaert, *Neptune and Amphitrite*, 1516



Image 9
Rubens, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1609



Image 10
Rubens, *Perseus Freeing Andromeda*, 1622



Image 6
Rembrandt, *Danae*, 1636



Image 7
Orazio Gentileschi, *Danae*, 1623



Image 8
Jan Gossaert, *Neptune and Amphitrite*, 1516



Image 9
Rubens, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1609



Image 10
Rubens, *Perseus Freeing Andromeda*, 1622



Image 11
Rubens, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1607-08



Image 12
Rembrandt, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1636



Image 13
Rembrandt, *Andromeda*, 1633-34



Image 14
Giorgio Vasari, *Perseus and Andromeda*, 1570-72



Image 15
Annibale Caracci and Domenichino, *Peresus and Andromeda*,
1597



Image 16
Rubens, *Peresus and Andromeda*, 1639-40



Image 17
Rubens, *Peresus and Andromeda*, 1620-21



Image 18
Rubens, *Lucretia*, 1664



Image 19
Rubens, *Lucretia*, 1666



Image 20
Tintoretto, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1555