



Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting (La Pittura)

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“Use his (Michelangelo’s) brush. Do a self-portrait,’ [Orazio] whispered slowly. ‘An Allegory of Painting. For all time.’ ‘Sì, Papa.’ I kissed him lightly on the forehead. ‘I will (Vreeland 315).’” Thus Susan Vreeland’s novel, The Passion of Artemisia, ends, with the death of Artemisia Gentileschi’s father and the beginning of, arguably, one of her most important works. However, as nice as it would be to take this version of events as the truth, the fact is that many details of the origin of the painting known as *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting (La Pittura)* are a matter of much debate. Although there is no doubt that this is an Artemisia piece, its exact date of completion, as well as its status as an actual self-portrait has caused much discussion and speculation.

The issue of self-portraiture in *La Pittura* is one of great importance given the subject matter. Simply put, Artemisia’s painting, if indeed a self-portrait, was one that no man could ever have painted (Garrard 97). Tradition dictated that the art of painting be represented by an allegorical female figure, forcing male artists to address the themes of artist portrait and allegory of painting separately (97). However, this necessity led to certain problems. Until the Renaissance, painting had been considered manual labor, and thus placed the practitioners of the craft at a low position of society (101). The practice of employing an allegorical figure for painting, which emerged during the 16th century, served to convey the idea that art was separate from the manual process required to make it, and that its essence was superior to that of the individual artist (101). This ability to separate the end result from the manual labor established painting as a Fine Art, one that required inspiration and creative thought as opposed to learned skill (101). However, although representation of Pittura (painting) served to elevate the practice of the art, it did nothing to further the status of the artist personally, save if it was depicted on the walls of the artist’s house (104). Several artists, including Vasari with his *Allegory of the Arts* in

his Florentine home and Federico Zuccaro with the Apotheosis of the Artist in his Roman palazzo, relied on this method (101). The necessity of the placement of these images within artist homes made their effectiveness extremely limited, as they worked to elevate the artist only so far as they lived there, and were on display to a limited amount of people.

In order to further their own status, artists often turned to self-portraiture, where their status as gentleman was emphasized (Garrard 102). Typically, the artist would paint themselves with the tools of their art (palette, brushes, mahlstick, easel, etc.), offset by fine clothes and other indicators of being a learned individual, such as the Greek poem that Antonio Moro attached to his self-portrait that is currently located in the Uffizi (102). Artists would often include themselves wearing a golden chain as an indicator of the rank conferred upon him by a ruler. However, these methods were also problematic. The latter method was not an effective means of communicating the sitter's status as an artist, unless he was famous enough to be recognized on sight, because other types of noblemen were given chains and medallions by rulers (104). The former method, while more clearly an indicator of the artist's status, was incredibly risky given that the inclusion of studio paraphernalia evoked associations with manual labor, despite the fineness of his clothes (104). In fact, the finer the clothes, the more out of place the artist looked in the studio setting (104). Attempts to circumvent this problem resulted in the depiction of the studio as a place where the arts were discussed and debated, as well as practiced, such as in the work *Academy* by Baccio Bandinelli (104). Still, this portrayal is not without its problems, with the link between the studio and a place of dialogue tenuous, relying almost entirely on the inscription included in the work (105). Another method employed to slightly more success was put forth by G.D. Cerrini, in his piece *Allegory of Painting with Self-Portrait of the Artist*, in which the female personification of the art holds a portrait of the artist, and Poussin with his self-

portrait of 1650, in which he reversed Cerrini's arrangement, placing himself as the living character painting an image of *Pittura* (106). Yet even in these, the artist is separate from the art he creates. Furthermore, these means of combining the two themes were often elaborate and complicated, at odds with the public's desire for abstract ideas to be rendered in clear, simple, cohesive images (106).

In contrast to previous attempts to link the allegorical with portraiture, if it is an actual self-portrait, Artemisia's piece is radically simplified (Garrard 106). The composition takes many of its details directly from Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (Christiansen and Mann 417). *Iconologia* was originally published in 1593, and provided an index of allegorical figures, gestures and attributes to be used by painters (Pingel, par. 4). In fact, Ripa's description of "Painting," though not exactly a description of the painting, sounds very similar to the Artemisia's piece:

A beautiful woman, with full black hair, disheveled, and twisted in various ways, with arched eyebrows that show imaginative thought, the mouth covered with a cloth tied behind her ears, with a chain of gold at her throat from which hangs a mask, and has written in front "imitation." She holds in her hand a brush, and in the other the palette, with clothes of evanescently covered drapery... (Christiansen and Mann 417-18).

La Pittura, does indeed feature a young woman with dark hair in a rather unkempt state, with a chain featuring a mask pendant (67). Brush in hand, the figure reaches forward as if to apply to first strokes to a blank canvas, with one hand, while her other holds a palette (67). The painting is signed "A.G.F." with the "F" most likely referring to a variation of the Latin verb *fecere*, meaning "to make (Christiansen and Mann 418).

The piece shows remarkable skill in its use of color. Ripa's description of painting also included a reference to *drappo cangiante*, a technique discussed in by Lomazzo in a 1584 treatise on painting that demonstrated an artist's skill in handling color by painting a passage of cloth with one color in the lights and a different in the shadows (Garrard 107). The sleeves of the figure's dress run from violet to green, showcasing the technique (107). She further exhibits color mastery through the careful relationships developed throughout the painting. The red-brown background, which seems to dominate the composition, continues onto the bodice of the dress, where it is balanced by the dark green of the blouse and the sleeve's blue-violet highlights (107). The flesh of the figure has been carefully modeled, with white highlights employed to precisely establish spatial planes (107). The entire color scheme is echoed by the five color patches on the figure's palette, serving almost as a sort of summary (107). What is perhaps most interesting about the color use of this piece, is that it might suggest, according to Garrard, Artemisia's choosing a side in the various art schools debate of *colore* (color) versus *disegno* (design), aligning herself with the former (107). If indeed true, it adds a sort of irony to Vreeland's novel as far as the creation of *La Pittura* is created. As mentioned in the introduction of the paper, Vreeland ends her novel with Artemisia promising to use Michelangelo's brush to create the painting (315). Michelangelo, however, was a champion of *disegno*, which makes the idea of Artemisia employing his brush to create a work that clearly speaks to color over design quite humorous.

Artemisia continues her adherence to Ripa's description of painting with the inclusion of the *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, before the figure, which stresses, according to him "the primacy of the artistic idea, as superior to the particular depicted image on the canvas that follows in its wake" (Christiansen and Mann 67). She furthermore evokes the contrast between Theory and

Practice, or the relationship between the material concerns of painting with its higher aspects of intellect (Garrard 108). With one arm raised upward, the hand stretching toward an invisible target, she suggests the painting's higher ideas, while the other arm firmly resting on the table holding the tools of painting conjures up the notion of material concerns (109). In *La Pittura*, however, instead of separating the two as was common, Artemisia unites them in a continuous arc in the composition (109). The head serves as the center of the arc, speaking to the fact that the two diverse ideas are joined in the mind of the artist, and provides a point of resolution for the two aspects (109). That she chose to suggest this abstract allegory through a realistic human form suggests that Artemisia believed that painting's worth as art derives from the work of the artist rather than association with royalty or theoretical pretension (109).

Artemisia takes some creative license in her painting as well. According to Ripa, *Pittura* was supposed to wear a long dress covering her feet, creating a metaphor between the covered female body and the ideal proportions of painting, established in the underdrawing but disguised in the final work when the color is added (Garrard 107). Artemisia ignores this focus, and instead leaves out the skirt and feet altogether, placing the figure in a foreshortened, transitory, active pose (107). In doing so, she prevents the viewer from discovering the conventional symmetry, beauty, and proportion, as well as the arched eyebrows, that Ripa had specified (107).

It is important to note that the canvas was cleaned in 1972, which removed later repainting on the background (Bissell 272). Certain areas were painted rather thinly on the finely woven canvas, which, coupled with loss of glazes, have resulted in the dark preparatory ground to be visible in some places (272). This renders the impression the picture was unfinished, but that is not the case (272).

While indeed a fine example of the allegory of painting, much debate has arisen over its status as an actual self-portrait since Michael Levey identified the artist in 1962 (Garrard 97). One of the leading voices amongst those in disagreement with the assumption is R. Ward Bissell, who believes that “the woman is not Artemisia in the guise of or conjoined with “La Pittura, but a semi-idealized if exceptionally contemporary and spirited personification of that Art” (272). Instead, Bissell feels that La Pittura was designed to accompany a separate, fully recognizable self-portrait of Artemisia that has since been lost (272). Mainly, Bissell argues that there is little relation between the face seen in *La Pittura* and the known Artemisia visages seen in an anonymous portrait medal and an engraving done by Jérôme David, as well as Artemisia’s own *Female Martyr* (273). Missing from La Pittura are the double chin and puffy eyebrows which are characteristics of Artemisia’s face, and would have been accentuated by the profile view of the image (273). However, others feel the wide forehead, full cheeks, bow lips, and ample, if not double, chin are reminiscent of the artist’s face (Christiansen and Mann 418). Furthermore, in comparing La Pittura with other images thought to portray Artemisia’s likeness, there are several reasons for discrepancies. First, only David’s engraving, with its inscription stating as recording a self-portrait, provides a true indication of how Artemisia may have fashioned an image of herself (Christiansen and Mann 421). There is clear mention of several self-likenesses produced by Artemisia, not all of which have been identified, though the ones that have seem to cover a variety of types (421). Thus, we may not even be aware yet of what constitutes a proper self-portrait of Artemisia (421). Furthermore, when considering *La Pittura*, it is important to know that the very nature of the piece is to “other” the figure represented (Bal 139). The image created was design to represent an allegory, and plays and abstract theory against the personal representation (139).

Arguments have also been proposed that Artemisia's portrayal of herself as Painting, with a prominent chain and unusually small mask as seen in *La Pittura*, was intended to represent the artist as serving her current patron, and that she no doubt employed herself as the model, albeit in a highly original fashion (Christiansen and Mann 420). The set-up required to paint a self-portrait in the way of *La Pittura* was difficult, requiring two mirrors, and would seem to support the boasting found in letters to Don Antonio Ruffio in Sicily, in which she wrote statements such as "And I will show our Most Illustrious Lordship what a woman can do," and "You will find the spirit of Caesar in this soul of a woman" (420).

Besides the issue of the actual image, questions of self-portraiture arise over how the piece was referred to in inventories. In the inventory of 1687-88 of the English Royal Collection there is two references "Arthemisia gentilesco. Done by her selfe," and "Pintura A peintaigne" (274). Levey presumes that these attributions were for the same image, representing a self-portrait and the Allegory of Painting, however, no where else does another painting appear twice in the inventory (274). Thus Bissell believes there were in fact two separate paintings, meaning *La Pittura* is not a self-portrait.

Another issue opened for debate is when and where this painting was created, as well as for whom was it originally intended. The provenance of *La Pittura* cannot be traced back earlier than 1649, when it was already in England (Garrard 110). It is here that it is first mentioned in the inventory collections of Charles I (110). However, many have connected the piece with one of Artemisia's principal Italian patrons, Roman scholar Cassiano dal Pozzo (110). Three letters written from Naples in 1639 to Cassiano mention a promise to deliver a self-portrait he had requested (110). No further mention of a self-portrait for Cassiano occurs until 1637, when Artemisia wrote to him that among the paintings she proposed to ship to Rome, pending a reply,

was “another for Your Eminence, in addition to my portrait in conformity with that which you once requested, to be numbered among {your other portraits} of illustrious painters,” (Bissell 274). Several scholars believe that *La Pittura* was the self-portrait mentioned in 1630, and that it was painted at that time, given the age (approximately thirty-seven years old) of the woman in the picture (274). This is not a fair indicator, as there are many examples throughout art history of individuals painted in the appearance of their prime, when in fact they are much older. Moreover, in order for this dating to be true, Artemisia had to have retained the self-portrait intended for Cassiano for seven years, and then brought it to London in 1638, a fact that is highly unlikely given that it would mean she had broken her promise to him in 1630, and then continued to seek patronage from him later (274). Even if the painting had been sent in early 1631 to Cassiano, and subsequently passed to Cardinal Francesco Barberini in 1637, there is no mention of a painting by Artemisia amongst the portraits of other famous individuals (275).

Stylistically, Garrard dates the painting to around 1630 (111). Given its naturalism and lighting, the piece shares many similarities with Artemisia’s early Caravaggesque period (111). However, the brushstrokes used in *La Pittura* are freer than the paintings of the 1620s, and feature a more sophisticated combination of blurred and sharp edges (111). However, it does not yet have the fluidity of the painted works of the 1640’s, which are also much more idealized than seen in *La Pittura*. Bissell, however, sees the most stylistic similarity with Artemisia’s contributions to Orazio Gentileschi’s 1638 ceiling for the Queen’s House at Greenwich (273). In particular, the position of the arms and heads, classicizing facial types, fluidity, shining highlights, robust physiques, and bold *chiaroscuro* speaks to *La Pittura* (273). Thus, he places the date at roughly 1638, and that she brought it with her when she came to England (272).

Despite all the debate, *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting (La Pittura)* is an exquisite piece. Imbued with the frenzy of creation, Artemisia created an image that in all likelihood represented herself at least partially. Despite, the assuredness of Vreeland's novel, one can only speculate as to the extent that this image captures her own.

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