The first woman ever to achieve both fame and fortune as an artist, Artemisia Gentileschi overcame many hardships, including a violent rape and a shot-gun marriage, to become a respected 17th century Baroque painter and the darling of European royalty.

**HER EARLY LIFE**

She was born in Rome on July 8, 1593, the daughter of a popular Tuscan painter, Orazio Gentileschi and his wife, Prudentia Montone. The first of five children and the only daughter, Artemisia lost two brothers and her mother by the age of 12. Her father decided to train Artemisia and her surviving brothers in his studio where he taught them to draw and mix paints.

He also introduced them into his circle of working artists in Rome where Artemisia met the famed Baroque painter Michelangelo Caravaggio, whose dramatic use of light and shadow, the so-called *chiaroscuro* style, greatly influenced her work.

By the time she was seventeen, Artemisia had already produced one of her most famous works, *Susanna and the Elders* (1610). A popular if racy subject with Renaissance and Baroque painters, it is based on an Old Testament story in the Book of Daniel in which Susanna, a young Jewish wife, is falsely accused of adultery by two old men because she refuses their sexual advances.

Brought to trial, she is condemned to death, but saved by the young prophet Daniel (of the lions’ den fame), who exposes the two old men as liars, resulting in their execution.
The painting’s subject is eerily prophetic because in 1612, two years after Artemisia completed it, her father accused Agostino Tassi, another painter, of raping her. In a sensational trial that lasted seven months, Tassi was found guilty despite his defense that the sex was consensual and that Artemisia was not a virgin.

One month after the trial ended, Artemisia was married in a face-saving ceremony to a Florentine artist, Pietro Antonio di Vincenzo Stiattesi. They moved to Florence where she eventually gave birth to several children, only one of whom, a daughter she named for her mother, survived to adulthood.

**ART IMITATING LIFE**

During this trying period in her life, Artemisia created one of her most dramatic baroque compositions, *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1612-13), a grisly realistic work. It is based on the Old Testament story of Judith, a virtuous Jewish widow, who entices and murders a drunken Assyrian general Holofernes, with his own sword, to save her people.

Artemisia painted this subject at least three times along with several interpretations each of other strong and/or legendary women, including Cleopatra, Esther, Mary Magdalen and Lucrezia, a Roman noblewoman who killed herself after being raped.

In these subjects, art historians have seen a grim reprise of the artist’s earlier sexual trauma. Her heroines are powerful women who take revenge on evil men who try to harm them or who prefer death to dishonor.

Did a “psychic wound” lead Artemisia to paint such personal protests throughout her life? Was she “acting out” her own revenge? Were her paintings a means for her to heal her own physical and psychic wounds?
We will never know if her choice of subjects was influenced by her refusal to be bound by the conventional genres of still lifes and portraits that her age imposed on women artists or, if perhaps, like her father and other successful male artists, she was merely responding to the demands of the marketplace.

Whatever the answer, history will remember Artemisia Gentileschi as the first woman to paint subjects drawn from powerful religious and historical moments. Her paintings brought her to the attention of other artists and in 1616, Artemisia became the first woman ever admitted into the Accademia dell’Arte del Disegno, Europe’s first academy of drawing, in Florence. *(Editor’s Note: Today it is called the Accademia di Belle Arti and houses Michelangelo’s David.)*

**FAME AND FORTUNE**

Within a few years, her elite circle of patrons and friends would widen to include Galileo, the grand duchess Cristina de Medici and Michelangelo’s nephew, Michelangelo Buonarotti the Younger, also a painter.

Some years later, other patrons would include Philip IV of Spain, the Spanish viceroy in Naples, members of the papal court and Prince Karl von Liechtenstein. Artemisia was not merely successful. She was famous.

In 1630, Artemisia finished a large altar painting of the Annunciation in Naples. It was her first known church commission. By 1638, she was in residence at the Court of King Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria in England. Artemisia served the king for two or three years. She was in England to collaborate with her father in painting the ceiling of Queen’s House at Greenwich, (now at Marlborough House, London, since 1711).
After civil war broke out in England in 1641 (a war that would result in the death of Charles I), Artemisia returned to Naples where she lived until her death in 1653 at age 56.

GONE AND FORGOTTEN

After her death, Artemisia Gentileschi was forgotten for many centuries and her paintings were often attributed to her father. In the late 20th century, however, her star rose again thanks to Mary D. Garrard, an art historian, who wrote the first book ever devoted to this trail-blazing artist: *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*.

Published in 1989, it was followed two years later in Florence by the first exhibit of Artemisia’s work – more than 300 years after her death. In 2002, Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi had a twin exhibit of their paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Another exhibit at the St. Louis Art Museum included 50 paintings by Orazio and 32 paintings by Artemisia. A TV documentary, a play and a French film, *Artemisia*, have helped spread her fame today.

“What’s extraordinary is that she sustained a painterly career throughout her life and was extremely skillful in placing her pictures and, indeed, in marketing her pictures,” says Elizabeth Cropper, dean of the National Gallery’s Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts in Washington, DC.

Keenly aware of being a woman in a male-dominated art world, Artemisia once described herself to a potential patron: “You will find the spirit of Caesar in this soul of a
woman.” She wasn’t going to be taken as “just another woman painter.” Today, many consider her one of the world’s most important Baroque artists.

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Susanna and the Elders, one of her most famous works, was produced in 1610 when Artemisia was only 17 years old.
Painted during her rape trial, Judith Slaying Holoferns may reflect the artist’s desire for revenge against the man who allegedly attacked her.
Self-portrait as the Allegory of Painting, c. 1630. Artemisia probably placed two mirrors at angles to get this unusual perspective.
How she signed her paintings. She claimed, however, not to know how to read or write.