

A Female Old Master

BY KYLE MACMILLAN

ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI'S grisly painting of Judith beheading the invading warrior Holofernes offers a still-shocking take on a biblical scene. But for some viewers, the 17th-century work represents something more—the artist's defiant, cathartic response to her own rape and a lifetime of struggles in a man's world.

Five decades ago, Gentileschi's canvases lay forgotten in museum basements. But starting in the 1970s, she became something of a feminist icon, her riveting life story grabbing the popular imagination and helping to make her more famous than some of her once better-known male contemporaries.

"She really was singular as a woman artist in that period—unlike any other," said art historian Eve Straussman-Pflanzer.

When the Art Institute of Chicago was offered a chance to present a painting from a major Italian museum with the help of the U.S.-based Foundation for Italian Art and Culture, it asked for Gentileschi's "Judith Slaying Holofernes" (circa 1620). The work, on loan from the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, will be the centerpiece of a compact exhibition that runs from Thursday to Jan. 9.

The Art Institute wanted to capitalize on the artist's popularity and give viewers a rare, intimate look at one of her most important works, said Martha Wolff, its curator of European painting and sculpture before 1750. Just four undisputed paintings by Gentileschi are owned by American museums, with scholars disagreeing over the attribution of a fifth at the Saint Louis Art Museum.

Scholars attribute the surge in interest in the artist's work to several factors. First, there was a change in artistic taste that brought the intense realism of the once-overlooked Caravaggio and his followers, of which she was one, into vogue. There was also a groundbreaking 1976-77 exhibition "Women Artists, 1550-1950," at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and other venues. Spurred by a rise in feminism and feminist studies, the show helped launch a larger effort to shine a light on unfairly overlooked female artists. Gentileschi stood out as a prime candidate for reappraisal.

Fueling the painter's revival has been her story, which has been dramatized in movies and novels like Susan Vreeland's 2002 "The Passion of Artemisia." More recent female artists like Camille Claudel and Frida Kahlo also had to overcome personal struggles and societal conventions. Yet Gentileschi not only was one of the rare women to carve a significant career in 17th-century Italy, but also endured a seven-month trial following her rape by artist Agostino Tassi, a friend and collaborator of her father, Orazio, when she was 17.

That history "really catches people's attention," Ms. Wolff said. "The drama surrounding that is very resonant and specific."



ITALIAN HORROR STORY Gentileschi's 'Judith Slaying Holofernes'

Some scholars caution against drawing too many connections between Gentileschi's life and her depiction of Holofernes' beheading. But Ms. Straussman-Pflanzer, who organized the new exhibition before leaving for the Davis Museum at Wellesley College, writes in the show's catalog that the painting—created about 10 years after the rape—is so "immediate and visceral" that such a reading is hard to avoid.

Given the recent surge in recognition the artist has enjoyed, it seems fair to ask: Does the art live up to the hype?

The answer may be yes and no. Ms. Straussman-Pflanzer, notes that Gentileschi's work was uneven, because the single mother was forced at times to dash off lesser paintings for the money, and she did not always have access to major patrons. But most scholars agree that her best works, like "Judith Slaying Holofernes," justify her newfound status. "She's a marvelous storyteller," said Judith Mann, curator of European art to 1800 at the Saint Louis Art Museum.

Because fascination with her personal story has gotten ahead of serious study of her work, it is difficult to fully assess Gentileschi's accomplishments as a painter. Her works have been often confused with those of her father or otherwise misattributed, and unknown works by her and related archival materials are being uncovered all the time.

Jesse Locker, assistant professor of Renaissance and baroque art at Portland State University in Oregon, believes that views of Gentileschi will be quite different in 10 years, and he is confident that some of her finest masterpieces have yet to come to light.

"Artists like Raphael or Michelangelo or Leonardo have been continuously studied for 400 or 500 years," Prof. Locker said. "With Artemisia, it's been 20 years, so we're still getting a sense of who she is as an artist."